

# A Unique Early Discoidal from CA-ORA-85, Bolsa Chica Mesa, Huntington Beach, California

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## Abstract

This article documents a one of a kind discoidal, unique for its geometric adornment. A motif consisting of concentric elements had been pecked into each of its faces. The bifacially decorated artifact is curated at the Bowers Museum, Santa Ana, but until now it had been without information on provenance or historical context. Recent study of Samuel C. Evans' papers at the Riverside Metropolitan Museum sheds light on the circumstances of its discovery and subsequent disposition. The specimen had been found in the 1910s at the Eberhart site (CA-ORA-85), Bolsa Chica Mesa, in a sacred cache containing cogged stones and other discoidals. A similarly assembled cache was uncovered close by at the same time.

## Introduction

Several years ago, Jennifer Ring, Collections Manager and Registrar with the Bowers Museum, Santa Ana, kindly granted permission for the senior author to peruse the facility's curation/storage areas that housed artifacts recovered from Orange County Indian sites. The general purpose of the searching was to locate and then more fully document the kinds of objects known or reasonably presumed to have abetted the ritual practices and belief systems of regional Native American peoples. The varied artifacts of special interest included the serendipitous finds of farmers, construction workers, etc., the more methodically recovered artifacts of relic hunters, and the scientific discoveries of SERA and WPA government archaeological crews employed during the Great Depression.<sup>1</sup> One specific goal of this effort was to illustrate a

selection of magico-religious artifacts not previously drawn or not previously rendered at a level of artistry commensurate with their scientific/historical importance. Accordingly, science illustrator and co-author Joe Cramer was in attendance.

This article first shares a specific outcome of our energies—the description and detailed rendering of a unique specimen (Bowers Cat. No. 2006.58; Aisle B12) (Figures 1-3), a discoidal with each face pecked and ground to produce identical geometric motifs. The study also resolves an issue of the artifact's provenance, an enigma that endured until quite recent investigations at a different curation/storage facility, the Riverside Metropolitan Museum, uncovered crucial information within a rough draft book manuscript (Evans ca. 1930-1932) on cogged stones but with some useful discoidal content (see Koerper and McDearmon 2010, 2011 [this issue]). Once the provenance question had been satisfactorily addressed, it became possible to infer chronological placement.

## Description

The artifact shown in Figures 1-3 is unequivocally a discoidal; exhibit one is simply the match of its morphology to a type within the genre of discoidals—specifically, the Right Convex type (Figure 4). Some discussion regarding typology will be helpful.

Discoidals are disc-shaped objects, their circular faces either convex, flat, or concave (see also Farmer 1953:177). The lateral surfaces, or encircling panels, are flat to curved (Underbrink and Koerper 2006:117); any curvature is almost always convex, very rarely concave. Farmer (1953:177) apparently was unaware of those seldom encountered specimens with concave encircling panels

Discoidals' lateral surfaces are absent the elevations (i.e., "cog teeth," "point projections," "clover leaves") or indentations that help distinguish the several coggled stone morphological types (see Underbrink and Koerper 2006:117). Also, discoidals are comparatively large discs with a high thickness to diameter ratio; Farmer's definition included "usually a third to a quarter as thick as its diameter" (Farmer 1953:177). Farmer noted that discoidals were occasionally perforated through the center; these are actually extremely rare (see e.g., Koerper and McDearmon 2011 [this issue]:Figure 15, far

right). Some other discoidals exhibit small pits/depressions centered upon one or both faces.

Farmer's observations of a range of discoidals included the occasional "beveled" specimen, that is, a specimen having its panel slanted ("oblique") rather than perpendicular ("right") relative to the faces, a consequence of a specimen's faces differing in circumference/area. Explained another way, abstracting out any curvature that might be attendant with a lateral panel and imagining or actually observing a flat, encircling panel, a cross-sectional slice would describe a trapezoid rather than a rectangle. The two divisions of discoidals in the Figure 4 schema are named "oblique" and "right."<sup>2</sup> Parenthetically, the two broad divisions of coggled stones are similarly identified as "oblique" and "right" (Underbrink and Koerper 2006:Figure 1).

When the contours of lateral panels are considered, six permutations can be modeled; accordingly, we

