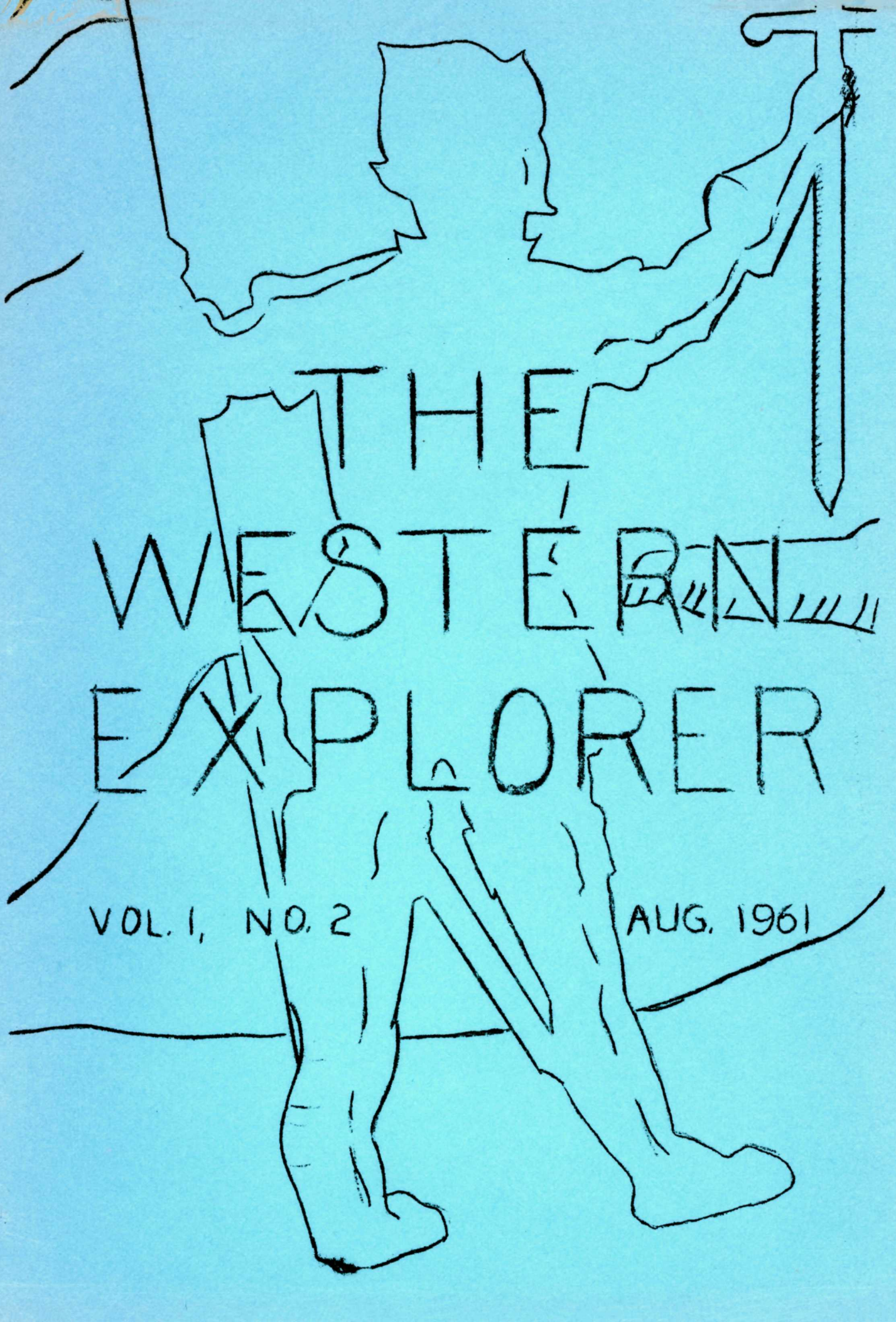

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A BRIEF SKETCH OF

THE ARCHEOLOGY OF SANTA CRUZ ISLAND, CALIFORNIA

by

John A. Hussey *

Parallel to the coast of California from Ventura to Point Conception and running in a west-northwest direction are a group of four islands known collectively as the Santa Barbara Channel Islands. The most easterly island is Anacapa and the most westerly San Miguel; between are the larger islands of Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa. Each of these two latter islands comprises over 62,000 acres.

