

SACRED ROCKS: NOT FOR PUBLIC CONSUMPTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a discussion of a little-known rock art site in the interior coast ranges of western Fresno County in central California. Anthropological evidence strongly suggests that tribal "rites of passage" into manhood were practiced at this remote and powerful place, in ceremonial activities involving anthropomorphic "male" petroglyphs and associated sacred objects. The significance of this locality is heightened due to its probable use to observe the winter solstice.

INTRODUCTION

I was the staff archaeologist for the Bureau of Land Management in the Hollister Resource Area Office of California from 1980 to 1983. My responsibilities included public lands in Monterey, San Benito and Fresno Counties within the coast ranges, the interior coast ranges, and the southern Sierra Nevada foothills of central California. My interest in rock art research was great, especially for this region where few such sites were recorded. I had searched for rock shelters and associated pictographs that are reported to occur around Joaquin Rocks (Latta 1950), but found none in the naturally diverse ecotones atop Joaquin Ridge.

The Joaquin Ridge area is bounded on the north by the east-flowing archaeologically rich Cantua Creek, on the east by plains above the valley bottom sloughs, and on the south by the alluvial plains north of Coalinga in western Fresno County. Serpentine masses form the upland areas to the immediate west. A series of north-south trending interior coast ranges and valleys generally divide this part of the Diablo Range from the Salinas Valley and other more westerly coastal valleys and ranges. Earthquakes are commonplace in this subregion. The uplands known as Joaquin Ridge contrast sharply with the Great Central Valley and provide a likely environment for obtaining plants, medicines, and a wide variety of rocks and minerals. These

mountainous lands also afford a retreat for shamans and for ritual isolation from lowland villages and populations.

In 1982, I examined a unique rock art site on public lands in the Joaquin Ridge area that had access restrictions due to privately owned inholdings, with the cooperation of a local landowner. I studied and documented this rare petroglyph during several visits in the summer, fall, and winter of that year, and designated this unusual locality the Westside Solstice Site (Crespín n. d.; USDI 1983). Subsequently, in 1988 the site was recorded by archaeologists with the California Department of Forestry as the Birdwell Rock Petroglyph Site, with the official trinomial CA-Fre-2244 (Foster, Jenkins, and Betts 1989).

This extraordinary place is approximately eight miles NNW of Coalinga, California. The Tachi Yokuts village of *Udjio*, historically known as the regionally significant trading center of *Poso Chana*, is about ten miles downstream from where the perennial Los Gatos Creek joins an unnamed seasonal drainage (Latta 1977; von Werlhof and Vierhus 1956a, 1956b). The subject site is over five miles upstream along the ephemeral watercourse from that confluence. This upland subregion of the Upper Sonoran Life Zone is dominated by oak-grass savanna and chaparral (*chamiso*) vegetation types, with locally occurring scrub oak, native shrubs and non-native grasses.

The generally south-facing site is at an elevation of 2,620 feet (above mean sea level or a.s.l.) on a flat bench that is drained by ephemeral streams and flanked by steep uplands on all sides (Plate 3). This landform would have been suitable for various temporary activities and for seasonal camps, but as it has only a small water seep and is virtually devoid of economic or ceremonial plants (e.g., *Quercus spp.*, *Datura spp.*, etc.), the tribal use of this locality is enigmatic.

Extensive sandstone cliffs are located a few hundred meters northeast of the Birdwell Rock Petroglyph Site. Raptors known to have ritual value could have nested there, such as eagles, condors, and perhaps hawks. Such sacred creatures would have been known to shamans and religious leaders, and could have been used ceremonially, such as to supply feathers and down or for ritual sacrifice. If present, eagles, condors, or hawks would have sanctified this locality (Gayton 1976; Latta 1977; Hudson and Underhay 1978).

A prominent sandstone monolith that bears abstract and representational petroglyphs forms the main rock art panel at CA-Fre-2244 and is central to the cultural features present (Figure 1; Plates 1, 2). A small mortar cup (approximately 10 cm. diameter) has been developed near the central base of the sandstone monolith, which also has several areas covered with pecked pits or punctations, in patterns forming lines and grids (Figure 1; Plates 4, 8). At least six heavily weathered male anthropomorphic figures (i.e., humanoids with phallic appendages) are depicted, as is a possible sundisk, a circle with a central dot and short lines radiating from the circle (Figures 1-2; Plate 5).

