

THE WIND SYCAMORE: A CHUMASH SACRED SITE NEAR VENTURA

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The Wind Sycamore, or Aliso del Viento, was a Chumash sacred site located near Ventura. The Chumash made offerings of feathers, animal skins, strings of pine nuts, and items that belonged to the deceased at this shrine. A wooden idol was also reportedly hung in a cavity of the tree. During the mission period, the Spanish located an asistencia of Mission San Buenaventura, called Santa Gertrudis, close to this site. The author attempts to locate the site of the Wind Sycamore and discusses the significance of this shrine.

Certain trees or groves of trees are associated with important cultural traditions (King 2003:120). National Register Bulletin 38 states, “A natural object such as a tree or rock outcrop may be an eligible object if it is associated with a significant tradition or use” (Parker and King 1998:11).

The California or western sycamore (*Platanus racemosa*) is a medium to tall tree (40 to 100 ft. in height) that sometimes reaches 11 ft. in diameter. This tree is native to California, but is confined to western North America (Calflora 2013). California sycamores live more than 200 years (Stuart and Sawyer 2001:290). The California sycamore ranges from Baja California northwards to the Sacramento Valley. The tree grows in riparian woodlands below 1,400 m (4,500 ft.) in the warmer parts of California, except the deserts (Stuart and Sawyer 2001:291). In southern California, sycamores were originally found in the South Coast Ranges along the streambeds and northward through the Sierra foothills and the San Joaquin Valley, and as far as Tehama County. The largest known sycamore is in Goleta and is 27.4 m (90 ft.) tall and 2.4 m (8 ft.) in diameter (Stuart and Sawyer 2001:290).

In California, the Spanish word *aliso* most often refers to sycamore (Timbrook 2007:147). The Chumash made wooden bowls from the round, burl-like growths found on the trunks of some sycamore trees (Timbrook 2007:147). In the Barbareño and Ventureño languages, the name for the sycamore tree, *khsho'*, is also the word for wooden bowl (Timbrook 2007:147). Among the Diegueño, a decoction of sycamore bark was used to treat asthma (Hedges 1986).

HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS OF THE WIND SYCAMORE

Sol Sheridan (1926:51-52), in the *History of Ventura County*, described the location of the Wind Sycamore:

The spot had always been a sacred one to the Indians. There at the point where the Casitas Pass road branches from the road to Ojai, stood their own sacred tree—a great sycamore under whose wide-spread boughs they had always assembled to worship their primeval god, and amongst whose leaves, even down to modern times, they were used to hang their offerings of gay feathers and bright cloth and the skins of wild animals.

Those who came after them grew to call that sycamore “The Wishing Tree,” and a belief arose that a wish breathed beneath its shade would always come true. And, still later generations of lovers came to whisper vows there, and to know it as the “Kissing Tree.”

Mrs. D. W. Mott collected a series of stories about various places in Ventura County in *Legends and Lore of Long Ago, Ventura County, California* (Mott 1929). The stories were contributed by “Women’s Clubs of Ventura County.” A Mrs. George L. Conklin of the Ojai Valley Women’s Club described “The Legend of the Whispering Tree.” Conklin stated:

In the old days, before the Gringo came, the Matilija Indians held a certain religious ceremony at the “Whispering Trees,” a group of sycamores on the old Creek Road to Ojai. In a hollow in one of these old monarchs, somehow, by someone, none knoweth how or by whom, a crude figure like a doll, and made of asphaltum had been placed, and this was supposed to represent some minor Deity in communication with the Great Spirit, the one God of the Indian. As time went on it came to be noticed that weird whisperings and inarticulate sounds came from the Tree, and the story grew, that the Spirit inhabiting it had a great desire to impart wonderful truths to those having “ears to hear.” And again in happy vein, musical tones were heard, as tho the old Tree would almost not quite burst into song...listen. While not an object of fear to the Indians, the vicinity of the Tree became a sort of magic circle, and when children of the early Spanish families were tumbled into the creaking carata [sic] of a Sunday morning by the Indian nurse, they were hushed to a thrilling silence as they approached this circle, and, with eyes and ears alert, they hoped, yet feared, some whisper or word might come to them. The Tree stood at the junction of the San Antonia [sic], Coyote Creek, Casitas and Cañada del Rio San Buena Ventura Canyons, where the wild sea winds met and mingled with the milder, softer airs wafted down thru the upper channels, which may explain the reason for the singing, talking and whispering that became at times so realistic and uncanny.... The Doll, the Spirit of the Tree, is now in the Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, D.C. [Mott 1929:173-174].

