

Key to the genus Pisaster (Asteroidea: Asteriinae)

Large starfishes with thick and usually broad disk and five, occasionally six stout tapering rays. Dorsal skeleton rigid with spines and ossicles present in a scattered or reticulated arrangement. A single row of ambulacral spines, three to six rows of close actinal spines and marginal plates with stout ventral spines present.

Species common in Southern California

Pisaster ochraceus (Brandt) A. Agassiz
most common intertidally but found subtidally

Pisaster brevispinus (Stimpson)
can be found at low tide, but most common subtidally to 100 '.

Pisaster giganteus capitatus (Stimpson)
depth of water varies from intertidally on rocky shores to very deep waters on the open coast; also found on wharf pilings.

Key to the species of Pisaster

I Color of star ranges from orange to brown and purple to purple-black. Dorsal spines are white, capitate, and flattened on top (Fig. 1). Spines are clustered in tight groups, forming isolated clumps, or forming a reticulated pattern (network) covering the entire dorsal surface. A dense cluster of spines, usually a conspicuous pentagon, present at center of disk (Fig. 1). The dorsal spines are unequal in size, the smaller generally surrounding the larger.

Pisaster ochraceus
(species may have several forms)

II. Dorsal surface and spines not as above.

A. Color of star pink. Dorsal spines pink, short, clavate, uniform, with subacute tips. Dorsal spines distributed irregularly over entire dorsal surface, with a conspicuous median band of spines on the dorsal surface of the rays (Fig. 2). A pentagonal cluster of spines may be present at the center of the disk.

Pisaster brevispinus

B. Color of star brown except the areas around the base of each dorsal spine, which are blue. Dorsal spines blue, numerous, uniform and distributed equidistantly over the dorsal surface; there is no reticulation or median band of spines (Fig. 3).

