

An Abalone “Treasure-Pot” from Coastal Southern California

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Introduction

Marine shells containing or having once contained ample amounts of asphaltum are occasionally exhumed from coastal southern California archaeology sites. Some (Fig. 1a, b) undoubtedly functioned to melt and/or store asphaltum (Anon. 1937). More rare are those abalone shells which served as ritual repositories for talismans and/or remains of infants and young juveniles.

On the Channel Islands, large abalone shells once served as one-child ossuaries, the jumbled bones often held in place by generous amounts of tarry material. The example shown in Figure 2 was one of three identical burials found on the west side of Santa Rosa Island in 1934 (Bowers Museum accession notes). It contains the remains of a young juvenile. We AMS dated a small piece of shell from this *Haliotis cracherodii* receptacle. Its radiocarbon age of $3,975 \pm 75$ yrs. BP (AA-3248) is testimony to a funerary practice reaching at least into the Middle Holocene. The specimen (Cat. #9329) resides with the collections of the Bowers Museum of Cultural Art.

Robert Lamb, a Works Progress Administration (WPA) archaeological field foreman, reported that “quite a few” abalone/asphaltum infant interments were discovered at ORA-58 (McKinney 1963). WPA excavations at the San Joaquin Home Ranch Site (CA-

ORA-111) produced two abalone receptacles holding cremation remains and asphaltum. Specimen #2165 (Fig. 3) contained burned fragments of bone, possibly from a child “not more than a month old” (Anon. 1938:49, 127-128, 157). A cardium shell was inverted over this ossuary (see Anon. 1938:127). Specimen #2166 (Fig. 4a) housed “ashes and tiny bone fragments of a child apparently only a few days old” (Anon. 1938:49, 128-129, 160). Three chert bifaces, one knife-like and the other two similar to dart points, reposed amongst the bones and two pecten shells. Another abalone shell (Fig. 4b) covered this receptacle.

Other abalone shells with significant asphaltum and providing containment for artifacts are called “treasure-boxes” (Walker 1936), the most celebrated being the San Nicolas Island specimen of Figures 5 and 6, curated at the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles. Its two abalone shells remain cemented together, and it was only through X-ray analysis (Fig. 6) that the contents could be seen (Walker 1936). Inside are what appear to be shell beads (probably abalone), three shell pendants, possibly two stone knives and a spear or harpoon point, possibly an arrow projectile, and a probable ornament (abalone) of a type known to have been sewn on garments (Walker 1936).

We speculated that the unprovenienced abalone shell filled with asphaltum (Figs. 7, 8) and housed at the Bowers Museum of Cultural Art concealed treasure

