

Lost and Found: From CA-ORA-291, an Unusual Phallic Pestle and a Set of Fishnet Weights

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Abstract

Eleven fishnet weights, all from a single feature, and an interestingly configured phallic pestle were retrieved at CA-ORA-291 during excavations conducted by Archaeological Research, Inc. in 1970–1971. This article describes and discusses the artifacts by drawing on data sequestered four-and-a-half decades within “gray literature” and by examining these specimens long curated by the Pacific Coast Archaeological Society. Characterization of the unusual phallic symbol turns particularly on its comparatively realistic rendering. Observations concerning the net sinkers call out their stark simplicity, barely distinguishable from certain natural waterworn rocks, and then give attention to their sizes in consideration of whether the weights had once attached to a seine net or instead to a gill net.

Introduction

An assemblage of 11 fishnet weights and an unusual phallic pestle were discovered during excavation conducted by Archaeological Research, Inc. (ARI) in 1970–1971 at CA-ORA-291, Huntington Mesa (Figure 1), in Huntington Beach. The artifacts were unearthed from the same 5 m x 5 m subunit (X1C4) that yielded the pinniped partial middle ear bone *qua* Gabrielino charm or “keeper” discussed in Koerper and Lipps (this *Quarterly* issue). Until recently, all these artifacts resided with the ORA-291 collection stored at the PCAS Curation Facility, Santa Ana, but are now set aside for eventual display at the Blas Aguilar Adobe, San Juan Capistrano (Figure 2).

The great majority of coastal southern California pestles and pestle-like artifacts (e.g., spikes) communicating a priapic referent were rendered in comparatively conventionalized styles. The ORA-291 phallic pestle is particularly noteworthy for a certain palpable faithfulness to anatomical reality.

The ORA-291 net weights indubitably constitute a complete or nearly complete set of sinkers that once attached to woven open mesh fishing equipment, either a gill net or a seine net. The circumstance of the sinkers’ numbers and clustering is perhaps unique in the annals of regional prehistoric research.

This article resurrects awareness of these previously unpublished net sinkers and phallic pestle because: (1) the artifacts are too interesting and too important for regional prehistory to remain “out of sight—out of mind” and (2) to showcase them points up an object lesson, to wit, revisiting of long-ignored collections and attendant documentations can result in unexpected rewards.

The unusual finds, phallic pestle and grouped weights, are described and discussed below. Background information on ORA-291 occurs in the article on marine mammal ear bones that directly precedes this essay.

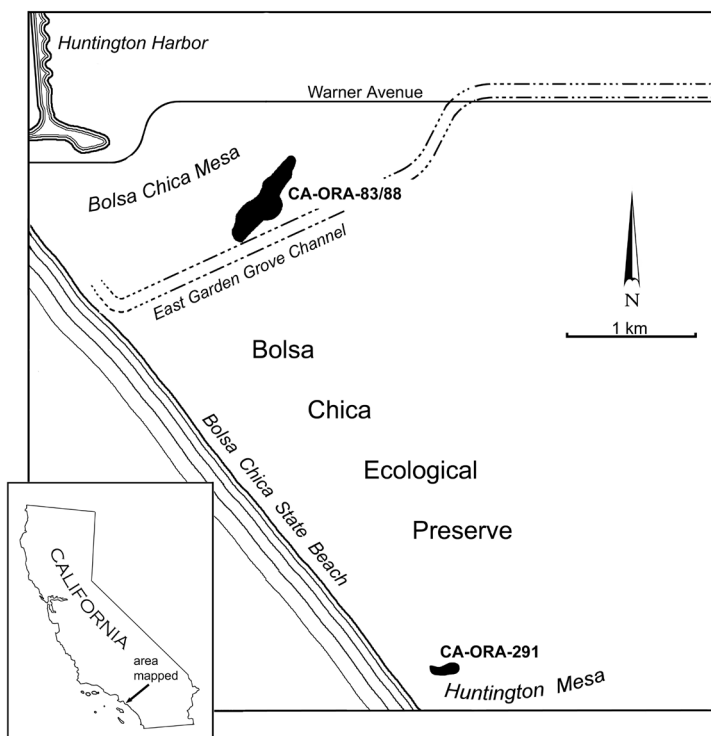


Figure 1. CA-ORA-291 sits on the western bluff of Huntington Mesa overlooking the Bolsa Gap, now an ecological preserve. Before 1900 freshwater swamps at the gap graded westward into marine salt marshes (see Ahlering et al. 1971b:3).

