

SOUTHWEST MUSEUM PAPERS  
NUMBER TWENTY-TWO

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPLORATIONS  
on  
SAN NICOLAS ISLAND

*by* BRUCE BRYAN



SOUTHWEST MUSEUM  
HIGHLAND PARK, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90042  
1970

## APPENDIX

### The Southwest Museum's Field Work On San Nicolas Island

By CHARLES E. ROZAIRE

Field work by the Southwest Museum on San Nicolas Island during 1960 consisted of the following:

1. Excavations at Site SNI-51 in order to obtain cultural remains and datable raw materials in stratigraphic context.
2. Putting down two test pits at Site SNI-9 in the hope of gaining further stratigraphic information regarding the northeast portion of the island and some specific artifact types, such as projectile points, which seem to be rare in the south-central portion.
3. Making a spot surface survey of certain areas to check on the occurrence of particular classes of cultural material, including such perishable items as woven sea-grass water bottles, cordage, matting, and the like.
4. Salvaging an isolated burial eroding out of the surface in the vicinity of Site SNI-97 (just west of Site SNI-38).

#### Inhumation Near Site SNI-38

This isolated human burial was found with the top of

the skull exposed in a cut bank of consolidated, cream-colored, sterile dune sand about 1000 yards from the shore. No midden soil was associated with the burial, though shells are seen thinly scattered on the heavily eroded surfaces of the slopes south of the site toward the ocean. The bones, lying a maximum of 33 inches below the surface, were contained within an oval grave pit, the faint outlines of which measured 23 by 37 inches. The burial was tightly flexed, in ventral position, face down and head pointing to the south.

The individual was a male and in his early twenties. Interestingly, the two hemispheres of the frontal bone had not united, as usually occurs after the first few years of life, thus producing a metopic suture from bregma to nasion. [A skull with a frontal (metopic) suture was also found by the 1926 expedition]. The only associated cultural remains were a few bits of plain 2-element, S-twined woven sea grass and fragments of S-strand, 2 Z-yarns cordage which may together constitute the remnants of a cape (since they were concentrated in the area of the scapula) or a shroud.

#### Work at Site SNI-51

Work was continued at Site SNI-51 by taking two five-foot squares down to sterile base, excavating two others to depths of 54 and 30 inches respectively, and digging along a portion of the east side of the cut bank to get a straight vertical surface to show up strata and expose some woven sea grass that was eroding out.

The work of exposing a portion of the east cut bank was undertaken in the last few days of work at SNI-51 in 1960, and there was not enough time left to dig a regular five-foot square down to check extensively the strata where some of the woven sea grass was weathering out. Only the lower portion of the embankment was carefully dug back about two feet to get a smooth, straight face that would show up the strata more distinctly (Fig. 1).

In the course of this work the strata at the six-foot level yielded a fragment of plain 2-element, S-twined sea-grass fabric (28-F-96d), S-strand, 2 Z-yarns sea-grass cordage

