# EVIDENCE FOR POST-MISSION PERIOD NATIVE AMERICAN CEREMONIAL ACTIVITY ON SAN CLEMENTE ISLAND, CALIFORNIA

**Tanya L. Wahoff and Andrew L. York**

KEA Environmental, Inc., 1420 Kettner Blvd, Ste. 620, San Diego, CA 92101
(619) 233-1454, FAX (619) 233-0952, Email: twahoff@keasd.com

## ABSTRACT

Several sites on the Central Plateau of San Clemente Island are known to contain ceremonial features dating to the Late Prehistoric period, including floors, ritual animal burials, and a variety of offertory pits. Recent testing at site CA-SCLI-1437 on the plateau revealed a small ceremonial pit containing 11 projectile points, 902 shell or stone beads, and a piece of colorless bottle glass smeared with asphaltum, all within an ash and charcoal matrix. The secure association of the colorless glass with the ceremonial feature raises the intriguing possibility that Native American ceremonies were practiced on the island into the mid to late nineteenth century.

**Keywords:** California, Channel Islands, protohistoric archaeology, beads, projectile points, ceremonial pit features.

## INTRODUCTION

From an anthropological perspective, one of the most important periods for Native Americans in California is the time after the arrival of Europeans. In coastal southern California, many of the native lifeways were destroyed almost immediately, while others proved more resistant to change. Of special interest is the extent to which native ceremonial life was retained and modified in the face of these devastating changes. We know from early accounts that a rich and active ceremonial life was continued well into the late nineteenth century and beyond, particularly among the Luiseño; however, archaeological evidence is very rare, and many details have been lost. We believe we have identified evidence of native ceremony dating to the 1860s or later in an archaeological site on the central plateau of San Clemente Island, generations after the Gabrielino left the island and native lifeways were disrupted. In the following discussion we review some of this evidence and consider some of its implications with regard to the persistence of certain aspects of Native American culture in coastal southern California.

Research over the past several decades has documented a rich and complex archaeological record at San Clemente Island. Major excavations at several sites have documented native occupation extending from the early Holocene until well into the Mission Period (Hale 1995; Rechtman 1985; Salls 1990, 1991; Raab 1997; Raab and Yatsko 1990; Raab et al. 1995). As at all of the Channel Islands, the archaeology of San Clemente Island is benefitted by the absence of the pocket gopher and other rodents, thus preserving many sites and features in near-pristine condition.

### Post-Contact Native Ceremony on San Clemente Island

A number of archaeological investigations on the island's central plateau provide evidence for extensive ceremonial activity at this location. Several large archaeological sites on the plateau, including Lemon Tank, Ledge, and Old Airfield (Figure 1), have been found to contain numerous pit features that are apparently ceremonial in nature. These pit features contain a variety of offerings, including raptor and fox burials, seed caches, shell ornaments, ground and flaked stone artifacts, and steatite objects, as well as, occasionally, items dating to the historic period (Meighan 1986; Rechtman 1985; Hale 1995). The great majority of the historic period items from the central plateau's ceremonial features have been found at the Ledge site, which yielded 98 historic items associated with 41 pit features. These items

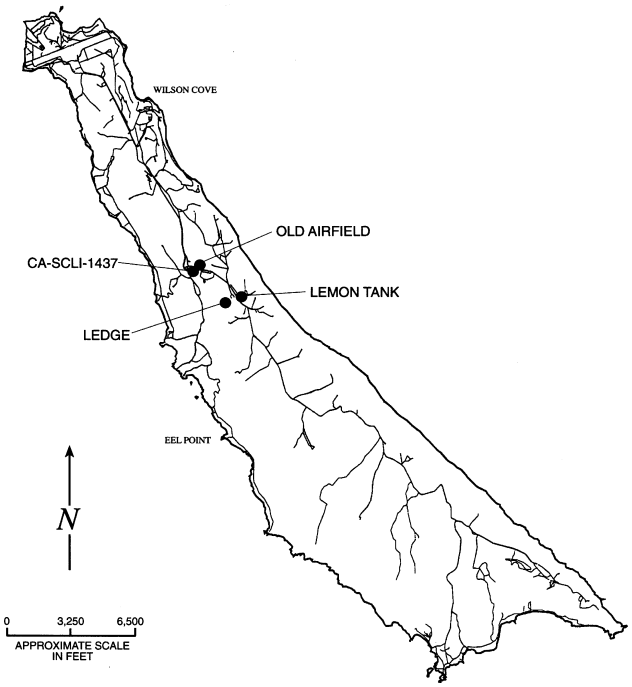


**Figure 1. Central Plateau sites containing ceremonial features.**

are reported by Rechtman (1985), who concludes that except for a single recent-appearing metal knife, all were made during the Mission period.

