

## 'Awi Kuseyaay: The Ringing Rock of San Bernardo

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*Ringling rocks were, and still are, an important part of the cultural landscape for the Kumeyaay people of San Diego County. This report discusses the anthropological and historical documentation that is available concerning one such “ringing rock” or “bell rock” in the San Pasqual Valley, and describes its recent relocation within the valley.*

Within the Kumeyaay ('Ipaay/Tipay) culture of San Diego County there are many physical objects and landforms that are of spiritual value or possess sacred significance. These features are part of a larger, more encompassing cultural landscape, as has been described by others for the San Diego/Baja California region (Gamble and Wilken-Robertson 2008) and in general for native people (Basso 1996; Ashmore and Knapp 1999). These include pictographs (rock paintings), petroglyphs (rock carvings), rocks and landforms of special significance because of their shape or an event that occurred there, and rocks that when struck emit a particular sound.

San Pasqual Valley in northern San Diego County begins at an elevation of 700 feet above mean sea level (amsl) north of Ramona and drops to less than 300 ft. amsl, at which point it is known as San Bernardo. Within this ten-mile stretch at least two rock art sites have been recorded, one on the south side of the valley near Highland Valley and one on the north side east of Mule Hill (Ken Hedges, personal communication 2010). These rock paintings include red diamond chains, a common motif for this area, and one possibly associated with girl's puberty rites.

In addition to pictographs, the valley contains many rock features that reflect the deep past and consciousness of the 'Ipaay. Examples include a pile of rocks that was home to a mythical rabbit, a smooth rock face that children once slid down, a prominent rock that appears to have a slender neck leading to a head and from which the valley's Kumeyaay name ('ewily kwakalkul)

is derived, a rock known as white goose rock, and a rock with magical ringing powers (Harrington 1925).

While not well documented, ringing rocks served special functions in Kumeyaay culture, and they have been ethnographically recorded in the Santa María and San Pasqual valleys. They could be used to call on the east wind spirits or to alert villagers to danger. This report documents the anthropological and historical record of one such “ringing rock” or “bell rock” that was recently relocated within the valley.

### BACKGROUND

Documentation about the ringing rock of San Pasqual Valley appears in early twentieth century local histories, newspaper accounts, and in at least one anthropological study. The first clearly documented written record of the ringing rock at San Pasqual was in Elizabeth Judson Roberts' book of Kumeyaay stories and tales that was printed in 1917 (Roberts 1917). Having grown up in the San Pasqual Valley in the 1880s, Roberts knew many of the remaining Kumeyaay, including Crisosta, whose grandmother Venadita had lived at Mission San Diego; Felicita, daughter of the great *kwaipaay* Paantu (also known as Panto or Pantho); and her husband Morales. While it is difficult to ascribe complete accuracy to Roberts' stories, they are clearly based on historical events, actual Kumeyaay people, and stories related to her that were then recounted in a reasonably factual manner.

Roberts recounted a story told to her by an 'Ipaay elder, Manuella, who described an important battle with warriors from east of the mountains, probably marauding Quechan, who had come to San Pasqual to steal livestock and young women. The story is set more than one hundred years before Roberts heard it, which might place it in the period between 1800–1810. Based on a similar version of the story recorded by J. P. Harrington in 1925, the Quechan intrusion is set sometime before the 1840s<sup>1</sup> but clearly after the 1780s because of the mention of cattle and horses. In the story, Paantu leads a party of 'Ipaay warriors to capture and kill the Quechan who have come to San Pasqual. Tracking them to a locale along the San Dieguito River, the 'Ipaay men stop at a rock feature before pursuing the intruders to the hills immediately south of what is now Lake Hodges. Manuella told Roberts that

[r]eaching the Ringing Rock, where dwells the spirit of the hot desert wind, Pontho stopped. “Ring the rock, and pray for the hot wind,” he said to Katong.

Running quickly to the top of the great pile of boulders, where lay the strange Ringing Rock, Katong picked up a stone and struck it once, twice, three times. At each stroke it rang out loud and clear, just as the big steel anvils in the blacksmith shop ring when struck with a hammer. As the tones sounded on the quiet air, the war-party turned facing the east and bowed their heads.

