
Centuries-old bones of horses unearthed in Carlsbad

BY PHILIP K. IRELAND - STAFF WRITER

JULY 17, 2005 12 AM PT







CARLSBAD — Archaeologists working against the clock in Carlsbad have unearthed



The San Diego Union-Tribune

LOG IN



the Spanish began their conquest of California.

Last week's discovery, high on a hill overlooking the Agua Hedionda lagoon, follows the discovery in June of the skeletal remains of another horse and a small burro, said project manager Dennis Gallegos of Gallegos and Associates, the contractor hired to explore the site.

The finds are significant because native North American horses were thought to have been extinct more than 10,000 years ago, and the remains are older than the recorded conquests by the Spanish, who reintroduced horses to the New World.

"This is a story untold," said Mark Mojado, the cultural representative for the San Luis Rey Band of Mission Indians.

Why the animals were buried at all, why they were buried together, and why they appear to have been buried in a ritualistic way is a matter of academic conjecture, according to archaeologists, paleontologists and others who have seen the site.

Radiocarbon dating of 340 years, plus or minus 40 years, puts the death of the horse sometime between 1625 and 1705, Mojado said. Therefore, the horses died at least 50 years before San Diego Mission de Alcalá, the first of the California missions, was founded in 1769. The other horse and the burro were buried at the same level, suggesting that they were buried about the same time.

The bones of the horses and the donkey showed no signs of having been shod, an indicator that the horses were not brought by the Spanish, who fitted their horses with iron shoes, said Larry Tift, a researcher with Gallegos.

The site

The three animals were unearthed within a few feet of one another on a hilltop overlooking the Agua Hedionda Lagoon, Gallego said.

The 900-square-meter site has also revealed several “shell middens” — or layers of disturbed shells. A pile of small 2- to 3-inch river rocks 20 feet away may have been a part of a cooking pit or perhaps a sweat lodge, Tift said.

Shell beads, flaked cutting and scraping tools, grinding tools such as metates and manos, even relatively recent pottery shards found over the last seven weeks, tell the story of constant habitation over 5,000 years on the hilltop, Tift said.

Possible explanations

The radiocarbon date, if corroborated by more elaborate tests, may be remarkable since North American horses were thought to have been extinct by the late Pleistocene era more than 10,000 years ago, said Bradford Riney, a paleontology specialist with the San Diego Natural History Museum.

“That would make (the site) extremely important,” he said Thursday. “It would be an early example of domestication.”

Alternately, Mojado postulated that the horses may have been Spanish in origin, perhaps from an ill-fated exploration that never returned and so was lost to history. Perhaps the lost Spanish explorers offered the horses and donkey to the American Indians as a gift, Mojado said.

“There were no horses here then,” he said. “They didn’t know what a horse or a donkey was. They would have seen them as big deer or antelope.”

As a gift, and an unusual gift at that, the animals most certainly would have been revered, which could explain why they were buried high on a hill in the same way some Indians buried their own, Mojado said.

One horse and the donkey appear to have been buried ritualistically with their heads to the north, faces to the left, and their bodies “flexed” in the fetal position, an American Indian method of burial. The newly discovered horse, its ochre-colored bones already fading to yellow from exposure to sun and air, was not similarly posed.

Researchers said they know horses were deliberately buried because they can see definite lines where someone cut into the shell layers to dig a burial pit.

“I’ve been doing this for 16 years and I’ve never seen anything like it,” Tift said.

The bones show no signs of cutting, splitting or crushing that would indicate a violent death, Piek said. Researchers see no sign the horses were butchered for meat.

Carlsbad then

Taken together, the features of the site suggest that the hilltop was used by American Indians from about 5,000 years ago.

At that time, the region now called Carlsbad was much wetter and more lush, with an average annual rainfall of about 350 inches. Although sea level was lower than now, lagoons — fed by freshwater springs — reached deeper into inland valleys, providing a ready food and water source for its people, said Gallegos archaeologist Lucas Piek.

The hilltops provided an ideal place to live, Tift said. The ocean breezes would have helped cool dwellers and keep insects away, as well as providing security. Inhabitants could watch the approach of other humans and animals. The vantage point was also ideal for observing the movements of game animals.

The site is one of more than 300 in the Carlsbad area, Mojado said. A stone’s throw away, researchers found the 8,000-year-old remains of a human. Down in the valley, archaeologists uncovered glass beads — trinkets brought from Spain — to trade with the natives.

California's Prehistoric State Artifact, a stone that some believe is shaped like a bear, was found on the Kelly Ranch property on a nearby hill to the north. Radiocarbon dating of artifacts at that site suggest that humans occupied the area more than 9,000 years ago.

Why was this site studied?

The cultural exploration is required by law as part of a study of the environmental impacts the project will likely create. The study examines traffic, noise, threats to indigenous plants and animals, as well as potential damage to historically significant sites. Gallegos said his work should conclude within two weeks.

Grand Pacific Resorts plans to break ground on a 700-room resort on the hill on Aug. 1, said Tim Stripe, Grand Pacific Resort Inc.'s co-president. The company plans to build 350 hotel rooms, 350 time-share units, two restaurants, four pools, tennis courts and conference rooms on a 50-acre site between Cannon Road and Hidden Valley Road. The \$150 million, Mediterranean-style complex will become Carlsbad's third large-scale resort.

After Gallegos and Associates has documented the site and removed the animal skeletons and other artifacts, a portion of the hilltop site will be capped with sand and soil to preserve any remaining archaeological artifacts. A small park, planted with native flora, is in the planning stage to preserve the site as open space, Mojado said.

Contact staff writer Philip K. Ireland at 901-4043 or pireland@nctimes.com.

Support our journalism

Submit a story tip

Report a problem with this story

SUBSCRIBERS ARE READING >

Were others complicit in Champion-Cain's Ponzi scheme to defraud investors?

2 FOR SUBSCRIBERS

An area of San Diego County bigger than Balboa Park is available for \$18.75M

3 FOR SUBSCRIBERS

'Oh my gosh. I'm myself again.' Growing evidence vaccines prevent, treat long COVID

4 Column: San Diego council member, constituents clash over bias claims in housing

5 Opinion: Two decades after 9/11, many questions are left unanswered

LATEST >



SPORTS COLUMNISTS

Column: Dodgers, Giants remind Padres how far they are from baseball's October standard

2 hours ago

READERS REACT

Opinion: California's new laws show lawmakers must rethink their priorities

Oct. 16, 2021

READERS REACT

Opinion: Don't kill California's rooftop solar industry in its infancy

Oct. 16, 2021

SPORTS

NFL DFS Week 6 Optimal Lineup

Oct. 16, 2021

BUSINESS

HOA Homefront – New laws approved for 2022: Changes in HOA elections (again)

Oct. 16, 2021

© 2021 The San Diego Union-Tribune

1111 La Jolla Village Drive, San Diego, CA 92108

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Terms of Service](#)

[Sign Up For Our Newsletters](#)

Follow Us



[About Us](#)

[Contact the Union-Tribune](#)

[Archives](#)

[E-Newspaper](#)
