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30. EXCAVATION OF ISABELLA MEADOWS CAVE, MONTEREY COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

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Introduction

The site here described is located on Church Creek in the Southern Coast Ranges of Monterey County, California. It is about 40 airline miles south of Monterey and 20 miles east of the Pacific Ocean. The cave is near the center of the region inhabited at the time of white contact by the Esselen Indians. This is the first archaeological site in Esselen territory to be reported upon, and since the occupation of the site extends into the historic period, the objects recovered are presumably attributable to Esselen manufacture. The Esselen constituted a small group of only a few hundred individuals, and they became extinct almost immediately after contact with the Spanish Missions. The tribe is thus virtually unknown, and the site described here is of importance because of the light which it throws on Esselen culture.

Meadows Cave was discovered in 1949 by a survey party under the direction of A.R. Pilling, then Assistant Archaeologist of the U.C. Archaeological Survey. The latter named the cave after Isabella Meadows, the last known informant on the now-vanished Esselen Indians. Isabella Meadows' grandfather was a Mission Indian who had transmitted some details of Esselen life to her. Although she was herself a Costanoan (Rumsen), she was also a speaker of the Esselen language.

As in all archaeological excavations, the cooperative effort of many individuals is represented in the report presented here. My thanks are due the crew of University of California students whose enthusiastic and skillful labor enabled us to obtain a maximum sample of the site in a few working days. The crew included Leroy G. Fischer, William C. Gonsalves, David M. Pendergast, and James Siegel. We are also indebted to the personnel of the Church Ranch, which borders the site area, for permission to enter and to make use of private roads and other facilities. For courtesies rendered, thanks are here expressed to Mr. Bruce Church, owner of the ranch, and to Mr. John Nardone, both of Salinas. Mr. Jack Thompson, foreman of the ranch, extended the crew every courtesy and assisted the excavation in many ways.

Technical advice on specimens was given by Miss Chérie N. Grégoire of the University of California. Mrs. Sheilagh Brooks kindly assisted in determining facts regarding the age and sex of the human burial. Finally, my personal gratitude is owed to Mr. Arnold R. Pilling of the University of California. As the discoverer of the site and the instigator of archaeological exploration in this part of California, the excavation was rightfully his. Being prevented by other commitments from doing the field work, he very generously encouraged others to carry it out and also aided the project by permitting use of his personal records on the site area.

Burial

The partially mummified body of a small child was found toward the rear of the fissure, in pits 11 and 12 (UCMA No. 12-8576). The burial was at a depth of 61 inches, which meant that it had suffered considerable moisture damage. Nonetheless, sufficient body tissue was preserved so that the bones could not be completely exposed, and traces of dry materials were found in the grave.

The body was tightly flexed on the back, with the head oriented toward the entrance to the fissure (west). The base of the grave pit was lined with grass and pieces of bark. The burial was accompanied by the following artifacts:

1. A pubic apron of cordage, bearing ornamentation of spire-lopped olivella beads. The cordage was almost entirely disintegrated, but seven fragments up to 12 cm. in length were capable of preservation. The cordage is 0.25 cm. in diameter and differs from all other cordage found in that it is 2 ply Z twist. The material is rotted so that it is impossible to be sure of its identity, although it looks as if there were two types of plants used.

   There were 217 shell beads, made of olivella shells, in the pubic region. Some of these still had bits of cordage remaining within them, but the cordage between them had disappeared. No two beads were found in a position suggesting an extended string, and it is possible that each bead was at the end of one string of the apron. This would leave about 100 strings hanging down before and behind.

   The beads were made by breaking out the entire spire of the shell. The tips are not ground off, as is commonly found with this kind of bead.

2. A fragment of a leather belt, found lying across the occiput and probably originally a head-band. The piece is 36 cm. in length, 2.5 cm. wide, and 0.5 cm. thick. It is made by folding the edges of a piece of leather in until they meet and then sewing the edges together. The thread has disappeared, but the needle holes are somewhat uneven, being 2.5 to 3.5 mm. apart, and the belt was probably hand-sewn. This is the rounded buckle end of the belt, but there are no holes for a belt buckle.

   This artifact is no doubt to be attributed to Caucasian contact. It may be a scrap of harness from one of the missions.

3. About ten glass trade beads, only two of which are whole, from the head region. They are exceedingly crumbly and break on being touched. They appear to be made of short pieces of glass tubing bearing irregular facets. The beads have a pink-red, almost rose, color and are translucent but not transparent. They are 2 mm. long, 2.7 mm. in diameter, with perforation of 1.0 mm in diameter.

These glass beads appear to have been partly decomposed by body acids or soil conditions, although their fragility may be due to some manufacturing defect. Because of their poor condition, it is difficult to identify them with certainty, but they appear most likely to be type 129 of the type collection of trade beads in the U.C.M.A. This type has been found at the following sites, in addition to Mnt-250:

Santa Rosa Island, site 4 (P.M. Jones)
Santa Rosa Island, site 15, with a burial (P.M. Jones)
Santa Rosa Island, site 18, with a burial (P.M. Jones)
4-Sac-56 (Mosher)
La Purisima Indian Barracks (2 specimens only)

All of these sites represent Spanish contact, although the La Purisima site could extend into the 1840's. However, the general occurrence suggests that the Mnt-250 specimens are not later than 1830 and may date from several years before this time.

