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A Crescent from the Southern San Joaquin Valley, California

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A complete crescent was discovered in the Elk Hills, California (Fig. 1), just north of Buena Vista Lake in the southern San Joaquin Valley. The specimen was found in the berm of a bladed road and not in association with a known archaeological site. It therefore is recorded as an isolated find (IF-KER-388). The location of the discovery is on a generally north-facing, and badly eroded, slope of the Elk Hills at an elevation of 115 m. (380 ft.), some 27 m. (90 ft.) above the nearby valley floor. Its precise provenience is unknown but presumably it was deposited in the immediate vicinity of the place of discovery.

Crescents typically are viewed as dating from the late Pleistocene or early Holocene and have been used as marker artifacts, along with fluted projectile points, for cultures dating to those times. Such artifacts are known from California and the Great Basin (Tadlock 1966; Davis et al. 1969; Davis and Panlaqui 1978:Table 9; Moratto 1984:76) and often are discovered in association with fossil lakeshores.

In the southern San Joaquin Valley, crescents have been reported from surface contexts near Tulare (Gifford and Schenck 1926:86; Riddell and Olsen 1969:126, Fig. 4h, k-o) and Buena Vista and Kern lakes (Gifford and Schenck 1926:85-86, Plate 26). Wedel (1941:99-100, Plate 39w-y) recovered six fragmentary specimens from Site No. 2 (CA-KER-60) at Buena Vista Lake, mostly from depths of 36 to 40 in. (90 to 100 cm.). Three crescent fragments were discovered in the buried component of CA-KER-116 at Buena Vista Lake (Fig. 1; Fredrickson and Grossman 1977:Table 2, Fig. 4d-f), radiocarbon dated to

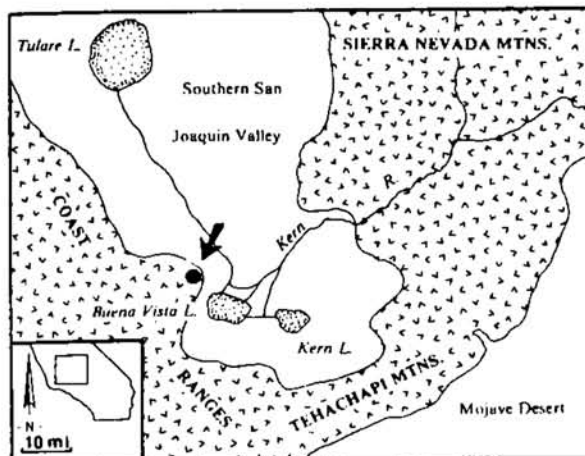


Fig. 1. Location where the crescent was discovered in the Elk Hills, California.

approximately 8,000 years ago and assigned to the San Dieguito Tradition (Fredrickson and Grossman 1977:188).

The function of crescents is unknown. A number of uses have been proposed, including transverse projectile points, amulets, and knives. Convincing evidence for these interpretations is lacking.

THE ELK HILLS CRESCENT

The crescent (Figs. 2 and 3) is made from Monterey chert, measures 82 x 27.5 x 5.6 mm. and weighs 14.5 g. The specimen is essentially complete, with only a very small portion of one tip missing, and is very finely flaked on all of its edges. Apparently the maker began with a thin, tabular piece of chert, rather than a flake from a core, then thinned and shaped the piece. A slight straightening is evident in the center of the convex margin. This area appears to have been worn or abraded and the straightening may perhaps be due to re-sharpening. Two slight "nipples" are present in the center of the concave side. The significance of these attributes is unknown but they are common on crescents.

The Elks Hills crescent is noteworthy for several reasons. First, it is the only complete

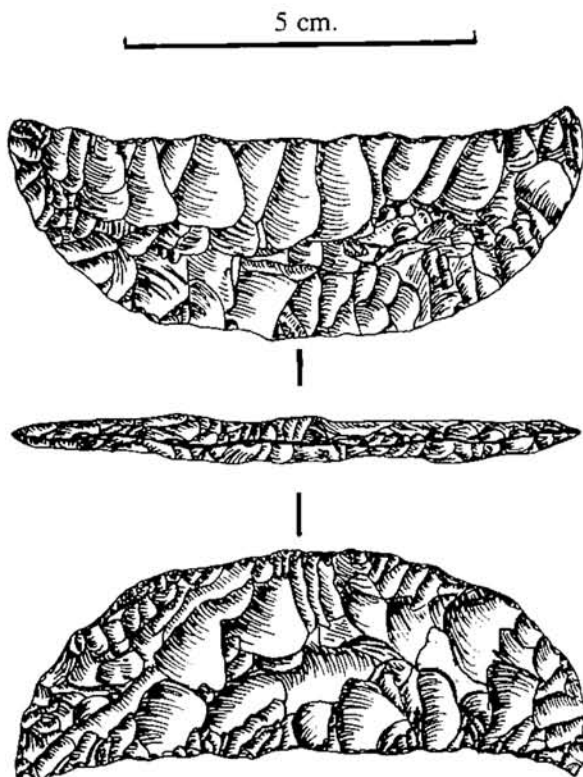


Fig. 2. Line drawing of the Elk Hills crescent.



Fig. 3. Photograph of the Elk Hills crescent. The specimen is coated with ammonium chloride powder to enhance detail. Length, 82 mm.

specimen known from the valley, with only one other fragmentary specimen being larger (Gifford and Schenck 1926:Plate 26u). Second, as with many of the other known crescents in the area, it is made of chert. Third, it was found in a location near and above the shoreline of a lake dating to the late Pleistocene-early Holocene (Snyder et al. 1964). This general location suggests that some early occupation may have occurred in

the low hills bordering the western valley, away from the immediate environs associated with the early lake.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The crescent was found and recorded by Bob Stafford of the Elk Hills Naval Petroleum Reserve. I thank both Bob and Tom Kato for their cooperation and interest. The artifact is on display at the Elk Hills Naval Petroleum Reserve. Robin Novickas produced the line drawing of the artifact and Philip J. Wilke assisted with his views on the manufacture of the piece and by providing the photograph. The reviewers provided useful comments.

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