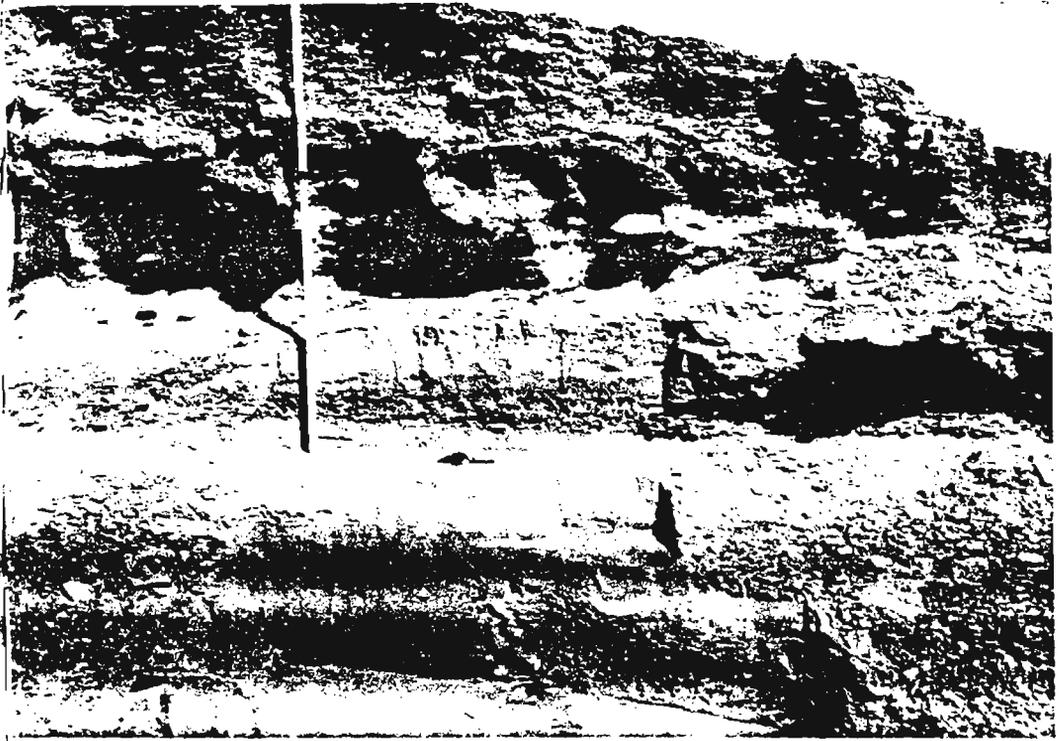


Figure 1. Vertical cuts exposing lower strata in east face of SNI-51.

(28-F-95), a fragment of a spatulate bone tool (28-F-93g), and two porphyry flake scrapers (28-F-101b, i), and charcoal.

The two squares (153, 154) taken down to base provided a stratified sample of artifacts, some shell and charcoal materials for dating, and additional information on the midden's profile. The latter (Fig. 3) shows a somewhat variable deposit with many relatively short lensings rather than long, continuous strata. This situation probably reflects the various undulating surfaces characteristic of changing dune sand. The top portion is a relatively continuous midden with occasional heavy concentrations of shell, sea urchins and charcoal which are loosely compacted. With increasing depth sterile areas are more frequent and much indurated with midden debris scattered throughout. No features were encountered in the pits, but over 50 artifacts were recovered.

Since only two pits were taken down to base it is felt that the sample of the lower layers (only 22 artifacts below 48 inches) is not yet sufficient to make adequate interpreta-

tions of stratigraphic differences. However, it is interesting to note that the following did come from below the four-foot level:

- 1 metate
- 6 shell fishhooks
- 1 bone barb
- 1 bone gouge or adze blade
- 4 core scrapers
- 1 uniface chopper
- 1 small piece of sandstone showing grinding
- 1 uniface mano
- 1 pestle (?) end
- Some cordage fragments

Manos are the only artifacts that appear to have some possible significant depth difference in that they all occur below 24 inches, while the other types are scattered through almost continuously from six inches on down. Items recovered from the surface include a bird bone whistle, two bone flakers, two bone awl tips, a flat, pointed bone implement, a fragment of stone pendant and a piece of asphaltum with basketry impression. Examples of shell and animal bones were kept in all pits for all levels in order to check on possible indications of dietary differences.

#### The Burials at Site SNI-51

During a casual surface survey one noon hour a cremation and an inhumation were discovered eroding out upslope about 225 yards from the road and the excavated square of SNI-51. These burials were on the east edge of a heavily eroded midden area measuring 180 yards north-south and 30 yards east-west, adjacent to and slightly northwest of the main SNI-51 site, separated only by a narrow, shallow gully with very few shells between. Nevertheless it is assumed that this section constitutes a part of Site SNI-51 and could be called the upper portion of it.

Cremation. The cremation (Fig. 2) was found eroding out of the side of a cut bank 14 inches below ground surface.



Figure 2. Cremation found eroding out of slope at north edge of SNI-51.

The fragmented and charred bones were contained in a saucer-shaped pit dug seven inches into the compacted sterile yellowish-cream sand. The maximum diameter was 35 inches east and west and 24 inches across in the opposite direction to where it had been weathered away on the north side. The soil in the bottom of the pit was slightly reddish and was covered by a thin layer (less than  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch thick) of chunks of charcoal. Charcoal and dark earth filled the rest of the pit, and it was in this matrix above the thin charcoal layer that most of the fragmented human bone occurred.