4. One green glass bead, sub-spherical, transparent, 2.6 x 3.0 mm., 1.0 mm. diameter of perforation. Type 228 in the U.C.M.A. type collection, reported from Santa Cruz Island (site 138), Fort Vancouver, and La Purisima Indian Barracks. Again, an early nineteenth century date is suggested.

5. Minute shell disc beads, probably of olivella, 2 mm. diameter; 0.5 to 0.8 mm. thick; 0.6 mm. perforation. Twelve specimens found; others could have been lost in the site because of their small size. Two were found stuck together in stringing position.

6. Beads made of the chitinous leg segments of beetles; 95 specimens recovered, which is not more than half of those present since many were decomposed. Specimens are black, ca. 1.0 cm. long and 0.2 cm. thick. Only the larger leg segments, possibly only femora, were used, and the "necklace" must have utilized at least 30 insects, possibly as many as 60 or 70. About the only insects which are common enough and large enough to serve for this purpose are ground beetles of the family Tenebrionidae. A couple of these were observed living at the mouth of the cave itself and the beads could well have been made there.

7. Additional fragments of cordage at the head region. One piece is 10 cm. long, of 2 ply S twist cordage. It is imbedded in scalp tissue in the occipital region and is not further identifiable. There are 8 additional pieces of 2 ply S twist cordage, each only about 1 cm. long, black, ca. 0.15 cm. in diameter.

8. Finally, there is a fragment of the edge of a twined object of grass or tule. It is composed of 2 ply S twist cordage, 3.5 mm. in diameter. The fragment may be part of the cordage skirt, although the loose bits of cordage were all left (Z) twist. The specimen is 5.8 x 5.0 x 0.9 cm. (See pl. 5c).

1-132802, 1-132845 -- Two crude chert scrapers (see plate 5G, H).

1-132788 -- A roughly shaped chunk of steatite, 10 cm. long and 6 cm. in diameter. An exceedingly soft piece, bluish-white in color. Could well have been used for pigment, but it is too soft for artifact manufacture.

1-132852 -- A cobble pestle, 19 x 7.5 cm. A natural stream cobble, roughly shaped to cylindrical form with nearly flat pounding surfaces. Both ends used, but one end shows much more use than the other.

Miscellaneous artifacts

The following additional specimens were found:

1-118165 -- The quill of a very large bird feather, 34 cm. long (not complete) and 1.1 cm. in diameter at the base. Must be from an eagle or condor. All the soft parts are missing, apparently from insect damage.

1-132702 -- A tuft of reddish black hair, probably a lock of human hair.

1-132739 -- A coil of basketry weft material, 10 cm. in diameter and 1 cm. thick (see plate 3K).

1-132792 -- A bundle of rushes, possibly iris or some sort of marsh grass. 25 cm. long, 8 cm. in diameter; one end tied in a loose overhand knot.

Materials of historic date

The following evidences of post-Caucasian occupation were recovered:

1. One sheep skin, with feature 1.
2. Ca. ten glass trade beads, of two kinds, with burial 1.
3. Fragment of a leather belt, with burial 1.
4. Small fragment of a red wool blanket.
5. Two fragments of a single large blue trade bead.

The first named objects have been described with the burial or feature in which they occurred. The last two are described below:

1-132781 -- A small strip of simply woven wool, 16 x 1 cm. (0.18 cm. thick). It is red and from the texture looks like a piece of a wool blanket. There is an overhand knot tied in the center, and it is not unlikely that the piece was tied in the hair as an ornament. Found at a depth of 24 inches in the cache-pit containing feature 1.

1-132823, 1-132835 -- Two fragments of a blue glass bead, 1.2 cm. in diameter when whole. Undoubtedly pieces of the same bead, but the fragments do not fit together. One piece was found at 12" in pit 4; the other at 9" in pit 5. The bead is light blue, verging on a turquoise blue, and is opaque. It has very fine surface cracks, corresponding to crazing in glazed pottery, and also contains occasional hair lines of a reddish color. This is type 78 in the U.C. Museum of Anthropology collection; it has also been found at 4-Sha-22 in northern California, at four sites in Alaska (collected by Frederica de Laguna) and at the Indian Barracks of La Purisima Mission.

As mentioned earlier, the overall evidence suggests that the historic occupation was during the first part of the nineteenth century, terminating by about 1825. However, since "wild" Indians are reported to have occupied this region until 1850 or later, the possibility of post-1825 occupation must be considered. The writer considers such late occupation to be extremely unlikely because of the scarcity of historic materials and the complete absence of metal, glass, nails, or other functional materials which might be expected to occur as soon as the Indians could obtain such things. Further, the bead types which can be dated suggest the earliest portion of the nineteenth century.

Stratigraphy

No stratigraphic change can be derived from the material found in the dry levels. The artifacts are quite evenly distributed in depth and appear to represent a cultural unit with no temporal changes visible.

Areally, the distribution is also fairly even, although the number of artifacts diminishes sharply in the rear of the cave, between pits 12 and 18. Pits 13 and 14 were not completely excavated of dry material, and pits 15 to 18 were quite shallow.

Numerical distribution of artifacts by depth and pit is given in Table 3. It will be seen that most of the occupation was in the outer half of the fissure; the deeper recesses being little used. In depth, the top 6 inches were virtually sterile; the 17 objects recovered from this layer are small bits of cordage, two broken foreshafts, and three small pieces of basketry.