

A CAVE BURIAL FROM KERN COUNTY (KER-185)

Robert F. Heizer

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From the files of the C. Hart Merriam Collection

In September, 1903, James W. Stockton who seems to have been at the time a schoolteacher in Bakersfield, wrote C. F. Lummis in Los Angeles saying he had "two Indian baskets, a tule mat and most of a mummified body, found by me some months ago in the remains of an old cave near Kern River Canyon." Stockton also mentioned "a net of milkweed fiber about the larger basket in which the mummy was casketed, a breech cloth made of cords of wild hemp wrapt with skin." Lummis forwarded the letter to Dr. Merriam who wrote Stockton and received an answer stating where the specimens might be seen. A typed extract of Dr. Merriam's observations under date of October 8, 1903 reads:

"At a store in the town [Bakersfield] I saw an interesting recent find from a cave on Kern River about 10 miles east of Bakersfield. It consists of a cornucopia shaped basket about 20 inches diameter at big end and apparently bluntly rounded at small end. The small end I could not see as it was packed in a box which it fits tightly. It contained and still contains the partly mummified remains of an Indian. The skull appears to be perfect and the teeth are so worn that the person must have been past middle life. From its size it must have been a small person probably a woman.

It was found by James W. Stockton of Bakersfield, who states that the basket in which the skeleton is doubled up (with still a good deal of skin, etc. attached) was wrapped in a net of milkweed fiber. With it were some other things, including a partly decomposed tule mat, a lot of fiber cord which he says was a breech cloth and a smaller basket. The latter is a bowl about $14 \frac{1}{2}$ in. diameter by 5 inches in height, with nearly vertical sides.

Both baskets are still fairly well preserved though of course pretty rotten. They are of coiled weave of the 3-rod type, though more than 3 splints were used in places. They appear to be of tule, over willow rod foundations but I am by no means sure of the material. The big one is about 13 inches high by 20 in. diameter at the big end. I saw no design on either and believe them to be perfectly plain."

In June, 1904, Stockton again wrote Dr. Merriam some particulars on the location of the cave, and attached to his letter a sketch map. In July, 1905, Dr. Merriam was in Bakersfield, and in his Journal are the following additional observations on the cave:

"On the north side of the river (Kern) extending from near the bridge to opposite the mouth of Cottonwood Creek (say $1 \frac{1}{2}$ mile) is a semi-circle of abrupt hills and vertical clayey cliffs rising from the river bottom to a height of perhaps 100 feet. On the face of the highest cliff, just above the steep-sloping talus and perhaps 30 feet (estimated) above and some little distance from the river, is the remains of what once must have been a most interesting cave. All that is left of it is two holes, one about 4 feet above the other, going back horizontally with the clayey cliff and each sub-dividing into other holes which are lost

to sight as they wind into the clay. Both are now occupied by dens of skunks of the genus *Mephitis*. They smell skunky and long tail-hairs and cylinders of excrement, made up almost wholly of beetle (Coleoptera) remains, abound.

The lower hole still has black walls from the smoke of the fires built in the cave by Indians a thousand or more years ago.

The cave has practically disappeared from the gradual falling away of the face of the cliff. This is the cave in which a young man named James W. Stockton (of Bakersfield) found, a couple of years ago, a small human 'mummy' buried in a basket. This I saw in the fall of 1903 and persuaded the National Museum at Washington to purchase. It is now in the National Museum and is the only case of basket-cave burial known to me on the Pacific coast.

I photographed the cliffs from the hills on south side of river, looking across the river bottom.² The river flows in two channels enclosing an island between the bridge and mouth of Cottonwood creek.

An old irrigating ditch runs along the face of the cliffs, at the bottom or near it, and by following this ditch one comes to within say 20-30 feet of the remains of the cave."

