

Sex and Symbolism: A Middle Holocene Phallic Artifact from Santa Rosa Island, California

Torben C. Rick, Jon M. Erlandson, and
Christopher B. Wolff

Abstract

A phallic-shaped stone carving from CA-SRI-667 on Santa Rosa Island provides evidence of Middle Holocene sexual symbolism. Unlike most other phallic objects from southern California, this 4800 to 4200 year old sandstone specimen is relatively small. We describe this unique artifact, place it within the context of other “fertility” or sex based imagery from coastal southern California, and discuss the challenges of identifying such symbolism in the archaeological record. The CA-SRI-667 phallic representation provides further evidence for the elaboration of California’s Middle Holocene maritime cultures.

Introduction

The search for symbolism and ideology in the human past is one of archaeology’s greatest challenges. This is particularly true for archaeological studies of hunter-gatherers whose ritual artifacts were often made of perishable materials and may be difficult to distinguish from domestic or other artifacts. In southern California, some of the most common symbolic artifacts found in the archaeological record include a variety of phallic and vulvar shaped objects made of stone, shell, and other materials (Desautels, Koerper, and Couch 2005; Koerper 2001, 2006; Koerper and Whitney-Desautels 1999; Lee 1981). Similar

artifacts—often interpreted as fertility symbols—have been found in other areas of the western United States (Howe 1997) and around the world (Meighan 1997).

Along the southern California Coast, such artifacts have been recovered in a variety of archaeological contexts including burials and caches. Many come from Late Holocene deposits, reflecting the higher population densities and intensified social, political, and economic systems of this time period. Artifacts with presumed sex-based intent are generally rare from the Early and Middle Holocene, however, leaving questions about the antiquity and nature of symbolic, social, and ritual systems of the more distant past.

In this paper, we report on our discovery and analysis of a carved and ground phallic stone artifact discovered at CA-SRI-667 on Santa Rosa Island. This is one of the few phallic objects identified from the Channel Islands. Lee (1981:50) mentioned one each from Santa Rosa, Santa Cruz, and San Nicolas islands, but the CA-SRI-667 specimen is the only one that appears to be of Middle Holocene age. Moreover, it may have been

suspended as a pendant, making it a distinct phallic artifact type not previously described for the region.

Santa Rosa Island and CA-SRI-667

With a land area encompassing roughly 217 square kilometers, Santa Rosa Island is the second largest of the Northern Channel Islands. It is situated about 44 kilometers off the Santa Barbara mainland coast, around 5 kilometers east of San Miguel Island and 9 kilometers west of Santa Cruz. Santa Rosa Island contains some of the greatest biological and environmental diversity on the Channel Islands, including a number of relatively well-watered streams, mountain peaks up to 508 meters high, and several distinct vegetation communities. Coastal beach and dune vegetation, island chaparral, oak and riparian woodland, and a grove of an island endemic species of Torrey pine (*Pinus torreyana insularis*) are among the island's plant communities.

CA-SRI-667 is a 280 by 110 meter shell midden located in a sand dune complex on the northeast coast of Santa Rosa (Fig. 1). The site contains two distinct dunes separated by a swale. Dune 1 is located on the eastern part of the site and Dune 2 is located to the west. The site has at least three components, including intact deposits capping both dunes, a middle stratum about halfway down both dunes, and a lower basal component underneath Dune 2. The two upper components are largely composed of California mussel and other rocky intertidal shellfish, with the lowest site component containing estuarine shell. Much of the site has been deflated, and a pavement of eroded shell fragments, burned rock, stone artifacts, and small amounts of animal bone covers the surface.

Most of our research at CA-SRI-667 was conducted in 2003, associated with a revegetation and site stabilization project conducted by Georganna Hawley of Channel Islands National Park. We

