

The "Aquatic Motif" in Chumash Rock Art

TRAVIS HUDSON
KATHLEEN CONTI

DESPITE what seems to be a profuse and diverse collection of designs in Chumash rock art, there are some which are repetitive from site to site. One such design so recognized by Grant (1965:84, Fig. 77) is the "aquatic" motif, a form whose geographical distribution includes parts of San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Ventura, and Kern counties. Although the design was thought to have been restricted just to pictographs, recently it was also found as an ornamentation on a Chumash tubular stone pipe from Santa Barbara County. The association of the aquatic motif with such ritual activities as rock art and pipe smoking would indicate that this design must have had some symbolic meaning to the people who employed it. Our purpose will be to explore the possible meanings and dating of the symbol based upon our study of some 29 examples of the form from 19 different rock-art sites, as well as its association with a stone pipe, by relying upon the available ethnographic data.

THE MOTIF

In a general sense, the aquatic motif consists of a bar-like element, usually with a slight curvature, with either or both ends bifurcated. These bifurcations may be rounded (thus giving the motif a "bone-like"

resemblance) or sharp. Either variant is occasionally associated with an additional element, a bar-like projection which resembles a "dorsal fin," thus giving the motif its name. In addition, a few of the forms also have what appears to be a "tongue-like" projection from one of the bifurcated ends.

In short, the aquatic motif ranges from simple to ornate, and based upon our survey it may be oriented on a cave wall or ceiling either vertically or horizontally. At some sites the figure appears as a single element, while at others it appears in groups. Moreover, it occurs at some sites as an isolated figure, while at others it is integrated in terms of its placement with respect to other elements in the pictographic panel. One such association which we can only comment upon at present is the association in some cases of the aquatic figure with circular elements, such as seen in one of the figures that follow. In terms of coloring the motif is primarily a solid red, though a few have been further enhanced by the addition of white pigment as a solid or stippled outline. Two of the twenty-nine motifs we studied were done in black; none is in white.

These marked attributes of similarity and difference provide a means by which to subdivide the aquatic motif into two general types and seven subtypes. Type I is characterized by the absence of the "fin-like" element and has three subtypes: Ia, in which

Travis Hudson and Kathleen Conti, Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, Santa Barbara, CA 93105.

only one end is bifurcated (Fig. 1); Ib, in which both ends are bifurcated (Fig. 2); and Ic, in which one end is bifurcated while the opposing end is either trifurcated or with some sort of external attachment (Fig. 3). Conceivably, Type Ia may be only pigment remnants of what originally may have been a Type Ib or Ic depiction.

Type II has the "fin-like" projection, and there are four subtypes: IIa, in which only one end is bifurcated (Fig. 4); IIb, in which both ends are bifurcated (Fig. 5); IIc, in which both ends are bifurcated and some sort of "tongue-like" projection is present (Fig. 6); and finally, IId, whereby both ends are bifurcated and some form of "limbs" are attached to the body (Fig. 7).

SYMBOLIC MEANINGS

Thus far no formal analysis has yet been made to attempt to determine whether the variation represented in the aquatic motif involves a single symbol or several. In all probability several different symbols are involved. Since it is possible that the various forms represent several different natural objects, such as aquatic animals, we sought the opinion of terrestrial and marine zoologists at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History. They had no idea what might be represented by Types Ia, Ic, or IId. Type Ib, they felt, might be an otter or perhaps a stylized femur. As for Types IIa, IIb, and IIc, they were of the opinion that these repre-

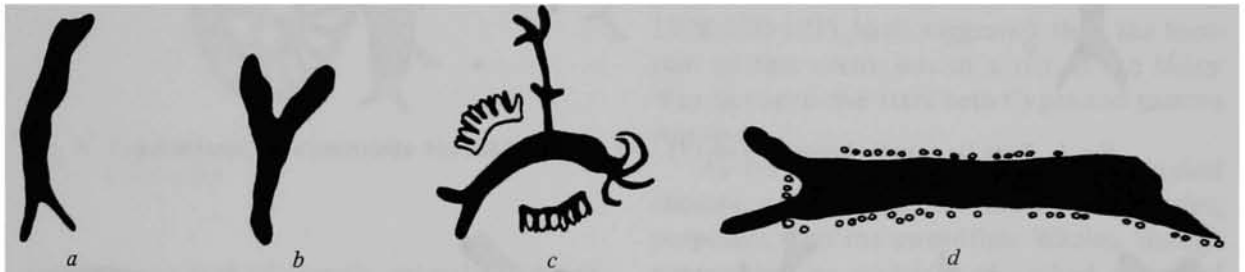


Fig. 1 Type Ia aquatic forms. *a*, Kern-77, red; *b*, SLO-79, black; *c*, Ven-51, red and white; and *d*, SLO-995, red with white dots. (Sources: *a*, *c* Conti n.d.; *b*, *d* Lee n.d.)

