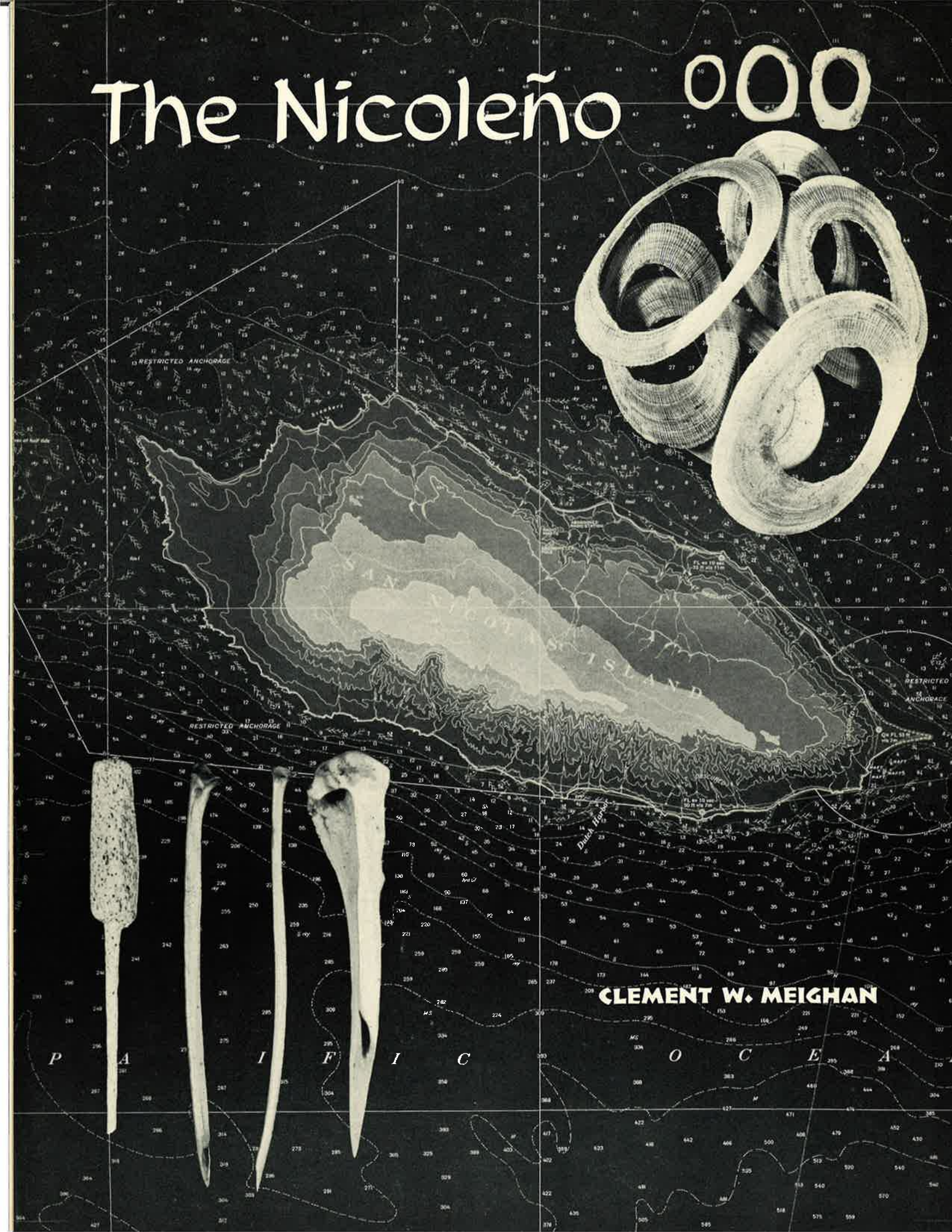


The Nicoleño 0000



'Desert' San Nicolas Island once supported 1,000 Indians, yet white men call it worthless

SAN NICOLAS ISLAND, a small semi-desert patch of land southwest of Los Angeles and 55 miles from the coast, has long attracted the attention of archeologists. Between 500 and 1,000 years ago, the island supported several Indian villages and maintained a population which has been estimated at more than a thousand people. Such a population is not exceedingly dense by modern standards, but the usual Indian populations were quite sparse and a population of a thousand on San Nicolas' 32 square miles would represent a very crowded settlement by aboriginal standards.

