

11. AT THE BEDROCK OF HISTORY

Recent Remarkable Discovery of Human Remains Over Three Hundred Years Old in the San Joaquin Valley of California

A. L. Kroeber

[The following article first appeared in Sunset Magazine, vol. 25, no. 3, pp. 255-260, September, 1910. Because of its unusual interest and importance and general lack of availability, the UCAS feels that the article deserves reprinting. This same lot of Kern County material is described by E. W. Gifford and W. E. Schenck, "Archaeology of the Southern San Joaquin Valley," U.C.P.A.A.E., vol. 23, no. 2, 1926 from their site 15. The material, now in the UC Museum of Anthropology, is to be found under Accession No. 361 and is catalogued as nos. 1-14570 to 1-14598 and 12-1731 to 12-1752. Ed.]

Recently, the Department of Anthropology of the University of California was able to secure, with the courteous assistance of the Miller and Lux Company, a collection of remains, left by a prehistoric California people, which are so unique as to be of unusual historical importance and general interest.

At some time in the past, a tribe in what is now Kern county buried a number of its dead with their belongings near the edge of a flat-topped hill cut by an arroyo draining into Buena Vista lake, now more properly Buena Vista reservoir. In the course of time the intermittent stream widened its cañon, until in the winter of 1908-09 that part of the upper surface of the mesa in which the burials had been made, slide down into the bottom of the gulch. Here part of the bones were uncovered and this led to the discovery of the collection.

These ancient people, whoever they were, cremated or at least partly cremated their dead, a custom which was also followed by the Indians living in the Tulare Valley within the historic period. The burnt or half-burnt remains were subsequently buried. Other individuals, for some reason, seem to have been buried without being previously placed on the funeral pyre. According to the habit of almost all Indians and prehistoric peoples, the principal belongings of the dead were consigned to the earth with them. The objects which were buried in this instance comprise articles of basketry, netting, string and rope, matting and wood. Implements of this sort that have been made and used by the modern Indians of the state are well known, and large collections of them repose in the University Museum for permanent preservation and the enlightenment of the future. The objects found in this discovery are remarkable in being of a perishable nature and yet by some fortunate chance preserved from a prehistoric period. The aboriginal inhabitant has left behind him innumerable remains of his work in hard or indestructible materials, so that mortars, pestles, arrow-points, flint-knives, pipes, charm-stones, sinkers, bone-awls, and shell-beads have been found in abundance in almost all parts of the state. But it is only once in a thousand times that articles made of fragile and delicate substances, such as vegetable fibers and hair, are preserved in the ground intact for centuries. When such are discovered they are consequently of special importance, because of the information they give as to those sides of the life of

ancient people of which the material evidences are usually destroyed by the lapse of time and the elements, so that the archaeologist is compelled to content himself with mere guesses.

In another respect this collection is unique. Almost every piece in it tells a story. This, however, is best made clear by an account of the actual objects. Probably the most interesting specimen is the human skull which is here illustrated (Pl. 2D). An arrow has penetrated clear through the head. The point entered the eye, destroying it, and piercing the thin socket of bone in which the eye rests. The arrow then continued downward and somewhat to the rear, through the interior of the nose and upper part of the mouth, striking no bones except some of the thin plates of the inner air-chamber of the nose. The point then passed below the joint of the left jaw, either coming to rest against the bone of the lower jaw, or perhaps piercing the softer tissues and emerging.

It is clear that the wound was inflicted at close range. The force of a good arrow is tremendous when it leaves the bow, but quickly diminishes in its flight on account of the resistance of the air. In this case only the thinnest walls of bone intercepted its progress; nevertheless, a considerable body of muscle and tissue was penetrated, so that the man behind the bow could not have been more than a few yards from the one he shot. Then the direction of the shot was downward and nearly from the side. The Indian habit in battle was to watch for the arrows and either receive them on a shield or avoid them by dodging, at which the warriors by long training were very expert. In the excitement of a fight all possible positions are likely to be taken and a lucky shot may catch a man in almost any attitude. The arrow must, however, have had a practically horizontal flight. If shot upward into the air and again descending, it would no longer possess the momentum to pass entirely through a man's head. The victim, dodging to the side to avoid one arrow, might have been caught by another; but if so, the part of the shaft that remains imbedded shows that he must also have been inclining his head, which seems an unlikely thing to do in battle.