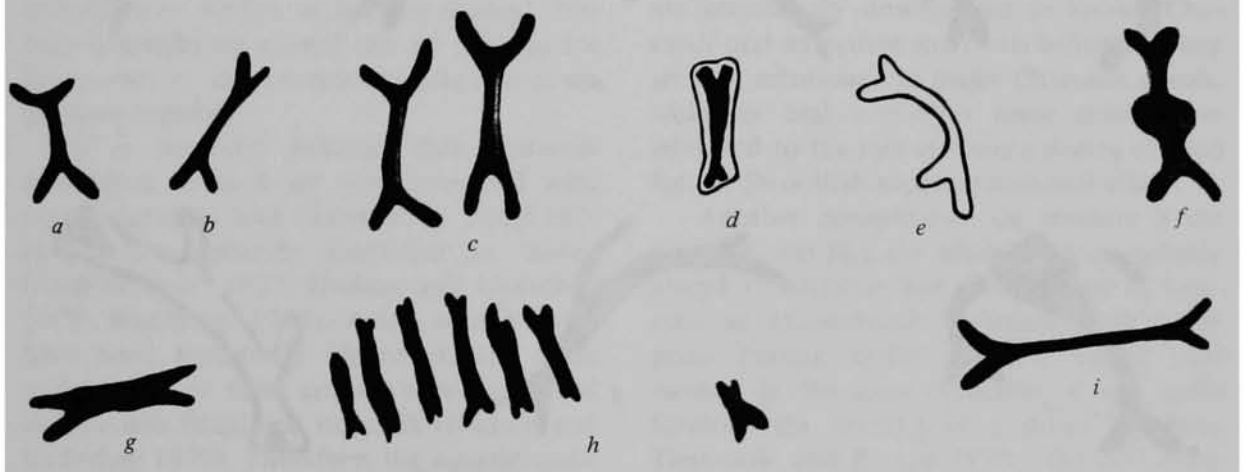


Fig. 2. Type Ib aquatic forms. *a*, SBa-101B, red; *b*, Ven-35, red; *c*, Ven-160, red; *d*, Ven-347, red with white outline; *e*, SLO-336, red; *f* and *g*, SLO-100, red; *h*, Ven-35, red; *i*, SBa-1200, red. (Sources: *a-d*, *f-h* Conti n.d.; *e*, *i* Lee n.d.)

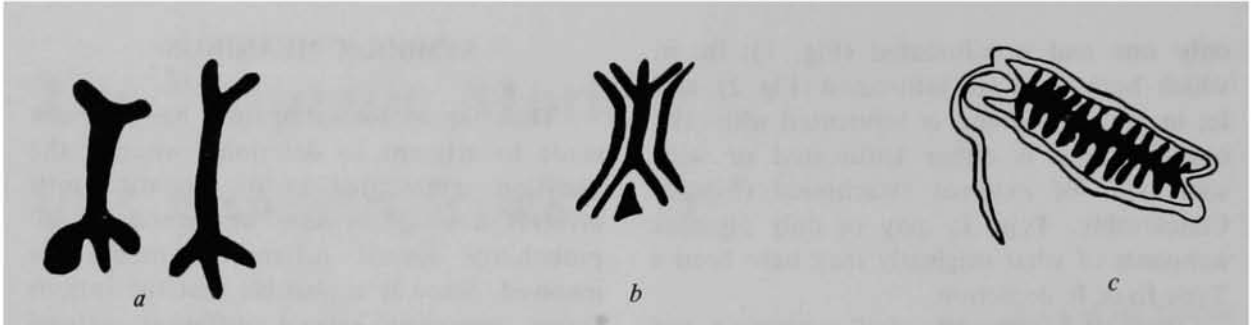


Fig. 3. Type Ic aquatic forms. *a*, SLO-105, red; *b*, 4SLO-AS-668, red; *c*, Kern-77, red with white outline. (Sources: *a-b*, Lee n.d.; *c*, Conti n.d.)

