

71. Further Notes on Clay Human Figurines
in the Western United States*

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Since the discovery in 1940 of two fired clay figurines from California representing the female torso, and subsequent similar finds in the western United States, numerous notes on the occurrence of these objects have been published (Heizer and Beardsley, 1943; Heizer and Pendergast, 1954; Morss, 1954; True, 1957; Byers and Morss, 1957; Pendergast, 1957; Wallace, 1957; Bryan, 1959). Two earlier accounts of similar specimens are also available. One of these describes a specimen from Tiburon Island, Gulf of California (Saville, 1924), which is closely similar to several Basketmaker III examples illustrated by Morss (op. cit., Fig. 19) in his report on clay figurines of the American Southwest. The other describes a fired clay figurine found near Nampa, Idaho (Wright, 1890, 1891).

The present paper is offered as a further contribution to the knowledge of the distribution, historical relationships, and possible origin of this rather specialized trait in the western United States, and is based on six previously undescribed archaeological occurrences, five from Marin County and one from Sacramento County, California. A description of these specimens follows:

Unnumbered Specimen from Mrn-124¹

Provenience. This site is situated at the northern base of a range of hills on the southern edge of a marshy tideland slough where Gallinas Creek debouches into San Francisco Bay. The figurine was collected by George Poore from the surface of the site and is now retained in his personal collection.

General description. This specimen is a dark buff color and is fashioned from a very fine-grained yellow clay. Temper is apparently absent, and it appears to have been fired under an even temperature since no black smudges from carbon reduction are exhibited. A conical breast rises 8 mm. on the left side; another conical protuberance once present on the right side is worn down, as if through a very soft rubbing action, since no abrasive

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1. See End Notes.

striations are observable. Neither of these protuberances is appli-
qued, hence they may be assumed to have been modeled from the torso. The back of
the object is flat and undecorated, while the upper surface thickens evenly
toward the middle, being plano-convex in cross section. The head of the
figure is represented by a small pinched extension of the body. Running
transversely through the head is a perforation 1.5 mm. in diameter. The
perforation was probably achieved by forcing a small twig or other object
through the head prior to firing--this was apparently burned out during the
firing process.

Decoration. Two lines of punctate dots 1 mm. in diameter are present
on the neck of the specimen. The upper row consists of four dots, and the
lower row contains six dots. Possibly these decorative elements represent
a necklace of beads. Extending diagonally from each shoulder and continu-
ing the length of the upper surface are rows of grooves which cross between
the breasts. The rows originating at the right shoulder are made up of
four irregularly spaced grooves 1 to 2 mm. in depth. That commencing at
the left shoulder contains three irregularly spaced grooves having the same
measurements. Below the point where the rows of grooves cross is a circu-
lar punctation 1 mm. in diameter which possibly represents an umbilicus.

Measurements. Maximum width, 49 mm.; maximum thickness, 23 mm.;
length, 56 mm. (See Fig. 1a, b for illustration.)

UCMA No. 1-166230²

Provenience. This mid-section of a female figurine was excavated by
A. E. Treganza, of San Francisco State College, while engaged in a research
project for a private corporation (Treganza, 1955). The site, Mrn-80, is
located on the north side of Point San Quentin at the edge of a marshy tide-
land slough, near the point where San Rafael Creek flows into San Francisco
Bay. Recovered from a depth of 30 inches, this specimen has been assigned
a Middle Horizon cultural context (Treganza, ibid., p. 16 f.).³

General description. The object is a medium buff color on the decora-
ted surface, and the flat undecorated back is a charred dark gray. In cross-
section it is plano-convex. Burned-out impressions of grass(?) demonstrate
that a binding agent has been modeled with the clay prior to firing. Two
small conical breasts rise 3 mm. one-third of the distance from either edge
toward the center. Neither of these protuberances is appli-
qued.

Decoration. Immediately below the breasts, running horizontally across
the width of the figurine, are three grooves 1 mm. wide and 1 mm. deep which

are spaced about 2 mm. apart. Situated slightly off-center toward the right breast on the central groove is an ovoid punctation which represents a navel. No other decorative features are observable on this specimen.

Measurements. Maximum width, 38 mm.; thickness below the breasts, 10 mm.; thickness at the breasts, 12.5 mm. (See Fig. 1f for illustration.)

