

# More on *Atulkus*

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## Abstract

“*Atulku*” denotes a ground stone, curvilinear-shaped, magico-religious object that was employed mainly in the female puberty ceremonies of certain southern California Native groups. Two previously unpublished *atulkus* from an Orange County private collection, discovered decades ago in Luiseño and/or Juaneño territories, are herein documented. While vulvar imagery is certainly attached to the sacred artifact, some *atulkus* seem intended to also project phallic imagery, in which case they would have communicated dimorphic sexual symbolism.

## Introduction

Some *Quarterly* readers will be conversant with a type of crescent-shaped, ground stone artifact known by its Diegueño name, *atulku*. Within recent memory the front covers of two *PCAS Quarterly* issues were illustrated with this sacred artifact (Figure 1), each publication carrying an article with *atulku* content (viz., Militello 2009; Koerper and Cramer 2011).

The Cupeño or Luiseño *atulku* seen in Figure 1a and the Luiseño or Juaneño *atulku* shown in Figure 1b were each crafted from a mortar sherd. Among the tribes just mentioned, the essential investment of this sacred vulvar effigy lay in girls’ puberty ceremonies, or “roastings,” but its imagery and/or purpose might also be directed to parturition. Rust explained that at first menses, womanhood initiation rites prepared girls for marriage (1893, 1906; see also Kroeber 1906; Oxendine 1980; Militello 2009:16–17). At Campo, San Diego County, Tipai girls were “steamed” in a pit, and seeds were broadcast onto them with the express intent that they go forth and be prolific (Rust 1906:28–29). Following

this, the initiates were taken to a hillside where they were shown an *atulku* and instructed that it represented the vagina.

With regard to birthing, Waterman (1910:286–287) wrote that during the Diegueño girls’ initiation, the ceremonial crescent-shaped stone was warmed at the fire and placed in turn between the legs of each, “this ostensibly to soften the abdominal tissues, imparting life-long quality of ease and safety during the delivery of offspring (also Kroeber 1925:716).

The primary purposes of this article are: (1) documentation of two additional *atulkus*, both with provenance within the southern Orange County-northern San Diego County area, territories occupied at the Contact period by Luiseño and/or Juaneño peoples; and (2) description and illustration of the two specimens that became available for hands-on observation. The two indubitable *atulkus*, both manufactured out of mortar sherds, and what is very possibly a third *atulku* appear in 1965 photographs of a large residential backyard display of “Indian rocks” (Figures 2–4), that collection presently held and protected by a person who requests anonymity.

This paper does not revisit discussions of why Native peoples chose mortar sherds to craft an effigy type that bore symbology/imagery relating to fecundity. Readers curious about such are directed to an article that links the aetiology of the *atulku* to a culture change process, “sexualization-sacralization” (viz., Koerper 2007); an encapsulation of that article accompanies Koerper and Cramer (2011:78–79). For

