

SOME NEW FINDS AT SAN NICOLAS

by Gary S. Vescelius, with a discussion of the cultural relationships of the San Nicolás industry by Edward P. Lanning

Along the shore of the Bahía de San Nicolás, on the Peruvian coast, about 45 miles to the southwest of the town of Nasca and approximately 125 miles southeast of the Paracas Peninsula, lie some shell heaps which were first investigated in November, 1952, by a Columbia University field party headed by W. D. Strong.¹ These deposits are of considerable interest, because they have yielded what Strong has characterized as "positive proof of an hitherto undescribed lithic culture which is seemingly preceramic and preagricultural."² Some five mounds, varying in length from 15 to 25 m. and in height from 3 to 4 m., are distinguishable midway along the bay shore in the area immediately behind the beach (fig. 1). These mounds are composed largely of "disintegrated shells including sea urchin, scallop, limpet, mussel, and clam," together with "ash, charcoal, charred and split rocks, sea lion and bird bones, numerous pebbles, and sandblasted obsidian chips." From the surface and in the course of a small amount of digging and screening the Columbia expedition secured a broken granite "handstone," 3 side scrapers, a flake knife, 5 projectile points, and "many flakes, cores, and nodules of both black and red-flecked obsidian which represented work shop debris."³

On October 23, 1958, the San Nicolás shell heaps were revisited by a party representing the Instituto de Etnología y Arqueología of the University of San Marcos and consisting of Carlos A. Guzmán Ladrón de Guevara, Dwight T. Wallace and his employee, Jorge Esparza, my wife and myself.⁴ During our brief visit we found two obsidian projectile points, one of them broken in half, and two other flaked tools. In view of the fact that the Columbia expedition's original sample from this site was not large, even this small an additional collection is worth recording.

The larger of the two projectile points (fig. 2a) is broken into two fragments, both of which were recovered by Wallace's sharp eyed workman. It measures 8.6 cm. in length, 2.0 cm. in width, and 0.8 cm. in thickness, thus ranking as the largest point so far recovered from the San Nicolás site. Like the other, smaller points illustrated by Strong, this specimen is pointed at both ends, and, like all the bits of stone to be found on the surface of the shell heaps, it has been so thoroughly sand blasted that it is smooth and rather dull. The edges of the break have been eroded to such an extent that the two fragments can no longer be fitted together exactly, although there can be little doubt that they represent one and the same artifact.

The second point (fig. 2b) is much smaller, less carefully flaked, and quite reminiscent in form of one of the specimens found by Strong.⁵ It is 3.5 cm. long, 1.7 cm. wide, and 0.8 cm. thick. Like the other point, it is of black obsidian.

The third specimen (fig. 2c) is a red obsidian scraper, 3.5 cm. long, 2.0 cm. wide, and 0.5 cm. thick. It does not resemble any of the artifacts recovered by the Columbia expedition.

The fourth specimen (fig. 1d) is a crudely worked piece of tan chert-like stone which may have served as a scraper or chopper. It measures 5.9 cm. in length, 4.8 cm. in width, and 1.1 cm. in thickness.

Discussion by Lanning. The closest relationships of the San Nicolás industry are with the Ica-Huancayo lithic complex. The Ica-Huancayo complex is characterized by straight edged side scrapers and small non-stemmed projectile points, either double pointed or leaf shaped with convex or straight bases.⁶ The complex is defined on the basis of materials from the Casavilca site, a preceramic shell mound at the mouth of the Ica River, and on the basis of an industry from one of the rock-shelters near Huancayo first described by Harry Tschopik, Jr.⁷

The Casavilca site is a small mound located on the coast 1 km. north of the mouth of the Ica River. A test excavation was made there by Frédéric Engel and E. P. Lanning.⁸ There was no pottery in the 4 cubic meters of refuse sifted, but worked stone was relatively abundant, and there were also remains of gourds, cotton, and a piece of cotton netting. The presence of gourds and cotton suggests that cultivation was practiced at the time the site was occupied. Two stone points from the Casavilca site have been illustrated by Engel.⁹

New excavations at Tschopik's Huancayo Rockshelter no. 1 were carried out by Mrs. Rosa Fung Lanning in 1958.¹⁰ The deposit in this rockshelter is stratified, with two stone industries present, each associated with a different kind of pottery. The earlier of the industries, which is the one Tschopik published, closely resembles the industry from the Casavilca site. It is associated with coarse, undecorated pottery.

