ARTICLES

FEASTING, RITUAL PRACTICES, SOCIAL MEMORY, AND PERSISTENT PLACES: NEW INTERPRETATIONS OF SHELL MOUNDS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Lynn H. Gamble

Shell mounds have not been investigated as prominent ritual features in southern California, despite evidence to the contrary. The largest extant shell mound in the region is on Santa Cruz Island, measures 270 by 210 m (44,532 m² in area), is 8 m higher than the terrace it rests on, is covered with 50 house depressions, and dates to 6000–2500 B.P. In the 1920s, three cemeteries were excavated at the top of El Montón; one young woman stood out among the over 200 individuals in that she was buried with 157 stone effigies. Analysis of multiple lines of evidence, including stratigraphic profiles of features, 85 radiocarbon dates, ground penetrating radar, and mortuary data, supports my claim that the mound was a persistent place where early visitors had significant feasts, constructed dwellings, buried their dead, and performed ceremonies where select groups of infants, children, and adults were revered. These mortuary rites conveyed the symbolic power of the place and created a history of events that became part of a mythical and real past that was repeatedly visited, modified, and (re)interpreted as social relationships were reinforced. This study supports the idea that shell mounds are socially constructed landscapes, not just accumulations of refuse.

A pesar de la evidencia existente, los conchales no han sido estudiados como elementos rituales prominentes en el sur de California. El conchal más grande de la región se encuentra en la isla Santa Cruz: mide 270 por 210 metros (44,532 m² en área), tiene una elevación de 8 metros por encima de la terraza donde descansa, está cubierto por 50 depresiones dejadas por viviendas y se puede fechar entre 6000 y 2500 a.P. En la década de 1920, tres conjuntos de entierros fueron excavados en la cima de El Montón; una mujer joven destacó entre los más de 200 individuos debido a que fue enterrada con 157 efigies de piedra. El análisis de múltiples líneas de evidencia, incluyendo perfiles estratigráficos, 85 fechados radiocarbónicos, información de radar de penetración terrestre y datos funerarios sustenta la interpretación que el montículo constituyó un lugar duradero donde desde épocas tempranas los visitantes celebraron significativos banquetes, construyeron viviendas, enterraron a sus muertos, y realizaron ceremonias donde fueron venerados grupos selectos de infantes, niños y adultos. Estos rituales mortuorios expresaron el poder simbólico del lugar y crearon a partir de estos eventos una historia que se convirtió en parte de un pasado mítico y real. La historia fue repetida, modificada y (re)interpretada a medida que se reforzaban las relaciones sociales. Este estudio sustenta la idea de que los conchales son paisajes socialmente construidos y no únicamente acumulaciones de desechos.

Recent investigations of shell mounds associated with hunter-gatherer-fishers are generating new interpretations and considerable debate. Questions about function and meaning of mounds, intentionality of their construction, and their symbolism are shifting discussions from viewing shell mounds in ecological terms of subsistence, resource exploitation, and seasonality to considering them as significant structures on the landscape that serve as places for daily practices and rituals that are inextricably tied to social memory (Thompson 2010). Human memory is socially constituted, where mythical principles are mapped as reminders of catastrophes and triumphs in the past (Knapp and Ashmore 1999:13), as an enduring record of past lives (Ingold 1993:152–153). Through memory of place and the reuse and reinterpretation of it, landscape is connected to the identity of its inhabitants (Gamble and Wilken 2008). Landscape as identity is related to collective recognition of places, often associated with symbolic or

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ceremonial practices. Social memories are shaped by cumulative economic, social, and political factors (Climo and Cattell 2002) that are closely tied to the landscape. These places have the capacity to trigger self-reflection and memories of past times, people, and events (Basso 1996). They may be repeatedly visited, modified, and interpreted, often reinforcing social relationships (Pauketat 2008) and creating links to the past and the ancestors (Meskell 2003, 2007; Yoffee 2007). Memory of the past is preserved in these links, negotiated, reinterpreted, and commemorated in rituals and public events, some associated with the deceased, others with more quotidian activities; practices of remembrance emerge from repeated actions and performances (Meskell 2007:224).

Mounds as Places of Persistence and Social Memory

The materialization of social memory, whether through mortuary ceremonies, ritual congregations, or daily practices (Bourdieu 1977), provides the archaeologist with the possibility of identifying remembrance. This is not straightforward, especially for those who work in more ephermal sites associated with hunter-gatherers. Closely linked to ideas of social memory and landscape is the concept of place-making (Basso 1996) and "persistent places," locales that were used and occupied repeatedly over long periods of time (Kidder and Sherwood 2016; Schneider 2015; Thompson 2010; Thompson and Pluckhahn 2010).

Herein I present a case study from a shell mound at the far western end of Santa Cruz Island in southern California. I propose that multiple lines of evidence support the idea that El Montón (CA-SCRI-333) was a persistent place that over thousands of years of occupation became a prominent feature on the landscape, as the site became higher and expanded as people practiced rituals, staged feasts, buried their dead, and constructed houses. Before examining in detail, I first turn to discussions of shell mounds outside of southern California as theoretical and contextual background.

Southeastern United States

Several recent publications on hunter-gatherer shell mounds as places of social memory—as socially constructed monuments or landscapes, not just accumulations of refuse—are centered on sites in the southeastern United States (Kidder 2011; Marquardt 2010; Randall 2011; Russo 1994; Sassaman and Randall 2012). Many interpretations rely on detailed construction histories of mounds that include geophysical surveys such as ground-penetrating radar (GPR) (e.g., Thompson and Andrus 2011; Thompson and Pluckhahn 2010). Some investigate how mounds were tied to ritual behavior associated with feasting and mortuary ceremonialism, while others consider orientation and siting (Randall 2011; Sassaman and Randall 2012). The earliest mounds in the southeastern United States are particularly relevant to this discussion because of their similarities to El Montón. One of the most prominent Archaic sites in the southeast, Watson Brake, consists of 11 earthen mounds elliptically arranged into a 280 × 370 m complex (Saunders et al. 2005). It is one of several Archaic mound complexes in the lower Mississippi River valley that date to 5,600–5,000 years ago and required planning, perhaps a reflection that non-egalitarian structures existed in the Archaic (Sassaman 2010).

Other World Regions

In the Torres Straits Islands, ceremonial mounds of dugong bones are documented, as well as mounds of large gastropods that were often used in rituals (David and Badugal 2006; McNiven 2012). Earth and shell mounds in Australia and New Zealand number in the hundreds and have been interpreted primarily in economic terms and as significant boundary markers that denote ownership (Bailey and Flemming 2008; Brockwell 2006; Cribb 1991). Hausmann and Meredith-Williams (2016) investigate middens in Saudi Arabia to explore accumulation rates of shell deposits. In Brazil, some are huge (up to 50 m in height), serve funerary purposes, and are prominent landscape features (Gaspar et al. 2008). Many hunter-gatherer mounds, including some in which funerary rituals are regularly reenacted, can also be found in South Africa (Jerardino 2010), Japan (Okada 1998), the Northwest

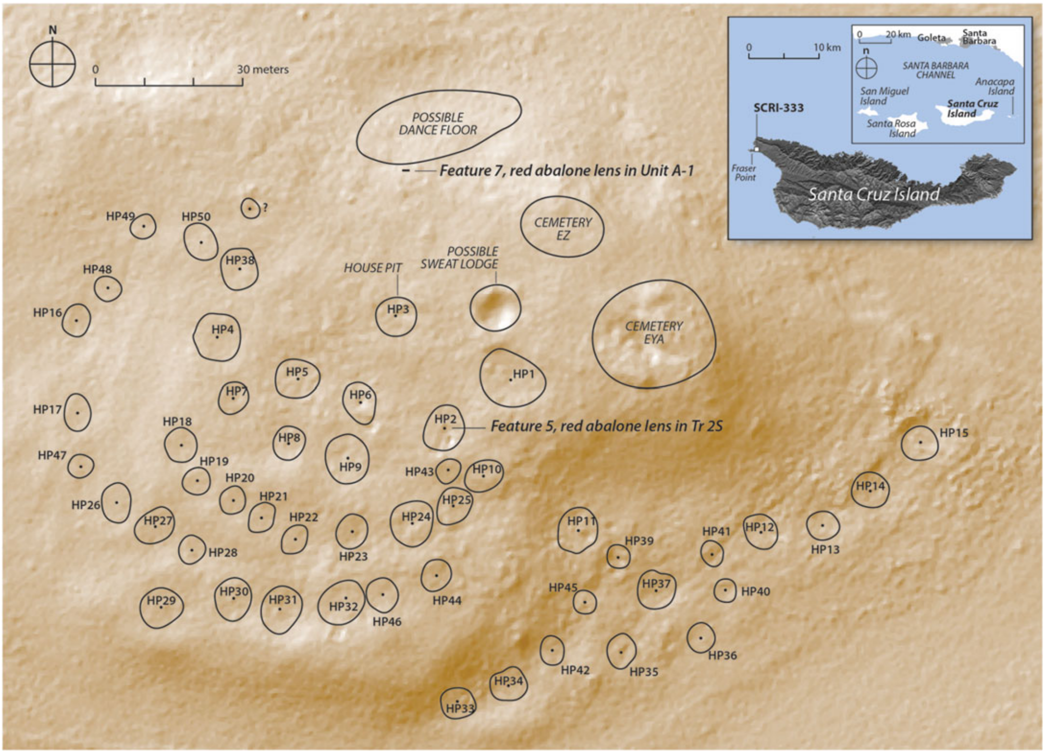

Figure 1. Map of SCRI-333. (Color online)

coast (Grier 2014; Mathews 2014), and the San Francisco Bay area.

