

An Unusual Feature at the Malaga Cove Site: A Conglomeration of Asphaltum Tarring Equipment, Magico-Religious Objects, and Much More

Henry C. Koerper and Joe Cramer

Abstract

An archaeological feature discovered in 1941 at CA-LAN-138 by Thomas Tower I receives descriptive treatment that draws on the relic collector's notes and photographs and on a photographic record and measurements of artifacts compiled by Tower's grandson, Thomas Tower III. The feature, probably dating to a later phase of the Del Rey Tradition, contained a great diversity of artifacts, including arrow and spear points, a dagger, a knife, drills, shell fishhooks, a metate, manos, hammerstones, abalone shells, a shaman's sucking tube, a ceremonial pestle, donut stones, a quartz crystal, a smoking pipe, pigment pots, comals, a ladle, figurines, and varied ornaments. Of particular interest are those objects that relate to the processing and application of asphaltum—an asphaltum melting pot, tarring pebbles, and a very large piece of bitumen. The concentration of these items (the discoverer's "Find No. 3") presents a functional conundrum that is briefly visited at essay's end.

Introduction

Thomas Tower's typed manuscript (1942) focused particularly on the relic collectors' discoveries of "grouped finds" at CA-LAN-138, the Malaga Cove site, immediately north of Palos Verdes Peninsula (see Hunter and Koerper, this *PCAS Quarterly* double-issue: Figure 4). There were 12 "grouped finds" in all, 11 of them archaeological features (see Koerper et al. 2014; Koerper and Peterson 2014). Unfortunately, Tower did not supplement his manuscript with a plan view map that might indicate his discoveries in

relation to one another or to local topography. Apparently, no camera documented his finds in situ.

The "grouped find" with the greatest number and broadest array of artifacts was "Find No. 3," which Tower also labeled "The Sunken Dwelling of the Chumash," but less formally Tower referred to this feature as "a headquarters of importance," and even less formally as "a veritable gold mine" (T. Tower to E. Walker, letter, 20 June 1941; Edwin F. Walker Collection, Braun Research Library, Autry National Center). "Find No. 3" housed the tar-melting stone crucible pictured on the front cover of this *PCAS Quarterly* double-issue and also shown in Figures 5 and 6 of the study directly preceding the present article. Additional asphaltum-related items suggest the possibility that "Find No. 3" functioned, at least in part, as an asphaltum workshop. Other contents of the feature lack prima facie connection to either the processing or application of bitumen. Herein, "Find No. 3" is characterized by its contents, followed by cursory notes regarding interpretation of this so-called "Sunken Dwelling of the Chumash." In Thomas Tower's day, assemblages with "fancier" artifacts, particularly artifacts fashioned of steatite, were sometimes ascribed to the Chumash even if unearthed in territory occupied by the ethnographic Gabrielino/Tongva, as is the case here.

“Find No. 3” Characterized

Recent articles (Koerper et al. 2014; Koerper and Peterson 2014; Hunter and Koerper, this *Quarterly* double-issue) provide information to support ascription of Tower’s “grouped finds” to Walker’s (1937, 1951) Level 2 and to infer that Level 2, or what Tower called “Stratum 3,” reflected mostly the Del Rey Tradition (see Sutton 2010). Indeed, “Find No. 3” is almost certainly a manifestation of one of the later phases of the Del Rey Tradition.

Tower reported that the artifacts of this “grouped find” lay just inside an “11 ft” (3.4 m) “circular depression” in “black soil” that sat on top of “the original hard sand clay” (Walker’s Level 1). There were no human skeletal remains associated with this so-called “sunken dwelling.”

Tower’s manuscript provides a listing of contents, generally spare on details. Some artifacts he measured (only one dimension; English system), but others were not measured. It is possible to confidently match only a small number of artifacts listed in the manuscript to artifact displays photographed over seven decades ago by the relic collector. Some specimens listed by Tower can be matched to artifacts seen in photos taken by Tower’s grandson who holds an incomplete collection of items recovered at the Malaga Cove site. There is no information available on the feature’s construction, little description bearing on internal organization of “grouped finds,” and nothing about external associations.

Tower was particularly pleased with his discovery of the asphaltum melting pot. In correspondence to Southwest Museum archaeologists (T. Tower to Mark Harrington and E. Walker, letter, 6 December 1940; Edwin F. Walker Collection, Braun Research Library, Autry National Center) he reported his recent acquisition of a “steatite cooking pot with handle, perfect in every way and well coated with tar.” He supposed

that it must have been used in basket work because it contained 10 small pebbles coated with asphaltum, and he indicated that Walker and Harrington would soon receive a picture of these 11 artifacts alongside many other artifacts. The photograph later received by the two archaeologists was published in Koerper et al. (2014:27, Figure 7).