“Ring again!” called Pontho, and again Katong struck the rock three times. Like an answer to their call, a soft breath of warm air from the east came against their faces. A moment later there came a stronger, warmer wave of air, and Pontho cried out: “It is enough! The spirit of the wind has heard our call!” [Roberts 1917:110].

Later, having killed most of the Quechan by torching the wind-driven dry brush on the hills, Paantu leads his men east from the battle site and along the north side of the San Dieguito River. Here he and his victorious warriors again stop at the Ringing Rock. Manuella told Roberts that

[s]hortly after starting on [from the battle site] they came to the great pile of boulders where lay the Ringing Rock of the wind spirit. Pontho stopped and raised his hand; every man stood with head bent, while the wind moaned and whispered as it flew past them.

“Ring the Rock again, Katong,” he said. “Ring it to thank the wind spirit for helping us against our enemies.”

Katong climbed to the top of the pile of boulders and struck the magic rock three times, then stopped. At once the wind seemed to blow more softly. Again he struck the rock three times, and now all could feel that the wind was yet more gentle.

“It is enough,” called Pontho. “The spirit of the wind has heard our thanks,” and the war party moved on [Roberts 1917:116–117].

Roberts (1917:126) concluded the story by noting: “Afterward I persuaded some of the Indians to take me to see their sacred rock. The Indians themselves refused to touch it, but I struck it with a hammer and it did ring, as they had said, like a big steel anvil. That musical sound coming from a granite boulder gave me a peculiar feeling, I admit; but no ill wind followed after.” In ringing the rock, Roberts may have been the first person to do so in several decades.

The next recorded non-Indians to see the ringing rocks were anthropologist J. P. Harrington in 1925 and a newspaper reporter, Edward M. Skagen, in 1938.

Harrington was accompanied by an ‘Ipaay consultant, Isidro Nejo, who was born at Julian, lived for decades at San Pasqual (*Mukalkal*), and lived at Mesa Grande (*Tekemuk*) when Harrington encountered him. Nejo, glossed as *e/Nex* by Gifford (1919:4) as meaning “handing a gift to someone,” was an extremely knowledgeable and reliable ‘Ipaay elder who told Harrington of the ringing rock and of the battle with the Quechan (Harrington 1925). Harrington photographed Isidro Nejo standing in front of the Ringing Rock formation (Fig. 1) and made a rough sketch map of its location.

Thirteen years later, a newspaper article entitled “Ringing Rock of Legendary Mystic Power to Indians Lies on Lake Hodges Island” included a photograph of a man in a hat apparently ringing one of the rocks (Skagen 1938). Most of the information in the article is apparently derived from Roberts’ book, although the reporter also offered up a geological description of the rocks and described them as phonolite. The author also noted that because of its historical value, some Escondido citizens had suggested moving the ringing rock to the San Pasqual Battlefield area to the east. Luckily, such a movement and desecration was apparently not carried out.

Having been aware of the story of the San Bernardo ringing rock for several decades, in July 2010 I made a concerted effort to locate and document it as part of a larger study on the San Pasqual/San Bernardo area. The general location of the ringing rock was assumed to be somewhere between the Lake Hodges Dam and the San Pasqual Battlefield Monument—that is, in the more westerly portion of the San Pasqual Valley. The west end of San Pasqual Valley was intensively used by the ‘Ipaay from the prehistoric and historic-period village of San Pasqual (*Mukalkal*), as well as by the people of San Bernardo (*Agta*). The general area was probably shared with the adjacent village of *Agta* on the east side of what is now I-15 and north of Lake Hodges.