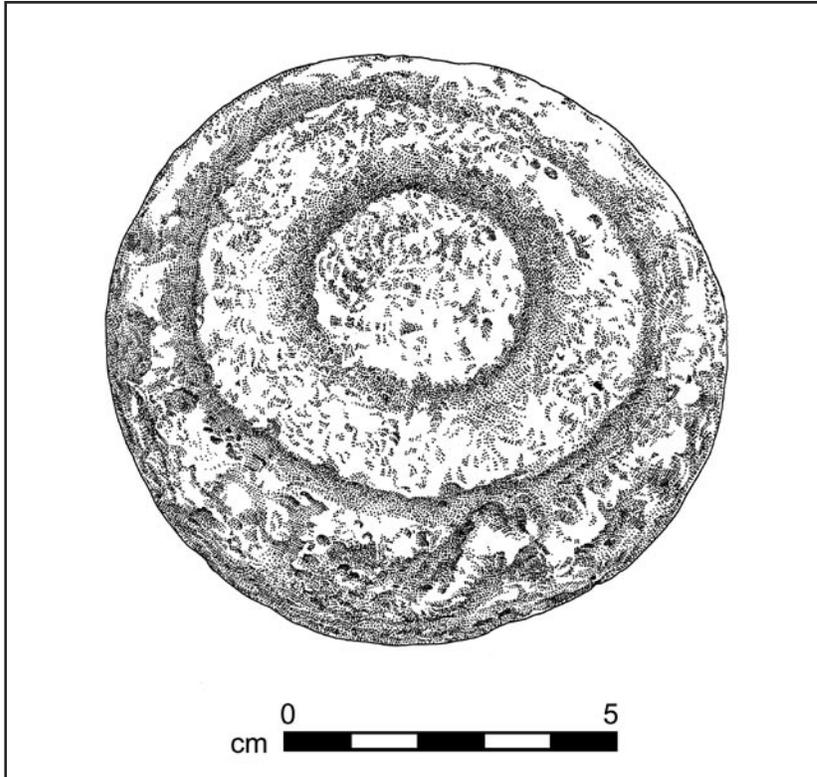


Figure 1. Bifacially decorated discoidal curated at the Bowers Museum, Santa Ana (Catalog No. 2006.58).

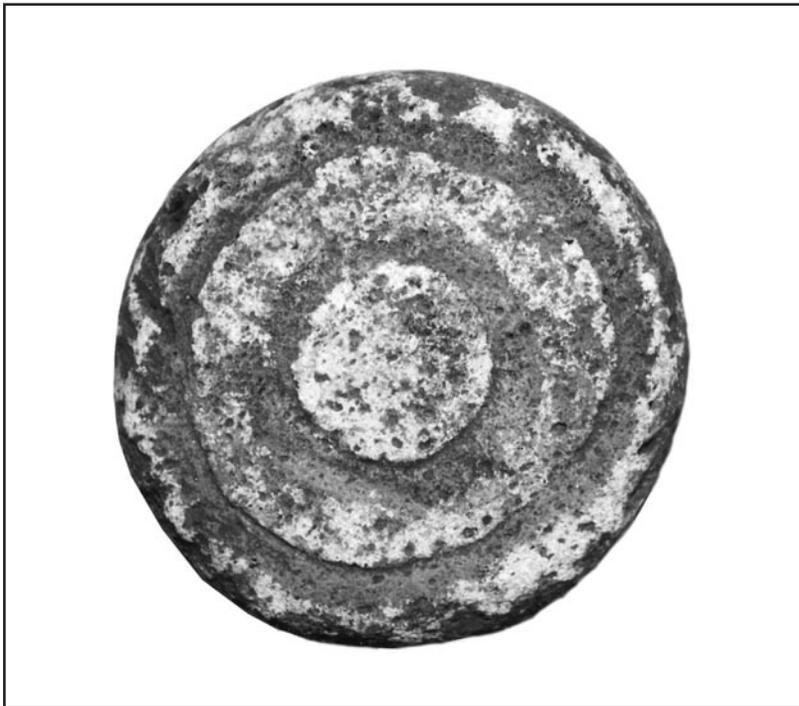


Figure 2. Photographic image of the same face of the discoidal seen in Figure 1. Maximum diameter is 93 mm, and maximum thickness is 44 mm.



Figure 3. Two views of the side opposite that shown in Figures 1 and 2.

propose the half dozen taxa presented in Figure 4. We eschew employments of additional descriptive referents to break out subtypes, at best, an *ad nauseam* exercise, and a “splitting” headache. Just imagine if the combinations of flatness and curvature (concave and convex) of a discoidal’s two faces became the basis for further breaking out discoidals’ shapes from one another—36 subtypes, an unwieldy number! The schema of Figure 4 is merely a convenience to cover a range of basic shapes.

Following the schema, the Bowers Museum artifact (Figures 1-3) is a fit to the most common variety of discoidal—the Right Convex type. Both faces are slightly convex. The outer edges of both faces of the specimen curve to meet the lateral panel. Maximum diameter is 93 mm, and maximum thickness is 44 mm. Weight, as determined by Samuel Evans (ca. 1930-

1932), is five eighths of a pound. The material is a light greyish white, diatomaceous stone.

Two roughly concentric rings have been pecked into each ground facial surface. This makes for the appearance on each face of two concentric raised rings, one inside the other, that surround a slightly elevated circle positioned more or less at the center. The adornment is what makes the specimen unique. Parenthetically, S. C. Evans was not able to acquire the object, but he did have a cast made for his study.

