

THE FIRST ANGELINOS

The Gabrielino Indians of Los Angeles

By

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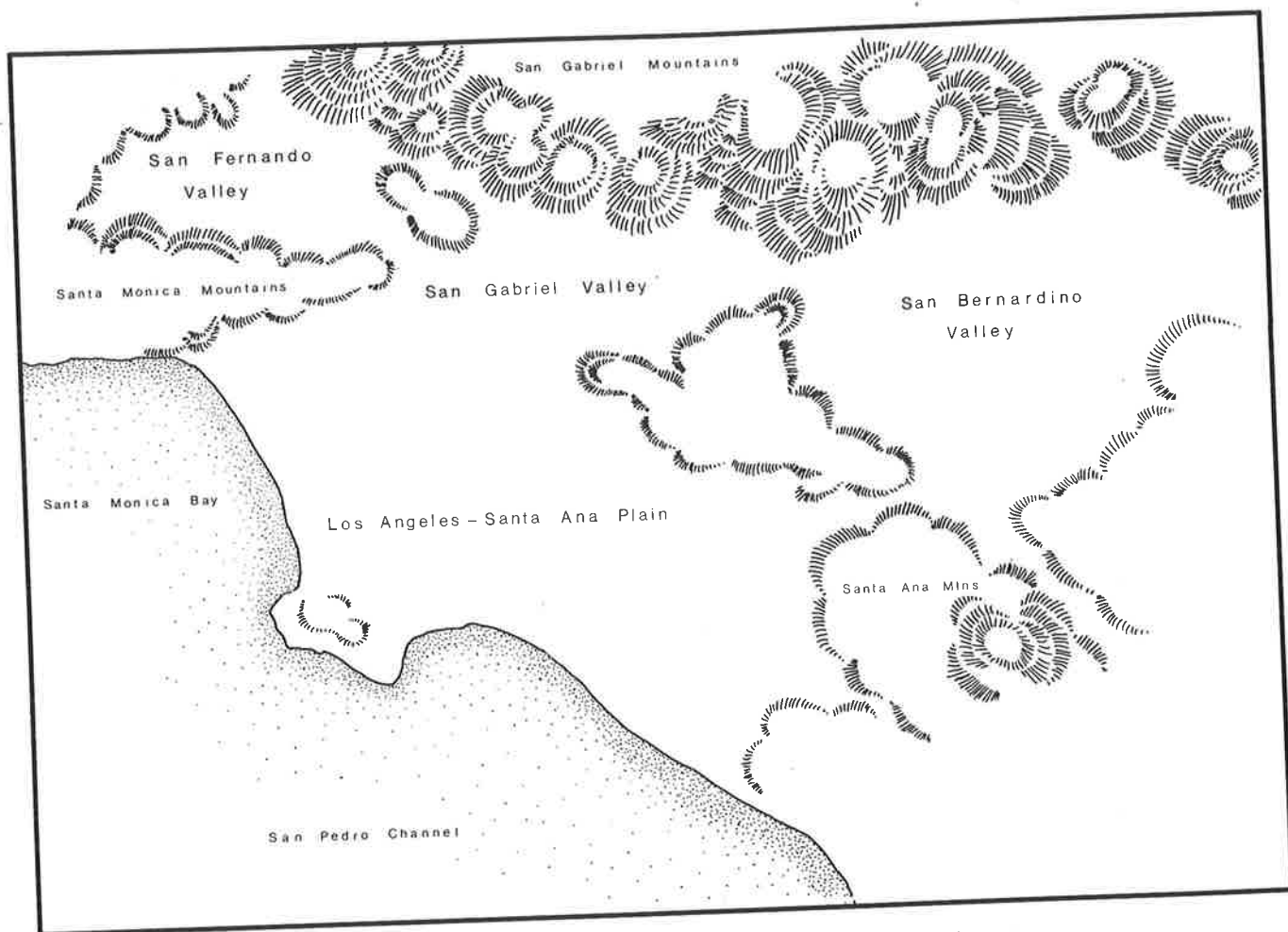
Cover:
Portion of a painting of Mission San Gabriel by Ferdinand Deppe, 1832.
Courtesy of Santa Barbara Mission Archive Library. Author's photograph.

In the west beyond pimū'ηa [Santa Catalina Island] there is a land which rises as a sierra from the sea with pines, fruits and flowers. That county is called 'erēspat, and the Captain of that county is šEhē'vajt. He cares for all and tolerates no evil. . . . Those who do not believe šEhē'vajt, he punishes. God made both worlds. They are connected. The one there is connected and balanced with the one here.