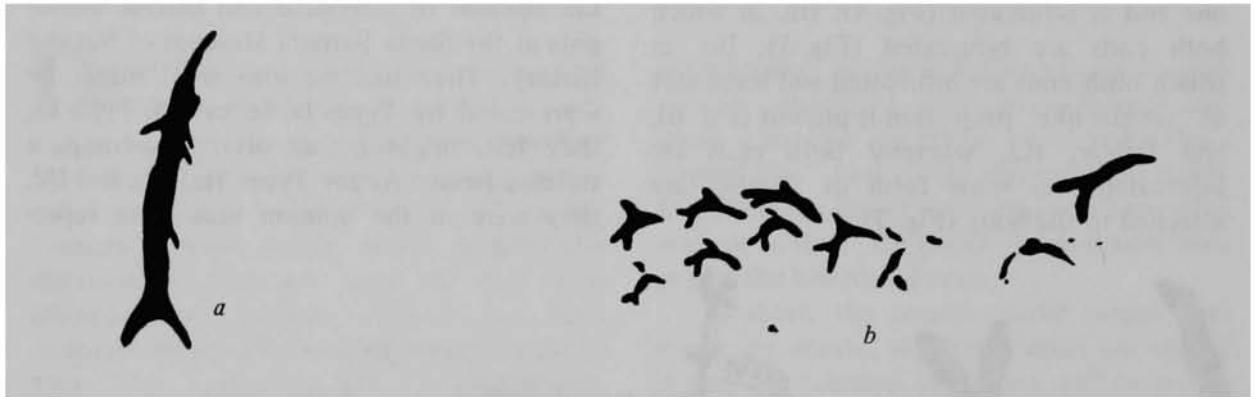


Fig. 4. Type IIa aquatic forms. *a*, Ven-195, red; *b*, SBa-1380, red. (Sources: *a-b*, Conti n.d.)

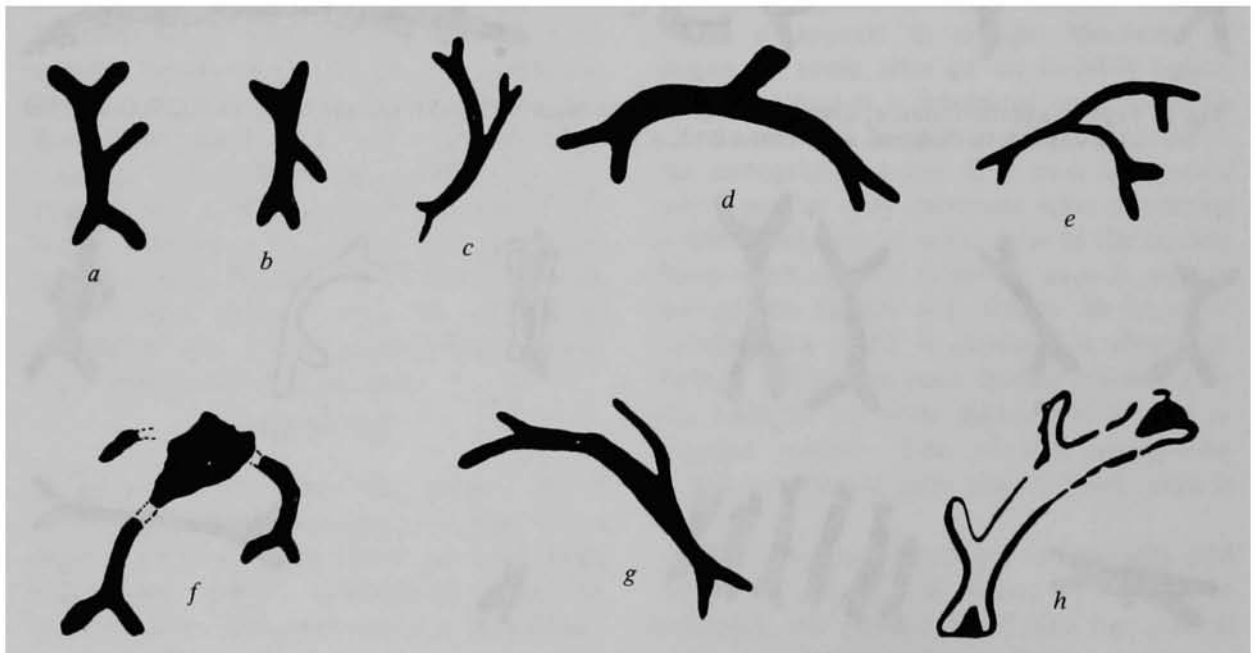


Fig. 5. Type IIb aquatic forms. *a*, Ven-160, red; *b*, Ven-119, red; *c*, SLO-79, red; *d*, Ven-51, red; *e*, SLO-79, black; *f*, SBa-101 (SBa-565), red; *g*, SBa-138, red; *h*, SLO-995, red. (Sources: *a-d*, *f-g*, Conti n.d.; *e*, *h*, Lee n.d.)