Mrs. J. H. Chaffee of the Avenue Ladies Club described the “Legend of the Winds.” Chaffee stated:

On the highway from San Buenaventura to the Ojai Valley, at the foot of Adobe Hill, between there and the entrance to what is now known as Foster Park, there stood, many years ago, a large grove of sycamore trees (a few are still standing), and it was here that the residents of the Arnaz, Santa Ana, and Ojai districts first caught the winds from the coast in coming to the Pueblo of San Buena Ventura. So the Indians believed that the winds were manufactured here, by the spirits of the trees, and named them “El Aliso del Viento,” or Sycamores of the Winds [Mott 1929:140].

Although not directly attributed to her, this information on the Whispering Tree may have come from Candalaria (Valenzuela), a Chumash woman whose photograph (Figure 1) appears on the title page of the chapter. Candalaria is described by Mrs. Chaffee as “an Indian basket worker.”

ETHNOHISTORIC ACCOUNTS OF THE WIND SYCAMORE

From 1912 to 1915, while he was in the Ventura area, linguist-ethnographer John Peabody Harrington interviewed local residents, including the Chumash informant Fernando Librado *Kitsepawit* (1804-1915), about the tree. Travis Hudson, the former curator of the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, edited and organized Harrington’s notes in a 1978 article entitled “The Wind Sycamore: Some J.P. Harrington Notes on a Ventureño Chumash Shrine,” and published in the *Ventura County Historical Society Quarterly* (Hudson 1978).

Among Harrington’s informants was a Mrs. del Campo, who was described as “a very old Spanish California lady who has resided for many years in Ventura.” Mrs. del Campo stated:

A sycamore tree by Casitas road was shaped like an arch. This arch was oriented so that its opening faced toward the south, just like a door. There was a hollow in the tree near the ground at one end, and here the Indians would deposit acorns, pine nuts, and beads; they would also deposit baskets of ants at the tree. In front of the tree was a level place used by the Indians to erect an enclosure of brush. Here some would dance and others would cry.

