

## SHELL MOUNDS\*

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The subject of "Ancient Mounds" and their builders has attracted the attention of antiquarians, and men of science generally, for years. Much has been written on the subject, and much may be written, yet conjecture forms the basis of our knowledge regarding them.

California does not appear to have been visited by the "mound builders," whose works are numerous in the Mississippi Valley, as no trace of their work has yet been discovered on our coast. The only "ancient works" in the form of mounds yet discovered, are what we familiarly term "Shell Mounds," in consequence of their composition being largely of shells.

My attention was attracted at an early day to their existence on this coast, and from some memoranda made by me in 1854, I have drawn up this sketch, showing the position, appearances, and dimensions at that time, of a group of such mounds situated about one-fourth of a mile inland from the Bay of San Pablo, on the west side, a short distance below San Pedro Point, in Township 2 North, Range 6 West, Mount Diablo meridian. There are four of them. The largest is eighty feet in diameter on the top, forming a perfect circle, and twenty feet in height, with sides sloping about one and a half degrees to one degree. Capt. Simpton, the proprietor of the land on which they were situated, has erected a comfortable dwelling on the top of it, two stories in height, where he resides.

Immediately in the rear, and extending northwardly, are three others, about the same distance from each other, respectively sixty, forty-five and forty feet in diameter at the top, and fifteen, twelve and ten feet in height, with a basin-shaped depression in the top of each. They are situated in a beautiful and picturesque valley, well wooded, and thoroughly shielded from the prevailing summer winds, by the surrounding hills and high lands, with a stream of water at their base, and in full view of the waters of the Bay.

Here must have resided a chief of a tribe, with his "men of science" about him, as the position and shape of these mounds indicate more than ordinary Indian skill and design.

Differences of opinion may and probably do exist as to the origin of these mounds, yet the more general opinion appears to be that there was no other definite object in their construction and subsequent growth than the one herein suggested. They are undoubtedly the work of the present race of Indians on this coast and their immediate ancestors.

Those that I have seen are uniformly situated in the neighborhood of beds of mussels or other shell fish, either on the banks of bays or streams of water, distant from a few chains to a quarter of a mile. A favorable place is selected for a residence or lodge, and a commencement is made by excavating a depression in the earth and throwing up a circular ridge; or where the ground is too low, commencing a foundation by a basin-

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\* Proc. Calif. Acad. Sci. 4: 86-87, 1873.

shaped deposit of earth. Around and on the ridge, poles or stakes are planted, with the tops connected, to form a haystack-shaped structure, which is covered by bark, or more generally with the skins of animals. Around this lodge the refuse of their shell-fish, as well as the bones and other offal from other animals are thrown daily. After years of such deposits and accumulation, which at different times has been more or less covered over with earth when the stench became too offensive, and when fleas and other vermin became unbearable, a "purging by fire" is resorted to; then new structures are formed, and another series of years and deposits is added.

Let this extend to centuries, as has been the case on this coast, and you have the shell mounds which we see in favorable and desirable localities.

There is another species of mounds similarly formed, but not for the same purpose, which I may call attention to at a future day.