Further information on the occurrence of the burial is contained in a letter to W. H. Holmes from J. W. Stockton of October 30, 1903. He says, "The smaller basket was unearthed first, bottom up and resting on the larger one which was on its side and facing north. The smaller one was full of and the larger one surrounded by a great deal of weeds, brown and sere with age. I judged them to be principally pennyroyal, dogbane and cynamore leaves. About the larger basket was a carrying net of milkweed fibre and entangled with it was some larger cordage of wild hemp. The mummy was casketed in the larger basket. Arms were placed across abdomen and head was crushed between knees. About the abdomen was a breech cloth of cordage in loops which had been covered with skin wrapped with fur outward.... The position of articles justified my thinking that the larger basket was placed upright, mummy in sitting posture, weeds packed about it, mat over its head, and second basket used as lid. After being placed thus a slide at mouth of cave forced debris inward overturning baskets. The body faced the setting sun."

Description of burial and artifacts:

Skeleton. The remains are those of a child of about 12 years old. This determination was made by Dr. T. Dale Stewart, U.S.N.M. The corpse appears to have been placed originally in a sitting position in the basket. As may be seen from the photograph (Pl. 2,b) there still adheres to some of the bones dried flesh and skin. The burial and baskets were thus protected from disintegration in the dry deposit of the interior of the cave.

Rabbit skin blanket.

This is the item referred to by Stockton as a "breech cloth," wrapped about the abdomen. Fragments of this are shown in the photograph in Plate 2, b, but the bulk of the blanket has been removed. The blanket is made by wrapping strips of rabbit skin 9 mm. wide in a clockwise spiral on foundation cords of 2-ply right twist grapevine bark 5 mm. in diameter, or on cords of some other fiber (probably milkweed, Asclepias) also 2-ply right twist, or two 2-ply right-twist cords twisted together in a clockwise direction. The wrapped warps are 1 cm. in diameter, and are bound side-by-side with twining elements of cordage (2-ply, right twist string 1 to 3 mm. in diameter), each course being spaced 8 cm. apart. The blanket now measures about 50 cm. wide, and was originally at least this long, or perhaps longer. Although in a fairly good state of preservation (some of the strips still bear hair and the cordage is firm and strong), the blanket is fragmentary due to separation of warp elements and breaking of weft twining elements. In its present condition nothing can be determined of the manner of finishing the edges of the blanket.

Carrying net

None of the carrying net described by Stockton as of milkweed fibre found wrapped about the burial basket was collected, or at any rate, did not reach the U.S.N.M. as part of the collection.

Small coiled basket

This basket (Pl. 2, d) is flat-bottomed with low, vertical sides. It measures 14 inches (35.5 cm.) in diameter, and stands 5 inches (12.5 cm.) high.

The foundation of the basket consists of a bundle of small grass (Epicampes?), split willow splints and an occasional small round willow rod. The basket is rather coarse, with 27 stitches per 10 cm. and 21 vertical coils per 10 cm. Occasional interior and exterior stitches are split, apparently by accident, and the basket cannot be said to bear intentionally split stitches. The coils are clockwise, and the stitches lean toward the left. The convex work surface was used in making the basket. Stockton's account states that the smaller basket was inverted over the larger one, serving as a cover.

Basket containing burial

This basket (Pl. 2, a-b) is somewhat larger than the last, and measure 13.5 inches (34.5 cm.) high, 19 inches (48 cm.) in diameter at the top, 13 inches (33 cm.) in diameter at the base. The bottom is flat and the side walls are straight. No decoration is apparent. The foundation of the coils is again a bundle of fibrous hollow grass stems (Epicampes?); there are 21 coils per 10 cm., and 26 stitches per 10 cm. Except for size, the coils, stitches, direction of work and work surface of the larger basket is identical to the smaller one.

The larger basket contained the dessicated remains of the child with the rabbit skin robe (or breechclout) wrapped about it.