**Provenance and Association**

On the basis of general morphology, the Bowers Museum artifact (Figures 1-3) falls to the genre of discoidals. Yet, since it is unique among large disc-like objects for its carved geometric designs, there is a legitimate ques-

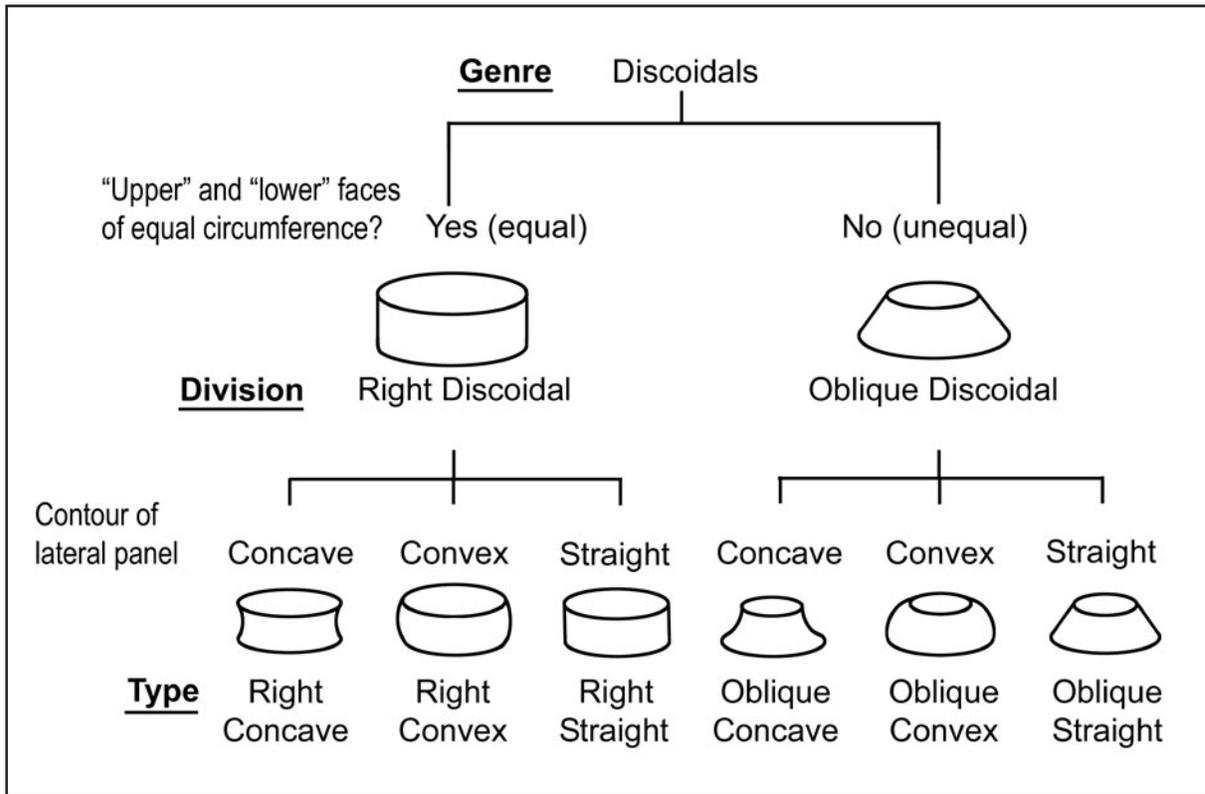


Figure 4. Discoidal typology key.

tion as to whether prehistoric peoples had assigned this oddity to some other genre. Exhibit two in support of its placement among the discoidals revolves on determinations of provenance and association.

Within the Bowers Museum artifact registry no provenance had been recorded for this geometrically embellished discoidal. Careful readings of all available SERA and WPA archaeological documents turned up no description offering a match to the artifact in question. An extensive library search was equally unproductive. However, a breakthrough emerged with recent perusals of papers, photographs, etc. contained within the Samuel Wayne Evans Collection (Gift A1524), Riverside Metropolitan Museum, that relate to S. Wayne Evans' father's obsession with the cogged stone type. Samuel Cary Evans, Jr. (1866-1932), four-time mayor of Riverside, devoted much time, especially from about 1923 through 1932, researching the cogged stone genre (see Koerper and McDearmon 2010, 2011 [this issue]).

Among the Riverside Metropolitan Museum materials are two photographs (Figures 5 and 6) that together show 22 artifacts, half being discoidals and half cogged stones, that were at the time of this photo-documentation owned by Pasadena relic collector Joseph Barbaeri. Evans had only contacted Barbaeri after learning from the finder of the artifacts, Charles Andrews of Huntington Beach, the circumstances of the discoveries and their subsequent disposition with the Pasadena collector.

Andrews related to Evans (C. J. Andrews to S. C. Evans, [?] August 1930, letter, Samuel Wayne Evans Collection, Riverside Metropolitan Museum) that the 22 objects seen in Figures 5 and 6 were retrieved on a single occasion sometime between 1912 and 1915 in the Bolsa Bay area (Figures 7 and 8), when Andrews had been Superintendent of Farming Operations for the Bolsa Chica Gun Club (see Smith 1965:1 [reprinted 1968:1]; Carlberg 2009:Chapter 5) (Figure 9).<sup>3</sup> The

occasion was leveling for a road adjoining a water reservoir that sat at the highest eminence on the upper terrace of Bolsa Chica Mesa (Figure 10); the gun club was built on the lower terrace.