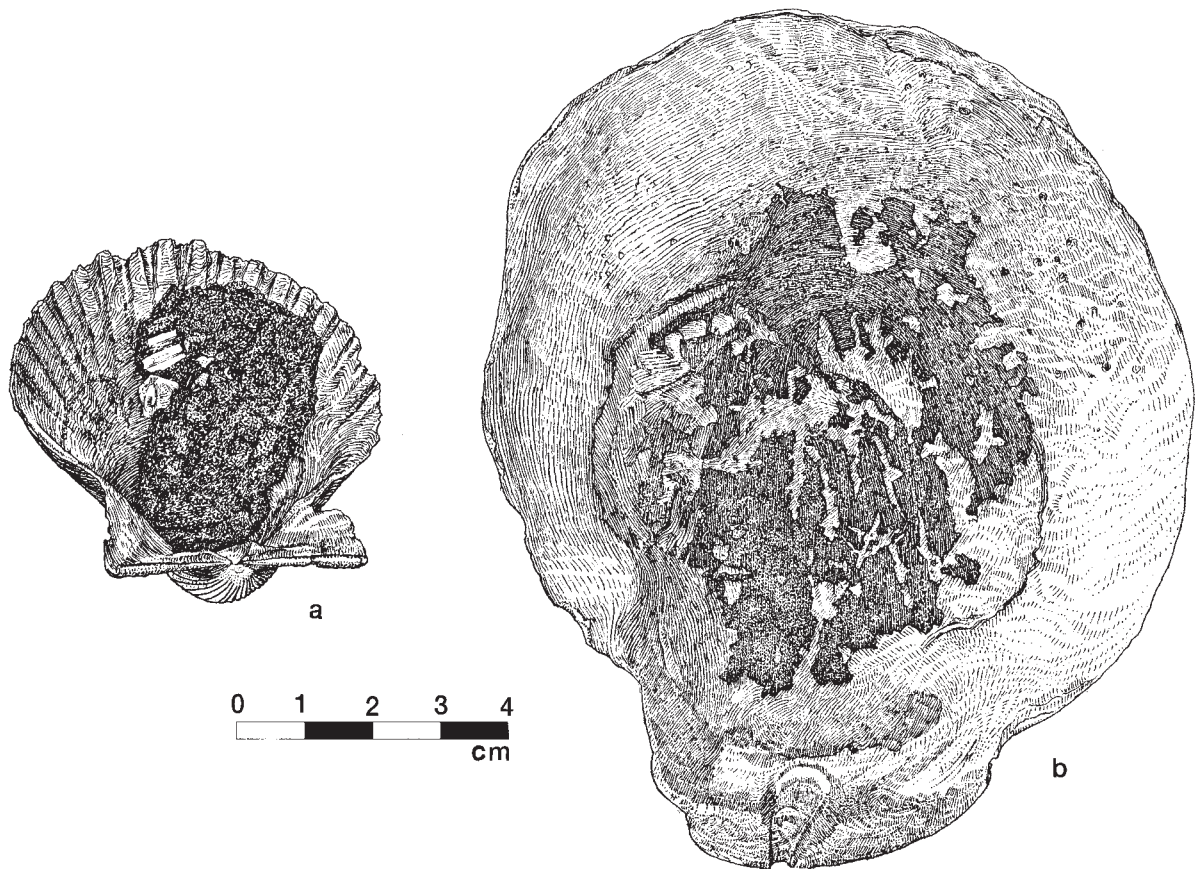


Fig. 1. Probable asphaltum melting pots. a) *pecten* shell, CA-ORA-119-A; b) *Hinnites giganteus* shell, CA-ORA-106.

