10. A PREHISTORIC YUROK CEREMONIAL SITE (HUM-174)

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During the late summer of 1949 the University of California continued, at Trinidad Bay, the investigation of the prehistory of Northwestern California begun the year before when the large shellmound at Patrick's Point State Park was excavated. Both sites lie in territory occupied by the coastal Yurok tribe. Site reconnaissance by James Bennyhoff and Ynez Haase on July 25, 1948 led to the discovery, about one-half mile south of Patrick's Point and one-quarter of a mile offshore, of a conical sea stack named locally Cone Rock or Sea Gull Rock (Pl. 1A) whose east slope was covered with a thin mantle of soil and which supported a thin growth of grass and nettles. Archaeological interest in the site derived from the finding on the surface of a number of sea lion skulls which usually had a round hole punched in the right or left or in both parietal bones. No long bones or mandibles of sea lions were seen.

On August 8, 1949 the author, accompanied by T. Bolt, A. Croft and J. Bennyhoff visited the rock in a rubber life raft and spent several hours studying the site. Visible on the surface were no fewer than 67 partial or complete sea lion skulls, and minor excavation showed that the 6000 square feet of surface of the west slope of the rock with a soil cover about 18 inches deep contained large numbers of additional skulls. We would estimate that the number of skulls on the island might run to 1000 or even more. No sea lion long bones, mandibles, or vertebrae were found, and it is clear that the skulls alone were brought here and left by Indians.

The Patricks Point site (Hum-118) yielded a large number of sea lion skulls with holes in the braincase, some with one perforation, others with two. These seemed to occur at random at all depths in the site, and except in one instance showed no evidence of having been specifically disposed of. The exception referred to was in Feature 30 (Pl. 1E) where a skull with one hole in the left parietal was buried with an incomplete dog skeleton and several minor artifacts. This aggregate could have been simply a storage or garbage pit in which a decapitated dog, sea lion skull and a few trivial artifacts happened to have been disposed of.

The Sea Gull Rock site is not an occupation site, and seemed to have served solely as a depository for sea lion crania. Of a sample of 16 complete skulls, 8 had one hole (5 in the left side, 3 in the right side), and 8 had 2 holes in the braincase. The holes were generally 2 to 3 inches in diameter, though 2 of the skulls with single holes had perforations only 1 inch in diameter (Pl. 1 B-D).

Our reasons for attributing some ceremonial motivation for the presence of the sea lion skulls on Sea Lion Rock depend upon the fact that only skulls were present. The absence of mandibles and atlas vertebrae must mean that the skulls were pretty well cleaned before they were brought to the Rock. Careful inspection of the foramen magnum and the mandible articulation areas showed no evidence of cutting marks which could be taken as evidence of the severing of the head from the neck, or the mandible from the larger skull mass. Possibly the skulls were exposed in the village and thus were well cleaned before being deposited on the Rock. None of the skulls at either Hum-118 or Hum-174 showed evidence of being gnawed by dogs or other carnivores. The excavation of site

Hum-169 the historic village of Tsurai in Trinidad Bay, although moderately extensive, failed to produce a single sea-lion skull, though numerous post-cranial bones of this animal occurred in the midden as food waste.

Some of the punched holes in the sea lion skulls from Hum-118 and Hum-174 are large enough to have permitted extraction of the brain from the interior of the skull. Many of the holes are, however, simply too small to have permitted brain extraction, and this does not seem to have been the primary purpose for which the holes were made. The special disposal on the slope of the Sea Gull Rock indicates ritual disposal of the skulls of slain sea lions, and the following references to similar practices among more northerly tribes may support this contention.