The five projectile points illustrated by Strong (his fig. 2, a-e) correspond to the Ica-Huancayo complex, as do the small projectile point and side scraper described in the present paper (fig. 1, b and c). The large point (fig. 1a) is a type not hitherto reported from the Ica-Huancayo complex, but it cannot be identified as belonging to any other known industry, either.

Engel's experience in looking for preceramic sites along the Peruvian coast suggests that a fairly substantial excavation is necessary to establish the absence of pottery and cultivated plants. It is doubtful that Strong's excavation at San Nicolás was sufficiently extensive to justify his claim that the site is both preceramic and preagricultural. If it is approximately contemporary with the Casavilca site, it should produce no pottery, but evidence of cultivated plants might be found when more digging is done.

NOTES

¹Strong's report gives the year as 1953, but the Columbia party finished its work in Peru in January of that year, so the published date is evidently in error.

²Strong, 1957, p. 8.

³Strong, 1957, pp. 8-10; fig. 2.

⁴Our visit was undertaken in the course of fieldwork sponsored by the University of San Marcos and supported by the U. S. Educational Exchange Commission in Peru (Fulbright Program).

⁵Strong, 1957, fig. 2D.

⁶Lanning and Hammel, 1961, pp. 141-143.

⁷Tschopik, 1946.

⁸Engel, 1958, pp. 83, 126-127.

⁹Engel, 1958, pl. XXXIV, upper photo, nos. 8, 15.

¹⁰Fung de Lanning, 1960.

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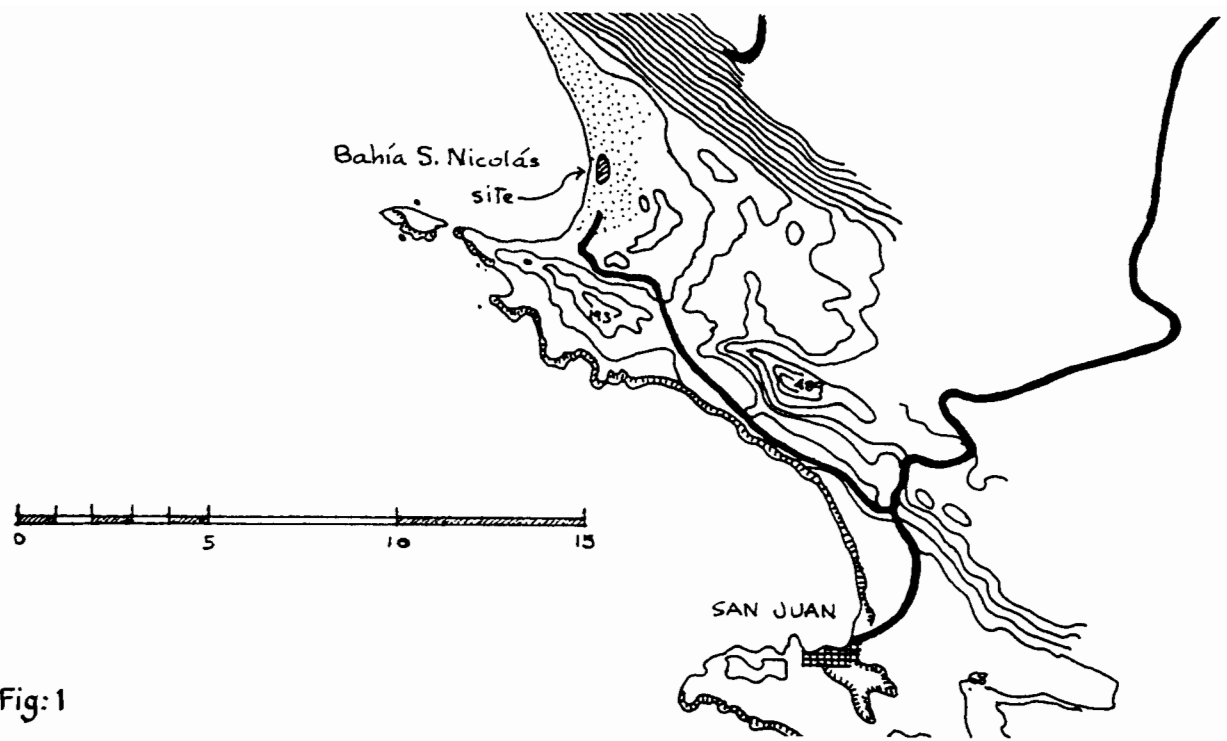