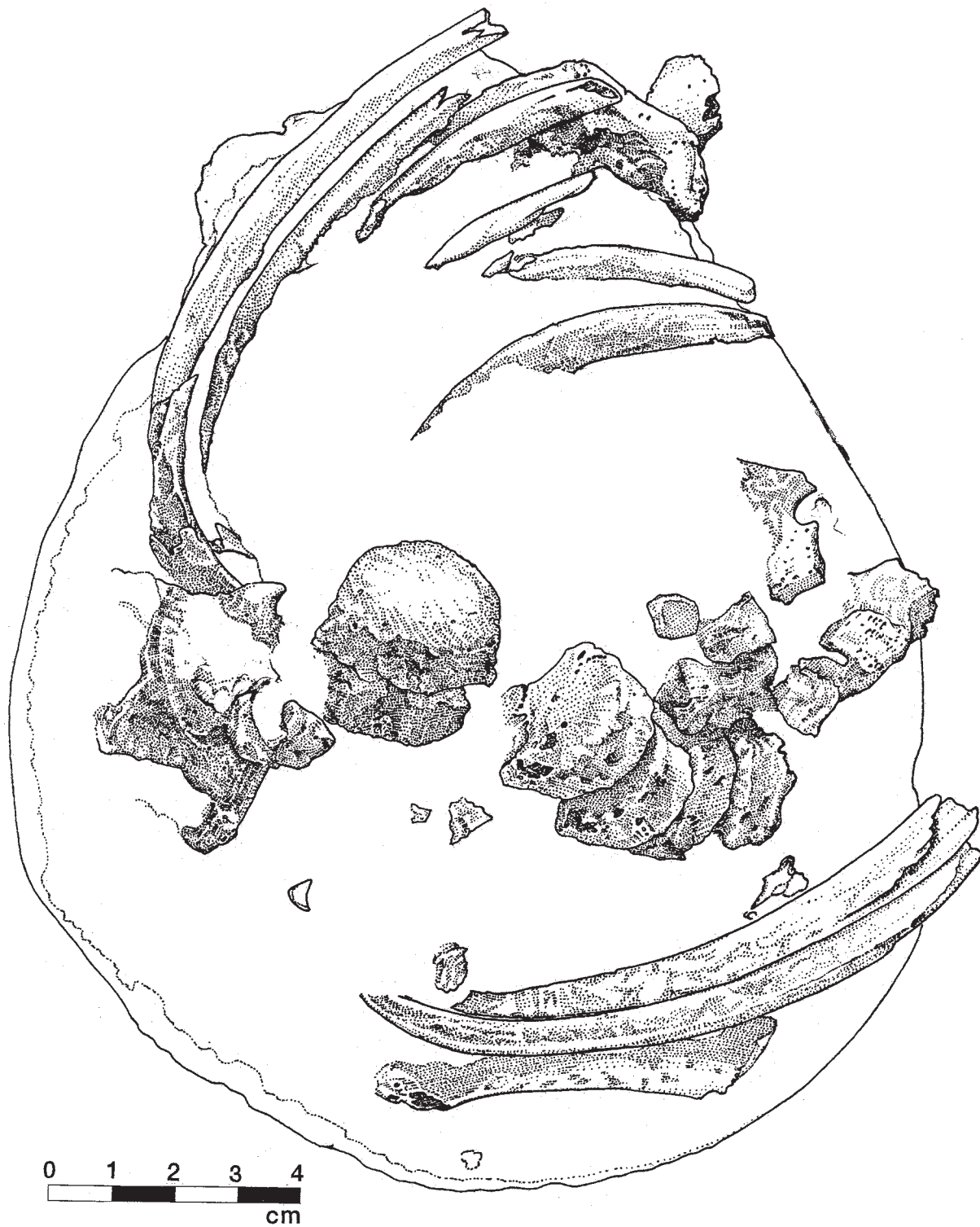


Fig. 2. *Haliotis cracherodii* ossuary bowl from Santa Rosa Island. Asphaltum indicated in white, rather than black, to allow better definition to observe the skeletal elements.

