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A Presentation by

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“Chumash: Shells, Shelter, Seafaring and Spectacular Rock Art”

Chris Oravec is a member of the DAS Board. In the past she has presented papers to the Society on the interpretation of rock art and the Flower World in San Juan Anthropomorphic rock art.

The name “Chumash” means shell-makers, or people of the shell. The Chumash people are associated with the sea although Chumash culture stretches from California coastal waters inland to the pinyon forests bordering Yokuts and Miwok territory. Coastal Chumash traded shells, beads and other products of the sea with inland Chumash for upland forest products made from pinyon and deer, creating a rich localized economy.

Recent archaeological and DNA research indicates the Chumash culture has roots in the early migrations of Northern Siberian people over the Bering Land Bridge some 14,700 years ago. They probably traveled by boat along the coast of present-day Alaska, Canada and the Northwest. This migration leads to the California coast near Ventura, Santa Barbara and the Channel Islands. One of the earliest burials in North America is of a woman on one of the main islands dating around 10,000 years ago.

Sometime earlier, around 11-13,000 years ago, pigmy mammoths inhabited the islands as evidenced by a recently uncovered skull of a juvenile. This indicates a rich source of food and materials may have been available at the end of the Pacific ice age during the Bering migration.

The main islands of Santa Rosa, San Juan and others contain immense amounts of heretofore unexcavated artifacts including shell beads and curved implements presumed to be scraping tools. Caves on the islands, protected by the National Park Service, contain many pictographs. Recent archaeology is just beginning to uncover these massive deposits of cultural materials. Dates for them range around 500 B.C.E. to around the beginning of the twentieth century. Other shell implements include pitch-and shell covered rattles, gaming pieces, and fishing weights in the form of such sea creatures as dolphins and whales. Flutes made of deer bone were used in ceremonies as well.

The relationship between human beings, animals, the rich sea life and the lush landscape is reflected in Chumash myths. Reversing the origin stories of many other tribes, Chumash start with the creation of humans who then emerge as animal-like figures. For example, people have lizard-like hands because Sky Coyote fails at fitting people with paws when Lizard quickly places his fingers on a marble stone. In another example, dolphins, created after humans, are considered to be close cousins. Further, there appears to be a corresponding land-based creature (such as Scorpion) for each sea-based creature (such as the mythological Sea Dragon), indicating a balance between ocean and earth.

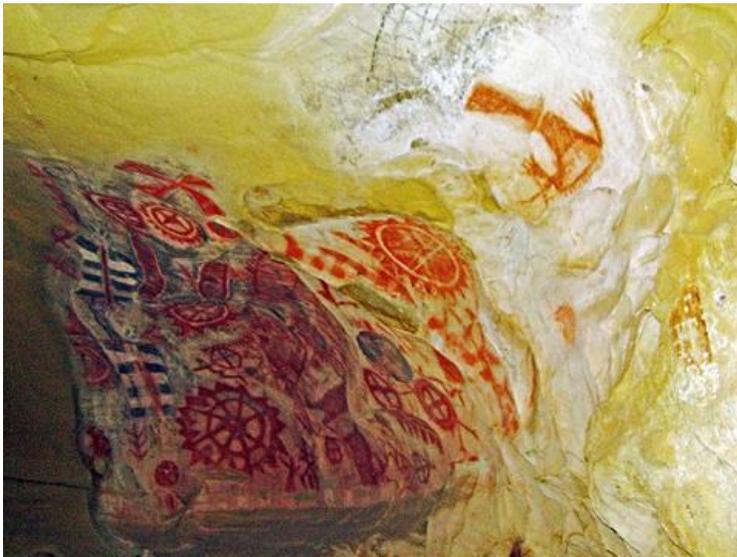
In the Chumash calendar, each month of the year designated a spiritual figure that conferred qualities to those born in that month. The month of February was dedicated to Momoy, an elderly spirit woman. According to oral histories from the turn of the twentieth century she gave Datura to the people for the initiation of young men into adulthood. Certainly the ceremonial use of Datura, or jimsonweed, was central to the Chumash belief system. The shamanistic theory of rock art, in which trances induced by Datura and other hallucinogens were recorded in rock art predominantly by shamanic medicine men, dominated archaeology in the 60s, 70s, and 80s and was applied far beyond the Chumash culture.

A newer theory based in archaeoastronomy is the current paradigm for interpreting Chumash rock art. The existence of the yearly calendar, tied to stories about major mythological spirit forces such as Sun, Moon, Sky Eagle, and Sky Coyote, suggests that the culture valued close observation and precision, not only shamanic trance states. For example, Chumash shelters were made of tule reeds lashed together by whalebone straps. A clan or village would host other villages in these shelters during the Winter Solstice. This was a time of ritualized uncertainty over whether the sun, once stopped in its travels, would return to its normal path and resume the calendar year. Shamans would conduct ceremonies while the people sheltered in the huts, sometimes not emerging until the sun resumed its course.

The sky is also important for navigation, and Chumash boats called tomols were the most sophisticated along the coastline. They were not dugout canoes but planked boats tied together with lashes and pitched together with tar at the seams. They were typically about 25 feet long and were painted red, black and white with decorative elements on the bow and stern. These boats were capable of ocean forays for creatures like seal and swordfish, and the latter were highly prized emblems of the culture.

Recent research underscores the emphasis on archaeoastronomy among the Chumash. In 2009 Rex Saint Onge published an article that describes a motif called the Guardian and the Sky Coyote. The Guardian is a scorpion with a square headdress or crown that hovers near the Sky Coyote or Great Creator, represented by a rayed disk. This motif represents the Big Dipper revolving nightly around the North Star. The motif is represented in rock art at the Painted Cave near Santa Barbara, Painted Rock in the Carrizo Plain, Morro Cave, and an arboglyph (tree carving) on private land near San Luis Obispo on what is known as the Scorpion Tree. Each location pointed to true north, a sign that the rock art was aligned with the North Star and the Big Dipper.

The Painted Cave is in Chumash Painted Cave State Park protected by a steel grate but accessible to the public for viewing and pictures. Its many star and sun-like motifs and its vaguely zoomorphic human figures, along with chains of diamonds and centipede-like images, are painted in the Chumash primary colors of red, black and white. They are a spectacular display of Chumash material culture.



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