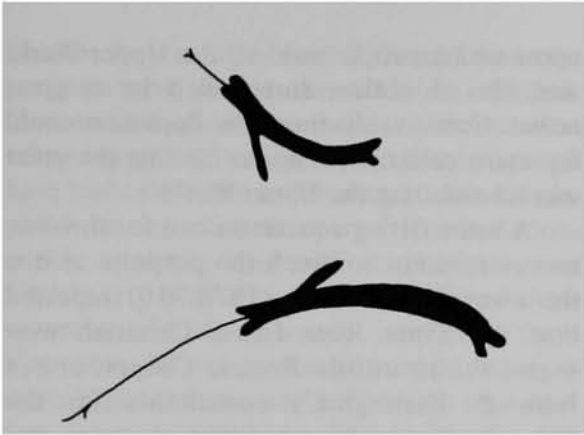


Fig. 6. Type IIc aquatic forms. Ven-51, red. (Source: Conti n.d.)

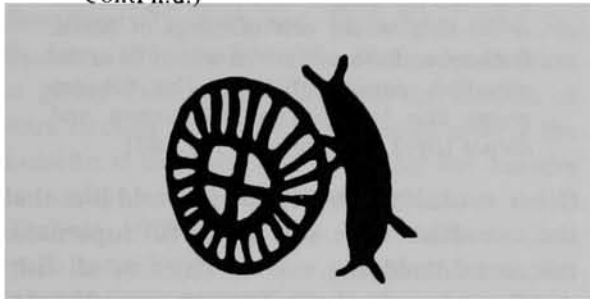


Fig. 7. Type II d aquatic form. Ven-51, red. (Source: Conti n.d.)

sented some sort of aquatic animal: IIa being fish, perhaps in one case a swordfish, while in another a group of trout; and IIb and IIc, perhaps grey whales or basking sharks.¹ Perhaps a gregarious animal can be inferred for those cases in which several aquatic figures are grouped together.

It is currently believed that Chumash symbolism in rock art was connected with supernaturalism and executed by ritual officials ethnographically identified as *?antap* (Hudson *et al.* 1977; Hudson and Underhay 1978; Blackburn 1975). A few animal forms have been tentatively identified, and quite understandably these are also ones mentioned in Chumash ritual and narrative (Hudson and Underhay 1978). Therefore, the aquatic motif conceivably is tied into Chumash myth and ritual as well, either in the terrestrial realm of the living, or the celestial realm of the

supernatural. We do know that a number of animals were recognized by the Chumash to have counterparts among the stars, such as coyote, deer, bear, raccoon, and snakes and birds of various sorts (Hudson and Underhay 1978). What aquatic animals, if any, were also present among the Sky People remains to be determined.

Chumash narratives describe a celestial ocean near the Land-of-the-Dead. It was occupied by two large, undescribed monsters who would rise from the water and give out a loud cry when a soul drew near. Souls ignorant of the old religion or who had no dreamhelper (*?atishwin*) would become frightened of the cry and fall into the water, transformed into a were-fish, -frog, or -turtle (Blackburn 1975:100). Hudson and Underhay (1978:120-121) have suggested that the location of this event was in a rift in the Milky Way between the stars beta Cygni and gamma Aquilae.

As for other aquatic animals, the logical choices would seem to center upon whales, porpoises, and the swordfish. Whales, though represented by a variety of pecked or carved effigies from the Chumash and Gabrielino areas (Hudson and Blackburn n.d.: Vol. IV), are surprisingly downplayed in known Chumash oral narratives and ritual behavior. They are not mentioned in major Chumash rituals, while in oral narratives these animals are relegated to the role of being a source of food for the Swordfish supernaturals and man.

