

Selected Palos Verdes Peninsula Artifacts from the John Kohler Collection

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Abstract

The earliest formal public display of Palos Verdes Peninsula artifacts that occurred on the peninsula featured the collection of John Kohler. Only a small portion of Kohler's accumulation of Native objects are presently accounted for, all now owned by and stored with the Rancho de los Palos Verdes Historical Society and Museum.

A brief sketch of the virtually forgotten relic collector is provided. Four of the sequestered Kohler specimens were chosen for illustration and discussion, each selection based on presumed ability to help draw attention to the scientific resource. The several showcased objects are: (1) a roughout for a tubular artifact; (2) a probable manufacturing die for shaping certain kinds of stone items; (3) a large barrel-shaped perforated stone, probably once dedicated to magico-religious purpose(s); and (4) an unusual sinker for a fishing line or fishnet.

Introduction

William Wallace was referring to the Malaga Cove site (CA-LAN-138) when he wrote:

There are ... half a dozen or so substantial collections in private hands. Brought together and carefully analyzed, these materials would certainly enlarge knowledge of this important archaeological site's prehistoric past [Wallace 1986:27].

Efforts are already begun to examine certain of these minimally acknowledged collections and to publish some level of characterization for each, thereby alerting practitioners and consumers of regional archaeological science to the disposition of several

currently or previously privately owned accumulations of artifacts. The program underway turns especially on identifying collections and featuring selected artifacts from among their inventories. Specimens recently chosen for published description and/or illustration were those deemed best suited to elevating the profile of collections containing Malaga Cove materials

Since 2014, several *PCAS Quarterly* articles have featured LAN-138 artifacts from the family-owned Thomas Tower Collection (see e.g., Koerper et al. 2016). A study of Malaga Cove items within the Harbor College Milo Moore Collection (HCMMC) was just published in Koerper and Hunter (2016), that particular discourse mentioning archaeologist Daniel Foster's (1988) long ago visit to the community college hoping to find "the elusive Kohler Collection," but instead encountering exclusively Milo Moore's extensive donation of relics.¹

A small portion of what Kohler accumulated, now designated the John Kohler Collection (JKC), is owned and curated by the Rancho de los Palos Verdes Historical Society and Museum (RPVHSM). The larger focus of this essay is a selection of artifacts from the JKC.

Kohler (Figure 1) obtained many more artifacts in the Palos Verdes Estates area than the current accounting of JKC specimens. It is reasonably supposed that his searches included work at the Malaga Cove site (CA-LAN-138). Some of Kohler's acquisitions that remain elusive appear in old photographs (see Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 1. John Kohler. *Palos Verdes Bulletin*, April 3, 1926.

Immediately following is a quick sketch of the relic collector, followed by a section that describes, illustrates, and discusses four JKC objects. A summary section finalizes our presentation.

John Kohler

Less biographical detail surfaced on John Kohler than on either of two of his contemporaries, “amateur archaeologists” Milo Stuart Moore (see Koerper and Hunter 2016) and Thomas Tower I (see e.g., Koerper et al. 2014; Koerper and Peterson 2014; Koerper and Cramer 2014). Kohler and Moore had direct interactions; not known, however, is whether Tower and Kohler shared a personal acquaintance.



Figure 2. Display of mounted artifacts found 1923–1924 by John Kohler at Palos Verdes Estates. Photograph by Adelbert Bartlett, taken ca. 1930. Courtesy UCLA Library, Special Collections.

Tower counted Moore not merely a friend but also a source of inspiration (Koerper and Hunter 2016:47).

By at least the early 1920s, John Kohler had garnered a reputation in and around the Palos Verdes Peninsula as an authority on regional fossils and Indian artifacts. Indeed, the Secretary and Manager of the Palos Verdes Homes Associations requested that the collector “act as curator and custodian of all Indian relics, fossils and other interesting subjects of natural history which may be donated to our community association from time to time or discovered on Palos Verdes Estates and ranch” (CRC [name unknown] to J. Kohler, letter, 10 April 1926, Rancho Palos Verdes Historical Society and Museum Papers, Palos Verdes Estates).



