

## THE OBSIDIAN BLADES OF CALIFORNIA<sup>1</sup>

By HORATIO N. RUST

During a canoe voyage on the Klamath and Trinity rivers in the northern part of California, in 1898, the author had occasion to visit many Indian villages and took the opportunity to make special inquiry for obsidian spears, knives, or swords, as they are commonly called. Ten in all were seen and five procured. They measure from seven to fifteen inches in length and from two to four inches in width, and are beautifully chipped to the edge from end to end. In color the obsidian is black, red, or gray.

In almost every instance the owners were reluctant to show these blades. All were carefully wrapped in redwood bark and carefully hidden away, sometimes under the floor of the lodge, oftener outside beyond the knowledge of any one except the owner. In one instance the owner could not be induced to get his blade until night-fall, in order that no one should learn of its hiding place. This habit of secreting valuable articles for safety no doubt accounts for such objects having been found at times in isolated places remote from dwellings or burial places. The owner having died or forgotten where he hid an object, it was lost until chance brought it to light again. It was learned from one family that an obsidian blade belonging to them had in this way been lost beyond recovery.

In nearly every instance the blade had a strip of cloth tied securely around it, the ends of the strip forming a loop designed to pass around the wrist to enable the owner to recover it from falling in case it slipped from his hand.

These obsidian blades pass from father to son, with hereditary rank, and are retained with pride as heirlooms; consequently it was only by much persuasion and considerable expenditure that they could be obtained. In several instances the Indians regarded the

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<sup>1</sup> Read at the meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Berkeley, California, August 31.

blades as tribal property, and in one case I found it impossible to persuade the holder to part with the one in his possession at any price.

One old Indian, living alone in abject poverty, exacted a promise that I would not tell his neighbors that I had bought his blade. He said: "Now they call me rich. If they know I sell him, they say 'He poor Indian — no account.'" The promise was given and his reputation for wealth and honor saved.

Another piece was obtained from an Indian who had adopted the white man's dress and customs and cared no more for the Indian dance. He showed me a fine blade, and said: "My father he big chief. He have this one; I no sell him. My wife her father he big chief too; she got him sword; I sell you hers." Recognizing the husband's right to the wife's property I bought the implement.

When inquiries were made as to the use of these objects it was learned from all informants that they were for ceremonial purposes. They were carried in the dance as a wand or badge of distinction, indicating rank and wealth. They were used to mark time in the dance and to gesticulate in speaking.

From what was seen and learned among these Indians of northern California, it would appear that the larger so-called spearheads, which are well known from different parts of the country, may have been made and used for a similar purpose. Sometimes they were mounted on a short stick and used in a similar way. One such was obtained from a Klamath Indian, its stone head being about four inches and the stick or handle eighteen inches long. Subsequently a blade similar in size and form has been found by the author in use during an eagle dance of the Mission Indians of San Diego county. This was mounted on a handle of hard wood, which was ornamented with bits of abalone shell set in asphaltum and wound about with a strip of shell beads. This object was used in a manner similar to that of the obsidian blades of northern California. Similarly shaped implements of bone have often been found in grave deposits on the California coast.

