

53. A Steatite Whale Figure from San Nicolas Island

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In the collections of the State Indian Museum, administered by the State Division of Beaches and Parks at Sacramento, is a remarkable piece of prehistoric California Indian sculpture. Permission to illustrate the specimen was granted by Jack R. Dyson, Curator at that time. John R. Goins made the excellent sketch of the specimen shown here in Fig. 2a.

Nothing of the history of acquisition of the piece is on record—it is part of the original material forming the nucleus of the museum which was established by B. Hathaway.

The material is a black steatite and the surface finish is excellent, steatite being soft and with a facility for taking a high lustrous polish. It measures 22.5 cm. (8 13/16 in.) in length, and from base to top of dorsal fin is 10.5 cm (4.0 in.) high.

As part of one of the earliest excavation projects in California, Leon de Cessac, who was in charge of a French scientific mission to America in 1877-79, carried out considerable explorations on the Santa Barbara mainland and the offlying Channel Islands. De Cessac wrote an account of the "sculptured stone fetishes" found by him on San Nicolas Island, and believed that some were sufficiently accurate that he could make exact zoological identification of some cetacean forms.¹ De Cessac notes that accompanying one male skeleton he found twenty "more or less well executed stone animals, and a medicinal or witchcraft pipe also of stone." Since the tubular stone pipe was, as we know from ethnographic records, commonly used by shamans in this area,² the stone figurines found by him may indeed be interpreted, with some reason, as objects of religious or ritual use.

The specimen under consideration here has the dorsal fin of the killer whale (Orca), but the general profile of the blunt head, thin lower jaw, back and tail clearly is that of the great sperm whale (Physeter). Our cetacean is, therefore, a composite of two forms. It is rather more realistic than any of the examples illustrated by de Cessac from the same island, and altogether stands as an unusually excellent example of the California Indian stone-carver's art. A further significance of this specimen is that there is no reason to suspect its authenticity as a prehistoric aboriginal production.

Notes

1. De Cessac's account is translated and printed in UCAS Report No. 12, Paper No. 13, 1951.
2. See California Indian Linguistic Records: The Mission Indian Vocabularies of H. W. Henshaw, ed. by R. F. Heizer, U.C. Anthropological Records, Vol. 15, no. 2, 1955 (p. 153, note 23).