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An Incised Soapstone Object from Johnson's Landing, Santa Catalina Island, California

ROBERT J. WLODARSKI

A fragmented, incised soapstone object (Fig. 1) was recovered from a large coastal site on Catalina Island during a research project in February 1983. The site had previously been excavated by Paul Schumacher in the 1870s and Ralph Glidden in the 1920s. The object was found at Johnson's Landing, which lies at the western end of Emerald Bay on the leeward side of the Island, approximately three miles west of the Isthmus (Fig. 2).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Paul Schumacher (1877) and Ralph Glidden (1920, 1927) excavated over 243 burials from the cemetery at Johnson's Landing. Notes, photographic material, and artifactual data curated at the Peabody Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Museum of the American Indian, and the Catalina Island Museum indicated that, in addition to the skeletal remains,

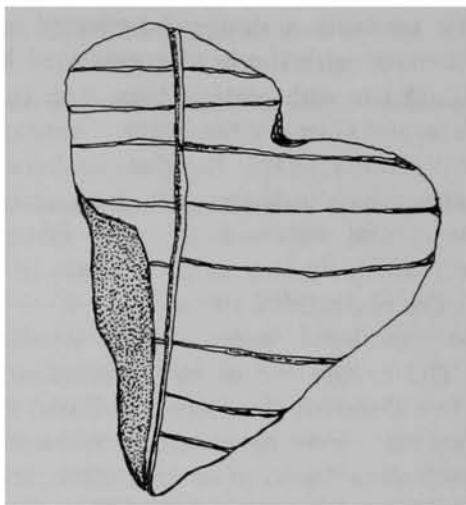


Fig. 1. Incised soapstone object from Johnson's Landing, actual size.

a large quantity and variety of burial goods were also collected from the cemetery.

A preliminary inventory of materials collected by Schumacher and Glidden indicated that the bulk of artifactual material removed from the burial area consisted of shell and stone bead necklaces; comals; mortars and pestles; soapstone bowls; and shell, bone and stone ornaments; however, effigies, quartz crystals, and several small, grooved and incised soapstone and serpentine objects were also found in association with some burials.

The incised, fine-grained soapstone object recently recovered from Johnson's Landing appears similar to other forms discussed by Abbott (1879), Pond (1968), Hoover (1973), Wlodarski (1974), and Lee (1981). However, several of these objects are large and bulky (some exceeding 15 cm. in length) and appear to represent broken comal and bowl fragments which were reworked and incised. Smaller, more delicate incised objects appear to be pendants or charmstones, while the larger "tablets" may have served more specific functions. As Pond stated:

The Malaga Cove tablets are heavy slabs without any means of attachment. Incised

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fragments from other sites prove the existence of other tablets equally as large. It is probable that they were held in special regard, otherwise their destruction at many villages would not have been so complete. Their classification as pendants or gorgets seems doubtful since none has been found in such a situation with a skeleton. A strong case can be presented for their use as "sacred tablets" in religious rites and shamanism. An equally strong theory suggests that they were plaques belonging to the elders of tribes and that these were destroyed when their owners died [1968: 131].

It appears highly plausible that both the large bulky tablets and the smaller pendant-like objects could have served several functions. In a social context they may have functioned as status and wealth indicators, or religiously and ceremonially, as burial offerings to accompany an individual in death. As Pond (1968) pointed out however, it is less likely that the larger "tablets" functioned as pendants which were worn, although they could have been carried.

Lee (1981: 42-45) discussed engraved stones in more detail, summarizing their presence based on culture area rather than strictly design motif, size, or shape. Lee further discussed and illustrated over 70 incised stones from the Channel Islands and adjoining mainland area. Of the 70 objects, 43 are made of soapstone, and 26 have observable designs.

COMPARATIVE INTERPRETATIONS

It appears that the incised object from Johnson's Landing falls into the bisected chevron design motif where a central vertical line or lines bisect the object, with lines radiating either diagonally or at an angle from the central line. There are no visible design elements on the reverse side and the remnant of a possible hole is located near the broken edge of the object, indicating its possible use as a pendant.

