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An Incised Tablet from Northern California

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An unusual incised tablet was discovered during an archaeological survey of Walpert Ridge, a remote section of the Alameda County Ridgeland overlooking San Francisco Bay (Parkman, Watts, and Eisenlauer 1978). Location of the artifact's discovery has been recorded as Ala-397 with the California Archaeological Site Survey (Fig. 1).

The tablet is composed of a medium grained gray sandstone, and is encrusted with a heavy growth of lichen. It is subrectangular in shape, measuring 47 cm. in length, 25 cm. in width, and 5 cm. in thickness. Both sides of the tablet have been incised, with one side receiving more attention than the other (Fig. 2). Four very small cupules are located on the more extensively modified side of the tablet. The cupules range in size from 0.5-0.9 cm. in diameter, and 0.1-0.2 cm. in depth. They are circular in outline, with rounded to flaring walls, and rounded to pointed bases. The incisions range in size from 3-30 cm. in length, 0.3-1.0 cm. in width, and 0.1-0.3 cm. in depth. They have rounded to flaring walls, and rounded to pointed bases. The cupules, and several of the smaller incisions, were not detected until after the tablet had been subjected to an intensive inspection using various indirect lighting techniques.

The tablet was found resting beside a game trail on a steep hillside. The trail parallels an ephemeral stream, and leads down to the San Francisco Bay plain, approximately one kilometer to the west. The area in which the tablet was discovered is 310 m. above mean sea level, and it is situated within

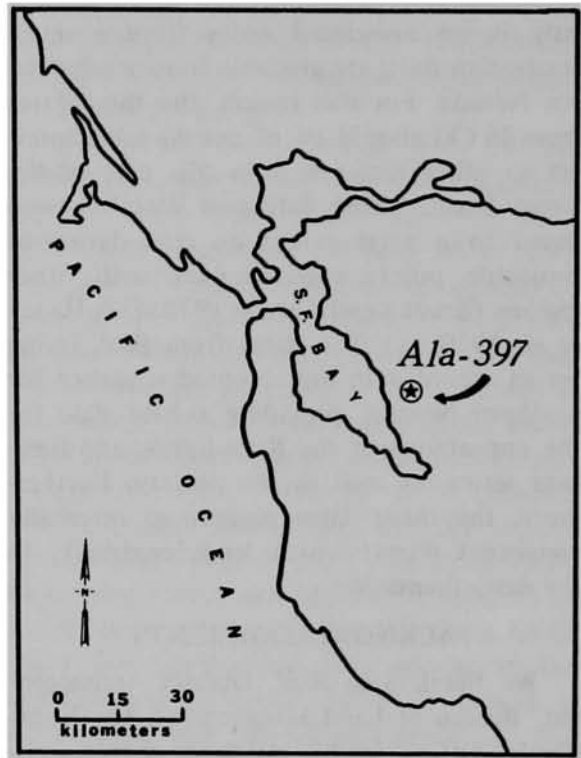


Fig. 1. Location of Ala-397 in the eastern San Francisco Bay area.

the micro-ecotone separating the local Grassland and Riparian plant communities. The vegetation of the immediate area includes California laurel (*Umbellularia californica*), coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia*), and wild oat (*Avena* spp.).

An inspection of the Ala-397 area revealed that several other tablet-shaped sandstone slabs were eroding out of the hillside about 10 m. uphill from the incised tablet. None of these other specimens exhibited any evidence of cultural modification, nor were any other archaeological materials found at Ala-397. Given the presence nearby of the unmodified slabs, it is likely that the incised tablet was manufactured at the site, rather than having been brought there from elsewhere. It also is likely that the artifact originated somewhere uphill, having gradually slid to its discovered location.

Two archaeological sites, both bedrock milling stations, are located within 0.6 km. of Ala-397. The closer of the sites, Ala-410, is located on a grassy hillside 0.5 km. north-northwest. This site consists of a single bedrock mortar, and appears to have been used by a small family unit for the spring/summer processing of grass seeds, and other available hard seeds. The second site, Ala-396, is located 0.6 km. north, and also is situated on a grassy hillside overlooking an oak grove. This site consists of ten bedrock mortars, and may have been used by a superfamily unit for the fall processing of acorns. A third (and unrecorded) site, WR-2, is located 0.3 km. to the north. This site consists of a single portable mortar found resting in a stream bottom. In addition to these nearby sites,

three other bedrock milling stations (Ala-344, Ala-398, and Ala-400) are located between 1.5 and 2.0 km. north and north-northeast of Ala-397.