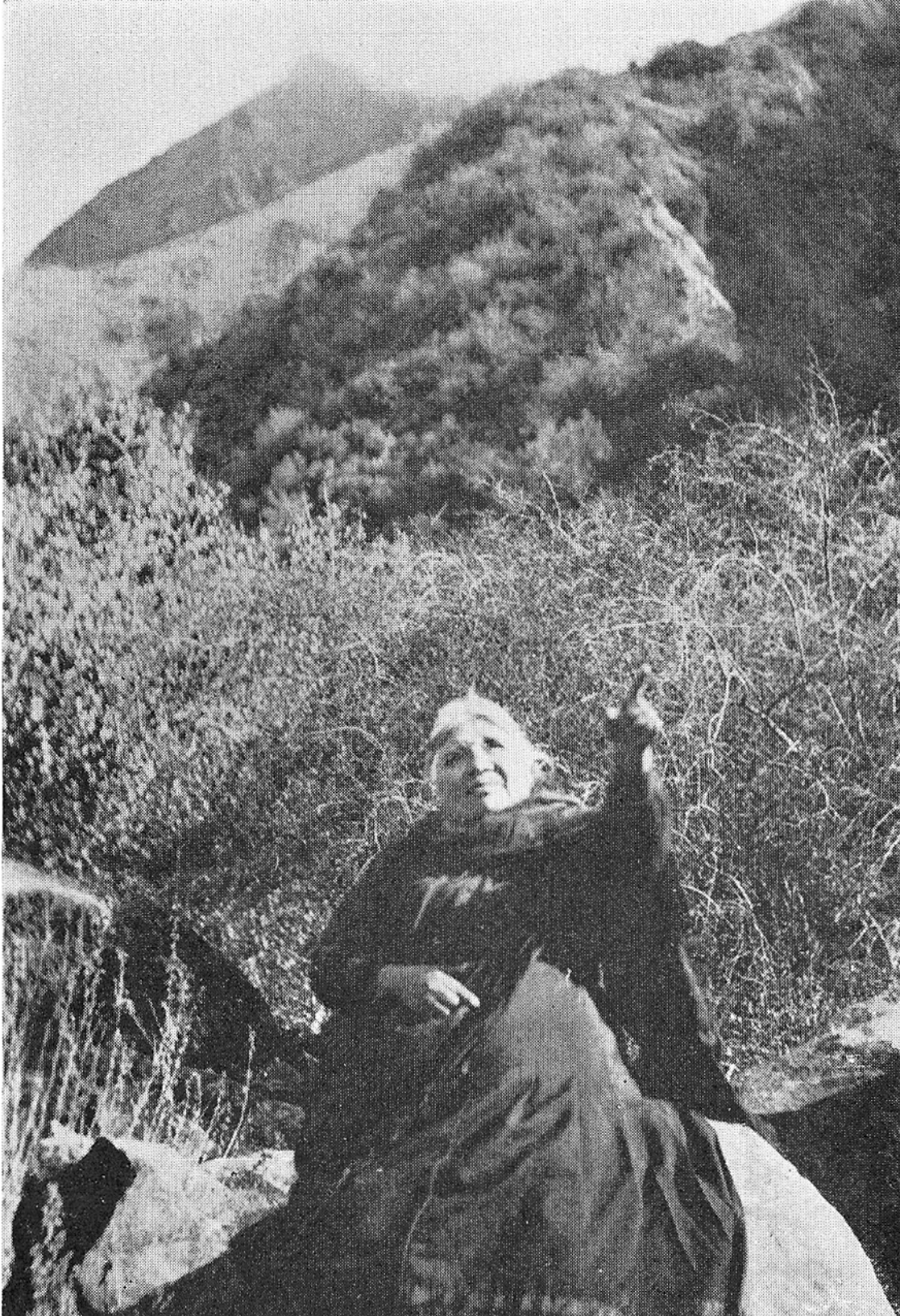


Figure 1. Native informant Candelaria (Valenzuela) (reprinted from Mott 1929).

Within the hollow of the tree a god was hung. It was about two and a half feet long, unpainted and made from wood. It had arms and legs; and the head had eyes, nose and mouth with feathers coming out of the nose. The thing was suspended by plugs from the shoulders, and there was a halo of hawk feathers in back of the god. The hollow itself was decorated with needlework and beads.

When the Indians wanted to wish someone wrong, they would turn a leg or an arm on the god and think that they had caused a corresponding affliction on their enemy [Hudson 1978:5-7].

Another Harrington informant (possibly Endegunda Camarillo) said that “girls used to be afraid when they passed a certain tree” (Hudson 1978:7). This informant called the tree “Aliso del Viento” (Wind Sycamore). She stated:

There was said to always be a wind near the tree. They thought the idol in the tree was a god; they made offerings there. The chiefs, and not just anybody, would pray there. To cause ill to enemies, one would turn the peg. If one turned the peg in the idol’s head, it would cause pain in the head; if one turned the peg in the stomach, one caused a bellyache.... Strings of green glass beads were hung around the neck and shoulders. This image was about three feet tall, with the feet hung about five inches above the ground [Hudson 1978:7].

Hudson’s (1978) article contains a drawing of the idol and two photographs of a re-created wooden idol hanging in a tree (Figure 2). Who made the wooden idol and where it was placed are not stated in the article. In the second photograph, the idol is shown hanging in “the hollow near the ground” of an unspecified sycamore tree. Hudson’s (1978) article also includes a photograph of “a grove at the turn of the century”; however, the location of the grove in the photograph is not specified.

Richard Applegate, working from Harrington’s place-name notes, recorded that the name of the Wind Sycamore was *ka?aqtawaq*, which means “north wind” (Applegate 1974:196). Applegate (1974:196) reported that the “wind sycamore” or “wind tree” rustled constantly. An informant, Russell Ruiz, told Applegate that this tree was also called “the talking tree”; one who listened intently at the talking tree would hear the voices of his ancestors in the tree’s murmur (Applegate 1974:196).

THE CHAPEL OF SANTA GERTRUDIS

A mission outpost, or *asistencia*, called the Chapel of Santa Gertrudis, was built ca. 1793-1809 “for the Indian community” (Hoover et al. 1966:578). The outpost was located at the entrance to Casitas Pass, about 7 mi. north of the San Buenaventura mission (Hoover et al. 1966:578). At this location, “a number of small houses were constructed for the neophytes” and it was after these houses that the area became known as Casitas, meaning small houses (Sheridan 1926:51).

