

29. A CHARMSTONE SITE IN SONOMA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

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The type of artifact called variously "charmstones," "sinkers," "plummets," "slingstones" and the like has figured so heavily in the archaeological literature of the United States and of California in particular that a review of the many speculations on their function or purpose would here be superfluous. Probably the only clear-cut evidence concerning the use of these artifacts has been obtained from ethnographic sources. Henshaw, for example, was told 70 years ago by the Indians at Santa Barbara and at San Buenaventura that the specimens were "medicine or sorcery stones," i.e., objects employed ceremonially for such purposes as curing the sick, bringing rain, or calling fish up the streams (Henshaw, 1885, pp. 6-7).

An old Indian in Napa County informed Yates (ca. 1885) that plummet-shaped implements were used as charm stones; that they were used by being suspended by a cord from the end of a pole, one end of which was stuck into the bank of a creek in such a manner as to leave the stone suspended over the water where the Indians intended to fish. In other places they were suspended at points in the mountain favorable for hunting (Yates, 1889).

The Wintu people of the Sacramento Valley looked upon strangely shaped stones as being possessed of supernatural power. For example, flat ovate stones pierced at one end for suspension were identified as luck charms. "Were the particular attributes of the charm not disclosed by its shape, a shaman might be asked to reveal them by consulting his spirits. Usually, however, the shape of the stone denoted the type of charm and pragmatic evidence of its efficacy often revealed to the owner its attributes" (DuBois, 1935, p. 82).

Other ethnographic sources (infra) assign a primarily practical use to the specimens. Even here, however, is the strong likelihood that some of the specimens were thought to be possessed of magical qualities as well.

The intent of this paper is not to suggest yet another use for these specimens, but to offer evidence that they were used in some way as shaped throwing stones. The objects will henceforth be referred to as "charmstones," since this label has probably gained more general usage in discussion on the subject than any other.

The chief consideration here will be with a locale in Sonoma County and the relation to it of some hundreds of charmstones which reportedly have been recovered from the surface of this site. The first mention of the site, so far as is known, appeared in 1900: ". . . Messrs. Stayley and Cherry, of Santa Rosa, each have a goodly series of charmstones, and Mr. Ricksecker of the same place, about 500. These, by the way, were taken the last three years from a single locality, i.e., the bed of an extinct lake, in Sonoma County. I have communication from the

superintendent of the property of which this lake bed is part. He says that originally the lake covered about 300 acres; that it was drained for cultivation in 1870; and that larger numbers of the 'sinkers' have been found and sold to collectors. He further says three or four other persons collected there during the time Mr. Ricksecker collected. It is not known how many they obtained, but to be conservative let us say these three or four persons secured one hundred while Mr. Ricksecker was collecting five hundred. That would give us six hundred for three years or two hundred per year. Suppose the same rate of yield obtained for the whole period since draining the lake, (it was doubtless much larger during the first few years), and for the whole time we have a yield of 6000 specimens. I need not pause here to emphasize the significance of such numbers, or that of the fact that they were found in a lake-bed" (Meredith, 1900, p. 282).

The area must have become well-known at the time through several subsequent citations (Peabody, 1901; Hodge (ed.), 1910).

In October, 1954, the writer, accompanied by Mr. R.M. Rulofson and Mr. G.W. Niles, of Cordelia, visited a spot east of Lakeville in Sonoma County which is beyond question the same as that described by Meredith. The present owners of the property, Mr. J.S. Cardoza and sons, are in possession of an abundance of charmstones, about two hundred complete specimens and half that number of fragments. These are in addition to many which were picked up during plowing operations and subsequently given away since the Cardozas have owned the property. A sample of the types of specimens collected is shown in Plate 1b (Photo R.M. Rulofson).

The most striking feature about the specimens shown is their general crudity of manufacture. This is of course shared with many similar specimens found in other parts of California. On the other hand, specimens associated with burials have been recovered at some sites in California which are models of slender symmetrical beauty (See, for example, Lillard, Heizer, and Fenenga, 1939, Plates 13, 14, and 31). Many of the latter are made from smoother material, such as porphyry, alabaster, schist, or steatite, while the Sonoma specimens shown are of coarser stones, such as actinolite or sandstone. Whether this difference alone is enough to determine crudity or refinement, or practical versus non-practical use, is an open question. The Sonoma specimens, however, have also a battered appearance which does indicate practical use. Further, a number of the specimens are equipped with encircling grooves at one end, while others have a concave form or "neck" at one end which could serve the same purpose as a groove. A few still have asphaltum showing at one end. One specimen has the beginning of a drilled or pecked hole on both sides of one end. All these devices of course suggest the attachment of a line of some kind.

An interesting occurrence of specimens showing signs of abrasion and use is in a probable single-phase site in Contra Costa County (CCo-256). The specimens were found at the edges of the site, near an old slough channel, in dirt mixed with that scraped off the top 48 inches of the mound. "They may have been used as sinkers on nets in the slough, or they may

have occurred in the mound mass or with burials only in the top 48 inches of the deposit. The only indication we have is that of the 20 burials actually excavated by Johnson [Mr. E.N. Johnson, of Concord, who reported the site] and the UCMA parties, none were associated with these sinkers or plummets. In form they are similar to our "charmstones" yet they are unique in showing checks, signs of abrasion, etc. as if they were definitely utilitarian and had undergone hard usage" (Lillard, Heizer, and Fenenga, 1939, p. 61).