Several game animals, among them seal, sea lion and bear, are associated with certain beliefs among which is the ritual disposal of the animal's bones or skull. The special disposal of these osseous remains is explained as necessary to prevent dogs from gnawing them (Hallowell, 1926, pp.136 ff.; Flannery, 1939, pp. 136-137; Frazer, 1935, Part V, Chap. 14, p. 259) and thus angering the spirit of the animal so that the hunter will have no success in later hunts. Thus, Hallowell (1926, pp. 136 ff.) notes numerous instances of special disposition of the bear's skull among Arctic and Subarctic tribes. The Haida and other Northwest Coast tribes show particular concern for the bear's skull (Swanton, 1908, p. 455, Drucker, 1950, el. 1494); on Unalaska the bones of the first sea lion secured in the hunting season were thrown back in the sea (Sarytchev, 1806-1807, pp. 57-58); and on Nunivak Island a similar practice for both seals and sea lions (?) is noted by Lantis (1947, p. 43.) Jochelson (1925, p. 118) observed that skulls of game animals did not occur in the Aleutian middens, and attributes this lack to their special disposal. Collins (1939, p. 248) observes that while walrus skulls were abundant in St. Lawrence Island middens, seal skulls were very rare "evidently having been disposed of in some particular manner -- no doubt thrown into the sea -- in accordance with a ceremonial custom still observed by the St. Lawrence and other Eskimos." Many of the tribes of Northwestern California, including the Yurok, ritually dispose of deer and bear bones (Driver, 1939, element 166). No ethnographer seems to have inquired specifically about how or whether sea lion skulls were disposed of, and whether the brain of this animal was extracted to be used for tanning hides or for food. On St. Lawrence Island at the Kukulik site Geist and Rainey (1936, pp. 337, 357, fig. 7) state that polar bear skulls from middens "with broken brain case... indicates the invariable custom of eating the brains of this animal by the ancient bear hunters", and describe dog skulls with holes in the parietal bone for removal of the brains for food. Collins (1939, p. 248) notes that "many dog skulls, particularly from the Old Bering Sea levels, had a large opening in the parietal region, evidently made for the removal of the brain, which must have been eaten." The Menomini remove the bear's brains through a hole made in the right temple (Hallowell, 1926, p. 140), though the purpose is not stated. Hallowell (1926, p. 143) cites similar data for the Goldi and Gilyak.

One is tempted to suggest that the perforated dog, and polar bear skulls from St. Lawrence Island, and the bear skulls of the Menomini, Goldi and Gilyak with artificial parietal openings mean the same thing as the holed sea lion skulls from Northwestern California. Possibly they do, but since the purpose of the opening of the braincase of these various animals is uncertain, we should perhaps admit several possible explanations such as removal of brains for food or hide dressing, or the ritual opening of the skull without brain removal.

Because of the strong connections of the Northwestern California culture with that of the Northwest Coast (cf. Kroeber, 1925, Chap. 59), the explanation of the ritual sea lion skull repository at Sea Gull Rock (site Hum-174) can probably be stated in terms of the southward diffusion of the idea of ritual disposal of game animal remains. So far as is ascertainable from the ethnographic literature, the coastal tribes south of the Yurok do not follow this custom, though the silence of published accounts cannot be taken as proof of such absence as witness the Yurok instance just discussed.

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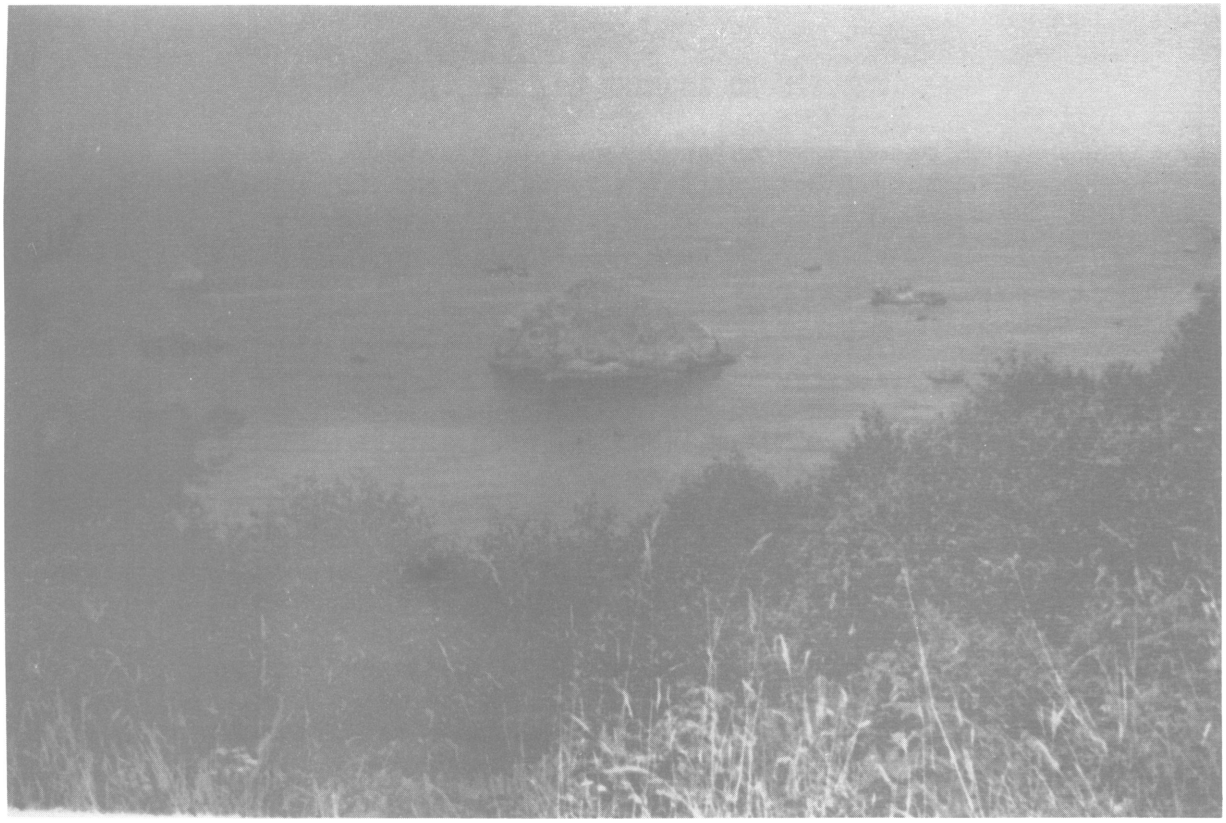