Figure 3. Unidentified persons examining Palos Verdes Estates artifacts found by John Kohler. *Palos Verdes Bulletin*, April 3, 1926.

CRC requested that Kohler gather together the varied specimens for proper labeling and to “keep an eye out” for other finds on the association’s property. It was further asked that the principal of the new Malaga Cove School be contacted to discuss a plan for displaying and securely protecting the objects at that facility. Cost estimates for such would be submitted to the Board of Education.

The reader might find amusement in the letter’s final request: “Please take charge immediately of the important stone drawing [see Figure 4; also *Quarterly* front cover] . . . and make sure that nothing happens to it as it will probably turn out to be quite a famous archaeological find and we do not want it stolen or broken.” The “drawing” is neither an ethnographic nor a prehistoric piece, indubitably bogus.

The display at Malaga Cove School unfolded under Kohler’s direction. It was known as the Kohler Collection, and later it was transferred to the Malaga Cove Library. It entered the Rancho de los Palos Verdes

Historical Society as a donation by the Palos Verdes Home Association.

It was previously noted that much of the Kohler Collection is unaccounted for. This is apparent from quick perusal of certain photographs which show Kohler material that is absent from the RPCHSM holdings. Figure 1 pictures John Kohler in 1926 behind a table. He cradles a display of mounted artifacts, all of which he found in 1923 and 1924 (see Figure 2). On that table (see Figure 3) were placed eight or more pestles, a mano, six mortars/bowls, and other items difficult to identify.

John Kohler self-identified as both an amateur archaeologist and an amateur paleontologist. In a 1927 *Palos Verdes Bulletin* blurb (Figure 5), Kohler is pictured holding a geology hammer just above a mastodon tusk. The fossil was discovered by F. H. Racer, a local medical doctor, who, incidentally, was a good friend of Frank Palmer (first director of the Southwest Museum). He was searching a bluff edge just west



Figure 4. So-called “important stone drawing” referred to in an April 10, 1926 letter delivered to John Kohler. The supposed Indian artifact is bogus. Woman not identified. Courtesy UCLA Library, Special Collections.

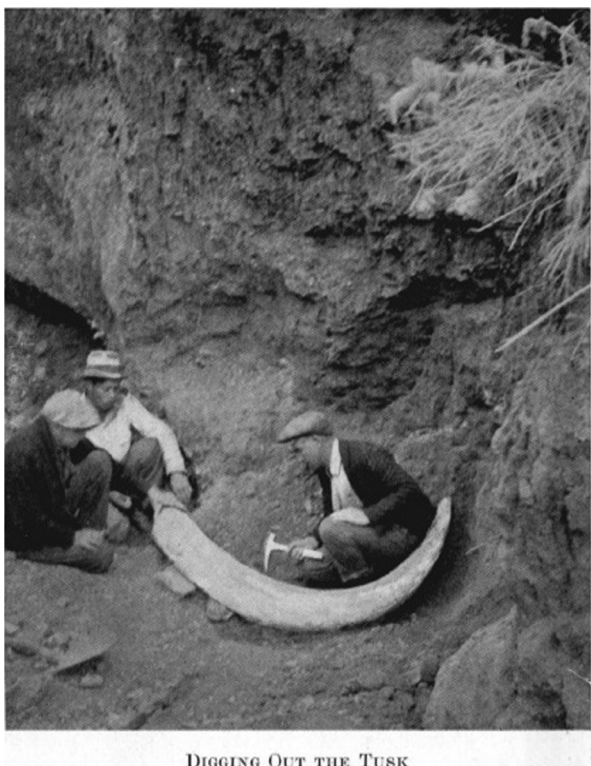


Figure 5. John Kohler, geology pick in hand, excavating a mastodon tusk in May, 1927. Malaga Cove area. Photograph from *Palos Verdes Bulletin*.