The CA-ORA-291 Phallic Pestle

Discovered at ca. 54 cm below ground surface in subunit X1C4, the pestle (Cat. No. D2000) illustrated in Figure 3 measures 19.8 cm in length. Much of the distal end is compromised, yet a reasonable estimate of maximum width is possible, viz., ca. 7.5 cm. Its present weight is 944 g; we estimate its mass before breakage at ca. 1,020–1,050 g.

The pestle took shape through pecking and grinding. Initial abrading required a coarse-textured implement. Subsequent reduction employed tools of finer grit to impart a general yet imperfect smoothness to the surfaces of this effigy pestle. Close inspection of surfaces reveals a multitude of tiny pits resulting from dislodgement of mineral grains during finishing. A glossy, polished appearance over most of the specimen is largely the consequence of modern applications of some kind of varnish to help preserve the artifact.

The phallic look is owing particularly to the tapering and curved configuration of the shaft that leads to the proximal knob, which is a relatively graphic representation of a glans penis. Clearly, this ORA-291 pestle is one of the least conventionalized phallus mimics documented for south central coastal California.

Where its rounded, distal end and shaft sides meet, there is a pronounced border, indicating that the artifact had probably not served a mundane practical use, such as food preparation, but rather had ephemeral employments in ceremonial/ritual contexts such as preparation of *Datura meteloides*.

The CA-ORA-291 Fishnet Weights

Descriptions

Each ORA-291 site report, the preliminary version (Ahlering et al. 1971a) and the final version (Ahlering et al. 1971b), documents two features. It is Feature



Figure 2. Blas Aguilar Adobe, San Juan Capistrano, where certain CA-ORA-291 artifacts are scheduled for permanent display. (a) circa pre-WW I; (b) circa post-1950s. Photographs courtesy O’Neill Museum, San Juan Capistrano Historical Society.

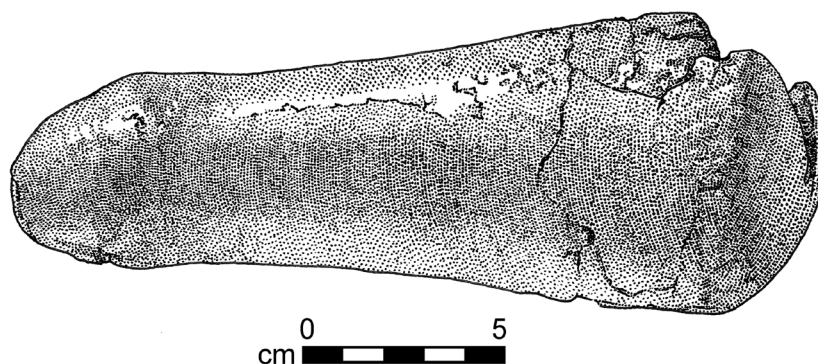


Figure 3. Phallic pestle from CA-ORA-291.

1 (Figure 4), discovered in subunit X1C4 at 61 to 75 cm depth, that draws our attention here. Ahlring et al. (1971b:20) described the feature as a “small tight grouping forming an arc through 30 degrees” In the preliminary report Feature 1 is said to consist of an “anvil stone” (Cat. No. M6510), a “hammerstone” (Cat. No. E2502), and 11 “bilaterally trimmed” sandstone net sinkers (Figures 5–6). The sinkers shown in Figures 5–6 were possibly rendered by Tom Elliot (Ted Cooley, personal communication 2014). Soon after fully exposing the feature’s contexts, ARI workers recognized they had discovered the remains of an open-mesh fishnet, its fibrous material long since decomposed. The 11 sinkers are listed in Table 1 with their weights and dimensions.