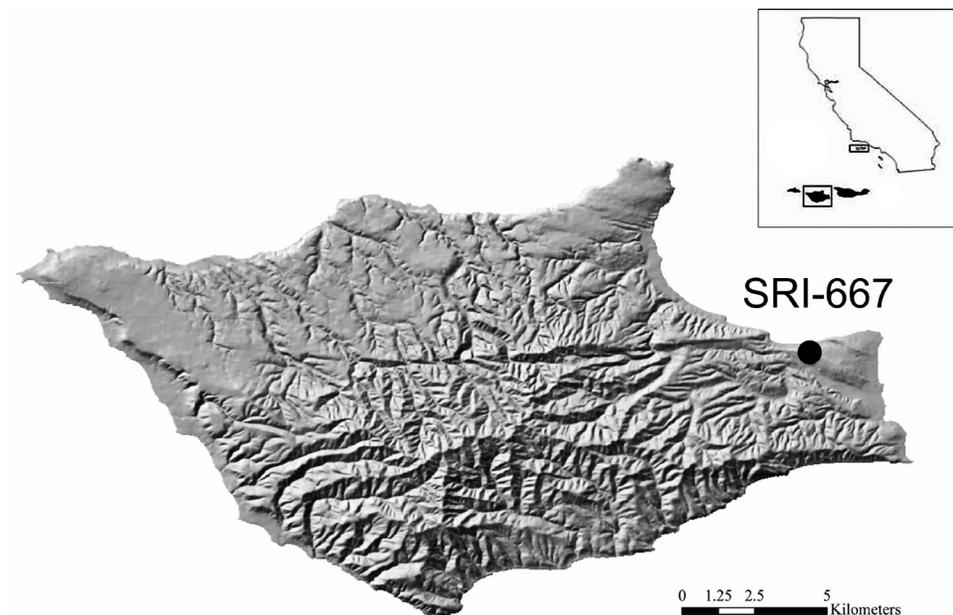


Fig. 1. Location of CA-SRI-667 and Santa Rosa Island.

excavated three samples: Sample 1 (25 liters) was obtained from a roughly 15-centimeter thick midden deposit capping Dune 1 (Stratum 1); Sample 2 (25 liters) was obtained from Stratum 2, a roughly 40-centimeter thick deposit located about 6 meters below Stratum 1 in Dune 1; and Sample 3 (30 liters) was obtained from Stratum 3, a roughly 20-centimeter thick deposit at the base of Dune 2. All excavated sediments were sifted over 1/16-inch mesh and the residuals retained for analysis. Wolff et al. (2007) recently presented details of the subsistence data and other artifacts from the site.

To complement our excavations and better understand the site structure, we performed extensive surface collections and observations. Similar to other Middle Holocene sites from the Channel Islands, most artifacts were expedient chipped stone and other utilitarian tools, although an *Olivella* barrel bead was recovered from Sample 3, an *Olivella* spire-lopped bead was collected from Sample 1, and a *Trivium californiana* (coffee bean) bead was found on the Dune 1 surface (Wolff et al. 2007). In 2005-2006, we made follow-up visits to check on the status of the site and make small surface collections of formal artifacts.

Five well-preserved marine shells were selected for radiocarbon dating from the intact archaeological

strata visible in the dune exposures. These ^{14}C dates range from 6260-4200 cal BP, with most of the occupation occurring between about 4800 and 4200 cal BP (Table 1). The presence of an *Olivella* barrel bead and a spire-lopped bead, large bifacial chipped stone artifacts, and the absence of clear Late Holocene artifacts (e.g., *Olivella* cup beads) all support the Middle Holocene chronology of the site.

In 2005, Erlandson found the phallic artifact on the site surface. It was situated on the east dune (Dune 1) in an area above Stratum 2 and below Stratum 1. Although it is problematic to assign precise chronology to surface artifacts, its location suggests that its most likely age is around 4370-4220 cal BP, roughly the same as the Stratum 1 deposits. Because it is located away from the basal deposits, a conservative estimate places the artifact between 4800 and 4200 cal BP, during the latter phases of the Middle Holocene, or King's (1990) Early period.

The CA-SRI-667 Phallic Artifact

The CA-SRI-667 artifact is made from an off-white fine-grained sandstone and appears to be complete or nearly so. The stem or base is slightly jagged, suggesting that it was broken or never fully ground like the rest of the specimen (Fig. 2). Maximum

Table 1. A Radiocarbon Chronology for CA-SRI-667, Santa Rosa Island.

Provenience	Lab Number ^a	Material Dated	Conventional ^{14}C Age	Calibrated Age Range (cal BP, 1 Sigma) ^b
Dune 1: Stratum 1	OS-41892	<i>Mytilus californianus</i>	4410 ± 40	4370-4200
Dune 2: Stratum 1	OS-48510	<i>Mytilus californianus</i>	4510 ± 30	4490-4350
Dune 2: Stratum 2	OS-48515	<i>Mytilus californianus</i>	4600 ± 35	4580-4430
Dune 1: Stratum 2	OS-41893	<i>Mytilus californianus</i>	4730 ± 40	4800-4640
Dune 2: Stratum 3	OS-41894	<i>Chione undatella</i>	5990 ± 45	6260-6130

a. OS=National Ocean Sciences AMS Facility, Woods Hole, MA.

b. All dates were calibrated using Calib 5.0.1 (Stuiver and Reimer 1993, 2005), applying a ΔR of 225 ± 35 years for all shell samples (Kennett et al. 1997). $^{13}\text{C}/^{12}\text{C}$ ratios were determined by the radiocarbon lab.