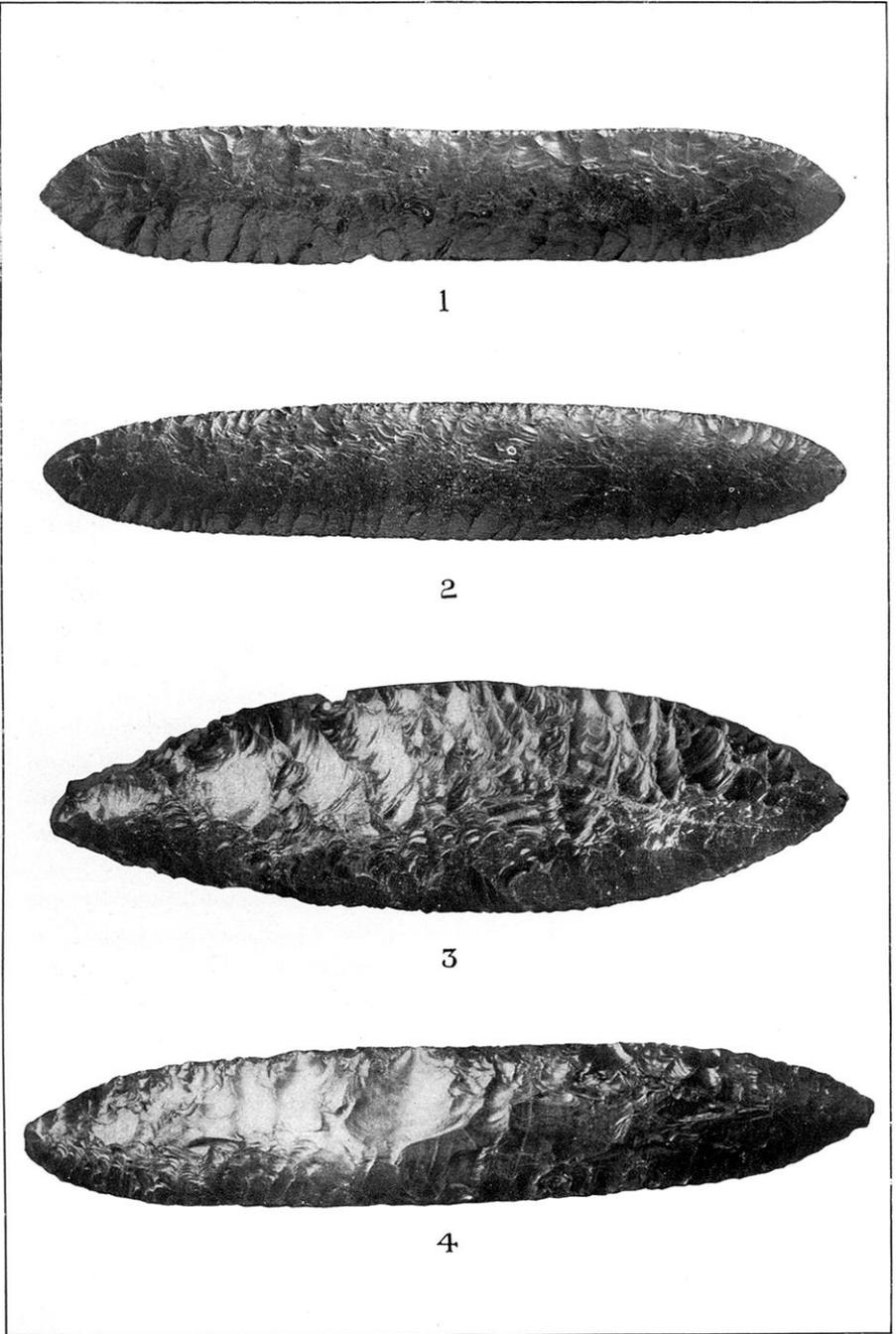
## NOTES BY A. L. KROEBER

The Indians referred to in Mr Rust's paper are in or near northern Humboldt county and belong to the quite distinctly specialized north-western culture area of California. On the lower Trinity are the Hupa, and on the Klamath below the confluence of the Trinity, the Yurok. On the Klamath above the mouth of the Trinity are the Karok. Other tribes or groups in this region also possessed obsidian blades, attached a high value to them, and used them ceremonially, but it is only the three tribes mentioned that practised the white deerskin dance of which the use of these blades is particularly characteristic. The subject has been briefly written about by Stephen Powers<sup>1</sup> whose statements are in the main correct. Dr P. E. Goddard has also treated of the subject, with plates showing the implements in use.<sup>2</sup>

Two specimens in the Museum of the Department of Anthropology of the University of California are shown in the accompanying plate XLI. The larger (cat. no. 1-1327) is 13 inches long and of black obsidian. The smaller (cat. no. 1-1542) is 10 inches in length and of deep red obsidian. It shows the finer finish of the two, though this is not brought out in the illustration. The slight narrowing of this piece at the middle should be noted, being a feature found both in black and red specimens, though the unconstricted form of the larger black specimen is probably more common. Almost all the blades are of these two colors, though black specimens not infrequently show colorless almost transparent streaks or mottlings which by reflected light look gray. The value of the pieces lies chiefly in their length; secondarily in the degree of perfection of the material and finish. The black are usually considerably longer, but length for length the red are of greater value. They are also less common. A red blade 15 or 18 inches long is extremely rare and valuable, while there are black ones more than 30 inches long. Blades of a third material are also occasionally seen. These are made of a white flinty stone lacking both the luster and translucence of obsidian. This white material seems not

<sup>1</sup> *Tribes of California*, p. 52, 79.

<sup>2</sup> *University of California Publications, American Archaeology and Ethnology*, vol. 1, p. 83, 84, with plates 4 and 30.