Using the John P. Harrington field notes and the photograph with Isidro Nejo in front of the rock pile (Fig. 1), as well as the poorly-reproduced photograph from the *San Diego Union*, an area of approximately 40 acres was intensively surveyed, with a focus on small, gently rising landforms and outcrops of rock of the size and configuration shown in the Harrington photograph. The newspaper article from 1938 had described the ringing rock site as being essentially on a small island that was

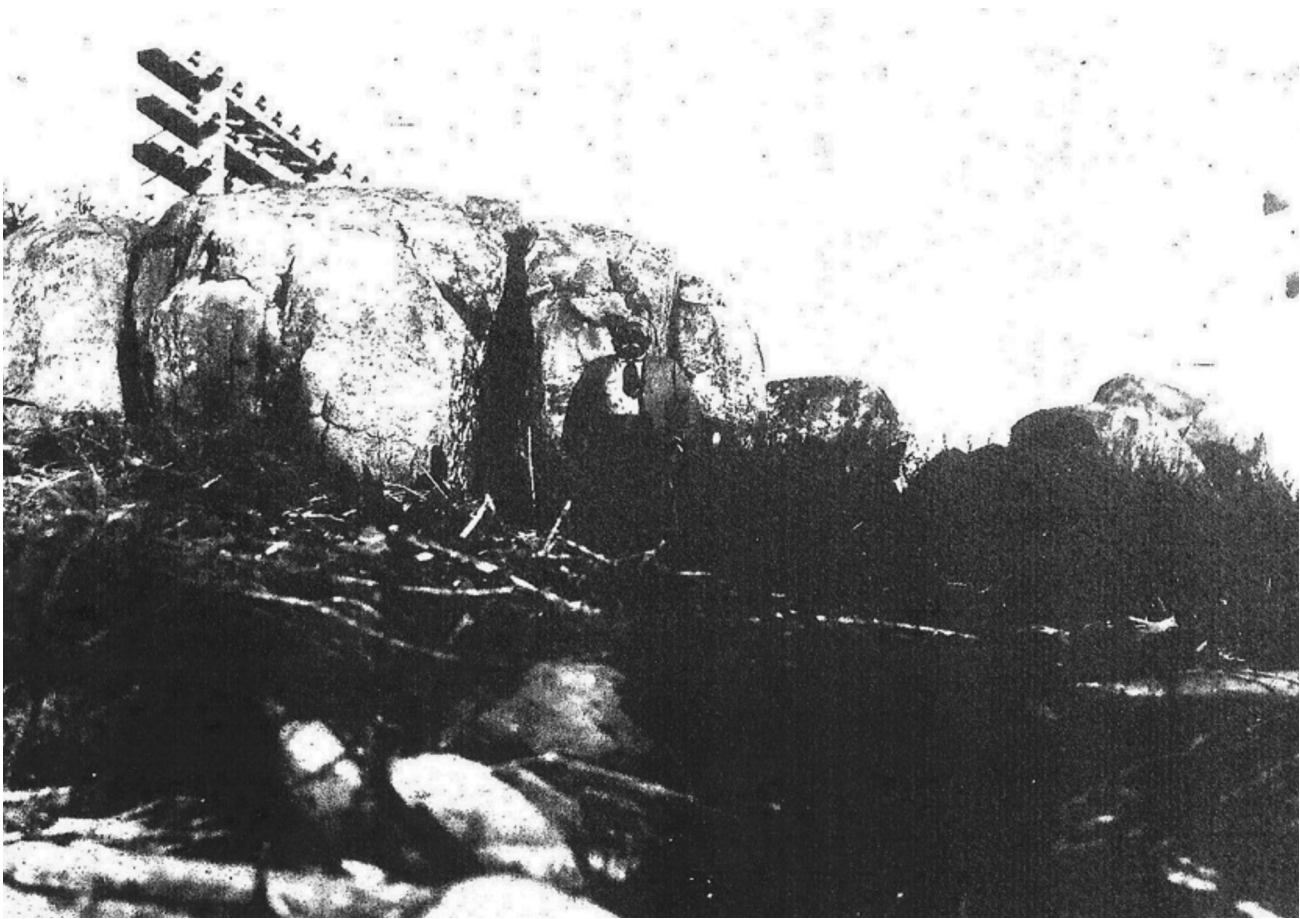


Figure 1. Ringing Rock as photographed by J.P. Harrington in 1925.

formed when Lake Hodges was full and the water backed up into the surrounding valleys and flats.

### LOCATING THE RINGING ROCK SITE

The rock formation with the ringing rock was found by approaching it from the southwest (Fig. 2), and upon examination it was clear that the rocks matched perfectly with the Harrington photograph (see Fig. 1). While some rock faces may have spalled off in the last 83 years, the shape and configuration remained the same. It was assumed that the ringing rock itself would be somewhat flat, perhaps bridging a hollow or concavity, and placed in a position such that it would resonate when struck.