Considering everything, it therefore seems probable that the wound was not inflicted in open fight but upon an unsuspecting victim. It has been an immemorial habit of the California Indians to kill such of their medicine-men as lost several patients in succession. Their faith in the powers of the shaman was so implicit that they endowed him with almost absolute power of curing disease. If a sick person died, they therefore argued that it must be through the neglect or malevolence of the medicine-man, and if ill-fortune brought him two or three fatal cases within a short period, suspicion became a certainty. The first opportunity was then sought by the relatives of those who had died under his care to destroy him. This custom is so deeply implanted that even to-day Indian medicine-men are sometimes killed, and there is little doubt that the majority of unexplained murders of Indians which are constantly occurring in all parts of the state are from the same motive, though fear of the white man's law prevents its public acknowledgement.

A favorite method of disposing of the marked medicine-man is to ambush him outdoors. At other times he is attacked while asleep. The direction which the arrow took through this skull favors the latter supposition. The position of the arrow and its penetrating power are explained perfectly if we imagine the murderer to have stood a few feet from the head of his unconscious victim, who was sleeping on his side. Very likely he approached so near that the point

of the arrow almost touched the head, and then shot downward at an angle. The fact that the arrow first struck the eye also favors this supposition, for the chance is but slight of this organ being struck in a fight, whereas, as everyone knows, it is the part that is instinctively and most naturally aimed at when there is opportunity for aim.

In any case, there is no question that the shot accomplished its purpose. Death was not instantaneous. The victim may have been dispatched by other wounds, or his friends may have had opportunity to try to remove the arrow. The barb of the point would, however, have prevented its being extracted by the way it entered, while if the point rested against the bone of the jaw, there was no possibility of pushing it through and out. Death certainly resulted soon. The body was then placed on a pile of wood for cremation, with the shaft, or part of it, still imbedded. The work of cremation was, however, hastily or imperfectly done, perhaps because suitable firewood was scarce. The charred portions of the skull, as visible in the photograph, show where the flame consumed the tissues and blackened and calcined the bone. The ends of the arrow were also burned off, as the blackened stubs prove. The section of the shaft which was most deeply imbedded, however, was so well protected by the surrounding tissues that the flame did not reach it, and it is not even charred. After the attempt at cremation, the remains were buried. The flesh and skin decayed, but the wooden arrowshaft offered more resistance to the elements and was preserved just as it had rested in the face.

Indian bones with stone arrow-heads imbedded have sometimes been found, and a greater number have been forged, but there is probably no case on record of part of an actual arrow remaining in position in a skull for centuries after decomposition of the flesh.

Another skull (Pl. 20) in the collection gives evidence of a different sort of death. There is nothing to show that this individual, who was also an adult male, came to a violent end. In his case preliminary cremation for some reason was not attempted. The eyes were covered with two square plates of abalone-shell. Into each nostril was inserted a long curved piece of shell taken from the lip of the abalone. Such curved pieces have been found in great numbers in the graves of the ancient California Indians, but usually as ornaments, and so far as known, they have never been observed used in this way. Finally, the head was wrapped in a beaver-skin. Time has also dealt leniently with this remnant of what was once a man. Part of the scalp and hair are preserved. The larger portion of the beaver-fur remains, pressed by the weight of the adjacent earth closely on the scalp and bone, so as to resemble a matting of felt. Tightly fitted in this matting are small shell-beads of the wampum type.

Several other human remains show remarkable features. The most interesting of these consists of the complete leg and foot-bones of an adult, apparently a man. The flesh has almost entirely passed away, but considerable portions of the skin remain, shrunk fast to the bone by the decomposition of the intervening tissues. Both limbs seem to have been entirely wrapped with string. In part the string enclosed masses of tule fiber, which were first laid along the leg. The photograph shows what remains of this string, and how about the feet and ankles, where the fleshy parts form but a thin covering over the bone, it was wrapped most closely and has best preserved its original position.

A similar set of limb-bones (Pl. 2B), lacking however, the feet, was found wrapped in masses of tule and tule fiber. These bones are from a youth or a young girl but yet fully grown. Of special significance is a mass of human hair, consisting of a dozen strands or locks, around which is wrapped one end of a long, fine net (Pl. 2A). Nets of this type were used by the recent Indians of the Tulare valley. They were made of very fine string. Either the net was twisted or folded into a sort of band or more frequently spread over the head and the long hair confined within it. The locks to which this net is attached are, however, identical with the coiffure of certain tribes of southern California, such as the Yuma and Mohave, who practice a peculiar style not followed among the Indians north of Tehachapi. The hair is allowed to grow full length, and is then rolled, plastered, and twisted, but without actual braiding, into from twenty to fifty or more long, slender, straight cylinders of about the thickness of a lead-pencil. The ends of these are trimmed off evenly at the waist-line or even lower. The fragment preserved shows that just such locks were worn by the people who made this burial.

