Two Unique Effigies from the Palos Verdes Peninsula

Henry C. Koerper, Galen Hunter, Ivan Snyder, and Joe Cramer

Abstract

Two Gabrielino (Tongva) effigies, both of previously undocumented shapes, are recognized. When observed one way, a Malaga Cove area specimen appears to mimic a body part, specifically a lower jaw with teeth, but a different view might instead suggest a whole-body creature, perhaps a caterpillar. The larger object, found at Abalone Cove, possibly represents a water bird in flight, but alternative hypotheses regarding referent are entertained.

Introduction

Two carved stone effigies, each exhibiting one-of-a-kind morphology, were recovered from Palos Verdes Peninsula (Figure 1) residential properties, real estate that remains privately owned. The smaller artifact (Figures 2–4) was professionally excavated in the Malaga Cove area at the Palos Verdes Estates site, often regarded as an extension of CA-LAN-138, or the Malaga Cove site. The larger artifact (Figures 5–7) was collected from CA-LAN-822 in the Abalone Cove area by a local resident.

Both specimens are herein described. Discussions will include the possible referents that attached to each highly conventionalized effigy and the objects' temporal placements.

The Ames Collection Effigy

William Wallace's (2000) characterization of the Palos Verdes Estates site (aka, Malaga Cove 2),[1] following from his 1961–1962, 1969, and 1975 investigations[2] on the abutting residential properties of the Ames and Levitt families, devoted a short paragraph to "miscellaneous objects of steatite." In that paragraph Wallace merely referenced the specimen seen in Figures 2–4, "a 'toothed' piece with 10 serrations cut into one long edge" (2000:189), offering no illustration of this intriguing carving. The authors believe that the object deserves greater attention since no artifact even remotely similar is published in the regional literature. Perhaps the carving represents a body part, viz., a mandible with teeth (zoomorphic or anthropomorphic?) (see Figures 2, 3), or it might have been intended as a whole-body mimic, say, a caterpillar, its tooth-like projections perhaps indicating legs (see Figure 4).

Two of us (HCK and GH) have recently been arranging and cataloging several archaeological collections at a storage facility provided to the Rancho de los Palos Verdes Historical Society and Museum (RPVHSM). The effigy appeared there among boxes housing most of the Ames Collection, the name given the accumulation of artifacts recovered on the Ames property at one side of the Palos Verdes Estates site. Artifacts found on the Levitt property at another side of the Palos Verdes Estates site constitute the Levitt Collection.

The material of this 26 g complete specimen is a medium-to-dark gray Catalina Island steatite. Its length is 70 mm. Maximum width is 24 mm, while maximum thickness measures 12 mm. Its surfaces are