## OBSIDIAN BLADES OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA AND MEXICO

1 — Of deep red obsidian; length 10 in.; from the Yurok village of Weitchpec, at the confluence of Klamath and Trinity rivers, Cal. 2 — Of black obsidian; length 13 in.; from Weitchpec. 3 — From Teotihuacan, Mexico; length 7 in. 4 — From Trinity river, Cal.; length 10 in. The first two specimens are in the Museum of the Department of Anthropology, University of California (cat. nos. 1-1542 and 1-1327); the other two (after photo by C. J. Crandall) are in possession of H. N. Rust, South Pasadena, Cal.

to be scarce, as many small blades made of it can be found ; but it is probably difficult to work into larger pieces, for but few can be seen and these are very highly valued. At best the white flint blades lack the beautiful regularity of chipping which the obsidian so readily takes in the hands of an expert workman. The white blades are also usually much broader in proportion to their length than the obsidian ones. All the obsidian used by the tribes of this region comes from up the Klamath river and no doubt has its origin in the deposits in the region of the headwaters of this stream. Both the specimens illustrated were obtained at Weitchpec, a Yurok village at the confluence of the Klamath and Trinity rivers.

When in use at a dance the blades have a strip of cloth or buckskin tied around them, as described by Mr Rust.

Like most of the more valuable property of these Indians, the obsidian blades are not destroyed at the owner's death or buried with him, but transmitted to the heirs. Social rank, which is dependent almost entirely on wealth, passes from father to son only if property is inherited. Strictly the ownership of these blades is purely personal ; but a certain claim or lien of persons possessing no title to them is recognized, as indicated by Mr Rust in his statements concerning tribal ownership. The chief opportunity for the display of wealth is at dances. The more important of these are held only at certain villages, but are always participated in by the people of other villages. The dances are performed by two or more parties, which aim to outdo one another in the display of wealth. At a dance held at a certain village a certain man is usually recognized as the principal person or organizer of a party ; but generally only a small part of the valuables displayed by his party are actually his property, the remainder being contributed by his wealthy friends living in other villages. In return, when a dance is held at a village where one of his friends is looked upon as the principal man of a dancing party, he is expected by the latter to bring or send his property, and failure to do so is deeply resented. In this way families living in villages many miles apart, and perhaps entirely unrelated even by intermarriage, are often connected from generation to generation by close ties of friendship and mutual help, and the obligation of one to the other is clearly recognized. A man disposing

of a well-known blade would thus make himself liable not only to incur the ill will of such friends, but to forfeit their support when he most needed it to maintain his honor and station in life.

At the same time the blades, especially those not of the largest size, are not necessarily handed down in one family from generation to generation. On account of their high value they are not infrequently used commercially, as in the purchase of a wife or in the payment for murder. In such cases they pass completely out of the control of the family formerly possessing them.

The right of the husband to dispose of his wife's property would scarcely be recognized by these Indians. It is not uncommon that a woman personally inherits obsidian blades, woodpecker-scalp ornaments, dentalia, or other valuable property. In so far as this is of a kind available for ceremonial use, it is naturally put at her husband's disposal on occasion ; but her ownership seems to be clearly established. It is probable that in the instance mentioned the man was either selling the blade with his wife's knowledge and consent and for her, or without her knowledge and contrary to right.

The use of the blades at dances is correctly stated by Mr Rust and has been described by Dr Goddard in the monograph cited, but may be amplified by a few statements. The recognized major dances of the Yurok, Karok, and Hupa are what are popularly known as the white deerskin dance and the woodpecker or jumping dance. In the latter of these the obsidian blades are not known to be used. In the white deerskin dance the performers stand in line holding the white and other deerskins for which the ceremony is named. In the middle of the line stands the singer. At both ends of the line are two men without deerskins. At certain stages of the song these advance toward each other, dancing in front of the line, and exchange places. As they do this, each carries a blade, extended forward and somewhat aloft, as if he would display it as conspicuously as possible. The two blades used at one time are matched as nearly as possible. At some stages of the dance red blades are carried, at others black ones. During the earlier songs the smaller and less valuable blades are always used ; at the last song the largest of all. A red and a black blade would not be carried at the same time. It is by no means necessary that the two blades used together actually

form a pair or belong to the same man, though this is not infrequent. In fact the smaller blades quite commonly come in pairs, though in proportion as their size is greater this is more rare. The dancers carrying the blades—and this statement applies to other ceremonial objects of value as well—are not the owners. These are usually elderly men, who supervise and order the dance, but do not themselves take part in it, the dancers being young or sometimes middle-aged men.