The abundant archeological remains which have been reported by numerous scientific expeditions to San Nicolas indicate that the island had many attractions for a native people. This comes as a surprise to the modern visitor, for San Nicolas has little in the way of scenic or climatic attractions. Indeed, early visitors to the island were unanimous in reporting it to be a dismal place for anyone to live. There are no harbors suitable even for small boats, the land is mostly a sandy waste without trees of any kind, sand storms due to the heavy winds are frequent, and a cold and clammy fog shrouds the island much of the time. San Nicolas is definitely not one of the resort spots of California, and except for some short-lived attempts to raise sheep on the island, it has been of use only for scientific and military purposes.

At the present time, San Nicolas is under the control of the U. S. Naval Air Missile Test Center, Pt. Mugu. Through the cooperation of Captain E. M. Condra, Jr., Commander of that station, the writer, accompanied by H. E. Eberhart of the University of California (Los Angeles), was permitted to spend several days on San Nicolas early in 1953 for the purpose of recording and mapping the archeological remains of the island. San Nicolas is now closed to casual visitors, and formal permission from the Navy is necessary for visiting this installation.

The remains of former Indian villages are found in all parts of San Nicolas. These village locations are usually on top of sand dunes, and they are marked by a litter of sea-shells, animal bones, burned stones from fire-places, and discarded tools and weapons. Such a location is called a kitchen midden — it is a spot covered with the debris of everyday living and representing a location where

people once lived for some length of time. A total of 68 such extinct villages, some of them covering several acres, have been located on San Nicolas. The Indians had their houses on top of the dunes, amidst the discarded refuse of cooking over open fires. They also buried their dead, accompanied by offerings of shell beads and other ornaments, in the sandy midden soil.

It should be noted that not all of San Nicolas' 68 villages were occupied at the same time. From what is known of the living pattern of California Indians, it seems certain that the Indians of San



Skeletons of the San Nicolas Indians show that they were a robust people. This skull was uncovered by the wind which blew away most of a sandy cemetery on San Nicolas.

Nicolas moved from place to place as the food supplies of each region were depleted. Even in the small area of San Nicolas, there was probably a seasonal migration to favored spots for fishing, hunting birds, and perhaps gathering some wild plant food. Aside from this consideration, we do not yet know how long each of the village areas was used. The total number of villages covers a time span of several hundreds, perhaps even thousands of years, and some village locations must have been abandoned long before others came into use. Thus, not more than five or six of the villages may have been actually inhabited at one time. The problem of determining which villages were contemporaneous remains to be solved by future archeological work.

(Upper right) Limpet shells (*Megathura*) were used to make ornaments. The shell has an oblong opening in the middle surrounded by a thick ring of enamel. The Nicoleño apparently broke out the centers and ground down the edges. Three finished ornaments above. (Lower left) Three bird bone awls and an object of sea mammal bone. CHART: USC&GS 5113. Scale of reproduction: 1.75 inch = approx. 2 sea miles. Contour interval: 100 feet; highest elevation: 907 feet. Soundings in fathoms. Intersecting lines in center of island: 33°15'N, 119°30'W. Five minutes between parallel lines.



Remnants of a Nicoleño village site which has been largely destroyed by erosion. (Official U. S. Navy photograph)

The objects found in the soil of the extinct villages provide us with practically all the knowledge we have of the people who lived on San Nicolas in pre-Columbian times. Although we know that there were Indians on San Nicolas at the time of the Spanish entry into California, the people became extinct early in the historic period and only fragments of their language and culture have been preserved. It is not known for certain what destroyed the Indian culture of San Nicolas, but most likely it disappeared under the same causes which affected the other southern California Indians: removal to the Spanish missions, new diseases to which the Indians had no resistance, and adoption by the Indians of the white man's way of life. In addition, early traders placed Aleut furbearers on the island, and according to one account these killed most of the native inhabitants.

For the sake of convenience, the Indians of San Nicolas have been called the Nicoleño by Professor A. L. Kroeber of the University of California. This is of course not the Indians' name for them-

selves, but it serves as a simple way of referring to the "people of San Nicolas."

