



Figure 1.1. A Pomo Indian woman gathering seeds with a seed beater and basket, date unknown. Today, speakers of the Pomo languages live along the California coast north of San Francisco Bay, in some of the same places in which their ancestors lived.

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# Thirteen Thousand Years on the Coast

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It is the year 1312 in a place people now call California. A small group of Chumash Indian leaders—a few chiefs, an astronomer, a messenger, a master of herbs, a curing doctor—huddle around the fire in a sweat lodge at Syuxtun, a Pacific coast village overlooking islands in the Santa Barbara Channel. For these men, the place is the Middle World, the center of the universe and the world in which the First People live. The Middle World lies between the feared Lower World, filled with malevolent beings, and the respected Upper World, where powerful Sky People control the heavens.

Suddenly, the men in the lodge feel a jolt. The earth shakes and rumbles. One chief remarks that the two giant serpents holding up the Middle World must be tired. From time to time the serpents performing this vital job grow weary and need to shift, causing earthquakes.

The Middle World is the setting, too, for the story my colleagues and I tell in this book. From north of San Francisco Bay to south of San Diego, a landscape teeming with food beckoned to some of the first humans to set foot in North America and nourished their descendants for more than twelve thousand years. The shoreline of the Pacific served up a rich variety of fish, shellfish, and sea mammals. Around the adjacent bays and lagoons and in the surrounding foothills, people could hunt land mammals and collect acorns, seeds, roots, and bulbs. Tumbling down the foothills and across the coastal terraces, creeks and rivers teemed with fish.

So abundant were all these wild sources of food

that Indians of the California coast, unlike their counterparts in most of the rest of North America, never had to take up farming. By the time the first Spaniards arrived on the coast in 1542, California Indians had developed flourishing, socially complex societies supported entirely by hunting, gathering, and fishing. Although these people never built large stone or adobe houses like those of the southwestern Pueblo Indians, or great stone pyramids, as some Mexican Indians did, they created far-reaching, thriving networks of trade and social interrelationships.

The story begins with early seafarers who landed on California's northern Channel Islands (chapter 2). On Santa Rosa Island, a lone skeleton protruding from the steep banks of a canyon caught the eye of archaeologist Phil Orr in 1959. Recent analyses and radiocarbon dating of the bones, known to researchers



Figure 1.2. Ohlone Indian dancers with painted bodies at Mission San José, at the southern tip of San Francisco Bay, 1806. Lithograph based on a sketch by W. G. T. von Tilenau.

as Arlington Man, show that the bones date to about thirteen thousand years ago, near the end of the Pleistocene geological epoch. They are the earliest evidence so far of humans living in California, and among the earliest cases in all the Americas.

Thirteen thousand years ago, the environment and coastlines of California were very different from those of today. The man who died at Arlington Springs lived on a “super-island” known as Santarosae, which formed during the last ice age, when sea levels were much lower than they are now (chapter 3). Woolly mammoths and their smaller pygmy mammoth cousins still roamed the island, right before their extinction. Despite the lower sea levels, the only way people could have arrived on Santarosae was by boat. The early dates for Arlington Man and for other archaeological sites on the northern Channel Islands challenge the once widely believed idea that the first humans to enter the Americas came by foot over the Bering Strait land bridge. Perhaps instead, or in addition, they found their way to the Americas by boat.

From thirteen thousand years ago, jump ahead 11,231 years. It is 1769, and Spanish soldiers are marching up from Baja California to the San Francisco Bay, looking for good places to establish missions and forts (chapter 14). Everywhere they meet residents of different local cultures. Each group wears a distinctive style of clothing, unique accoutrements, and special symbols tattooed across bodies and faces. The groups speak many different languages (see map page x), but they are all interconnected through a web of trade. Most of them happily treat their foreign visitors to opulent feasts accompanied by music, dancing, and gifts. Chiefs emerge bedecked in their finest to deliver speeches, showing respect for their visitors (chapter 10). They hand out shell beads and baskets filled with food. The beads are especially valuable, for it takes tremendous effort to make these tiny ornaments. Many of them are so small that today they pass right through the window screens that archaeologists use as sieves.