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of Malaga Cove School, probably looking for Indian artifacts. Dr. Racer reported his find to Kohler, then a resident of Palos Verdes Estates, who soon after took charge of an effort to extricate the tusk. The *Bulletin* article mentions that Kohler “has taken great interest in finding archaeological and paleontological specimens, and especially in preserving them for inclusion in a museum at Palos Verdes” (*Palos Verdes Bulletin*, May, 1927:7). His fossil interests went beyond vertebrates; for instance, an ancient ammonite was encountered by the authors among the Kohler materials held by the RPVHSM.

Selected Specimens

Roughout for a Tubular Artifact

The cylindrical steatite object shown in Figures 6–8 is most likely a roughout for a smoking pipe, but perhaps for a shaman’s sucking tube. No flaw is evident in either material or artisanship to suggest why manufacture was terminated well short of the artifact’s completion.

The 99 mm long roughout, or blank, weighs 244 g, with diameters at its opposite ends measuring 40 mm and 24 mm. The difference in diameters is perhaps more consistent with a pipe outcome rather than a sucking tube; however, there is uncertainty with a specimen whose shaping was only just begun.

Longitudinally running striae on the circumferential walls (Figure 6) suggest either the action of a stone carving tool whose scraping/cutting edge was irregularly serrated or that of a large grained sanding/abrading stone. The larger terminus was either pecked into its convex shape using a hammerstone or by banging it against an anvil stone (Figure 7). An angular hammerstone had perhaps excavated the shallow depression at the opposite end (Figure 8), preparation, it would seem, for insertion of an abrading drill/reamer to begin hollowing out the chamber that would run



Figure 6. Ninety-nine millimeter long steatite roughout for a tubular artifact. John Kohler Collection.



Figure 7. Convex end of the 99 mm steatite roughout seen in the previous figure.



Figure 8. Pecked depression in the smaller end of the steatite roughout intended to become either a smoking pipe or a shaman's sucking tube.

end-to-end. At this point crafting ceased, the chamber never excavated and outer surfaces never ground and smoothed to effect symmetry commensurate with the skillful work generally witnessed for Native artistry in soapstone.

Had shaping actually continued, perhaps a manufacturing die made of abrasive material such as vesicular basalt would have been employed to reduce and round

the object's ends. Such a die might have possessed some of the features seen for the artifact illustrated and discussed in the section that immediately follows. Further, had manufacture gone forward and the chamber actually biconically drilled, its interior walls might have been straightened and smoothed using a dowel-like wooden implement, operating in rotational and back-and-forth motions through the developing chamber, a task possibly abetted by a fine-grained

abrasive such as pulverized sandstone or siltstone, maybe in a slurry mix. Sharkskin might have effected finer smoothing of outer surfaces.

Kohler's Palos Verdes area find demonstrates that steatite tubular objects were not the exclusive domain of island carvers. The object's material is similar to that of the harder kinds of steatite bowls; the material to craft the specimen might have been a large soapstone pot sherd. Experimental archaeology directed to tubular artifact manufacture is suggested as the basis for a term paper, seminar presentation, or thesis project.

Manufacturing Die?

The specimen pictured in Figures 9–11 recalls a vesicular basalt artifact (Figure 12) from the Dobkin site (CA-ORA-145), whose uncertain function was the focus of a previous *PCAS Quarterly* article. In that study (Koerper and Desautels-Wiley 2009) three hypotheses were proposed to account for the oddly configured object. With its two chambers not conjoined, an unfinished smoking pipe seemed a reasonable idea, as was the suggestion that the artifact had served as a manufacturing die, purposed to producing the sorts of cylindrical objects that gradually narrow to tapered and sometimes rounded ends (e.g., plummet-like charm stones).² Thirdly, perhaps it served as shamanic paraphernalia conducive to prestidigitation, or sleight of hand. While very tentatively favoring a legerdemain hypothesis, Koerper and Desautels-Wiley (2009:131) expressed caution, admitting to no definitive answers regarding not only function but also temporal assignment.