Tower (1942) described what lay beneath the crucible—“a chunk of asphaltum weighing about 4 pounds.” Less than “1 foot away” were 16 additional tarring stones, and close-by lay 31 more tarring stones. Also in the feature were four abalone shells stacked together, two of which contained tarring pebbles (T. Tower to E. Walker, letter, 5 February 1941; Edwin F. Walker Collection, Braun Research Library, Autry National Center). Those two shells holding tarring pebbles appear with their contents in another previously published photograph (see Koerper et al. 2014:26, Figure 6).

“Find No. 3” held a possible cetacean effigy (specimen TT#16), previously discussed and illustrated in Koerper et al. (2014:30, Figure 11). Other artifacts included a “steatite shaman’s tube” (see Figure 1a) (also Koerper and Peterson 2014:55, Figure 8 [bottom row, far left]). Tower’s functional interpretation followed from his view that the hole at the tube’s small end was too large for a smoking pipe.

The illustration of this tubular artifact as well as all other figures presented below were possible thanks to photographs of his family’s collection taken by Thomas Tower III. These photos contained both horizontal and vertical metric scales.

A small, smoothly finished, red ochre daubed steatite smoking pipe (Figure 2a) turned up in the “sunken dwelling.” Any stem mouth piece it might have had (a hollow bird bone tube or hollow reed?) was missing when the pipe was unearthed. In correspondence from Thomas Tower I to Edwin Walker (letter, 20 June

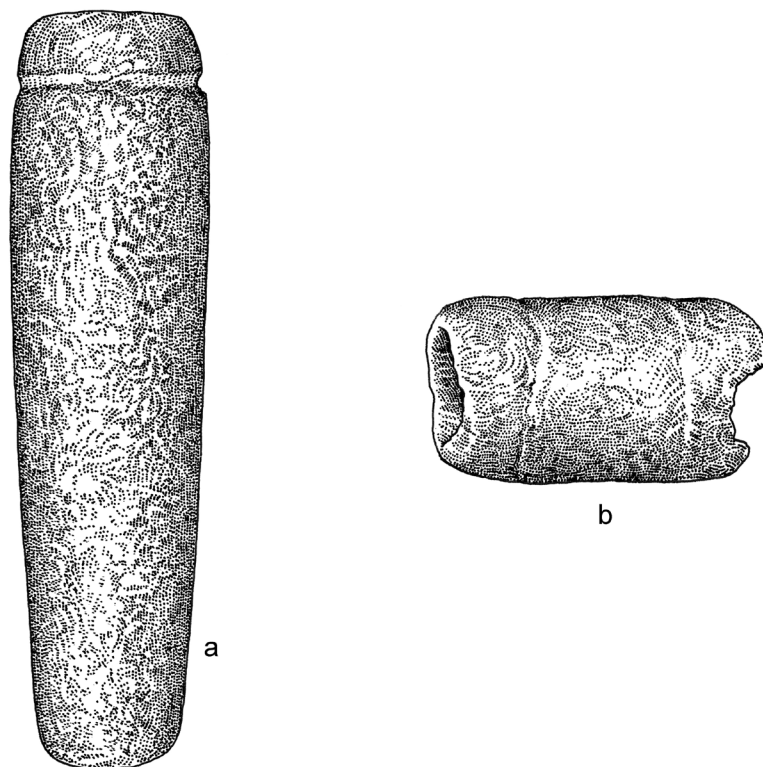


Figure 1. Tubular objects from "Find No. 3." (a) Shaman's sucking tube (l. = 107 mm); (b) Fragment of possible sucking tube (l. = 44 mm). After photographic images provided by Thomas Tower III.

1941; Edwin F. Walker Collection, Braun Research Library, Autry National Center) one reads that the pipe from "Find No. 3" was "plain," which allowed us to distinguish this specimen from two other pipes that appear with it in a photograph taken by Thomas Tower I (see Koerper and Peterson 2015:55, Figure 8, bottom row) and in color images sent to us by Tower's grandson (Figure 2). The steatite pipe of Figure 2b and the (sandstone?) pipe of Figure 2c both exhibit a deftly carved groove just below the bowls' rims, disqualifying each pipe from a characterization of "plain." The two grooved pieces are of uncertain provenance.

Another smoking pipe held out-of-state by the Tower family is far from "plain," having very busy patterned incising (Figure 3). This (consolidated sandstone?) piece is like the other pipes in being absent a mouth-piece. It had received a coat of reddish pigment. There is no mention of this object in Tower's 1942 manu-

script, and thus, if it is from Malaga Cove, it was not associated with any "grouped find."