San Francisco Bay area shell mounds are especially well-known in California, in part because of their massive size and frequency of occurrence. Many were used intensively during the Middle period (500 B.C.–A.D. 900) (Lightfoot 1997; Luby and Gruber 1999), although some became places of refuge after European colonization (Schneider 2015). Some were probably associated with polities and intentionally constructed, others served as territorial symbols and centers for numerous activities, including rituals, mortuary feasting, and places to bury the dead (Lightfoot 1997; Lightfoot and Luby 2002; Luby and Gruber 1999).

Santa Barbara Channel Region

Shell mounds in southern California have been investigated, but largely through a different theoretical lens. One on the Northern Channel Islands purportedly occupied continuously for 3,000 years is Prisoner's Harbor (CA-SCRI-240). Four m (13 ft) deep in the center, it was approximately 122 × 46 m (400 ft × 150 ft) in size (Rogers 1929:306). One feature at the site, interpreted as a feasting event, dates to the historic period (Noah 2005:280). Although mounds have been investigated on the northern Channel Islands (Braje et al. 2014), primarily through the perspective of subsistence, nothing like the mound at Prisoner's Harbor has been identified in the region except for El Montón at CA-SCRI-333.

Situated on Santa Cruz Island (Figure 1), El Montón is the best-preserved archaeological shell mound from the Middle Holocene in the Santa Barbara Channel region. With its many house depressions, features, and mortuary information, it is an ideal location to investigate the significance of a place of social memory—a persistent place on the landscape, within the context of hunter-gatherer-fishers throughout the world. This project is significant because the mound was first used 6,000 years ago, is the largest existing shell mound in southern California, has numerous features, including 50 house depressions visible on the surface,

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Figure 2. Person on top of El Montón (photograph by Macduff Everton). (Color online)

and has a well-documented bioarchaeological data.

The Chumash Indians of Southern California

The Chumash Indian inhabitants of the Santa Barbara Channel region exhibited a number of characteristics at European contact that are associated with complex hunter-gatherers, including the use of shell bead currencies, craft specialization, sedentism, high population densities, food storage, inherited leadership positions, and social hierarchy (Gamble 2008; Kennett 2005). Subsistence was primarily based on shellfish, fish, marine mammals, birds, and plant foods, including edible seeds, corms, and bulbs. Houses were domed-shaped with thatched roofs and often clustered in rows with pathways between them (Gamble 1995). DNA, linguistic, osteological, and archaeological evidence suggests that no major population replacements occurred during the last 7,000–10,000 years in the area (Erlandson 1994; Golla 2011; Johnson and Lorenz 2006:33), making this region ideal for exploring long-term historical trajectories of hunter-gatherer-fishers.

Although the Chumash had great antiquity in the Santa Barbara Channel area, they were not culturally static (e.g., Erlandson 1994; Glassow et al. 2007; Kennett 2005; King 1990). Many suggest that environmental change played a critical role in the development of sociopolitical complexity in the region about 1,000 years ago (Arnold 1992; Johnson 2000; Kennett and Kennett 2000). Less is known about societies between 6000 to 2500 B.P. than in later time periods.

This investigation is focused on the large shell mound on the western end of Santa Cruz Island, where intensive archaeological investigations have produced a rich array of radiocarbon dates within solid stratigraphic contexts, with 58 dates reported here for the first time. In this paper, I argue that El Montón was a persistent place that eventually became a significant feature on the landscape that served to create a social memory among many generations of people.

Case Study: El Montón, SCRI-333

What is most striking about El Montón is its size and prominence on the landscape (Figure 2). It is the largest extant shell mound and one of the best-preserved Early Period sites in the Santa Barbara Channel region, with most dates at the site falling between 6000 and 2500 B.P. The mound is 8–10 m higher than the marine terrace it rests on and measures 270 by 210 m, approximately 4.5 ha. Over 3 m of deposits on the mound are cultural. Ground-penetrating radar (GPR) and archaeological excavations indicate it was built on a small natural knoll identified as the Pleistocene surface (Gamble and Simms 2016). Approximately 50 depressions between 5–13 m in diameter are visible on the surface,

Table 1. Cemeteries Excavated at SCRI-333.

Excavator/Date	Time Period	Number of Burials
Olson 1928/1929	Early Period, Phase Eya, 6000–5000 B.P.	57
Van Valkenburgh 1933/1934	Early Period, Phase Eyb, 5000–3000 B.P.	132
Olson 1928/1929	Early Period, Phase Ez, 3000–2600 B.P.	48
Total		237

more than any site in the region. Excavations in five house depressions uncovered complex stratigraphic deposits, including red abalone and whalebone features that are over 5,500 years old, a large rock oven, and burned house deposits. A prominent feature on the landscape, CA-SCRI-333 is visible from sites over 10 km away on Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa Islands. The location of El Montón was naturally defensive, with a clear view of people coming by sea or land, and ideal for a population that focused on marine resources. The adjacent Forney's Cove is the most protected harbor on the western shores of Santa Cruz Island. Identified as the only primary village site on Santa Cruz Island during the Middle Holocene (Kennett 2005:129–134), CA-SCRI-333 served as a central place for social, economic, and ritual activities.

Previous Archaeological Investigations

Olson (1930) conducted the earliest well-documented excavations at CA-SCRI-333 in 1927–1928 in two cemeteries and Structure 1, where he found nearly 2 m (6 ft) of cultural deposits. He uncovered 57 burials from the earlier cemetery (6,000–5,000 B.P.) and 48 from the later component (3000–2600 B.P.; Table 1). Although Olson (1930) only briefly published on the site, he kept relatively detailed field notes, recording burial lots, grave goods, sex, age, position, orientation, and depth.

Both King (1990) and Glassow (2004) published on beads and other artifacts from Olson's excavations, but neither was a comprehensive study of the mortuary assemblage. Sholts (2010) reexamined the human remains from the site, recording age and sex of individuals.

In 1932, Richard Van Valkenburgh excavated 132 burials (over 100 complete articulated skeletons and 32 unassociated crania) in a third cemetery that spanned the period between those Olson excavated (Table 1), but unfortunately left limited notes (Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, "Archaeological Excavations on Frazier Point, Santa Cruz Island, California, 1932"). AMS dates from teeth of six individuals from this cemetery range between 5300–4190 cal B.P. (Monroe et al. 2010).

Finally, Wilcoxon (1993) conducted major excavations on house depressions and adjacent refuse deposits at SCRI-333 in the 1980s. Except for a brief publication (Wilcoxon 1993), he never completed his analysis.

Recent Archaeological Investigations

This paper discusses my archaeological investigations at CA-SCRI-333 between 2009 and 2016. One goal was to determine the occupational history of the mound, its formation processes, and its meaning. A detailed chronology of the site, achieved through excavation of selected house depressions, recovery of chronologically sensitive artifacts, and collection of radiocarbon samples within stratigraphic context, was integral to achieving this goal.

Therefore, I mapped 50 house depressions (Figure 1), many of which are in rows that appear to be on purposely constructed terraces on the mound (Figure 3). Detailed stratigraphic profiles of trenches were made, with radiocarbon samples identified on them (Figures 4 and 5). Three house depressions (Structures 2, 6, and 32) had features (Lens C) that were identified as probable burned house deposits (Figure 4). Two additional depressions lacked this lens, but one had a large burned-rock feature in its center (Figure 5b). I also analyzed notes and collections from the two cemeteries (Collection of Manuscripts from the Archaeological Archives of the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, # 442, Original Field Notebooks and Photo Prints of Santa Barbara Mainland and Santa Cruz Island Excavations,

Figure 3. Photograph showing terraces at SCRI-333 (photograph by Macduff Everton). (Color online)

Including Some Quad Sheets with Site Locations [by R. L. Olson, 1927–1928]) and identified Olson's excavation units in the field.