Another conspicuous sea creature is the porpoise, yet like the whale it too is notably absent in narrative and ritual. There is, however, an ethnographic statement that a porpoise passing under a plank canoe (and moving in the same direction as the craft) foretold the coming of a storm (Hudson, Timbrook, and Rempe 1978:145). A Gabrielino reference from Hugo Reid ascribes great importance to the porpoise, as this description implies:

The porpoises were believed to be intelligent beings, created for the purpose of guarding the world, and whose duty consists of going round and round the earth to see that all is safe [Heizer 1968:20].

Whether the Chumash held a similar belief or not is unknown, but one interesting rock-art depiction from a site (SLO-211) near San Luis Obispo is suggestive of a similar concept (Thomas Blackburn, personal communication 1977). This painting consists of a large disc (the same shape noted for various worlds in Chumash cosmology [Blackburn 1975]), which has been quartered with Type Ib aquatic elements (Fig. 8). In turn, each quadrant has been filled with a single aquatic motif, the finned Type Ib, which Hoover (1968) described as alternately executed in solid red pigment or red pigment outline. Since the disc has been painted on the ceiling of the cave, it is entirely possible that the depiction represents the Upper World, and that the central, circular element might well be a representation of Polaris, the most important supernatural among the stars and considered the being around whom all other supernaturals revolved (Hudson and Underhay 1978:100-102). Similar to the Middle World

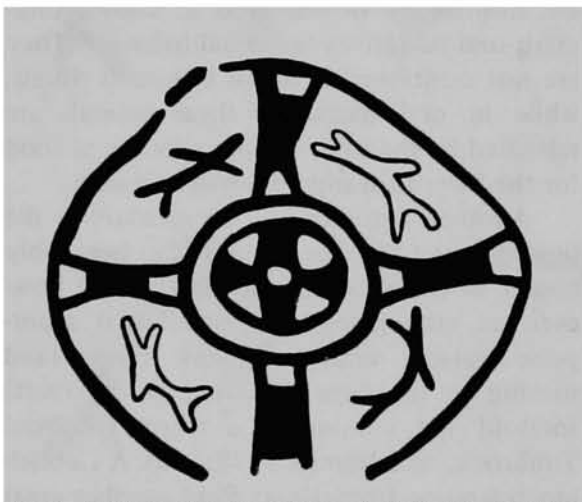


Fig. 8. Painted disc on ceiling of SLO-211, showing Type Ib and Ib aquatic forms, red. (Source: Lee n.d.)

upon which people resided, the Upper World was also doubtless surrounded by a great ocean. Conceivably then, the depiction could represent celestial porpoises circling the great seas surrounding the Upper World.

A more fitting aquatic animal for the disc, however, is not so much the porpoise as it is the swordfish. Bowers (1878:319) reported that the Santa Rosa Island Chumash worshiped the swordfish. Rosario Cooper, one of John P. Harrington's consultants for the Obispeño Chumash related that

when the old women were gathering clams at Avila, they would cast offerings of beads, feathers, and tobacco mixed with lime to the swordfish passing offshore. This tobacco recipe also brought on drunkenness and stupor [cited in Greenwood 1972:83].

Other consultants of Harrington told him that the swordfish were very powerful supernaturals, considered the *wot* or chief of all fish, and hunters of whales (Blackburn 1975:94, 102, 175-189, 190-193). Porpoises are not mentioned.

The Kitanemuk, unlike the Gabrielino, believed that it was the Swordfish supernaturals who circled the world, rather than porpoises:

The Kitanemuk also knew of the Central Chumash *?elyewun* or Swordfish, whom they called *papamašryam*. These were eight brothers who lived in a house under the sea near Mugu, sleeping all day and dancing all night. Light was supplied by a creature called *kočeanat*, with an upper torso like that of a man, and a lower body consisting of a burning brand. He sang while the brothers danced. During each song the brothers took turns racing three times counterclockwise around the world. They also hunted whales, tossing them back and forth like balls until they died, then throwing them up on shore [Blackburn and Bean 1978:568].