Though the bones were carefully exposed there was no apparent pattern to them to give a clue as to the original position. It would appear that the remains constitute a secondary burial which had been cremated, and in the course of burning the bones had been poked around to insure that they were fairly well consumed by the fire. Another possible indication of this situation is the occurrence of over 1300 shell and bone beads scattered throughout the pit. It could also



Figure 3. Inhumation 25 feet north of cremation at SNI-51, as found.

be the case that, rather than having been strung, the beads had been thrown loosely into the cremation fire during the burning. Curiously enough, over half of them were not charred.

Also in the cremation pit were a few small chunks of red and yellow ocher, five pieces of small rock, shell and animal bone fragments. In addition, above the cremation were almost 100 tarred pebbles, scattered about in small clusters of three or four. The cremation was associated with the remnant of a shallow, compacted, dark-colored midden 10 to 14 inches thick. A five-foot-square area east of the cremation was dug, but it yielded only a bird bone awl, three olivella disk beads, a tarred pebble and a flake of milky quartz.

**Inhumation.** The inhumation (Fig. 3) was discovered about 25 feet north of the cremation. A human pelvis and some long bones were weathering out of a small erosional gully about two feet deep. As the burial was laid bare it was observed that it had already been partially exposed in the

past, as indicated by the bleached white appearance of some parts of other bones, which had subsequently been covered over again by the slumping of the walls of the gully. The very compact, sandy, light-colored soil contained a few scattered shell fragments and some bits of charcoal.

The bones were disarticulated, broken in some instances, mixed and scattered over an area about 41 inches square, indicating a secondary burial. The skull was upright at the south end, facing west. Some small scraps of woven sea grass (plain 2-element, S-twined) and fragments of cordage (S-strand, 2 Z-yarns) were associated with the bones in a few places. A weathered and bleached white piece of shaped whale bone that may have been an abalone pry was on the surface in the vicinity of the burial and was the only other possible association.

#### Excavations at Site SNI-9

Site SNI-9 showed promise of amplifying our information regarding artifact types both from a spatial and stratigraphic viewpoint. A variety of implements (projectile points, awls, etc.) and ornaments (beads, pendants, etc.) had been gathered from the windswept surface by Navy personnel. Surface materials included in the Museum's collections include:

- 3 manos (2 biface, 1 uniface)
- 2 pestles
- 4 flake scrapers
- 2 projectile point fragments
- 1 conical porphyry scraper plane
- 1 coarse sandstone reamer
- 1 shell fishhook blank
- 1 bone flaker

The site has many broken cobbles scattered about its top and human bones had weathered out in several places. Its high, steep slope would seem to indicate some depths of significance in the deposit that might afford the discovery of many kinds of artifacts in stratigraphic context and provide a further check on work at SNI-51. Possible additional infor-

mation on burial patterns was another incentive to check the site.

The results, as they turned out, were disappointing, but not too surprising in view of the fact that the site is so gigantic (extending east-west along the shore one quarter of a mile and about 200 yards wide) and that only two days could be spent by two individuals to dig two five-foot squares and screen all the soil. These pits were put down on the highest point of the midden at the eastern edge of the site, about 45 yards west of a small embayment.

The first test pit revealed a top deposit of very black, friable sandy soil extending to a depth of 17 inches, followed by a layer of sterile yellow sand down to 40 inches where a second stratum of dark occupational soil 6 inches thick was exposed. Another layer of sterile sand 7 inches thick occurred below, with a thin dark lens of midden 5 inches thick. A small hole, about one foot square, was dug in the northeast corner down to a maximum depth of 88 inches, 30 inches under the third midden, and only sterile compacted dune sand was encountered.

The second test pit was laid out 23 feet south of the first, and was several feet lower than the other in the dune. The black sandy midden extended to a depth of 18 inches, when it changed to a yellowish-white sterile soil devoid of shell or charcoal. A small hole, about one foot square, dug in the northeast corner down to a depth of 52 inches, revealed no other successive midden layers as encountered in the first test pit. Apparently the site is characterized by variable limited lens-shaped deposits which would provide a different stratified picture for isolated test pits, and extensive trenching would be required to determine the variations and relationships of the several strata.