Results of Current Analysis from Old and New Investigations at SCRI-333

El Montón, a Persistent Place

How and why did the site of El Montón become a place of such significance during the Early Period? I suspect that the location was originally an attraction because of the rocky intertidal zones, fresh water sources, kelp beds, sandy beaches, and cove for boats. It also commands an impressive view of Santa Rosa Island and the west end of Santa Cruz Island and the surrounding hills—significant for defensive reasons and also as a prominent place on the landscape. I propose that over time, as people visited the site, they eventually settled there, constructing thatch-covered houses and harvesting a wealth of marine resources adjacent to the site. They chose the highest part of the mound to bury their dead in rites that included endowing some who died with grave goods that distinguished them from others. Undoubtedly inherent in these rites were significant ceremonies and feasts. Other occa-

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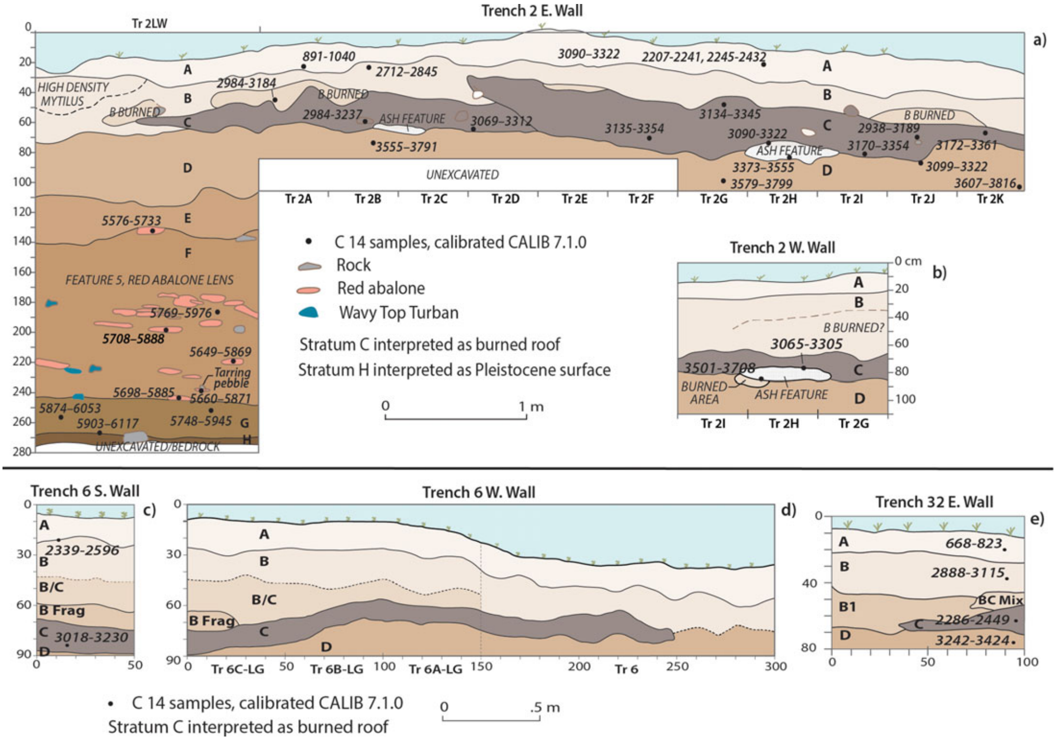

Figure 4. (a) Stratigraphic profile with AMS dates for Trench 2 east wall, (b) stratigraphic profile with AMS dates for Trench 2 west wall, ash feature, (c) and (d) stratigraphic profiles with AMS dates for Trench 6, south and west walls, (e) stratigraphic profile with AMS dates for Trench 32, east wall. (Color online)

sions, such as calendrical events like the Winter Solstice, were also probably associated with feasts. Eventually, the mound became higher and more expansive—a prominent place on the landscape that could be viewed from the sea and many surrounding settlements.

Chronology

Eighty-five radiocarbon dates have been analyzed from SCRI-333 (Table 2); I obtained 69 of these 85 dates, most from shell and in clear stratigraphic context (Figures 4 and 5), 58 of which are reported here for the first time. The calibrated dates range between 668–5117 cal B.P., with all but four (95 percent) dating between 2207–6117 cal B.P. (Table 2), and are consistent with most chronologically sensitive artifacts from the site. The four dates that postdate 2207 cal B.P. are from the upper 30 cm of the site, and probably a result of people visiting later in time, not site inhabitants.

Remembering the Dead

Three cemeteries excavated in the 1920s and 1930s are immediately adjacent to each other and situated at the highest point on the mound. None of the house depressions visible at the site are in the cemetery region, suggesting that the Chumash inhabitants recognized this area as formal sacred space. Their choice of the summit probably had significant symbolic meaning, as decisions of where to place the dead are not usually based on functional expediency, but instead often have powerful meanings about social geography (Parker Pearson 2000). In some societies, the dead still inhabit the world as spirits, and cemeteries can be viewed as a liminal space between the living and spirit world (Meskell 2007). When standing on the mound's apex, the view of the sea, Santa Rosa Island, San Miguel, and the west end of Santa Cruz Island are striking, yet visibility is limited to only certain portions of the site itself, thereby situating that space as private and prominent at the same

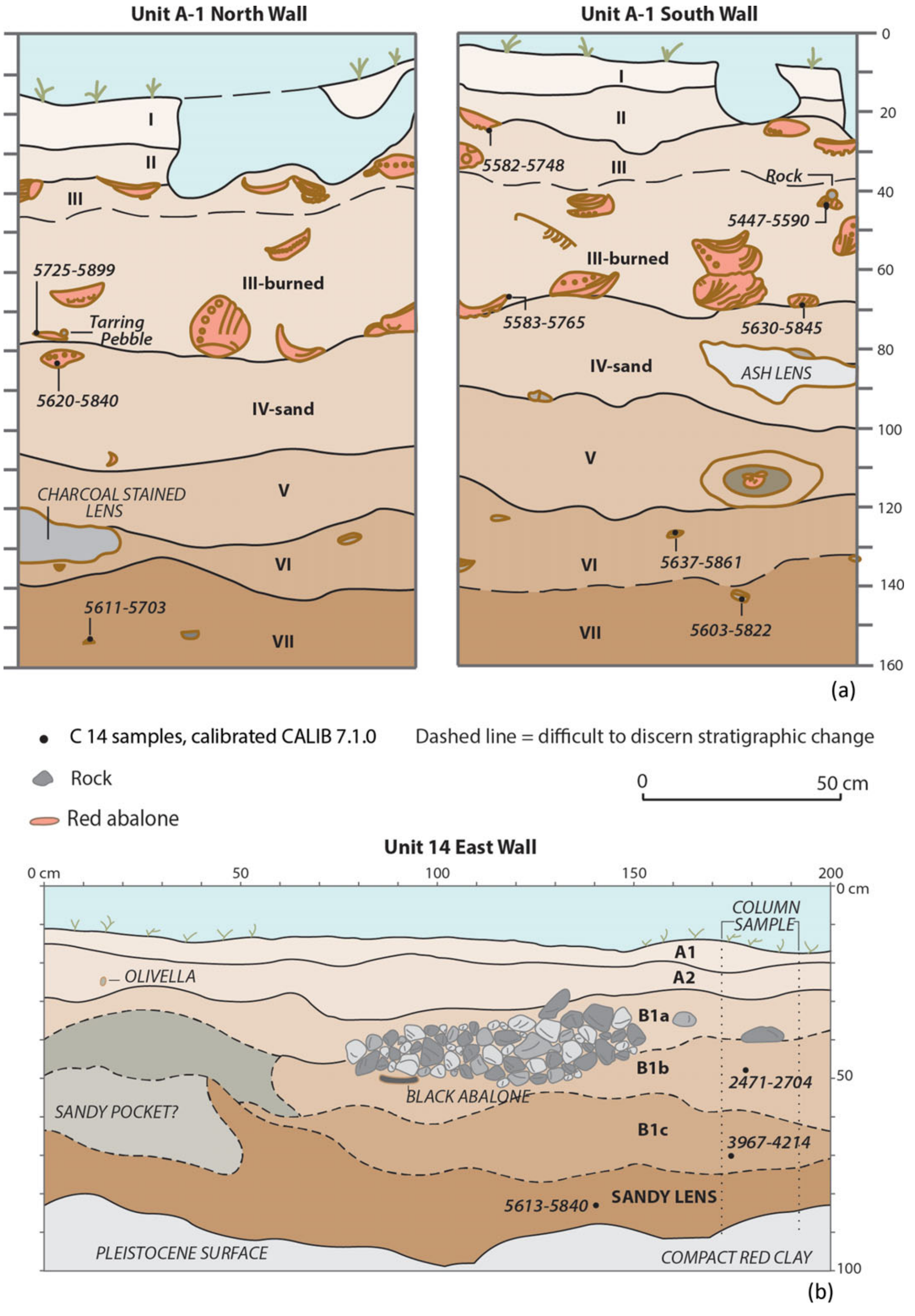

Figure 5. (a) Stratigraphic profile with AMS dates for Unit A-1, north and south walls, (b) stratigraphic profile with AMS dates for Unit 14, east wall. (Color online)

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Table 2. Radiocarbon Dates at SCRI-333.

