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The Journal of California Anthropology

Title

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Journal

The Journal of California Anthropology, 4(2)

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Publication Date

1977-12-01

Peer reviewed

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An Early Account of a Fired Clay Anthropomorphic Figurine from Marin County

FRANKLIN FENENGA

In 1952, while clearing out a file, Dr. William Duncan Strong passed on to me a folder of scraps of notes about California ethnography and archaeology accumulated during his student days at Berkeley. One of these notes was a newspaper clipping which permits us to add one more specimen to the corpus of 40 fired clay figurines recorded from Marin County by Goerke and Davidson (1975) and one more site to the list of 15 from which they have been reported.

The original account appeared in the *Oakland Tribune*, October 21, 1924, under the byline of Frank Cliff, and it is here repeated with minor editorial emendations consisting primarily of the elimination of a now irrelevant speculation on how it might have been introduced by a traveling Hopi and how the Coast Miwok are related to the main body of Miwok speakers:

1,000 YEAR OLD POTTERY ART DUG UP: Clay Figurine, Revealing Traces of Color, Is Unearthed from Tiburon Peninsula Shell Mound.

By Frank Cliff

Was the California Indian on the verge of developing the pottery art when the white man came into the land and drove him from his ancient holdings?

This is the question which has arisen over the finding of a small, crudely moulded pottery figure of a man excavated Sunday from a shell mound on the Tiburon peninsula in Marin County.

The find is a startling one as the making of pottery or the development of a figure art was unknown or unpracticed by the California Indian tribes. Yet the figurine is decidedly a step in both directions.

Resembles Hopi Art

If the figurine was not made by the tribe occupying the mound in which it was found, then it opens up the interesting alternative of having been carried into the bay region from the land of the Hopi Indians in Arizona. It greatly resembles certain figures of amulets which have been in use by those Indians for a long period of time and which have not changed their form despite the advancement which the Hopi art has made.

There is then the possibility that the little figure was the protecting god of one of these wanderers who reached as far as the Tiburon peninsula and there died. His remains were interred in the mound on the shore of the bay along with his belongings and the little god of clay.

The figurine, which is quite archaic in form, has been moulded and the finger prints of the primitive artist are still discernable. There are traces of coloration on the body which was moulded as though clothed in a blanket. The colors have been almost entirely weathered away, however, and there is no chance of identifying anything resembling design.

This type of baked clay figure was found distributed over a great part of southwest America and Mexico and even well down into South America. But never has it been found in the coast section of California or as far north as the bay region toward the east. Whenever found, however, it has always marked the start of the figure art.

The figurine was turned from its earthen resting place by a group of excavators consisting of Captain Jack Shickell, who has spent considerable time among the Indians of the Amazon basin; Milton Robinson and Ellsworth Shaffer, local artists; Dr. Louis Mullikin and Frank Cliff. In the same mound and close to the clay figure, were found a number of badly conditioned skeletons and a quantity of ornaments.

The mound itself was one of the older type. Owing to the absence of any time scale it is doubtful as to what its age might be. Evidence deduced from the amount of mold and earth which has accumulated on top of the shells and debris left by the Indian inhabitants, would lead to the belief that the age goes close to a thousand years. Further excavations are to be made at the site in the hope of turning up other articles which might throw light upon the origin of the little clay figure.

Unfortunately the account of the context in which it was found is limited to the general location of the site and the suggestion that it was in association with a burial. The descriptive data are also limited but for the observation that it was hand modeled and bore traces of paint. Cliff interpreted the figurine as

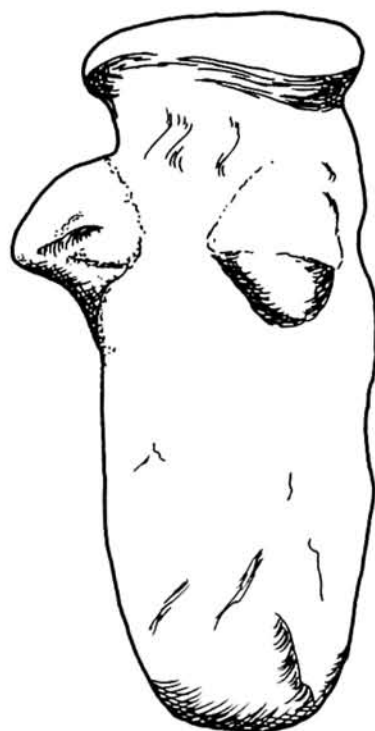


Fig. 1. Anthropomorphic figurine from Tiburon Island, Marin County. Copy from newspaper photo.

that of a "man," reading the protuberances as arms, but comparison with the other specimens from the area leaves little doubt but that breasts of a female are represented. The illustration of the specimen, copied from a photogravure (Fig. 1), shows that it shares with other local specimens the fact that limbs are not represented. It differs from other Marin County pieces in that a head is represented by a process of flattening the upper end into the form of a compressed disc. No facial features are recognizable.

If the reporter does not satisfy our descriptive needs with respect to observational data, he does address himself to three of the intellectual questions raised by the specimens. (1) Does a knowledge of the plastic quality of wet clay and its radical alteration by firing represent a prelude to pottery? (2) Are the figurines of Central California derived from other sources? (3) How does plastic anthropo-

morphic representation occur in a culture in which all graphic representation is virtually absent?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Claudia Nissley of the Museum of Northern Arizona made the copy of the non-reproducible photogravure from the original account.

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The 'Watcher's Stage' in Lower Colorado River Indian Agriculture

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Over the past ten years, the authors and other investigators have published a series of papers presenting an increasingly strong circumstantial case for the diffusion of native agriculture westward from crop-growing Indian tribes along the Colorado River to various interior Indian groups of the California deserts prior to Spanish contact.¹ The crop-growing complex in southern California probably was most developed among the Kamia of Imperial Valley, the Cahuilla of the Colorado Desert, and certain Diegueño groups of the desert interior and northern Baja California. The advance of aboriginal agriculture appears not to have extended west of the Salton Basin.² Coastal southern California

Indian groups learned agriculture as neophytes at the Spanish Missions or acquired it by diffusion from European sources after contact.

In our study of aboriginal agriculture in southern California, we have recently begun examining photographs of southern California Indians taken in the late historic period, looking for evidence of agriculture. The purpose of this brief report is to suggest by example how photographic images may aid in expanding or reinforcing our knowledge of native agricultural technology in the historic period. Analysis of such images can (1) reinforce ethnographic data by serving as a check on information derived from informants; (2) expand our knowledge of native agriculture in the historic period through providing new data; (3) inform us about acculturation in native agriculture (e.g., the borrowing of Spanish or American agricultural practices); and (4) possibly shed light on aboriginal agricultural practices that have extended into the historic period.

A cursory survey of images in museum and library collections indicates that photographs directly concerned with native agriculture are very rare.³ Regional photographers at the turn-of-the-century in southern California were primarily interested in the picturesque when they focused their cameras on local Indians. In general, images made by C.C. Pierce, George Wharton James, J.S. Chase, and other photographers of that era—both professional and non-professional—were confined to portraits of Indians, ceremonial events, adobe and brush dwellings, and other highly graphic scenes. The same is mostly true even for the more ethnologically oriented photographers such as DeLancey Gill or H.W. Henshaw, who photographed for the Bureau of American Ethnology, and for such well-known pictorialists as Edward S. Curtis and Frederick Monsen. In general, agriculture is only an incidental component—often easily missed in studying an image—in Indian photographs of