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## Notes on a Portable Rock Art Piece from Western Nevada

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The prehistoric aboriginal peoples of western Nevada are not well known for the manufacture of large quantities of portable art. Most of the art familiar to anthropologists in this Great Basin area of resource-deficient, large, indigenous populations is in the form of petroglyphs, or pecked images on non-portable boulders or cliff faces. A considerable amount of this art exists in the western Great Basin (Heizer and Baumhoff 1962), and it is astoundingly abundant in some areas. The Coso region, for example, has such a quantity of pecked designs (see Grant, Baird, and Pringle 1968) that its description in terms of hours of labor expended would be staggering (see Bard and Busby [1974] and Busby *et al.* [1978] for replicative data on amounts of labor required to produce petroglyphs).

Portable art, as discussed in anthropological literature, is less common. This statement is, of course, at least partially a reflection of the fact that anthropologists have not been substantially concerned with the aesthetic

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qualities of many common categories of Great Basin material culture. Projectile points, baskets, rabbit skin capes, etc., are most often seen for their functional attributes, although few would deny the artistry and art inherent in their manufacture and appearance. However, portable art "for art's sake" is simply not predominant in the prehistoric cultural inventory which has been compiled for the area.

Some areas, for reasons yet undetermined, demonstrate the presence of more portable art than others. Generically, this observation holds true for non-portable art, in the form of petroglyphs, as well. In the case of the latter, however, this may be explained on the basis of magico-religious behavior associated with hunting (Heizer and Baumhoff 1962; Heizer and Clewlow 1973). Perhaps a similar explanation would hold true for portable art, but, archaeologically speaking, such an assessment must await considerable further research. It should be noted that there seems to be no statistically meaningful locational overlap between the occurrence of rock art in the form of petroglyphs and portable art in the Great Basin.

At our present state of knowledge, it seems that the majority of portable art from the Great Basin has been reported in western Nevada. Tuohy and Stein (1969) listed a number of stone effigy collections from this area, and described five unusual stone carvings recovered as mortuary offerings in a Pyramid Lake shaman's burial. At least two of these are fish, one is a "lake monster," one is a legless vertebrate, and the fifth represents an antelope or mountain sheep. These specimens are associated with a bone collagen date of  $1820 \pm 180$  years B.P. Tuohy (1969) also described a carved and painted polychrome bird effigy from Hanging Rock Cave, in Churchill County, and is presently compiling data on over 130 portable rock art specimens from western Nevada (Don Tuohy, personal

communication). The lower Humboldt Valley, in the large sink below Lovelock Cave, also yielded a number of carved stone art specimens. Harrington (1927:45-47) described and illustrated one such piece, an apparent composite of a fish and rattlesnake. Four additional pieces are discussed and illustrated by Cowan and Clewlow (1968:202-203, Fig. 4). Three of these are interpreted as possibly representing horned toads or frogs, with the fourth perhaps representing an owl. In no case are these distinctions clear, and with imagination one could certainly arrive at alternative explanations. These four specimens, from site NV-Pe-67, were in a private collection when recorded in 1968. Cowan and Clewlow (1968:203) also note that the large site of NV-Ch-15 "has yielded a great deal of carved stone art," but none is illustrated, nor has any been published since that time. Nearby Lovelock Cave yielded a carved grasshopper effigy that is unusual in that it is made of wood and retains some traces of pitch and pigment (Jones, Weaver, and Stross 1967). Its function, like other portable art pieces, is unclear. Loud and Harrington (1929) describe and illustrate two carved wooden "talismans" and one problematical carved stone fish, possibly a pendant, from the same site.

From further east, at Grass Valley, animal effigy figures made of baked clay have been reported. One represents a horse (Magee 1966) and another may be an owl. Again, precise determination of species is impossible, and function is unclear. Ambro (1978) believes that they may represent toys, and cites a wide body of literature on the subject. He notes that they commonly are reported from both archaeological and ethnographic contexts.

The carved stone effigy under discussion was collected near the Lahontan Dam, which is located in Churchill County, a few miles west of Fallon, Nevada. It thus originates in

