CALIFORNIA ARCHAEOLOGY

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NEW WORLD ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD
CALIFORNIA ARCHEOLOGY

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Introduction

Three natural and archaeological divisions are recognized within the vast Central Valley region: the Sacramento Valley, Delta, and San Joaquin Valley (Figure 1). Ethnographic peoples of this region spoke more than 30 dialects of the Wintu, Nomlaki, Patwin, Konkow, Nisenan, Plains Miwok, Saclan, and Yokuts languages—all of which traditionally have been assigned to the California Penutian linguistic stock (Figure 11.1). Such diversity of languages implies a complex prehistory, and indeed Valley archaeology reflects population shifts and cultural replacement as well as the evolution of regionally distinctive social and economic patterns. The Valley was both a crossroads, marked by lively trade, and a center of dense populations at the heart of the “California climax culture” area (Kroeber 1939:53–55).

Environment

Valley cultures are best understood with reference to their natural environments. Indian residents of the Valley witnessed dramatic environmental changes over the centuries: a major episode of faunal extinctions and replacement at the end of the Pleistocene; the emergence of wetlands as sea levels rose and filled San Francisco Bay and its inland backwaters (see Chapter 6); flooding and massive siltation of bottomlands; cyclical appearance and evaporation of shallow lakes; and biogeographic shifts in response to climatic fluctuations. Such wholesale changes in the effective environment would have greatly influenced prehistoric Valley societies.

Because of its vast area and central location, the Central Valley shares common borders with more cultural and natural regions than does any other physiographic province in California. Topographically, the Valley is a low-elevation “flatland” composed of alluvial plains, river channels, old lakebeds, sloughs, marshes, and uplands of low relief. Before modern reclamation projects, tidal action in the Delta and seasonal flooding along streams produced extensive wetlands. Lakes, marshes, and sloughs once covered more than 5000 km² in the San Joaquin Valley alone. The largest