The 1910s grading crew was working to fill in a low spot, and at about one half meter below the natural level of the place, some stones appeared. Thrown out by the plow, one object immediately caught Andrew's eye for its strange configuration. Inspecting the location for more like it, the superintendent found cogged stones and discoidals "piled up in the form of a pyramid." A similar concentration soon turned up about 9 m away. Andrews gathered together all of the carved stones. There is no indication of how long he held them before the artifacts ended up with Barbaeri.

The two caches, then, had been buried on Reservoir Hill, at an old Indian village/camp that in time became known as Strandt #6; Strandt #6 was later named CA-ORA-85<sup>4</sup> (see Anonymous 1964:4; Eberhart 1964:2, 1989:53-63; Chace 1969:66-67). Eberhart's map (1989:Figure 3) shows a circular, 6.7 m diameter, reservoir at an elevation of about 19 m asl (62+ ft asl), and he explained that a road had at one time cut across the site which he described as an oval concentration of shell about 107 m (350 ft) by 152 m (500 ft).

Parenthetically, Eberhart (1989:57) recovered a discoidal at Ora-85 (the Eberhart site). Its material was described as "vesicular, porphyritic quartz latite." The specimen was nearly perfectly circular, its maximum diameter 79 mm and its minimum diameter 76 mm. Thickness was nearly uniform, 36 mm to 38 mm. Near the center of each face were shallow, fingertip sized depressions.

Bolsa Chica was the location of prolific cogged stone and early discoidal manufacture (Whitney-Desautels and Mason 1986). There and elsewhere cogged stones and discoidals had been cached together (e.g., Strandt 1965:23-24; Dixon 1975; Scientific Resource Surveys,

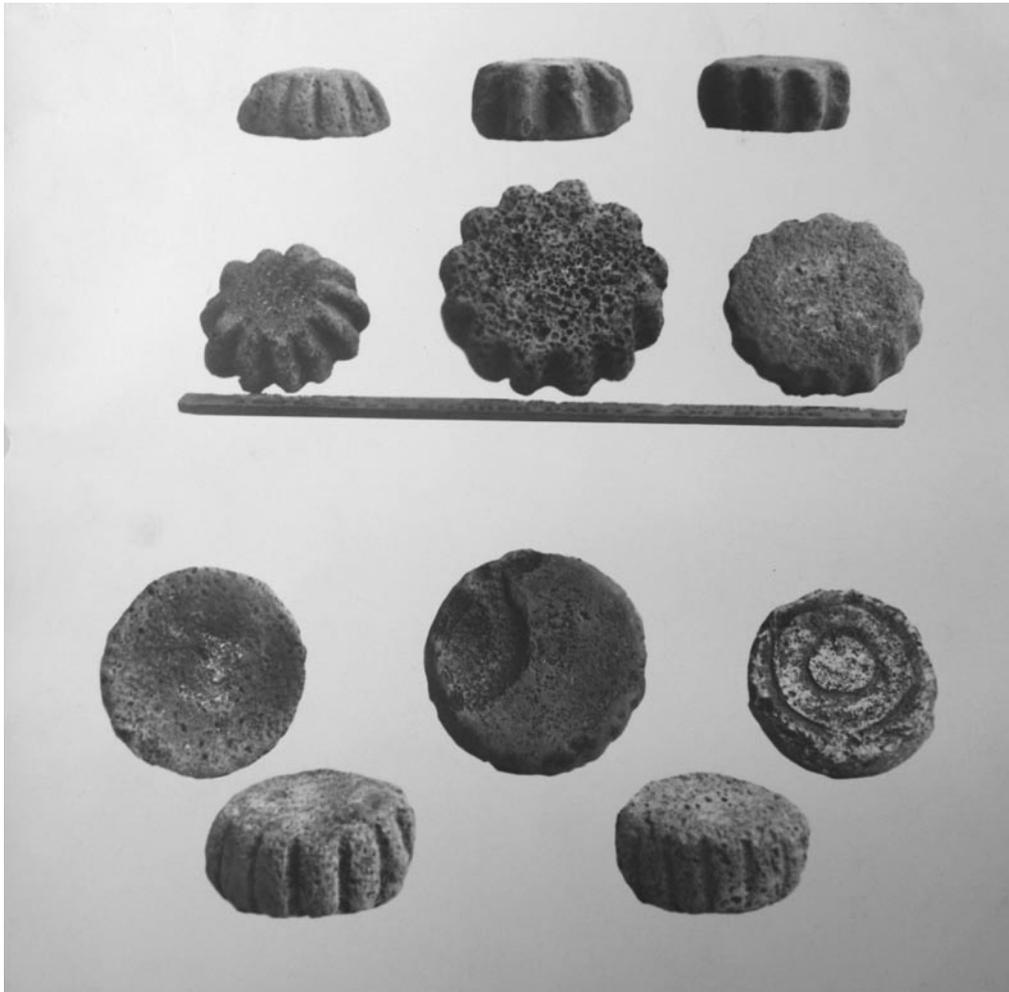


Figure 5. Artifacts discovered ca. 1912-1915 at CA-ORA-85 on the upper terrace of Bolsa Chica Mesa. The face showing on the geometrically decorated discoidal (third row, far right) is the same side shown in Figure 3. Maximum diameter of the decorated discoidal is 93 mm. Photo taken ca. 1930 when these specimens were in the Barbaeri Collection. Courtesy Riverside Metropolitan Museum, Samuel Wayne Evans Collection, Gift A1524.

