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Painted Pebbles from a Shellmound on Brooks Island, Contra Costa County, California

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In the fall of 1960, archaeological excavations were made at site CCo-290, a shellmound on the north side of Brooks Island, which lies about three-quarters of a mile off the Richmond shore in San Francisco Bay, directly opposite the now-destroyed Ellis Landing mound, site CCo-295 (Nelson 1910). During the excavation, two small pebbles with simple painted decoration were recovered. Because of their relatively rare occurrence in California, these previously unreported pebbles seem to warrant a detailed description.

Both specimens are composed of fine-grained sandstone. The surfaces are water-worn and rounded, although there are some flattened spots present. The decorations, probably painted with red ochre, are on one side only. One specimen (Fig. 1, upper) is 30 mm. long, tapering in width from 7 mm. at the narrow end to 16 mm. at the wide end; it is 6 mm. in thickness. The pebble is slightly convex on the painted side and slightly concave on the unpainted side. The painted decoration consists of two horizontal red bands 4 mm. wide, extending across the width of one side, 10 mm. from the narrow end and 5 mm. from the broad end. The painted bands are 7 mm. apart.

The pebble shown in Fig. 1, lower, is 41 mm. long, tapering in width from 17 mm. to 5 mm.; it has a thickness of 10 mm. It is flattish

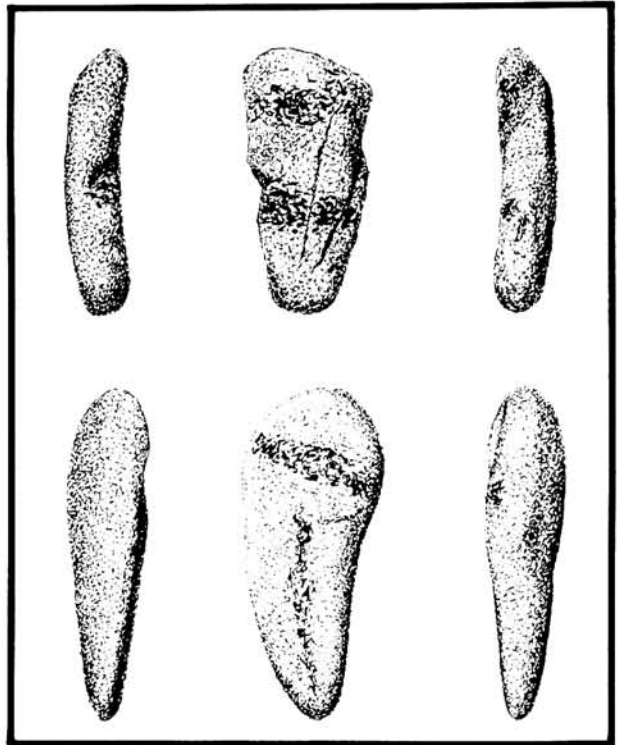


Fig. 1. Painted pebbles from site CCo-290. Actual size.

on the painted side and slightly concave on the unpainted side. Both ends of the specimen are rounded. The painted decoration consists of a slightly slanting horizontal red band 4 mm. wide and 7 mm. from the broadest end, with a vertical red band 1 mm. wide extending from the approximate center of the horizontal band to the narrow end, following the slight curve of the pebble.

The pebbles were found at depths of 30 and 23 in. from the surface. In the 5 X 5-foot excavation unit in which they were found, a hearth and house floor appeared at a depth of 24 and 29 in., with the hearth extending into the west wall of the excavation unit. In the profile of the west wall, a disturbed area

extending in depth from 12 to 26 in. could be discerned. This possibly represented a storage pit associated with the housing feature. Both pebbles lay within 4 in. of the disturbed area and were separated from one another by no more than 7 in. both vertically and horizontally. Several other artifacts including a worked sting-ray spine, a pestle fragment, a plummet-stone fragment, and two polished bird-bone tubes, were found in the same horizontal range of the house floor. Probably all of these artifacts, and the pebbles as well, were associated with the housing feature.

Temporal association of these artifacts appears to be Phase I of Central California's Late Horizon, i.e., the pebbles may date from around A.D. 500. This designation is based primarily on the occurrence of small, serrated projectile points found at similar depths on the site. At the present time there are insufficient data for attributing a particular facies designation to this Late Horizon component.

Incised stone objects have been reported from many areas of California, including Lassen (Pilling 1957), Mono (Elsasser 1957), Mendocino (Treganza, Smith, and Weymouth 1950), and Contra Costa (Nelson 1910) counties and from the Panamint Mountains (Lathrap and Meighan 1951). They do not seem to have significant similarity to the painted pebbles under consideration here.

Painted shells have been reported from both southern California (Gifford 1947) and from Marin County (Treganza and Valdivia 1957). The southern California specimens all appear to be of a consistent type with a design unrelated to the CCo-290 pebbles. The Marin County specimens are of two types, a *Macoma nasuta* valve with red painting over the entire surface, and the complete half-shell painted on the back and decorated on the inside with a series of wavy parallel lines connected at one end by a horizontal band. Treganza and Valdivia (1957:15) suggested that the probable use of the shells was decorative or ceremonial with the two types possibly representing male

and female elements, although their use as gaming dice or gambling counters was not ruled out.

Painted stones have been reported from the Napa region (Meighan, Fredrickson, and Mohr 1953) and from Kern (Riddell 1951) and Los Angeles (Walker 1951) counties. The Napa ground stone tablets are flat on both sides, both side-notched and unnotched, and pigment is located on one or both sides, with white as well as red pigment appearing on many of the tablets. Several of the specimens from site Nap-57 are within the size range of the CCo-290 painted pebbles. The Nap-57 specimens range from 18 to 38 mm. in width and 38 to 85 mm. in length. The designs on the Napa tablets, however, are frequently more complex than on the CCo-290 specimens. It has been suggested (Meighan, Fredrickson, and Mohr 1953:263) that the tablets are attempts at effigy figures and that they probably had ceremonial significance. The smaller, less elaborated painted tablets from the Napa region may have some relation to the CCo-290 painted pebbles.

The Kern County specimens are much larger (32 X 35.4 cm.) and have all-over painting of red ochre with both incised and painted designs added, unlike the CCo-290 pebbles.

The painted pebbles from Los Angeles County are of a size comparable to those of CCo-290. They are 51 to 64 mm. long and are painted on one side only. The Los Angeles examples range from oval to circular in shape and display a dark brown pigment in simple geometric designs. No burial or other association was noted for these specimens. Their use as circular gaming pieces or ceremonial items is suggested (Walker 1951:67), hence they are in some sense related to the CCo-290 pebbles.

Culin (1907:293) reported that the Klamath Indians of Oregon used roughly lozenge-shaped, undecorated stones 1½ to 2½ in. (38 to 57 mm.) long for the hand game, although Spier (1930), in his ethnography of

the Klamath, does not record the use of stones for this purpose. The Indians of other areas (Arizona and Nevada) used small, more or less circular pebbles for the moccasin game (Culin 1907:346). The designs burnt or incised on bone dice in California are often simple geometric designs similar to those on the CCo-290 pebbles. Since the hand game and gaming dice were widely distributed in California, the painted pebbles were possibly used as gaming stones.

In summary, the two painted pebbles recovered during excavation of site CCo-290 appear to be unique in the Central California area, although similar pebbles have been found at one site in Los Angeles County and a possible relationship exists with the painted stones reported from the Napa region. Ethnographic evidence points to the use of such specimens as gaming pieces. After comparison with other archaeological finds in the Central California area, it is suggested also that they may represent male and female elements, perhaps connected with fertility rites.

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