- José Zalvidea

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Map 3. The mainland Gabrielino territory comprised three inland valleys and a broad coastal plain.

familiar with the local Indian settlements, suggested that "the sites of San Bernardino, San Manuel, Redlands, Crafton, and the fertile land along the Santa Ana river southeast of Colton had originally been occupied by people who spoke the San Gabriel language" (Shinn 1941:66; see also Strong 1929:8-9). The Gabrielino also occupied the southern Channel Islands of Santa Catalina, San Clemente, and San Nicolas. Santa Barbara Island appears to have been occupied by them only on a temporary and periodic basis (Swartz 1960; Bean and Smith 1978:538; Hudson 1981:193-194).

The total area of the Gabrielino mainland territory exceeded 1,500 square miles. Most of this territory lies below 1,000 feet in elevation and consists of a lengthy coastal plain and several broad inland valleys. For the purposes of the discussion that follows, these will be designated the San Fernando Valley, the San Gabriel Valley, the San Bernardino Valley, and the Los Angeles-Santa Ana Plain.

The climate of this region is Warm Mediterranean, meaning that it is similar to that found in countries adjacent to the Mediterranean Sea. During the twentieth century, average annual precipitation has been less than 15 inches, although in the higher mountain regions 40 inches is not unusual. During Gabrielino times, the land was well-watered by three major river systems and numerous streams and tributaries, many of which ran throughout the year. In addition, prior to cattle and sheep ranching there was much less runoff, which resulted in a higher water table and more ground water. The predominant vegetation comprised grass and coastal sagebrush in valley bottoms and chaparral at higher elevations. At least eight distinct habitats, or ecological zones, existed within this territory, including Saltmarsh-Estuary, Freshwater Marsh, Grassland-Herbland, Southern Oak Woodland, Riparian Woodland, Chaparral, Coastal Sage Scrub, and Beach and Coastal Strand (Dixon 1974:40-43; Bean and Smith 1978:539).

POPULATION ESTIMATES

Estimates of the total Gabrielino population are limited by the available data; however, previously published estimates suggest a population in A.D. 1770 that exceeded 5,000 (Bean and Smith 1978:540). These estimates can be substantiated by ethnographic and historic data. Reid identified 28 Gabrielino communities, two of which were located on Santa Catalina and San Clemente islands, and reported that "there were a great many more villages than the above, probably some forty" (Reid 1852:7-8). Reid's observation is corroborated by the settlements that can be identified from mission records and the research of Kroeber and Harrington. More than 50 Gabrielino placenames have been associated with communities occupied around the time of Spanish colonization, although some of these may have been of minimal size.

Estimates of the average population size of the Gabrielino communities must be based primarily upon the accounts of the early explorers, which indicate that mainland community populations ranged from 50 to 150 inhabitants at the time of European contact, with 100 perhaps being a reasonable average (Smith and Teggart 1909; Teggart 1911). Mission records indicate that by 1797 most communities in the San Fernando Valley contained somewhat less than 100 inhabitants (Forbes 1966:139); however, this is almost 30 years after European contact, and populations had undoubtedly been reduced by disease and emigration. Using the above data, if approximately 55 Gabrielino communities were simultaneously occupied, with the average community population at about 100, a total estimated population in excess of 5,000 is easily justified.

Two important points must be noted with regard to these population estimates, which may be conservative. First, some Gabrielino communities may have contained more than 150 inhabitants. For example, when the Sebastián Vizcaíno expedition visited Isthmus Cove on Santa Catalina Island in 1602 the explorers were met by more than 300 Indians (Bolton 1908:85). Similarly, when the Portolá Expedition visited a community in the San Fernando Valley in 1769 they were met by 205 men, women, and children (Teggart 1911:24-25). Second, unrecorded epidemics of European diseases may have decreased the Indian population of southern California. Pablo Tac, a Luiseño Indian from Mission San Luis

Rey, reported that one such epidemic reduced the population of the neighboring Luiseño from 5,000 to 3,000 (Tac 1952). Similar early epidemics may have affected the Gabrielino population as well.

SETTLEMENT PATTERNS

A Gabrielino community consisted of one or more lineages, each comprising several related nuclear families (Harrington 1942:32, items 1238, 1241, 1261, 1263). Inland communities maintained permanent geographical territories or usage areas which, according to studies of the inland Luiseño, probably averaged 30 square miles (White 1963:117; but see Oxendine 1983:44 for a critique of White's territorial analysis of the Luiseño); these territories are sometimes referred to by the Spanish term, *ranchería*. It is unclear whether this pattern also held in certain regions that were particularly rich in food resources, such as the coastal areas. Within its territory, or *ranchería*, each community maintained a primary settlement as well as a variety of hunting and gathering areas, ritual sites, and other special use locations. These subsidiary sites might be periodically occupied while a special activity, such as acorn gathering, was under way; once that activity was completed the population would return to the main settlement. For purposes of the following discussion, the term community will refer to the primary settlement and the population that resided at that location.

