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Archaeological Evidence for Post-Contact Native Religion: The Chumash Land of the Dead

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Mortuary analysis of two related cemeteries in the southeastern Ventureño Chumash region suggests that, despite missionization, traditional private burial rituals were practiced post-contact. The dominant westerly orientation of the head in the Late Period Medea Creek cemetery (ca. 1300 -1785 C.E.) is still largely in evidence at the later Malibu Historic Period cemetery (1775 - 1805). Ethnographic data indicate a strong association between the direction of west, the spiritual travel of the soul, and the location of the Chumash land of the dead, which further associates with the westerly head orientation of burials.

The study of mortuary assemblages has been an important theme in the archaeology of the Chumash area (Gamble et al. 1996; Green 1999; Hollimon 1990; C. King 1990; King 1982; Lambert 1994; Lambert and Walker 1991; Martz 1984, 1992; Walker et al. 1996) as has the study of their world view and belief system (Applegate 1975, 1977, 1978; Blackburn 1975a, 1976; Erlandson et al. 1998; Flynn 1991; Flynn and Laderman 1994; Haley and Wilcoxon 1997, 1999; Hollimon 1997; Hudson and Underhay 1978; Sandos 1991). However, despite clear ethnographic links between mortuary behavior and belief systems, few archaeological mortuary studies combine them. Evidence is presented below not only for the probable archaeological manifestation of a belief system, but also the

persistence of indigenous religion during the California Mission era (1769 - 1834 C.E.). Ethnographic and historic data that are both specific and general are linked to the material culture of a corresponding and circumscribed area of the Chumash region in a direct historical approach.

ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

We know that many modern people of Chumash descent subscribe to various religious belief systems that include Christianity; Chumash consultants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were likely Catholic (Flynn and Laderman 1994; Gardner 1965; Haley and Wilcoxon 1997, 1999), and because we know that the Spanish practiced an intolerant, violent, and comprehensive program of conversion (Jackson 1994; Jackson and Castillo 1995), it would not be wholly unreasonable to assume that Chumash religion was suddenly and completely destroyed at contact. Yet, Chumash religion during the contact period demonstrated a remarkable resilience and ability to survive. Although a subsequent loss of traditional beliefs and practices was surely set into motion during the Mission era, historic and ethnographic data suggest that Chumash religion survived in some form, even past the secularization of the missions. Numerous isolated observations of shrines, rituals, and ceremonies are sprinkled throughout the literature. Larger episodes, such as the Chumash uprising of 1801 (Heizer 1941; Hudson and Underhay 1978; Sandos 1991) and the revolt of 1824 (Beebe and Senkewicz 1996; Blackburn 1975b; Geiger 1965, 1970; Sandos 1991) were permeated with religious undertones. Even the very public and costly mourning ceremony was still being performed as late as the mid 1800s (Blackburn 1976).

But what of private Chumash ritual practice and personal belief during this time of upheaval and change? Historic and ethnographic data are not clear. In the face of the unrelenting onslaught of disease and perhaps influenced by a perceived immunity to disease in the white community, some Chumash apparently reevaluated the

meaning of traditional practices in their private affairs:

A father, whose daughter was very ill, tried to cure her by visiting a Chumash shrine and praying for her recovery. When she died, he went to the shrine and destroyed it, saying: "I believe in those things no longer, [for] they were lies" [Walker and Hudson 1993:77, quoting a Harrington manuscript].

By the early 1900s, surviving Chumash related traditional religion in terms of the ancestors and others, in terms of observation and not participation, in terms that imply a certain distance.

However, according to a description of conversion methods from Fernando Librado Kitsepawit (1839-1915), we can only guess what the Chumash must have thought of Catholicism. Kitsepawit was a Chumash consultant, interviewed extensively by noted ethnographer John P. Harrington, and was well acquainted with the Ventureño language and heritage (Johnson 1982, 1988; Hudson et al. 1978, 1981). In his account, new mission recruits were shown a large crucifix and a picture of the Virgin Mary. An explanation was given that described the cross as symbolic of a god who was also a man and born of a virgin. The recruits were then asked whether or not they believed. Those who said that they did were told to kiss the crucifix and then were sprinkled with holy water along with fellow believers (Hudson and Underhay 1978:18). Surely this would not pass for conversion today, and it may not have passed for conversion even then. In fact, most ethnographic sources that refer specifically to Chumash attitudes toward Catholicism indicate that they exhibited a resigned acceptance that is difficult to characterize as belief:

One of the men spoke to Fernando, saying: "Now you are getting to be a man. Would you like to work?" Fernando said yes and the old man continued. "Don't put any faith in what they say that there was a man from above to help us out. ...When we received the baptismal

water we were already, as always, in the belief that a man was coming to benefit us — but on the contrary the world is now more difficult than ever" [Hudson and Underhay 1978:19].