Several other artifacts similar to the Walpert Ridge tablet have been recorded in northern California. Perhaps the most similar is a specimen discovered several years ago in the northern San Joaquin Valley, just south of Los Banos.

Indian mortars are not the only Indian artifacts in the area. In December 1975 the writer found a subrounded sandstone slab carved with petroglyphs. The sandstone slab found in a rockpile on the Panoche-Cantua interfan is about 38 by 28 by 11 centimeters (cm) and weighs 13.5 kilograms (kg). It is composed of medium to fine-grained gray sandstone which reacts with hydrochloric acid. The poorly preserved petroglyphs appear on both sides of the slab in an irregular pattern of branching and intersecting straight lines. The lines are 1-2.7 cm wide and 0.2-0.5 cm deep [Prokopovich 1976:274].

A similar tablet was discovered in northwestern Sonoma County in 1974. The artifact consisted of "... a milling stone fragment with a pecked crosshatch design on the back" (R. King 1974:4). The tablet was recorded as an isolated find in an area of abundant archaeological sites. At least 18 rock art sites, as well as several flake scatters and midden sites, are located nearby. The rock art sites are all characterized by boulders with cupules, incised lines, and deep grooves.

A third tablet was recently discovered in the Mendocino National Forest (Meacham 1980). This tablet, approximately the same size as the others, is decorated on one side with incised lines and alternating bands of circles and diamonds. The decoration of this tablet is somewhat similar to that of a smaller tablet found in southern Oregon (Bennyhoff 1957). Like the Walpert Ridge tablet, the Mendocino artifact was an isolated find pos-

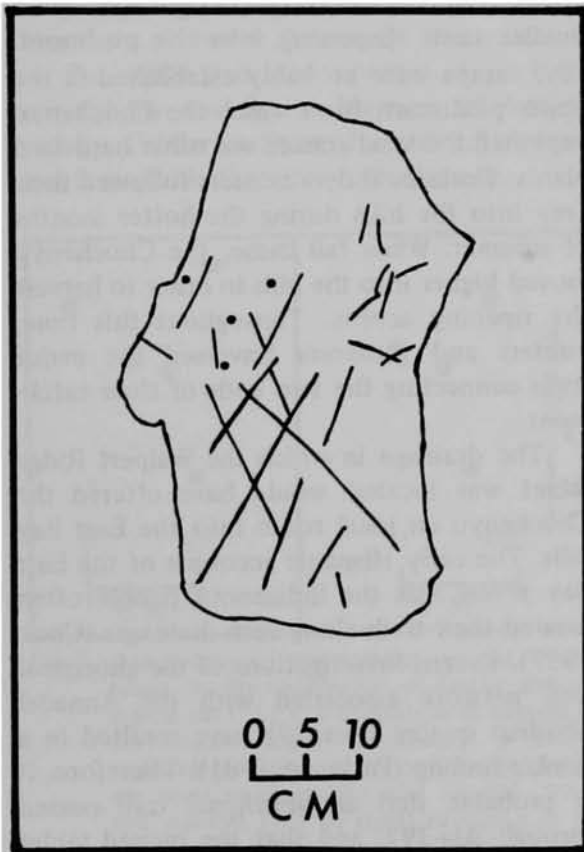


Fig. 2. Incised tablet from Walpert Ridge showing incised lines and cupules.

sibly associated with an aboriginal trail.

One small tablet, incised in a manner similar to the Walpert Ridge specimen, was recovered from the surface of a camp site in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of northern California (Elsasser 1978). Other incised tablets have been reported from southern California (Lathrap and Hoover 1975: 96-100; Lee 1981). Unlike the northern California specimens, however, these others appear to be associated with local mortuary practices.

The Walpert Ridge tablet is decorated in a manner which is stylistically similar to the rock art of the North Coast petroglyph style area (Clewlow 1978:622; Heizer and Clewlow 1973: 29-31). This style of petroglyph is found in Humboldt, Trinity, Lake, and Mendocino counties, and has been thought to be of fairly recent (A.D. 1600 to historic times) origin (Clewlow 1978:622). Recent studies by M. A. Baumhoff (1980:179), however, reveal that North Coast petroglyphs are much older, possibly beginning as early as 5000-3000 B.C. An earlier date for the petroglyphs also is indicated by the superimposition of bedrock mortars on cupule boulders (McGuire and Parkman 1981:35; Parkman 1980:154-155).