According to Hoover et al. (1966:578), “most of the Indians of the community soon settled about the Chapel of Santa Gertrudis, and the great numbers of their little willow-thatched houses gave the name Casitas (‘Little Houses’) to the entire region.” This place name lives on in nearby place names, including Casitas Springs and Lake Casitas.

Following the earthquake of 1812, the entire population of the San Buenaventura mission relocated to Santa Gertrudis (Sheridan 1926:51). The church at Santa Gertrudis was used intermittently for many years, even as late as 1868 (Hoover et al. 1966:578). However, by the 1870s, the chapel had fallen into disrepair and subsequently into ruins (Hudson 1978:3).

Hoover and others (1966:578) placed the location of Santa Gertrudis “at the present junction of the Ojai road and the road leading through Foster Park in Casitas Pass.” Hoover et al. (1966:578) stated that the chapel was near what is now the gateway to Foster Park, on the property of the Canet Company. However, they observed that “nothing remains to indicate the thriving villages that once stood in this vicinity” (Hoover et al. 1966:578).

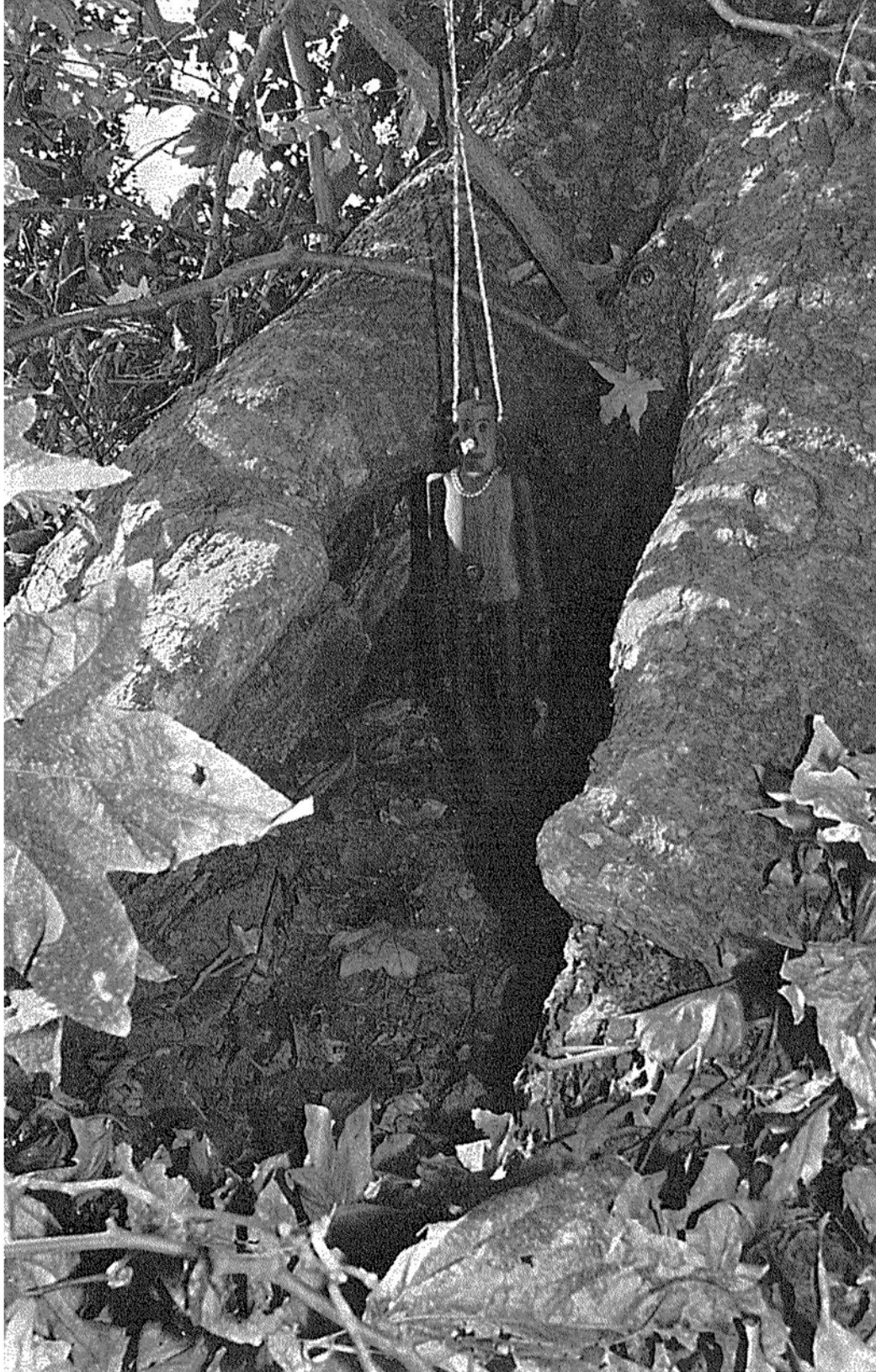


Figure 2. Re-created wooden idol (reprinted from Hudson 1978).