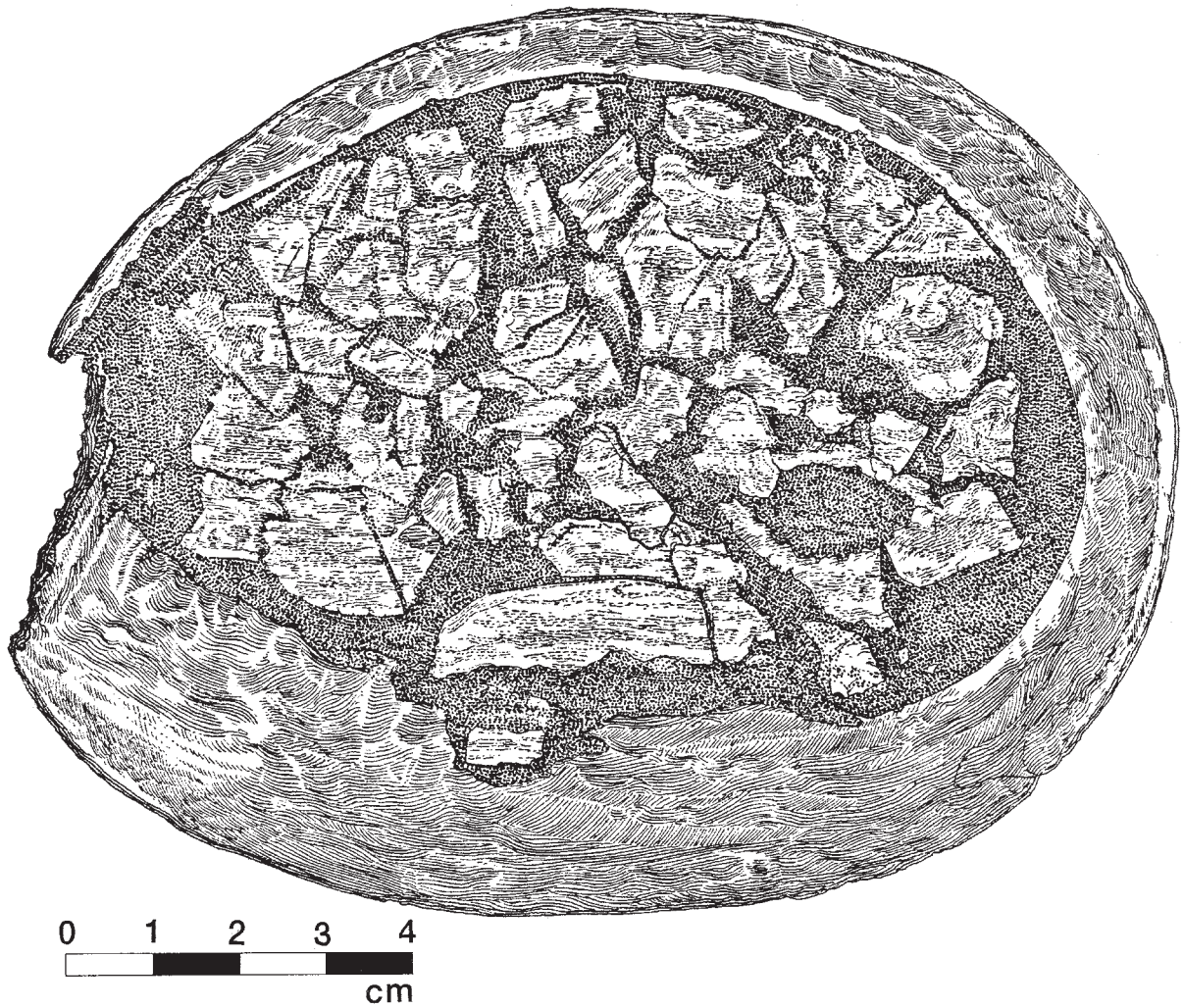


Fig. 3. Cremation receptacle for infant; coated with asphaltum. Specimen #2165, San Joaquin Home Ranch Site (CA-ORA-111). Rendering after drawing by an anonymous WPA artist (Anon. 1938:127).