Old Sudón spoke to all of them, saying "What have you profited by the belief of the Christians?" One answered for all, saying that the teachings obtained from the friars was to love thy neighbor, but that in ten there is not one who will put it into practice. To this José Sudón then replied "Yes, that is true. The word is given out as a teaching, but it is difficult to put it into practice. [...] They say that a God is coming. I say to you that perhaps some of you will see this God, if you don't die first. Our belief is that we must all die and resurrect again, and that these will be the modern ones" [Hudson et al. 1981:67].

Despite entrusting priests with previously secret private names (Hudson 1977:264), seeing visions of the Virgin Mary (Sandos 1991), and receiving numerous Catholic sacraments (Hudson et al. 1981; Hudson 1980), we also know that California ritual specialists were agents of change, who actively integrated or appended new and potentially powerful esoteric knowledge (Bean and Vane 1992:16). It thus comes as no surprise that traditional Chumash ritual practices had not stopped, nor been exchanged, even as observed by the missionaries themselves (Geigher and Meighan 1976:47-48, 57-58). Although Catholicism seemed to resonate with at least some portion of Chumash culture, the depth of its penetration is difficult to gauge. The following data shed additional light into this murky area and suggest that at least one aspect of private Chumash ritual remained largely unchanged, even at the height of mission activity.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

For the analysis, two related cemeteries in the southeastern Ventureño Chumash region were selected (Figure 1): Malibu (CA-LAN-264) and Medea Creek (CA-LAN-243). Medea Creek is an inland site which contains a completely

excavated Late Period cemetery (ca. 1300 -1785) with an estimated population of 400 individuals and approximately 27,000 associated artifacts. Malibu was a named historic village located on the coast approximately 15 kilometers southeast of Medea Creek, via the drainage of Malibu Canyon. It was an important regional capital which likely included Medea Creek in its territory (Hudson et al. 1978), perhaps even using it as a seasonal residence (King 1982:144). The Malibu site contains a completely excavated Historic Period cemetery (A.D. 1775 - 1805) with

an estimated population of 140 individuals accompanied by approximately 58,000 artifacts. Raw data for both the Medea Creek and Malibu cemeteries are available in published and unpublished form and both collections currently reside at the Fowler Museum of Cultural History at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Although the widest range of dates for use of the Medea Creek cemetery would encompass 1300 to 1785, the founding data of the cemetery is uncertain and could have taken place as late as 1600 (Martz 1994). However, the dearth of European