Hudson (1978:3) believed that despite the effort of the Spanish missionaries, Chumash beliefs concerning the Wind Sycamore survived. Hudson (1978:3) stated:

The chapel site was of course looked upon as sacred by the Roman Catholic Church, but of special interest is that it was considered no less so by the Ventureño Chumash. As the gray-robed priests gathered their followers around them to conduct prayers beneath the oaks and sycamores at the chapel, they were Christianizing a Chumash ritual that had preceded [sic] them into unknown depths of time. The process was no doubt intentional: as souls were converted to Christian ones, so were the locations upon which pagan rites had been performed. And at Santa Gertrudis this meant converting the symbolism attached by the Chumash to one particular natural feature of the area: a large sycamore tree.

Archaeologists Roberta Greenwood and Robert O. Brown conducted excavations at the site of Santa Gertrudis (CA-VEN-166) in 1966 (Figure 3). The excavations were conducted, “when it became apparent that the construction of new State highway route 33 would bury the probable location of the Santa Gertrudis Chapel under 20 feet [sic] of fill for the roadbed” (Greenwood and Brown 1968:2).

At the time, Greenwood and Brown reported that all that remained of the (chapel) building were the massive stone foundations (Greenwood and Brown 1968:13). Some portions of the chapel walls were still standing as late as 1873; however, by the mid-1880s the last traces of the chapel had been obliterated when the land was put into cultivation, first as an apricot orchard, then citrus, and finally beans in the 1960s (Greenwood and Brown 1968:7).

LOCATING THE WIND SYCAMORE

The general area of Foster Park in Ventura County has not changed significantly since the 1960s; the area remains largely rural and agricultural. From the above descriptions, the Wind Sycamore was associated with, and located in close proximity to, the Chapel of Santa Gertrudis. Greenwood and Brown (1968:7) give the location of Santa Gertrudis as about one-half mi. south of the community of Foster Park.

Currently, a grove of sycamore trees exists south of Foster Park, east of the former railroad right-of-way, and northeast of the Ojai Valley Sanitary District’s wastewater treatment plant. At present, the Ventura River Trail (Ojai Valley Trail Extension) runs along the former Ventura and Ojai Valley Railroad (later the Southern Pacific Railroad) right-of-way. Interestingly, the bed of the railroad, which was constructed in 1889, veers slightly around this particular grove of sycamore trees. Perhaps this was done to avoid the removal of these trees.

The suggested location of the Wind Sycamore is in the grove of sycamores adjacent to the Ventura River Trail, approximately 750 ft. west of VEN-166 (see Figure 4). This tree is approximately 75 ft. tall, 28 ft. in circumference, and 9 ft. in diameter (Figure 5). A large cavity near the base of the tree faces north (Figure 6). While it may never be conclusively known if this is the actual Wind Sycamore, the size of this tree and the fact that it contains a large cavity suggest that it could be the Wind Sycamore. The location of the possible Wind Sycamore is:

Datum: NAD 87

Zone: 11S

UTM 288695.14 m E

UTM 3802771.32 m N

For comparison’s sake, the Portola Sycamore, a local landmark in Carpinteria and documented to be more than 250 years old, has a circumference of 20 ft. and a diameter of 6.4 ft. It was also observed that this area is particularly windy, perhaps due to the venturi-like effect caused by the shape of the narrowing valley, cool temperatures along the coast, and hot inland temperatures.