Within a four-meter concentration of flattish boulders amongst the predominantly rounded, upright gabbroic boulders, there were three that emitted a decidedly ringing sound when tapped with a hardwood stick or baton. One of the boulders in particular produced

a clear, vibrant ring. Disappointingly, the sounds were not truly pronounced or loud.

A review of the existing literature may offer an explanation for the lack of clarity and resonance now produced at the Ringing Rock site. According to Harrington in 1925, “The AMS [Americans] took the rock that produced the most ringing.” The “AMS” are not named or described, but they may be assumed to have been relic collectors or misguided, if well-intended, local residents. The newspaper article (Skagen 1938) noted that “[a]t one time there were two rocks that gave the clear ringing sound, but one of them has been taken away. Where—no one knows.” It would appear that sometime after Roberts’ visit in the early 1900s and Harrington’s examination in 1925, some unknown persons removed the most resonant ringing rock.

The fact that the Ringing Rock may not ring as clear and loud as it did a hundred years ago does not lessen the importance of the rock feature for contemporary





**Figure 2. Ringing Rock today (photo by Richard Carrico).**

tribal members. The Ringing Rock site has great cultural significance for the 'Ipaay people of the San Pasqual Band of Mission Indians. The cluster of rocks is a part of their collective understanding and cultural landscape. The rocks and the stories associated with them are timeless. To the 'Ipaay they represent a direct link with their past, provide a type of memorial to their venerable *kwaipaay*, Paantu, and recall a time when their ancestors were the sole inhabitants of San Pasqual Valley.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Farris (1994) has suggested that this may be linked to the Yuman raids in 1837 that so terrorized the local Californio populace. An official report dated September 1, 1837 stated that the Indians from San Pascual Pueblo attacked a group of heathen Indians led by Claudio. Nine of the enemy Indians were killed and Claudio was captured.

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## Identification of the Buena Vista Lake Site 1 “Dog Burial” (*Canis familiaris*) as a Badger (*Taxidea taxus*)

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*In the 1930s, excavations at a site on the shore of Buena Vista Lake in the southern San Joaquin Valley recovered the remains of three animals that were described as having been deliberately buried; one was subsequently identified as being a dog (*Canis familiaris*). A recent examination of the “burial” has identified the skeleton as a badger (*Taxidea taxus*) that was probably deposited naturally rather than as a result of human activity.*

In 1933 and 1934, excavations by the United States National Museum, Smithsonian Institution (USNM; now the National Museum of Natural History) were conducted at five archaeological sites along the southern shore of Buena Vista Lake, in the southern San Joaquin Valley of Central California. These sites were occupied by the Tulamni, who lived there while extracting aquatic resources from Buena Vista Lake, as well as local terrestrial resources (Wedel 1941). The excavations at Site 1 yielded three animal burials that were considered to be possible pet burials. A photograph of one of these “burials” is shown in Plate 8b in Wedel’s (1941) report on the Buena Vista Lake excavations. Wedel (1941:35) described this specimen as a dog, noting that it “...had apparently been placed in a shallow depression and purposefully covered over. It lay at 27 inches depth near the south corner of square 83/40 (cf. pl. 8, b).” The specimen illustrated in Plate 8b is an articulated badger (*Taxidea taxus*) skeleton with the left side of the animal shown (Fig. 1).

The skull, femur, and tibia appear in sufficient detail in the photograph for the specimen to be identified as a badger. In order to verify the alternative identification, the specimen (USNM 259041, housed in the Department of Vertebrate Zoology, Division of Mammals), was examined. The skeleton is that of an adult male badger, bearing ante mortem injury to the scapula and post-



**Figure 1. Badger shown in Wedel Plate 8b. After Wedel (1941).**

mortem dental damage, probably of taphnomic origin (visible in Plate 8b). The dentition and morphology of the skull possess the morphological characteristics described for *Taxidea taxus* (Long 1972:728–729; 1973:2). The dental formula is i. 3/3, c. 1/1, p. 3/3, m. 1/2, total 34. To paraphrase Long’s description of key taxon-specific characteristics of the skeleton, the upper molars are subtriangular, and are nearly right angled with the hypotenuse-oriented posteriolateral. The carnassial premolar is subtriangular, with the longest side oriented posteriomedially. The skull is wedge shaped, broadening posteriorly, with large auditory and mastoid bullae (Long 1973:2).