The JKC object found near Malaga Cove is also shaped out of vesicular basalt and similarly has two openings. Whereas the two cavities directed toward the center of the Dobkin specimen are at a more or less 90° angle to one another, an estimate for the angle of intersection of the two cavities of Kohler's artifact is about 120°. Both objects display an overall roundish



Figure 9. Possible manufacturing die made of vesicular basalt. John Kohler Collection.



Figure 10. Possible manufacturing die made of vesicular basalt. John Kohler Collection.

conformation, reflecting, we speculate, intended ease of grasping, lending themselves to employment as a tool in abrading stone.

The Kohler specimen is smaller than the Dobkin object. Its maximum dimension is about 77 mm, and height is about 71 mm, versus 106 mm and 92 mm,



Figure 11. View showing smaller opening of Kohler's possible die.

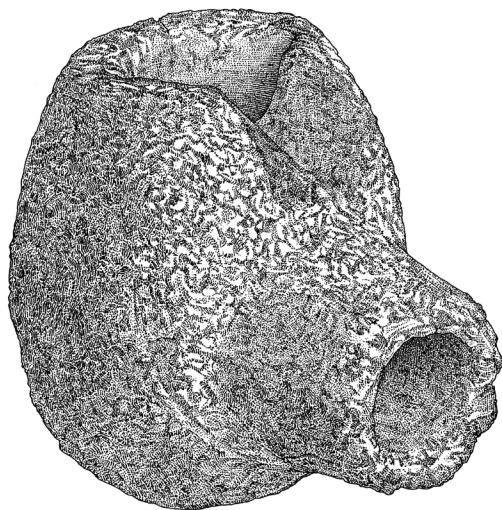


Figure 12. Possible manufacturing die from the Dobkin site (CA-ORA-145).

respectively, for the Orange County artifact. Weight difference is 234 g against 784 g.

The larger opening of the artifact found in the Valmonte district near Malaga Cove is about 35 mm across, its small opening close to 21 mm. There is a lipped

element surrounding this smaller entrance, a remnant of something that had broken away.

Where the cavities meet one another, the intersection is a hole about 7 mm to 8 mm in diameter. Within the larger cavity there appears to be a stain, darker than any other on the object's surfaces. The authors wondered at first whether this might be tobacco residue, although we also wondered whether any smoker would tolerate the harsh texture of a vesicular basalt pipe. Considering that the material offers a most effective abrasive, we lean toward a functional interpretation of the piece as a tool for working stone.

Unusual Barrel-shaped Perforated Stone

The large, centrally perforated (top to bottom), barrel-shaped object (Figures 13–15) is arguably assignable to the kind of coastal southern California artifacts labeled “donut stone” (also “doughnut stone,” “fossil doughnut,” or “donut”).³ If the label is best restricted to toroid-like objects only, such as the utilitarian digging stick weights and the more finely finished, purported ritual/talismanic “donuts,” then the artifact under discussion does not fit the donut standard—better to call it a large, barrel-shaped perforated stone, subsumed along with donuts and certain other kinds of objects under a generic rubric, viz., “large perforated stones.” Some measure of the complexity surrounding study of the functions and meanings of donut-like artifacts and certain other kinds of perforated stones is available from Koerper (2006). While that article draws distinctions between the utilitarian kinds of donuts and the proposed magico-religious kinds of donuts, it proffers the hypothesis that the two categories connect historically and symbolically, the explanation for which turns on a cognitive process labeled “sexualization-sacralization.” Explication of this process is too involved for the purposes of the present article, but a reading of



Figure 13. Barrel-shaped, perforated stone. John Kohler Collection.



Figure 14. Barrel-shaped, perforated artifact seen in previous figure. Height measures 84 mm.

Koerper (2006) should inform persons curious about proposed developments of a number of genres of magico-religious objects in regional iconography purportedly rooted in morphological-driven and behavioral-driven imageries attaching to either food procurement or food processing technologies.

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Figure 15. A third view of Kohler's barrel-shaped artifact.