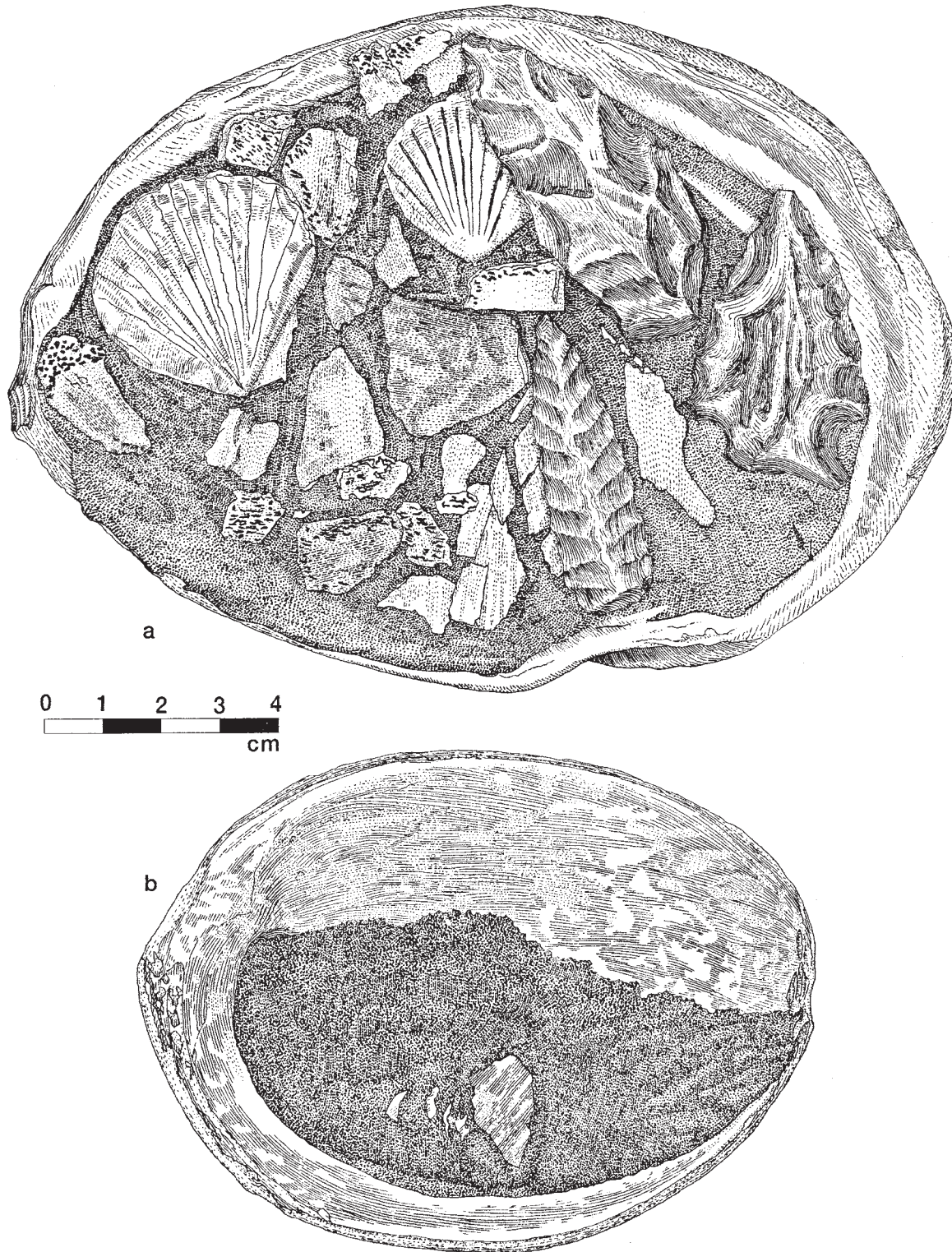


Fig. 4. CA-ORA-111 Cremation. a) Infant bones with burial goods (knife and two projectile shaped artifacts) in asphaltum lined abalone shell. Specimen #2166; b) abalone with asphaltum covering specimen #2166. Renderings after drawings by an anonymous WPA artist (Anon. 1938:129).



Fig. 5. San Nicolas Island treasure-box from the Southwest Museum, Los Angeles collection. After Walker (1936:134, Fig. 1). Shown approximately actual size.