Inc. 1986; Koerper and Mason 1998:66; Koerper et al. 2006; Couch et al. 2009). Aside from the caches, it is often the case that where there are cogged stones there are discoidals (e.g., Eberhart 1961:368; Strandt 1965:24; Herring 1968:8). The geometrically embellished disc-shaped artifact of Figures 1-3, see also 5) with its Bolsa Chica provenance and its cache association with cogged stones and discoidals is indication that prehistoric peoples had most probably counted the artifact among the category of discoidals.

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### Chronology

Underbrink and Koerper (2006:117) proposed that a chronological line be established to separate discoidals into earlier and later groupings.<sup>5</sup> They wrote:

For those kinds of discoidals linked historically to cogged stones, particularly through their appearance in caches with cogged stones, we propose the...name “early Holocene

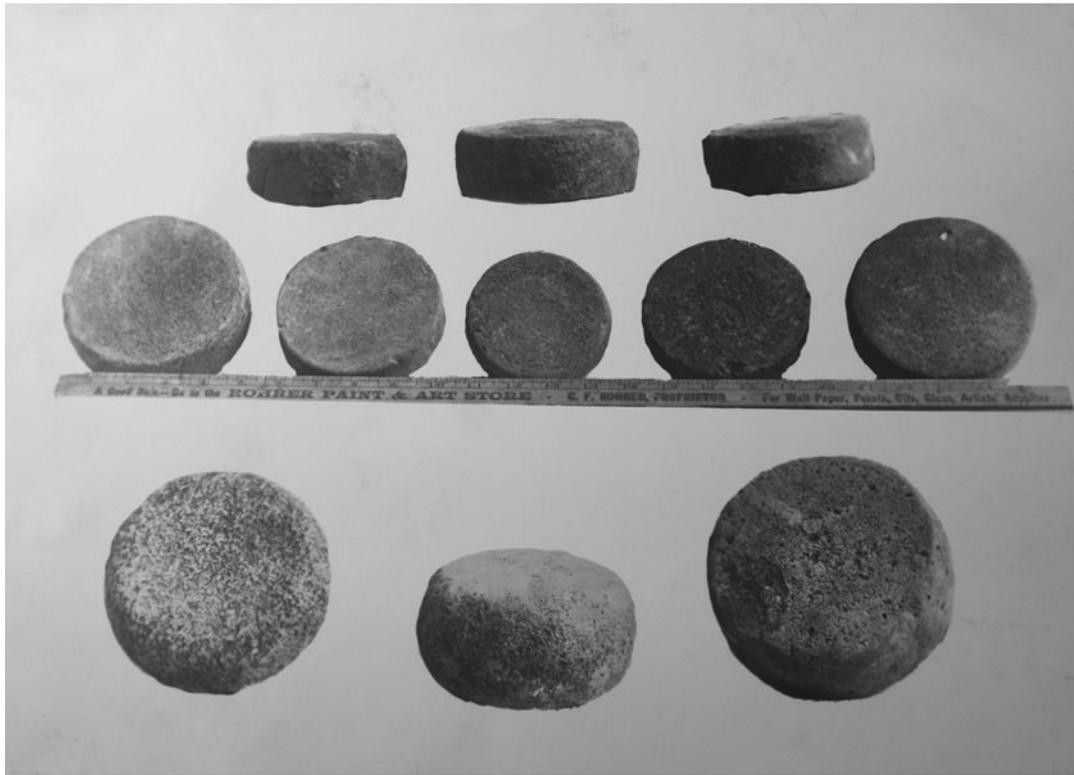


Figure 6. Artifacts discovered ca. 1912-1915 at CA-ORA-85, upper terrace Bolsa Chica Mesa. Scale is a yard stick. Photograph taken ca. 1930 when these objects were with the Barbaeri Collection. Courtesy Riverside Metropolitan Museum, Samuel Wayne Evans Collection, Gift A1524.

discoidal.” A sizeable proportion of the early Holocene discoidals are fashioned of vesicular igneous stone, as is the case for cogged stones, a circumstance further supporting historic connections, and suggesting perhaps an unknown degree of shared symbolic content. Further cementing the historical connection is the fact that several lower-tier design factors, such as centrally placed pits or depressions and concavities, cross over between cogged stones and these discoidals.