The morphology of prehistoric North American Indian dogs and other Canids do not possess these characteristics. Dogs have a dental formula of i. 3/3, c. 1/1, p. 3–4/3–4, m. 2/3, total 40 (and variations), while North American wolves, coyotes, and foxes have i. 3/3, c. 1/1, p. 4/4, m. 2/3, total 42. The dental formula eliminates all North American species of Canidae from consideration in the identification of USNM 259041. Moreover, North American species of *Canis* have subtriangular upper molars with hypotenuse posteriolateral, but with significant differences in cusp patterns; the lower carnassial premolar possesses a well developed talonid absent in *Taxidea*; the elongate crania taper anteriorly; with variable facial slope and maxillary breadth; auditory bullae are ovoid to spherical, inflated to compressed and crumpled (see Bekhoff 1977:1–3; Mech 1974:1–2). The configuration and usual orientation of these morphological features do not overlap between the Mustelidae and Canidae.

The original tray tag indicates that the specimen was identified as *Taxidea taxus jeffersonii* by W.M. Walker in 1933. Walker was assistant director of the field project and was tasked with the preparation of the site report until his retirement in 1935 (Wedel 1941:1, 3). His attribution of the specimen to species is correct. Another inconsistency in the reporting of the specimen occurs in the caption to Plate 8b, which identifies the burial as being from “Site 2;” this conflicts with the text where the citation occurs. No animal burials were reported from Site 2.

The *in situ* position of the badger skeleton shown in Plate 8b suggests that the animal may have died naturally in its burrow, or while digging in pursuit of prey. Wedel does not describe grave attributes (grave-pit outline, identifiable pit fill) that would support an intentional burial inference, nor are any evident in Plate 8b. Evidence of intentional burial, including grave-pit outline and fill different from the sediments penetrated by the grave pit, is identifiable in the illustrations of the human burials from Site 1 (Plates 7a–b, 8a); neither is there evidence of a tunnel outline with chamber fill that would indicate natural burrowing activity. The criteria used to identify the animal as occurring in a “shallow depression and covered over” (Wedel 1941:35) are not documented in the text. The identification of the specimen as an intentional animal burial is thus questionable. The skeleton was situated more or less on its chest with its limbs on the left side lying next to the thorax and abdomen. The limbs on the right side are not visible, and their position is not described in the text. The position of the skeleton suggests the specimen was not deposited through human agency. The skeletal remains of badgers identified as naturally occurring are found lying in prone position, with their skulls oriented approximately in line with their spinal columns, and their limbs immediately adjacent to their body cavity, unless disturbed (Langenwaller 2007:6–7). The position of the Buena Vista Lake specimen (USNM 259041) differs from that of the known intentional badger burial from Hellman Ranch, which was recovered from a clearly defined pit filled with midden (Langenwaller 2007). The Hellman Ranch specimen was found lying on its side and with the skull in reverse position to the body. The fact that the Site 1 badger skeleton was not accompanied by grave goods is not informative, since no putative badger burial recovered from the California Culture Area

(cf. Driver 1961; Heizer 1978) has been found with associated artifacts (cf. Langenwaller 2007).

The preservation of the badger skeleton implies a recent, post-occupational origin. The skeleton is in good condition, with slightly discolored bones that exhibit the porosity frequently associated with digenesis resulting from soft tissue decay. The skeletal remains of other animals excavated at the Buena Vista Lake sites that are present in the NMNH collections are more deeply stained than the badger skeleton. Some of the skeletal elements of the badger bear mold or fungus deposits on the external surfaces, implying a relatively recent burial. The badger’s skeletal elements are in approximately the same state of preservation as the jackrabbit (*Lepus californicus*) skeletal elements cataloged under the same number, and presumably collected with the badger skeleton. Some of the jackrabbit specimens still bear dried soft tissue. The badger skeleton and the associated jackrabbit specimens are housed in the modern mammal collection.

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