The coastal California seen by European explorers (plate 10) had changed greatly from the place where seafarers first landed thousands of years before. Sea



Figure 1.3. Two California Indian women from the San Francisco Bay area, wearing tule reed skirts, a feather cape (*left*), and a deerskin robe (*right*). Hand-colored engraving from an 1816 drawing by Louis Choris, artist for a Russian expedition under Lt. Otto von Kotzebue.

levels had risen nearly 250 feet as the planet thawed after the last ice age, dramatically altering coastlines, rivers, and wetlands and the plants and animals they offered to humans. A formerly open bay in the Pacific Ocean near modern Los Angeles, for example, had become a lagoon hosting masses of waterfowl (chapter 9).

Just as important, the landscape had filled with people over the centuries as waves of Native immigrants moved in. Linguists have been able to trace the relative timing of some of these migrations. They know, for instance, that the Chumash language family, which is not demonstrably related to other California Indian languages, has deep roots in the area around Santa Barbara. Its speakers must have been among the earliest to arrive. Over time, linguistic diversity throughout California increased, and some Indian groups moved into the coastal strip fairly late.

Altogether, California Indians spoke roughly eighty languages. In some places along the coast, speakers of different tongues lived as close neighbors, side by side in small regions. A Coast Miwok person from the San Francisco Bay area who traveled a hundred miles from home might have heard people speaking twenty languages or more. Although few California Indians traveled widely, many of those living

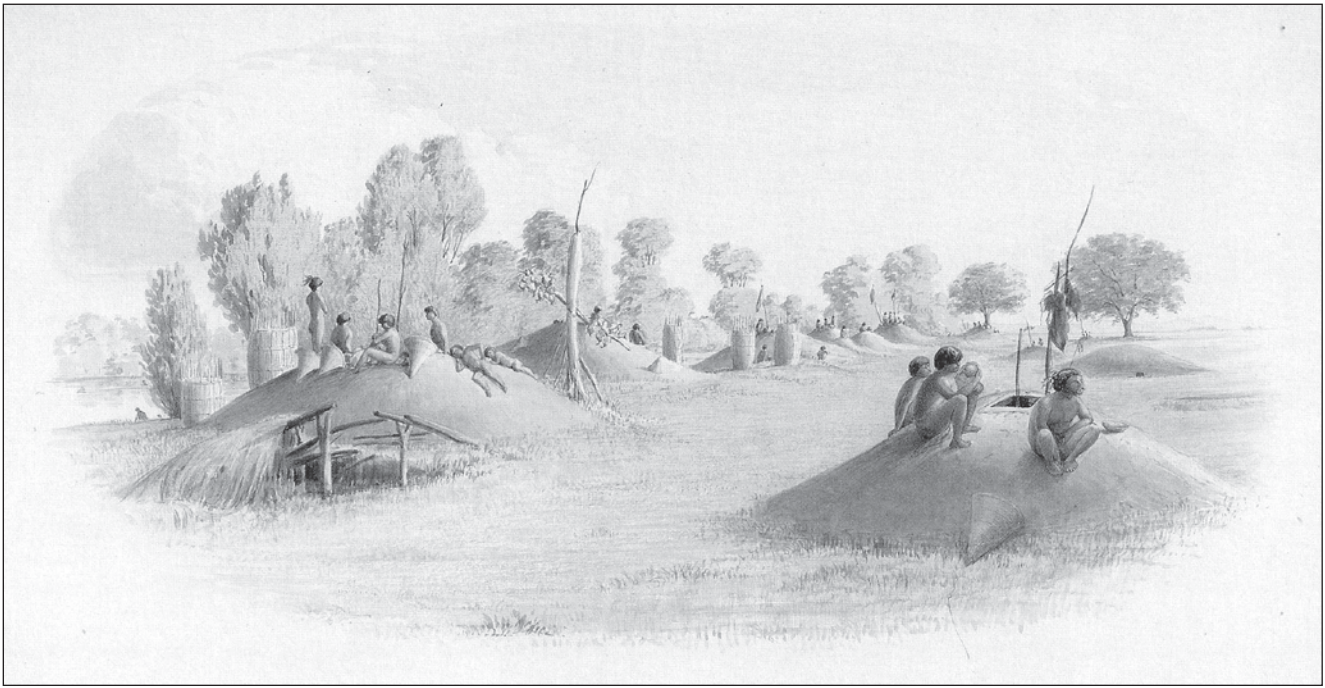


Figure 1.4. Earth-covered houses and acorn granaries at the Konkow Indian village of Céno, on the banks of the Sacramento River, about 1850. Pencil and ink wash by Henry B. Brown, 1851–1852.

in border areas probably spoke at least two languages. Looking a little farther inland to the Wintu Indians, we know that some shamans could switch from one language to another when channeling spirits.