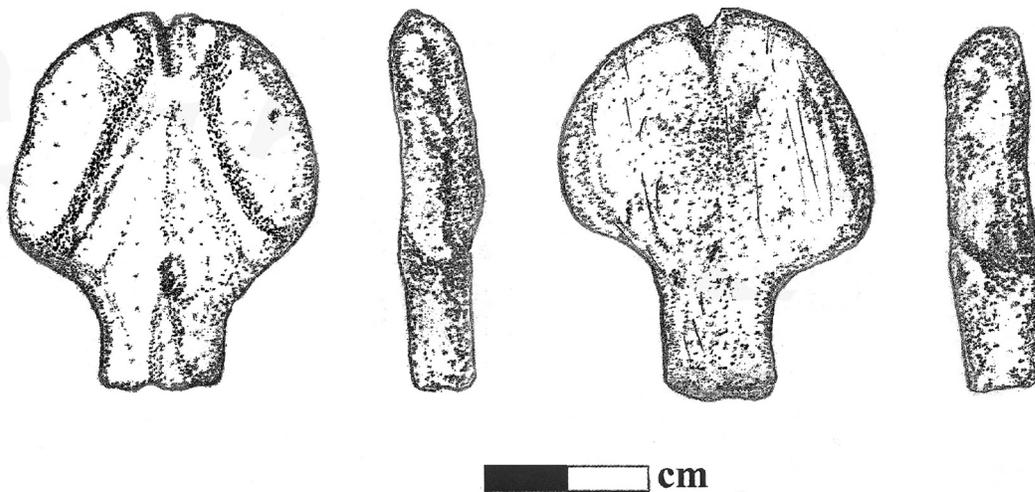


Fig. 2. The CA-SRI-667 phallic artifact showing four different views (drawn by Chris Wolff).

dimensions are 47 millimeters long, 35 millimeters wide, and 9 millimeters thick, with a weight of 11 grams. The distal portion of the artifact strongly resembles a glans penis, with an ovoid or bulbous head and a distinct carved slit at the end that depicts a urethral opening similar to those documented by Koerper (2001:31, 2006:139-140) and Lee (1981:112, 114). On the underside of this bulbous end, two diagonal grooves were carefully carved to mimic the appearance of a glans penis. This exaggerated bulbous end tapers to a distinct, parallel-sided stem or base that looks like the shaft of a phallus.

Because this phallic artifact sat on the surface of a recently active dune, abrasion by wind-blown sand particles gave it a slight polished and battered appearance. Despite this post-depositional abrasion, some striations are clearly visible on the artifact, demonstrating that it was carved and ground into its shape. One side is fairly convex while the other is concave. The concave side contains no visible markings other than the slit at the distal end of the artifact and a few striations from production. On the convex side, a small dimple

(\approx 2.5 millimeters wide), located near the center of the object had broken off either intentionally or unintentionally. The grooves carved on the convex side of the bulbous end slant away from the urethral slit, adding a three-dimensional quality. Our experiments suggest that these grooves could have anchored a string to suspend the artifact as a pendant.

Discussion

One of the great ambiguities of archaeology is determining symbolism from material remains. The overall morphology of the CA-SRI-667 artifact evokes the imagery of a glans penis with urethral opening trending into a shaft. Given this distinct shape, and the presence of other phallic artifacts on the Channel Islands and southern California Coast (Lee 1981), we interpret its probable function as a Middle Holocene male fertility symbol.

Phallic shapes are relatively common from the southern California Coast, but have primarily been recognized in pestles and charm stones (Hudson and Blackburn 1983:122, 126-127).

Koerper (2001) recently reviewed a variety of the characteristics of phallic and vulvar artifacts from the California mainland, noting their occurrence on ground stone pestles and cowry shells. Like the adjacent mainland, the archaeological record of the Channel Islands contains pestles with distinct phallic morphologies (Bryan 1970:80; Heye 1921: pl. X). Except for a few very obvious contexts (e.g., Koerper 2006), the interpretation of these artifacts as distinct phallic symbols, rather than just utilitarian artifacts, remains somewhat tenuous. It is also possible that some museum finds may be forgeries (Gamble 2002).

In a review of Chumash effigies, Lee (1981:50) noted that only six of these artifacts were phallic forms. Three of these (Lee 1981: Fig. 32, 34a) were from the mainland and represent a glans penis attached to a shaft. The three additional specimens that were not described were from Santa Rosa, Santa Cruz, and San Nicolas islands. Lee did not list the provenience or catalog numbers of these island artifacts, precluding any direct comparisons. Although phallic effigies appear to be less common than phallic pestles, they were important symbols for ancient people throughout California, the western United States, and beyond (Howe 1997; Meighan 1997).