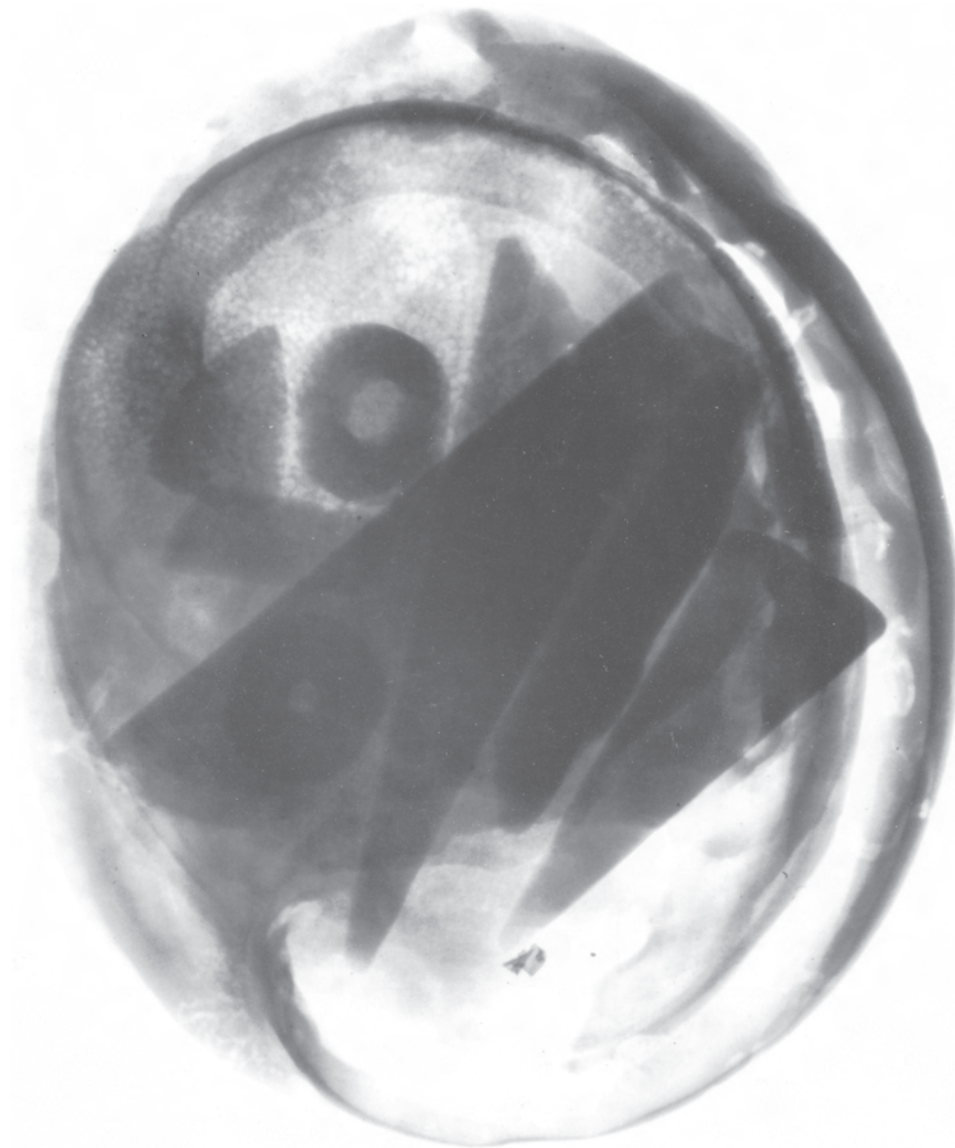


Fig. 6. X-ray photograph of San Nicolas Island treasure-box. Courtesy of the Southwest Museum, Los Angeles. Photo #N.2817. Shown slightly larger than actual size.

objects which might likewise be revealed using X-ray technology. This piece had originally piqued our curiosity for the fact that the asphaltum filling its interior had been carefully laid in place, differing markedly from the expected messy look for a melting receptacle.

The Artifact

Unlike the Southwest Museum treasure-box, the Bowers Museum *Haliotis cracherodii* specimen is a single shell. It is 12.7 cm long, 9.7 cm wide and 2.8 cm high, and weighs 248 g. Provenience is lacking, and no museum accession number appears on the artifact. It is housed among local artifacts, a fact favoring the strong possibility of an origin in or near Orange County.