The offertory pits at sites on the central plateau have been linked to mourning rituals and the Pames or eagle ceremony recorded historically among south coastal groups (Eisentraut 1990; Hale 1995). These ceremonies persisted long after many other aspects of traditional cultures were disrupted, and incorporated a number of Euroamerican elements. One newspaper account of an 1898 Luiseño cremation ritual, for example, shows modern influence in that sacks of grain and coins were tossed to the guests, while another, from 1907, describes Catholic services held prior to an eagle ritual conducted as part of a mourning ceremony for a man of the Mesa Grande tribe (Anonymous 1898, 1907). Kroeber stated that during the early part of this century, the Luiseñno and Diegueño sang most of their toaloache ritual songs in Gabrielino, without knowing what the words meant. One of Harrington's informants gave a detailed account of Gabrielino shamanism on Santa Catalina Island (Hudson 1979), and although it is unclear when the event occurred, detailed information on religious practices was still being passed on into the early twentieth century. Clearly, religion and ceremony were persistent aspects of native culture, even in the face of otherwise devastating disruptions to traditional life.

### San Clemente Island in the Historic Period

European contact with the inhabitants of San Clemente Island was only sporadic until after the Spanish mission system was established in 1769. As the missionization of mainland trading partners disrupted their traditional exchange relationships, it appears that the San Clemente Island natives gradually migrated via Santa Catalina Island to a Native American community near the Pueblo de los Angeles, where they worked as laborers for the Hispanic residents of Los Angeles (Johnson 1988). The last record of native occupation of the island was in 1803, when the log of the Leila Byrd reports eleven persons occupying a cave, believed to be Big Dog Cave. The latest recorded sighting of Gabrielinos on either San Clemente or Santa Catalina was in 1807 (Bancroft 1886:54), and it is evident that the island populations were considerably diminished by this time. The final abandonment of the island is believed to have taken place by about 1820 (Johnson 1988:7). By 1860, most Gabrielino cultural practices had disappeared (Bean and Smith 1978).

Euroamerican use of the island in the early nineteenth century included sea otter hunting, fur trading, and smuggling of contraband and undocumented Chinese, all of which would involve limited and sporadic occupation of the island. There appear to have been no permanent residents between about 1820 and 1864, when it was occupied by Union soldiers during the Civil War (Raab and Salls 1991; Hale 1995). After the war, the island was used almost exclusively for sheep ranching and, after 1880, for abalone fishing. Between the 1860s and the 1890s, the only known permanent resident of the island was a single sheepherder named Gallagher (Bruce 1994); but Native American or Hispanic laborers undoubtedly came to the island for a few weeks each year during shearing season.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

In November 1997, archaeological test excavations were conducted at CA-SCLI-1437 as part of a National Register evaluation of sites potentially affected by the use of the nearby Missile Impact Range (York and Wahoff 1997). Surface reconnaissance of the site, along with excavation of some 635 auger bores, revealed four spatially distinct midden deposits occupying an area measuring about 230 m by 160 m along the top of the island's central ridge. In general, the site assemblage is typical for the island, containing varying densities of shell, sea mammal and fish bone, groundstone, and flaked stone tools and debitage. Of the five radiocarbon samples from the deposit, the earliest yielded a calibrated date of 205 to 585 AD at 2 sigma; while the others yielded age ranges extending from the mid-seventeenth into the mid-twentieth centuries.

### Feature 1

Feature 1 was found at Locus 1, a roughly 1,000 $m^2$, 50 cm deep midden deposit occupying a low rise at the site's northwest corner. The feature was first indicated by an auger bore (N14/E12) that yielded 25 shell beads between 20 and 47 cm below the surface, and a single 50 x 100 cm test unit (Unit 2) was placed at this location (Figure 2). The