The CA-SRI-667 artifact is unique because unlike most phallic “pestles,” this artifact has no obvious utilitarian function. Because this is a surface find, there is no associated context, other than its location in a shell midden. However, Chestnut cowry (*Cypraea spadica*) shells, commonly linked with female fertility symbolism (Koerper 2001), were also observed on the site surface.

Conclusions

If we are correct that this phallic artifact was made during the Middle Holocene between 4800

and 4200 years ago, this unique find provides important information on the antiquity of sex-based symbols in southern California. It also expands our knowledge of the range of shapes that served as sexual symbols in the region.

The Middle Holocene remains the most poorly understood part of the Channel Islands archaeological record, with the CA-SRI-667 artifact providing a rare glimpse into the material symbolism of this time period and place. We will never know the exact meaning of the CA-SRI-667 artifact, but its distinct morphology and the presence of other such symbols in the Chumash region and broader southern California Coast suggest that it most likely carried a fertility/fecundity understanding. We hope that California archaeologists will continue to look beyond functional explanations for artifacts and develop hypotheses about ancient symbolism and ideology.

Acknowledgements

We thank Georganna Hawley, Kelly Minas, Ann Huston, and Mark Senning for facilitating our research at CA-SRI-667. Support for our Channel Islands research has come from a variety of sources, but the 2005 field work during which the phallic artifact was found was funded primarily by our home institutions. Funds for radiocarbon dating were provided by Channel Islands National Park and Southern Methodist University.

References Cited

- Bryan, Bruce
1970 Archaeological Explorations on San Nicolas Island. *Southwest Museum Papers* 22. Southwest Museum, Los Angeles.

- Desautels, Nancy A., Henry C. Koerper, and Jeffrey S. Couch
2005 A Birdstone and Phallic Pestle Cache from ORA-365. *Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology* 25:109-118.
- Gamble, Lynn H.
2002 Fact or Forgery: Dilemmas in Museum Collections. *Museum Anthropology* 25(2):3-20.
- Heye, George G.
1921 Certain Artifacts from San Miguel Island, California. *Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, Indian Notes and Monographs* 7(4). New York.
- Howe, Carrol B.
1997 *Fertility Symbols of the Western Indians*. Graphic Press, Klamath Falls, Oregon.
- Hudson, Travis, and Thomas C. Blackburn
1983 *The Material Culture of the Chumash Interaction Sphere. Vol. II: Food Preparation and Shelter*. Ballena Press Anthropological Papers No. 27. Menlo Park, California.
- Kennett, Douglas J., B. Lynn Ingram, Jon M. Erlandson, and Phillip L. Walker
1997 Evidence for Temporal Fluctuations in Marine Radiocarbon Reservoir Ages in the Santa Barbara Channel, Southern California. *Journal of Archaeological Science* 24:1051-1059.
- King, Chester D.
1990 *Evolution of Chumash Society: A Comparative Study of Artifacts Used for Social System Maintenance in the Santa Barbara Channel Region before A.D. 1804*. Garland Publishing, New York.
- Koerper, Henry C.
2001 Cowry Shells: Fertility/Fecundity Symbols in Southern California Iconography. *Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology* 23:27-37.
2006 An Unusual Ritual Cache from ORA-263, Seal Beach, California. *Proceedings of the Society for California Archaeology* 19:138-144.
- Koerper, Henry C., and Nancy Whitney-Desautels
1999 A Cowry Shell Artifact from Bolsa Chica: An Example of Prehistoric Exchange. *Pacific Coast Archaeological Society Quarterly* 35(2&3):81-95.
- Lee, Georgia
1981 *The Portable Cosmos: Effigies, Ornaments, and Incised Stone from the Chumash Area*. Ballena Press Anthropological Papers 21. Ballena Press, Socorro, New Mexico.
- Meighan, Clement W.
1997 Foreward. In, *Fertility Symbols of the Western Indians*, authored by Carrol B. Howe, pp. 1-2. Graphic Press, Klamath Falls, Oregon.
- Stuiver, Minze, and Paula J. Reimer
1993 Extended ¹⁴C Data Base and Revised Calib 3.0 ¹⁴C Age Calibration Program. *Radiocarbon* 35:215-230.
2005 Calib 5.0.1 Radiocarbon Calibration Program 2005. Quaternary Isotope Lab, University of Washington, Seattle.
- Wolff, Christopher B., Torben C. Rick, and Amanda Aland
2007 Middle Holocene Subsistence and Land Use on Southeast Anchorage, Santa Rosa Island, California. *Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology* 27:44-56.