The very last of the Nicoleño lived until 1853. Some years earlier, in 1835, a handful of Indians remaining on San Nicolas were removed to the Mission at Santa Barbara. A lone woman was somehow left behind and lived entirely alone on the island for 18 years until she was at last found and taken to the mainland in 1853. This woman, referred to in popular accounts of the period as the "Lost Woman of San Nicolas," could no doubt have told a story which would eclipse Daniel Defoe's tale of Robinson Crusoe. The true meaning of the word "solitude" is certainly conveyed by the image of the "Lost Woman" spending a lifetime alone on a barren and windy island, yet within sight of the mountains of the mainland and probably within sight of occasional fishing boats which visited the region.

By the time the last Nicoleño had been taken to Santa Barbara, all of her people who had been removed 18 years earlier had died. Nobody could

be found who spoke the woman's language, and since it was not possible to communicate with her except by sign language, the details of the woman's life on the island can never be known. A sprinkling of scattered observations by the people who discovered the woman are all that remain — four words of her language, some comments on her material possessions, and a few inferences about her life on San Nicolas. One of the first things she saw when she reached the mainland was a man riding a horse, a sight which amazed and delighted her no end. Perhaps no detail of her story is so indicative of the complete isolation in which this woman had lived for almost two decades.

When found, the "Lost Woman" was living in a small brush enclosure on one of the shell middens. Her meager possessions included a knife made of a rusty piece of a hoop, baskets and wooden containers for food and water, fishing lines, and cords for snaring seals. She was wearing a dress made of bird skins which hung down to her knees.

Unfortunately, the "Lost Woman" died only 7 weeks after she had been "rescued" from San Nicolas. The illness which caused her death was no doubt some disease which had little effect on the

whites but proved devastating to one whose race had never had contact with it. The few objects that the "Lost Woman" had made to sustain her life on San Nicolas were scattered, and no trace of them remains. It will always be a source of regret to scientists that the information which the "Lost Woman" could have given about her people died with her.

There remain to us the many objects, thousands of which have already been recovered, which lie buried in the old villages of San Nicolas and which throw much light on the former life of the Nicoleño. Objects which are directly connected with the business of making a living are most common, and it is these which indicate the attractions San Nicolas had for its Indian inhabitants. For the Indian, San Nicolas offered a steady and assured food supply, and this is what permitted the many villages and the relatively large population. Like nearly all of the California Indians, the Nicoleño had no agriculture; their livelihood depended entirely upon the food resources they could hunt and gather. Despite its lack of scenic attractions and its often unpleasant climate, San Nicolas was very favorable to a people with such a hunting-gathering economy. Indeed, by comparison with most



The bones of the Nicoleño lie strewn over the surface of their wind-bared cemetery. (Official U. S. Navy photograph)

other regions of the West, San Nicolas was a land flowing with milk and honey to its Indian settlers.

The Nicoleño, like the modern Eskimo, must have lived on a diet that was almost exclusively meat. The few plants on San Nicolas could not have provided more than a small portion of the food consumed. In addition, nearly all the food the Nicoleño ate came from the sea, for there are virtually no land animals on San Nicolas (there are only three, to be exact — a lizard, a mouse, and a diminutive fox).

Marine mammals, including seals, sea lions, and sea otters, were a major source of Nicoleño food supply. These were apparently either snared or clubbed, but they do not appear to have been hunted with bows and arrows for arrow points are extremely rare on the island. Among the marine mammals available was *Mirounga*, the elephant seal, which is one of the biggest animals ever hunted by any American Indian people. San Nicolas is one of the favored spots for these huge pinnipeds, the adult males of which reach a weight of 5,000 pounds. Since they are not now molested on San Nicolas, the marine mammals have become extremely tame and are little concerned with the occasional humans who visit their beaches. Elephant seals basking on the beach did not even turn their heads to watch the writer's party walking within ten feet of them. No doubt the sea mammals had reason to be more alert when they were hunted by the Nicoleño.

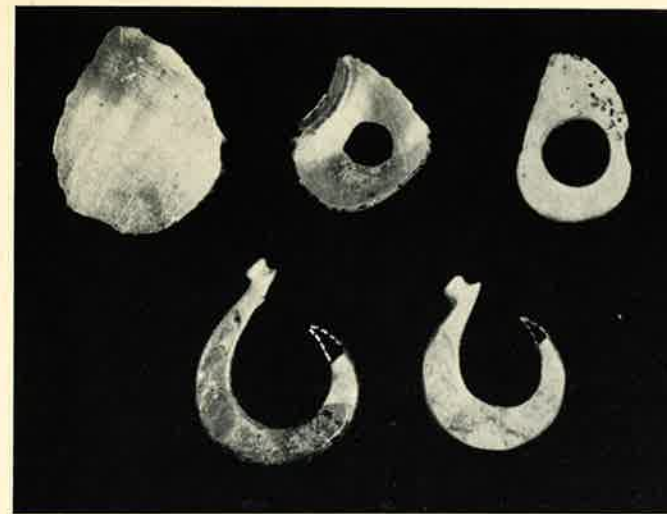
Fishing also provided an important share of the Nicoleño larder. This is seen in the great numbers of fish bones which are found in the middens and is also attested by quantities of aboriginal fish hooks which have been found. The Nicoleño used