Lab #	Unit/Trench	Depth (cm)	Strata	Feature	Material	Conventional ^{14}C Age (B.P.)	2σ cal B.P.	2σ cal B.P. Median	Reference
D-AMS 1389	Trench 2A	21	A	Above structure	*M. californianus*	1666 ± 23	891–1040	951	New
D-AMS 13310	Trench 2H	22	A	Above structure	*M. californianus*	2899 ± 25	2207–2241 2245–2432	2325	New
UCIAMS- 94055	Trench 32A/B	20	A	Above structure	*M. californianus*	1465 ± 20	668–823	741	Jazwa et al. 2013
UCIAMS- 94051	Trench 6C	21	A	Above structure	*M. californianus*	3000 ± 20	2339–2596	2443	Jazwa et al. 2013
D-AMS 1383	Trench 2B	21	B	Above structure	*M. californianus*	3260 ± 24	2712–2845	2768	New
D-AMS 13311	Trench 2H	37	B	Above structure	*M. californianus*	2980 ± 29	2318–2573 2579–2581 2589–2591	2419	New
UCIAMS- 94056	Trench 32A/B	34	B	Above structure	*M. californianus*	3460 ± 20	2888–3115	3000	Jazwa et al. 2013
UCIAMS- 87889	Trench 6A	29	B	Above structure	Charcoal	2485 ± 20	2489–2645 2647–2715	2586	Jazwa et al. 2013
D-AMS 1384	Trench 2A	42	B burned	Above structure	*M. californianus*	3511 ± 29	2948–3184	3071	New
D-AMS 13312	Trench 2J	55	B burned	Above structure	*M. californianus*	3611 ± 29	3094–3329	3209	New
D-AMS 1390	Trench 11	70	B Lower		*H. rufescens*	5428 ± 29	5449–5596	5530	New
D-AMS 10985	Trench 2K	67	B/B burned	Above structure	*M. californianus*	3664 ± 25	3172–3361	3274	New
UCIAMS- 87891	Trench 6B	49.5	B/C	Above structure	Charcoal	2540 ± 20	2506–2530 2536–2590 2616–2633 2697–2745	2715	Jazwa et al. 2013
D-AMS 1393	Unit 14B	48	B1b		*M. californianus*	3093 ± 24	2471–2704	2600	New
D-AMS 1391	Unit 14B	71	B1c		*M. californianus*	4318 ± 29	3967–4214	4087	New
D-AMS 1385	Trench 2B	55	C	Burned structure	*H. rufescens*	3547 ± 32	2984–3237	3118	New
D-AMS 13309	Trench 2D	55	C	Burned structure	*M. californianus*	3595 ± 28	3069–3312	3187	New
D-AMS 1382	Trench 2F	68	C	Burned structure	*M. californianus*	3642 ± 33	3135–3354	3249	New
D-AMS 10992	Trench 2G	49	C	Burned structure	*M. californianus*	3635 ± 29	3134–3345	3241	New
D-AMS 10991	Trench 2H	75	C	Slightly darker C	*M. californianus*	3606 ± 30	3090–3322	3202	New
D-AMS 10993	Trench 2H	76	C	Burned structure	*M. californianus*	3590 ± 26	3065–3305	3180	New
D-AMS 10988	Trench 2I	80	C	Burned structure	*M. californianus*	3658 ± 22	3170–3354	3268	New
D-AMS 10987	Trench 2J	69	C	Burned structure	*M. californianus*	3507 ± 33	2938–3189	3065	New

Table 2. Continued.

Lab #	Unit/Trench	Depth (cm)	Strata	Feature	Material	Conventional ^{14}C Age (B.P.)	2σ cal B.P.	2σ cal B.P. Median	Reference
UCIAMS- 87888	Trench 32A/B	60	C	Burned structure	Charcoal	2510 ± 20	2494–2598 2610–2639 2682–2732	2583	Jazwa et al. 2013
UCIAMS- 94053	Trench 32A/B	63	C	Burned structure	*M. californianus*	2920 ± 20	2286–2449	2344	Jazwa et al. 2013
UCIAMS- 87892	Trench 6C	61.5	C	Burned structure	Charcoal	2970 ± 20	3071–3185 3190–3209	3136	Jazwa et al. 2013
UCIAMS- 94052	Trench 6C	84	C	Burned structure	*M. californianus*	3555 ± 20	3018–3230	3130	Jazwa et al. 2013
D-AMS 10986	Trench 2J	85	C at D	Burned structure	*H. cracherodii*	3608 ± 24	3099–3322	3205	New
D-AMS 10994	Trench 2H	84	ash feature	Hearth?, bottom	*M. californianus*	3955 ± 25	3501–3708	3609	New
D-AMS 10990	Trench 2H	85	ash feature	Hearth?, top	*M. californianus*	3834 ± 25	3373–3555	3464	New
D-AMS 1381	Trench 2B	72	D	Below structure	*M. californianus*	3993 ± 30	3555–3791	3656	New
D-AMS 10999	Trench 2G	74	D	Below structure	Charcoal	3132 ± 28	3251–3303 3322–3405 3427–3443	3359	New
D-AMS 10989	Trench 2G	99	D	Below structure	*M. californianus*	4009 ± 24	3579–3799	3676	New
D-AMS 11000	Trench 2H	80–90	D	Below structure	Charcoal	2967 ± 22	3067–3209	3130	New
D-AMS 10984	Trench 2K	103	D	Below structure	*M. californianus*	4030 ± 23	3607–3816	3706	New
UCIAMS- 94054	Trench 32A/B	75	D	Below structure	*M. californianus*	3720 ± 20	3242–3424	3340	Jazwa et al. 2013
UCIAMS- 87890	Trench 6A	78	D	Below structure	Charcoal	3080 ± 20	3234–3359	3292	Jazwa et al. 2013
D-AMS 1386	Trench 2LW	138	F	Red abalone lens	*H. rufescens*	5555 ± 30	5576–5733	5648	New
D-AMS 1388	Trench 2S	218	F	Red abalone lens	*H. rufescens*	5570 ± 34	5575–5769	5664	New
D-AMS 1387	Trench 2S	220	F	Red abalone lens	*H. rufescens*	5646 ± 31	5649–5869	5758	New
D-AMS 11001	Trench 2S	190–200	F	Red abalone lens	Charcoal	5085 ± 26	5749–5830 5844–5909	5811	New
D-AMS 11002	Trench 2S	190–200	F	Red abalone lens	Charcoal	5095 ± 30	5749–5830 5844–5914	5813	New
D-AMS 10974	Trench 2S	185	F5	Red abalone lens	*M. californianus*	5766 ± 28	5769–5976	5891	New
D-AMS 10977	Trench 2S	195	F6	Red abalone lens	*H. rufescens*	5683 ± 24	5708–5888	5800	New
D-AMS 10978	Trench 2S	237	F8	Red abalone lens	*H. rufescens*	5654 ± 28	5660–5871	5769	New
D-AMS 10975	Trench 2S	242	F9	Red abalone lens	*H. rufescens*	5675 ± 24	5698–5885	5792	New

Table 2. Continued.