Seven bedrock mortar features with fourteen grinding cups are in close proximity, as are four boulders bearing cupule petroglyphs, and a possible hearth. The fourteen mortar cups range in size from incipient to 40 cm. (diameter) x 30 cm. (depth). Many are large and well-developed, particularly for this seemingly marginal environment with scant resources and no dependable source of water. No midden is evident and virtually no artifactual materials or lithic debitage are present, with the exception of four

crude pestles in and near some of the mortar cups.

Ritual artifacts reportedly found *in situ* at the main rock art panel include a well-made stone pestle (charmstone?) with a penis shaped distal end (Plate 6) and a "chert egg," or silicate spheroid of white chert with brown spots. These items were apparently in the small mortar cup on the face of the sandstone monolith and were collected years ago, according to the private landowner who provided site information and access.

Donut Rock, another monolithic sandstone rock art feature, is on public land about one mile to the southeast atop nearby Anticline Ridge at an elevation of 3,000 feet a.s.l. (Plate 3). In 1982, I determined that the winter solstice could probably be viewed directly from the vicinity of the Birdwell Rock Petroglyph Site, with Donut Rock forming a "viewsight." This conclusion was based on personal field observations and discussions with the staff at the Lick Observatory of the University of California at Santa Cruz (UCSC), who had calculated that Donut Rock would focus astronomical alignments for this locality. Apparently several celestial bodies would be visible when rising, including the sun during the winter solstice. On December 21, 1982, I was at the Birdwell Rock Petroglyph Site to directly observe the rising sun at dawn on the winter solstice. Unfortunately, a dense ground fog obscured any possible solar observations that morning, and I departed by mid-afternoon that day. Subsequently, the 1983 Coalinga earthquake dislodged Donut Rock. (Plans for viewing such events should include the few days prior to and following the actual winter solstice. I believe the winter solstice rising sun can still be directly observed from this locality, as can other celestial bodies, e.g., rising stars, etc. of concern to aboriginal astronomers and astrologers.)

BACKGROUND

Ethnographic and archaeological contexts relevant to this cultural geography are provided here to address potential site functions, antiquity, and possible ethnic affiliation. Parallels will be drawn with cultural traits documented for local and

adjoining tribal groups. Information for the subject region is extremely limited due to significant losses of population and culture since European contact (circa 1770), largely attributed to devastating epidemics in the 1830's, and the California Gold Rush of 1848 (Smithsonian Institution 1978).

This region is considered to be part of the area inhabited by the Tachi Indians, an ethnically distinct group of Southern Valley Yokuts, who focused activities around Tulare Lake, to the southeast of the study area. Tachi lands extended to the area of western Fresno County around Coalinga, including the major villages of *Udjio (Poso Chana)* and *Golon*, near the town of Huron, California. Other valley and foothill Yokuts groups lived to the north and southeast in the Great Central Valley, and to the east into the Sierra Nevada foothills. The Yokuts all spoke languages classified as Penutian linguistic stock, as did the *Chalon* Costanoan people who occupied lands of the upper San Benito River to the immediate northwest along a primary route to the coast. Neighboring Indian tribes speaking languages of Hokan linguistic stock included interior Chumash groups living generally to the south, and Salinan people inhabiting regions generally to the west of the Tachi. Trade and exchange with the Chumash, Salinan, and Costanoan tribes were well-developed and occurred intensively at *Poso Chana*, particularly for shells and shell beads. The Tachi received acorns in trade from Foothill Yokuts people, and exchanged numerous items with other valley and foothill Yokuts tribes (Davis 1961). Natural deposits of asphaltum or bitumen occurred near *Udjio*, providing an invaluable and essential substance for mending, waterproofing, as an adhesive, and as a commodity for exchange with other tribes (Latta 1977).

The Yokuts observed three seasons, winter, spring, and summer. The winter season began their year. They held no winter ceremony, but did observe the winter solstice (Gayton 1976; Latta 1977; Hudson, Lee, and Hedges 1979). They venerated the stars, celestial objects, and especially astronomical events like solar and lunar eclipses. Numerous seasonal ceremonies were publicly celebrated. The Yokuts also held portions of youth initiation ceremonies in public. At times, relatively private rites of passage were held for