UCMA No. 1-166258

Provenience. Same as that described above for No. 1-166230, except that the present specimen was recovered from a depth of 36 inches.

General description. This fragment is apparently the lower section of a figurine lacking representation of characteristics necessary for identification of sex. It is a golden buff color and was apparently fired under even temperature conditions since no firing discolorations are present. From a rounded base, the sides extend upward almost parallel, diverging slightly outward near the break. The specimen is oval in cross-section at the point of fracture and flattens slightly toward the base.

Decoration. Located midway from either edge 23 mm. up from the rounded base is a small circular punctation 1 mm. in diameter, and, as with the two previously described specimens, it is suggested that an umbilicus is represented. Originating at the navel and extending upward to the break is a series of zigzag lines which appear to have been pressed into the wet clay with a small fragment of clamshell because slight corrugations are present on only one side of each line forming the design elements and are very evenly spaced. The design elements are rather obscured due to erosion of the surface of the specimen, but the zigzag is discernible, and the diamond also appears to be present. Traces of a pink stain are present on the back and appear to be the remains of a red ochre paint with which the figurine was once painted.

Measurements. Width, 18 mm.; thickness, 11.5 mm.; length from base to point of fracture, 44 mm. (See Fig. 1c for illustration.)

UCMA No. 1-77872

Provenience. This object was recovered from a depth of 18-24 inches in the Estero Mound, Mrn-232, by C. W. Meighan while he was engaged in research for the U. C. Archaeological Survey. The figurine is mentioned in his doctoral dissertation (Meighan, n.d., p. 7) but has not been previously described

in print. This figurine may be assigned to a Middle Horizon cultural context as a part of the McClure Facies.

Estero Mound is located on the eastern shore of Estero Limantour, which is opposite Drakes Head inside Drakes Bay on the coast of Marin County, California.

General description. This fragment is the lower half of a figurine lacking characteristics necessary for identification of sex. It is extremely hard and is a dark gray color on the surface while the interior is quite black. Finely crushed shell fragments were apparently employed as a temper. Ovoid in cross-section, it has been carefully smoothed on the undecorated back. From the break, the object tapers gradually to a rounded and somewhat flattened lower extremity.

Decoration. Five lines of punctate dots run vertically down the front of the figurine. One of the rows runs straight down the center while approximately parallel rows run down each side and converge with the center one near the lower termination. The dots are 1 mm. in diameter and vary in depth. Apparently they were made by poking a tiny hollow bone tube or other instrument into the soft clay; the edge of the more shallow punctations is deeper than the center of the holes.

Measurements. Length (fragment), 44 mm.; width at break, 22 mm.; thickness at break, 14 mm. (See Fig. 1e for illustration of this specimen.)

UCMA No. 1-78156

Provenience. Same as that described for preceding specimen, No. 1-77872, except that depth of recovery was from the 12 to 18 inch level.

General description. A crudely fashioned complete female figurine of fired clay. Temper is composed of sparse, finely crushed clamshell and mica crystals, the shell being intentionally included while the mica is probably a natural component of the clay. The surface color is a dull buff. What may be considered breasts are slight prominences which had apparently been pinched from the mass forming the body of the figurine, one high on the left side near the front of the object, the other lower on the right front near the edge. At the flat, smoothed, angular upper extremity, the specimen is sub-circular in cross-section. From this point the front and back taper evenly to a flattened base. As with the other specimens, the back is flat and undecorated.

Decoration. The front and sides of the upper half of the object appear

to have been painted with red ochre. In addition, a crudely executed punctate decoration is present on the body of the specimen. Extending upwards 20 mm. from the base in a crescent is a row of shallow punctations which average 1 mm. in diameter. Curving downward on each side from each breast is a row of similar punctations which are less distinct than those of the lower row.

Measurements. Length, 57 mm.; thickness at upper end, 15 mm.; width at upper end, 16 mm. (See Fig. 1d for illustration.)

UCMA No. 1-85743

Provenience. Recovered from the 24-36 inch level in the Johnson Mound, Sac-6, in association with the clam disc bead complex, this specimen is affiliated with Phase II of the Late Horizon in Central California which is dated at 1600-1850 A.D. (Heizer, 1958, p. 6). The site is located on the right bank of the Cosumnes River on the south shore of a former lake about fifteen miles due south from the city of Sacramento.

