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A Chipped Stone Crescent from Simi Valley, Ventura County, California

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A chipped stone crescent, reportedly from Simi Valley, was recently identified in the anthropological collections of the University of Oregon's Museum of Natural and Cultural History. The small lunate crescent, donated to the university in 1952 by archaeologist Joel L. Shiner, appears to have been made from a gray Temblor Range chert. The well-preserved Simi Valley specimen, similar to non-eccentric crescents found in stratified contexts on Santa Rosa Island dated to ~11,750 cal B.P., is one of the few known from Ventura County.

Chipped stone crescents, among the more enigmatic artifacts from North America's Far West, have long been of interest as temporal markers of the Early Holocene (see Beck and Jones 2010; Fenenga 2010; Frederickson and Grossman 1977; Justice 2002; Tadlock 1966). Meighan and Haynes (1970) used obsidian hydration to propose that crescents had an even greater antiquity in California, with some Borax Lake specimens appearing to be roughly contemporary with fluted points. Usually found in sites near ancient lake, wetland, or coastal settings, crescents have often been interpreted as transverse projectile points used in hunting waterfowl (Erlandson and Braje 2008; Tadlock 1966). For Great Basin crescents, however, Mitchell et al. (1977) warned that variation in morphology and breakage patterns may suggest a more complex range of functions. The wide distribution and morphological diversity in crescent types—including classic lunate specimens and several eccentric varieties—also suggest that crescents were used for several millennia and that their function varied through space and time (see Fenenga 2010; Jertberg 1978; Mohr and Fenenga 2010). In California, some eccentric crescents, for instance, have been interpreted as zoomorphic effigies or fetishes (Koerper and Farmer 1987; Ruth 1937) which may have been reused by Late Holocene peoples (Erlandson 2011).

Several hundred crescents have been reported from the California coast over the years (see Davis et al. 2010; Fenenga 2010; Jertberg 1978, 1986; Jones 1956; Mohr and Fenenga 2010), more than half of which come from the Channel Islands. Until recently, relatively few of these crescents had detailed provenience data or temporal control. Recent research on the Northern Channel Islands has shed some light on the context and chronology of chipped stone crescents along the California Coast. Erlandson (2005) reported the first island crescent from a stratified context, a nearly complete specimen found eroding from the sea cliff at Daisy Cave (CA-SMI-261) and embedded in a stratum dated between ~10,200 and 8,600 cal B.P. Erlandson and Braje (2008) also described five crescents from the surface of CA-SMI-679 on eastern San Miguel island, where nearby shell midden deposits have been dated to ~12,000 cal B.P. (Erlandson et al. 2011). Recent research on Santa Rosa Island has also documented lunate crescents associated with hundreds of bird bones in a deeply buried paleosol at CA-SRI-512 that is dated between about 11,900 and 11,500 cal B.P. (Erlandson et al. 2011).

CRESCENTS AND MUSEUM COLLECTIONS

Numerous crescents from California and the Great Basin exist in museums around the United States and elsewhere in the world, with the best known examples in large museums such as the Smithsonian Institution, the American Museum of Natural History, the Southwest Museum, and others (see Justice 2002; Mohr and Fenenga 2010). Erlandson (2011) recently noted that crescents are also found in local or regional museums, where many may lie undiscovered and undocumented. My experience at the University of Oregon (U. O.) Museum of Natural and Cultural History (MNCH) confirms this, inasmuch as two crescents from small California collections were unexpectedly found in a search of documents and drawers that took less than one hour.

One of these small collections was donated to the MNCH by Joel L. Shiner in 1952. Shiner was an archaeologist who was born in Texas, earned a B.A. in anthropology from UCLA in 1948 and a Ph.D. from the University of Arizona in 1955. He then worked for the National Park Service for several years before joining