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS INFLUENCING SETTLEMENT

The mainland Gabrielino preferred certain locations within their vast homeland as sites for their primary settlements. Among the most important factors affecting this preference were the existence of a stable food supply and a reliable source of water, as well as a measure of protection against flooding. Studies of the neighboring Luiseño and Chumash Indians indicate that large, permanent communities typically developed near the interfaces of several environmental zones or habitats. Such locations offered a greater variety of food resources and helped ensure against famines brought about by drought, pestilence, or seasonal fluctuations in the availability of wild crops (White 1963:116-117; Landberg 1965:111-112; Oxendine 1983).

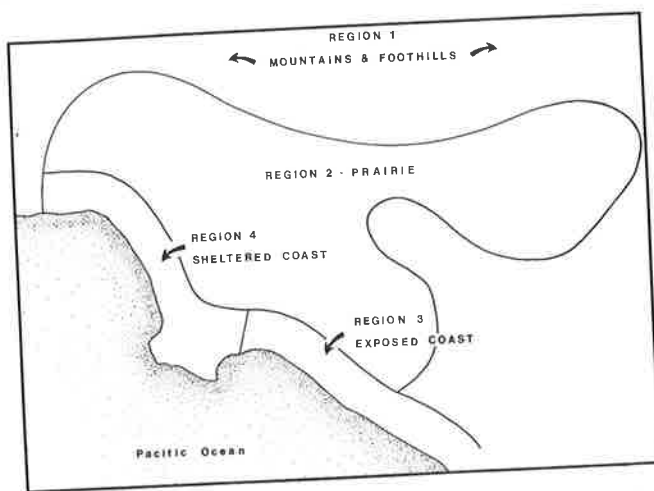
An examination of the distribution of known Gabrielino communities suggests a similar pattern. Permanent settlements appear for the most part to have been situated near the intersection of two or more environmental zones. Three geographical areas appear to have been especially favored, namely, the prairie-foothill transition zone ringing the interior plains, elevated locations near major watercourses, and coastal sites near sheltered bays and inlets.

The distribution of known Gabrielino communities also suggests considerable regional variation in the density of settlement. In some regions, such as the San Fernando Valley or the San Bernardino Valley, communities appear to have been rather widely distributed. Other regions, such as the San Gabriel Valley or the Palos Verdes Peninsula, may have been more densely populated.

Although caution must be exercised when drawing conclusions from the limited data available, it appears that variations in population probably resulted from a combination of social, economic, and environmental factors. Studies of the neighboring Luiseño and Chumash suggest that the economic patterns of inland, coastal, and Channel Island groups were different, and that the coastal and Channel Island groups placed a much greater reliance upon marine food resources than did the interior groups (White 1963:121-122; Landberg 1965:107-118; see also Oxendine 1983:44). This is substantiated by Reid's observation regarding the Gabrielino that "fish, whales, seals, sea-otters, and shellfish, formed the principal subsistence of the immediate coast-range of Lodges and Islands" (Reid 1852:22), and the report of the missionaries at San Fernando that "those on the coast are fond of every species of fish especially the whale" (Geiger and Meighan 1976:85, answer from Mission San Fernando).

Another important factor in the economies of the coastal and island Gabrielino was the development of a vigorous maritime trade based in large part upon the plank canoe and the exchange of Catalina soapstone for mainland goods (Kroeber 1925:629). Other cultural distinctions between inland and coastal groups were noted by Father Boscana, who studied the Indian population residing at San Juan Capistrano, which included both Gabrielino and Juaneno peoples. When discussing the oral literature of these people, the Franciscan priest observed that "the Indians of this particular location . . . account for the creation of the

world in one way, and those of the interior . . . in another" (Boscana 1933:27).



Map 4. The mainland Gabrielino territory can be divided into four geographical regions. This map is based on Hudson (1971).