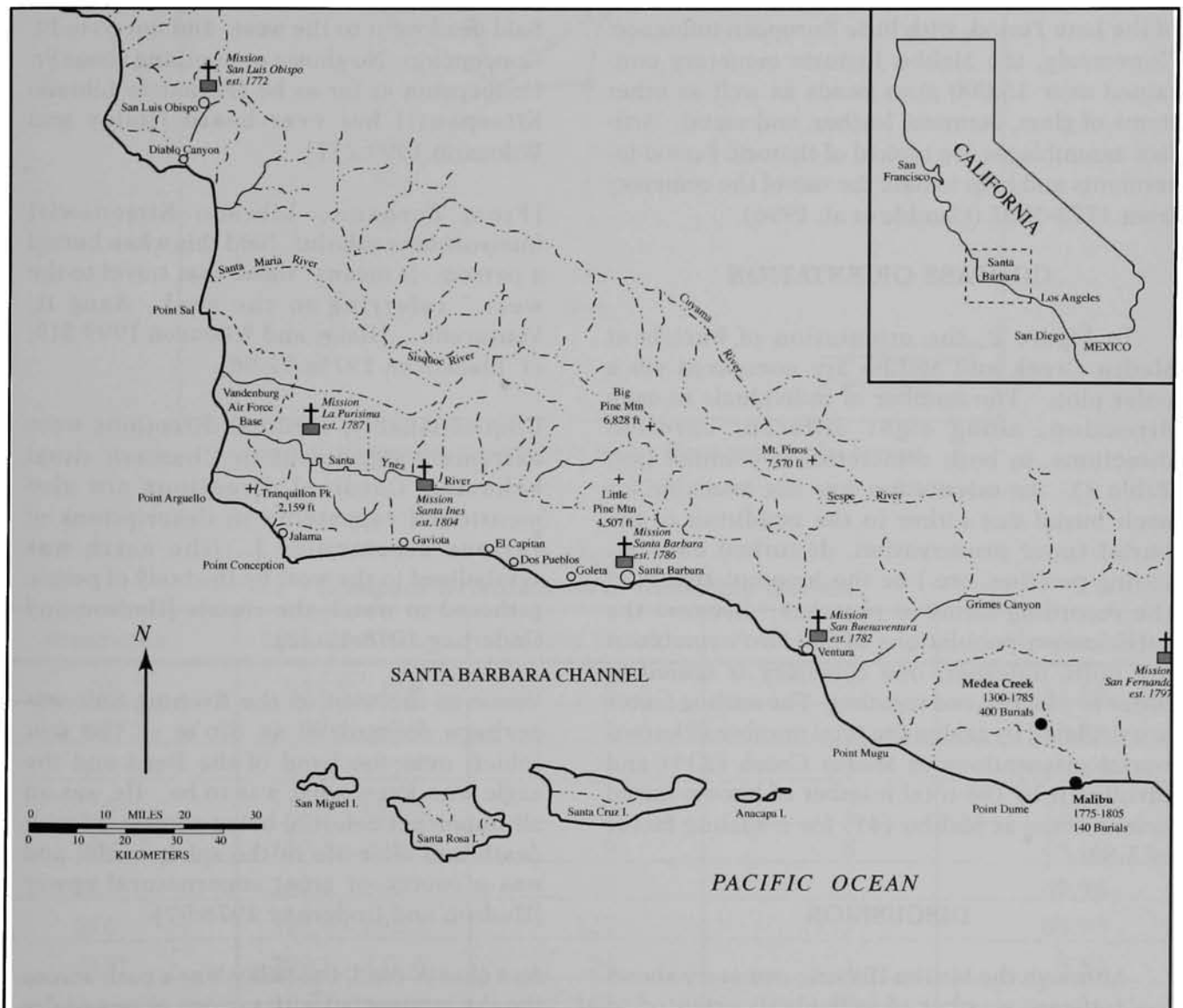


Figure 1. Map of Chumash territory showing missions, village sites, and cemeteries.

material (specifically, a total of only 425 glass beads) points up the limited contact that the villagers must have had with European culture — that contact perhaps even taking place in a single episode (King 1982:26). Similarly, the abandonment of the site may have been somewhat earlier than the 1785 date, since very few burials contained glass beads and the interment of one unusual individual in particular (accounting for 300 beads) may have occurred after abandonment of the site and thus been intrusive (King 1982:27). Indeed, the closest mission was that of Mission San Fernando founded in 1797. There is thus good reason to view the Medea Creek cemetery as representative of the Late Period, with little European influence. Conversely, the Malibu historic cemetery contained over 15,000 glass beads as well as other items of glass, ceramic, leather, and metal. Artifact assemblages are typical of Historic Period interments and help to date the use of the cemetery from 1775-1805 (Gamble et al. 1996).

COMPASS ORIENTATION

In Figure 2, the orientation of burials at Medea Creek and Malibu are compared via a polar plot. The number of individuals in each direction, along eight different cardinal directions, in both cemeteries is counted (see Table 1). An orientation was not available for each burial due either to the condition of the burial (poor preservation, disturbed context, sitting position, etc.) or the incompleteness of the recording forms or sketches. Because the total known populations of the two cemeteries are quite different, one cemetery is scaled in order to plot the two together. The scaling factor is calculated by taking the total number of known burial orientations at Medea Creek (239) and dividing it by the total number of known burial orientations at Malibu (41) for a scaling factor of 5.83.

DISCUSSION

Although the Malibu Historic cemetery shows a significant number of individuals oriented to the south, the majority were oriented in a

westerly direction, west and southwest, as at Medea Creek. Undoubtedly, a westerly orientation of the head was intentional. Ethnographic data, largely based on the notes of John P. Harrington, suggest why this should be so. The following excerpts are not intended as an exhaustive compilation of references to the westerly direction, since these have appeared elsewhere in both summary and detailed form (Blackburn 1975a; Hudson and Underhay 1978; Haley and Wilcoxon 1999). Instead they serve to highlight the connection between west and death. Bracketed comments are mine.