A small piece of the abalone shell was dated at the University of Arizona using the AMS radiocarbon technique. The radiocarbon age is 894 ± 50 years BP. The calibrated age (using the University of Washington Quaternary Isotope Lab Radiocarbon Calibration Program 1987, Rev. 2.0) is 792 BP, or AD 1158. The calibrated age ranges obtained from intercepts (Method A) are:

at 1-Sigma

cal AD 1033-1143 (917-807) 1148-1212 (802-738)

at 2-Sigma

cal AD 1033-1009 (947-941) 1020-1260 (930-690)

Clearly, this is a Late Prehistoric period artifact.

The object was taken to Saint Joseph Hospital in the City of Orange where, under the direction of Mr. Randy Brooks, Department of Radiology, two X-ray photographs revealed an object with lozenge-shaped outline resting within the tarry matrix (Fig. 9).

The 18 mm long, 11 mm wide “treasure” (amulet/charm?) is of undetermined material. Nor is it presently possible to know whether or not it is a man-made object. Since the receptacle is a single shell, we choose to call it an abalone “treasure-pot” rather

than a treasure box. Other items near this object appear bead-like. Dr. Werner Roeck and colleagues at the University of California Irvine Medical Center, Department of Radiology, examined the X-ray images but recognized no osteological elements within the asphaltum. At one time, we had also speculated that it might contain a fetus.

Concluding Thoughts

We suspect that there are other similar “treasure-boxes” and “treasure-pots” in museum collections that have not been investigated to learn their contents. Where are the two mortuary associated artifacts, possibly treasures-boxes, from a Carpinteria site cursorily described by Ford (1887:14)? One was described as asphaltum enclosed in two *Mytilus* valves, and the other as asphaltum held in a *Haliotis cracherodii* shell covered by a *Lottia gigantea* shell. With such spare information, one wonders whether the first object might not have been a mussel shell rattle (see Hudson and Blackburn 1986:333), an enigma easily addressed employing x-ray technology, should the artifact be located. Are there additional objects cataloged as melting pots that might be something else? We encourage curators and archaeologists to employ relevant remote sensing analyses to reveal the contents of certain asphaltum filled shells, particularly ones whose petroleum appears to have been placed with special care into the receptacle.

Acknowledgements

We are indebted to several persons connected with St. Joseph Hospital, Orange, California. It was through the efforts of Randy Brooks, Administrative Director of the Department of Radiology, Bill Hicks, Diagnostic Radiology Manager, Ginny Burger, Radiology Coordinator, and Ed Fernandez, a radiologic technologist, that we were able to secure X-ray photographs showing the artifact or manuport contained in the Bowers Museum abalone shell. We thank Dr. Werner