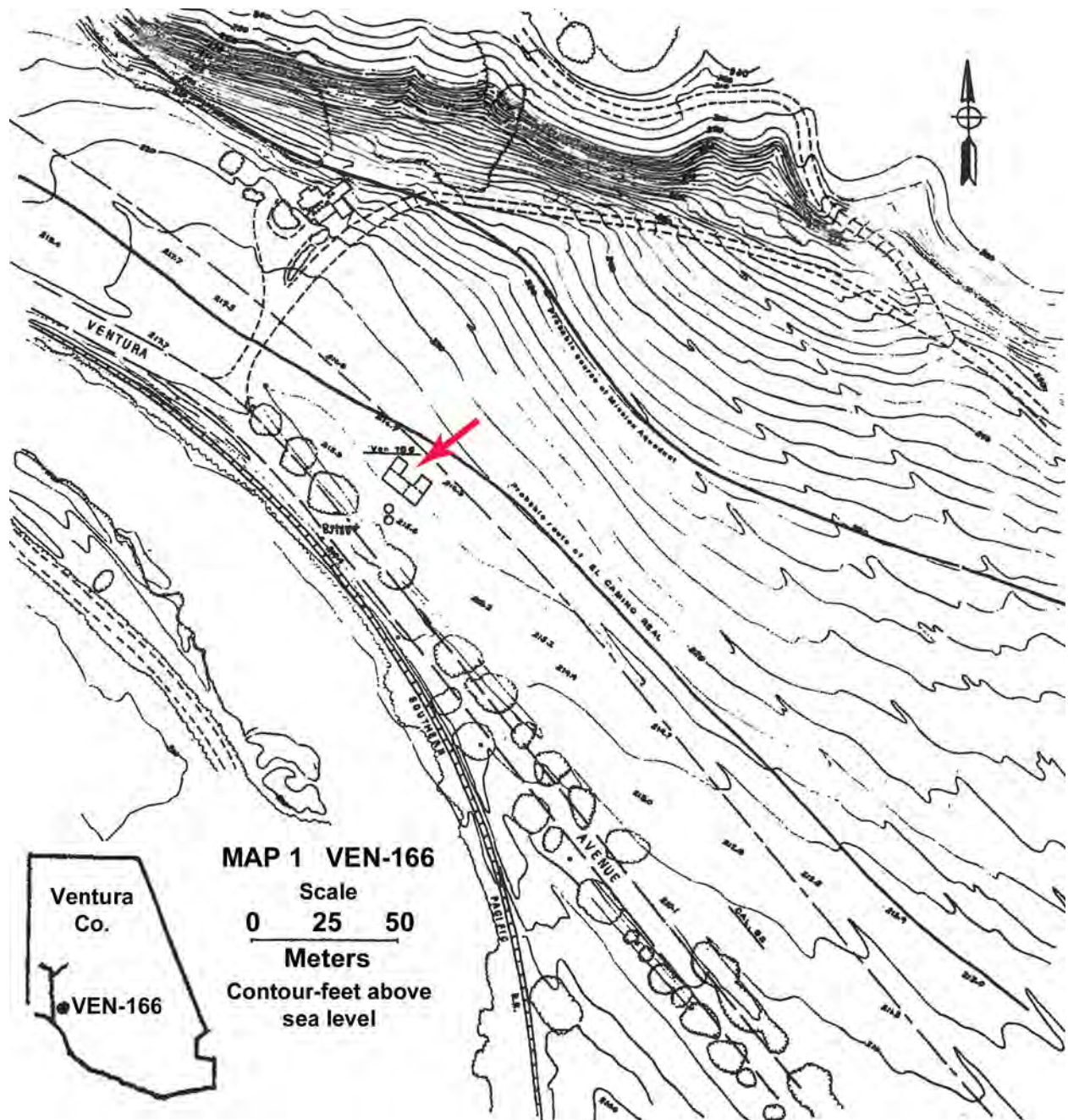


Figure 3. Map 1: VEN-166 (Reprinted from Greenwood and Brown 1968). Red arrow indicates the location of VEN-166.