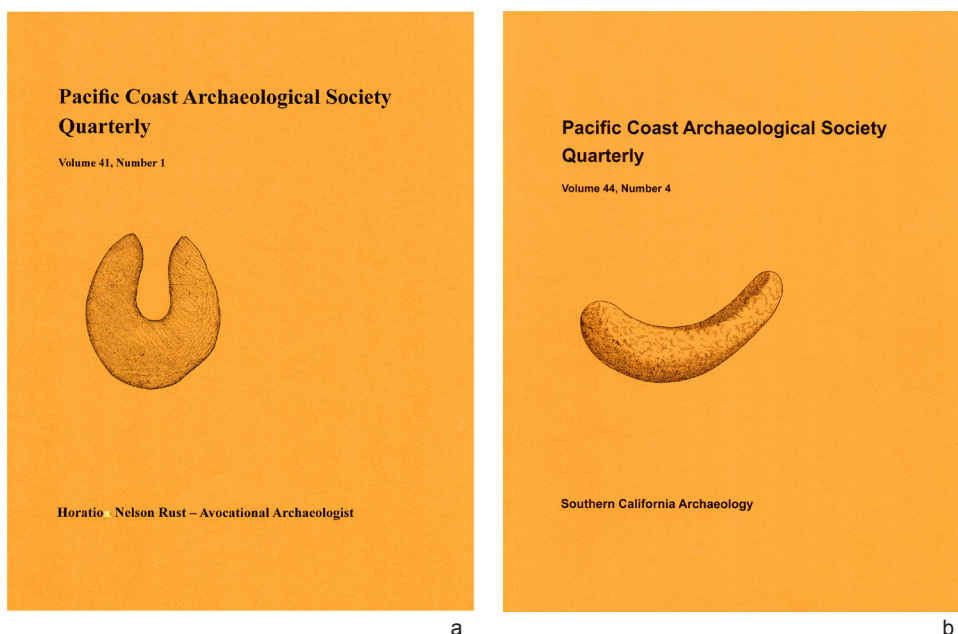


Figure 1. *Atulku* effigies depicted on *Quarterly* covers. (a) Cupeño or Luiseño, 33 cm x 38 cm, fashioned from a granite mortar (Rust 1906:Plate XI); (b) Luiseño or Juaneño, 25 cm (estimated) tip-to-tip length, shaped out of a mortar sherd.

another detailed explication of the process but also of its broader reach into southern California iconography, consult Koerper (2006a).

Our essay will end with a short summary section with some quick food for thought thrown in. Some *atulku* were possibly configured to project dimorphic sexual symbolism, that is, both vulvar and phallic.

### 1965 Photographs

In several photographic images (Figures 2–4) shot in 1965, the two *atulku* presently available for direct observation are positioned near one another in a meticulously ordered display of mostly ground stone milling equipment. One specimen is just to the right of an attractively sculpted mortar, and the other rests on its side, slightly forward of the receptacle. Exhibiting less apparent curvature, a third object reclines closely, just left of the mortar.

Within the total artifactual layout fronting the chain link fence, only these three artifacts are palpably lunate. It seems improbably fortuitous that the not yet located third object would have been placed so close to the others had the arranger of the collection not recognized morphological attributes held in common with the other two. This circumstantial evidence coupled with shape only incompletely observed from photos prompts the authors to extrapolate possible-to-probable *atulku* status for this third specimen.

The “Indian rocks” collection remains intact, albeit in a state of comparative disarray. The two unequivocal effigies were in fact rediscovered well away from their earlier placement among the bulk of the collection, in a garden abutting the property owner’s house. The third specimen did not resurface in a walkover survey of the spacious backyard, and we suppose it became hidden beneath other artifacts during rearrangements of the collection that occurred decades ago.



Figure 2. Backyard display with ground stone artifacts. The two atulkus documented in this article are seen within the oval. A possible third atulku is at left in 1965 photograph.



Figure 3. Backyard layout of artifacts, looking south. Photograph taken in 1965.



Figure 4. Looking north at backyard layout of ground stone artifacts. Photograph taken in 1965.

## Descriptions

The smaller of the *atulkus* available for measurement (Figure 5) weighs 2,770 g. Maximum length of the grayish basalt artifact, tip-to-tip, is ca. 270 mm, and maximum width measures ca. 91 mm. The sherd from which it took shape once occupied a rim position on a mortar, and thus the inner and outer curved surfaces, concave and convex, and the surface that sat atop this segment of a mortar rim, arrived as fait accompli, awaiting an artisan's modifications only along the greater length of the breakage and at the two ends. Pecking with a hammerstone gave shape to a bulbous protrusion at one extremity, rendering it much like the impact end of a pestle (Figure 6). The same sort of pecking shaped the opposite end into a

blunt termination, not unlike the proximal ends of many pestles. The artifact's shape is a fairly good match to the Magee *atulku* featured in Koerper and Cramer (2011), but Magee's artifact is smaller by an estimated 5 cm.

The second *atulku* weighs 10,825 g, close to four times the mass of the smaller (Figure 7). Tip-to-tip it extends ca. 350 mm. Maximum width measures ca. 131 mm. It had been a rim fragment from gray-colored basalt mortar or bowl which must have been huge, over 80 kg we estimate. Further shaping of the sherd would have proceeded much in the manner of what was described for the smaller specimen, however with the larger extremity ending up not nearly as remindful of the pounding end of most pestles.

