

Channel Islands Culture: Past and Present

Focus questions

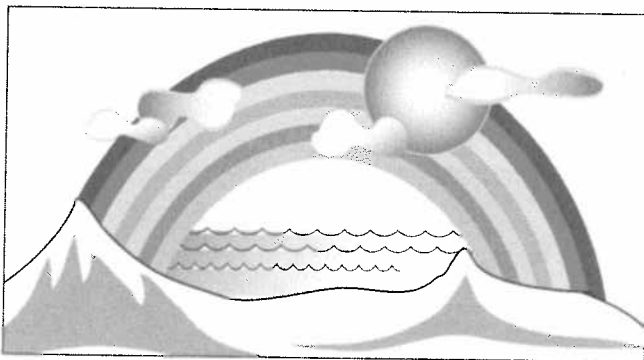
What tools and technologies have people in this region developed to adapt to the maritime environment?

How have people from different time periods used the marine and coastal resources of this region?

What methods do scientists employ to examine the Channel Islands' past?

Who were the first people in the Channel Islands?

The first Chumash people were created on Santa Cruz Island. They were made from the seeds of a magic plant by the Earth Goddess, whose name was Hutash . . . So begins an **oral narrative** describing the origin of the first people to inhabit the Channel Islands. According to the story, the Chumash crossed from Santa Cruz to other islands and the mainland on a bridge made by Hutash from a giant rainbow. As they crossed, some Chumash fell from the rainbow into the sea and were turned into dolphins. The Rainbow Bridge story symbolizes the close connection of the Chumash to the earth and the sea, and the expansion of their culture to the other Channel Islands and the mainland.



The Rainbow Bridge spanning the Channel.

Anthropologists and **archaeologists** have different ideas about when humans first migrated to North America. Some believe people arrived over 18,000 years ago, while others say there is no evidence that

people have been here more than 13,000 years. Either way, they came across a land bridge (now gone) that connected North America and Asia. There are also two theories about how humans dispersed through North America once they got there. One theory is that people migrated along the continent's western shoreline using boats. According to the second theory, people traveled overland, through an opening between glacial ice sheets in western Canada.

The first people in south central California spoke three distinct but related languages: Cruzeño Chumash, Northern Chumash (also called Obispeño), and Central Chumash (which included the dialects Purisimeño, Cuyama, Ineseño, Barbareño, Emigdiano, and Ventureño). Cruzeño was spoken throughout the northern Channel Islands of Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, San Miguel, and Anacapa. People of another, unrelated language group—the Tongva, or Gabrielino—inhabited the southern Channel Islands. The lone woman of San Nicolas Island, the subject of the novel *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, was a member of this group. (See the map on **Master A**.)

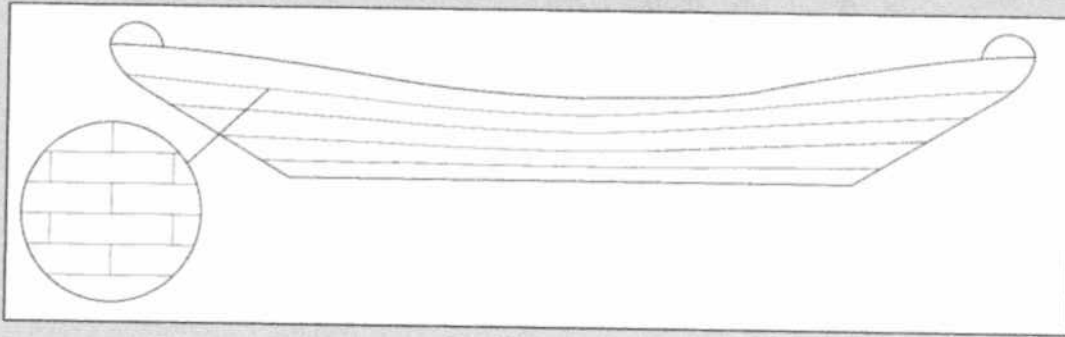
How have we learned about Chumash culture?