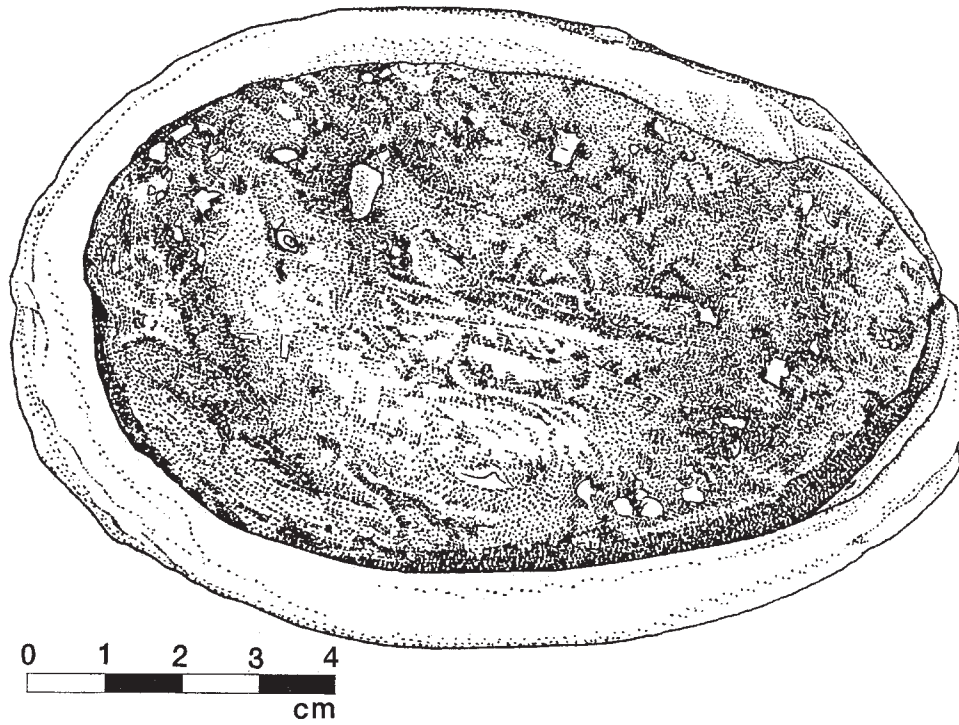


Fig. 7. Haliotis cracherodii "Treasure-pot." Length is 12.7 cm. Courtesy of Bowers Museum of Cultural Art.



Fig. 8. Photograph made using the negative of an X-ray photograph of the Bowers Museum "treasure pot."

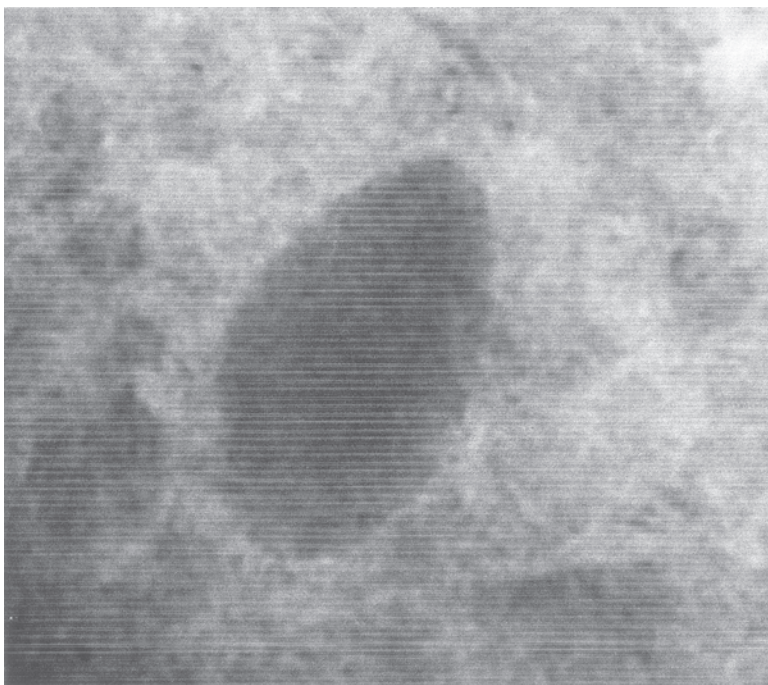


Fig. 9. Close-up of lozenge-shaped "treasure" object seen in X-ray of Fig. 8.

Roech, M.D. and several of his colleagues at the UCI Medical Center Radiology Department for further assessing the X-ray evidence. We are indebted to Dr. Austin Long, Professor of Geosciences, University of Arizona, and to the NSF Accelerator Facility for Radioisotope Analysis, Department of Physics, University of Arizona, for helping us secure the two AMS dates reported above. The Accelerator Facility is funded in part by NSF Grant No. EAR-85-12761. We appreciate the efforts of Ms. Kim Walters, Director, Braun Research Library, Southwest Museum, Los Angeles, who supplied us with the photograph of Figure 6. Alice Bryant, Bowers Museum of Cultural Art, provided us with collection assistance. Joe Cramer rendered the illustrations of Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 7. Laura Mitchell helped the senior author locate the McKinney interview with Robert Lamb from within the Pacific Coast Archaeological Society Library. Ken Stumpff (Cypress College Audio-Visual Department)

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