General description. This modeled fragment of the upper half of a fired clay female figurine is buff colored on the posterior surface and a dark gray on the anterior face. It was apparently fired by placing it face down in a bed of coals. Temper, in the form of mica crystals, is probably accidental, but small irregular holes seem to indicate that a grass temper had been purposefully employed. In cross-section the specimen is a flattened oval. Two nodal swellings have been pinched near either side of the anterior surface and probably represent breasts. No attempt has been made to indicate a head; the top is merely rounded and roughly smoothed. No decorative element is in evidence on either surface of the fragment.

Measurements. Length from top to point of fracture, 40 mm.; width at fracture, 36 mm.; thickness at break, 20 mm. (See Fig. 1g for illustration.)

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Suggested uses of the human figurines have ranged from toy dolls to fertility symbols employed as charms. Ethnographic accounts of the Pomo Indians of northern California contain descriptions of each of these uses (as toys: Loeb, 1926, p. 222; Barrett, 1952, pp. 350-51; as fertility symbols: Loeb, op. cit., pp. 246-47.)⁴ Otherwise similar, but unfired, clay dolls were apparently manufactured by the Californian Coast Miwok (unpublished ethnographic notes of Isabel T. Kelley, cited in Heizer and

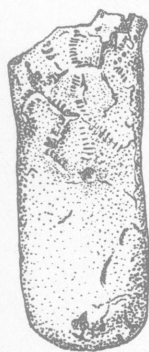
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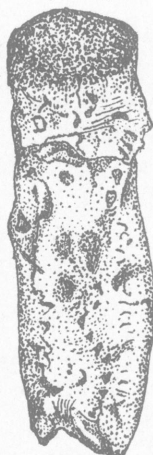
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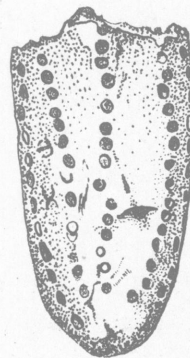
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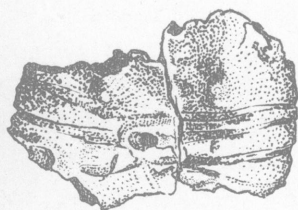
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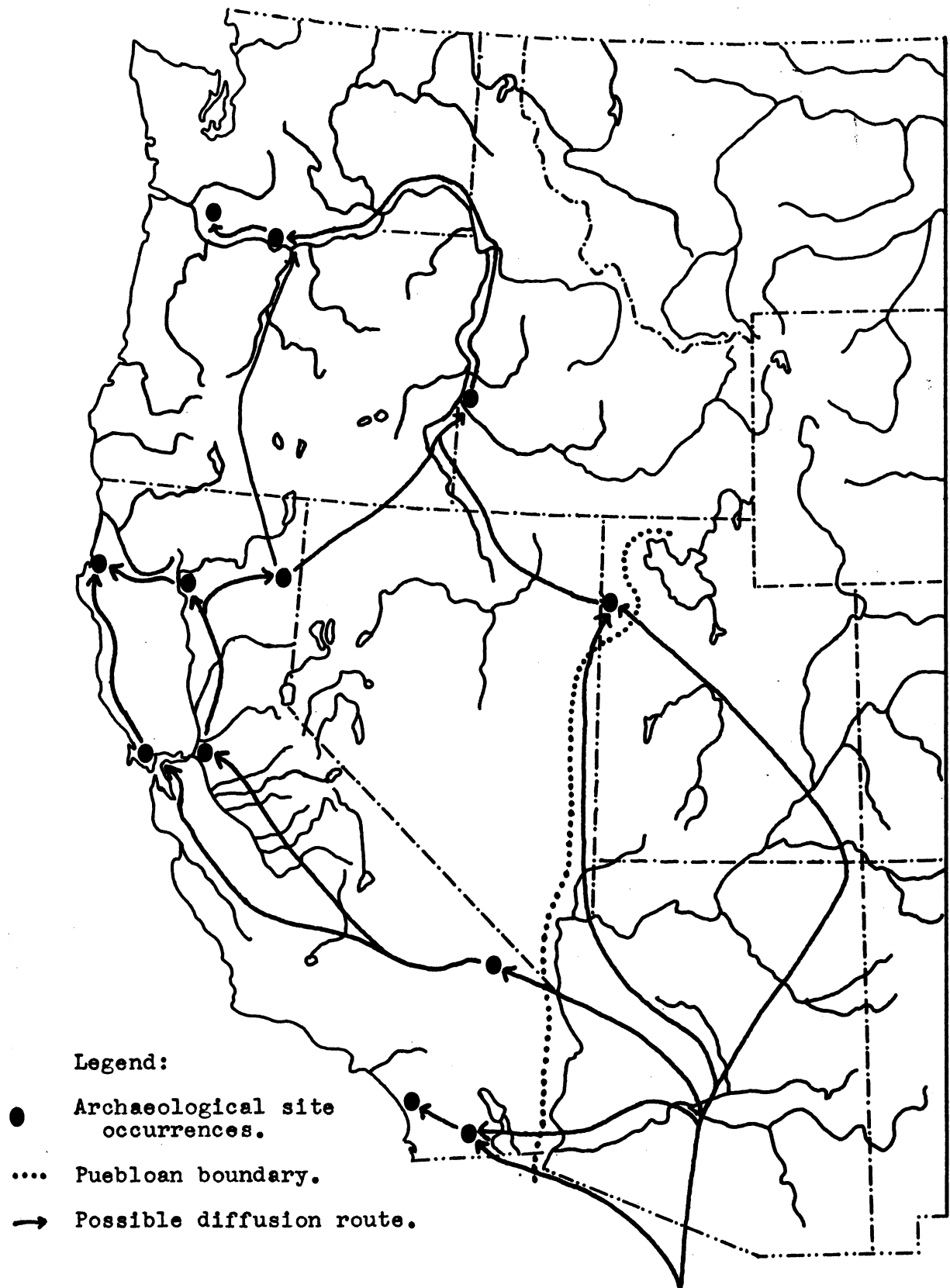


