Title
A Bear-Shaped Crescentic From Northern San Diego County, California

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4rt958db

Journal
Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology, 9(2)

ISSN
0191-3557

Authors
Koerper, Henry C
Farmer, Malcolm F

Publication Date
1987-07-01

Peer reviewed
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The development of this paper was supported in part by a faculty research grant, University of California, Davis. This assistance is greatly appreciated. Comments by the reviewers are appreciated and have been incorporated wherever possible.

REFERENCES

Clewlow, C. William  

Lanning, Edward, P.  

Palmer, F. M.  

Riddell, Harry S., Jr.  

Walker, Edwin  

W. J.  

Wallace, W. J.  


A Bear-shaped Crescentic from Northern San Diego County, California

HENRY C. KOERPER, Cypress College, Cypress, CA 90630.

MALCOLM F. FARMER, Whittier College, Whittier, CA 90608.

The diversity of functions proposed for chipped stone crescentics is mirrored by the variety of their shapes. Some crescentics are simply of lunate design (e.g., Tadlock 1966), while others (often called "eccentric crescentics") incorporate notches, "spurs," "legs," and tangs onto an underlying crescent form (Rogers 1966; Jertberg 1978, 1986). Malcolm Rogers (1929) believed that crescentics of San Dieguito age served as hunting amulets. Other suggested functions include lateral bird bunts, surgical instruments, skinning or slicing tools, ornaments, specialized scrapers, waterfowl points capable of glancing off water, and tools for peeling and stripping (Davis and Panlaqui 1978:61). Crescentics are generally thought to be of early Holocene age (Wallace 1955; Tadlock 1966; Warren 1968).

Certain crescentic specimens suggest animal effigies (Nelson 1936:206), a view supported by the recent recovery of an artifact (Fig. 1) that appears to represent a bear.

The object was found at the Allan O. Kelly site (CA-SDI-9649; Fig. 2) and extends the known range of morphological variation.

HENRY C. KOERPER, Cypress College, Cypress, CA 90630.
Fig. 1. Bear-shaped eccentric crescentic from the Allan O. Kelly site (CA-SDI-9649), shown actual size.

Fig. 2. Location of the Allan O. Kelly site (CA-SDI-9649).

of crescentic forms. It was discovered just above sterile soil of Unit Q, at a depth of about 55 cm., in San Dieguito III-early La Jollan transition period midden (Koerper 1986), dating to the seventh millennium B.P. (Table 1). The object, of meta-volcanic rock, measures 62 x 35 x 8 mm., weighs 15.5 g., and shows no evidence of use-wear.

While most persons who have seen the object acknowledge its bear-like appearance, some have questioned whether the “tail” is the result of a reworking of a broken end. A second, somewhat crude, effigy figure from the same site (Koerper 1986) has a similar “tail” (Fig. 3a). It seems unlikely that both objects broke and were similarly reworked.

Eccentrics with forms suggesting possible animal motifs are rare. The asymmetry of several such eccentrics (Fig. 3) appears purposeful rather than the result of reworking. The specimen illustrated in Figure 3e is remarkably bear-like, and along with the eccentric of Figure 3d, was described as an “animal-shaped flint” in 1901 by Jones (1956:233; see Plate 122f). Parenthetically, two stone eccentrics from Sonoma County have been noted as possible bear effigies (Origer and Fredrickson 1980:21; Moratto 1984:516, Fig. 10.14).

That bears could have been objects of special attention is not surprising. Cross-culturally, of all the non-primate animals, the bear is perceived as the most human-like (cf. Hallowell 1926:148-149; Shepard and Sanders 1985:xi). The earliest evidence for religion is found in Mousterian contexts (e.g., Peyrony 1934; Blanc 1961; Klein 1969; Solecki 1972), and appears to include special treatment of the cave bear and brown bear whose remains suggest a strong spiritual link between Neanderthal people and beast, if not actual bear cultism (e.g., Constable 1973; Howell 1973). By Upper Paleolithic times, ritual focus on the bear seems widespread in western Eurasia with depictions of bears appearing in cave art as well as on pieces on antler, bone, and ivory (Leroi-Gourhan 1967; Marshack 1972).