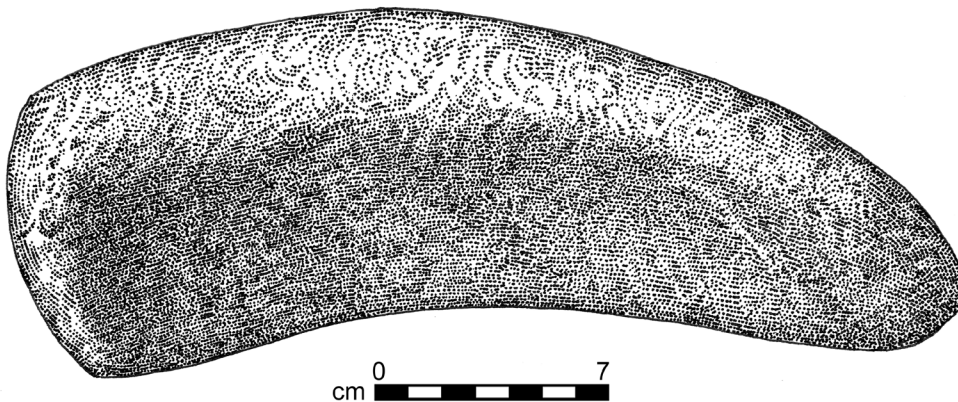


Figure 5. The smaller of the two *atulkus*.



Figure 6. Large end of the smaller *atulku* seen in Figure 5. It looks like the pounding end of a pestle.

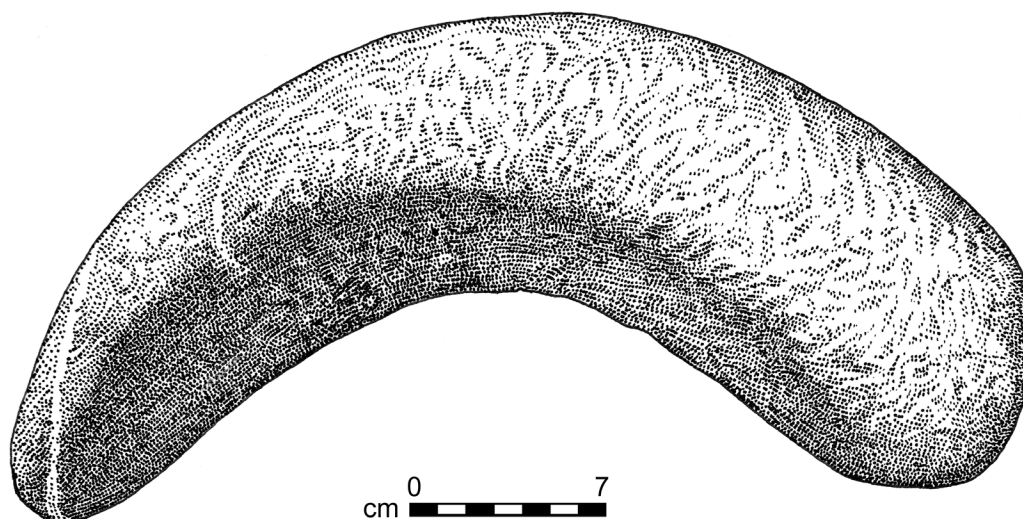


Figure 7. The larger of the two documented *atulkus*.

### Summary and a Concluding Thought

Three crescent-shaped objects are visible in old photographs of an extensive backyard display of ground stone artifacts. Carefully and pleasingly arranged at the time, that collection today, while purportedly not diminished in numbers, presents a much less tidy arrangement of mortars, bowls, pestles, manos, metates, discoidals, etc. Two of the crescent-like artifacts were easily located to allow descriptive treatment and illustrations (Figures 5 and 6), and these specimens are now formally documented as *atulkus*. The third curved object presumably lies hidden among the aggregation of artifacts; if and when the object reappears, it is planned that readers of the *PCAS Newsletter* will be apprised of its shape, measurements, and material and whether it might warrant *atulku* status.

Readers were referred to several sources, viz., Koerper (2006a, 2006b, 2007) and Koerper and Cramer (2011) for more information on *atulkus* and/or “sexualization/sacralization.” Also, readers were promised some food for thought in this section, and here it is.

The *atulkus* of Figures 1b, 5, and 7 all possess a design element at one end that is reminiscent of the pounding surface of many pestles. Further, the three *atulkus* each have an end opposite that recalls the proximal end of many pestles. The curvature of the body of the *atulku* easily invokes the mortar rim or a segment thereof; think of the part standing for the whole. It is recognized in California ethnology and prehistory study (e.g., see Koerper 2001, 2006b) that for Native peoples the acorn milling tool projected phallic imagery, while the mortar played the female complement. Beyond the morphologies of each, the kinetics of milling abet the sex-related personas of the two food preparation tools—one active and the other passive. Is “prior reasonableness” apropos for the hypothesis that some *atulkus* might have projected dimorphic sexual symbolism?

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