

Handbook of North American Indians

WILLIAM C. STURTEVANT
General Editor

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California

ROBERT F. HEIZER
Volume Editor



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Gabrielino

LOWELL JOHN BEAN AND CHARLES R. SMITH

The Gabrielino (gäbrēal'ēnō) are, in many ways, one of the most interesting—yet least known—of native California peoples. At the time of Spanish contact in 1769 they occupied the “most richly endowed coastal section in southern California” (Blackburn 1962-1963:6), which is most of present-day Los Angeles and Orange counties, plus several offshore islands (San Clemente, Santa Catalina, San Nicolas). With the possible exception of the Chumash, the Gabrielino were the wealthiest, most populous, and most powerful ethnic nationality in aboriginal southern California, their influence spreading as far north as the San Joaquin valley Yokuts, as far east as the Colorado River, and south into Baja California. Unfortunately, most if not all Gabrielinos were dead long before systematic ethnographic studies were instituted; and, as a result, knowledge of them and their lifeways is meager.

Language, Territory, and Environment

Gabrielino was one of the Cupan languages in the Takic family, which is part of the Uto-Aztecan linguistic stock (Bright 1975).^{*} Internal linguistic differences existed, Harrington (1962:viii) suggesting four dialects and Kroeber (1925), six. Harrington's four-part division includes: Gabrielino proper, spoken mainly in the Los Angeles basin area; Fernandēño, spoken by people north of the Los Angeles basin, mainly in the San Fernando valley region; Santa Catalina Island dialect; and San Nicolas Island dialect—although according to Bright (1975) insufficient data exist to be sure of the Cupan affiliation of the San Nicolas speech. There were probably dialectal differences also between many mainland villages, a result not only of geographical separation but also of social, cultural, and linguistic mixing with neighboring non-Gabrielino speakers.

The names Gabrielino and Fernandēño (fernän'dā-nyō) refer to the two major Spanish missions established in Gabrielino territory—San Gabriel and San Fernando.

^{*} Italicized Gabrielino words have been written in a phonemic alphabet by Kenneth C. Hill, on the basis of John Peabody Harrington's unpublished field notes. The consonants are: (stops and affricate) *p, t, c, k, kʰ, ʔ*; (fricatives) *s, ʃ, x, h*; (nasals) *m, n, ŋ*; (approximants) *v, ɟ, r, j, w*. Stressed vowels are *i, e [ɛ], a, o [ɔ], u*, which may occur long or short; in unstressed syllables the vowels are only *i [e], a, and u [o]*.

It was to these two missions that the majority of the Indians living on the coastal plains and valleys of southern California were removed.

Although the major outlines of Gabrielino territorial occupation are known, the fixing of definitive boundaries is difficult. Generally, Gabrielino territory included the watersheds of the Los Angeles, San Gabriel, and Santa Ana rivers, several smaller intermittent streams in the Santa Monica and Santa Ana mountains, all of the Los Angeles basin, the coast from Aliso Creek in the south to Topanga Creek in the north, and the islands of San Clemente, San Nicolas, and Santa Catalina (fig. 1). The area thus bounded encompassed several biotic zones (such as Coast-Marsh, Coastal Strand, Prairie, Chaparral, Oak Woodland, Pine) and, following Hudson's (1971) studies, can be divided into four macro-environmental zones (excluding the islands): Interior Mountains/Adjacent Foothills, Prairie, Exposed Coast, and Sheltered Coast. Each area is characterized by a particular floral-faunal-geographical relationship that allows delineation of subsistence-settlement patterns “according to the macro-environmental setting.” The interior mountains and foothills, according to Hudson, comprise an area of numerous resources including “many small animals, deer, acorns, sage, piñon nuts, and a variety of other plants and animal foods.” Settlement-pattern studies

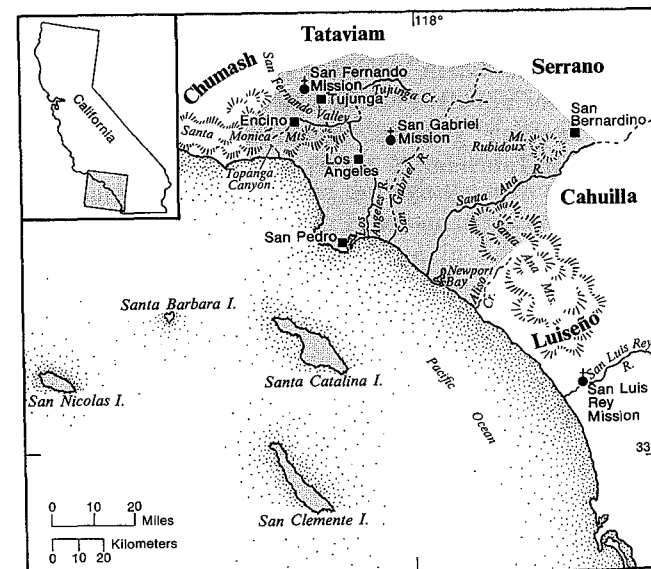


Fig. 1. Tribal territory.