Said dead went to the west. Did not go to Pt. Concepcion. No ghosts or anything about Pt. Concepcion as far as he [Fernando Librado Kitsepawit] has ever heard [Haley and Wilcoxon 1999:217].

[From Fernando Librado Kitsepawit] *husiyalinane alkulul*. Said this when buried a person. It means "those that travel to the west," referring to the soul. Sang it. Ventureño... [Haley and Wilcoxon 1999:219; cf. Blackburn 1975a:97-98].

Unquestionably, cardinal directions were extremely significant in Chumash ritual behavior. Cardinal directions are also mentioned repeatedly in descriptions of various ceremonies [...]the earth was symbolized in the west by the body of people gathered to watch the rituals [Hudson and Underhay 1978:41-42].

Venus in the west as the Evening Star was perhaps recognized as *Slo'w* — the *wot* [chief] over the Land of the Dead and the eagle who knew what was to be. He was an all-important celestial being connected with death and after-life in the spirit world, and was a source of great supernatural power [Hudson and Underhay 1978:97].

As a ghosts' road, the Milky Way's path across the sky intersected with various places where mythological beings dwelled. [...]The fall and

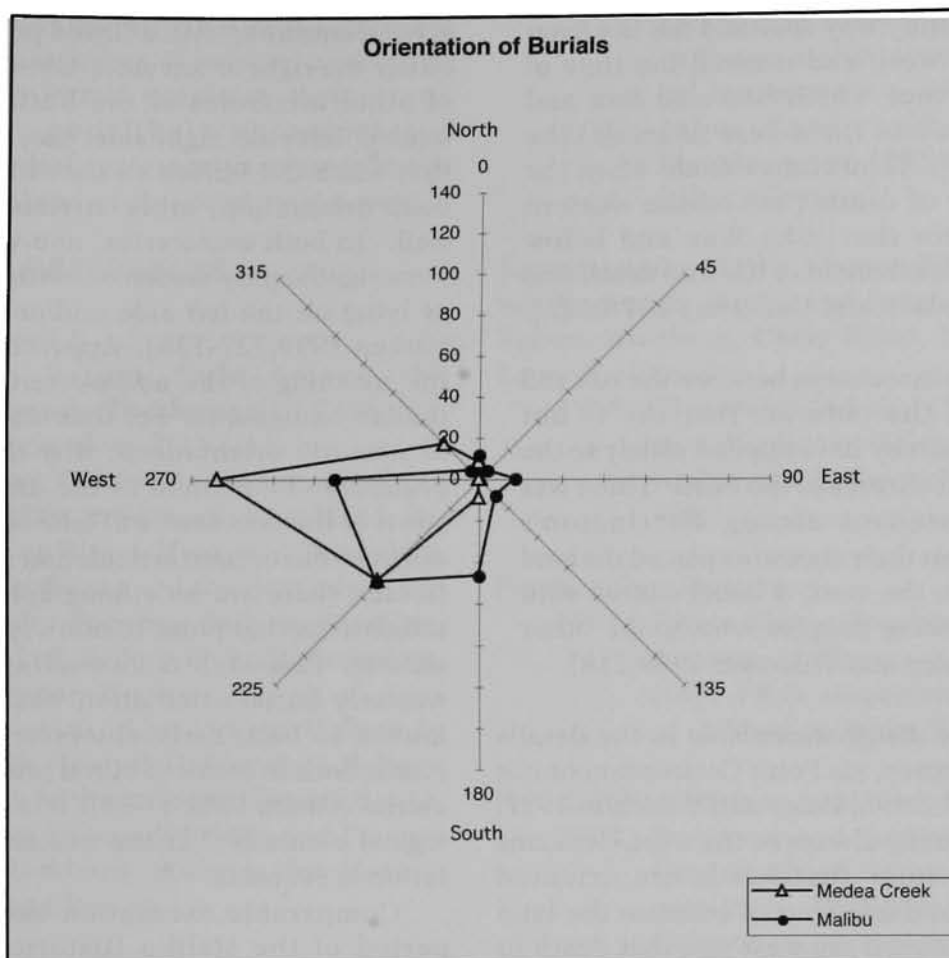


Figure 2. Compass orientations of Medea Creek and Malibu burials.