Fig:1

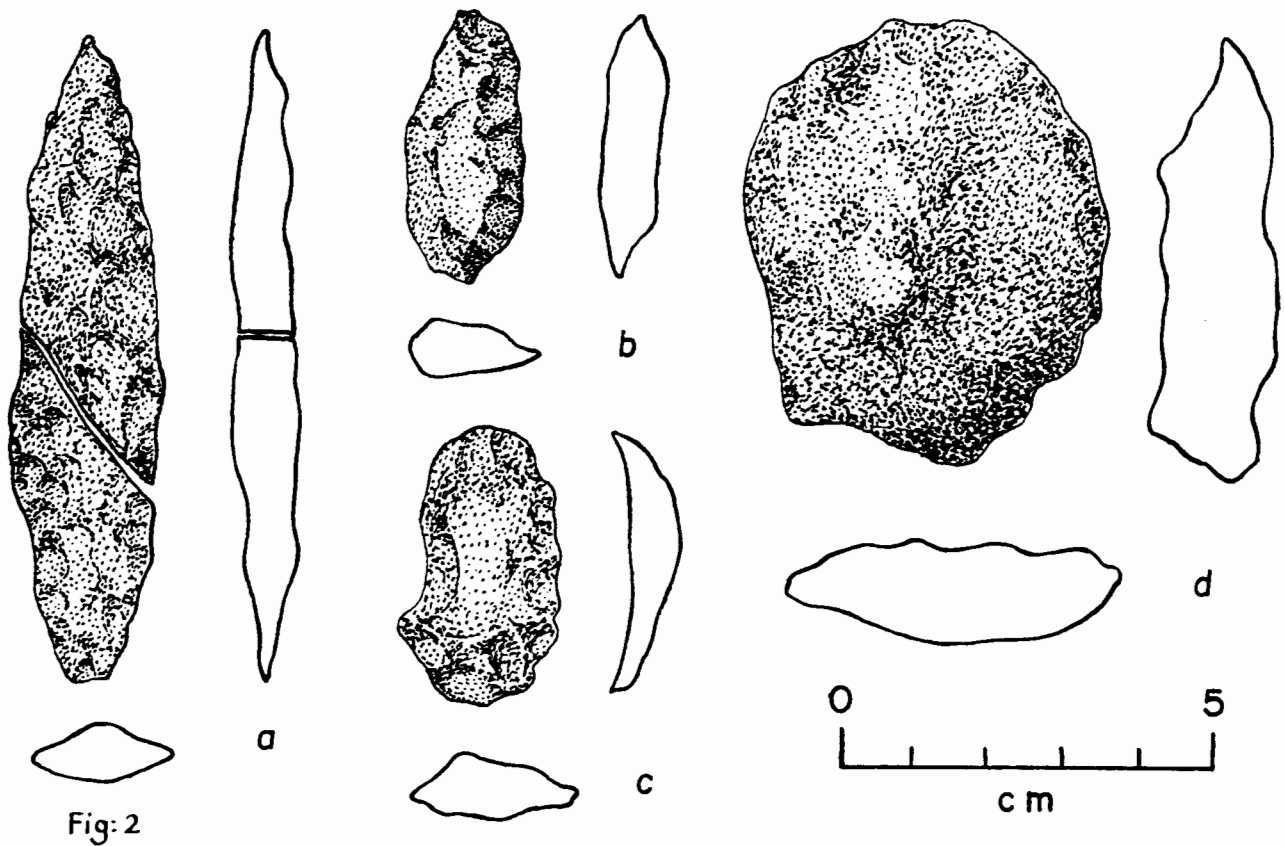


Fig:2