Lab #	Unit/Trench	Depth (cm)	Strata	Feature	Material	Conventional ^{14}C Age (B.P.)	2σ cal B.P.	2σ cal B.P. Median	Reference
D-AMS 1392	Unit 14B	37–40	FAR feature	FAR feature	*M. californianus*	3019 ± 25	2349–2616	2480	New
D-AMS 10973	Trench 2S	237	G1	Red abalone lens	*M. californianus*	5750 ± 26	5748–5945	5874	New
D-AMS 10972	Trench 2S	256	G2	Red abalone lens	Urchin	5824 ± 25	5874–6053	5946	New
D-AMS 10976	Trench 2S	267	G3	Red abalone lens	*M. californianus*	5869 ± 28	5903–6117	5998	New
D-AMS 10971	Trench 2S	268	G3	Red abalone lens	*M. californianus*	5766 ± 30	5766–5977	5890	New
D-AMS 13316	Unit A-2	22	I		*M. californianus*	3984 ± 24	3549–3761	3644	New
D-AMS 10995	Trench 11	23			*M. californianus*	3503 ± 29	2939–3175	3060	New
D-AMS 13317	Unit A-2	30	II		*M. californianus*	4198 ± 27	3825–4049	3922	New
D-AMS 13315	Unit A-2	35	II		*M. californianus*	3930 ± 26	3472–3678	3578	New
D-AMS 10998	Unit A-1	42.5	III	Red abalone lens	*H. rufescens*	5479 ± 25	5481–5649	5582	New
D-AMS 13314	Unit A-2	53	III		*M. californianus*	4334 ± 26	3984–4224	4111	New
D-AMS 10979	Unit A-1	20	III	Red abalone lens	*H. rufescens*	5574 ± 26	5582–5748	5666	New
D-AMS 10997	Unit A-1	43	III burned	Red abalone lens	*H. rufescens*	5423 ± 28	5447–5590	5526	New
D-AMS 10983	Unit A-1	66	III burned	Red abalone lens	*H. rufescens*	5581 ± 26	5583–5765	5673	New
D-AMS 10980	Unit A-1	67	III burned	Red abalone lens	*H. rufescens*	5621 ± 24	5630–5845	5720	New
D-AMS 10982	Unit A-1	75	III burned	Red abalone lens	*H. rufescens*	5703 ± 25	5725–5899	5817	New
D-AMS 10996	Trench 11	88			*M. californianus*	4109 ± 24	3749–3862	3805	New
D-AMS 10981	Unit A-1	80	IV?	Red abalone lens	*H. rufescens*	5615 ± 26	5620–5840	5712	New
D-AMS 1394	Unit 14B	83	Sand		*M. californianus*	5613 ± 29	5613–5840	5710	New
D-AMS 13306	Unit A-1	126	VI		*M. californianus*	5633 ± 31	5637–5861	5739	New
D-AMS 13307	Unit A-1	142	VII		*M. californianus*	5605 ± 31	5603–5822	5701	New
D-AMS 13308	Unit A-1	153	VII		*H. cracherodii*	5568 ± 31	5611–5703	5661	New
D-AMS 13313	Unit A-2	96	VII		*M. californianus*	4628 ± 26	4404–4615	4503	New
Beta–35005	Trench 2	30–40			Marine Shell	4130 ± 70	3635–4048	3834	Breschini et al. 1996:56
CAMS-9099	Unit 11B	200–210			*M. californianus*	4240 ± 60	3808–4172	3982	Kennett 1998:462
CAMS-9098	Unit 11B	200–210			*M. californianus*	4300 ± 60	3871–4251	4062	Kennett 1998:462
CAMS-9100	Unit 11B	200–210			*M. californianus*	4300 ± 70	3851–4280	4063	Kennett 1998:462
CAMS-9097	Unit 11B	200–210			*M. californianus*	4370 ± 60	3972–4364	4164	Kennett 1998:462

Table 2. Continued.

Lab #	Unit/Trench	Depth (cm)	Strata	Feature	Material	Conventional ^{14}C Age (B.P.)	2σ cal B.P.	2σ cal B.P. Median	Reference
CAMS-9661	Unit 11B	210–220		Red abalone lens	*M. californianus*	5580 ± 60	5570–5853	5684	Kennett 1998:462
CAMS-9660	Unit 11B	210–220		Red abalone lens	*M. californianus*	5610 ± 90	5541–5919	5721	Kennett 1998:462
UCR-1956	Unit 11B	70–80			Charcoal	4015 ± 100	4235–4826	4504	Wilcoxon 1993:148
UCR-1955	Unit 11B	10–30			Charcoal	2160 ± 100	1903-1908 1924–2350	2155	Wilcoxon 1993:148
UCR-1951	Unit 2B-S	20–30			Charcoal	2700 ± 70	2722–2963	2819	Wilcoxon 1993:148
UCR-1952	Unit 2B-S	90-100			Charcoal	3330 ± 90	3378–3732 3743–3775 3789–3826	3569	Wilcoxon 1993:148
UCR-1957	Unit 32B	10–20			Charcoal	2300 ± 90	2066–2081 2108–2542 2561–2618 2631–2701	2320	Wilcoxon 1993:148
UCR-1530	Unit 6A	220		Red abalone lens	*H. rufescens*	5190 ± 135	4885–5560	5237	Wilcoxon 1993:148
UCR-1954	Unit 6A	120–130			Charcoal	3310 ± 70	3386–3695	3541	Wilcoxon 1993:148
UCR-1953	Unit 6A	20–30			Charcoal	1410 ± 95	1089–1109 1128–1133 1146–1159 1172–1533	1328	Wilcoxon 1993:148
UCR-1852	Unit 6A	220–230		Red abalone lens	*H. rufescens*	4590 ± 95	4207–4779	4466	Wilcoxon 1993:148

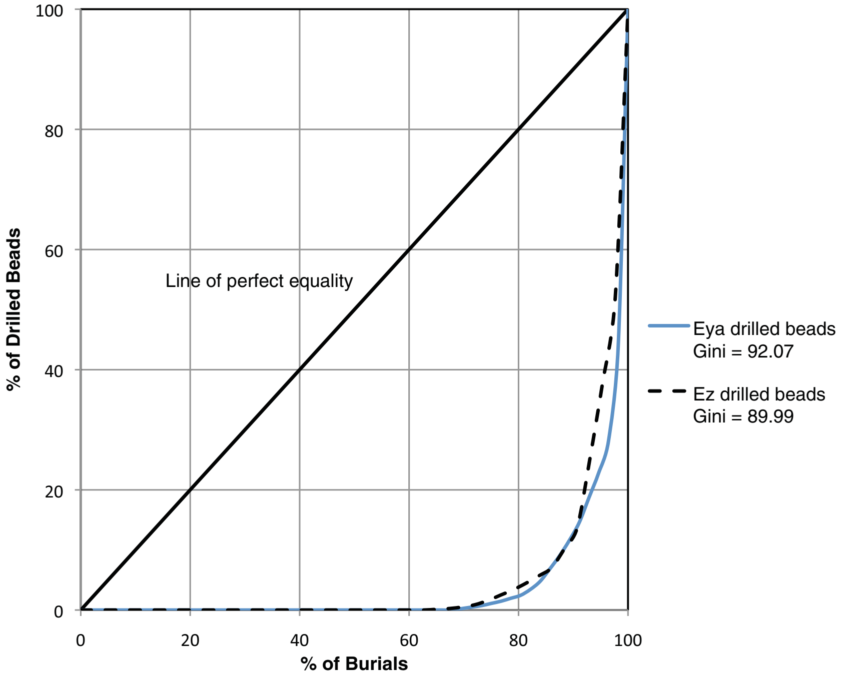

Figure 6. Lorenz curves and gini coefficient indexes of drilled beads from cemeteries Eya and Ez. (Color online)

time. Prominent places can be viewed in social contexts that help ensure rights over natural resources (Parker Pearson 2000). The prominent mound at the west end of Santa Cruz Island can be considered a liminal interface between land and sea—a transformational space where religious rituals mark the transcendence between the material and immaterial, between life and death.

Evidence that people were not treated equally in death is apparent in both cemeteries excavated by Olson. Some individuals were buried with many grave goods, and others with nothing or very few. To measure the degree of inequality in the distribution of beads, ornaments, and other grave goods, Lorenz curves and Gini Coefficients were constructed (Figure 6 and Table 3). The Gini coefficient converts the Lorenz curves to a single number between 0 and 100 percent, allowing one to numerically compare curves. A Gini coefficient of 100 percent conveys the maximum inequality. The Gini coefficients for all artifacts and the two Lorenz curves plotted for drilled beads by burial in each cemetery (Table 3 and Figure 6) indicate clear inequality.

Table 3. Gini Index for Different Types of Grave Goods.

Item	Eya	Ez
All grave goods	76.19	78.68
All beads & ornaments	80.16	79.19
Drilled beads	92.07	89.99
Non-drilled beads	84.01	84.94

The earlier cemetery (Phase Eya, 6000–5000 B.P.) contrasts with the later one at CA-SCRI-333 and other cemeteries in the Chumash region in the higher frequency of infants and children (41.9 percent) compared with adults (Table 4). Especially intriguing are the many subadults buried with numerous grave goods (Figure 7). For example, five of the six individuals with more than 150 beads and ornaments are infants. Although *Olivella biplicata* (now known as *Callinax biplicata*) shell beads were considered a type of currency in the Late period (A.D. 1150–1804), there is no clear evidence this was the case thousands of years ago. Instead, beads and ornaments were probably items of adornment associated with higher-status individuals. The

Table 4. Percentages of Infants and Children at Five Chumash Cemeteries.