Tule matting

This piece of tule matting (Pl. 2,c) lay over the head of the skeleton. One long edge with the tule (Scirpus) warp elements cut off square is the original border. It is bound with a simple twined technique .5 inch (1.5 cm.) from the edge, the weft consisting of a 2-ply right-twist cord, probably of Asclepias, 3 mm. in diameter. Three other twined weft courses are preserved, and are spaced from 5.5 inches (14 cm.) to 4.5 inches (11.5 cm.) apart. There are from 7 to 8 warps per 10 cm. The warp courses regularly consist of 4 tule stalks bound together by the cordage twined loops. The present measurements of the fragmentary mat are 15 inches (38 cm.) wide by 49 inches (124.5 cm.) long. One of the short edges bears an original segment of selvage. The warp element on the edge is a right-twist 2-ply tule rope caught by the weft cords. The second and third course weft cords are joined along the edge to form a loop.⁴

Discussion

A comparison of the cave burial artifacts with the culture inventory of the Yokuts tribe who held the territory of site Ker-185 in ethnographic times shows numerous points of correspondence. Because the Ker-185 burial was not accompanied by any Caucasian materials, we may regard it as dating from the prehistoric period, that is, earlier than 1850. The safest assumption would be that the burial dates from the last few centuries of the prehistoric period - say 1600 to 1850, though this is frankly a guess.

As Driver⁵ shows, the site lies in the territory of the Yauelmani tribe of the Yokuts group, not far west of the Kawaiisu tribal boundary. Looking to the Yauelmani Culture Element Distribution list⁶, we note that this group possessed the following: hammock type carrying net (element 806); rabbitskin blanket or cape with cordage wefts (elements 650, 891, 896); twined tule matting (el. 913); coiled basketry with grass bundle (Epicampes) foundation (el. 820); and cordage of milkweed (Asclepias) fiber (el. 936). Basket interment (element 1966) was not inquired for among all Southern Sierra native groups, though incomplete interrogation yielded affirmative replies by the Entimbich (Western Mono) and Kochevali (Yokuts) who are lower foothill groups near Kings River east of Fresno. Driver's monograph (notes to element 1962) mentions that most corpses were carried to the grave on the back of a person in a carrying net, carrying basket, or pack strap.⁷ The heavy carrying net mentioned by Stockton as enclosing the baskets, and the tightly flexed child's body stuffed into the large basket are features which suggest the packed remains were carried to the cave and there deposited. Although cave burial is apparently rare in this region, the Yokuts custom of burying the dead in a cemetery plot removed from the village⁸ offers the possibility that the single basket burial from Ker-185 is that of a child who died on the march or at a temporary camp in the vicinity and was left at this convenient spot. Because the cave was small, had not been used for other mortuary purposes,⁹ and the practice of cave burial was at best only rarely practiced locally,⁹ we must conclude that the burial is atypical for Southern Sierra foothill

Indians. Though such speculation can hardly be decisive, it is of interest to note that there are recorded at least two additional instances of individual basket cave burial in California. One of these is from a cave in Monterey County (site Mnt-85) excavated some years ago by W. W. Hill while a student at the University. The collection, now in UCMA¹⁰ includes the dessicated remains of an infant lying on a dressed skin and placed in a twined basket.

The second instance of child cave burial in baskets is that of the dessicated skeleton of an eight year old child wrapped in a cordage carrying net and sandwiched between two halves of an openwork twined burden basket. The location of this burial is Bamert cave just east of Clements, Amador County (site Ama-3).¹¹

These three examples, all of which probably date from the late prehistoric period and, to judge from the artifacts accompanying each skeleton, may logically be ascribed to the recent prehistoric ancestors of the ethnographic Yokuts (Ker-185), Miwok (Ama-3) and Costanoan (Mnt-85) tribes, and thus constitute evidence of a widespread late Central Californian custom of occasionally interring dead children in dry caves.¹² In Central California children's graves are often lavishly endowed with offerings. These are to be interpreted as evidence of affect-laden attitudes surrounding a much loved young son or daughter. The factor of youth may help to explain the rare, though widespread, special interment of children in caves.