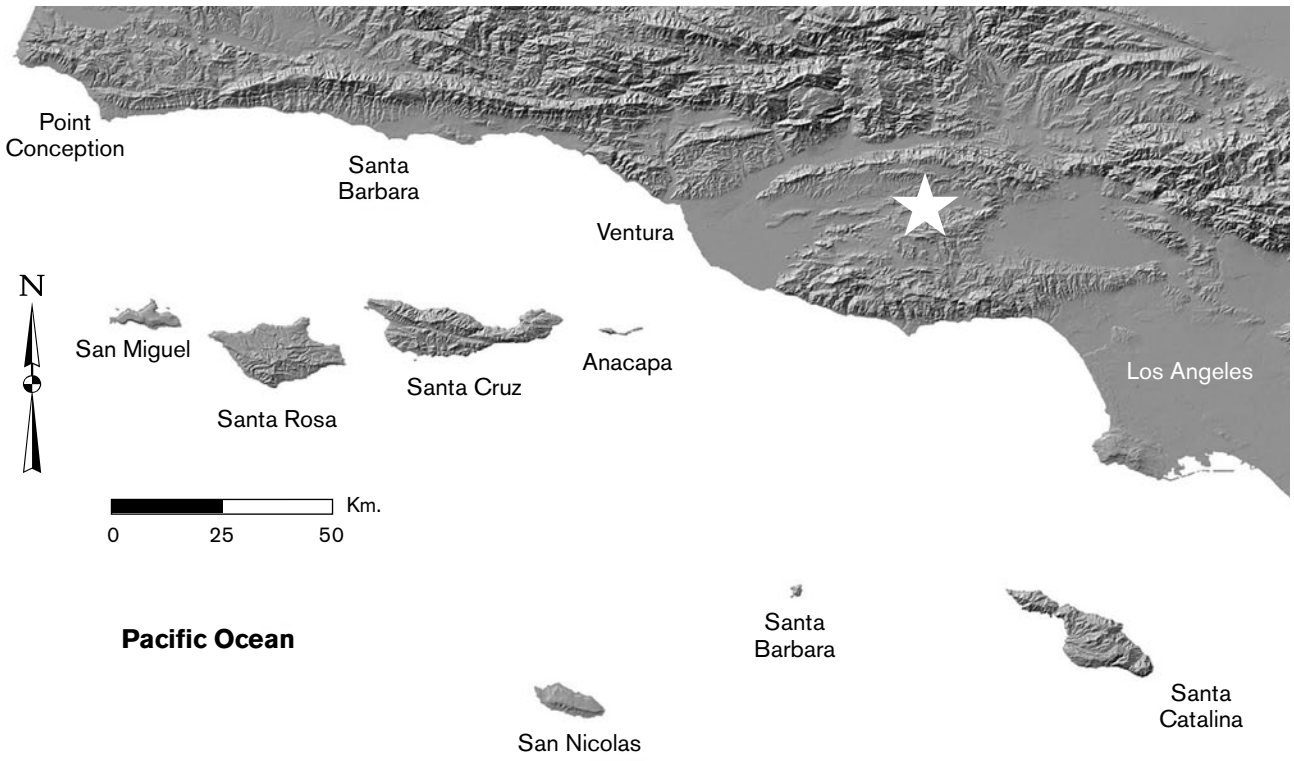

Figure 1. Map of the Santa Barbara Channel region showing the approximate location of Simi Valley (star).

the faculty of Southern Methodist University in 1960 (Wetherington 1989). During the 1950s, Shiner worked in the Pacific Northwest as an acting field director with the River Basin Surveys of the Smithsonian Institution. At this time, Shiner may have come into contact with Luther Cressman, chairman of the University of Oregon's Anthropology Department and director of its Museum of Natural History (now known as the MNCH), who was involved in the Smithsonian's River Basin Surveys. Presumably, the donation of Shiner's California artifacts to the U. O. was the result of his contacts with Cressman or other museum staff members.

The MNCH's Shiner Collection contains six artifacts from southeastern California, including a large stemmed point from the Lake Mojave area and five small arrow points attributed to the Owens Valley area. It also contains 14 artifacts identified in museum notes as coming from Chumash territory in Ventura County's Simi Valley. The Simi Valley (Fig. 1) is near the boundary of ethnographic Gabrielino (a.k.a. Tongva) territory (Johnson 2006), however, and Shiner (1949) himself described excavations at a Simi Valley site that he attributed to a Fernandeño occupation. The Simi Valley collection Shiner donated to the U. O. appears to be unrelated to those excavations and has no specific provenience. It includes eight shell beads (one mussel disc, two cupped, four lipped, and one wall bead made from *Olivella*), an asphaltum basketry impression, a large bone awl made from a deer metapodial, a wooden stick with two fire-making hearth concavities, a small leaf-shaped chert point, a small triangular obsidian point, and one chipped stone crescent. Except for the crescent, most of these artifacts are probably of Late Holocene age, which raises the possibility that the crescent may have been an older artifact reused by later Chumash or Tongva people.

THE SIMI VALLEY CRESCENT

The Simi Valley crescent is a complete lunate specimen, between a quarter-moon and a half-moon in plan view, and lacks the pronounced serrations, notches, or legs typical of eccentric crescents from California (Fig. 2). Relatively small, thin, and bilaterally symmetrical, the Simi Valley crescent is 1.89 cm. long, 3.07 cm. wide, a maximum of 0.47 cm. thick, and weighs just 2.56 g.

