Chumash: Introduction

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Language and Territory

The Chumash (ˈchōōˌmăsh) were known to Henshaw and other early investigators as the Santa Barbara Indians. The first reference to their language (Latham 1856) noted that the dialects of Santa Barbara, Santa Ynez, and San Luis Obispo were related. Powell (1891) later referred to the dialects of the region as Chumashan.

Beginning in 1878 with the Chumash vocabularies collected by Alphonse Pinart (Heizer 1952), considerable information on their languages was recorded from surviving Chumash. There were at least six Chumash languages (fig. 1): Ventureño (probably including Castac), Barbareño (probably including Emigdiano), Ynezeño, Purisimeño (these four forming a Central group of more closely related languages), Obispeño, and the Island language. Whether the interior Cuyama spoke a different Chumash language is uncertain (Beeler 1970:14, Beeler and Klar 1974).*

Geographically, the Chumash occupied the region from San Luis Obispo to Malibu Canyon on the coast and inland as far as the western edge of the San Joaquin valley. In addition, they occupied the Santa Barbara Channel Islands—San Miguel, Santa Rosa, Santa Cruz, and Anacapa.

History

For such a large and important tribe, there is remarkably little documented history. The Chumash were docile and friendly to the Spanish and readily went into the mission system that ended their native culture. Before anthropologists became interested in them, there were few Chumash left with any knowledge of the ancient life patterns; therefore, the ethnological record is slim.

The diaries and journals of the Spanish explorers who passed through the Chumash territory do remain, and in their writings can be glimpsed these interesting Indians before their destruction. The Chumash were the first major group of California Indians to be discovered by Europeans. On October 10, 1542, Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, on an exploring trip up the coast, landed near the present site of Ventura. Cabrillo visited many points on the mainland and on the Channel Islands and noted the names of many of the settlements. The next brief contact was 60 years later when Sebastián Vizcaíno entered and named the Santa Barbara Channel.

In 1769 an expedition under the command of Capt. Gaspar de Portolá passed through the Chumash coastal region heading north to find Monterey Bay, reported by Vizcaíno in 1602. With him were Lt. Pedro Fages, the engineer Miguel Constansó, and the Friar Juan Crespí. All four wrote valuable accounts of the appearance and activities of the Indians. There are several more contemporary accounts before the turn of the nineteenth century: the 1775 diary of Father Pedro Font, diarist of the Juan Bautista de Anza expedition; Father Francisco Palou's account of 1778; the 1791–1792 journal of the naturalist José Longinos Martínez; and in 1793 the first account of the Chumash in English by Archibald Menzies, the naturalist of the George Vancouver expedition.

Those early historical accounts describe only the heavily populated Santa Barbara Channel coast. For all other areas in the Chumash territory, the scanty references to Chumash people and places in the mission records must be used in combination with the archeological evidence for a picture of Chumash life.

In 1772, San Luis Obispo, the first of the Franciscan missions in Chumash territory, was founded. Four others soon followed: San Buenaventura (1782), Santa Barbara (1786), La Purísima Concepción (1787), and Santa Ynez (1804). By the early 1800s, the entire Chumash population, with the exception of those who had fled into the mountains and the inland valleys, had come into the mission system. The Spanish missionaries were determined to make industrious farmers and artisans of the Chumash and taught them the trades that made the

* All the Chumash languages have been extinct since the death of Mary Yee, the last native speaker of Barbareño, in 1965. Materials on most or all the languages were provided by late 19th- and early 20th-century investigators, especially John P. Harrington, and by the work of Madison S. Beeler with Yee during her last year. According to Beeler (personal communication 1974), "the differences among the various Chumash languages, at least those that constitute the Central group, were lexical and inflectional rather than phonological." Thus a single orthography should suffice for all of them—that of Beeler (1970:15–16), which conforms to Handbook standards if ʌ is substituted for the raised comma, and i̇ replaces ï. The italicized Chumash words in the following chapters have been rewritten by Beeler in this orthography; the spellings of those with a question mark following are less certain. The principal difficulties are that early recorders rarely recognized glottalization and did not hear the difference between *k* and *q*, so that words from sources other than Harrington and Beeler cannot be accurately transliterated in these regards. Most of the Chumash words that Beeler was unable to identify are written in a Spanish-based orthography.