Table 1.
Compass Orientations of Cemetery Burials

Orientation	Inclusive Range	Medea Creek	Malibu	Malibu Scaled
0°	337.5 - 22.5	8	2	11.66
45°	22.5 - 67.5	1	1	5.83
90°	67.5 - 112.5	1	3	17.49
135°	112.5 - 157.5	0	2	11.66
180°	157.5 - 202.5	9	8	46.63
225°	202.5 - 247.5	69	12	69.95
270°	247.5 - 292.5	127	12	69.95
315°	292.5 - 337.5	24	1	5.83
Unknown	Unknown	161	99	
Total		400	140	

early winter Milky Way spanned the sky from north-east to west, and marked the time of ritual observance which honored Sun and (probably at about three-year intervals) the recent dead. [...]The climax came when the sun, “bringer of death”, set on the western horizon within the Milky Way and below Altair — the symbolism of life and death was complete [Hudson and Underhay 1978:125].

Therefore, the association between the sun and the name of the pole at *Iwayiki* is not incidental, and may have applied widely to the pole erected at shrines to the dead. There was a broad consensus among Harrington’s consultants that their ancestors placed the land of the dead in the west, a belief shared with some neighboring peoples who spoke other languages [Haley and Wilcoxon 1999:218].

While there are disagreements as to the details of the soul’s journey, via Point Conception or not (Erlandson et al. 1998; Haley and Wilcoxon 1997, 1999), it is virtually always to the west. It seems reasonable to infer that heads are oriented toward the west during burial because the land of the dead is toward the west and that death in general is associated with the west. Previously at Medea Creek, the westerly burial orientation was interpreted as an association with the setting sun (King 1969:36). However, the ethnographic data above further associate the setting sun and the west with death.

For the case of Malibu, we might also speculate that because the ocean is in a southerly direction, and the spirit travels across the ocean to the land of the dead, head orientations tend to also fall in the southern category more often. Variation might also be introduced by the changing compass location of the setting sun between the summer and winter solstices. Indeed, the winter solstice — also the time of the annual mourning ceremony — is when the sun sets in its most southerly location. More than likely, though, there is more meaning embedded in the compass orientation of the head than just the location of the land of the dead. The dominant burial in both cemeteries is typified by the west-

erly orientation, with a flexed position, lying on either the right or left side. Chi-square analyses of other attributes of the burials (flexed, extended, left side, right side, age, sex, etc.) found that when the burials deviated from a westerly head orientation, other attributes deviated as well. In both cemeteries, non-westerly burials were significantly associated with variations such as lying on the left side and/or being unflexed (Green 1999:127-135). Apparently intentional, the meaning of the non-westerly burial is particularly enigmatic. For that matter, in the case of westerly orientations, why the head should preferably be pointed in the direction that the spirit of the deceased will take seems intuitively obvious, but certain articulation remains elusive. In fact, there are no ethnographic or historical indications that point to more specific interpretations. Indeed, it is interesting to note that a westerly burial orientation was apparently unknown to both early observers and ethnographers, both in terms of burial practices and cemeteries (Green 1999:87-98). It is only in archaeological contexts that the westerly burial orientation is revealed.

Comparable excavation data for the time period of the Malibu Historic cemetery are strikingly different. In 1964, the Mission La Purisima cemetery, in use from ca. 1812 to 1834, was excavated. Burials, the majority of which were likely Chumash, were uniformly oriented with heads to the east, extended on the back, and without grave goods (Humphrey 1965); i.e., European in most every respect. In light of this type of mortuary data, it is all the more remarkable that a cemetery with such a traditional form as that of the Malibu Historic cemetery was founded and used during a time of such transition. Its very existence is testimony to how entrenched mortuary behavior can be and the persistent nature of Chumash ritual and beliefs. Aided perhaps by their central political importance and their relatively distant location from either coastal (San Buenaventura) or inland (San Fernando) missions, the villagers of Malibu seem to have pursued a private burial ritual that remained largely unchanged in

terms of body treatment. This archaeological pattern suggests a degree of cultural continuity with respect to burial practices, before and after contact, and likely an associated continuity in belief system with respect to the location of the land of the dead in the west.

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