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Figure 1. Various Human Figurines of Clay from Californian Archaeological Sites



Map I. Archaeological Distribution of Human Figurines of Clay
Beyond the Puebloan Southwest

Beardsley, op. cit., p. 204, fn. 7) and the Nisenan (Dr. S. A. Barrett, personal communication).

Gifford and Kroeber (1937, p. 183, Supplementary Note 489) note another type of figurine in use among the Pomo. Referring to a description of a dance house, their informant reported:

"Large numbers of small cradles hung inside, each with baby figurine of magnesite. These placed in [dance] house for luck; . . . all made by old men."

In view of diverse uses of several varieties of figurines in the ethnographic record and apparent temporal differences archaeologically, it might seem futile to speculate on the historical relationship of these specialized artifacts in the archaeological record. However, it is felt that some general considerations and tentative conclusions should be presented now for testing by future discoveries.

In the first paper describing central California figurines, Heizer and Beardsley (op. cit., p. 205) suggest two possible explanations for their isolated occurrence:

" . . . (1) they have an independent local origin . . . ; (2) these figurines are due to an as yet undefined direct diffusion from the south or east."

It is also suggested in this paper that one need not assume a direct historical connection between the northern and central California occurrences (ibid, fn. 21).

In a later study of Southwestern figurines and their extra-regional relationships by Morss (1954), it was suggested that the specimens from California and the Southwest, especially the Basketmaker III examples and to a lesser degree those from the northern periphery generally, are more closely related "than can be explained by 'psychic unity' alone." Heizer and Pendergast (op. cit.) agree generally with Morss' conclusions, basing their decision on further data from California. Specifically they state:

"Reason and probability all favor the conclusion that historical connection of this art exists between these 2 areas [i.e., between the Southwest and central coastal California], but since objective archaeological evidence of similar figurines in the intervening area (south central and Southern California) is not at hand we must admit the problem is still unsolved" (ibid., p. 184).

In the same paper Heizer and Pendergast felt that the northern California occurrences, i.e., those from Humboldt Bay and Shasta County, were beyond the reach of diffusion from the Southwest.