smaller groups (Blackburn 1974). Spirit helpers were initially acquired and typically called through dreams and visions, commonly invoked by the use of *tani* or toloache (from *toloatzin*, Nahuatl for ritually consumed *Datura spp.*, or Jimsonweed). The societal role of shaman was demanding, given sometimes rigorous requirements for fasting, using tobacco emetics, and praying in isolated places (Gayton 1976). There was limited access to esoteric knowledge for general tribal populations. Chiefs, shamans, and participants (i.e., the *intelligentsia*) controlled proprietary knowledge regarding ritual practices and sacred places to maintain power and their societal roles (Blackburn 1974; Bean 1976; Hudson and Underhay 1978). The Yokuts considered rock art to be *tripne* or supernatural, partly because shamans cached ceremonial paraphernalia at rock art ritual sites (Latta 1977). Such shamanic implements might include ceremonial mortars and pestles for preparing tobacco (*Nicotiana spp.*) or *tani*. The Tachi and others had "fertility" (phallic shaped) pestles for ritual uses which remain undescribed (Plate 6; Latta 1977; von Werlhof and Vierhus 1956a).

The Tachi reportedly did not use *tani* specifically for youth initiation rituals; however, such use is known for the surrounding Yokuts groups, and for other tribes of the region, including Salinans, Costanoans, and the Chumash (Smithsonian Institution 1978). To the south, the nearby Serrano practiced boys initiations that included ritual ingestion of toloache the first night at a hidden place away from the village, followed by three nights of ceremonial dancing after returning to the village. In south-central and southern California, toloache was processed with a special mortar and pestle, and then placed in a ceremonial bowl from which the decoction was administered (Strong 1929). For most tribes initiates might include youths aged six to eighteen years; however, males in their teens were most typical. Participants were generally separated and secluded from others of the village for ritual purposes (e.g., fasting, spiritual guidance, etc.), for several days prior to and following the administration of the toloache. Special mentors assisted and counseled initiates throughout the ceremony as participants derived visions and identified spirit helpers for personal power (Latta 1977). Typically, a person might take toloache

only once, although shamans and certain others might use it ritually many times. Toloache was used in ancient practices, such that the geographic distribution of its use was extensive. However, at times it is associated with regional religious cults and rituals, such as the Chingichgnish religious rites of south-coastal California and the 'Antap Society of the Chumash (Bean and Vane 1978).

Chumash shamans and religious leaders employed the sacred *momoy* (toloache) for most of their ceremonial rituals, and named a female deity and a month (January) after *momoy*. They are also thought to have used specific rock art localities during the important winter solstice celebration, such as Condor Cave (CA-SBa-101). High elevations are always involved in winter solstice ritual observations. A Chumash astronomer-astrologer ('*alchuklash*) would go into the mountains to observe the winter solstice and to create pictographs while guided by the sacramental *momoy*. Sundisks are images created at Chumash pictograph sites and thought to symbolize the winter solstice (Hudson and Underhay 1978). It is worth noting that tribal groups throughout the regions adjacent to the study area observed the winter solstice; perhaps in conjunction with rock art rituals, possibly including the Yokuts at Painted Rock (CA-Tul-17) in the Sierra Nevada foothills. Shamans in some tribal groups, including the Chumash and the Yokuts, probably made astronomical observations of certain rising stars to plan seasonal activities, in addition to noting the solstices (Hudson, Lee, and Hedges 1979).

On a somewhat related note, the ethnographic groups from this study area and the adjacent extended regions had weather shamans or rain doctors. These were powerful individuals who performed rituals to control water, rain, the wind, and earthquakes. Ritual paraphernalia commonly included quartz crystals and plummet-shaped stone charmstones that were used by such shamans to start or stop storms and to influence the weather (von Werlhof and Vierhus 1956a; Latta 1977; Grant 1965; Hudson and Underhay 1978). In archaeological contexts in Chumash country, singular groups of ten charmstones or plummets have been found in association with a solitary round stone, all within a small boulder

mortar cup at ceremonial shrines used in rituals by weather shamans (Rogers 1929). Unique round stones are also used in combination with charmstones by weather shamans in the Great Central Valley and adjacent areas (Latta 1977). Locally observed plummet forms resemble those of the Yokuts (Plate 7); however, the archaeological context at the Birdwell Rock Petroglyph Site is strikingly similar to the occurrences described for Chumash country. The presence of a "chert egg" and a possible charmstone (i.e., phallic pestle) in the small mortar cup at the base of the main rock art panel at CA-Fre-2244 compels the consideration of site functions that are linked to weather shamanism.