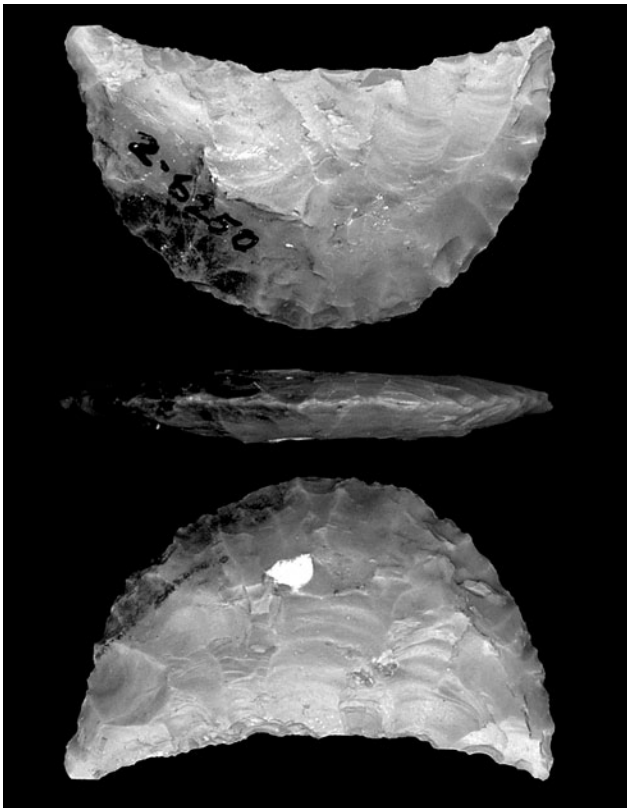

Figure 2. Composite digital scans of the Simi Valley crescent, showing both faces and a cross-section of the artifact. Note traces of hafting residue on the left portions of the convex edge of crescent and small spot of white cortex on lower image (by Keith Hamm).

In cross-section, the crescent is very flat and slightly thinner (0.44 cm.) along the midline, possibly to facilitate hafting. Almost completely flaked on both sides through a combination of percussion and pressure flaking, the crescent has just one small spot of cortex on one face. It was made from an opaque gray (10YR 5.5/1) chert visually similar to cherts from the Temblor Range located between the Carrizo Plain and the southern San Joaquin Valley area in western Kern and eastern San Luis Obispo counties (see Elliot 1966; Hudson and Blackburn 1987:29). Temblor Range chert outcrops, found in uplifted Monterey Formation rocks (Elliott 1966), often contain thin plates of gray chert with white cortex.

The relatively high degree of finish and bilateral symmetry suggest that the Simi Valley crescent was a finished artifact rather than a preform. Unlike many specimens found in surface contexts in California and the Great Basin, this crescent shows no sign of abrasion from eolian sandblasting, stream transport, or other post-depositional damage. The convex edge of the crescent, in fact, appears to retain remnants of a dark residue (asphaltum?) that is probably related to hafting.

Typologically, the crescent appears similar to Tadlock's (1966:663) Type I crescent and Mohr's Type 3 crescent (concavoconvex lunate; Hopkins 2010:65; Mohr and Fenenga 2010:108-109). Lunate crescents, the most common varieties found in California's interior regions and on the Northern Channel Islands (Mohr and Fenenga 2010), are very similar to the non-eccentric crescents found throughout much of the Great Basin and the Columbia Plateau regions, where they are strongly associated with lakes, marshes, and other wetland habitats (Tadlock 1966).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The Simi Valley crescent is one of the few specimens known from Ventura County. Although not firmly dated, its morphology is consistent with lunate crescents found on Santa Rosa Island that date between about 11,800 and 11,500 cal B.P. (Erlandson et al. 2011). The fact that several other artifacts in the Shiner collection from the Simi Valley area appear likely to date to the Late Holocene, however, suggests the possibility that the Simi Valley crescent could have been an old artifact recycled by Chumash or Tongva people. This has been suggested elsewhere for zoomorphic crescents (Erlandson 2011; Fenenga 2010:38), but not to my knowledge for lunate crescents. According to Hudson and Underhay (1978:75–77), however, the Chumash considered the moon to be a female deity intermediate in power between the sun and earth; they closely monitored the phases of the moon and conducted prayers and ceremonies during the new (crescent) moon seeking "good health and good fortune," and used the crescent form as a symbol of the moon on ritual sunsticks. If the remnants of mastic found on just one side of the convex edge of the Simi Valley crescent are complete, they might suggest that this crescent—although probably of ancient manufacture—was hafted obliquely and reused for symbolic and ritual purposes by later Chumash peoples.

Considering that several early Milling Stone sites have been identified in the general area (e.g., CA-VEN-1, VEN-294, and VEN-853; see Erlandson 1994:228), it is

equally possible (and perhaps more likely) that the Simi Valley crescent was collected from a site containing an Early Holocene or Terminal Pleistocene component. Similar lunate crescents have also been found in early sites scattered across the Far West—from the Pacific Northwest, through most of California and the Great Basin, and into northern Baja California (see Mohr and Fenenga 2010; Smith 2008; Tadlock 1966). The wide distribution of these artifacts argues for broad cultural links between early coastal and interior peoples in the Far West (see Beck and Jones 2010; Erlandson and Braje 2008). As early chronological markers and evidence for adaptive similarities and information exchange among early coastal and interior peoples of the Far West, it makes sense to carefully track the distribution of lunate and other crescents in Native North America. Given their broad geographic range and established antiquity, it would seem appropriate to include lunate crescents in continental digital archives such as the Paleoindian Database of the Americas (Anderson et al. 2010; see http://pidba.utk.edu/main.htm).

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