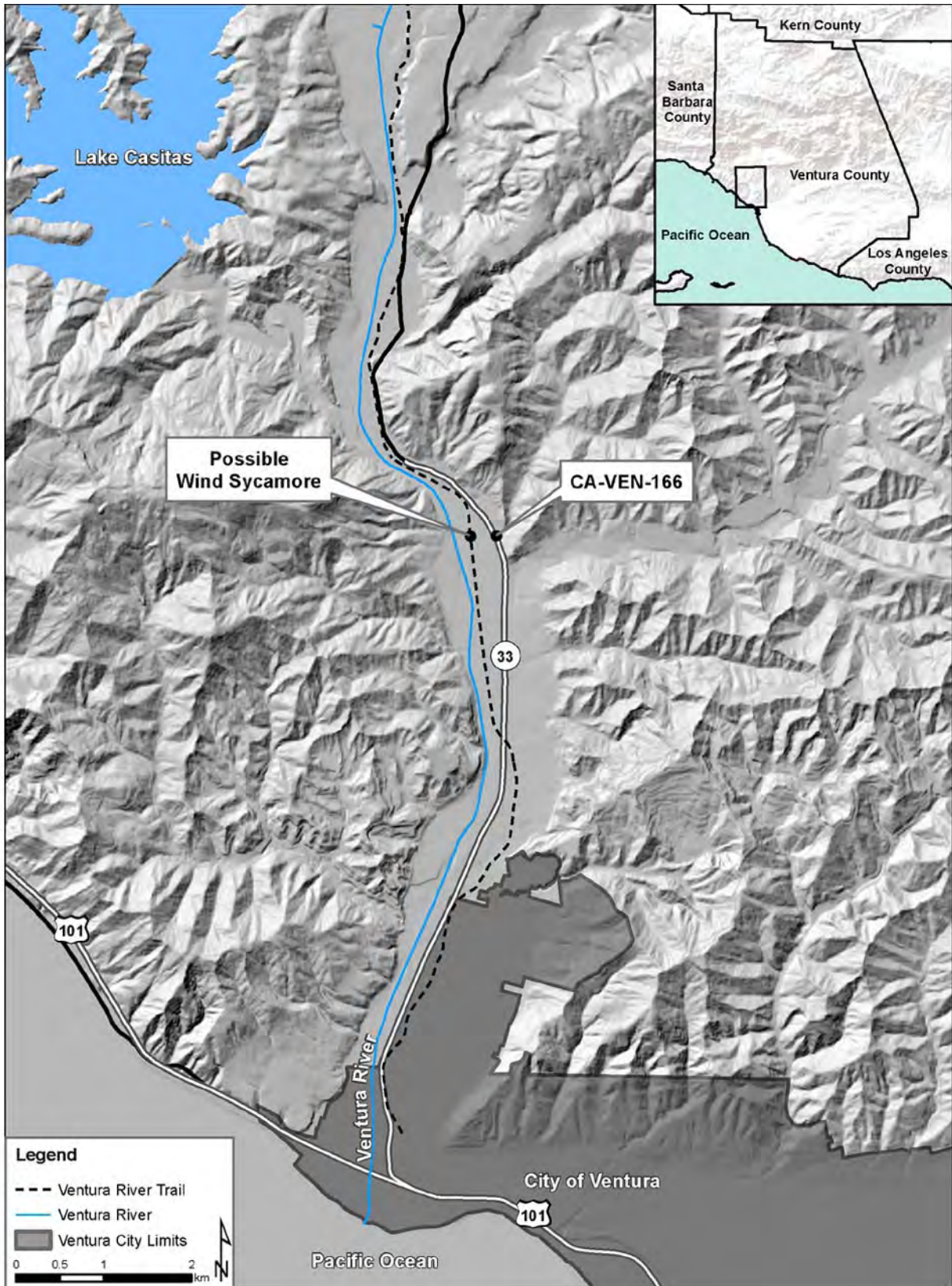


Figure 4. Locations of CA-VEN-166 and possible Wind Sycamore.



Figure 5. Possible Wind Sycamore.



Figure 6. Possible Wind Sycamore, showing cavity near the tree's base.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WIND SYCAMORE

The Wind Sycamore, or its location, was culturally significant or sacred to the Chumash. The Wind Sycamore and the recently discovered Chumash arborglyph in San Luis Obispo County (Saint-Onge et al. 2009) point to the significance of trees to the Chumash.

The Chumash village of Kohsho, meaning “The Sycamore,” was located near here and may have been related to the Wind Sycamore. The location of this village is given as “a village in Casitas Canyon, northwest of Ventura” (Librado 1981:114).

Spanish missionaries located a satellite mission to the Santa Buenaventura mission, called Santa Gertrudis, close to this spot, perhaps recognizing the sacred nature of this location and attempting to co-opt the power of the location. The former site of Santa Gertrudis is recognized as archaeological site VEN-166.

Early white settlers in the Ventura area knew of, and appear to have respected or even feared, this location, perhaps recognizing it as a “power spot.”

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