(Hudson 1969) indicate the existence of both primary subsistence villages occupied continuously (perhaps by multiple clan groupings) and smaller secondary gathering camps (small family unit occupation) occupied at various times during the year, depending upon season and resource. All settlements in this zone, as well as in the other zones, were situated near water courses.

The Prairie, the area flanking the interior mountains on the north, east, and south, had as its predominant food resources acorns, sage, yucca, deer, numerous small rodents, cacti, plus a wide variety of plants, animals, and birds associated with marshes (Hudson 1971). Sites (both primary and secondary) were distributed throughout, but always near water courses or springs. The exposed coast from San Pedro south to Newport Bay was an area of concentrated secondary subsistence gathering camps with no primary subsistence villages immediately adjacent to the coast, but rather located inland. Various shellfish, some rays, sharks, and fish were the important food resources, while the offshore kelp beds (prime fishing areas for tuna and swordfish) were used year-round, especially in late summer and early fall. The sheltered coastal area stretching from San Pedro north to Topanga Canyon was characterized by primary subsistence villages located on the coast and secondary subsistence sites concentrated inland near areas of plant-food abundance (like sage stands and acorn or pine nut groves). The resources of this area were primarily marine (fish, shellfish, rays, sharks, sea mammals, and waterfowl), and “it is likely that some ecological elements of this region were also present in Area III (Exposed Coast), depending upon geographical features and weather” (Hudson 1971:56).

Climate varied according to locality, but average July temperatures along the coast ranged from approximately 68° F. to 76° F., with average January temperatures for the Gabrielino area as a whole ranging between 40° F. and 52° F. In the mountains, especially above 7,000 feet, temperatures often dipped as low as 30° F. in the winter (accompanied by snow), while summer temperatures on the prairies occasionally rose as high as 100° F.

While average annual precipitation in the twentieth century is generally less than 15 inches, as much as 40 inches is known in the higher mountains; and it is assumed that a similar pattern existed in precontact periods. The predominant climatic type is Hot Steppe, but near the coast and inland in the foothills and mountains the climatic type is warm Mediterranean. The predominant vegetation associations throughout most of the mainland area are grass and coastal sagebrush, especially in valley bottoms, and chaparral at higher elevations. Over 89 percent of Gabrielino territory was within the Sonoran life-zone, an extremely rich zone, while the balance was Forest Transition along the higher slopes and peaks of the San Gabriel and Santa Ana mountains.

The islands presented a different environmental picture. On San Nicolas Island, called *so'yn̄a* in Gabrielino, 75 miles southwest of Los Angeles, there were virtually no land mammals and a scarcity of exploitable floral resources. However, the little (32.2 sq. mi.), semidesert, windswept island was “particularly favored by the occurrence of abundant sea mammals” in the surrounding sea (Meighan and Eberhart 1953:113), including California and Steller sea lions, harbor seals, sea otters, and northern elephant seals. Additionally, the island was rich in sea fowl, while several different species of fish abounded in the surrounding sea. But the most important meat source was shellfish (rock scallops, mussels, several kinds of limpets, sea urchins), obtainable in large amounts along the island's rocky shoreline. From the hundreds of mortars and pestles (fig. 2) found on the island it is assumed that some plant material was prepared (some parts of the island supported trees, brush, mosses, grasses), but early Spanish references indicate mortars were also used in processing dried abalone meat.

The settlement pattern on San Nicolas is remarkably consistent through time. Villages were located either on sand dunes within 200 yards of shoreline or at considerable elevation above sea level inland on the island's central plateau. The determining factors in settlement pattern were access to the beaches or sea, fresh water (limited to a few springs in the inland's northwestern corner), and elevation affording an unobstructed view. From archeological research it appears that the densest



Dept. of Anth., Smithsonian: top, 18670, 18698; bottom, 21887.

Fig. 2. Utensils for food preparation. top, Sandstone mortar and pestle collected at San Nicolas Island, diameter of mortar 23.5 cm; bottom, soapstone pot collected at Santa Barbara Island, same scale.