

76. A SAN NICOLAS ISLAND TWINED BASKETRY WATER BOTTLE

Robert F. Heizer

ABSTRACT

Concerning the few possessions taken by the last surviving native of San Nicolas Island to the mainland in 1853, published records are scarce or non-existent. The basketry analysis presented here is based upon a photograph, reproduced herewith, of a San Nicolas Island twined specimen which finally came to the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, but which was destroyed in the fire following the 1906 earthquake.

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In 1836 the Franciscan missionaries effected the removal of the last survivors of the Nicoleño tribe¹ to the mainland. In the confusion of the transfer a woman was left on the island who remained there alone until 1853 when George Nidever brought her to Santa Barbara mission where, after four months, she died. The several published and manuscript accounts of her life alone for eighteen years on San Nicolas Island are being prepared by me for separate publication.

The few personal possessions which she brought with her to Santa Barbara in 1853 are said to have been sent to Rome except for one piece described as a "water bottle made of rushes and covered with asphaltum." This water bottle was reported in 1904 by Eisen as in the possession of the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, and the illustrations of that same basketry piece shown here (Fig. 1) are reproduced from photographic prints found in the C. Hart Merriam files at the University of California. The photographs were secured by Merriam's efforts, and are of particular value because the basket was destroyed, along with the building and other collections of the Academy, in the fire following the 1906 earthquake.

1. The Nicoleño group is classified by Kroeber (1925:633-34) as Shoshonean. This classification rests upon analysis of four words recorded from the old woman. The words (after Eisen, 1904:15) are: tocah, hide; nache, man; toygwah, sky; puochay, body.

Dimensions of the bottle are not recorded, but its height may be estimated at about 10 inches (ca. 25 cm.) and its diameter at about 6 inches (ca. 16 cm.). The base of the bottle has a surface coating of asphaltum and there are small spots randomly distributed on the outer surface of the basket which apparently are daubs of asphaltum applied over leaks. Since the old Nicoleño woman is known to have followed the customary Chumash-Gabrielino trick of coating the interior of baskets with asphaltum by means of lumps of asphalt and hot stones which melted the asphalt and distributed it over the inner walls, it seems unlikely that the basket was, as Eisen (1904:15) states, "asphaltum covered."

The basket is made by the twined technique and the accompanying diagram (Fig. 2a) of technique has been kindly provided by Dr. M. A. Baumhoff. In the diagram the dotted lines represent weft elements which have disappeared through rotting away. The disintegrated wefts may have been of buckskin, fur strips, feathers or hair. Two main areas, the body just above the center, and the neck, once held the decorative bands which have now disappeared. The ordinary warp appears to be of bundles of fibers rather than a single vegetal element, and this type of warp according to Mr. L. Dawson, who has made a particular study of Southern California basketry, is also the ordinary Chumash technique. The alternately spaced wefts, now disappeared, probably were decorative elements. The alternating pitch of single pairs of weft elements to form a chevron has not been noted by Mr. Dawson as a Chumash basketry trait, but he has observed this in two baskets attributed to Salinan manufacture, and this feature has been also noted by Dawson on some of the basketry fragments from Isabella Meadows Cave, Monterey County (Meighan, 1955).

Beyond this not much can be said. Any basket from the Southern California coastal area is of interest because we know so little about the textile art of such groups as the Chumash and Gabrieliño. The uniqueness of the San Nicolas specimen lies partly in the circumstances surrounding its history and preservation of this bare record in the form of a photograph now over half a century old. That such water bottles were commonly used by the Shoshonean tribes of Southern California seems probable since the mainland desert groups are otherwise reported to have used such forms, and there is a Chumash record for a large asphalt-sealed water bottle of basketry (Heizer, 1955, p. [102]) as well as one for the Costanoans (*ibid.*, p. 163). That there remain as yet undiscovered baskets dating from the eighteenth century is a practical certainty, and in the course of time museum collections in Mexico and Europe will probably yield such treasures to the seeker. Father Font on the Anza expedition in 1776 says that he saw no baskets being made on the Santa Barbara Channel coast and quotes some religious colleagues who told him that baskets were made on Santa Cruz Island and traded from there to the mainland people. Anza collected a number of baskets from the Chumash on the way north with the intention of

taking them back to Mexico, and it is these pieces which may ultimately turn up in Mexico if a search is made for them. Font remarked on the return trip a few months later that no baskets were to be seen in the Channel villages because the expedition had already collected them--presumably the supply was not yet replenished. While speaking of unusual baskets, reference should be made to the two remarkable early nineteenth century specimens, one of which is now in the University of California Robert H. Lowie Museum of Anthropology and described by Zelia Nuttall (1924) and to the unusual seedbeater (?) from a cave in the Manzanera region, Santa Barbara County, described by Irwin (1946) and illustrated by Heizer (1951, Fig. 3E).

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