Shamans used toloache for guidance while handling charmstone plummets, as these very powerful stones were also considered to be *tripne* (Gayton 1946; Latta 1977; Hudson and Underhay 1978). Cupules and pit-and-groove petroglyphs on boulders, called rain rocks by some tribes, are associated with the shamanic control of weather in parts of California (USDI n. d.; Parkman 1986). Some weather shamans would perform ceremonies while guided by toloache, including the ritual production of rock art. Most rock art in the southern part of California is connected with toloache use, especially as exemplified by Chumash ritualism (Kroeber 1925; Grant 1965; Hudson and Underhay 1978).

In Chumash country, rock art occurs at sacred sites in remote areas in the coast ranges, high above population centers. The best examples of Chumash rock art occur in inland regions somewhat south of the study area, where the Cuyama and Emigdiano Chumash lived. The male humanoid glyphs at the Birdwell Rock Petroglyph Site closely resemble certain painted motifs at the San Emigdio Site (CA-Ker-77) and sundisk pictographs are also present at this spectacular Chumash rock art site (Grant 1965, Plate 27; Hudson, Lee, and Hedges 1979). Humans and sundisks are standard features of Chumash rock art, as are placements in isolated, less accessible, high places with shamanic ritual contexts (Grant 1965).

No specific rock art style is attributed to the subject study area because few rock art sites are known or documented for that general region (von

Werihof and Vierhus 1956a; Foster, Jenkins, and Betts 1989) other than cupule petroglyphs (Plates 9 and 11), which are thought to predate pictographs and other petroglyphs in California (Steward 1929; Parkman 1986). Some cupule features may have ritual functions related to astronomical observations of celestial bodies, such as constellations (USDI n. d.).

The Santa Barbara Painted Style (i.e., Chumash rock art) and the "Tulare" or Southern Sierra Painted Style (i.e., Foothill Yokuts rock art) are the nearest locally prevalent rock art styles in this part of California. These two styles feature the most developed and elaborate depictions in the State, share many similarities of execution and motif, and are thought to have common origins linked to other regions (Steward 1929). Anthropomorphic figures with phallic appendages occur in the rock art of the Tulare region and in Chumash country. The male humanoids at CA-Fre-2244 are not stickmen, but have thickened torsos and limbs and a spread-eagle appearance. These anthropomorphs, although incised not painted, appear graphically similar to those commonly occurring in the adjacent areas.

DISCUSSION

The fluid and poorly understood nature of the local culture history and the limited archaeological studies of this part of California are amplified by the dynamic nature of the regional cultural environment through time, with major transportation and exchange corridors co-occurring within the subject study area.

Esoteric knowledge is privileged and not generally known to all members of tribal communities. It would probably not be revealed even when known, especially to non-traditionalists and non-Indian scholars. Moreover, the lack of information provided to researchers regarding this or other sacred places is partly due to major population declines and the detrimental effects of post-contact historic processes upon indigenous cultures.

The Birdwell Rock Petroglyph Site location in a remote and marginally productive environmental zone may be related to ceremonial rituals requiring

seclusion from others, similar to the ritual isolation required by Yokuts shamans and/or participants ingesting *tani* (toloache). The male anthropomorphic figures at this site are possibly linked with a youth initiation rite-of-passage, or puberty ritual, widely practiced by native people in all directions (e.g., Yokuts, Chumash, Costanoans, etc.). The designs, the composition, and the execution of rock art motifs at CA-Fre-2244 are similar to styles from the nearby Tulare region and from Chumash country. The possible relationship to Chumash or perhaps coastal traditions is reinforced by one of the site's apparent functions as a winter solstice or astronomical observatory, as well as apparent similarities to known practices of coastal weather shamans.

The lack of subsistence implements or midden development at CA-Fre-2244 reinforces its probable non-subsistence functions. The well-developed bedrock mortars apparently have little to do with food processing. There are virtually no vegetal foods and little water locally available in the modern environment, although local ranchers report that there is improved water flow from the seep when the chaparral is burned. In early spring the small seep may temporarily provide adequate water for ritual activities in this vicinity. The grinding features here are probably not exclusive to later temporal periods of local prehistory, although bedrock mortars can be time indicators in California archaeological reconstructions. Perhaps for millennia these mortars were used to ceremonially process minerals to prepare pigments for ritual painting of the body or rocks (Steward 1929).