Pisaster giganteus capitatus

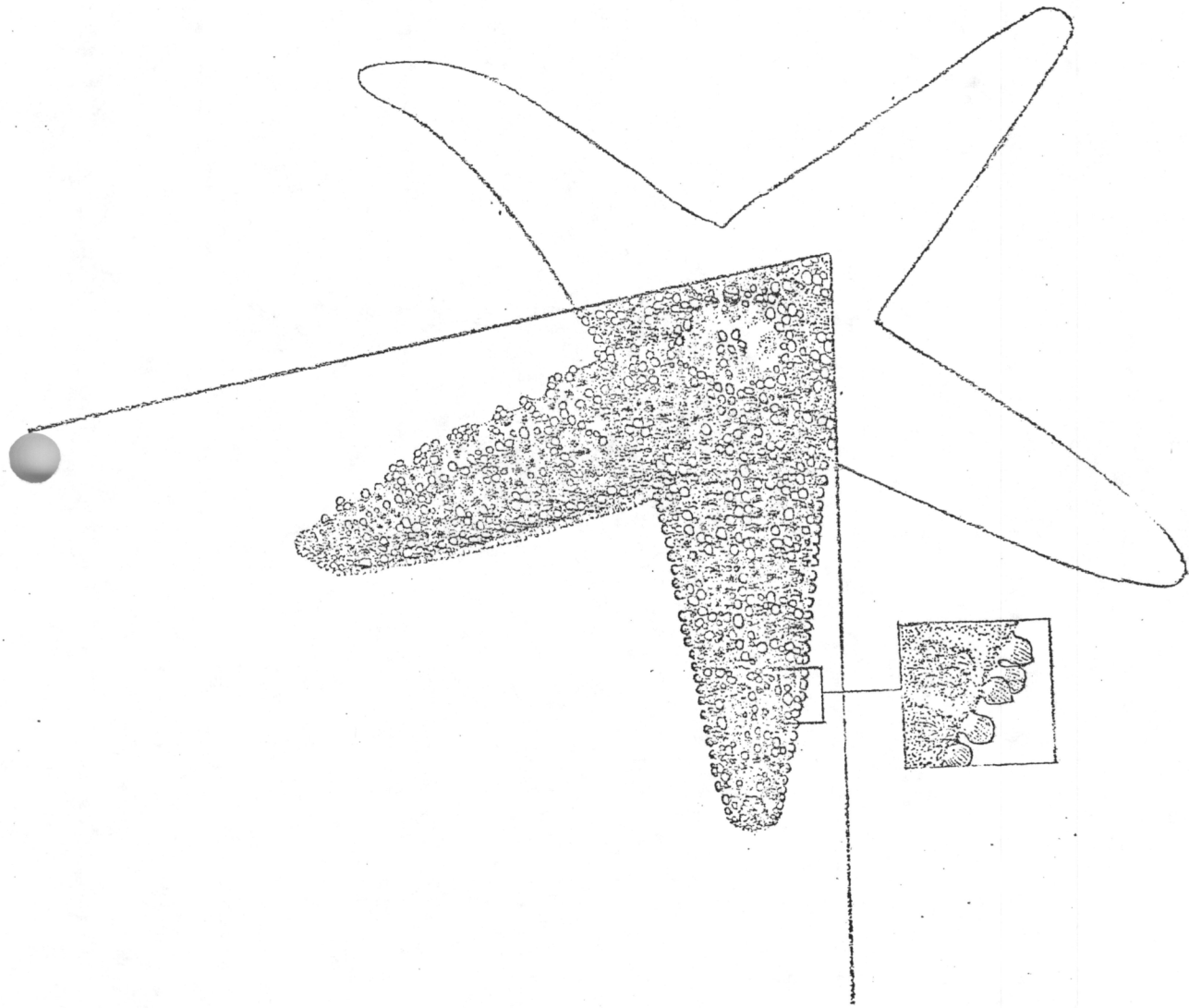


Fig. 1 *Pisaster ochraceus*

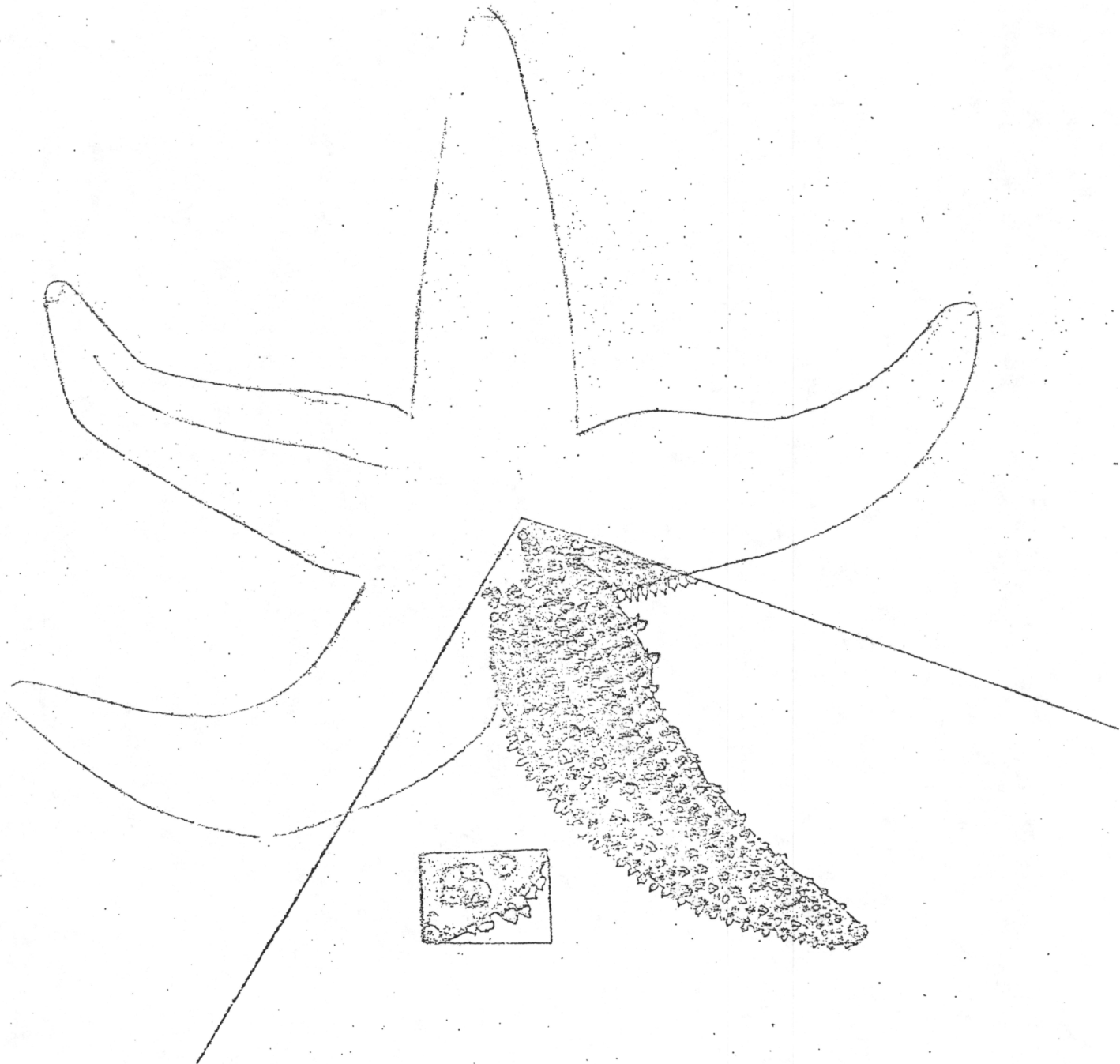