During initial ARI cataloging, 11 objects were identified as net sinkers, including the specimen shown in Figure 5e, which at the time was given the catalog designation “M6504.” All were listed under the “miscellaneous stone” category. In the final catalog, Specimen M6504 had been removed from that category and reassigned to the “choppers/handaxes” category with a new specimen number, “F3007.” An ARI illustration of F3007 carries the label, “hand ax.”

For the final site report (Ahlring et al. 1971b) only 10 Feature 1 artifacts were deemed sinkers, but this is a mistake. To explain, while Specimen F3007 exhibits less pronounced trimming, it is nonetheless bilaterally notched. Of the 11 sinkers, it is the least roundish



Figure 4. Feature 1, CA-ORA-291. Fishing net weights in close proximity, indicating a net was once at this location. Catalog numbers are superimposed on seven sinkers. ARI photograph by Steve Colgrove. Courtesy PCAS Library, Old County Courthouse, Santa Ana.

in plan view, its edges the least curvaceous. At this juncture it is instructive to point to another sandstone artifact (Figure 7) whose size and shape should remind one of Specimen F3007; it weighs 413 g and is 122 mm long, 104 mm wide, and 24 mm thick. Seventeen

holes drilled by invertebrates are counted on its surfaces. Having a different provenience (subunit X1D2), it was cataloged (No. M6538) among the “miscellaneous stone” and is identified only as a “large flat stone.” Under “remarks” in the catalog, one reads “notched two sides, resembles net sinkers from X1C4Z4.” There can be little doubt that it and Specimen F3007 are both net sinkers. Also consider that sandstone is inappropriate material for chopper/hand axe duties. Further, the F3007 artifact lacks use-wear expected of tools serving choppers/hand axe purposes (Andrew Garrison, personal communication 2014).

Proximity offers additional argument for Specimen F3007 being a net sinker. After all, it was found within a tight grouping of net weights, as seen in the photograph of Figure 4. It is seen touching, to its left, Specimen M6505, and it is atop what is perhaps Specimen M6512. Specimens M6502 and M6503 are positioned closeby. The object surrounded by Specimens M6507, M6505, and M6503 and largely obscured beneath midden soil is possibly Specimen 6508, less likely Specimen 6513.

All 11 bilaterally trimmed items were fashioned from stones that were gathered from an ocean beach.

Table 1. Sandstone “Bilaterally Trimmed” Net Weights from Feature 1, Subunit X1C4.

Catalog No.	Level (cm)	Weight (g)	Length (mm)	Width (mm)	Thickness (mm)
M6502	60–70	303	115	61	30
M6503	60–70	191	79	59	33
M6505	60–70	210	87	81	19
M6506	60–70	277	99	73	23
M6507	60–70	295	102	96	21
M6508	60–70	288	110	65	23
M6509	60–70	327	109	72	26
M6511	60–70	389	127	85	34
M6512	70–80	203	98	73	23
M6513	70–80	160	98	70	18
F3007 ^a	60–70	405	133	112	22

^a Initially cataloged as M6504.