The area of the "extinct lake-bed" in Sonoma County (Plate 1a) is today not easily recognizable, though the arrangement which served to drain the lake is still in use -- a partially stone-lined ditch which now terminates in the natural bed of Tolay Creek. This small stream ultimately empties into San Pablo Bay. According to the statements of the present owners and workers, the charmstones have been collected in the area said to have been occupied by the old lake. There are no terraces remaining to indicate the old dimensions of the lake. However, the rich alluvial deposit in the floor of the valley suggests the approximate shore of the old lake. From a cursory inspection the impression is gained that the lake could not have been more than five feet deep in the center, at the fullest stage. The natural overflow into Tolay Creek would not have allowed the lake to become any deeper. This view is supported by the depth of the drainage ditch (about five feet) from the old surface. In addition, there are three village or camp locations in the valley, adjacent to the area supposedly occupied by the lake. Two of these sites are quite low enough to have been right on the shore of the lake. The possibility of these sites ever being submerged for any length of time is slight. There is no evidence of silt deposition on either site. Also, the ashy, "greasy" quality of the soil of one of the sites is sufficiently distinctive to discourage the idea of submersion.

Assuming that the great number of charmstones found on the lake bottom after the lake was drained had a primarily practical function (disregarding the possibility of their magical significance), then the depth of the old lake has great bearing on the question of what this function was. In the opinion of the writer, the lake must have been both too shallow and too small in surface area to allow the explanation that fishing activity could be responsible for the presence of so many charmstones, which would presumably have been used in fishing as net or line sinkers. It is barely possible that salmon could have come up Tolay Creek to spawn in an overflowing lake. The small size of Tolay Creek and the fact that there would be many more strategic fishing spots along its banks seem to militate against the idea of large netting operations in the lake.

It is much more likely that the "lake" was actually a rather large, shallow pond, and as such an attractive spot for resident or migratory birds. A small marsh, not more than several hundred yards from the lake bottom, fed from a spring is still in use as a hunting preserve by the owners of the property. It is said to be an excellent spot for the taking of waterfowl.

A series of three test pits recently dug at the highest part of the site which is probably closest to the center of the lake bottom did not

disclose any fish bone (nor any charmstones). Mammal bone and bird bone were present, with one pit showing a preponderance of the latter. It is possible that this testing does not represent an adequate sample because screens were not used. Fine screens might have revealed a percentage of small fish bone which would not otherwise be apparent. On the other hand, a finer technique for the recovery of unmodified bone would not necessarily lead to a positive conclusion, since there would yet be no way of ascertaining the reality of any connection between food animal bone and charmstones without an extensive excavation.

On the basis of the general situation of the lake (relative shallowness, small surface area) and the large number of charmstones recovered from the bottom, the suggestion is thus made that the charmstones were used primarily as slingstones, i.e., as shaped throwing stones, for use in killing or crippling birds. Ethnographic evidence for this usage is not lacking. We may quote for example from a monograph on a branch of the Algonkian peoples in Maine: "According to old authorities among the Penobscot, a slingstone attached to a leather line about three feet long was used to knock over water fowl. These slingstones were, it is claimed, carried in the canoe ready to be thrown at birds or other small animals when espied on the water. The plummet-shaped stones found commonly throughout New England and numerous also in the Penobscot valley are identified by the Indians as the slingstones. Several were obtained, one having been fixed to a thong to illustrate the complete object. They average from two and three-quarters to three inches long and one and a quarter to one and three-quarters wide" (Speck, 1940, pp. 46-47).

Treganza (1954, p. 13) referring to a find made by him at Redbank in Tehama County, says: "Of interest is a natural elongated pebble containing a longitudinal girdle. . . . The author was informed by Mr. Dale (age ca. 80 years) of Dale's Station, located some 20 miles northeast of Red Bluff, that as a boy he had observed the Indians using such girdled stones in pairs strung like a bola for hunting geese. Several of these specimens were in the present Dale collection of artifacts and had been found on the surface of the open lava plains containing shallow sumps or ponds. Both modern and Indian duck blinds are still present in the area, thus providing possible confirmation to the story."

The use of round sun-dried balls in the throwing sling by the Pomo of Lake County (Yates, 1889, p. 302; Loeb, 1926, p. 184, Pl. 3) is not the same as that proposed here for the plummet-shaped pieces from Sonoma County. The latter, it seems, had a cord tied at one end and were probably thrown after being whirled around the head.

While it is not claimed that these examples prove the point made for the Sonoma site, they do establish concretely the fact that shaped stones have been used as slinging or bola stones by people traditionally or at least within the memory of living persons. It is believed that when the problem is attacked seriously with archaeological data supplemented with expert biological observation, the conclusion will not be discordant with that presented here.

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