... we begin to draw a needed distinction between this class of artifact and those kinds of discoidals whose floruit occurs later in time and which rarely if ever are crafted from vesicular materials. Rather, the materials are

often granitic and other kinds of hard stones of the kinds that can be worked to smooth, even nicely polished, finishes. These are the kinds of artifacts Sutton (1978) illustrates and describes for SDI-4575. These later discoidals are never oblique..., and their top and bottom faces exhibit varying degrees of convexity. These surfaces are nearly always without modifications such as pits or depressions [Underbrink and Koerper 2006:117].

These discoidal distinctions, early Holocene and middle Holocene, have been formerly incorporated into Sutton and Gardner’s (2010) reconceptualization of the Encinitas Tradition of southern California. The two scholars offered the pattern name “Topanga” to cover prehistoric coastal Orange and Los Angeles counties from 8500

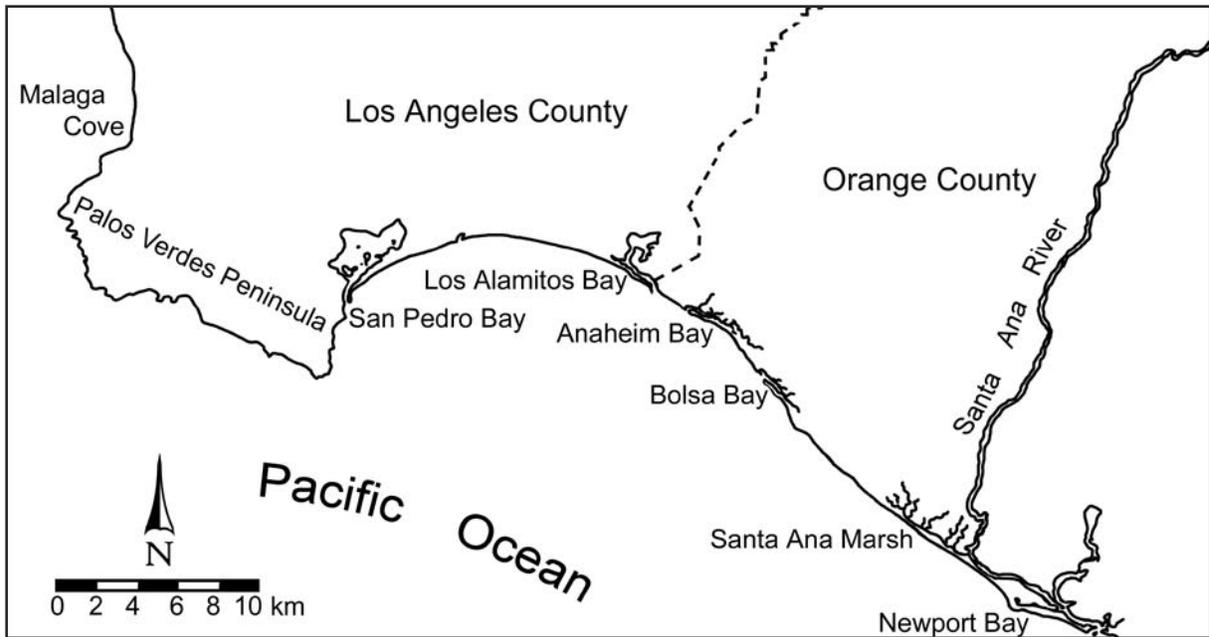


Figure 7. Map showing Bolsa Bay in relation to other embayments and land forms along south coastal California.

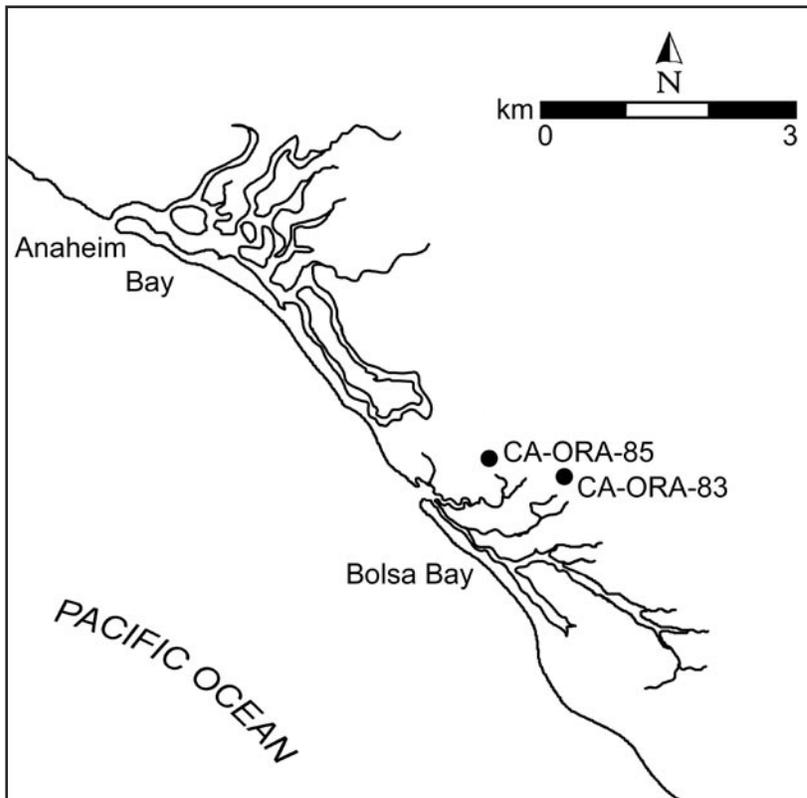


Figure 8. The Eberhart site, or CA-ORA-85, and the Cogged Stone site, or CA-ORA-83, are located on the upper terrace of Bolsa Chica Mesa, Huntington Beach.