Petroglyphs similar to those of the North Coast petroglyph style have been recorded throughout the San Francisco Bay area. In addition to cupules, incised lines, and deep grooves, the Bay Area rock art sites are often characterized by Pecked Curvilinear Nucleate elements (Hotz and Clewlow 1974; Miller 1977). In addition, pictographs similar to those of the Central Coast Ranges are currently being recorded near Mt. Diablo in the eastern San Francisco Bay area (Dwight Dutschke, personal communication 1981).

The function and age of the Walpert Ridge tablet have yet to be determined. The artifact was found on the fringe of the eastern San Francisco Bay hinterland, an area belonging to the Chochenyo Costanoan during the historic period (Levy 1978:485). With a 10

km. wide plain separating the San Francisco Bay shoreline from the oak-covered East Bay hills, the local Chochenyo exploited an environment in which the desired resources were more widely scattered than anywhere else in the Bay Area (T. King 1974:44-45).

The Chochenyo practiced a seasonal subsistence cycle which was focused on the annual scheduling of available resources. Their catchment extended from the bayshore into the hills, with the two primary food resources, shellfish and acorns, being located at opposite ends of the catchment. During the winter, large base camps were established along the bayshore, especially in the vicinity of Coyote Hills. From these winter villages, the Chochenyo exploited nearby shellfish and waterfowl resources. Upon the coming of spring, the winter villages fragmented with smaller units dispersing into the piedmont. Base camps were probably established in the upper piedmont, from which the Chochenyo exploited the local grasses and other hard-seed plants. Occasional deer hunters followed their prey into the hills during the hotter months of summer. When fall came, the Chochenyo moved higher into the hills in order to harvest the ripening acorns. Throughout this time, hunters and gatherers traversed the major trails connecting the two ends of their catchment.

The drainage in which the Walpert Ridge tablet was located would have offered the Chochenyo an ideal route into the East Bay hills. The early Hispanic accounts of the East Bay reveal that the indigenous people often located their trails along such drainages (Cook 1957). Recent investigations of the aboriginal trail network associated with the Annadel obsidian quarry (Son-29) have resulted in a similar finding (Parkman 1981). Therefore, it is probable that an aboriginal trail passed through Ala-397, and that the incised tablet was either directly or indirectly associated with the trail.

An artifact indirectly associated with the hypothetical trail would have been deposited nearby by means of either accidental loss or intentional discard. Since the incised tablet appears to have been manufactured on-site, it does not seem reasonable that it was lost there. More likely, the artifact was produced on-site, then abandoned. One possible explanation for the function of the tablet is that it represents a trail or boundary marker. Trail offering-places are recorded for the Chochenyo (Harrington 1942:41; Research Committee 1965:53), and the incised tablet may have indicated the location of such a place. As a boundary marker, it also might have "mapped" the general area. A similarity appears to exist between the placement of cupules on the tablet, and the location of nearby archaeological sites (Fig. 3). At the present time, however, a precise functional interpretation of the artifact is not possible. It is being curated by the Smith Museum of Anthropology, California State University, Hayward, and is available there for further study.

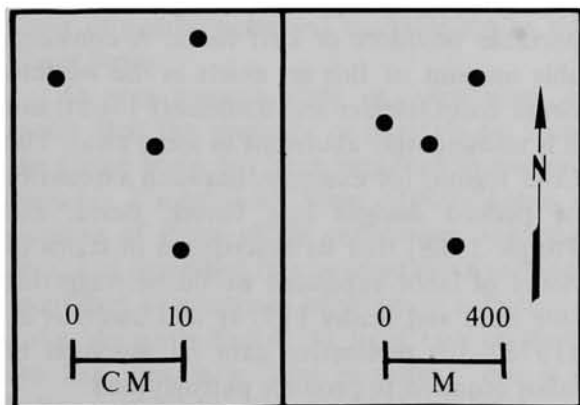


Fig. 3. Comparison of the cupules on the incised tablet, to the distribution of nearby archaeological sites. Left: Distribution of cupules on the artifact. Right: Distribution of nearby archaeological sites, with Ala-397 representing the most southern site, and Ala-410, WR-2, and Ala-396 (left to right) occurring to the north.

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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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