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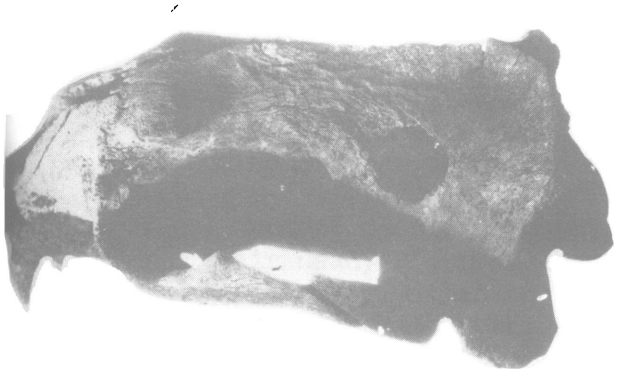

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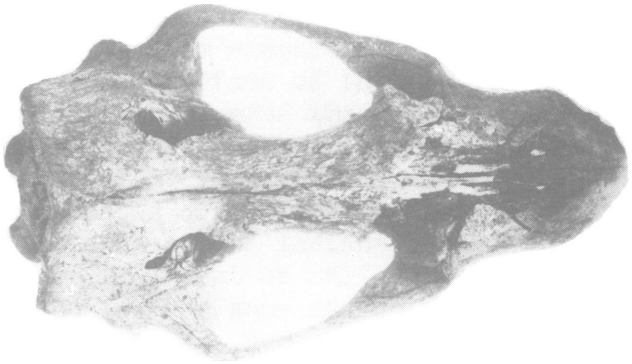

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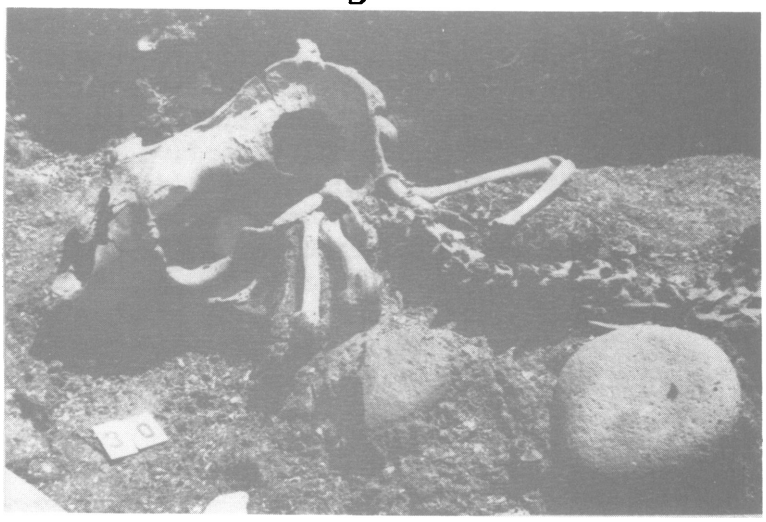

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PLATE I. SITE HUM-174; SEA LION SKULLS FROM HUM-174 AND HUM-118