two kinds of fish hooks; one is simply a straight piece of bone, sharpened on both ends and technically called a gorge — the other type of hook was curved, barbless, and made of pieces of marine shell (usually abalone, although mussel shell and the red top shell were also used). Both kinds of hooks have been proven effective for Pacific fishing by recent experimenters. Unfortunately, no study has been made of the fish bones from San Nicolas to determine which species was the favored catch of the Indians. Jaw bones of the California sheephead (*Pimelometopon pulchrum*) are common in the shell middens, but there are also many species not yet determined.

Marine birds and migratory waterfowl were also of considerable importance to the San Nicolas Indians. The bones of many birds (also unidentified as to species) are found, and beads, whistles, and bone awls were commonly made from the long bones of birds.

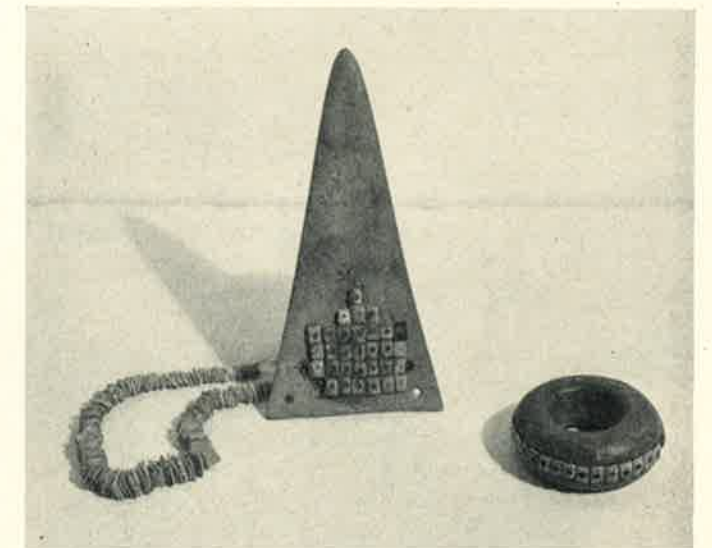
Perhaps their most easily obtained food was derived from the various kinds of shellfish which could be gathered by hand. The rocky shores of San Nicolas afford a favorable environment for many species of shellfish. The sand dunes of the ancient villages are covered with scattered limpets, mussels, and thousands upon thousands of abalone shells. Many other species of shells, and also the remains of sea urchins, occur in lesser numbers. Common artifacts from the village sites are curved pieces of sea mammal ribs which had the same size and function as the tire-irons used by modern man to detach abalone shells from the rocks.

This brief listing of food resources indicates clearly how favorable San Nicolas was for supporting an aboriginal population. But like all other human groups, the Nicoleño were not solely concerned with the food quest. They must have had



Steps in making abalone shell fish hooks, and two finished hooks.

mals of the sea may have played a large part in Nicoleño religious beliefs, since the Indians' lives were oriented to the sea. Whale bones were commonly used as grave markers and sometimes occur in graves with the deceased. Other non-utilitarian objects which have been found include a great variety of beads and pendants made of shell, bone, and stone. At least 14 different species of shells were used in the production of the shell ornaments, and some sort of mass production technique was no doubt used to make the commoner types of shell beads.