GEOGRAPHICAL REGIONS

The mainland Gabrielino territory can be divided into four geographical regions, each of which offered a distinctive variety of resources (see Hudson 1971). The first region comprised the interior mountains and adjacent foothills, including the Santa Ana, San Gabriel, and Santa Monica ranges. Distinctive food resources available within this region included numerous small animals, deer, acorns, sage, and piñon nuts. The second geographical region included the prairies flanking the interior mountains, an area that included the San Fernando, San Gabriel, and San Bernardino valleys, and a greater portion of the Los Angeles—Santa Ana Plain. Significant food resources found within this region included acorns, sage, yucca, deer, numerous small rodents, cactus fruit, and a variety of plants, animals, and birds associated with the freshwater marshes.

The third geographical region was the exposed coastal strip extending from San Pedro south to Newport Bay. Food resources found within this region included shellfish, rays, sharks, and fish that are available near coastal inlets. The fourth region was the sheltered coastal strip from San Pedro north to Topanga Canyon. Food resources within this region included shellfish, sharks, rays, fish of many species (including pelagic, i.e., deep-water fish), sea mammals, and sea birds.

SETTLEMENT AND SUBSISTENCE PATTERNS WITHIN THE REGIONS

At the present time the most complete model of Gabrielino settlement and subsistence strategies suggests three broad patterns of cultural adaptation (see Hudson 1971). The first settlement and subsistence pattern prevailed in the interior mountains, where primary settlements were located in the lower reaches of canyons that offered protection against cold weather. During spring and summer, individual family units dispersed to seasonal camps to gather bulbs, roots, and seeds, while in the fall these families moved to oak groves to gather acorns.

The second settlement and subsistence pattern prevailed among the communities located on the inland prairies. During the winter these communities divided into family units that migrated to shellfish-gathering camps located along the exposed coast south of San Pedro. Few, if any, primary settlements are thought to have been located along the exposed coast, probably because much of the area was low-lying marshland subject to winter flooding. A region of higher elevation extending from the Newport Bay area southward may have been an exception (see Howard 1977).

The third settlement and subsistence pattern was found among the communities scattered along the sheltered coastal strip extending northward from San Pedro. During the winter, when storms and rough seas made fishing impossible, the occupants of these communities dispersed to inland camps where they hunted and gathered acorns, seeds, berries, and roots.

Although this model does not encompass the entire range of variation in Gabrielino settlement and subsistence patterns, it does provide a broad framework for the integration of future research. The testing and refining of this model is an important focus of archaeological research in the Gabrielino homeland (see Ross 1970; Howard 1977; Koerper 1981; Craib 1982; Wlodarski et al. 1985).

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

The primary settlement was the heart of Gabrielino political and spiritual life. Larger primary settlements functioned as political, legal, and administrative centers; some, such as *Povuu'nga* on Alamitos Bay, served as ritual centers. Other settlements may have provided a focal point for regional trade activities. For example, *Nájquar* on Santa Catalina Island may

have provided a central depot for the trade in soapstone.

Gabrielino settlements were organized along a regular pattern, although smaller communities might lack some of the features of the larger population centers. In the middle of the settlement was an unroofed religious structure known as the *yovaar*; surrounding the *yovaar* were the homes of the chief and the elite members of Gabrielino society, and beyond them were the houses owned by other members of the community. Adjacent to the settlements were large cleared areas which were used as playing fields for races and games. Sweat huts were commonly located near streams or pools of water which were used for rinsing, while the special huts occupied by women during menstruation were located near the outskirts of the settlement.

RELIGIOUS STRUCTURES

The center of each community was occupied by an unroofed sacred enclosure known as the *yovaar* (Reid 1852: 21; Bean and Smith 1978:542; Hudson and Blackburn 1986:56-60). The earliest description of a Gabrielino *yovaar* was recorded by Father Antonio de la Ascensión in 1602 (Wagner 1929:237). According to Father Antonio it was a

place of worship or temple where the natives perform their sacrifices and adorations. . . . This was a large flat patio and in one part of it, where they had what we would call an altar, there was a great circle all surrounded with feathers of various colors and shapes, which must come from the birds they sacrifice. Inside the circle there was a figure like a devil painted in various colors. . . . At the sides of this were the sun and the moon.

Generally the *yovaar* consisted of an open, level courtyard surrounded by a brushwork fence. Father Boscana observed that the enclosure was "four or five yards in circumference, not exactly round, but inclining to an oval" (Boscana 1933:37); Reid (1852:21) described the surrounding fence as "circular and formed of short stakes, with twigs of willow entwined basket fashion, to the height of three feet." José de los Santos Juncos, a Gabrielino consultant who worked with Harrington, reported that the enclosure was round, 50 feet in diameter, with a fence of tule mats eight feet high (Harrington 1986:R104 F007, R125 F367; see also Harrington 1933:135-138, note 55; Hudson and Blackburn 1986:56-60). Poles with