The presence of ceremonial paraphernalia at this petroglyph, including special "fertility" pestles or perhaps charmstones and the "chert egg," is similar to the Foothill Yokuts trait of associating shamanic tools with rock art. The phallic stone pestle in association with the small grinding cup at the base of this monolith may represent a special mortar and pestle utilized to prepare toloache, or it may be for tobacco preparation. It is also possible that this site is a shrine where shamanic weather rituals were practiced, involving ceremonial plummets, round stones, and small mortars, similar to rites documented from Chumash country and perhaps for the Yokuts.

In California, petroglyphs and cupules are probably from older traditions that predate pictographs. The association of the heavily weathered and unique Birdwell Rock Petroglyph Site with native cultures disposed towards ceremonial isolation, including initiation rites and other practices when toloache was administered, is a viable site function. Winter solstice observation, another functional interpretation, may demonstrate connections with coastal cultural traditions. Weather control and rainmaking ceremonies of ancient origin involving the shamanic inscription of cupules and pit-and-groove petroglyphs and the use of certain ritual paraphernalia may also be evident at this site.

CONCLUSIONS

Interpretations of possible site functions for CA-Fre-2244 are based upon the limited anthropological knowledge of the region (e.g., ethnography, archaeology, linguistics). Some tentative conclusions include:

- This rock art/ceremonial site may be a relic from the traditions of earlier Hokan speakers that were subsequently displaced by later Penutian speakers.

- This site may have been created by displaced Hokan speakers (and/or their descendants) who returned to the site to practice sacred rituals incepted at an earlier time.
- This site may represent a mixed cultural monument to syncretic indigenous religious practices, utilized by Yokuts people but influenced by the sacred traditions of coastal people or others with whom they interacted.
- The Birdwell Rock Petroglyph Site is probably associated with magico-religious shamanic practices requiring ritual isolation at this particular locality. Possible ceremonial activities may have involved seeking personal power, initiation rites, control of rain and wind by weather shamans, and/or astronomical observation of the winter solstice and other celestial bodies. All of these activities may have required the periodic or intermittent use of this locality for various rituals, at times involving the concomitant use of sacred toloache by shamans, religious leaders, or participants.

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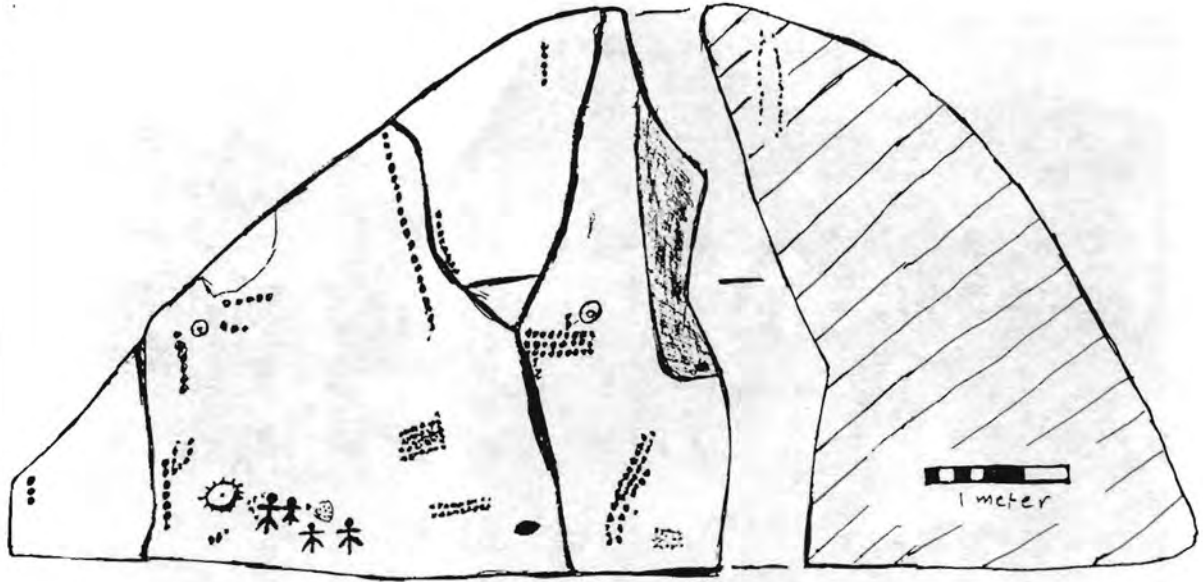