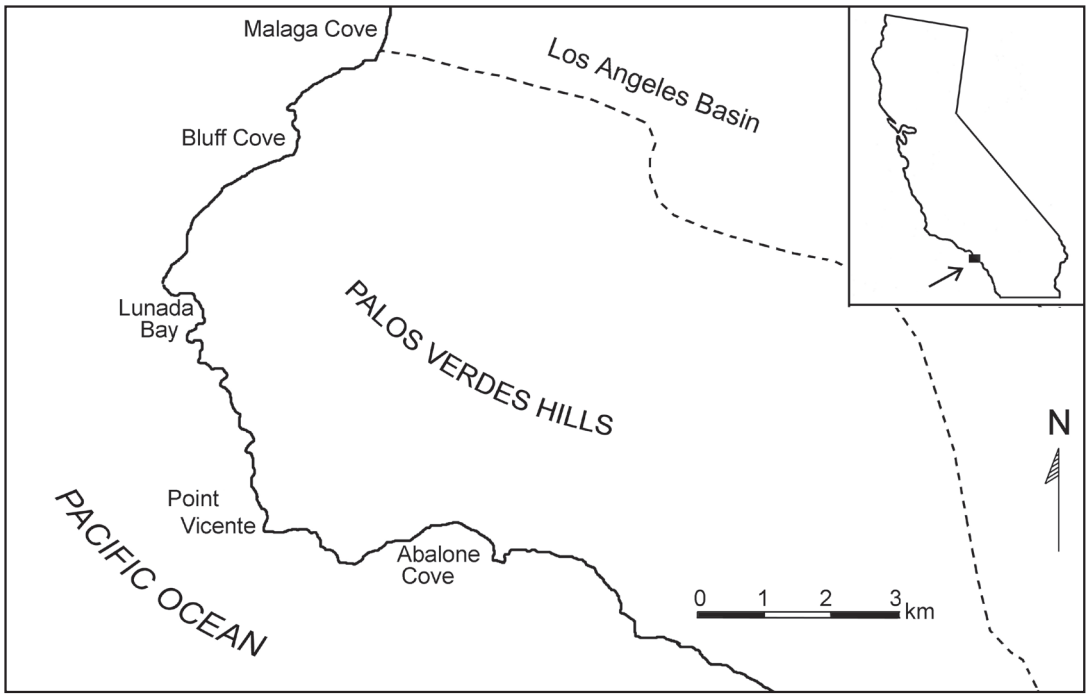

Figure 1. Location map.

unsmoothed, with manufacturing scars clearly seen overall. Possibly, in its final stage of crafting, a coarse abrasive sanding implement was employed, perhaps of large-grained sandstone.

While Dr. Wallace counted 10 "serrations," we see no more than nine "nubs." Provenience information was penned onto the piece (MC [Malaga Cove 2]; C9 [unit]; and 30–36 [depth in inches]).

Radiocarbon assays help place the Ames and Levitt collections within the late prehistoric period. Occupation covers at least the AD 150–AD 780 time span (Wallace 1964:2, 2000:195; Berger et al. 1965:342).[3] The site's temporally sensitive artifacts (Wallace 2000, 2002) support late time placement.

Abalone Cove Effigy

The larger effigy (Figures 5–7) was collected by an Abalone Cove homeowner from his property, which sits within LAN-822. The specimen was eventually donated to the Point Vicente Interpretive Center and is presently displayed within the Discovery Room of the Rancho Palos Verdes Recreation and Parks Department's Ladera Linda Community Center.

The 1,324 g, Altamira shale siltstone artifact measures 348 mm in length and 60 mm in width. Its cultural life may have begun as a manuport possibly retrieved because certain attributes communicated animal imagery, but subsequently it was shaped to some degree by an artisan. Its surfaces are quite smooth, owing perhaps to the application of a fine-grained abrasive stone and/or shark skin in the final stage of manufacture. A few small flecks of asphaltum adhere to surfaces.

The piece appears zoomorphic, our favored speculation, an airborne water bird such as a duck. Others might perceive cetacean-like attributes or imagine a long-necked snail.

Figure 2. Ames Collection steatite effigy. Sideview (appearing mandible-like). Length is 70 mm.

Figure 3. Ames Collection effigy. Top view.

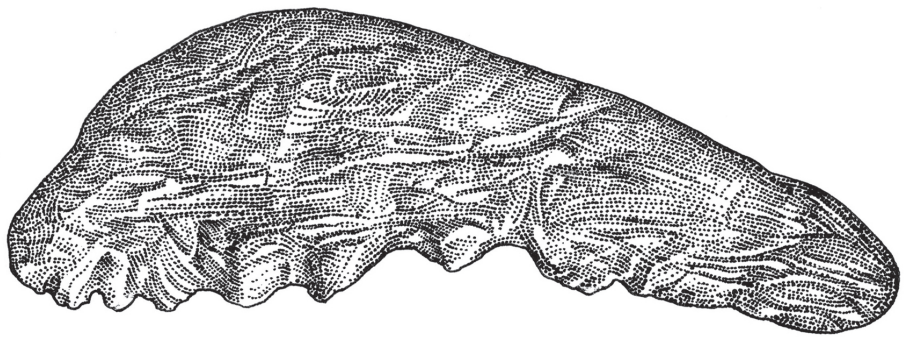

Figure 4. Ames Collection effigy. Side view (with the look of the larval stage of a moth or butterfly)

Figure 5. Abalone Cove siltstone effigy. Side view. Note incised line.

Figure 6. Abalone Cove effigy. Bottom view.