Another example of geometric decoration is seen in Figure 4, which illustrates a sherd out of what was possibly a shaman's sucking tube. Tower referred to the specimen as "one half of a finely marked pipe." It did derive from the "sunken dwelling," or "headquarters of importance." The sherd's material is currently unidentified.

Other "Find No. 3" items included two small, steatite pigment pots. One (Figure 5a) held gray-blue powder, possibly azurite (see Campbell 2007:43–44), and it also contained a small, bug-shaped, steatite pendant. Tower's outline drawing of the ornament indicates it was probably drilled side to side, rather than front to back, for suspension (T. Tower to E. Walker, letter, 5 February 1941; Edwin F. Walker Collection, Braun Research Library, Autry National Center). Two scallop



Figure 2. Smoking pipes. (a) From "Find No. 3" (l. = 58 mm); (b) Provenance uncertain (l. = 68 mm); (c) Provenance uncertain (l. = 74 mm). Images courtesy Thomas Tower III.



Figure 3. Smoking pipe with geometric incising, uncertain provenance (l. = ca. 60 mm). Image courtesy Thomas Tower III.

Figure 4. Fragment of a geometrically decorated tubular object from "Find No. 3" (l. = 48 mm). Image courtesy Thomas Tower III.

shells covered this small paint pot; the pot and both shells appear at the very middle of an artifact display photographed by Tower ca. 1940 (see Koerper et al. 2014:26, Figure 6).

The second pigment pot (Figure 5b) had once contained red ochre powder. The outer surfaces of the container were daubed with red pigment. Both pots are seen in another photo taken by the relic collector who had laid out a rug over a set of stairs on which he posed some of his treasures; refer to Figure 8 in Koerper and Peterson (2014:55) to see on the second step, front row, left to right, the following: (1) the broken tubular object seen in Figure 1b; (2) the pigment pot that held gray-blue paint (Figure 5a); (3) the pigment pot that had held red ochre (Figure 5b); and (4) a very tiny, remarkably symmetrical delicate cup, not from “Find No. 3,” but rather from “Find No. 4.”¹

Yet more steatite artifacts were recovered from the “Find No. 3” feature—a “whale charm” (see Koerper, Snyder, et al., this *PCAS Quarterly* double-issue: Figure 8b); three figurines (not further described); three more pendants (none further described); four beads; three comales, from “6 in” (15 cm) to “8 in” (20 cm) in diameter; a spoon or ladle (Figure 6a). This last noted item appears in a photograph taken by Thomas Tower I (see Koerper et al. 2014:26, Figure 6, top row, fourth from right).

The list of artifacts continues—a piece of “cinnabar paint;” five abalone shell buttons with diameters ranging from “1 in” to “3 in;” a “4.5 in” (diameter) “whale skull button;” three shell fish hooks; three “jig hooks” (two of bone and one of flint); a “5.5 in” long, round tapering punch; and three cowry pendants. A “ceremonial” pestle, its proximal end sporting a “three ringed head” (Figure 6b) was also listed; material type was not given. That artifact appears in the top row (fourth object from left) of a Tower photograph (see Koerper et al. 2014:26, Figure 6).

Other large stone items from the “sunken dwelling” include four donut stones with “straight holes,” which the self-described “amateur archaeologist” took to be club heads. The largest of these four (“4 in” diameter) is crafted of “green stone steatite” (serpentine), and the piece is said to be “marked,” or incised, and shows evidence of having once been decorated with shells. It is likely that all four appear among an array of eight donuts spread along the middle stair of an artifact display in a ca. 1940 photograph (see Koerper and Peterson 2014:55, Figure 8). These “donuts” were more likely ceremonial than practical (see Koerper 2006).

Among the flaked stone tools there were 11 drills, six arrowheads, six spear points, a dagger, and a knife. Biface morphologies were not noted, and there are no illustrations of such to help with temporal placements. Tower listed 14 hammer stones, a “square” ca. 35 cm x ca. 40 cm metate, and six manos. Further, a “conglomerate” ball of crystals turned up in the feature.