FIGURE 1



PLATE ONE

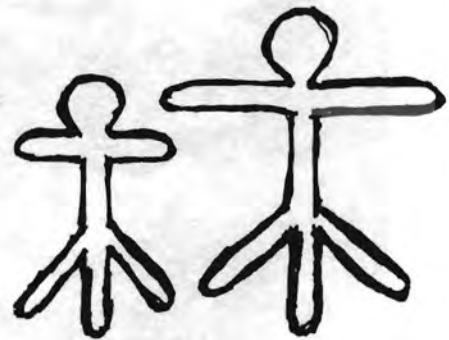


FIGURE 2



PLATE TWO



PLATE THREE

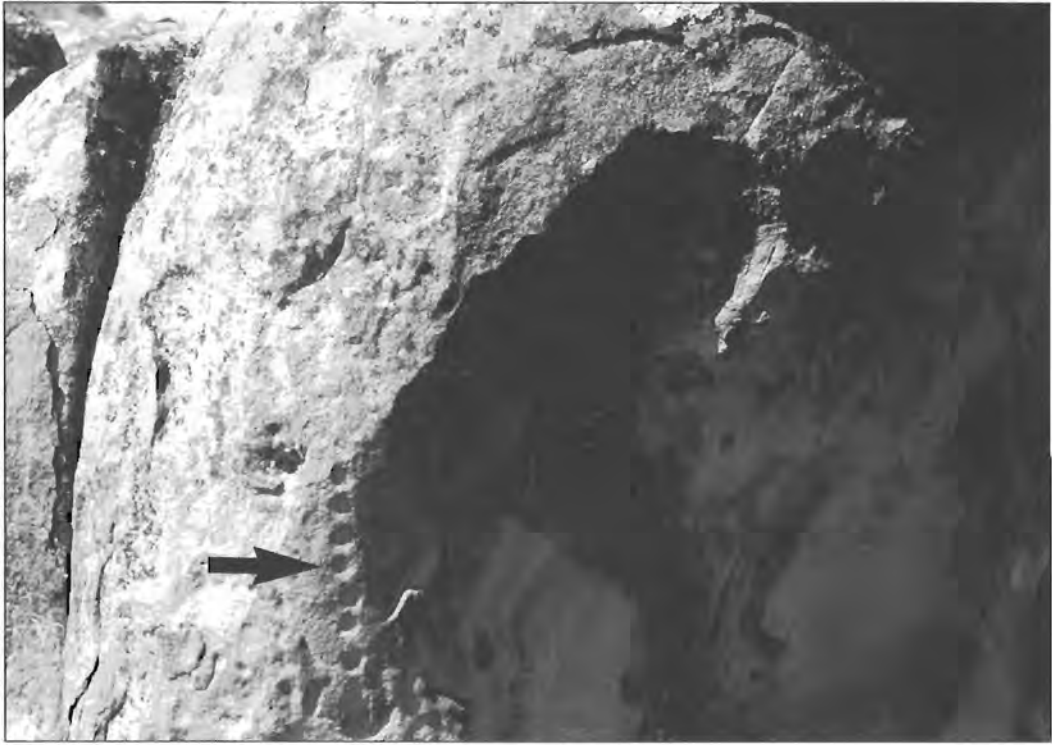


PLATE FOUR



PLATE FIVE

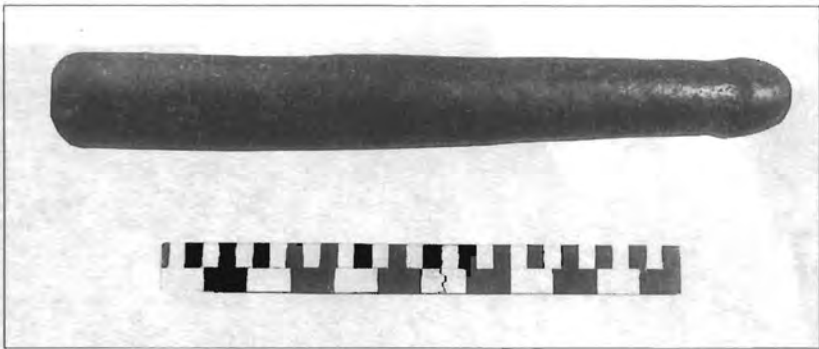


PLATE SIX



PLATE SEVEN



PLATE EIGHT



PLATE NINE



PLATE TEN