Summary

The dessicated body of a child buried in a coiled basket in a small Kern County cave (site Ker-185) is probably to be interpreted as deriving from the later prehistoric Yokuts tribe who in recent times occupied the area. Most of the cultural objects accompanying the skeleton are of the recent Yokuts type. Although cave burial is rare in California, most graves being localized in cemetery plots within or near village sites, two additional dry cave burials of an infant and child are cited with the suggestion that occasional burial of sub-adults in dry caves is a Central Californian culture trait explainable in part to the care with which corpses of children were sometimes disposed.

Addendum

Published references to basketry in Western North America.

In the far west the arts of basketry were brought to a very high development. This subject has been fairly adequately covered in publications describing ethnographic specimens. Among the more important contributions are those by Mason (1904), Barrett (1908), O'Neale (1932), Kroeber (1909), James (1904), Boas et al. (1923), Kissell (1916), Roberts (1929), Douglas (1937).

Of archaeological or prehistoric basketry we have the excellent major studies of Morris and Burgh (1941), Weltfish (1930, 1932a, 1932b), Tschopik (1939), Cressman (1942), Loud and Harrington (1929), and Cosgrove (1947) besides a large number of minor, though significant, contributions.

Robert F. Heiser
Director, UCAS

NOTES

- 1 The C. Hart Merriam collection of data on California Indians was deposited at the University of California by Dr. Merriam's heirs. In the collection was found an envelope containing some letters, photographs and Dr. Merriam's observations on the "mummy" and its wrappings. Dr. Merriam was instrumental in seeing that the U.S. National Museum secured the find. To the staff of the U.S. National Museum, in particular Dr. Frank M. Setzler, Curator of the Department of Anthropology, Dr. Remington Kellogg, Director of the Museum, Dr. T. Dale Stewart, Curator of Division of Physical Anthropology, Dr. Herbert W. Krieger, Curator of the Division of Ethnology, we are indebted for the loan and photographs of the material from Ker-185. The Ker-185 specimens, accessioned in the U.S.N.M. under No. 41, 978, catalogue numbers 222, 142/222, 146. The burial is on permanent exhibit at that institution.
- 2 These photographs, 4 in number, are in the Merriam Collection.
- 3 Right-twist is the same as clockwise or S-twist; left-twist is counter-clockwise, anticlockwise or Z-twist.
- 4 The looping of two twined weft courses occurs elsewhere in Western North America. Cf. J. L. Nusbaum. A basket-maker Cave in Kane County, Utah. Mus. Amer. Indian, Heye Fndn., Indian Notes and Monographs, 1922, Fig. 15. In UCMA are 4 Yokuts tule cradle mats made by twining 2-ply right-twist cordage. Nos. 1-10730, 1-10732 show occasional weft courses carried along the edge to the next weft course as in the case of the Ker-185 mat. Other weft courses are tied at the mat edge. The selvage of these tule matting pads is, like the Ker-185 specimen, two tule stalks with a right twist. In brief, these ethnographic Yokuts specimens are practically identical with the cave matting.
- 5 1937, Map 1. See also Stewart, 1927, Pl. CXXIII; Gayton, 1948, Map 1.
- 6 Driver, 1937.
- 7 See also Gayton, 1948, p. 46 (Paleuyami)
- 8 Wedel, 1941, p. 121 ff.; Driver, 1937, element 1968. The Yokuts are not unique in this practice which is also attested for the Yurok and Chumash.
- 9 Northeastern California caves, the Sierran limestone caverns, and some caves south of Tehachapi yield burials.

- 10 Accession no. 100 SF; catalogue nos. 12-3930, 1-27084.
- 11 Accession no. CAS-84; collection in UCMA.
- 12 Alternatively one may prefer a less specific explanation, and, pointing to the wide occurrence of cave burial in North America, incline to the possibility that the three California instances cited here are specially selected examples of a fairly general mortuary practice.