Chumash narratives tell of similar beliefs, and thus it is entirely likely that for these

people it was the swordfish and not the porpoise who circled the world. In addition, the association of these beings with activities occurring at night suggests that they may well have had celestial counterparts, perhaps recognized among certain stars or constellations which remain unidentified (Hudson and Underhay 1978). From the context of these supernaturals in Chumash narratives there may also be an association with wind or storms, phenomena which Chumash pipe doctors interacted with by blowing smoke and delivering prayers for each of the cardinal directions (Hudson and Underhay 1978:36; Hudson 1979:66-67). The clockwise motion in giving these prayers mirrors the motion of stars circling Polaris, which at least among the Luiseño is the direction taken by the dancers to imitate the movement of these stars (DuBois 1908: 162-164). In terms of Chumash ceremonies, we are told that during the burning ceremony of the things of the dead, the people gathered about the pit "were the stars." Offerings and prayers were made in a clockwise direction and to the cardinal directions for protection from fire, wind, and water. Following the erection of a grave pole called "pillar of the sun," placed over the spot where the burning had taken place, a swordfish dancer would immediately begin to dance near the pole in order to erase all traces of that which had been burned (Hudson *et al.* 1977:48-49, 104). This dance is reported not only for the coastal Chumashan groups, but also for such distant inland peoples as the Kitanemuk (Hudson and Blackburn n.d.:Vol. III). Thus, given the ritual and mythological importance of the swordfish to the Chumash, it is entirely possible that some variants of the aquatic motif (Type IIb) may be *stylized* depictions of this being, especially when associated with storms, winds, or cardinal directions. A *realistic* depiction has also been reported for a coastal site in Santa Barbara County (Grant 1965:81, Fig. 71).

Some researchers, notably Lee (1981), have taken note of the prospects of equating some motifs found in rock art with those depicted upon such material objects as pendants, tablets, tubes, and so forth. Solar and lunar motifs painted on the sunstick is an example in point, with their obvious counterparts in Chumash rock art (Hudson and Underhay 1978:63-66). The aquatic motif has not been previously noted to occur on any material object, although just recently Hudson and Blackburn discovered its depiction on both sides of a stone pipe (T-5983) in the Terry Collection of the American Museum of Natural History (Fig. 9).²

THE PIPE

Collected by A. Barnard in Santa Barbara County in 1881, and later acquired by Terry and deposited in the collections which bear his name (Nelson 1936), the pipe is a dark grey colored steatite. It measures 14.6 cm. in length. The bowl is 2.4 cm. in outside diameter, and 1.7 cm. in inside diameter. The tapering end for the mouthpiece has a 1.2 cm. outside diameter and a 0.6 cm. inside diameter.

The aquatic motif, Type IIb, is present on both sides of the pipe and was made by inlaying tiny, white shell beads flush with the curvature of the stone, set into place with black asphaltum. Although many of the beads are missing, their impressions in the tar indicate that the inlay was originally continu-



Fig. 9. Steatite Pipe with shell bead inlay representing a Type IIb aquatic form, found by A. Barnard in Santa Barbara County in 1881. Length: 14.6 cm. American Museum of Natural History No. T-5983. Photograph by Travis Hudson. Courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History.

ous. Bead diameters range from 2.0 to 2.8 mm., with the central perforation ranging from 0.5 to 1.0 mm. A small, incised band filled with asphaltum is present near the rim of the bowl and completely circumscribes the pipe. The workmanship is excellent.

DATING THE AQUATIC MOTIF

Rock art has been notorious in terms of our inability to date it, but the Terry pipe does provide a means by which to estimate a date for the aquatic motif by dating the pipe upon which it is found. We are assuming that the design as found on the pipe and on rock art is the product of the same, elite entity in Chumash society known as *?antap*. We do know that they were the makers and users of these pipes (Hudson *et al.* 1977; Hudson and Blackburn n.d.: Vol. IV), as well as the artists who undertook the rock paintings (Hudson and Underhay 1978). In short, if the Type IIb aquatic motif as found on the pipe can be dated, the age of its counterpart in rock art can be estimated.

King's (n.d.) results in chronological ordering of various artifacts from the Chumash area provides two approaches to the task of dating the pipe: (1) an age estimate based upon the style and form of the pipe itself; and (2) an age estimate given for the type of shell beads used to ornament it. According to his charts, the style of pipe belongs to the phase 3 historic component of the Late Period (after A.D. 1780, or Spanish occupation), while the beads fall within phase 2 of the Late Period (between A.D. 1500 and 1780). Both age estimates suggest that the pipe, and therefore the Type IIb aquatic motif, was in use around A.D. 1780. Just how much earlier in time the Type IIb aquatic motif may extend is as yet unknown.