A less elaborate and important ceremony than the white deer-skin and jumping dances is the brush or medicine dance, which differs in being held for an individual instead of the community or tribe; in being of shorter duration; and in being capable of being observed at any time or place. Less valuable paraphernalia are also used in connection with it, and this applies to the obsidian blades. The smaller or medium sized blades are sometimes brought out at this dance, though this does not seem to be a necessary rule or an established custom. The largest blades are not, however, used in connection with this dance, which would be considered too insignificant for such an act. On the other hand, the small blades of only a few inches in length, mentioned by Mr Rust, which are not of sufficient size to be carried by themselves, but are mounted on sticks, are used at the brush dance. These, on account of their small value, would not be displayed at the more important dances. Usually these small mounted blades, which may be of red or black obsidian or of white or colored flint, are decorated with a few feathers or bits of buckskin at the mounting. Plate 4 of the work of Dr Goddard referred to shows a Hupa holding such a small mounted blade. As a matter of fact the use of these small mounted blades seems to have been comparatively limited in purely aboriginal times. Many that are now found in the hands of the Indians, or have come into collections or museums, have been made for sale. Some of these small blades themselves are undoubtedly old, but the handles and mounting in almost all instances that have been seen are modern and gaudy, and in many cases the blades themselves have quite obviously been rudely chipped from splinters or masses of obsidian with so little attempt at finish or form that it may be doubted whether any Indian would not be ashamed to acknowledge their ownership

or exhibit them at a purely native dance. Often the small blades, which are generally from 4 to 5 or 6 inches long, differ from the large ones in being pointed only at one end, the butt being brought to a square edge for insertion in a handle.

Obsidian implements somewhat similar to these of the northwestern tribes have been found in most parts of California. Those from the Santa Barbara island and mainland region resemble those discussed in the present paper in their degree of finish and the regularity of their chipping. They differ from them in shape, however, being not double-ended, but with only one point, the opposite end being either convexly or concavely rounded. Such pieces may be found in many museums and have been well illustrated in volume VII of the Wheeler Survey. In most other parts of the state the obsidian blades are double-ended like those from the northwest, but are rarely more than from 6 to 12 inches long, and are on the whole very much rougher than those from the northwest. Even where they show a tolerably regular outline they lack the symmetry and beautifully retouched edge characteristic of the northwestern blades. As to their use, other than the one instance from southern California mentioned by Mr Rust, nothing appears to be actually known. That they were not used exactly like the blades of the northwestern tribes is certain, for the majority of the Indians of the state not only lacked the northwestern dances at which these blades were used, but conducted their dances in a generally quite different manner. On the other hand, it would appear from statements of the Indians of several parts of California that their use of such blades was primarily ceremonial, though rather with a personal function, in the nature of charms or shamanistic objects, than at public dances. Statements to this effect have been made to the author by the Yuki Indians of the northern Coast Range and by the Yokuts of the San Joaquin valley. The fact that the larger obsidian blades from the territory of these Indians and from adjacent regions are usually double-ended, seems also to be an argument corroborating their ceremonial rather than their technological use.

The blades from northwestern California are not particularly scarce in spite of their value, and many museums contain specimens. There is a large collection of them in the Peabody Museum. Al-

most all of those that have been secured are, however, black. An idea of the value of these blades among the Indians, and this value is not likely to have increased in the last fifty years, may be obtained from the fact that they are generally reckoned as worth a dollar per inch of length. This is, however only a rough approximation. Blades less than 6 or 8 inches long would be held at a lower ratio. Beginning with blades from 12 to 15 inches in length to those still larger the ratio rises. A good blade 20 inches long would rarely be parted with by its owner for fifty dollars, while one 30 inches in length is practically invaluable. Considerable allowance is made for the quality of material and workmanship, the red blades probably being considered at least half as valuable again as the black ones.

These obsidian blades of the Indians of northwestern California have been called, and in a measure are, sacred. Nevertheless the term can be applied to them only qualifiedly. They are primarily objects of wealth. Their display in important ceremonies, their preciousness, and the general disposition of these Indians to connect exhibitions of wealth and ceremonies, give to these objects certain associations of a religious nature. They do not, however, appear to be sacred in the same sense in which a small class of other objects, such as certain pipes, fire-sticks, and similar ceremonial paraphernalia, which are used in a purely ritualistic way and whose value lies entirely in this ritualistic and traditional use, are sacred. Like the white deerskins and woodpecker-scalp ornaments, the obsidian blades are not used directly in connection with any of the sacred formulas around which the deeper religious life of these Indians clusters. There seems also to be very little and probably no sense of their being charms or objects with a fetish or medicine or animistic power. They are thus sacred in a very different sense from the objects belonging to an altar of the Pueblo Indians, or from the objects contained in a sacred bundle of the Plains Indians. Their general position in the ceremonies and social life of the Indians of northwestern California resembles more nearly that of the coppers of the Indians of the North Pacific coast.