The oral narratives of Chumash elders and rich archaeological finds throughout the Channel Islands are the sources of much of our knowledge about the Chumash. JASON host researcher John Johnson is an anthropologist and Curator of Anthropology at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History. As part of his work, Dr. Johnson goes to ancient village sites where he studies ancient Chumash trash heaps called **middens**. The middens are dark, composted piles of earth, charcoal, and shell fragments. They contain fishing hooks, shell beads, and other **artifacts** that reveal much about Chumash life, from thousands of years ago up to the mid-1800s. Dr. Johnson and other anthropologists have also learned about the Chumash by studying written records of the last native people to live in their original communities.

Host researcher Julie Tumamait-Stenslie is a direct descendant of the Cruzeño, or Island Chumash. She monitors artifacts on the islands and works closely with Dr. Johnson and other anthropologists.

Building a Tomol

A tomol's frame was constructed of redwood logs that had washed ashore. Skilled craftsmen, known as The Brotherhood of the Tomol, made the canoes by splitting the logs into planks, sanding them, and lashing them together using dogbane or nettle cords. The seams were caulked with *yop*, a substance made from tar (from the region's natural oil seeps) and pine pitch. The redwood planks swelled when wet, making a watertight seal.



Tomol construction.

What happened to the Chumash culture?

The Spanish explorer Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo was the first European to write about the Channel Islands, on his 1543 voyage. Another Spanish explorer, Sebastian Vizcaino, developed the first good charts of the islands in 1602. The Chumash, however, did not have significant contact with Europeans for about another 150 years. At the time of their first contact with Europeans, about 15,000 Chumash lived on the islands and adjacent mainland. Yet, by the time of the first state census in California (1852), fewer than 600 Chumash people remained. How did this happen?

Like many Native American cultures, Chumash culture nearly disappeared with the arrival of Europeans. The Spanish took Chumash people from their villages to build Spanish missions on the mainland. They taught the Chumash how to grow and harvest food and tend livestock, made them speak the Spanish language, and converted them to Christianity. As more Chumash became associated with **missions**, the Chumash lost their traditional way of life. The last of the Island Chumash were relocated to mainland missions in 1822. In addition, diseases such as smallpox and measles, unwittingly transmitted by settlers, soldiers, and fur traders, killed thousands of Chumash people. By the end of the Mission Period, few people who identified themselves as Chumash were left.

In the 1800s, ranchers, Russian and Aleut sealers and

whalers, and Chinese abalone fishermen moved into the Channel Islands. The islands also continued to be a popular trading stop for ships from the Gold Rush and from the fishing, sealing, and freight industries. The less fortunate of these vessels were wrecked near the Channel Islands. Now, resting on the ocean floor, they are of great interest to maritime historians.

What is Chumash culture like today?

Chumash culture in the Channel Islands is stronger today than it has been in many years. Descendants of Chumash people are rediscovering the words of their

Radiocarbon Dating

Radiocarbon dating is a way to determine the age of a sample that was once living or contained living material (for example, bones, hair, soil, pottery, water, wooden objects). All living things contain the element carbon. A tiny part of Earth's carbon is radioactive: its structure is not stable. This carbon is called carbon-14, or radiocarbon. Once a living thing dies, the total amount of radiocarbon in its remains decreases at a measurable rate, called a half-life. A half-life is the time it takes for half the radiocarbon in a sample to disappear. By measuring the remaining carbon-14, scientists can determine when a once-living sample died.

Trading for Life

Winter is coming and your village needs the proper supplies to make it through. By role-playing members of a Channel Islands Native group (Chumash or Gabrielino), you will use the resources that are most plentiful in your region to trade with other groups for food, clothing, and valuable materials.

Focus questions

How have humans used the marine and coastal resources in this region?