Bear ritualism flourished in the early Holocene of Eurasia, as in the Old European Tradition (9,000-5,000 B.P.) of the Balkans. Later, bear ritualism was reflected in the beliefs of the Greeks (Carpenter 1946; Burkert 1985:149-152). Bear cultism was also
Table 1
RADIOCARBON DATES FOR CA-SDI-9649 SHELL SAMPLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Laboratory Number</th>
<th>Provenience</th>
<th>$^{14}C$ Age</th>
<th>$^{13}C/^{12}C$</th>
<th>Adjusted Agea $^{14}C$ Years B.P.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beta-6954b</td>
<td>Unit N, 0-10 cm.</td>
<td>7,520 ±90</td>
<td>+0.35 o/oo</td>
<td>7,940 ±90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beta-13437</td>
<td>Unit Q, 10-20 cm.</td>
<td>6,850 ±120</td>
<td>+1.18 o/oo</td>
<td>7,280 ±120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beta-13438</td>
<td>Unit N, 20-30 cm.</td>
<td>7,200 ±100</td>
<td>+1.89 o/oo</td>
<td>7,640 ±100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beta-13439</td>
<td>Unit Q, 30-40 cm.</td>
<td>7,270 ±90</td>
<td>+1.64 o/oo</td>
<td>7,710 ±90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beta-13440</td>
<td>Unit N, 40-50 cm.</td>
<td>7,090 ±90</td>
<td>+1.35 o/oo</td>
<td>7,520 ±90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beta-13441</td>
<td>Unit N, 50 cm-sterile</td>
<td>6,970 ±100</td>
<td>+1.77 o/oo</td>
<td>7,410 ±100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beta-13442</td>
<td>Unit Q, 50 cm-sterile</td>
<td>7,260 ±90</td>
<td>+2.11 o/oo</td>
<td>7,710 ±90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Adjusted ages do not reflect correction for reservoir effect.
b Sample submitted by Van Horn (Ultrasystems, Inc. 1983).

Archaeological evidence of bear ritualism includes bear paw symbols in rock art (Heizer and Baumhoff 1962; Heizer and Clewlow 1973; Grant 1967; Gortner 1984; Lee 1984) and plastic art (Koerper and Cramer n.d.), bear figures in the rock art of the southern Sierra Nevada and Chumash areas (Grant 1967; Lee 1984), rock art figures that may represent bear hides, bear burials (Heizer and Hewes 1940), artifacts of bear teeth and bone (Moratto 1984), and chipped obsidian bifaces or "Stockton Curves," that Central Miwok consultants identified as imitation claws used in the grizzly bear dance (Barrett and Gifford 1933:213). A bear dancer participated in the Kuksu ritual. The recovery of a "bear" eccentric from the Allan O. Kelly site suggests that interest in bears may be traced from at least 8,000 years B.P.

DISCUSSION

In the early 1920s, Malcolm Rogers initiated archaeological surveys in San Diego County beginning in the vicinity of Escondido. Among the artifacts discovered were a few flaked stone eccentrics. Rogers (1929) noted similar objects from San Miguel Island (see Wilson 1899:Pl. 40, items 8, 11, 24; Wardle 1913; Heye 1921), and suggested that these eccentrics may have been mounted on wood shafts to be used ritually as shaman's batons, somewhat like the ethnographically known shafts with asphalt-cemented quartz crystals or flaked stone blades set at one end.

Rogers extended his surveys to the desert areas of eastern California, and on playa shorelines found crescentics of a less eccentric form than those of San Diego County (Rogers 1939). Eccentric objects were also found on the shorelines of Lake Mohave (Campbell et al. 1937). Parallels between the objects from the desert area and from San Diego County sites were noted. The crescentics ranged in form from plain lunate to more eccentric types. Rogers (1939:36) reaffirmed his earlier ideas that the objects were hunting amulets or fetishes, perhaps
representing some animal forms (double-headed animals, quadrupeds, or deer antlers). Given the archaeological and ethnological evidence for widespread reverence for bears, the discovery of an eccentric resembling a bear and lacking use-wear supports the view that at least some of the eccentrics may be animal forms of nonutilitarian or magico-religious function.