Five basketry pouches or bags were found. In weave these are identical with the baskets of the modern Indians, but are entirely distinct in two respects. In the first place, the materials used are all soft, so that while the technique is strictly one of basket weaving, the product is as soft and flexible as thick cloth. All the modern basketry from California is quite stiff and hard in comparison, the only exception being certain large wallets or pouches among the Indians about San Diego. The photograph [not reproduced in this reprinting] shows the circular bottom of one of the five pouches found in the present discovery and part of the side. The remainder has been torn away or has rotted off and been lost.

The second distinctive feature of this work is that the ornamentation is practically all confined to patterns made by weaving in strands or strings of human hair, black, of course, as the Indian's always is. This is quite unexampled and unexplained. We know that all the California Indians, when in mourning, cut their hair short, and the hair that was cut off was sometimes preserved and made into belts or other objects of ceremonial or sacred use. There is no previous case on record of human hair having been employed for any such utilitarian purpose as ornamenting basketry. These ancient people, however, made an extensive use of hair, as is also evidenced by the finding of fragments of string of this material.

Other objects bearing a fascinating significance to the archaeologist, but which must be passed over here, comprise a sack of network with a draw-string to close it; fish-nets of various sizes and strength; a fragment of aboriginally hewn plank painted red, of which the ends and one side are charred by fire, and of which the purpose is entirely conjectural; string and rope of various thicknesses, made chiefly of shredded tule and of the fiber of the mesal plant of southern California; and finally, fragments of tule matting, some of them woven and some sewn through, of the same type that the Yokuts Indians of the Tulare valley used as bedding and for the walls of their huts until a few years ago. There are only two objects that it will be possible to describe separately.

One of these is the skull of an eagle, evidently carefully prepared. Both eyes were covered with circular disks of abalone shell nearly two inches in diameter, fastened in place with some sort of gum. Such treatment of the dead was usually accorded by the Indians only to human beings, and when applied to

an animal is therefore clear evidence of religious worship. A parallel comes from southern California. The Diegueño and Luiseño Indians of San Diego county practise what is called the Eagle Ceremony, which is a form of mourning ritual held in honor of a chief. The principal act of the worship is singing over a captive eagle, which is finally killed by pressure upon its heart. The feathers are then carefully kept for dancing regalia, to be used in future repetitions of the ceremony, while the body of the eagle is buried as carefully as if it were a man. Evidently this same ceremony, or something very like it, was anciently part of the religious worship of the Indians inhabiting the Tulare valley.

The last piece which can be mentioned consists of a blanket. This fact is in itself remarkable, for no Indians within California have ever been found to possess the knowledge of weaving cloth, nor have even fragments of cloth of any sort been discovered in their graves or among their remains. This piece is of plain white cotton, about six feet square, and preserved almost completely. Its last possessor, however, had strange notions of the purpose of a blanket, for he cut or tore in it two large holes, through which he could pass his arms, and then wore the blanket as a cape or coat. The piece was clearly not made for such a purpose, for in that case it would have been woven of the proper shape, or the armholes would have been smoothly cut out and edged, instead of being frayed. A comparison of this blanket shows it to be identical in material and appearance with the textile goods manufactured by the cliff dwellers and ancient Pueblos of New Mexico and Arizona. The Pueblo Indians as known in historic times have made no cloth of this nature, preferring instead heavy goods of a very different texture. There can be no question but that this piece was made by an ancient cliff-dweller or Pueblo of New Mexico or perhaps eastern Arizona, was carried in the course of trade as far as central California, and there fell into the hands of some less civilized aborigine and was converted by him into a garment by the rude process of punching out two armholes. This is the first clear evidence of prehistoric communication between the Southwest and that part of California which lies north of Tehachapi.

Who were the people that left these remarkable remains, what were their affiliations, and how long did they roam over the plains and hills of the southern San Joaquin valley? The age of the objects can only be estimated. A prematurely hasty supposition, based only on the perishable nature of many of the materials, might put the age at only a century or less. It must be remembered, however, that much of the west side of this valley, especially at the upper end of the San Joaquin-Tulare valley, is exceedingly arid. The burials were made on an elevation, in firm yet porous soil, so that the drainage conditions as regards rainfall were almost ideally perfect. It is doubtful if the objects were even damp more than a few days in the year. As articles of hair, wool, cotton, fibers, and wood have been found well preserved after thousands of years' burial in Egypt and Peru and other desert regions, there is no reason against the assumption of a high antiquity for this discovery, if other circumstances so demand. And such circumstances there are.