Since then further data have accumulated which tend to narrow the distribution gap in one area at least, that is, in southern California. D. L. True, who described the southern California examples, felt that there could be little doubt that the knowledge of making these figurines was the result of diffusion from the Southwest, specifically from Morss' northern tradition area, although he also suggests the possibility of a later diffusion from the Hohokam, Mogollon, and Yuman areas, perhaps coupled with a post-contact Mexican influence (True, op. cit., p. 295).

Wallace (op. cit., 132 ff.), in a report of an unfired clay female figurine recovered from a rockshelter near Death Valley, California, mentions others having been found in the southern California desert, but these are not described. He concludes that the trait had diffused from the Southwest, probably through the Great Basin.

Two presumed figurine fragments from southwestern Washington are described by Pendergast (op. cit.) in one of the most recent notes on this subject. I am not sure that the two specimens actually represent anthropomorphic figures; however, Osborne (1957, p. 30) states that figurines, presumably anthropomorphic, are known from the lower Columbia River region, and Bryan (op. cit.) describes and illustrates two specimens which appear to be true human figures of clay which were possibly recovered from the same site as the clay fragments described by Pendergast.

Pendergast, in the same article describing the fired clay specimens from Washington, argues for an independent origin for this trait in the Northwest Coast region. He also states that the trait developed independently in northern California and suggests still another independent origin for the central California manifestation. Part of his reasoning is based on the stated assumption that "evidence of cultural interchange between southern and northern California is lacking" (Pendergast, op. cit., p. 179).

An assumption which is inherent in Pendergast's statement is that there must be a direct and primary diffusion from southern to central and northern California. It is felt by the present author that such an assumption is not the only logical one which may be made. Diffusion of a single specialized trait, such as the one under consideration here, may mean the trait's passing from group to group without transmitting any other physical elements with it. Information concerning the manufacture of the object, and ideas about its use may be passed along with it, but unfortunately such information is seldom, if

ever, preserved archaeologically. Certainly, however, the type of inter-tribal contacts necessary for such transmission existed in prehistoric California.

A survey of the literature in the area of trade relations in the western United States demonstrates the existence of considerable exchange and interchange of culture traits, not only within the boundaries of California (Sample, 1950, passim) but between California and the Southwest (Kroeber, 1928, pp. 382-85; Heizer, 1941, 1946; Gifford, 1947, 1949), between California and the Great Basin (Loud and Harrington, 1929, p. 105; Heizer and Krieger, 1956, p. 86; Baumhoff and Heizer, 1958; Bennyhoff and Heizer, 1958, passim), and between California and the southern extension of the Northwest Coast (Gifford, op. cit., p. 7; Drucker, 1955, p. 80). Because of the abundant evidence of diffusion of elements between California and the neighboring culture areas, it is felt that one need not assume several independent origins of the clay human figurine trait in the western United States.

If we are to postulate reasonable hypotheses concerning the origin or the possibility of independent invention of this trait, we must seek correlations between typology, areal distribution, and chronology. However, this is a difficult task because the known distributions are discontinuous and temporal associations are only approximate or entirely lacking beyond the Southwest and the Puebloan fringes of the Great Basin.

A site by site survey of the archaeological occurrence of anthropomorphic clay figurines reveals an enigmatic time-space relationship beyond the Southwest.

In the Southwest itself, including the Puebloan fringes of the Great Basin, that is, the Fremont, Fremont-Sevier, and Colorado River Yuman areas, we have a reasonably clear picture of the areal-temporal relationships and development of this trait. Its first manifestation is apparently during the Vahki Phase of the Hohokam, dated at 300 B.C. to 100 A.D. (Gladwin, 1937, p. 8; Wheat, 1955, pp. 168-188, p. 185, Fig. 12). Slightly later it occurs in the Pine Lawn Phase of the Mimbres Branch of the Mogollon dated at 250 B.C. to 100 A.D. (Wheat, op. cit., p. 185, Fig. 12) and still later in the Anasazi region during the Basketmaker II period (Morss, op. cit., p. 9 ff.) dated at 46 A.D. to 250 A.D. (Morris and Burgh, 1954, p. 48). Subsequently there is a continuous development of the trait in each of the major Southwestern cultures (Morss, op. cit., passim).