For thousands of years after the first seafarers landed on California shores, while the sea slowly rose and newcomers trickled in, Native people along the coast tended to live fairly similar lives. In small bands of a few related families apiece, they moved frequently about the landscape, following game animals and ripening plants as they came into season. On the coast they fished, hunted sea mammals, and collected shellfish. Inland they gathered large quantities of small seeds in expertly made baskets, later grinding the seeds into flour with stone milling tools. Wherever they camped for a while, they built brush huts and left behind the animal bones and broken tools that today signal archaeological sites.

Eventually, by about five thousand years ago, after sea level had stabilized at roughly its present level, human populations in many parts of coastal California had grown large enough that bands could no longer move so freely over the land. Former seasonal campsites and hamlets now became villages where people lived year-round. Settlements also began to look

increasingly different in areas along the coast from north to south (chapters 6–9).

Around San Francisco Bay, villagers about thirty-eight hundred years ago started building up imposing shell mounds, which rose ever higher over the millennia as mourners buried in them their dead and the detritus of funeral feasts (chapter 6). Later, people also lived on the mounds in tightly packed villages of small, earth-covered houses and larger dance houses. Using ingenious fish weirs, or dams—some so large that several people could walk abreast on top of them—these early Bay Area residents caught millions of salmon and other spawning fish, many of which they smoked and dried to eat later. Chiefs staged great feasts at fish-harvesting time, inviting other chiefs and commoners from surrounding settlements to enjoy the catch in exchange for shell beads. Today, few of the mounds remain; Euroamericans destroyed most of them in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for farming and urban development. Yet new studies of collections made by pioneering archaeologists and new work in surviving remnants of mounds are yielding fresh and sometimes surprising understandings of the mound dwellers' lives.

South of the Bay Area, along the central coast,



Figure 1.5. Excavations by a crew led by Lynn Gamble at an archaeological site on Santa Cruz Island. Ancestral Chumash people lived there from about six thousand to twenty-five hundred years ago.

California Indians began to cluster around estuaries and in adjacent valleys about ten thousand years ago. There they fished, gathered shellfish, hunted small animals, and collected wild plant seeds (chapter 7). So ubiquitous in archaeological sites are the flat milling stones on which people ground seeds into flour that archaeologists call their way of life the “Milling Stone” culture. This lifestyle endured for some forty-five hundred years, only to disappear at a time of cooler climate and new immigration into the region. Replacing it about fifty-five hundred years ago came a lifestyle founded on hunting larger game, collecting and grinding acorns, and, increasingly, fishing—especially after the invention of a new, more efficient style of fishhook about three thousand years ago. Hunters, too, benefited from innovation when the bow and arrow quickly caught on about fifteen hundred years ago. By the time the first Spanish land expedition, under Gaspar de Portolá, arrived in 1769, Native groups speaking at least seven languages lived in small villages on the central coast, making use of an enormous

variety of natural resources in ways finely honed over hundreds of generations.

In contrast to the central coast, with its many language groups living side by side, the next place on our north-to-south tour was home for at least the last seventy-five hundred years to people from a single language family, Chumash (chapter 8). The stretch of coast along the Santa Barbara Channel, protected from large surf by the offshore Channel Islands, provided calm waters for early fishing boats and sustained a rich marine life. Today, the channel supports one of the most prolific coastal fisheries in the world, partly because of its geographical situation and the upward movement of nutrient-rich deep water. Seaweeds and phytoplankton thrive, a veritable banquet for marine fish. Sea mammals living in the channel’s kelp beds dine on the fish, and Chumash people throughout pre-Columbian times dined on both. They fished and hunted from sewn plank canoes, a novel type of watercraft found nowhere else in North America (chapter 5).