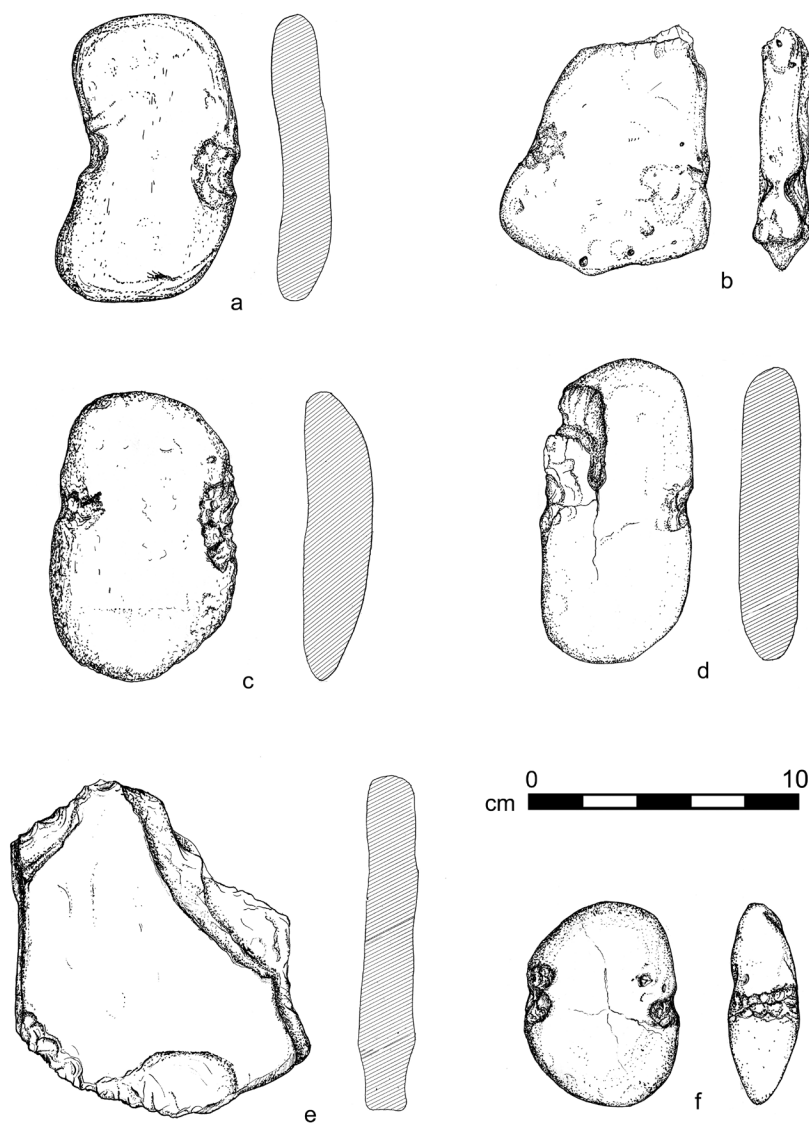


Figure 5. CA-ORA-291 net weights. (a) M6508; (b) M6505; (c) M6509; (d) M6502; (e) F3007; (f) M6503.

Surfaces of several show invertebrate (Family Pholadidae) burrowing holes.

The regional ethnographic record documents the Native practice of obtaining beach stones to attach to fishing lines and nets (Henshaw 1885:112, 1887:19; Weidman 1973:3). Candelaria Valenzuela (Ventureño and Fernandéño) told J. P. Harrington about beach stones used as sinkers (Hudson and Blackburn 1982:160).

Gill Net or Seine Net?

The 11 weights had attached to either a gill net or a seine net. The former is “a large-mesh net that was suspended vertically in the water, into which fish might swim and become entangled” (Hudson and Blackburn 1982:157). The meshes of such nets were sized for particular kinds of fish. Floats were secured along the upper margin; sinkers were fastened to the lower border, anchoring the net and keeping it,

