

58. An Incised Tablet From Oregon

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The unusual incised tablet shown in Figure 4h, i, was found in 1947 on the south bank of the Malheur River, two miles east of Vale, in southeast Oregon. It was found by the father-in-law of Mr. Kenneth Carey of Ontario, Oregon, while refilling a pipe-line trench. A cobble pestle was also found at the same location, but no other evidence of aboriginal occupation was noted. Arrowheads and rock-slide graves have been found on the hillslope to the west of where the tablet was found. The specimen is now owned by Mr. George Eldredge of Richmond, California, who brought it to our attention.

The tablet, of soft, buff-colored slate, is oval in outline with a length of 22.5 cm., a width of 9.4 cm., and a thickness varying from 0.5 cm. at one end to 1.5 cm. in the center. The cross section is lenticular, with rounded edges. Originally a thin, flat slab, the edges were rounded by grinding and both faces were smoothed irregularly by grinding; the upper end was thinner, and this part of face B still retains the slightly concave surface of the natural slab. The ends have been battered and chipped since manufacture, and one large chip was removed from the lower portion of face B when the finder hit the specimen with a shovel.

As shown in the illustration, there are three biconical perforations and one pair of biconically drilled pits which represent an incipient perforation. All of these appear to have been drilled after the incising had been finished. Two of these perforations occur along one side of the tablet, and both show evidence of wear on their outside edges on both faces. It seems clear from this that the tablet was suspended horizontally, and used in such position for a sufficient length of time for the binding to wear slight grooves in the soft stone. The pits at one end of the same side indicate the intention to add another perforation, perhaps to achieve better balance, but the perforation was never finished. The single perforation on the opposite side shows only slight evidence of binding wear on one surface only. It is possible therefore that the tablet was suspended vertically, which would be in better agreement with the pattern of face B, but the tablet was not kept in this position long enough for the full development of wear grooves.

Both faces are incised with geometric figures and lines. Obvious accidental scorings appear on both faces, but have not been shown in the illustration. The edges of both sides were notched with short horizontal grooves but the ends do not seem to have been so decorated. Face A (Fig. 4h) bears deeply grooved triangles, arranged horizontally in five pairs, apex to apex, and filled with grooved lines. Smaller filled triangles occur around the upper end. The spaces between the triangles are filled with vertical lines with a parallel tendency but frequently curved, occasionally intersecting, and with variable spacing. These lines are not as heavy as the fillers within the triangles and have no close relationship with the fillers. In one of the central spaces there are very light horizontal lines between or across some of the vertical lines, but no consistent pattern is apparent (accidental

scorings have damaged the surface in places, but it is clear that the horizontal lines were neither continuous across the face nor limited to alternate bands). A special "fish-like" figure appears at the bottom, done in deep grooves, with deeply-incised horizontal line-fill, and lightly-incised vertical line-fill. Small unfilled triangles were lightly incised along one side of this figure, and a series of lightly-incised vertical lines with a few irregular horizontal lines appear on the other side. Another lightly-incised rectilinear design appears at the left edge.

Face B (Fig. 4i) reveals a deep horizontal groove across the upper portion, with incised vertical lines on either side spaced at irregular intervals. Three groups of four connected ovals, with vertical line fill (one filled horizontally) are also grooved. In the lowest band of ovals the spaces between alternate lines were filled with short, lightly-incised horizontal lines (vertical in one oval). A central group of three vertical line-filled triangles are deeply grooved; another set of three above the uppermost ovals is heavily incised with careless line-fill which is partly continuous between two of the triangles. A group of five lightly-incised vertical triangles appears at the bottom, with irregular line-fill. Ten pairs of parallel lines appear below these latter triangles. A variety of line arrangements are incised at the top of this face.

There remain several groups of chevrons, zigzags, and lines which are very lightly incised. These are scattered all over face B but are concentrated toward the upper end. The chevron groups which appear just above the uppermost group of ovals appear to have been incised before the larger triangles were made over them. The vertical zigzag which appears in the left upper center was almost certainly cut through by the deep horizontal groove. There is no suggestion that these light incisions are remnants of an earlier pattern which had been ground off. Possibly these incisions represent a sketch for a proposed design which was discarded in favor of the deeply-incised extant pattern, though the random nature of the light incisions suggests mere doodling.

The absence of the dot-and-circle may be noted, which may indicate some antiquity for the specimen. Decorative pits are also absent.

Face A was painted with a white pigment which does not react to hydrochloric acid but is removed by paint thinner; presumably modern oil-based paint was applied to bring out the incisions. Traces of a white chalky substance remain in some of the grooves on both faces, representing another attempt to reveal the incised pattern clearly. The specimen has been displayed publicly several times which probably explains both treatments, though the chalk is conceivably aboriginal.

The geometric incising style represented on this tablet is widespread in the Basin and Plateau, as well as California (see Elsasser in the present volume), occurring on a great variety of stone, bone, and wooden artifacts. The following citations offer certain close similarities to the Vale tablet but none appear to be strictly comparable, particularly as to function. A schist "pendant" from Wahluke, Washington, has one end perforation, is more triangular, and bears horizontal incisions (Krieger, Pl. 6, No. 2). Despite the single perforation, this specimen may well represent the same class of artifact as the Vale tablet. A steatite pendant from the Yakima Valley is end perforated,

trapezoidal in outline, and bears pits and rectilinear incised designs on both faces (Smith, Fig. 119, p. 127); this smaller specimen was found on the chest of a burial. The guardian spirit effigies found in the Umatilla region of Oregon are similar in shape to the Vale tablet, but they are unperforated and the simple incised designs are vaguely anthropomorphic (Osborne, pp. 92-97). A schist weaving heddle from near Vulcan, Washington, is unperforated, rectangular in outline, with simple incised designs on one surface (Krieger, Pl. 6, No. 3).

At present the function and age of the Vale tablet must remain problematical.

Bibliography

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