The first contact of white men with the natives of the Channel Islands occurred in 1542, when Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo coasted the California shore. He found Indians living on all of the islands he touched, including Santa Cruz. Apparently he was little impressed by the islanders. He reported that they were unclothed and slept on the ground and were generally swinish in their habits. They lived, he observed, exclusively on fish.[1] Cabrillo noted that Santa Cruz Island was called "Limu" or "Limun" by the natives.[2] He listed the names of ten villages.

Little else about the aboriginal inhabitants of the island was recorded by later explorers; and by the time Santa Cruz was visited by ethnologists its native population had disappeared.[3] Evidently many of the islanders were killed by the fierce Northwest coast Indians who occasionally raided the Channel Islands during the period of organized sea otter hunting, and the survivors apparently were moved to the mainland missions during the early nineteenth century.[4] Thus, except for

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[1] David Banks Rogers, Prehistoric Man of the Santa Barbara Coast (Santa Barbara: 1929), 5.

[2] Erwin G. Gudde, California Place Names (Berkeley: 1949), 315.

[3] Arthur Woodward, Trans., The Sea Diary of Fr. Juan Vizcaino to California, 1769 (Los Angeles: 1959), contains some descriptive material on the natives of the Channel Islands.

[4] In 1776 Fr. Pedro Font recorded that the viceroy of New Spain had ordered the governors of California to see "that the islands were not depopulated, especially the Island of Santa Cruz; and that they should not induce the Indians to leave it in order to settle on the mainland or to be converted to Christianity." Later, however, this order seemingly was reversed or disregarded; or, at least, the voluntary migration of the island natives to the missions was not discouraged. Zephyrin Engelhardt, Santa Barbara Mission (San Francisco: 1923), 442.

what can be assumed from the culture of related groups on the mainland and for what evidence has been gathered from archeological investigations, almost nothing is known about the original inhabitants of Santa Cruz.

The northern islands of the Channel group were inhabited by the Chumash Indians, who also lived on the opposite mainland coast. One of the seven known dialects of the Chumashan tongue was spoken by the natives of Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz. The Chumash houses were made of grass or tule, dome-shaped, and often fifty feet or more in diameter. Each sheltered several families. The Chumash were noted for their finely made shell ornaments and their decorative work in shell, inlaid by means of asphaltum.[5]

Perhaps the most notable feature of the culture of the inhabitants of the Santa Barbara coast and its offshore islands was their construction of large, sea-going canoes. These craft were formed of planks, lashed together with thongs. The seams were calked with hot asphaltum. Similar plank boats are found in parts of the South Seas, but the Chumash canoes were entirely different from anything found elsewhere in the Americas.[6]

With the rest of the Channel Islands, Santa Cruz has long been the subject of investigation by professional and amateur archeologists. The records of the University of California Archaeological Survey contain information on four archeological explorations on the island. These surveys were conducted by Paul Schumacher (results published in 1877), L. Outhwaite, (1918), D. B. Rogers and the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History (results published in 1929), and Ronald L. Olson (1927, 1928, partial results published in 1930; further results in 1958 in preparation for publication by the University of California).[7]

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[5] George G. Heye, Certain Artifacts from San Miguel Island, California, Indian Notes and Monographs, vol. VII, No. 4, (New York: 1921), 27-29; John R. Swanton, The Indian Tribes of North America (Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 145, Washington: 1952), 484-487.

[6] Rogers, Prehistoric Man of the Santa Barbara Coast, 6.

[7] University of California Archaeological Survey, Archaeological Survey Records, Santa Cruz Island, MS.