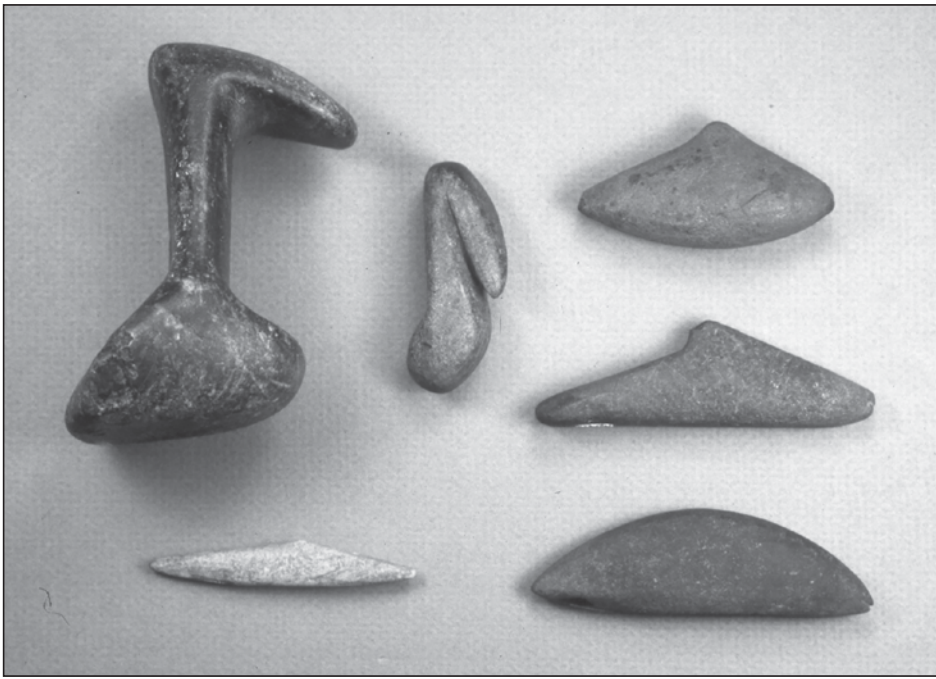


Figure 1.6. Carved soapstone effigies of fish and other creatures from a site at Malibu, California. Such talismans or amulets reflected Native spiritual beliefs.

The channel coast was also known for its shell bead makers, who spent countless hours hunched over stone anvils shaping and drilling small seashells into beads (chapter 12; plate 5). Some kinds of shell beads belonged only to chiefs and other high-status persons, but other kinds served as money, available to many people for paying debts, buying food, purchasing dance regalia, procuring services, and acquiring brides. Like the Chumash, most other California Indians relied on shell beads as indispensable objects in daily life.

Just south of the Santa Barbara Channel, near where Los Angeles International Airport now sits, Indians once lived in lush wetlands around Ballona Creek, the original main course of the Los Angeles River. Now largely drained and covered by the industrial and residential buildings of west Los Angeles, the area called “the Ballona” still holds surprisingly plentiful traces of a successful Native way of life. Excavating in the heart of the city, archaeologists have investigated eight thousand years of human residence there (chapter 9). At first, families visited the shores of an open bay on the Pacific to fish and hunt for a week or two at a time. As sea level rose and then stabilized, the open coast at Ballona became a lagoon,

a habitat rich in shellfish, birds, and small mammals, highly attractive to humans. People began to settle more permanently in the area, in villages instead of hunting camps. They hunted aquatic birds, fished, and gathered abundant oysters and clams. They buried their dead and conducted mourning ceremonies along the edges of the lagoon, practices they continued even after Spanish colonization began to upend their way of life forever.

Wherever they lived along the coast, California Indians, like people everywhere throughout human history, faced challenges posed by unpredictable

weather and climate: lengthy droughts, catastrophic floods, changing sea temperatures, and El Niño events. In response, they developed ways to manage their environment for the greatest food security possible (chapter 4). One of the best examples is their deliberate burning of the terrain. Today, disastrous fires plague Californians, obliterating not only forests but also entire human communities. California Indians developed a different relationship with fire: they used it to their advantage, as a tool to enhance the diversity of resources on which they relied. By intentionally setting fire to an area—rather the way the US Forest Service now conducts “prescribed burns” to thin underbrush—Native people created conditions that favored the growth of new plants and tender shoots to be used for food and materials for housing, cooking utensils, storage containers, weapons, baskets, and other basics of daily survival.