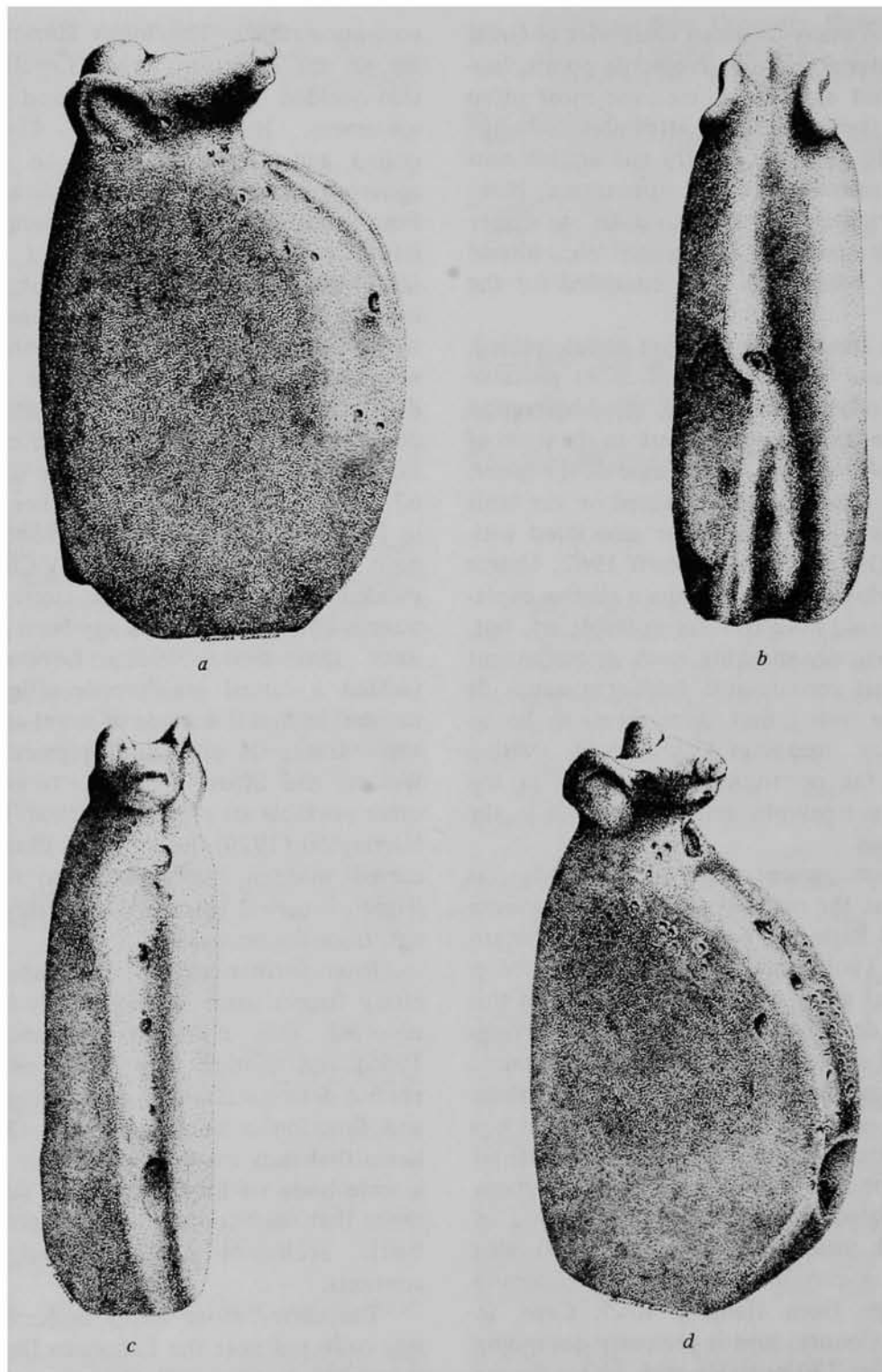


Fig. 1. Stone effigy (scale: 1:2). Drawing by Jennifer Corsiglia.

an area known to contain quantities of such art. The sculpture was made from a flat piece of scoria about 5 cm thick. The stone is not quite oval in outline, with one long edge providing a flat back and the opposite edge providing a rounded belly for the animal sculpture. It was mounted by its owner on a piece of wood (see Fig. 1).

As mounted, the sculpture stands 16.5 cm. tall. Viewed in profile (Fig. 1a), it measures 5.5 cm. wide at the base and 11 cm. wide at the middle of the belly. From the outer edge of the horn or ear to the tip of the nose, the head measures 6 cm. wide in profile.

Although the specimen sculpture clearly represents an animal, it is impossible to determine the species intended. As mounted, with its head vertical in relation to its body, it may be interpreted as a kangaroo rat or other rodent, or as a skunk. Turned on its side, however, it bears a resemblance to the mountain sheep portrayed in Great Basin rock art.

The angle at which the head is attached to the body was determined by the shape of the stone and the limitations of the sculptor's skill. In the upright position, as mounted, the back of the head rests directly on the body and the nose is pointed in the air, revealing only a short neck in front. Turned on its side, it lacks a well-defined neck and holds its head low.

Viewed upright, the sculpture has large, saucer-shaped ears which lie flat against the sides of its head; viewed on its side, however, these are not as clearly ears, but recall the curled horns of the mountain sheep.

The mouth is indicated by a faint groove below the nose, but the upper part of the face is flat and featureless.

A groove about 2 mm. deep begins between the ears (or horns) and extends down the animal's back. In the front, a matching groove follows the curve of its belly from chest to base. This groove varies in width from about 1.5 to 2.5 cm. It appears to run

continuously from front to back around the figure.

The animal lacks both front and hind legs, but, when viewed from the rear, a suggestion of both shoulders and haunches is created by the presence of the medial groove. A tail, about 6 cm. long and tapering from 0.5 to 1.5 cm. in width, protrudes from the center of this groove. It is worth noting that the four NV-Pe-67 specimens are grooved, and it is probable that the use of grooving was one of the primary shaping techniques available to the artist. The specimen under discussion in this note is shown in profile (Fig. 1a), from the back or top (Fig. 1b), from the rear or bottom (Fig. 1c) and in 3/4 view (Fig. 1d).

As with all Great Basin carved effigies, the piece may be classed as rather crude and experimental. A best guess at its species would be mountain sheep, an assessment with which Tuohy (personal communication) is in accord. As Wellmann (1979:56) has noted, mountain sheep are by far the most common animal portrayed in petroglyphs of the Great Basin. They are also the most faithfully executed and accurately rendered of all the quadrupeds, allowing for their easy modern-day recognition. Most other petroglyphic portrayals of animals are more aptly described as amorphous zoomorphs. Such figures could represent abstractions of known species, totally mythical or imaginary "dream" species, or non-realistic composites of the above. Such terms could also be used to interpret the piece described herein. It is suggested that such pieces would receive more attention if they were perceived as a type of rock art. Although portable, and admittedly at the other end of the spectrum from pictographs, petroglyphs, and geoglyphs (intaglios), they are nevertheless made of stone and are generally felt to be functionally magico-religious. If placed under the rock-art rubric they might become more attractive as objects of serious interpretive efforts.



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