The Santa Barbara Museum, which during the 1920's conducted the first systematic archeological survey of the Channel Islands, found that Santa Cruz was the most important island of the group as far as the number of sites was concerned. Everywhere on Santa Cruz, stated Rogers, are evidences "of the former existence of a teaming prehistoric race."[8] More than 100 sites were noted by the museum staff. At every advantageous place on the island's coast were found evidences of aboriginal occupation, and perhaps several dozen sites were found inland.

There has been fairly extensive erosion at some of the sites, although to a much lesser degree than on most of the other islands, and relic hunters have destroyed many more. But, Rogers reported in 1929, many of the most interesting sites have been preserved. A number of these sites were examined in some detail and were found to be rich in artifacts, burials, evidences of workshops, and remains of structures.

Mr. Rogers believed that the Santa Barbara mainland opposite the islands was inhabited by three successive types of aborigines, designated by him as the Oak Grove People, the Hunting People, and the Canalino People. The last are thought to have been in possession of the entire Santa Barbara region as early as 1000 A.D., and they were the people whom Cabrillo met in 1542. According to Rogers, the first two types of inhabitants never advanced beyond the mainland. Only the Canalino, who had boats, are supposed to have reached the Channel Islands.

Rogers based this conclusion upon the insular archeological sites which he examined. Some of them were deep and stratified, but he found little or no evidence of cultural change from the most recent surface deposits to the earliest habitation levels.[9]

During 1927 and 1928, Dr. R. L. Olson, of the University of California, conducted excavations on Santa Cruz Island. Although some of his notes were lost and much of his material remains uncorrelated, Olson's work was an important contribution to man's knowledge of the prehistory of the island. Olson, "without any systematic effort or sacrifice of time," located 120 sites on Santa Cruz in addition to the 86 mapped by Mr. Leonard Outhwaite in 1918. Of these 206 sites, he reported that "the more promising" had already been excavated or had been looted by pothunters. He believed, however, that considerable collections could still be obtained.

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[8] Rogers, Prehistoric Man of the Santa Barbara Coast, 274.

[9] T. D. A. Cockerell, "San Miguel Island, California," Scientific Monthly, XLVI (Feb., 1938), 187; Rogers, Prehistoric Man of the Santa Barbara Coast, 260-274.

Although Dr. Olson found, as did Rogers, that there was little evidence of cultural change from top to bottom of even the deepest deposits, he did differentiate between two levels of Channel Island culture: the Early Island Period and the Late Island Period. The "late" sites show European objects or certain other characteristics, such as more elaborate shell work and an absence of charmstones. Olson believes that the islands were first inhabited at a considerably later period than the adjacent mainland.[10]

Subsequent studies have produced indications that man may have reached the Channel Islands at a date much earlier than hitherto supposed. An expedition sponsored by the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History in 1946 found evidences of fire and what appeared to be the remains of a man-made hearth buried deep in Pleistocene deposits on Santa Rosa Island. During another expedition to the same island in the summer of 1955, Dr. George F. Carter, a geographer at The John Hopkins University, found charred bones of the dwarf mammoth in several ancient fire sites. Radiocarbon dating indicated an age of 29,650 years for these remains. If further research confirms these results, Santa Rosa Island may be established as one of the oldest known inhabited locations in the New World.[11]

Investigations have convinced Mr. Phil C. Orr, of the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, that there are about fifty ancient Indian village sites on San Miguel Island "containing a wealth of archeological information covering the past ten thousand years."[12] If San Miguel and Santa Rosa both possess sites of great antiquity, then undoubtedly the neighboring island of Santa Cruz also does. Many archeologists have not yet accepted the thesis that the Channel Islands were inhabited by Early Man, but the subject remains as a challenging and important field for additional study.

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[10] Ronald L. Olson, Chumash Prehistory (University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology, vol. 28, no. 1, Berkeley: 1930, 1-21.

[11] Phil C. Orr, "Early Man on Santa Rosa Island," Museum Talk, XXXI (Fall, 1956), 4044; "Roast Elephant, 27,000 B.C.," Scientific American, vol. 194, no. 4 (April, 1956), 68.

[12] Phil C. Orr to George L. Collins, Santa Barbara, September 9, 1957, MS in files of Region Four Office, National Park Service, San Francisco.