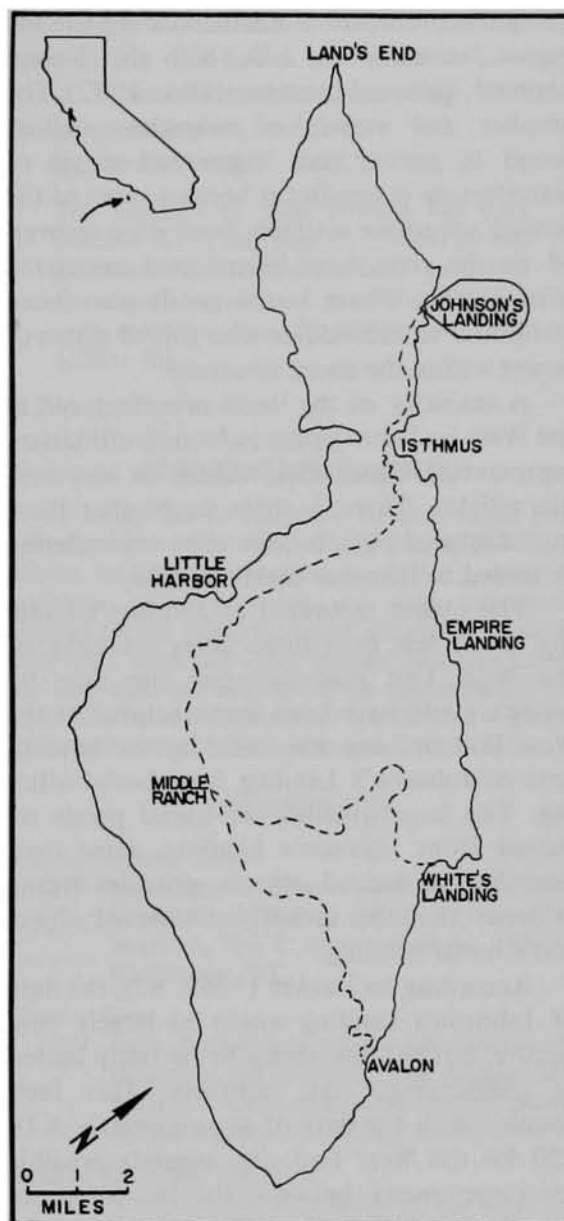


Fig. 2. Location of Johnson's Landing on Catalina Island.

Several soapstone objects similar to the Johnson's Landing artifact have been recovered on Catalina. One such piece was recovered from the West End Site (SCaI-106) (Decker and Plog [1971] and Wlodarski [1974]). The West End site was known to have been a

fine-grained soapstone manufacturing site occupied as early as A.D. 800 (N. Nelson Leonard, personal communication 1982). The number and variety of soapstone objects found in partial and fragmented stages of manufacture is significant because most of the incised soapstone artifacts heretofore recovered on the coast have been found associated with burials. These burial goods have been attributed to individuals who gained status or power within the social structure.

A majority of the items manufactured at the West End site appear to be non-utilitarian, representing either sociotechnic or ideotechnic articles. There is little doubt that these manufactured objects were then redistributed or traded to Island or mainland sites.

The object recovered at Johnson's Landing, a site less than three miles southeast of the West End manufacturing site (less by canoe), could have been manufactured at the West End site and then used by the inhabitants of Johnson's Landing for a burial offering. The large quantity of burial goods removed from Johnson's Landing, some even described as incised objects, provides strong evidence that this recently discovered object was a burial offering.

According to Decker (1969: 82), the date of Johnson's Landing would be largely conjecture, but the site seems to be fairly barren of characteristic late artifacts. This fact, coupled with the date of approximately A.D. 800 for the West End site, suggests possible contemporaneity between the two sites and therefore trade or redistribution occurring.

DISCUSSION

The design motif of the Johnson's Landing artifact is similar to that of others reported for the Channel Islands and mainland locations. Differences in the size and shape of items with similar design motifs may not be as important as their possible functional relationships. The large, incised and

grooved plaques and tablets which have been found in burial contexts may have been used for the same purpose as the smaller, more delicate objects, and merely represent idiosyncratic variations.