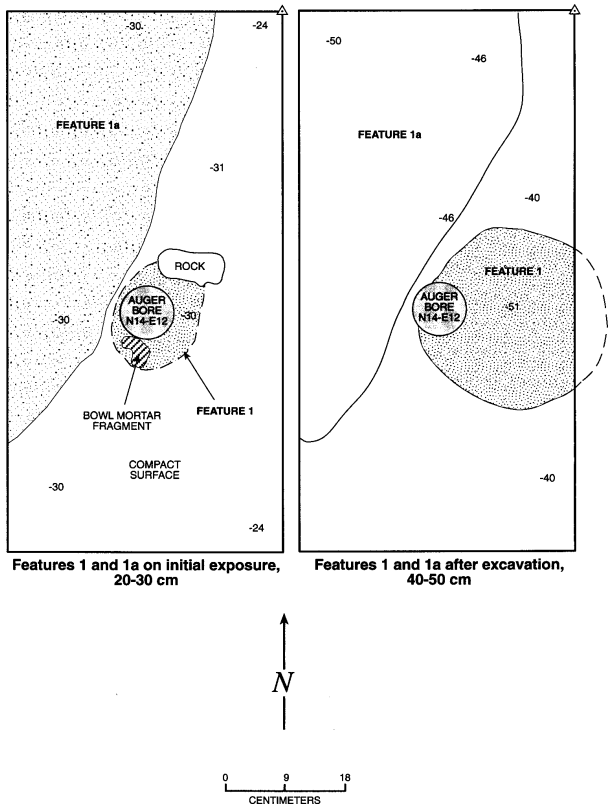


**Figure 2. Plan views of Features 1 and 1a at CA-SCLI-1437 during and after excavation.**

excavation unit revealed, at about 24 cm below the surface, an indurated layer that was identical to the overlying matrix except for its extreme compactness. Averaging about 6 cm in thickness, this layer had the appearance of a house floor.

The auger bore had penetrated this, the indurated layer, revealing an underlying matrix extremely rich in ash and charcoal. Careful exploration of this underlying matrix revealed it to be a small offertory pit completely overlain by the compact layer. The compact layer was carefully removed, exposing a circular pit measuring 35 cm in diameter and 11 cm deep, and containing abundant charcoal, beads, and other items. A fragment of a small stone bowl was embedded in the compact surface overlying the pit. A second pit, this one about 10 cm deep, had apparently been subsequently dug through the compact surface, barely avoiding the offertory pit. This pit, designated Feature 1a, contained grey, ashy silt with charcoal, but few cultural materials.

The matrix of the offertory pit was carefully removed in bulk and screened through 3 mm mesh in the laboratory (materials smaller than 3 mm were retained for further study).

## RESULTS

The matrix of the Feature 1 offertory pit yielded several hundred shell beads, eight projectile points, and two historic items consisting of a piece of rusted metal and a fragment of colorless glass. These items, as well as an additional 43 beads and three projectile points recovered either from the auger bore or contexts directly associated with Feature 1, are discussed below.

### Beads

Several hundred shell beads were recovered from the Feature 1matrix or contexts immediately associated with the feature. The majority of these beads are *Olivella* wall disk beads, most of which appear to be Class H1a or H1b beads as defined by Bennyhoff and Hughes (1987). These beads have straight sided perforations of less than 1.0 mm, attributed to the use of steel needles as drills, and are associated with the Mission Period (H1a 1770-1800; H1b 1800-1816). While most of the beads appear to have straight bores, a few conically and biconically drilled examples were also noted.

Roughly 10% of the beads are *Olivella* Class H2 and H3 chipped disk beads, considered by King (1990) to postdate 1803, and by Bennyhoff and Hughes (1987) to mark the terminal Mission and post-Mission periods (1834-1900). Also noted were a number of *Olivella* lipped beads, which are considered diagnostic of the Protohistoric and early Historic periods. Three atypical *Olivella* beads were recovered, consisting of split *Olivella* shells with a large ground facet on the outer surface of the wall. The time range represented in the bead assemblage suggests that at least some of these beads were archived.

### Projectile Points

Eleven projectile points were recovered from Feature 1 or its immediate vicinity. All of the points are very small, ranging in length from 16.0 to 27.9 mm, averaging 22.1 mm. Two can be classified as Cottonwood Triangular points, while the others include stemmed, leaf-shaped, and one bi-pointed (Figure 3). One point is unfinished. One of the Cottonwoods is an unusual small serrated point, while the other is very similar to Cottonwood Triangular points found on the mainland. Overall, the points are roughly made; several still show the detachment scar and are worked primarily along the margins, while others have flake removals which tend to be short and deep, resulting in a somewhat lumpy point that is biconvex in cross-section.

Although the majority of the points are of possibly local cryptocrystalline material, three are of fused shale, a material found in northern Los Angeles County. The points from the pit at CA-SCLI-1437 exhibit crenulated breaks, pot lids, and other signs of exposure to extreme heat. Three of the cryptocrystalline points exhibit a thin asphaltum residue. While the residue may be a result of prior hafting, asphaltum lumps have been found in some ceremonial pit features at the nearby Lemon Tank site, and the asphaltum may have melted onto the points when exposed to heat.

Due to the absence of terrestrial game, projectile points are rare on San Clemente island, and the small collection from Feature 1 is a considerable addition to the islands' projectile point inventory. In addition, their atypical shapes and their presence in a ceremonial feature suggest that these points were manufactured specifically for ceremonial purposes.