Site	Time Period	% Infants	% Infants and Children	Number of Burials
SCRI-333	Early Period Eya, 6000–5000 B.P.	36.4	41.9	55
SCRI-333	Early Period Ez, 3000–2600 B.P.	12.5	18.5	48
Malibu LAN-264	Middle Period 5, A.D. 950–1150		17	90
Medea Creek LAN-243	Protohistoric, A.D. 1300–1785		24	296
Malibu LAN-264	Historic Period, A.D. 1775–1805		21	140

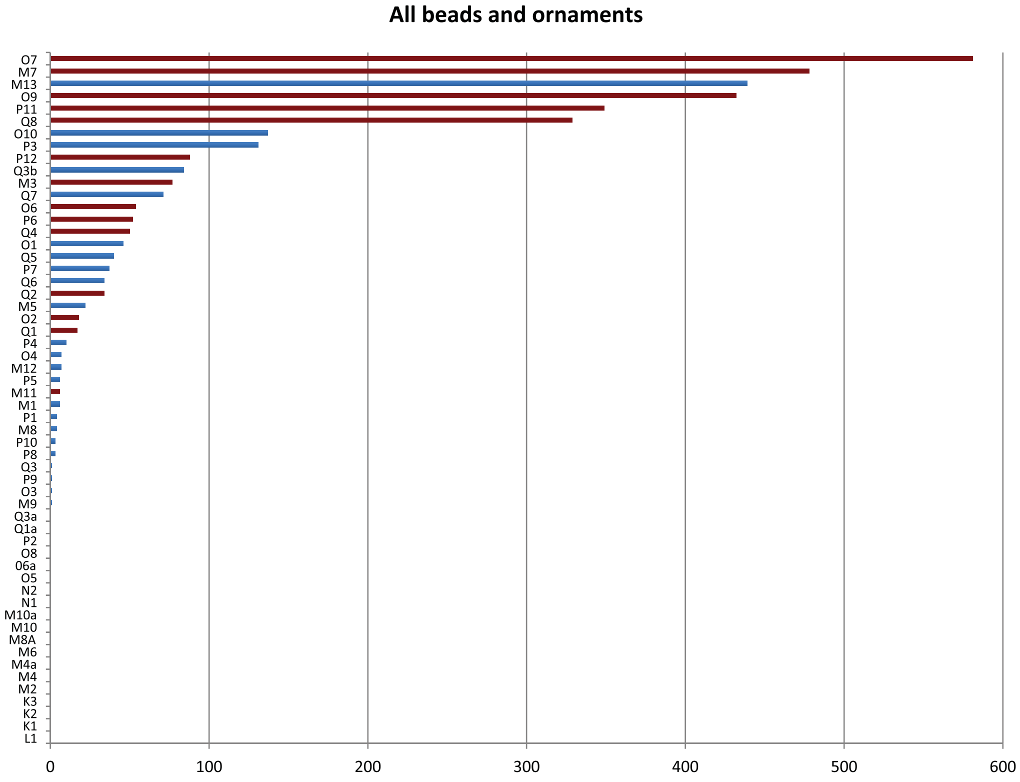

Figure 7. Graph of beads and ornaments by burial in Early Period phase Eya (6000–5000 B.P.) Cemetery at SCRI-333. (Color online)

presence of many beads with infants and children implies ascribed status, or at the very least, special treatment that others were not afforded. Other, less common, types of grave goods are listed in Table 5. The later cemetery (Phase Ez, ca. 3000–2600 B.P.) is similar to the earlier one in that many subadults were buried with beads and ornaments, although the percentage of subadults compared to adults was much less. Significant literature about infants and children in the archaeological record has emerged over the last couple of decades (Kamp 2001; Lillehammer 2010; Sofaer Derevenski 1994); some have focused on a history of children as invisible, marginalized, and disempowered in anthropological publications (Baxter 2008). In certain regions of the world, archaeological evidence suggests that infants were perceived as incomplete persons, often not even afforded formal burial rites. We see that at CA-SCRI-333 they are treated similarly to adults, if not with even greater veneration, and were perceived as complete persons even as infants.

The central portion of the later cemetery (Ez) is distinctive because of placement and treatment of burials, with nine individuals in extended

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Table 5. Artifacts in Cemeteries.

Artifact Type	Eya Cemetery	Ez Cemetery
Shell disc or tube beads, drilled	825	1,563
Shell beads, whole	2,822	7,386
Bone beads	5	11
Stone beads	9	185
Shell ornaments	64	48
Stone ornaments	0	10
Stone ornament/bead blanks	0	3
Bone pins	39	5
Bone implements	19	12
Bone awls	8	5
Bone barbs	10	6
Mortars	4	4
Pestles	2	9
Digging stick weights	9	1
Digging stick weight blanks	0	2
Points	1	1
Abalone pries	3	0
Asphaltum basketry impressions	20	189
Tarring pebbles	5	48
Olivella shells, unworked	33	381
Worked shell	0	1
Pebbles	19	30
Chipped stone	18	40
Effigies	1	166
Charmstones	0	2
Shell dishes	9	14
Shells with ochre	2	2
Shell with asphaltum	0	5
Turtle shell	3	2
Whale bone objects	19	4
Possible sun stick stones	2	0
Ochre	13	8
Steatite bowls	2	1
Pipes	2	0
Total	3,968	10,144

positions, in contrast to the flexed positions of all other burials in both cemeteries. This was not a result of chronological differences, as beads and other temporally diagnostic grave accompaniments are contemporaneous (King 1990) with those from the rest of the cemetery. Most of these nine were buried with a greater diversity and quantity of grave goods than other people, and, especially striking, these were the only individuals interred with black serpentine artifacts, including beads, ornaments, ornament blanks, and a small bowl. The serpentine in the cemetery is a hard stone that closely resembles that found near Figueroa Mountain in the San Rafael range on the mainland, about 80 km north of Santa Cruz Island. A most remarkable burial in this central area is an adolescent female (C7) interred with six serpentine beads. What really made her stand apart from others, however, were the associated 157 effigies (95 percent of all the effigies) (Figure 8), some of which were painted and shaped. Effigies in southern California have been interpreted as instrumental in the mobilization and control of supernatural powers (Applegate 1978). Although it is unknown exactly how they were used thousands of years ago, it is likely that this young woman was recognized as someone with special significance and ritual power. This is not unlike young women buried with effigies in the mainland Chumash site of Malibu during the Middle Period (Gamble et al. 2001).

The inhabitants of El Montón buried their dead at the top of the mound for over three millennia; ceremonies surrounding mourning and interment were undoubtedly significant events in the lives of the inhabitants of and visitors to El Montón (Arnold 2006; Meskell 2003; Parker Pearson 2000). Mortuary events have been suggested as critical in the creation of persistent places in shell mounds in Australia and the Green River Valley in Kentucky (Littleton and Allen 2007; Moore 2015). Few material remains encountered by archaeologists are as clearly sacred as mortuary space (Moore 2004).

Houses and Other Features

In addition to the cemeteries, approximately 50 house depressions, a possible dance area, and a possible sweat lodge have been documented at CA-SCRI-333, among other features. The house depressions range between 20–133 m^2 in area each and are situated on a series of five terraces that radiate around the southern, western, and eastern portions of the mound (Figures 1 and 9). The largest depression (Structure 1, diameter = 13 m) is near the center of the mound at the highest elevation, not far from the three cemeteries. This depression had the best visibility of the surrounding settlements on Santa Cruz Island, the eastern part of Santa Rosa Island, and San Miguel Island. Hierarchy in the sizes of houses is clear (Figure 9). No occupational floors have been encountered yet. However, a highly distinctive lens (Lens C) was identified

Figure 8. Sample of effigies found in burial C7, Cemetery Ez. (Color online)

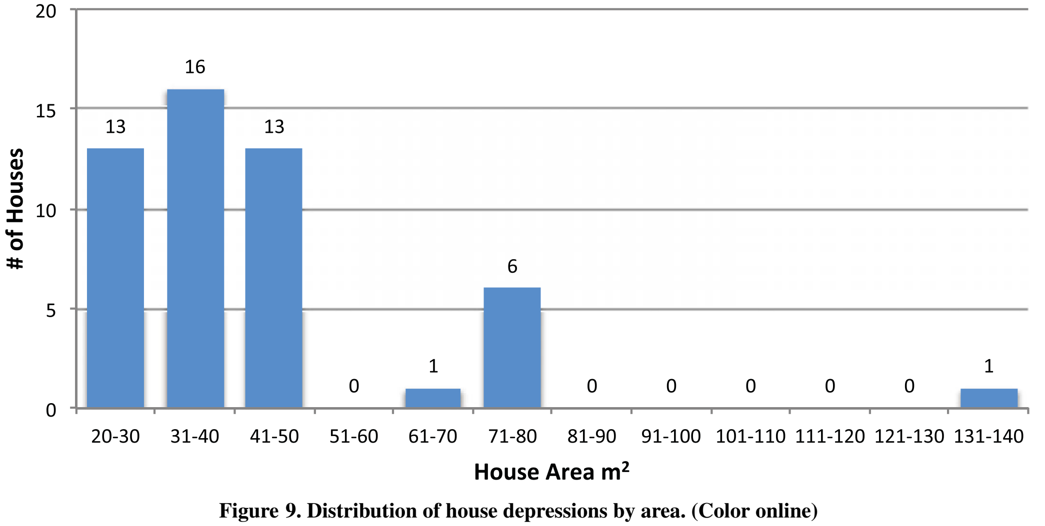

Figure 9. Distribution of house depressions by area. (Color online)

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in three house depressions, and does not occur in deposits outside of house depressions. It is not a continuous stratum (Figure 4), but a lens consisting of light-colored ash with few to no artifacts. In Trench 2, fire-reddened soil was noted in a few places immediately beneath Lens C, suggesting that something burned in situ. This lens can be meters in length, and therefore does not appear to be a hearth, but a larger burned feature. Based on these data, I interpret Lens C as the remains of burned thatch (originally on the roofs of the structures) and possibly woven mats or sea grass that covered the floors. Most archaeological examples of domestic structures in the region lack clay floors, rock rings, and other distinguishing features, although exceptions exist (Gamble 1995).