Beyond the Southwest we find the trait scattered in time and space. Briefly enumerated, the occurrences are as follows: in the Imperial Valley (Heizer and Beardsley, op. cit.), the Panamint Mountains (Wallace, op. cit.),

and in Shasta County, California (Heizer and Beardsley, op. cit.), we have single occurrences of the trait on record whose time setting is entirely unknown. In northern San Diego County, figurines are known from the San Luis Rey II period during the 18th and 19th centuries A.D. (Meighan, 1954, p. 223; True, op. cit.). In southwestern Riverside County figurines were recovered from the historic village of Temeku (McCown, 1955, p. 39). In central coastal California they occur in numerous sites in Marin (Heizer and Beardsley, op. cit.; Heizer and Pendergast, op. cit.), Sonoma (Heizer and Pendergast, op. cit.), and Contra Costa Counties (Beardsley, op. cit., p. 91), i.e., north and east of San Francisco Bay, sometime between 1500 B.C. and 1000 A.D. (for dating see Heizer, 1958, samples C-690, L-187A, B, M-121 through M-127, and discussion of sample M-648, p. 6). In interior central California the trait is known from Phase II of the Late Horizon, dated at 1600-1850 A.D. (ibid., sample M-648, p. 6). On the northern California coast numerous figurines have been recovered from a large village site on Gunther Island in Humboldt Bay. The age of this occurrence has not been definitely established, but a maximal date of 1000 A.D. has been suggested (Mills, 1950, p. 24).

Twelve fragments of crudely made, undecorated, headless, cigar-shaped, female and asexual figurines of fired and unfired clay were recovered from the Karlo site in northeastern California, actually in the Great Basin, by Riddell (1956). He equates the temporal affiliation of certain burials and artifact assemblages in this site with that of the Early and Transitional Lovelock periods, which date by means of radiocarbon analysis from 1500-958 B.C. to 48-488 A.D. (Grosscup, 1958, Table 1). Two discontinuous culture periods are apparently represented at Karlo, although physical stratigraphy is lacking. The midden is quite shallow: nowhere has more than three feet of culture bearing deposit accumulated and generally the deposit is considerably less than three feet in depth. Also, the site has been considerably disturbed by rodent burrowing, and none of the figurines was associated with a burial. Under these conditions it would prove quite difficult to assign the figurines to any specific culture period within the site. Since the publication of Riddell's preliminary report on this site, he has informed the writer that a radiocarbon date of 2350 B.P. has been secured for this site, which would place it within the Transitional Lovelock period. The most recent occupational horizon in the site, it is believed, is not earlier than 1500 A.D.

In the northeastern section of the Great Basin, the figurine trait occurs at Danger Cave (Jennings, 1957, p. 208, Fig. 188e), again in a deposit covering a great time span, from 5400 B.C. to 260 A.D. (ibid., p. 93, Table 11). Actually parts of the uppermost level, from which the figurines were recovered, are much more recent in time, as evidenced by the presence of

pottery on the surface of the deposit. The one complete example from this site is generally similar in style to certain California specimens, especially to one from Shasta County, California (Heizer and Beardsley, op. cit., Pl. 26b, b', facing p. 200).

Early accounts by G. F. Wright (1890, 1891) describe a fired clay human figurine found near Nampa, Idaho. The authenticity of the antiquity of this find is questioned by Powell (1893). The Nampa specimen differs considerably from other archaeological specimens in that it is sculptured or carved rather than hand-modeled, and the representation of arms and legs is quite different from other archaeological types which have been reported. In spite of the doubt concerning the originally proposed antiquity of the specimen, there is little question but that it was in fact recovered from the vicinity of Nampa, Idaho.

Possible occurrences of the trait in California which are open to question and therefore will not be considered further in this report are: 1) a fragment of clay suggested to be the breast of a female figurine which was recovered from a rockshelter in Siskiyou County in northern California (Wallace and Taylor, 1952, p. 28); 2) a possible perforated female figurine from the Cauley site in Marin County (Beardsley, 1954, p. 52).

The occurrences described above include, to my knowledge, all published accounts of the distribution of the clay anthropomorphic figurine trait in the western United States, beyond the Puebloan Southwest.