The top layer of the first test pit and the deposit of the second yielded all but two of the artifacts recovered from these limited excavations. The two other items come from the second level of test pit #1 and consist of a broken fishhook blank and a crude small scraper plane; a broken piece of white quartz from level 2 and two small dark quartzite flakes

from level 3 are the only other clues to aboriginal implements. The rest of the artifacts include 11 shell fishhooks, 1 bone tube (bead?), 3 bone awl tips, one well-shaped bone piercing(?) tool with tip missing, 2 bone flakers, 2 spire-lopped Olivella beads, 1 Olivella bead with both ends ground off, 1 spire-lopped conus bead, 1 Olivella disk bead, 1 flat oval steatite bead, 1 keyhole limpet circlet, 5 crude core scrapers, 2 cobble hammerstones, half of a sandstone reamer, 1 broken rock with a pecked groove around it, an abalone shell fragment with tar inside, and 9 tarred pebbles.

#### General Surface Survey of the Island

A random cursory surface survey was made of various areas on the island in order to check on the occurrence of various classes of artifacts so as to expand the range of available comparative material and learn of possible other sites which might yield significant finds for future investigation and excavation. Materials were collected from the surface of 23 sites and are listed as follows:

- SNI-4 Large flaked stone picks (2)
- SNI-7 Basketry impressions in asphaltum
- SNI-8 Small metate
  - Small hopper(?) mortar
  - Small manos(?) (4)
  - Mano
  - Possible pestle
  - Scraper planes (5)
  - Possible scraper planes (2)
  - Small picks (2)
  - Used flakers (2)
  - Possible used flakers (5)
  - Scrapers (6)
  - Reamer
  - Grooved pebble
  - Large flaked scraper
- SNI-10 Small elongate rock
- SNI-11 Small flaked stone picks (3)
- SNI-12 Head of a fragmentary phallic(?) pestle

- SNI-14 Used flake
- SNI-15 Pestle
- SNI-16 Weathered scraper planes or cores (2)  
 Scraper planes, rounded bottoms (4)  
 Scrapers (2)  
 Core hammerstones (2)  
 Small pick  
 Large flaked stone pick  
 Flat oval rock showing grinding  
 Projectile points of shale-like material (3)  
 Piece of chert
- SNI-18 Scraper
- SNI-21 Fragment of "doughnut" stone
- SNI-25 Bottom portion of small steatite bowl  
 Used flake
- SNI-47 Metate
- SNI-53 Core(?)  
 Small graver or drill
- SNI-55 Scrapers (2)  
 Small pick(?)  
 Stemmed chert blade  
 Triangular obsidian blade  
 Handle of steatite dipper  
 Small rectangular rock with pecked grooves
- SNI-57 Double-ended pestle  
 Mano  
 Oval stone with pecked depressions  
 "Doughnut" stone  
 Upper portion of phallic(?) stone  
 Curved rock
- SNI-58 Flattened elongate pestle-like rock
- SNI-59 Large crude scraper plane  
 Used flake  
 Small hammerstone(?)
- SNI-62 Triangular rock with depression on both sides  
 Possible scraper
- SNI-88 Mano
- SNI-91 Small flaked stone pick

- Pestle  
 Oval rock with groove around center  
 Elongate rock pecked along 2 sides, rubbed  
 along other 2 sides
- SNI-92 Mano(?)  
 Pestle(?) of siltstone  
 Fragment of elongate pestle-shaped rock with  
 wide grooved lines pecked in
- SNI-94 Conical (weathered) scraper plane  
 Conical rock with depression pecked in flat  
 bottom  
 Scraper (weathered)  
 Flaked stone pick or scraper(?)  
 Grooved pebble
- SNI-99 Large flaked stone pick  
 Scraper planes (large) (3)  
 Scraper planes (small) (3)  
 Scrapers (4)  
 Pestles (including fragments) (4)  
 Manos (2)  
 Grooved cobbles (3)  
 Hammerstones and choppers (5)  
 Grooved rim fragment of sandstone bowl

The survey was rewarding in that a few (presumably early) non-shell midden sites were located, some artifacts heretofore not found on or described for the island were revealed, and artifacts with a wider range of characteristics for types already known were acquired.