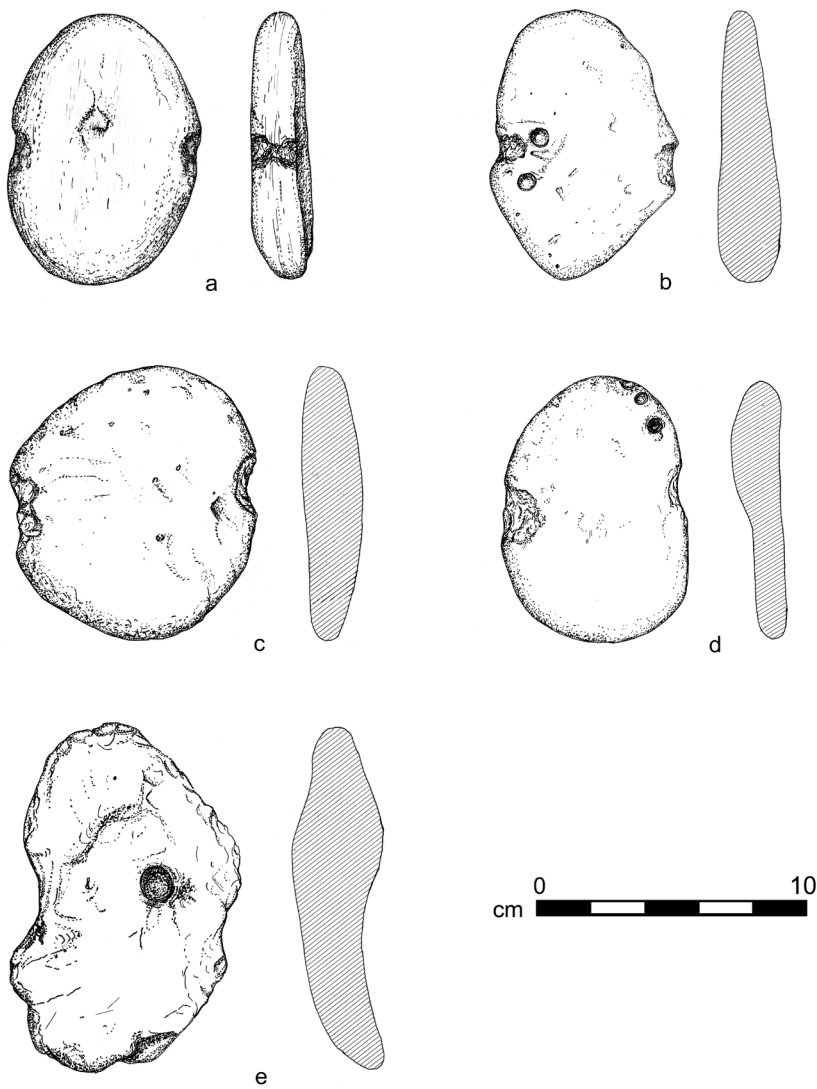


Figure 6. CA-ORA-291 net weights. (a) M6506; (b) M6512; (c) M6507; (d) M6513; (e) M6511.

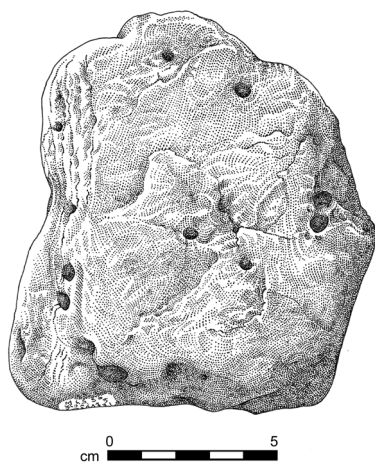


Figure 7. CA-ORA-291 net sinker (M6538), not associated with Feature 1.

more or less, at one location. Gill nets could have been played out from a single watercraft (canoe or bolsa raft) or set up in a tidal channel to catch fish on ingoing or outgoing tides. Thus suspended, a gill net entangled fish swimming into it, the mesh's open spaces allowing a fish's head entry but maybe not allowing all of the trailing body to pass through. With head poked into the curtain-like trap, gills might catch on the mesh as a fish attempted to back out of its placement.

Unlike the gill net, a seine was not fixed in place with weights that might be characterized as anchors. It was "a long net . . . arranged (by means of floats and weights) to hang vertically in the water and used to encircle and trap schools of fish" (Hudson and Blackburn 1982:163–164; see also Hoover 1973:7). Seine nets could have been employed in estuary tidal channels or outside the estuary at a beach. Encirclement could have involved the use of watercraft. Seine mesh was smaller than that of gill nets.

There are no ethnohistoric or ethnographic testaments to sizes of the weighting devices for either category of net. Intuitively, the mass of any ORA-291 net sinker seems insufficient to have anchored a gill net; rather, they seem better suited to the requirement that a seine be movable to be effective. We favor, if only tentatively, a seine net over a gill net interpretation.

Summary and Concluding Remarks

Herein, descriptions and discussions lift several ORA-291 artifacts from relative obscurity to inform archaeologists and to entertain followers of our science. These specimens are a realistically phallic pestle, more likely ceremonial than mundane and practical, and a set of fishnet weights, perhaps representing a seine net rather than a gill net.

The pestle extends our understanding of the range of coastal southern California creative expression

in the plastic arts intended to communicate phallic imagery. The ORA-291 net sinkers demonstrate that very minimal notching might define a sinker; in other words, the field worker or laboratory technician ought to very carefully examine certain inauspicious rocks absent the shallow, encircling groove expected for net weights.

Our article is further testimony to the potential payoffs of visits to older, nearly forgotten collections and perusal of attendant documentations.

Acknowledgments

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