IV. DECORATED STONE DISCS FROM THE LOWER

HUMBOLDT VALLEY, NEVADA

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A fairly common kind of prehistoric artifact found in occupation caves and open village sites in the vicinity of Humboldt Sink, Churchill County, Nevada, is a thin, circular stone object, usually with a central drilled perforation and biconcave in cross section. Fifty examples of these have been recorded by me, most of them being undecorated. Decorated examples, numbering 13, are described here. Of these 11 come from the large open village site (NV-Ch-15) on the margin of the former lake or sink near the point where the Humboldt River emptied into the lake. Two examples were recovered from nearby Lovelock Cave, a closed site probably temporarily utilized in times of cold weather or as a defensive retreat by the people occupying NV-Ch-15.

We must first admit that we do not know what function or purpose or use these pieces served. Nothing known as regards their occurrence or association seems to offer us any direct lead to inferences about what part they played in the life of their makers. Failure to offer an "explanation" of these pieces does not, however, deter us from making their existence known in the hope that workers in future may be able to offer us enlightenment on their function. None have, to my knowledge, been found attached to wooden shafts in the manner of those found in Bowers Cave in southern California (Elsasser and Heizer 1963: Pl. 5c), and I know of no evidence so far reported in Great Basin ethnographies of their use as whorls for a spindle used to spin the fibers of "a tule-like plant growing among the tules" such as reported by Kroeber (1929:262-263) for the Valley Nisenan.

It is probable that the nicely finished and decorated examples had a different purpose from the generally more crudely made and more abundant undecorated examples from the same sites. No doubt it will be possible for persons inclined to see "notations" in such objects as evidence of their having served as calendrical records or mnemonic devices, but I do not have much faith in such numerological interpretations.

Here are the basic facts about the 13 pieces illustrated in Figures 1-3.

Fig. 1a, a', a". Lowie Museum of Anthropology (hereafter LMA) 1-65855. From surface of site NV-Ch-15. Fine-grained white limestone. Edge of disc is not notched; decoration is in form of inscribed triangles.

Fig. 1b, b', b". Formerly in possession of J. T. Reid, Lovelock, Nevada. From surface of site NV-Ch-15. White limestone.
Fig. 1c. Reid Collection. Site NV-Ch-15. Black slate. One surface decorated.

Fig. 1d. Formerly in collection of T. Derby, Lovelock, Nevada. Site NV-Ch-15. Fine-grained mica-schist. One surface decorated; thickness at center, .8 cm.

Fig. 2a, a', a''. LMA 2-39399. Recovered in 1969 during screening of the 1911 guano miner’s dump outside Lovelock Cave (site NV-Ch-18). Decoration consists of different sized concave dull pits on each surface and paired tick-lines on one surface. A few of the pits appear to have been started with a hollow drill, then deepened with a slightly smaller diameter solid drill with a sharp tip.

Fig. 2b, b', b''. LMA 1-19192. Collected by L. Loud from site NV-Ch-18 in 1912. Broken in half. Material: dense, fine-grained brown tuff (?).

Fig. 2c, c'. J. Reid Collection. Site NV-Ch-15. Gypsum (?).

Fig. 3a, a'. LMA 1-65854. White limestone. Site NV-Ch-15. One surface is much weathered, and all that can be positively seen on it are the same edge tick marks and an identical pair of engraved dot-and-circle and X designs. Originally on the weathered surface there were also tick marks around the perimeter of the straight-walled central perforation. It thus appears that both surfaces were decorated in the same way.

Fig. 3b, b'. LMA 1-65856. Site NV-Ch-15. White marble. Only one side decorated.

Fig. 3c, c'. LMA 1-65858. Site NV-Ch-15. Fine-grained gray sandstone.

Fig. 3d, d'. LMA 1-46113. Site NV-Ch-15. Black slate. One surface decorated.

Fig. 3e, e'. LMA 1-65857. Site NV-Ch-15. White limestone. One surface badly eroded and no decoration visible.

Fig. 3f. LMA 1-8589. Site NV-Ch-15. White limestone.

Fig. 3g. Reid Collection. Site NV-Ch-15. White marble.

The occurrence of the dot-and-circle motif in the Humboldt Sink extends its distribution further south than the limit indicated by Smith and Spier (1927). Some of the discs have central perforations which are straight-sided (Fig. 1a''; 2a'', b''; 3a'') and these holes were presumably drilled with a hollow shaft drill, perhaps of bone or cane, charged with sand. The other discs were biconically drilled.
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Kroeber, A. L.  

Smith, D. A. and L. Spier  
Fig. 1