Interpretation

“Find No. 3” offers an interpretive challenge. The feature contained what may have been an asphaltum workshop, perhaps the best example of such in the regional archaeological record; yet, it also housed magico-religious artifacts and a variety of tools. Although Tower referred to this feature as a “sunken dwelling,” there is little to recommend it as a place of domestic activities (food preparation, dining, sleeping). No domestic refuse was reported. Perhaps the feature was an all-purpose storage area that just happened to house objects used to process and apply bitumen. No human bones were reported for the feature; consequently, if its contents were mortuary related, a Mourning Ceremony cache comes to mind. Perhaps the varied items represent one individual’s belongings that were purposefully covered over upon the owner’s demise, or then again all these objects may have been lost on the occasion, say, of an earth

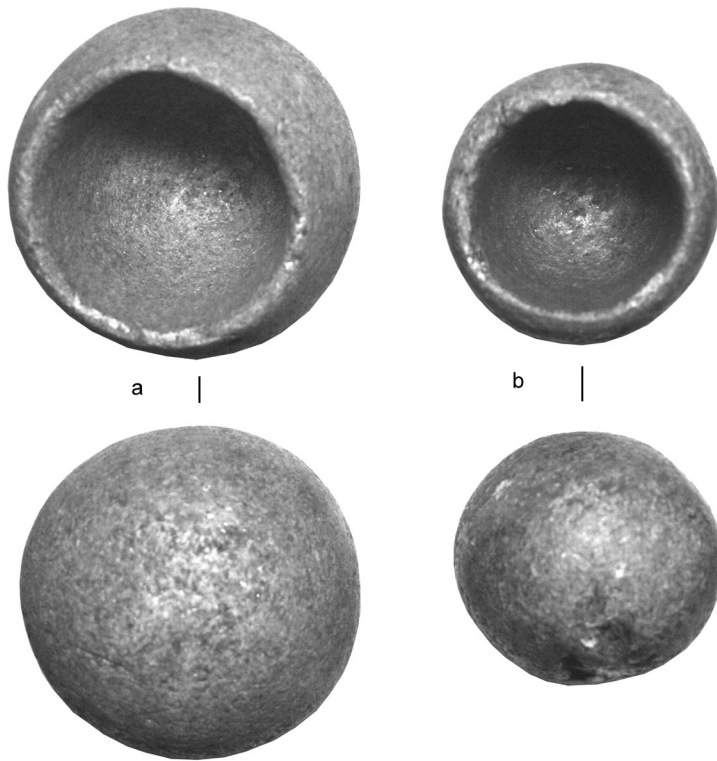


Figure 5. Pigment pots from "Find No. 3." (a) Pot contained gray-blue powder (diam. = 47 mm; ht. = 39 mm); (b) Pot contained red ochre (diam. = 34 mm, ht. = 40 mm). Images courtesy Thomas Tower III.

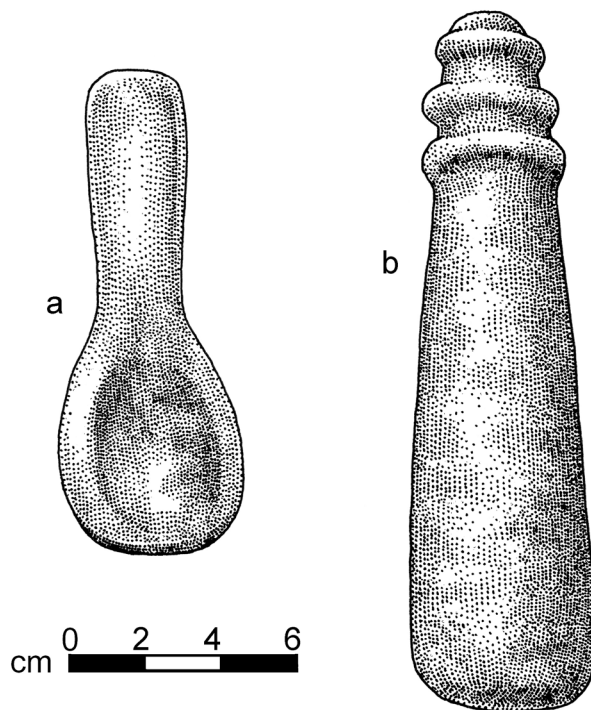


Figure 6. Artifacts from "Find No. 3. Scale only approximate. (a) Steatite spoon/ladle; (b) Pestle with three rings encircling the proximal end. After photograph taken by Thomas Tower I and provided by Thomas Tower III.

slide. What is certain is that uncertainty will continue to attend this unusual mix of artifacts found confined within such a small area.

End Note

1. Thomas Tower's "Find No. 4" with its delicate, remarkably symmetrical, small cup was from what Walker (1937, 1951) designated as Level 2. A draft manuscript in progress gives attention to "Find No. 4" and will highlight the tiny steatite cup that perhaps had connected to toloache ritual (see Hudson and Blackburn 1986:289–290; Wallace 2002).

Acknowledgments

We are especially grateful for the assistance and support of Thomas Tower III. We appreciate the encouragement of several persons associated with the Point Vicente Interpretive Center, Rancho Palos Verdes. We thank reviewers Dr. Richard Ciolek-Torello and Sherri Gust for their helpful comments.

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