But California Indians’ lives were not only about the necessities. They were also rich in religious observances filled with celebratory feasting, dancing, and singing. Secret religious societies, composed of the elites of the community, regularly held ceremonies and initiation rites in which girls and boys learned how to handle the dangerous power contained in the group’s

ceremonial paraphernalia (chapter 11). Membership in the secret societies buttressed the elites' political and social power, and members' performances of both secret and public ceremonies reinforced the legitimacy of chiefs and other leaders. Public ritual celebrations often brought many commoners together, too, to visit with friends and relatives, exchange beads and food, and meet potential marriage partners.

Far removed from such ritual gatherings, people left hints of an entirely different aspect of religious life. Painted on remote rocks in the backcountry are all sorts of images—in some areas, myriad spiders, turtles, coyotes, bears, condors, lizards, salamanders, water striders, and frogs; in others, winged dancers, brilliant sunlike images, and streaking comets. Produced by shamans, astronomers, and other experts entrusted with maintaining cosmic equilibrium in an uncertain world, these images mark places of power, mystery, and self-induced trances. Although pre-Columbian Indians had no writing in the sense in which we know it today, they depicted their spiritual lives and cosmic beliefs on stone. Archaeologists recognize these images as some of the most spectacular rock art in the world, and specialists continue to document these hidden places and interpret their meanings (chapter 13).

It is hard not to wonder what life might be like for California Indians today if Europeans had never stepped ashore in the Middle World. But step ashore they did, and we will never know, for example, whether the many language groups would have stayed separate and distinct or might have melded over time, or whether coastal people would ever have begun growing maize like their neighbors in the Southwest. After several hundred years of exploration, Spaniards colonized coastal California, establishing powerful institutions—especially Catholic missions backed up by military forts—that changed the lives of the first Californians forever (chapters 14–16). The newcomers brought with them an onslaught of disease, the curtailment of traditional hunting and gathering grounds, unhealthy living conditions in dank mission barracks, and countless hours of forced labor.

Yet California Indians did not simply succumb to the colonizers. Rebellion, resistance, cooperation, and persistence are all threads in the story of this period of stunning change. Native people survived,

and today they thrive. One hallmark of California Indian culture, the basket, is still woven today from the same materials employed for thousands of years, gathered in the same woods and meadows (chapter 17). Collectors prize these baskets highly, just as did early Spanish, Portuguese, English, French, Russian, and American voyagers, who competed to acquire the finest baskets to send back home (plate 1). In 1775 and 1776, when the Anza expedition passed through southern California, its men bought so many baskets that subsequent travelers complained that few were left for them to purchase.

With the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, Mexico ceded the territories of California, New Mexico, and Arizona to the United States. Disastrously for California Indians, in the same year the treaty was signed a white man discovered gold near present-day Sacramento, sparking the United States' first gold rush. Euroamericans swarmed into central California seeking fortunes; only a year later, an estimated one hundred thousand miners lived in California. Single-mindedly ruthless in their quest for gold, miners massacred California Indian men, women, and children if they stood in the way. Those who were spared found themselves dispossessed of their traditional land and, in many cases, enslaved. Without women companions, miners freely raped Indian women. Some researchers have estimated that only two years after the gold strike, one hundred thousand California Indians had died.

Passage of the Homestead Act in 1862, which offered vast tracts of land cheap to white settlers, attracted even more land-hungry immigrants to displace even more Native Californians. With so many Indians dead or displaced, rituals and traditions deteriorated along with the food-producing environment. By 1870, perhaps as few as fifty thousand California Indians still lived.

Finally, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the US government began to establish federally recognized reservations and rancherias for California Indians. Many Native groups living near the coast, however, never received federal recognition, partly because the coastal strip had been colonized so early by whites and its original residents had already been displaced or mixed together for several centuries. Native people in this region still struggle for the rights

and recognition afforded to some other Indians in the state and throughout the nation.

Despite the devastation of the Spanish, Mexican, and early American years, some California Indian populations have rebounded from their lowest ebb. Tribal members work to ensure that traditional customs such as basket weaving and the building of plank canoes continue to flourish or are revived. They have

successfully saved some of their traditional plant-collecting areas and ancestral burial grounds. California Indian lawyers, environmental specialists, engineers, teachers, and scientists work with traditional specialists and others to maintain group identities and deep cultural values. It is a testimony to the resilience of California Indians that they thrive today, dancing in the footsteps of their ancestors.