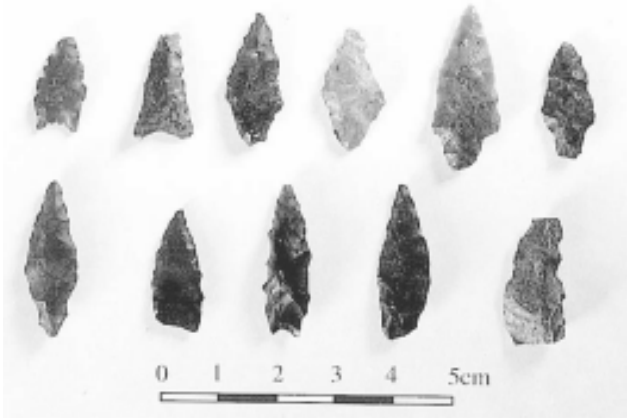


**Figure 3. Projectile points from Feature 1, CA-SCLI-1437.**

### Historic Items

Two historic items were recovered from the offertory pit matrix: a rusted metal piece which may have been a nail, and a fragment of glass (Figure 4). The latter is a very flat piece of high quality, colorless glass with a beveled edge, and appears to be a panel and shoulder fragment of a bottle. The surfaces of the glass exhibit the cloudiness and iridescence often found on old bottle glass, a result of water

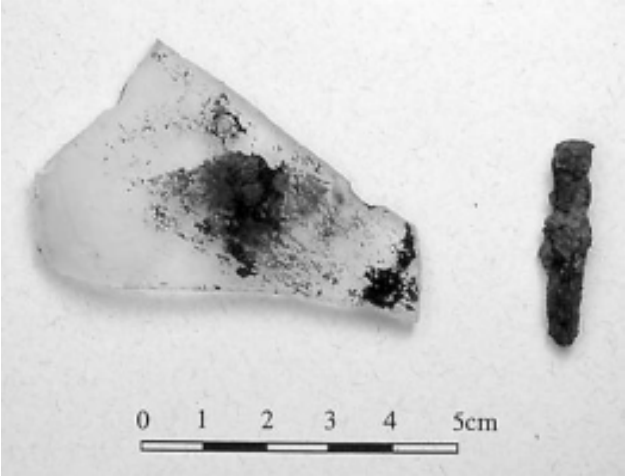


**Figure 4. Glass and metal fragment from Feature 1, CA-SCLI-1437.**

damage to the outer glass layers. An asphaltum residue is present on one surface and some edges of the glass, and what appear to be bead impressions are visible in the asphaltum.

The glass fragment is especially interesting since dark glass was used for bottles until about 1860, in the belief that darker colors reduced exposure to light and preserved the contents better. Starting at about 1860, lighter colors, including light green, light blue, aqua, and amber, were increasingly preferred for bottle glass, since it made viewing the contents easier. In 1861 the first lead glass medicine bottles were produced, followed closely by "French squares" which were tall, four-sided bottles with beveled edges (Berge 1980). According to Fike (n.d.), colorless glass for general use started about 1875. Before this time colorless lead glass was used mostly for tumblers, goblets, and decorative items. The fragment does not appear to be tableware, but instead appears to be the upper body portion of a French square bottle.

## DISCUSSION

While historic period items are known to occur in ceremonial pit features on the central plateau of San Clemente Island, the recovery of a glass bottle fragment that apparently dates to at least the late nineteenth century was unexpected. Given its context, solidly within the matrix of an undisturbed offertory pit that is capped by a compact floor surface, it is highly unlikely that this piece is intrusive. Moreover, the presence on the glass of the apparent asphaltum residue, identical to that found on other artifacts from the feature, is compelling evidence that this artifact was placed there during performance of a Native American ceremony. If so, the intriguing possibility is raised that Native Americans practiced ceremonies on the island at least two generations after they were supposed to have left.

Other than this piece of glass, there is no documentary or archaeological evidence for Native American ceremony on the island during the late nineteenth century; however, it is not implausible. We know, for example, that the Luiseño and Diegueño continued an active ceremonial life into the twentieth century, even if some of the original meanings had been lost; and we also know that Euroamerican artifacts, such as money and presumably glass, were incorporated into these ceremonies. During the late 1800s, there was only one known permanent resident on the island, a sheepherder near the north end; so it is not unlikely that Native activity there could have gone undocumented. The island could have been visited during a special trip from the mainland, or, perhaps more likely, the ceremonies could have been performed by Native Americans employed seasonally by the ranch. There was a strong tradition among the Gabrielino to return to the same site for annual ceremonies; and, being only a few generations removed from the island, it is likely that they were well aware of the central plateau's importance as a center of ritual activity.

If further archaeological studies can confirm the practice of Native American ceremony on the island during the late nineteenth century, it would provide important evidence for the persistence of religious life in the face of devastating cultural changes. This is an aspect of human behavior not often documented by archaeologists, and certainly adds to the significance of the archaeological record of San Clemente Island.

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