The dark gray, hard and dense steatite donut weighs 1,010 g. As previously stated, it is barrel-shaped, but imperfectly so. Its maximum width is 90 mm, but width measured transverse to the maximum width is only 76 mm. Its height is 84 mm.

The outer surfaces were likely finished using fine-grained sandstone, siltstone, and/or sharkskin. No evidence points to the specimen having been polished. The surface scar visible in Figure 14 suggests the impact of a metal object, perhaps a shovel or maybe a plow.

The central hole was biconically drilled; its inner walls are very smooth. Perhaps a cylindrical implement or even animal hide with a fine abrasive suspended in a slurry effected evenness to the chamber walls. The central perforation has such a small diameter as to rule out the object as a digging stick weight. The level of craftsmanship is that seen for artifacts with supposed symbolic content apropos for magico-religious purpose. In other words, its primary or sole purpose may have been nonmaterial (e.g., talismanic) and not practical.

Weight for a Fishing Line or Fishnet

The JKC contains an interesting sinker that was attached either to a fishing line or a fishnet (Figures 16).

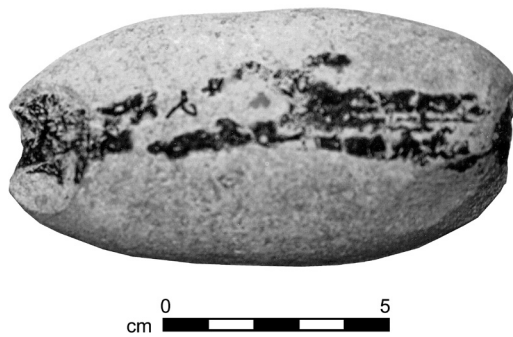


Figure 16. Fishing sinker for either a line or net. John Kohler Collection.

Like the great majority of regional fishing weights, it was made from a beach stone (see e.g., Henshaw 1885:112, 1887:19; Weidman 1973:3; Hudson and Blackburn 1982:159–161). It is notched for attachment rather than grooved. Our intuition is that for south central coastal California there is no great frequency difference between notched versus grooved specimens. The formal regional definition of “sinker” (Hudson and Blackburn 1982:159) does not admit of perforated sinkers, but there are at least some (e.g., Koerper et al. 1988:134, 137–138).

Stark simplicity characterizes notched and grooved line and net weights, and the Kohler piece is no exception. There are, however, things that are somewhat distinctive about this find. First, few if any sinkers have appeared that retain so generous an application of asphaltum. Secondly, cordage that wrapped onto the artifact ran longitudinally rather than laterally. The asphaltum that glued the cordage to the specimen runs end-to-end across both faces rather than encircling at or near the object’s midsection. Bifacial notching occurs at both ends, whereas bilateral trimming seems by far the norm for notched sinkers (e.g., Koerper and Cramer 2015). This waterworn rock was subjected to hammerstone blows to detach the several flakes.

The JKC specimen weighs 255 g. It is 103 mm long, 53 mm wide, and 31 mm thick.

Parenthetically, Koerper and Cramer (2015), which showcased a set of fishnet weights from CA-ORA-291, Huntington Mesa, drew much of its data from a collection long sequestered in the PCAS storage facility at a former Red Car transformer station in Santa Ana. The article’s summary pointed up an object lesson – unexpected rewards await revisits to collections long forgotten or long ignored. A companion piece (Koerper and Lipps 2015) to Koerper and Cramer (2015) that highlighted marine mammal ear bones from ORA-291 concluded with a similar alert to the potential payoffs of seeking out old archaeological collections.

Summary and Final Comments

Of the several featured artifacts, each received some small attention exceeding mere description. The roughout, or blank (Figures 6–8), for what was more likely intended as a smoking pipe but perhaps a shaman’s sucking tube, gave thought to how some Gabriolino (Tongva) tubular steatite artifacts might have been manufactured. The unusual object is evidence that pipe and/or sucking tube craftsmanship was not the exclusive domain of island artisans, but that some unknown amount of such production occurred on the mainland.