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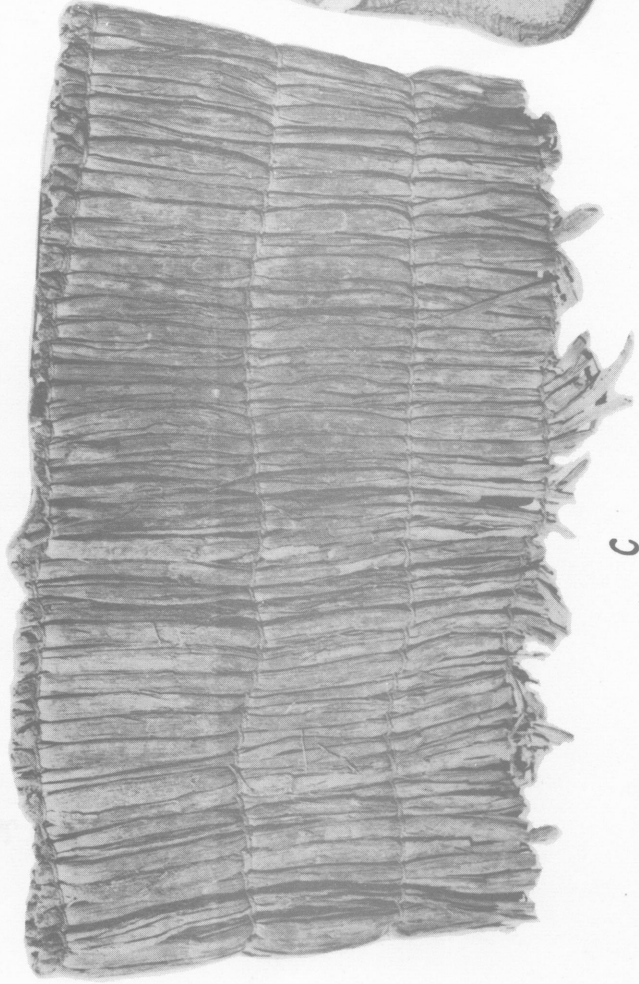
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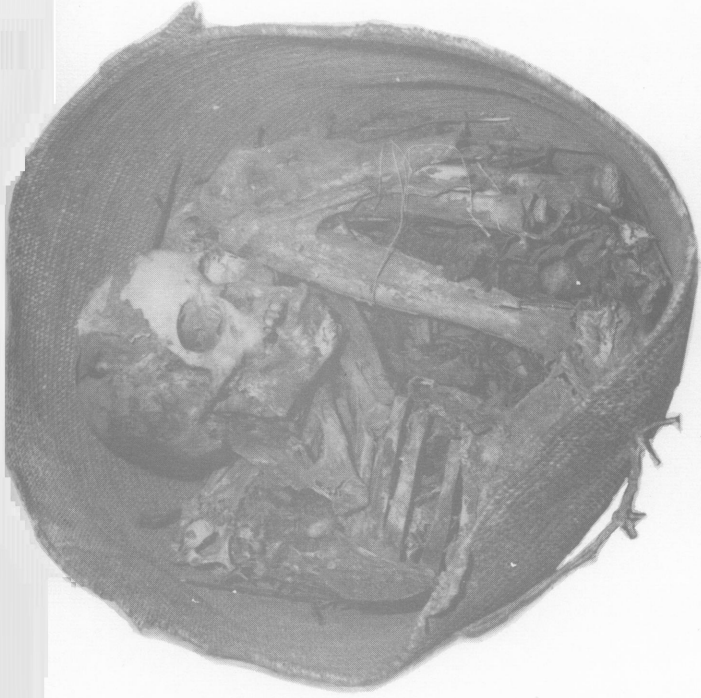
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a



c



b



d

PLATE 2. Burial and associated specimens
from Ker-185.