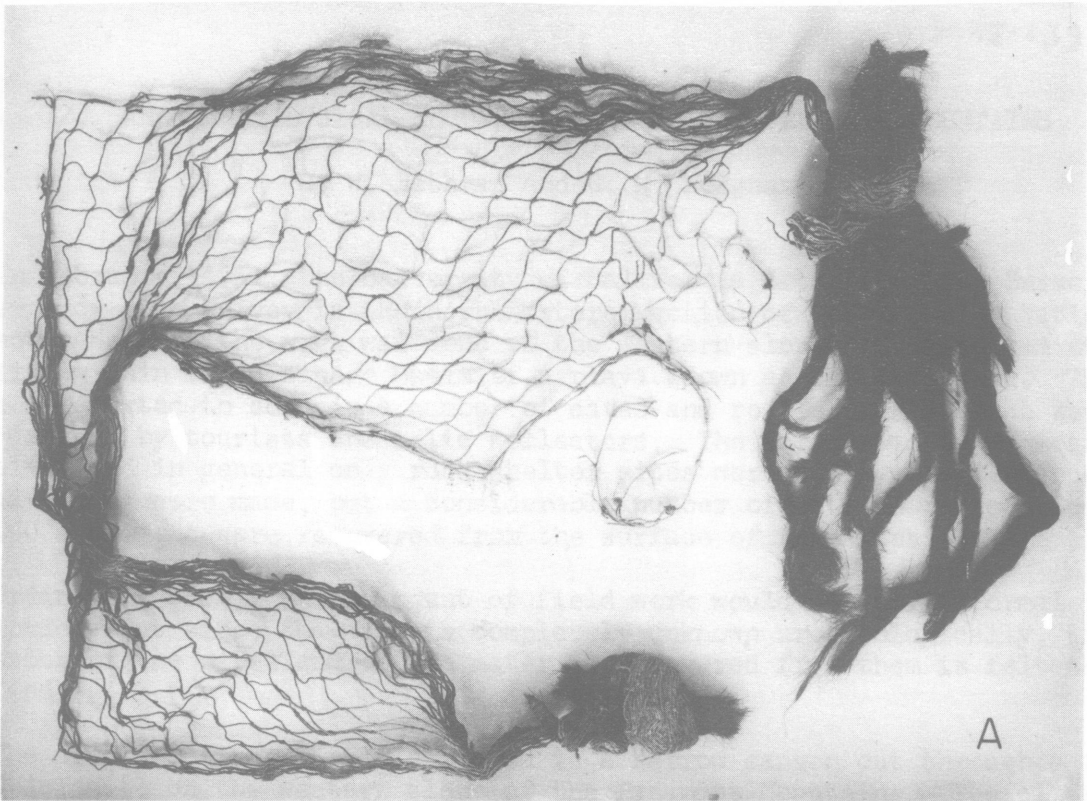
In the first place, no article of European manufacture, or made from a substance imported by Europeans, or showing the influence of European civilization, occurs in the collection. All the twine and rope, with the exception of one extra-heavy fragment, is two-ply. The rope and string of civilized peoples is almost always three-ply; but it is regularly two-ply if of aboriginal Indian manufacture. Then, most of the objects are in a fragmentary condition, and this in spite of the favorable situation and protection. The basketry pouches,

the string made of mescal fiber, the decorated eagle skull, the style of wearing the hair, are all unexampled in the interior of the state and find parallels only in southernmost California. It is therefore necessary to suppose either that a people allied to the Indians of southern California, or perhaps their very progenitors, lived in the Tulare valley at the time these articles were made; or at any rate, that the customs and habits which are now characteristic only of southern California extended at the time in question much farther north.