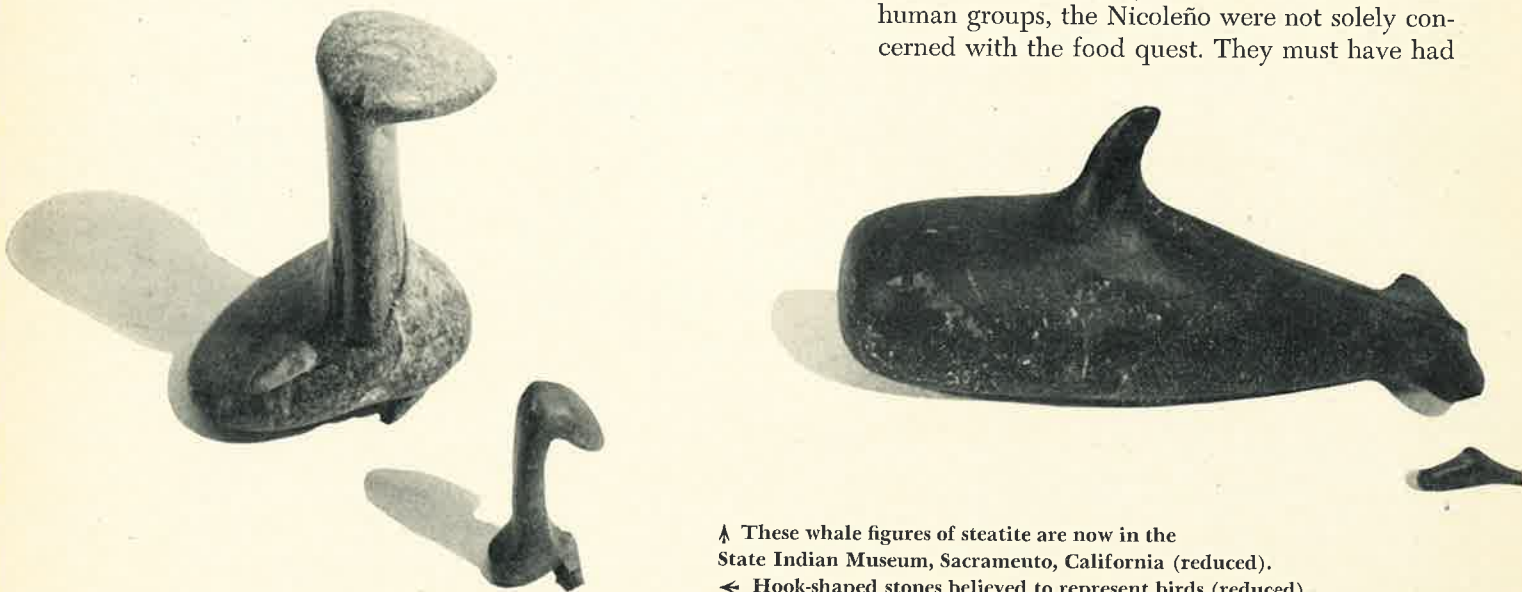
Nicoleño shell beads and stone ornaments in the state Indian Museum, Sacramento (reduced). (Photo by Jack R. Dyson, Curator)

music, folk-beliefs, social regulations, and a religion of some sort. Such aspects of life are seldom indicated in material remains, however. These are the things the "Lost Woman" could perhaps have told about, but lacking an eye-witness report our knowledge of the less tangible parts of Nicoleño culture is largely conjectural.

It is known from the objects found at the village sites and with the burials of the dead that the Nicoleño devoted a large amount of time to the production of "art objects" and other things which were not utilitarian but served primarily for esthetic satisfaction. Among the most striking of these specimens are effigies of sea mammals and whales, carved with great care from blocks of soapstone (steatite). Most of the effigies appear to have been found with burials. It is logical to surmise that killer whales and similar striking ani-



Various objects of steatite, including a canoe, in the State Indian Museum, Sacramento (reduced). (Photo by Jack R. Dyson, Curator).



↑ These whale figures of steatite are now in the State Indian Museum, Sacramento, California (reduced).
← Hook-shaped stones believed to represent birds (reduced).
(Photos by Jack R. Dyson, Curator, State Indian Museum)

Although the Nicoleño passed into oblivion without making an impression of any sort on our own historical traditions, archeologists will continue to be interested in reconstructing the life of these little-known people. As further archeological work is carried out, we may expect to learn more about their adaptation to their specialized environment, their industries and manufactures, and perhaps their customs and beliefs. As a passing comment, it may be worth some reflection that the "primitive" aborigines managed to make a living for many people on San Nicolas, whereas our own technological society has managed to get nothing of economic value from the island in the last hundred years. In any case, the study of the Nicoleño has barely begun, and there is no doubt that important finds await the archeologists' shovels. ❁