

HUMAN REMAINS IN CALIFORNIA CAVES*

C. Hart Merriam

Since the discovery of the celebrated Calaveras skull, many human skulls and skeletons have been found in caves along the west slope of the middle Sierra. The presence of human remains in these caves has been interpreted to mean that the Indians now living in the region practise cave burial, or did practise it until recent times. This is an error. The Indians of this region, the Mewuk, burned their dead, and never under any circumstances put them in caves. These Indians believe the caves to be inhabited by a stone giant, whom they call Chehalumche, who sallies forth at night in search of food. He preys, by preference, on people, but when he can not get people, takes deer or other animals. He never eats his victims in the open but carries them into the caves and there devours them. Members of several subtribes of the Mewuk have told me this, and have looked with horror on the suggestion that they or their ancestors might ever have put their dead in caves. They say: "Would you put your mother, or your wife, or your child, or any one you love, in a cave to be eaten by a horrible giant?" The idea is so abhorrent to them that the theory of cave burial must be abandoned as preposterous. The Mewuk feel that the finding of human bones in these caves must convince us of the truth of their belief in the occupancy of the caves by Chehalumche, the bones being those of the victims he has carried there.

The mythology of the Mewuk does not admit of any migration but describes the creation of the people in the area they still inhabit. This, in connection with the fact that these Indians speak a language wholly different from any known in any other part of the world, proves that the Mewuk have occupied the lands they now occupy for a very long period -- a period which in my judgment should be measured by thousands of years.

This argues a great antiquity for the cave remains, for they must be those of a people who inhabited the region before the Mewuk came -- and this takes us back a very long way into the past.

* The American Antiquarian and Oriental Journal, Vol. 31, pp. 152-153, 1909. Also published in Science, N. S., Vol. XXIX, No. 751, pp. 805-806, 1909.