The possible manufacturing die made of vesicular basalt (Figures 9–11) recalls a palpably similar object (Figure 12) (see Koerper and Desautels-Wiley 2006) found at the Dobkin site, Huntington Mesa. Together they might recommend formal recognition of a distinct type, a tool used for grinding stone to help shape Late Holocene pipes and sucking tubes, or if of Middle Holocene antiquity, perhaps to shape plummet-like charmstones.

The steatite barrel-shaped, perforated stone (Figures 13–15) adds to a limited count for specimens whose morphologies somewhat mimic the contours of the common barrel, that is, cylindrical and with slightly bulging sides and flattish parallel ends. It is worth

noting that two similar perforated objects illustrated in Hudson and Blackburn (1982:251, Figure 56.1.7, upper row far left and far right) offer pleasing symmetry and display well-smoothed outer surfaces that seemingly belie utilitarian purpose. The image of the far left specimen (MH 84.91.79) reveals a chamber entrance too small to accommodate a digging stick shaft; poor photographic resolution precludes any such estimate for the second barrel-shaped object (MH 84-91-946).

The claim of probable talismanic purpose for the JKC barrel-like stone donut was accompanied by an invitation for readers to visit the article that introduced the concept of “sexualization-sacralization,” (Koerper 2006), a concept proffered to account for certain imageries emerging from the morphologies and kinetics of tools associated directly or indirectly with food procurement and processing, imageries that spawn symbolisms that become embedded in magico-religious communications and ritual contexts.

The short discussion of Kohler’s sinker drew notice of longitudinal notching versus transverse notching. Hopefully, attention to the distinction will help precipitate more detailed examinations and descriptions of a category of fishing equipment that seems understudied in regional literature. Is the modified waterworn pebble a unique example of procurement technology, or are there similar specimens to broach recognition of a sub-type of fishing weight?

The remaining JKC artifacts are few, none of them inspiring for us any point of special interest. They include a small soapstone bowl, a sandstone bowl not much bigger, a number of tarring pebbles, a large chipped stone plane or scraper, a chert core, large chert flakes, and two hammerstones. A catalog of JKC items will be prepared and deposited with the South Central Coastal Information Center, California State University, Fullerton. Much of what John Kohler collected has disappeared, but the

authors are attempting to track down descendants who might yet possess some of his finds or maybe even an inventory.

Endnotes

1. Harry Quinn (personal communication 2016), while a student at Los Angeles Harbor College, accompanied Anthropology Department Professor Patricia Merriam to Milo Moore’s residence to pick up the chemistry teacher’s donation to the junior college. The relic collector was not at home, but the two were met by a person in charge of transferring the artifacts.

Only minor documentation accompanied the “impressive” accumulation of objects, the majority of which carried Channel Islands provenance, mostly San Nicolas Island. Among the objects were two Northwest Coast slave killers. Merriam and Quinn together inventoried the collection. That accounting has not yet been located.

After permission was granted to use two hall cases to display part of Moore’s gift, the professor put her student in charge of the HCMMC. Quinn remained in charge until his graduation when he moved on to CSU Long Beach.

2. The die manufacturing proposal drew some inspiration from Henry Henshaw’s (1887:18–19) hypothesis that some perforated stones of comparatively hard and rough material served such a purpose, albeit secondary, he supposed, to some other use. His Figure 10 illustrated what he considered an ideal example bearing out his idea. He provided description:

It is [crafted of] sandstone, the rough surface of which admirably adapts it for grinding purposes. On either side a cavity is pecked, which is clearly intended to firmly grasp the object. With such a tool, a suitable piece of

steatite could readily be worked down to the cigarshaped [sic] pipes [Henshaw 1887:19].

This description and the illustration belie the notion that this particular object's secondary application was that of a die. Rather, possessing finger cavities, its primary and probably only function was that of a manufacturing tool.

3. Similar barrel-shaped specimens along with pear-shaped stones are sometimes posed with donut stones, possibly implying a shared functional category (see e.g., Rogers 1929:Plate 44, upper panel; Landberg 1965:109; Hudson and Blackburn 1982:251).

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