Figure 9. Bolsa Chica Gun Club (BCGC). Photograph taken by W. W. Bradley shortly after the Long Beach earthquake of March 10, 1933. Note damage along both sides of the dam. The dam was constructed for the BCGC by Tom Talbert to prevent tidal flow from entering into the wetlands east of the dam. This barrier enabled the BCGC “to construct duck ponds about the property and enjoy calm hunting waters” (Carlberg 2009:71). Courtesy U.S. Geological Survey Photographic Library.

BP into the early Late Holocene. Early discoidals are noted as a feature within the Topanga I Phase (8500 BP-5000 BP), and later discoidals are a feature within the Topanga II Phase (5000 BP-3500 BP) (see Sutton and Gardner 2010:Table 1). For Orange and Los Angeles counties discoidals are not in the list of material culture traits beyond the onset of the Shoshonean incursions, ca. 3500 BP. Thus, the artifact is absent from the Topanga III Phase (see Sutton and Gardner 2010:Table 1), and their use was long terminated by the time of the Del Rey Tradition (see Sutton 2010:Table 1, Figure 3).

Our best guess is that inception of the earlier discoidals occurred ca.  $7500 \pm 500$  BP, the same for coggled stones. The span of manufacture for each, their limits

of employments, and their heirloom histories are an enigma.

### Summary and Concluding Remarks

The discoidal reported on here (refer to Figures 1-3 and 5) is unique for its possession of a decorative motif, a pattern of concentric circles appearing on both faces. This article has described the specimen and resurrected its provenance—site ORA-85 at the upper terrace of Bolsa Chica Mesa, Huntington Beach (see Figures 8 and 10). The geometrically decorated object was discovered in the close company of other discoidals as well as coggled stones. This grouping and a similar one found nearby are additions to the list of