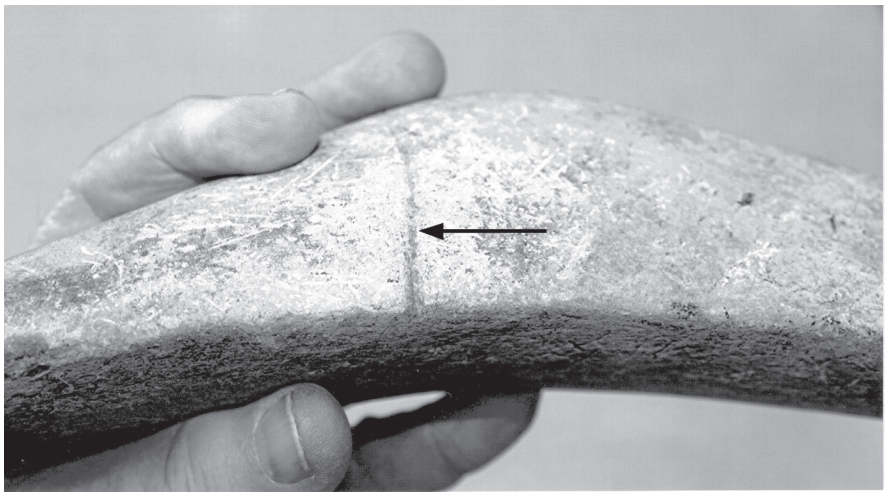

Figure 7. Abalone Cove effigy. Arrow points to incised groove.

There is an incised line (Figures 5 and 7) that plays to considerations of taxonomic referent. That thin, shallow groove courses from one side of the artifact to the other, passing at its highest elevation just below the top of the effigy's hump on the concave slope. That slope descends toward a design element that possibly represents a head (on left side in Figure 5). The groove does not appear on the bottom surface.

The purpose of the groove was likely to indicate the object's center of gravity. When one of us (IS) first bound a string around the effigy at the incised line to

lift and suspend the artifact, it assumed a horizontal position, projecting imagery that recalls an avian in flight. Tying the string at either a small distance fore or aft caused a precipitous tilting toward a vertical position.

Another unique artifact from LAN-822 has been published (Snyder and Koerper 2014). It is a greenish serpentine, compound tubular artifact, likely a shaman's sucking tube. Its presence at the site indicates a late prehistoric component.

Concluding Remarks

A careful, protracted search through archaeological and related literature bearing on south central coastal California and adjacent Channel Islands coupled with a review of the senior author's notes and photographs of institutional and private artifact collections failed to reveal any effigy or effigy-like object that compared favorably in shape with the two artifacts featured here. Perusal of sources reaching farther afield in the California culture area, albeit a much less extensive effort, likewise failed to identify similar specimens. Consequently, to label both specimens "unique," if only tentatively, seems reasonable. One certain outcome of our efforts is an expansion of the documented variability of nonutilitarian prehistoric items occurring within coastal southern California.

As frequently occurs in the study of esoteric artifacts, their functions might remain forever elusive. For both subject specimens some magico-religious purpose would not be surprising. "Amulet," "whimsy," "keepsake," and "toy" are a sampling of functional possibilities.

Endnotes

1. The Palos Verdes Estates site is near a ridgeline that overlooks Malaga Cove. Just around the corner and to the northeast, on the same ridgeline, sits the remains of the famously studied Malaga Cove site (CA-LAN-138) (see e.g., Koerper and Peterson 2014), a two- to three-minute pedestrian march away. Wallace withheld any formal decision regarding the relationship between the Palos Verdes Estates site and the late prehistoric occupations at LAN-138; however, his first designation for the Ames and Levitt properties, Malaga Cove 2, suggests a tilt towards regarding Gabrielino (Tongva) occupations at each location as identical cultural entities. Interestingly, Van Valkenburgh (1931) proposed that the location was the "dance floor" for LAN-138.

Owing to a potential problem for students of local prehistory, wherein Level 2 of Edwin Walker's (1951) Malaga Cove site might become confused with Wallace's "Malaga Cove 2," Wallace (see 2000:196) offered the name "Palos Verdes Estates site" for the Ames/Levitt location.

2. Data recovery at the Palos Verdes Estates site in 1961–1962 was aided by volunteers from Archaeological Research Associates and field classes from USC and California State University, Los Angeles. In 1969 and again in 1975 volunteers under the direction of Dr. Wallace dug and screened at the site (William Wallace, personal communication 1996). The reader is pointed to the following sources: Ripton 1971; E. Wallace (1961); W. Wallace (1961, 2000, 2002); Wallace and Wallace (1970).