AMS dates (Table 2 and Jazwa et al. 2013) from Lens C in Structures 2 (diameter = 10 m), 6 (diameter = 8 m), and 32 (diameter = 10 m) suggest that occupation in Structures 2 and 6 overlapped (2938–3354 cal B.P. and 3018–3230 respectively). Interestingly, both are on the same terrace near the top of the mound, while Structure 32, which was apparently occupied earlier (2286–2732 cal B.P.), is situated on a lower terrace (Figure 1). Two additional dated house depressions, Structures 11 (diameter = 9 m) and 14 (diameter = 7 m), lacked Lens C, so I am uncertain whether their occupational levels are contemporaneous. GPR results indicate possible buried houses (Gamble and Simms 2016). However, their presence needs confirmation. Because CA-SCRI-333 was occupied for 3,800 years and all dated house deposits are in the latter 3,250 years, I expect that earlier houses not visible on the surface existed.

Although Structure 14, which is situated on the lowest terrace of the mound, lacked Lens C, a large (1 × 1.25 m) and impressive burned-rock feature was discovered (Figures 1 and 5b) that consisted of approximately 100 heavily burned rocks within a very dark and greasy soil with bits of charcoal. It is slightly concave in cross-section and much larger than average Chumash hearths. I propose that it was a rock oven that probably was used after the abandonment of the structure. The location of the feature was on the leeward side of the mound, which served as a natural windbreak. Roasting ovens in southern California have been used to cook yucca (*Yucca whippelei*), blue dicks (*Dichelostemma capitatum*), and pine nuts (Gamble and Mattingly 2012; Gill 2015; Timbrook 2007). Yucca does not grow on Santa Cruz Island; however, a burned-rock roasting pit with the remains of blue dicks was documented at CA-SCRI-619/620 (Gill 2015). No blue dicks were found in the CA-SCRI-333 feature; however, some were recovered at the site. Thick-shelled pine nuts, probably those of Torrey Pines from Santa Rosa Island, were also at the site but not associated with the feature. Torrey Pine nuts, very large and nutritious (Gamble and Mattingly 2012), are geographically closer than mainland Grey Pines, the only other California species with thick-shelled pine nuts. Torrey Pines are rare and grow only in San Diego and Santa Rosa Island. The burned-rock feature is strikingly similar in appearance to hundreds in San Diego that are interpreted as ovens for processing Torrey Pine nuts (Gamble and Mattingly 2012).

Subsistence or Feasting

Shellfish remains are ubiquitous at El Montón and make up the bulk of the midden deposits. Most not associated with red abalone features are highly fragmented and dominated by mussel (*Mytilus californianus*), which usually comprises between 91 and 96 percent of the species represented by weight (Landazuri 2015), followed by barnacle, black abalone, and sea urchins, with few or no red abalone. The red abalone features at the site differ significantly from other shell concentrations in that the shells are large and often whole, with red abalone consisting of 10 percent or more of the species by weight. Using multiple lines of evidence, I propose that at least one of the red abalone features may be the remains of a feasting event. I define feasting in a broad sense as communal consumption of food and or drink (Dietler and Hayden 2001) beyond daily sharing of meals. Instead, it is sharing in more atypical contexts, such as large communal meals associated with unusual occasions within or outside the context of ceremonies, which may involve singing, dancing, and other performative acts. Archaeological indicators for feasting include the presence of rare or labor-intensive plant or animal taxa, signs of wasting of food, or the presence of exceptionally large quantities

Table 6. Weight and Percentage of Shellfish Taxa in Red Abalone Features.

	Trench 2S, 40–60 cmbd		Trench A-1, 30–50 cmbd	
Taxa	Weight	%	Weight	%
Balanus	1,123.2	3.2	269.4	0.8
H. cracherodii	198.7	0.6	412.5	1.2
H. rufescens	4,491.4	12.8	28,880.1	82.4
Leaf barnacle	270.2	0.8	5.5	0.0
Limpet	180.0	0.5	37.5	0.1
Mytilus	22,201.3	63.2	4,379.2	12.5
Urchin	5,347.6	15.2	62.6	0.2
Wavy top	1,059.4	3.0	531.1	1.5
Miscellaneous	281.9	0.8	492.1	1.4
Total	35,153.7	100.0	35,069.8	100.0

of food (Hayden 2001:39–42). Rapid deposition and minimal trampling of faunal remains are also markers of feasting.

The red abalone feature (Feature 5, which is relatively close to the cemeteries) in Trench 2SLG, 110–245 cm below datum, dates between 5575–6117 cal B.P. (Figures 1 and 4a and Table 2), a period of time when sea surface temperatures (SSTs) were warmer (Braje et al. 2009; Kennett 2005). The red abalone feature was about 135 cm thick, thicker than any documented on the Channel Islands. Species of shell identified for two high-density levels consist of 12.8 percent red abalone, 15.2 percent sea urchin, and 63.2 percent mussel (Table 6), more red abalone and urchin than found in other parts of the site. Most red abalone shells were stacked (possibly purposely placed), bright in color, and whole, as were mussel, many of which had both valves attached. Remarkably, some sea urchins, a fragile shell, were also relatively intact, with large portions or whole shells found in situ.

Although the ratio of bone to shell is only 2.1:97.9 in Feature 5, those found are noteworthy. Articulated vertebrae were occasionally found in situ, illustrating little disturbance or trampling after their deposition. For example, 12 articulated leopard shark vertebrae were in Feature 5 (Figure 10), along with 20 additional leopard shark vertebrae in the same level. Another unusual characteristic were three large fragmentary bones in one level identified as baleen whales (Mysteceti), most likely gray whale (*Eschrichtius robustus*). The Chumash are not known to hunt whales, so their presence is probably from beached whales. Dolphin bones ($n = 18$), identified only in Feature 5 at CA-SCRI-333, were similar in size and adjacent to one other, indicating limited postdepositional disturbance. Dolphin remains are relatively uncommon on Santa Cruz Island except at Punta Arena (CA-SCRI-109), a site situated on the south coast that overlaps in time with CA-SCRI-333; hundreds of dolphin remains were identified there dating between 5,300 and 6,300 years ago (Glassow 2005). The hunting of dolphins is often associated with seaworthy watercraft and harpoons, and some scholars consider them a high-status food (Noah 2005). Although not nearly as many dolphin remains were found at El Montón, the presence of 18 dolphin bones suggests that dolphins were either found washed up on the beach, hunted, or perhaps imported from Punta Arena. Irrespective of how they arrived at the settlement, they are rare and significantly only found in the red abalone feature. Another unusual marine species identified in Feature 5 was one *Mola mola* bone, the only remains of this unusual fish found at the site. *Mola mola* or ocean sunfish are huge, the largest of any teleost fish, can weigh in excess of 1,500 kg (Porcasi and Andrews 2001), and are often associated with warmer waters. As with the dolphin bones, *Mola mola* are rare at the site and found only in the red abalone feature.

Not only rare faunal remains were in the red abalone feature, but uncommon ethnobotanical remains were also. Certain taxa of plant remains found only in Feature 5 include the pits of holly-leaved cherry and manzanita, despite the fact that more liters of flotation samples were

Figure 10. Articulated shark centra in red abalone feature. (Color online)

processed in other areas of the site. Holly-leaved cherry and manzanita are both important plant foods in the Chumash region. The pits of holly-leaved cherry were preferred over the fruits and required time-consuming leaching. Cherry pits were highly valued and traded between the mainland and Northern Channel Islands (Timbrook 2007). Archaeobotanical samples of them are documented in ceremonial features on San Clemente Island. Their presence provides additional evidence that Feature 5 may be the remains of a feasting event.