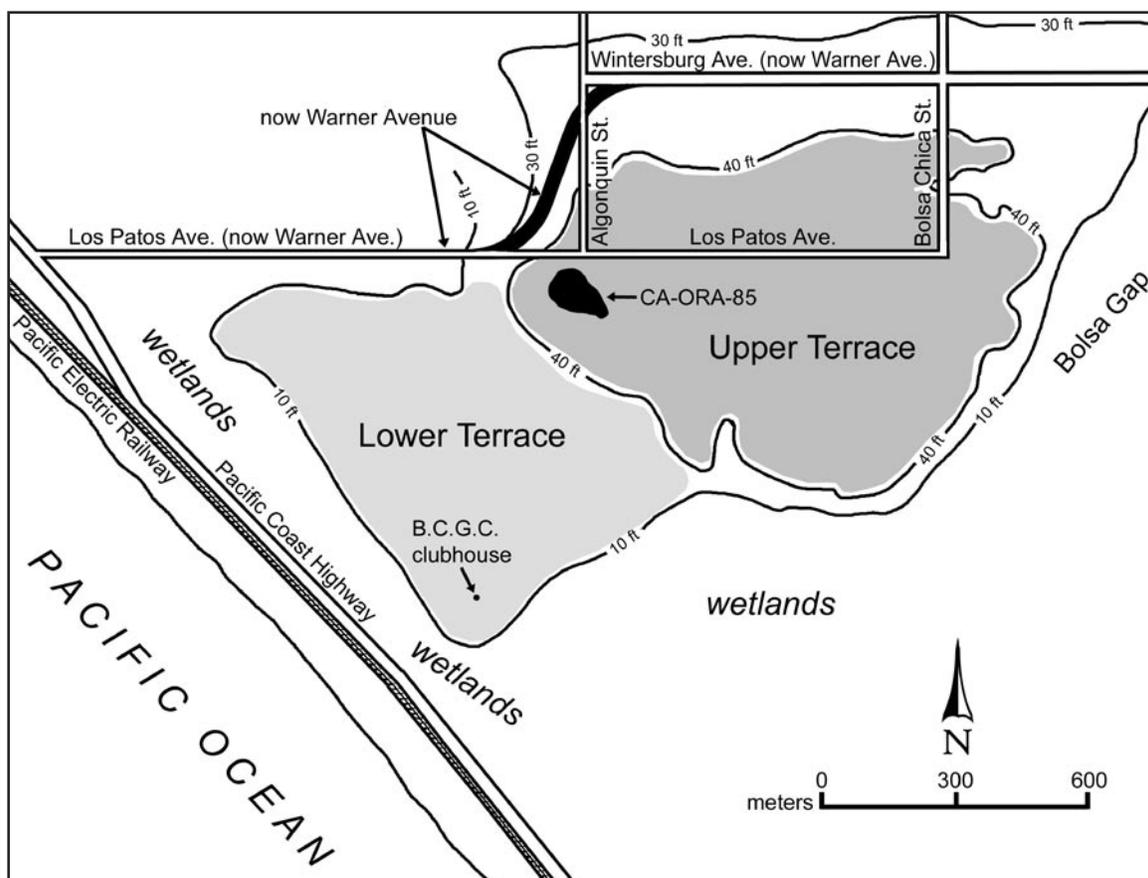


Figure 10. Bolsa Chica Mesa and surrounding area, ca. 1943. The Bolsa Chica Gun Club sits on the lower terrace of the mesa, and CA-ORA-85 sits on the highest point of the upper terrace. A 6.7 m diameter reservoir was located toward the southeast corner of the Eberhart site. Note the Pacific Electric Railway route adjacent to the Pacific Coast Highway. Warner Avenue was then known as Wintersburg Avenue, which did not extend to the Pacific Coast Highway. Rather, it was Los Patos Avenue that at that time extended to the coastal highway.

a species of sacred cache previously documented for Bolsa Chica Mesa (Scientific Resource Surveys, Inc. 1986; Koerper and Mason 1998:66; Couch et al. 2009) and elsewhere (e.g., Strandt 1965:23-24; Dixon 1975; Koerper et al. 2006).

Cache co-occurrences of early discoidals and coggled stones imply a shared symbology or complementary symbologies within a ritual/belief system (Koerper and McDearmon 2011:53-58). The authors anticipate that such co-occurrences might help to identify first order referents of the multivalencies having once attached to each of these kinds of graven images. Prehistoric symbolic

communications of discoidals and coggled stones will be the subject of a future *Quarterly* submission.

In the larger effort to provide description for the bifacially decorated discoidal from ORA-85, a formal taxonomic key for discoidals was presented (Figure 4). Six types were proposed (Right Concave; Right Straight; Right Convex; Oblique Concave; Oblique Straight; Oblique Convex). The bifacially decorated discoidal fell to the Right Convex type.

The ORA-85 geometrically decorated artifact had been crafted during the Topanga I Phase (see Sutton

and Gardner 2010:Table 1). This is in line with age estimates for the manufacture of all early discoidals as well as cogged stones, however the temporal span of recycling and/or heirlooming is uncertain. Both genres are absent in Orange County Del Rey contexts (see Sutton 2010:Table 1, Figure 3), thus indicating no employment of the artifacts by Shoshonean peoples. Shoshonean speakers first entered the Los Angeles Basin around 3500 BP (Sutton 2010:Table 1, Figure 3).

Were it not for Samuel Cary Evans' zealous pursuit of the function(s) and meaning(s) of cogged stones, regional prehistory would lack crucial information on this one of a kind discoidal, and there would remain no remembrance of the two sacred caches from ORA-85 found by Charles Andrews and his grading crew. Using Evans' photographs of the Barbaeri Collection that are with the Samuel Wayne Evans Collection (Riverside Metropolitan Museum, Gift A1524), it may perhaps be possible to locate more, possibly all, of Charles Andrews' Bolsa Chica Mesa discoveries within the Bowers Museum.

Clearly, this article points up the value of repositories such as the Bowers Museum and the Riverside Metropolitan Museum. The serious scholar should not ignore these kinds of resources. "Seek, and ye shall find."

### Acknowledgments

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### End Notes

1. With regard to archaeological investigations, the State Emergency Relief Administration

(SERA) operated in 1935, and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) operated from 1936 into 1940 (see Chace 1965:6-10; Koerper et al. 1996:11-15).

2. Herein, use of the term "beveled" in lieu of "oblique" is rejected partly out of concern for injecting a possible source of confusion; to explain, Treganza and Malamud (1950:148) had observed a "beveled" option for both their Type I and Type II "stone discs." A check of their illustrations (1950:Plate 24) reveals that it is convex edges that are referred to as beveled. Farmer's (1953:177) usage and Underbrink and Koerper's (2006:117) usage of "beveled" are identical yet quite different than that of Treganza and Malamud. Note that Underbrink and Koerper (2006:117) had favored "beveled" over "oblique," but herein, oblique is the preferred term. In fact, the terminology of this article's formal typological schema should be taken as replacement for the suggested varied taxa/categories nonformally offered in Underbrink and Koerper (2006:117).

3. Carlberg (2009:76) explained that about 500 acres of the Bolsa Chica Gun Club property were planted with grain in order to attract waterfowl. Other acreage was leased to farmers who raised barley and celery.

4. Common name—the Eberhart Site.

5. Alika Herring (1968:13) alluded to the idea of earlier kinds of discoidals versus "later type discoidals." Unfortunately, he provided no details regarding exactly what he meant.

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