Materials

For each student

Copy of Master A (Channel Islands language groups)

For each group

4 copies of Master B (tomol assembly)

Copy of Master C (Chumash trade items)

Q-tips, 2 for each tomol

Red and black paint or markers

Cloth or plastic bag (30 centimeter by 38 centimeter) for each group

Elbow or rigatoni pasta strung on string or heavy thread (to represent bead money)

Cotton balls and/or pipe cleaners (to represent clusters of plant fibers)

Small bars of soap (to represent talc/soapstone)

Craft fur (to represent deer)

Kidney beans (to represent baskets of acorns)

Popsicle-type sticks painted different colors (to represent different marine mammals)

Acrylic beads

Wood barrel beads

Small bag of seashells

Scissors

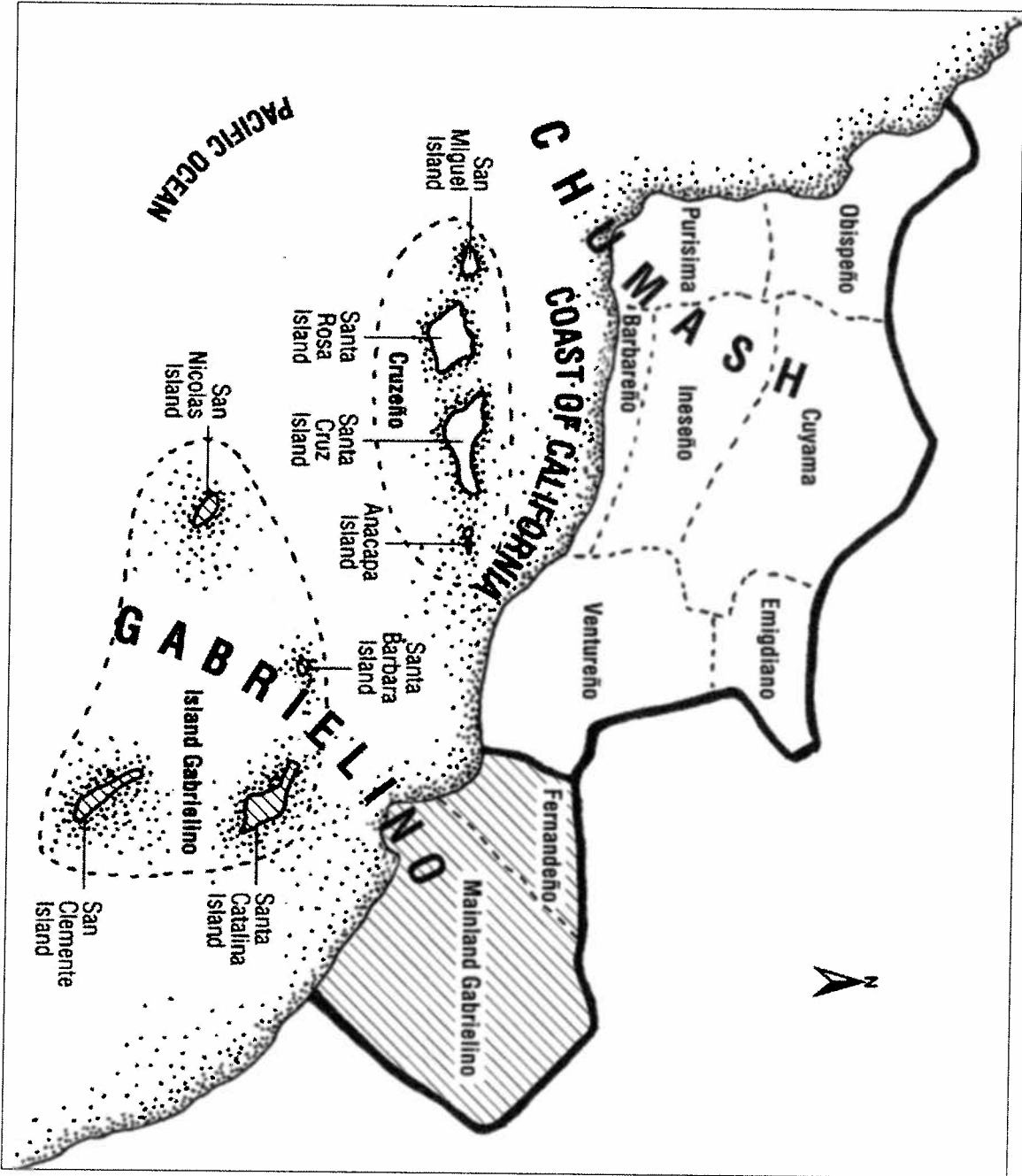
Tape or glue

Procedure

1. Divide up into groups of three or four, with each group assigned one of the following cultural regions on **Master A**: Cruzeño on Santa Cruz, Cruzeño on Santa Rosa, Gabrielino on Santa Catalina, Mainland Barbareño, Mainland Ventureño, Mainland Cuyama. Divide up the space in the classroom so that each group “inhabits” a different geographic region.
 2. Follow the directions to cut out, assemble, and decorate two tomols. Use two copies of **Master B** for each tomol. Take four Q-tips to use as paddles: two for each tomol.
 3. Collect your group’s bag and resources according to the list below.
 - Santa Cruz Cruzeño: 10 strings of bead money (pasta)
 - Santa Rosa Cruzeño: 10 marine mammals (popsicle sticks painted and labeled “otter,” “whale,” “seal”)
 - Santa Catalina Gabrielino: 10 pieces of soapstone (soap)
 - Mainland Barbareño: 10 plant fibers, each representing a bundle (cotton balls, pipe cleaners)
 - Mainland Ventureño: 10 acorns, each representing a basketful (beans, peas, or acorns)
 - Mainland Cuyama: 10 deer (fur or felt)
- Using **Master C**, discuss what each item represents in terms of fulfilling needs.
4. Now you are ready for the first trading period. Divide your group in half; one half will “travel,” the other will stay at “home” to trade with visitors. As a group, decide on a strategy for getting what you need and determining the value of each trade item. As you trade, keep in mind what you will need to end up with to survive the winter! (Away traders: Move your tomols to the proper region on the map and/or physically move to the group’s “village” in your room. Home traders will be trading with visiting groups.)

Channel Islands Region Language Groups

Courtesy of the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History



Chumash Trade Items



Shell bead money and chert drills