Fig. 2. *Pisaster brevispinus*

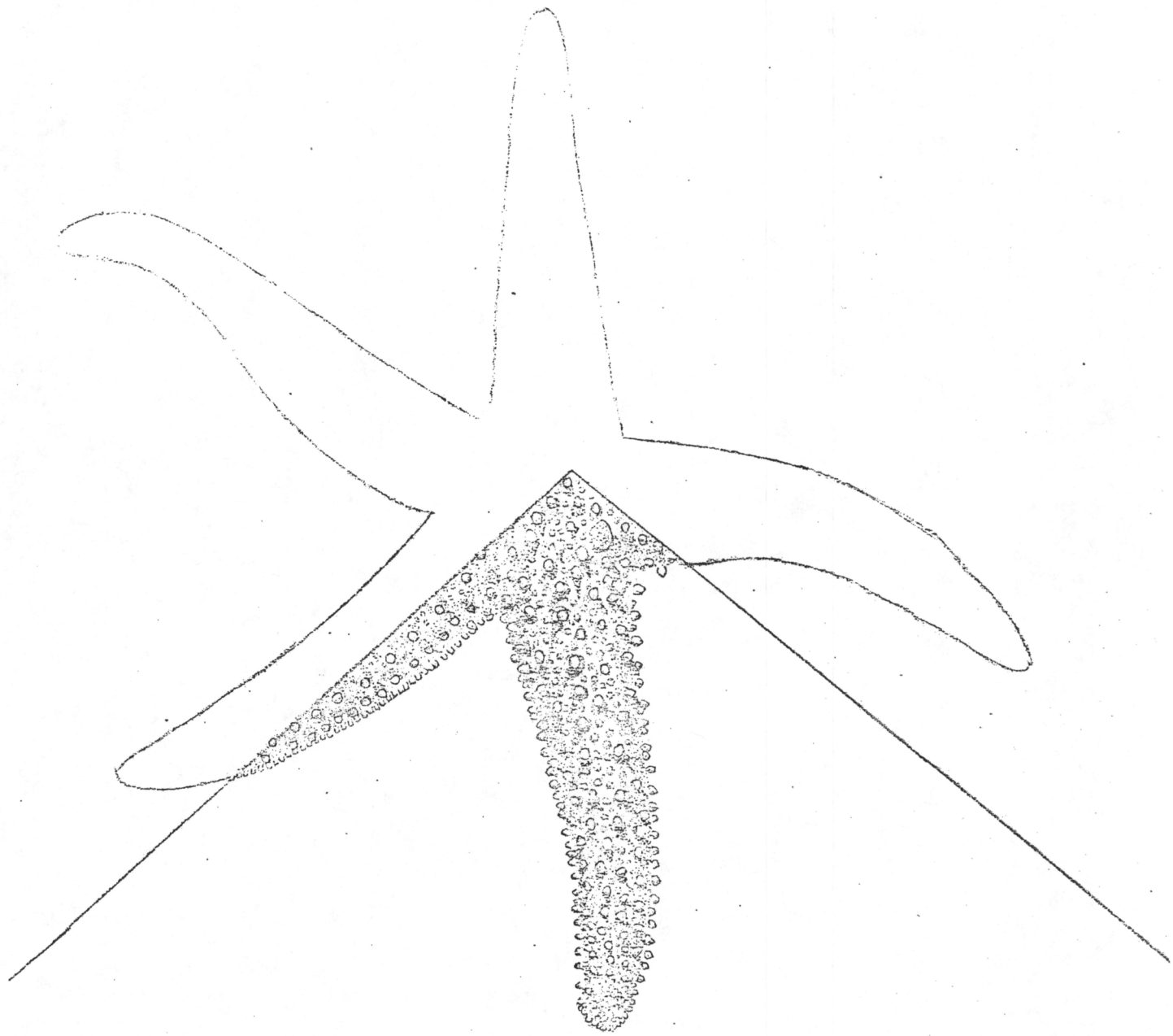


Fig. 3. *Pisaster giganteus*