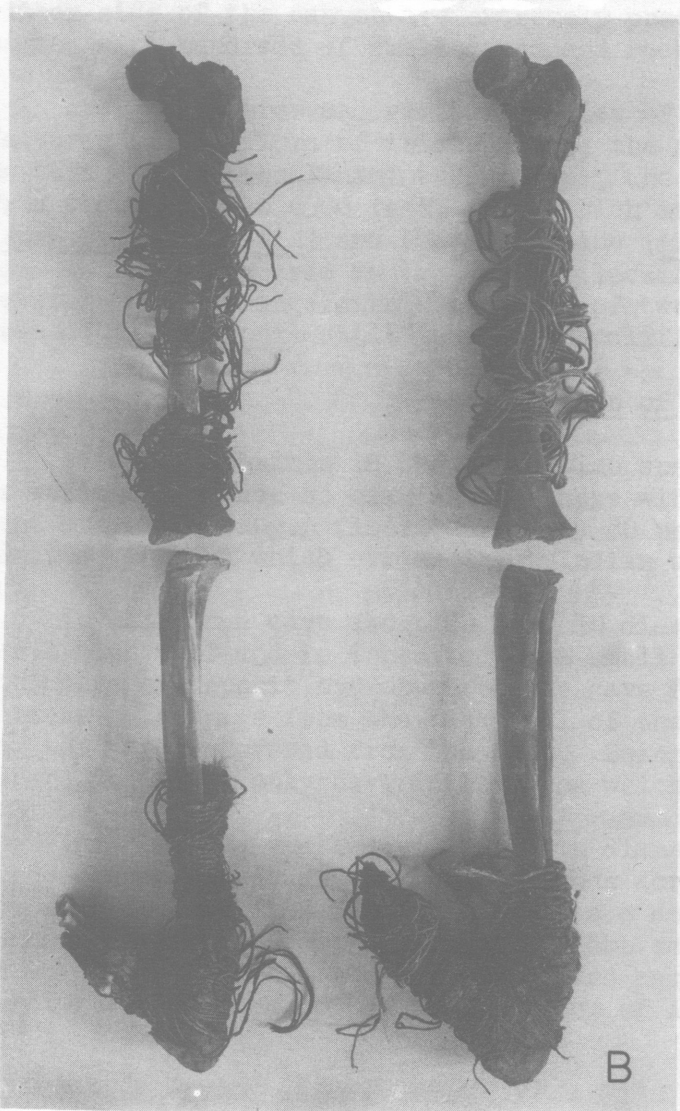
In either case a long period of time must have elapsed. The California Indians are noted for being vehemently attached to the particular locality where they have been born. They can be induced only with difficulty to remove from their homes, and ethnology, history, and the evidences of language show that they have all been for a very long time sedentary and stationary. Movements of population undoubtedly must have occurred, as they have taken place everywhere else, but they were slow and gradual shiftings of bodies of people, not true migrations. Such a gradual shifting from Buena Vista lake to southernmost California would have occupied at least centuries.

On the other hand, if the people themselves did not move, but if the customs which were once widespread died out in the north through the importation of new habits and manners of life and became gradually restricted to the southern area, a long period must also have been requisite to bring about such a change. Indians, like all uncivilized races, are notoriously conservative when left to follow their own inclinations. Their father's way is good enough for them. That customs and fashions alter among them as well as among ourselves is of course not to be doubted, but it is necessary to assume at least several centuries as the shortest period within which so many characteristics of the life still found in the south could have been completely obliterated in the north by mere evolution and gradual change of habits.

Finally the character of the cloth blanket shows clearly that it must have been carried from the Southwest prior to the historic period. As the Pueblo Indians have been under Spanish influence for more than three centuries, it is necessary to assign at least this age to the bones and objects in the burials. How much older they are, it is only possible to conjecture by judging of their state of preservation. In any event, it is clear that we have in this discovery, which will remain permanently preserved for the people of California in the Museum of their State University, the concrete evidence that at some period going back into the centuries there lived in the great central valley of the state an aboriginal people, differing from those found there is historic times, in some way connected or affiliated with the ancestors of the more recent tribes of the southern part of California, and maintaining communication with the ancient Pueblo Indians of the Southwest.



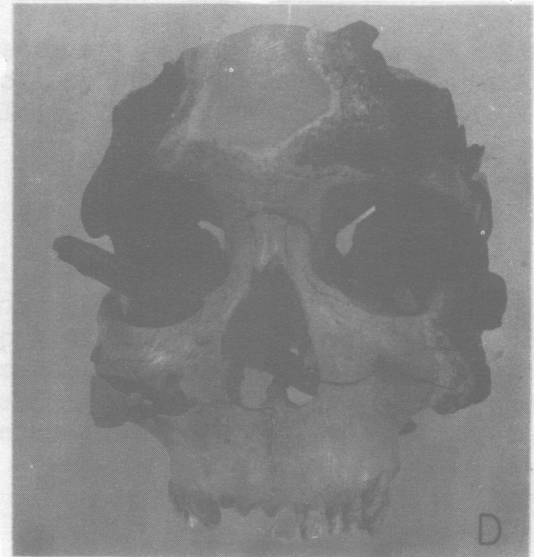
A



B



C



D

PLATE 2. BUENA VISTA LAKE REMAINS.