IMPLICATIONS

The relatively late date for the Type IIb aquatic motif, as inferred from this meager

evidence, leads to the suggestion that perhaps examples of Chumash rock art are not as old as previously thought. Both Grant (1965) and Clewlow (1978) suggested that the art probably is no older than 1000 years, and Hudson and Underhay (1978:58) also suspected a more recent age for some of the paintings. Given the exposure and potential deterioration of the paintings within the past 100 years (aside from vandalism and the current problems of air pollution), it would indeed seem realistic to consider that some of the surviving examples of the art were probably undertaken within the past 300 years or so. Certainly this now seems to be the case for those paintings which include the Type IIb aquatic motif.

As for the meaning behind the symbol, perhaps we will never know. The data at hand currently indicate that perhaps several symbols have been grouped under the term "aquatic motif." But from the strong correspondences between Chumash beliefs and the painted disc at SLO-211, conceivably a quartered Upper World was inhabited by celestial swordfish who were associated with the winds. That these same beings should also be depicted (as Type IIb forms) in other rock-art panels or upon a steatite pipe would be consistent with the nature of their importance to the Chumash elite who manipulated and worshiped them.

NOTES

1. We thank the following zoologists at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History for their comments on identification: Dr. Charles Woodhouse, Dr. Eric Hochberg, Mr. Paul Collins, Mrs. Janet Hamber, and Mrs. Carre Smith. In addition, we thank Miss Georgia Lee for use of her extensive slide collection on rock art, and Mr. Robert Edberg for locating additional ethnographic data.

2. Dr. Stanley Freed, Curator of Anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History and Mr. Anibal Rodriguez of his staff, kindly allowed Travis Hudson and Thomas Blackburn to study and photograph items in the Terry Collection, and gave permission to publish the photograph of the pipe.

REFERENCES

- Blackburn, Thomas
1975 *December's Child*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Blackburn, Thomas, and Lowell Bean
1978 *Kitanemuk*. In: *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 8, California, Robert Heizer, ed., pp. 564-569. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution.
- Bowers, Stephen
1978 *Santa Rosa Island*. Smithsonian Institution Annual Report for 1877:316-320.
- Clewlow, C. William, Jr.
1978 *Prehistoric Rock Art*. In: *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 8, California, Robert F. Heizer, ed., pp. 619-625. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution.
- Conti, Kathleen
n.d. Slide collection of Chumash Rock Art.
- Dubois, Cora
1908 *The Religion of the Luiseño Indians of Southern California*. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 8(3):69-186.
- Grant, Campbell
1965 *The Rock Paintings of the Chumash*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Greenwood, Roberta
1972 *9000 Years of Prehistory at Diablo Canyon, San Luis Obispo County, California*. San Luis Obispo County Archaeological Society Occasional Paper No. 7.
- Heizer, Robert
1968 *The Indians of Los Angeles County: Hugo Reid's Letters of 1852*. Southwest Museum Papers No. 21.
- Hoover, Robert
1968 *An Unusual Chumash Pictograph*. Berkeley: University of California Archaeological Survey Reports No. 71:117-119.
- Hudson, Travis
1979 *Breath of the Sun*. Banning: Malki Museum Press.
- Hudson, Travis, and Thomas Blackburn
n.d. *The Material Culture of the Chumash Interaction Sphere: Vol. III: Clothing, Ornamentation and Grooming; Vol. IV: Ceremonial Paraphernalia, Games and Amusements*. Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, MS, 5 vols. (in preparation).
- Hudson, Travis, and Ernest Underhay
1978 *Crystals in the Sky*. Socorro: Ballena Press Anthropological Papers No. 10.
- Hudson, Travis, Janice Timbrook, and Melissa Rempe
1978 *Tomol*. Socorro: Ballena Press Anthropological Papers No. 9.
- Hudson, Travis, Thomas Blackburn, Rosario Curletti, and Janice Timbrook
1977 *The Eye of the Flute*. Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History.
- King, Chester
n.d. Tables illustrating chronological ordering of material culture objects for the Chumash area. Set on file, Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History.
- Lee, Georgia
n.d. Slide Collection of Chumash Rock Art.
- 1981 *The Portable Cosmos: Effigies, Ornaments, and Incised Stone from the Chumash Area*. Socorro: Ballena Press Anthropological Papers No. 21.
- Nelson, N.C.
1936 *Notes on the Santa Barbara Culture*. In: *Essays in Anthropology Presented to A. L. Kroeber*, R. H. Lowie, ed., pp. 199-209. Berkeley: University of California Press.