If we accept maximal dates in each instance, we are faced with the rather implausible assumption that the trait either originated in the Great Basin and diffused in some manner to California without leaving a trace in the intervening area, or that it enjoyed three or four independent origins and persisted locally for thousands of years with practically no observable effect on neighboring groups.

If we accept other dates within the known ranges in each instance, a clearer and more logical picture develops. We are reasonably sure that the trait was highly developed in central Mexico by about 1350 B.C. (Piña-Chan, B. B., 1956; Piña Chan, R., 1958), and its presence in Mogollon I, the Vahki Phase of the Pioneer Period of the Hohokam, and in Basketmaker II sites indicates that the trait had reached the Southwest by about 300 to 200 B.C. and spread to the San Juan Country by the first century A.D. It is possible that impetus from the diffusion to Basketmaker II could have allowed the trait to reach the northeastern part of the Great Basin sometime later. It is also possible that the trait could have spread northwesterly at about this same time, entering California and diffusing northward along either side

of the Central Valley. From either the northeastern or northwestern section of the Great Basin, the trait could have diffused northward, for example, along the Owyhee River to the Snake River, where it occurs in the ethnographic record (Powell, 1893), and thence down the Columbia. Another possible diffusion route to the Columbia may have been from northern California northward along the Klamath River (Spier, 1930, p. 86, reports the use of clay human figurines among the Klamath) and thence down the Deschutes into the valley of the lower Columbia (see Map 1).

Subsequent diffusions within northern California apparently took place, and the trait has persisted into the ethnographic period among such groups as the Pomo, Coast Miwok, Nisenan, and the Klamath Indians of Oregon (ibid.).

A much later direct diffusion from the Southwest evidently occurred during the protohistoric period, and the trait arrived in southern California in a more elaborate form than is noted for central and northern California.

Documentation of the fact of diffusion of elements, traits, and even entire complexes from the Southwest to California is readily available. It is perhaps true that much of this influence is of a comparatively recent order, but Kroeber (op. cit.), Heizer (1941, 1946), and others suggest that there has been a long continuum grounded in considerable antiquity, of diffusion of Southwestern influence into California.

Another question arises in a study of this nature, and that is whether or not we are comparing related phenomena. In this instance it is believed that the answer is affirmative. Although there are specific differences between individual specimens from California, the lower Columbia River region, the Great Basin, and the Southwest, there are also specific similarities. Whether or not the specimens are fired, I believe, is really not of great importance, for the specimens from Karlo are both fired and unfired, as they are in the Columbia River region and at Snaketown. Specific differences between the different areas are in representation of facial features and limbs, which become more highly developed in more recent times. Specific similarities are the presence of representation of the umbilicus, punctate and incised body decoration, and representation of the torso only; the back is generally flattened and undecorated. Certain areal specializations are apparent in some instances, for example, the carving of features on the figurines from Idaho and Washington.

If these figurines are directly comparable and historically related, as has been suggested, then it is felt that we are dealing with a specific diffusion of a unit trait, even though time control is lacking. Numerous

examples of specific and selective diffusion of unit traits from the Southwest and/or Mexico to California are discussed in a paper by R. F. Heizer (1946).

End Notes

1. Site number designation assigned by U. C. Archaeological Survey
2. UCMA numbers refer to catalog numbers of U. C. Museum of Anthropology.
3. For descriptions of archaeological horizons in central California, see Lillard, Heizer and Fenenga, 1939; Beardsley, 1954.
4. Barrett does not mention their use as fertility charms. On p. 387 of his monograph, as well as in personal communication, he reports that no informant had ever suggested such a function to him.

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Explanation of Illustrations

[Following page 20]

Figure 1:

- a,b. Front and side views of clay figurine (Mrn-124).
- c. Figurine fragment from Mrn-80 (UCMA 1-166258).
- d. Figurine fragment from Mrn-232 (UCMA 1-78156).
- e. Same as above (UCMA 1-77872).
- f. Figurine fragment from Mrn-80 (UCMA 1-166230).
- g. Figurine fragment from Sac-6 (UCMA 1-85743).

Map 1:

Archaeological Distribution of Human Figurines of Clay Beyond the Puebloan Southwest.