Archaeological work in the far west of North America has shown that flaked stone crescentics have wide distribution. These objects are not common, but there are notes on some 300. The distribution includes central Washington (Warren 1968), the Lind Coulee site in southeastern Washington (Daugherty 1956), southeastern Oregon (Cressman 1936; Butler 1970), Nevada (Tadlock 1966), Idaho (Bowers and Savage 1962), Danger Cave in western Utah (Jennings 1957), California, Baja California, and western Arizona. Over half of these objects are of the plain forms, with the others falling to the eccentric category. Of the simpler lunate forms in California, the majority are from east of the coastal mountains at the western margin of the Great Basin. The largest collections of crescents are from Long Valley Lake, eastern Nevada (Tadlock 1966) and Coyote Flat, southeastern Oregon.
The more eccentric forms are mostly from California, and their distribution is generally from Sonoma and Lake counties in the north to the western San Diego County area (Gallegos 1986:106, Fig. 6; Jertberg 1986:38, Fig. 1). Since M. R. Harrington's (1948) work at the Borax Lake site, it has generally been accepted that crescents are of considerable age (Tadlock 1966; Clewlow 1968; Butler 1970; Meighan and Haynes 1970; Davis and Panlaqui 1978; Jertberg 1978, 1986). Phil Orr (personal communication in Tadlock 1966:670) stated that curation was responsible for crescents in later-than-expected contexts. Heirloom pieces may exist but the use of crescents seems to have survived into later times (Koerper and Drover 1983:20; Koerper et al. 1986:41).

The bear-shaped eccentric crescentic from the Allan O. Kelly site may be the most realistic example of representational art known from the early Holocene of North America. Perhaps other early western North American eccentrics also should be interpreted as "art objects" with possible symbolic or magico-religious implications.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Frank Fenenga for constructive comments, Joseph Cramer for drawing Figures 1 and 3, Pat Lynch for producing Figure 2, and Karen Koerper for typing several drafts. Pat Welch and David Van Horn supplied us with useful documents, and Frank Norick helped us secure a photograph of the eccentrics shown in Figures 3d and e. The bear-shaped eccentric was recovered under terms of a contract between the senior author and Elfend and Associates, Inc., Newport Beach, California.

REFERENCES

Barrett, S. A., and E. W. Gifford

Blanc, A. C.

Bowers, A., and C. Savage

Burkert, W.

Butler, B. R.

1937 The Archaeology of Pleistocene Lake Mohave. Southwest Museum Papers No. 11.

Carpenter, R.

Clewlow, C. W., Jr.

Constable, G.

Cressman, L. S.

Daugherty, R. D.

Davis, E. L., and C. Panlaqui
Driver, H., and W. C. Massey

Gallegos, D. R.

Gortner, W. A.

Grant, C.

Hallowell, A. I.

Harrington, M. R.
1948 An Ancient Site at Borax Lake, California. Southwest Museum Papers No. 16.

Heizer, R. F., ed.

Heizer, R. F., and M. A. Baumhoff

Heizer, R. F., and C. W. Clewlow

Heizer, R. F., and G. W. Hewes

Heye, G. G.

Howell, F. C.

Hudson, T., and T. C. Blackburn

Jennings, J. D.
1957 Danger Cave. University of Utah Anthropological Papers No. 27.

Jertberg, P. M.


Jones, P. M.

Kitagawa, J. M.

Klein, R.

Koerper, H. C.
1986 The Agua Hedionda Project: Archaeological Investigations at CA-SDi-5353 and CA-SDi-9649. MS on file at the Cultural Resources Management Center, San Diego State University.

Koerper, H. C., and J. Cramer

Koerper, H. C., and C. E. Drover

Koerper, H. C., J. E. Ericson, C. E. Drover, and P. E. Langenwalter II
1986 Obsidian Exchange in Prehistoric

Kroeber, A. L.

Lee, G.

Leroi-Gourhan, A.

Marshack, A.

Meighan, C. W., and C. Vance Haynes

Moratto, M. J.

Nelson, N. C.

Origer, T. M., and D. A. Fredrickson
1980 The Laguna Archaeological Research Project, Sonoma County. MS on file at the Public Works Department, City of Santa Rosa.

Peyrony, D.

Rogers, M. J.


Shepard, P., and B. Sanders

Solecki, R.

Tadlock, W. L.

Ultrasystems, Inc.
1983 Supplemental Environmental Studies: Kelly Ranch. MS on file at the Cultural Resources Management Center, San Diego State University.

Wallace, W. J.

Wardle, H. N.

Warren, C. N.

Wilson, T.