3. The Palos Verdes Estates site draws some attention of anecdotal character for a radiocarbon-related event occurring in 1964 on a vacant lot near the site. The circumstances for this event were set in motion by the creative mind of Willard F. Libby, who in his Nobel lecture stated:

> We intend at UCLA to attempt to make a portable radiocarbon dater which will allow us to work in the field with the archaeologists and geologists in obtaining dates which,

> though not as accurate as those which would be obtained in the laboratory, may be useful enough to serve as guides during the digging. The problem is to find a truck which will carry the rather heavy equipment over the rough country which is usually involved. If this effort is successful, it will be a development which will bring the carbon daters and the archaeologists and geologists even closer together. Of all the rewards of research, none is greater than the meeting of people in different fields and the finding of interests in common. It will be most refreshing and rewarding for the radiocarbon daters to go out and partake, at least vicariously, in the great thrill of an archaeological dig [Libby 1960:609].

Libby protégé R. E. Taylor, future Anthropology Department Chair at UC Riverside, drove from Westwood to the Palos Verdes Peninsula the first and last portable, conventional decay counting, radiocarbon laboratory. He had previously helped Gordon Ferguson assemble the portable system for truck transport. The vehicle was obviously top-heavy, a cause of some concern. Only a single ^{14}C measurement (Berger et al. 1965:342) was taken. The impracticality of it all convinced Erv Taylor that the assay would be the only one ever produced in the field (personal communication 1981).

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank the Rancho de los Palos Verdes Historical Society and Museum for the opportunity to study the Ames Collection effigy. We very much appreciate the encouragement of our efforts from Joy Ames, Larry Ames, Yvetta Williams, Walter Lombardo, Andrew Garrison, and Joe Cōcke. Stacy St. James of the South Central Coastal Information Center, CSU Fullerton, was very helpful. We also thank the Point Vicente Interpretive Center for allowing access to their siltstone effigy. Ivan Strudwick and two anonymous reviewers provided helpful comments.

References Cited

Berger, Rainer, G. J. Ferguson, and Willard F. Libby
1965 UCLA Radiocarbon Dates IV. *Radiocarbon* 7:336–371.

Koerper, Henry C., and Mark L. Peterson
2014 On the Anatomy of the Malaga Cove Site. *Pacific Coast Archaeology Society Quarterly* 49(1 and 2):37–62.

Libby, Willard F.
1960 Radiocarbon dating: Nobel Lecture, December 12, 1960. https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/chemistry/laureates/1960/libby-lecture.pdf

Ripton, Ray
1971 Last Traces of Palos Verdes Indian Tribe Will Soon Vanish. *Los Angeles Times* 21 March: CS1, CS8. Los Angeles.

Snyder, Ivan, and Henry C. Koerper
2014 A Unique Tubular Artifact from Abalone Cove, Palos Verdes Peninsula. *Pacific Coast Archaeology Society Quarterly* 49(1 and 2):63–84.

VanValkenburgh, Richard F.
1931 Notes on the Malaga Cove site. On file, Department of Archaeology, Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History, Los Angeles.

Walker, Edwin
1951 *Five Prehistoric Sites in Los Angeles County, California*. Publications of the Frederick Webb Hodge Anniversary Publication Fund Vol. 6. Southwest Museum, Los Angeles.

Wallace, Edith
1961 Two Mortars from Malaga Cove. *ARA Bulletin* 6(4):6–7.

William J. Wallace
1961 Salvage Excavation at Malaga Cove 2. *ARA Bulletin* 6(1):1.
1964 C14 Dates For the Malaga Cove II Site. *ARA Bulletin* 9(4):2.
2000 A Late Prehistoric Site on the Palos Verdes Peninsula, Los Angeles County California. In

Archaeological Passages, a volume in honor of Claude Nelson Warren, edited by Joan S. Schneider, Robert M. Yohe II, and Jill K. Gardner, pp. 182–196. Western Center for Archaeology and Paleontology, Publications in Archaeology, No. 1. Hemet, California.

2002 Toloache Mortars (?) from the Palos Verdes Peninsula. In *Essays in California Archaeology: A Memorial to Franklin Fenenga*. Contributions of the University of California Archaeological Research Facility No. 60, W. J. Wallace and F. A. Riddell, editors, pp. 142–147. Berkeley.

Wallace, William J., and Edith Taylor Wallace

1970 A Cache of Stone Vessels from Malaga Cove 2. *ARA Bulletin* 15(3):2–3.