Another prominent red abalone feature was found in Unit A-1 (Feature 7) on the north side of the mound (Figures 1 and 5a). Although its dates, 5481–5899 cal B.P. (Table 2), are similar to those in Feature 5, it differs significantly in that the shell was not as brightly colored and was not in a dark greasy soil matrix, but instead in sand. The percentage of red abalone (82.4 percent) in this feature was significantly higher than the percentage (12.8 percent) in Feature 5 (Table 6), and matches some of the high densities observed on Santa Rosa and San Miguel Islands (Braje and Erlandson 2016; Braje et al. 2009; Glassow 2015, 2016). The red abalone feature in Unit A-1 was not nearly as thick as Feature 5, (40–50 cm in thickness), with most of the red abalone occurring within a 20 cm level. Although not all bone in Feature 7 has been identified by taxa yet, relatively few bones were in the feature, with the ratio of bone to shell 0.1:99.9. Three possibly articulated dolphin vertebrae and a few tiny scattered fish bones were noted during excavation. In addition, very little charcoal compared with that in Feature 5 was recovered. Many shells were whole, but fragmented easily because they were burned, although burning did not appear to be in situ. They may have been burned elsewhere and then redeposited on the north side of the mound away from the living area. The lack of a greasy soil matrix, scarcity of bones, and lack of articulated vertebrae support the idea that this was not the remains of an in situ feasting event, but more likely redeposited shells.

The spatial distribution of red abalone provides additional clues about the nature of these features. Nineteen augers placed across the site proved especially effective, in combination with excavations of units and trenches, in the identification of buried red abalone deposits and their extent. Interestingly, red abalone features were in limited patches, versus continuous strata throughout the site. One auger a few meters from the thickest documented red abalone lens (Feature 5) had only a couple of red abalone.

In summary, at least one of the red abalone features at El Montón appears to be the result of a feasting event. First, the bright color of the shells and their intact nature, including more fragile species such as sea urchins, suggest that shells were deposited rapidly in an area of the site where there was little trampling afterward. Second, numerous AMS dates overlap in time, indicating rapid deposition. Third, the presence of rare species, some of which are highly valued and previously found in ceremonial features elsewhere, adds further evidence that Feature 5 was the remains of a feasting event. Finally, the patchy distribution of red abalone suggests that at least some of them are remains of events, not accretions developing over long periods of time. Not all red abalone features at the site appear to be a result of feasts. Some, such as Feature 7, may be redeposition of food remains, whereas others, especially those that are limited in thickness and lack rare species, may be more related to quotidian activities.

Discussion

My primary goal in this paper is to move beyond looking at shell mounds in southern California as primarily accumulations of refuse that inform us about subsistence and climate change, and instead to consider the significance of landscape and persistent places. This entails viewing them as locales that take on symbolic meanings as they are repeatedly occupied and as social memories are embodied through events that are collectively modified over time. This study differs significantly from many regional publications on shell middens because of its focus on social memory, persistent places, identity, and context. It is situated in theoretical underpinnings elaborated among scholars investigating hunter-gatherer mounds in the southeast and other regions. Although El Montón differs in construction form from many mounds elsewhere, significant parallels exist. The concept of persistent places is especially fitting in the current example. As in Australia and the southeastern United States, certain locales were occupied for centuries and even millennia after founding events such as mortuary rituals. The many features and mortuary data provide multiple lines of evidence to address issues of collective memory making, performative acts associated with the commemoration of the dead, ritual events, and significance of place.

Mortuary rituals actively reflect the construction of social orders among the living in memory of the dead through practices such as elaborate feasting and gift giving that serve to honor the deceased but also create important alliances between the living (Ekengren 2013; Hayden 2009; Mills and Walker 2008; Parker Pearson 2000). Objects placed with individuals are parts of complex and transformational rituals (Bell 1992) and, as such, provide symbolic meanings that may differ outside these ceremonial contexts. Ceremonies commemorating individuals are moments that will be remembered, contested, and reinterpreted over time (Mills and Walker 2008).

The Chumash at El Montón recognized the top of the mound as a sacred space, a sanctified area where, for thousands of years, they conducted rituals centered on honoring the dead. Not all those who died were treated equally; some had many more grave goods than others. Infants and children were treated very much like the adults. Claims that institutionalized social inequalities did not exist as early as 6000–2500 B.P. in the Santa Barbara Channel region are not supported by this study; instead, these data confound the concept that people were relatively equal thousands of years ago. Otherwise, why were some infants and children not afforded the same recognition at death as others, or adults? I suggest that not everyone was equal.

Especially intriguing are the burials in the central portion of Cemetery Ez at CA-SCRI-333. Here we see individuals buried in extended positions, instead of flexed with rare trade items such as serpentine beads, ornaments, and a bowl. The adolescent girl buried in an extended position with 157 stone effigies clearly was treated differently than others, perhaps because of special powers she possessed. These patterns compel us to rethink this early period of time—the differential treatment of people in death most likely mirrors differential treatment in life.

El Montón differs from other sites on the northern Channel Islands in the size of the massive shell mound and its 50 visible house depressions (in addition to probable buried ones), many more than any other site. Most sites from this period have less than five visible depressions and are much smaller than CA-SCRI-333 (Gamble and Barbier 2015), which was most likely a center where people from surrounding settlements assembled for ritual gatherings, knowledge exchange, potential marriage partners, and many other reasons. It differs from some Archaic sites in southeastern United States, such as Watson Brake, in that it is not an earthen mound, does not appear to have been planned, and has evidence of residential living in addition to ceremonial features. Despite these differences, the presence alone of hunter-gatherer mounds as massive as those at Watson Brake and El Montón over 5,000 years ago challenges traditional concepts of early hunter-gatherer groups as egalitarian, generalized foragers (Sassaman and Heckenberger 2004). Instead, the mounds are testimony to transformations in the landscape and in society—a reflection of greater hierarchy.

I propose that the shell mound at El Montón originally attracted maritime-oriented populations because of its ideal location, including abundant resources. Its calm anchorage, the best on the west end of Santa Cruz Island, allowed early mariners to interact with populations on the northern Channel Islands as well as mainland Santa Barbara. It became a persistent place that was repeatedly occupied over long periods of time. Early visitors feasted on red abalone, urchins, sea mammals, and other marine delicacies during ceremonies, whether for mourning (Hull 2014) or annual rites such as the winter solstice. Mortuary rites conveyed the symbolic power of the place and created a history of events that became part of a mythical and real past. El Montón was repeatedly visited, modified, and (re)interpreted as social relationships were reinforced. Over time, the mound, whether purposely built higher or not, became more prominent and visible. Leaders with ritual power, wealth, distinction, and exotic goods emerged as social inequality increased.

El Montón clearly fits the characterizations of persistent places as discussed by Schlanger (1992) and Thompson (2010): (1) its location is near easily accessible concentrations of significant resources; (2) the natural features at the site (i.e., the anchorage, situation on a low mound) made it desirable for repeated use; and (3) it was created through practice over an extended time period. El Montón is similar to sites in the southeast, Australia, Brazil, and central California in the prominence of mortuary features, some of which may have been critical in the founding of persistent places.

Conclusion

By situating investigations of mounds like El Montón within a broader interpretive lens, we see that the building of mounds, whether intentional or not, is widespread among hunter-gatherers in the world. Features such as terraces, remains of feasting events, dedicated cemeteries, and remains of ritual events are well documented. Some mounds, such as El Montón, are thousands of years old, persistent places recognized for millennia. Whether scholars view these as monumental or not, their mere presence is significant in (re)interpretations of hunter-gather societies as more than simple foragers in an evolutionary schema that leads to sedentary agriculturalists. By taking a historical perspective, we see early practices of Chumash Indians that developed in situ for thousands of years. In interpreting the archaeological evidence at El Montón, it is difficult to tease out the ritual from everyday life. Fowles (2013) reminds us that separating secularism from religion reflects a Western perspective, a position that can significantly differ from those of premodern people. Daily practice was probably intimately tied to ritual events associated with ceremonies or religious beliefs in the past, obfuscating the identification of secular versus religion.

The massive mound at El Montón on the west end of Santa Cruz Island can be interpreted in multiple ways. Clearly much of the mound consists of the refuse of meals—fragments of shells and bones deposited for thousands of years. The relatively shallow house depressions attest to people living at the site and hundreds of burials suggest many died there. They had children, and hunted, gathered, and fished for a living. Diets shifted with changes in climate, as sea-surface temperatures warmed and cooled during repetitive El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO) cycles. Longer-term climatic events too, such as extended droughts and wet-periods, challenged the Chumash who lived there for millennia. All these issues are significant, particularly with the challenges that we face now and in the upcoming centuries, but there is more to El Montón than adaptation to changing environments. As noted in the beginning of this paper, archaeologists throughout the world are excavating and analyzing shell mounds in unique ways. I hope this paper inspires archaeologists working in southern California to contemplate these intellectual trends and think about shell middens in a broader theoretical and cultural context.

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