Most shell bead money was made from olivella shells. Shells were broken into square blanks, drilled, and strung on cordage. Drills were made from a hard mineral called chert, abundant on Santa Cruz Island. After stringing the beads, their makers shaped them by grinding them on a large stone. A string of disk-shaped beads measured around the hand was called a *ponco*. The *ponco*'s value was determined by the color and quality of the beads. Abalone and mussel shells were also sometimes used to make shell bead money.



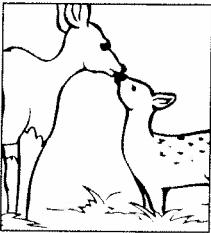
Plant fibers

Dogbane grew only on the mainland. It was important for its fibers: with them, island dwellers bound the redwood planks they used to make tomols. Dogbane stems were used for cordage and nets. Tule or bulrush was another important fibrous plant. It was used for thatching, mats, sandals, and skirts, as well as balsa (reed bundle) canoes.



Steatite (soapstone)

The mineral steatite occurred naturally only on Santa Catalina Island in the southern Channel Islands. All native groups in the area valued the stone: they made steatite cooking bowls and frying pans, pipes, charms, beads, ornaments, and "doughnut stones" that served as weights on digging tools. It is soft and easily carved, and does not break when heated.



Deer

Deer were found only on the mainland, but had so many important uses that they were sought in trade by island dwellers throughout the region. Deer meat was eaten and deer bones were used for whistles, flutes, tools, and fishhooks. Sinew was used for bowstrings and the backs of bows, and antlers were used as wedges and tools to make arrow and spear points. The skins were made into clothing, and the hoofs were often used as rattles.



Acorns

Acorns, the fruit of oak trees, were a staple food. They were often ground, leached to remove bitter acids, then cooked into a thick mush. This bland but filling mush was usually eaten with meat, fish, or other dishes. Acorns were also used in ceremonies and ornaments. Oak trees did grow on the islands, but many island dwellers still received a large percentage of their acorn supply through trading with mainland villages.



Marine mammals (otter, seal, sea lion, whale)

The island dwellers ate seals and sea lions. They also used their skins for capes and blankets, drilled holes in shells with their whiskers, and made tools from their bones. Sea otters were highly valued for their furs, which were also used in capes and blankets. Whale meat and blubber were eaten; whale rib bones were used as pry bars and wedges, and in the doorways of houses. Seals, sea lions, and otters were hunted by Island Chumash and traded to mainlanders. Whales were not hunted, but used when they washed ashore.