Several possible functions for these artifact types have been suggested. For instance, it was unclear to Walker (1951: 49) "whether these objects were of ceremonial or utilitarian significance." Lee stated that these:

... stones vary in size and type. . . . The material apparently was not an important factor. Some of the stones have been modified and display smoothed and rounded edges. Others are simple chunks of generally rectangular shape which is naturally smooth, requiring no preparation for incising. Designs are engraved on one or both sides; some are also painted. Engraved stones have been found in both early and late time periods [1981: 41].

Lathrap and Hoover suggested that:

These slabs were certainly not functional tools of any kind, but certain evidence from other sites suggests that these artifacts may have had religious significance [1975: 96].

As Lee summarized:

We are dealing with one or more culturally defined concepts which were made manifest by incising lines, some of which form patterns on the stone. It appears that the steatite plaques, which fall into a discrete group, were utilized for a distinct and specific function, perhaps in healing or other shamanic practice, or as indicators of status. It has been suggested that they were used as mortuary stones [1981: 44-45].

The object from Johnson's Landing was, most likely, a mortuary offering. Its likeness to other similar objects, its size, shape, design motif and, most importantly, its association with a known cemetery component justify this conclusion.

The design elements found on many incised objects like the one from Johnson's

Landing are usually categorized by researchers on the basis of similarities or differences in design motif. However, these design elements may represent local or regional variations in style and not reflect their actual function. Although the analysis of a particular design motif may provide insights into the social or ceremonial behavior of a group, it is unlikely that this can be used to discuss function. All attributes of the object must be taken into consideration, along with its spatial and temporal relationships, before meaningful behavioral statements can be made.

A final thought concerning the size and shape of many incised and engraved objects found in the Chumash and Gabrielino territory involves the importance of these variables in understanding social or ceremonial behavior. The objects which have been previously discussed have varied from simple to complex, bulky to fragile, drilled to undrilled, and elaborate to simple designs. The study of the variability in design motif, size, and shape of these incised objects centers on the question: "Does the variability in the elements that make up the object reflect differences in function, customs, norms, or beliefs?" To an extent we could say yes, since a heavy, undrilled, comal-like object would not necessarily have functioned in the same manner as a small, drilled, fragile pendant. However, they both could have been carried, used as status or wealth indicators, and functioned in a ceremonial context.

It is possible that the craftsman who manufactured these objects did so at the request of chiefs, shamans, or high-status individuals. However, they may represent the personal artistic freedom of the craftsman, or be manufactured as amorphous forms to be further designed or elaborated on by their owners. If there were soapstone specialists performing the technical aspects of shaping and designing the particular objects based on demand or their own creative, artistic abili-

ties, then the ultimate function of objects such as the one found at Johnson's Landing could have had some relationship to their design motifs, sizes, and shapes.

In conclusion, Lee stated:

The function of these artifacts has been obscure for some time The general practice in the literature has been to describe the engraved stone, refer to similar artifacts, and comment that its use is unknown [1981: 40].

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A Great Basin Pecked Style Petroglyph in the North Coast Ranges

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In early August, 1979, a petroglyph fragment was discovered adjacent to a hiking trail in the Yolla Bolly - Middle Eel Wilderness of the Mendocino National Forest (Fig. 1) by Ken Jones, a wilderness ranger. The fragment was located at the junction of two hiking trails near the crest of the North Coast Ranges in southeastern Trinity County, California (ca 2103 m. [6900 ft.] elevation). The area is characterized by rugged relief and a high-altitude red fir forest; the discovery location itself is an extremely barren, rocky ridge.

Because the petroglyph, as described by Jones, was of a pecked design thought to be rather unusual for the North Coast Ranges, arrangements were made to recover the fragment. Approximately one month after it was first reported, the petroglyph location was re-visited by Michael Boynton, Mendocino National Forest Archaeologist, the author, and other Forest Service personnel. At that time a second fragment that fit together with the original piece was discovered nearby. The two petroglyph fragments were collected and are currently curated at the Mendocino National Forest Supervisor's Office, Willows, California (Acc. No. 80-11-436).

As it appeared that the petroglyph was not in its original context, an effort was made to locate the parent panel. On two occasions, surveys were made of ridges within a mile of the discovery site. The first was in early September, 1979, when the Forest Service party examined the ridge where the petro-