

NOTE ON THE OCCURRENCE OF HUMAN
REMAINS IN CALIFORNIA CAVES

John C. Merriam

In the course of an investigation of some of the limestone caverns in California during the last four years, a number of cases have been noted in which human remains were found in such situations as to indicate that their entombment was not of historically recent date. In no instance have any specimens been discovered which can be said to be of Quaternary age, although some of the occurrences are of such nature that it would be difficult to prove that the remains were buried during the present period.

The writer has already called attention¹ to the occurrence of human remains in Mercer's Cave in Calaveras County, and in the Stone Man Cave in Shasta County, under conditions which certainly suggest a considerable antiquity. In Mercer's Cave a number of human skeletal remains were found in close proximity to the bones of a Quaternary ground-sloth. The bones of both sloth and man were encrusted with a deposit of stalagmite, the encrustation on the sloth bones being considerably thicker than that on the human remains; and it is not probable that they were buried at the same time. It is, however, true that stalagmite deposits may be very uneven, and it is possible that the covering on the ground-sloth was formed in a shorter time than the thinner layer on the human bones.

The remains in Stone Man Cave were discovered in a remote gallery of this extensive cavern. The greater number of the bones were embedded in a layer of stalagmite which enveloped them to the thickness of one eighth of an inch or more. A vertebra which was obtained many years ago from this locality is found to have lost most of the organic material, and the cavities are largely filled with calcite crystals.

In neither of the cases just described is it possible to fix the age of the remains, but the impression given in both instances is that some centuries have elapsed since the skeletons came into the position in which they were found.

Another interesting occurrence of human bones has recently been brought to the notice of the writer by Dr. J. C. Hawver, of Auburn, California. During the past few years Dr. Hawver has engaged in an energetic exploration of the limestone caves in the vicinity of Auburn, partially at the instance of the University of California, but largely on his own resources. Hawver Cave, discovered by him and recently named in his honor, has been explored and described by Mr. E. L. Furlong,² but Dr. Hawver has continued the exploration

¹ "Recent Cave Exploration in California", American Anthropologist, N. S., Vol. 8, No. 2, p. 221.

² Furlong, E. L., SCIENCE, N. S., Vol. 25, p. 392.

of this cavern farther than it was carried by the university. In March, 1908, while attempting to open what Dr. Hawver supposed to be an ancient passageway into the lower cave, a number of human bones were found at a depth of twenty feet below the surface, under a mass of cave earth, fallen rocks and soil, over twelve feet in thickness. The remains lay at the lower end of a passageway which has evidently been closed for a long period. In this case, as in that of Mercer's Cave, remains of extinct animals undoubtedly of Quaternary age were found near the human bones, but the degree of alteration of the unquestionably Quaternary bones differs from that in the human skeletons. Some of the human bones were embedded in a cemented breccia consisting largely of angular fragments in limestone. So far as examined the bones seem to have lost most of their organic matter. A fairly preserved skull in the collection does not differ strikingly from the crania of the modern California Indians, although no comparative study has yet been made by a specially trained craniologist.

It is not possible in the case of the Hawver Cave relics to prove Quaternary age for the human bones. As in the other instances mentioned, the inference is, however, that the date of their entombment preceded the present day by centuries, if not by millenniums.

John C. Merriam

University of California