

Etched in Stone: Ground Stone as a Symbolic Medium

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Visual renderings on stone appear occasionally in the archaeological record providing a rare glimpse into the abstractions and ideas of their creators. This paper reviews the occurrences of these objects in the Great Lakes region and attempts to identify stylistic patterns and their associated symbolic meaning. They are viewed within the context of both the anthropological and Aboriginal iconographic interpretations of pictographs and petroglyphs found throughout the Canadian Shield.

Introduction

Over 80 years ago, W.J. Wintemberg (1924) published his treatise, "Examples of Graphic Art on Archaeological Artifacts from Ontario." The majority of his examples made on stone were found in artifact collections from southwestern Ontario. The fact that only half a dozen or so additional examples have since been discovered and reported over the intervening eight decades attests to their rarity in the archaeological record. These inscribed items consist of tabular pieces of slate or other kinds of rock, or are made on formal artifacts such as pendants and gorgets. In this paper I consider portable objects or artifacts that have been etched. (For consideration of carved figures and carved stone pipes see Robertson, this volume.)

In terms of raw material, slate appears to be the most prevalent, although examples made from siltstone, shale, and catlinite are also found. The latter materials are easy to work but do not have the hardness or permanence of slate. Slate is not only hard but also fine-grained. It fractures into thin sheets and is relatively free of inclusions. It is also easy to obtain in cobble form or from primary sources in most areas around the Great Lakes region. For that reason it is an ideal medium, provided one has the right tools to work it. Prior to European contact and the introduction of metal tools the designs were likely etched into the slate with chert burins or graters.

Slate comes in a variety of colours and patterns. Colours include black, brown and red. Perhaps the most visually appealing was

"Huronian banded slate" with its distinctive variegated grey/green and black banding.

In many cases the natural properties of the stone define the form of the design. In particular, the natural grain and peculiarities in the stone appear to have guided the artist. This is most evident with other carefully crafted stone artifacts, such as birdstones, in which careful attention is paid to the banding in the slate. Protruding eyes, for example, coincide with concentric circles in the material. This kind of attention is also certainly true of pictographs, whose placement and arrangement take advantage of (or pay homage to) natural features of the rock face—especially crevices, which have been described as entranceways into the under world (Rajnovich 1994:35). Indeed, looking closely at the celebrated Michipeshu, the great water lynx or panther at the Agawa pictograph site (Figure 1), one can see the subtle use of fissures in the rock to represent a life-line entering through the head of the creature through to its heart and exiting out its rear end. As it leaves Michipeshu, the life-line is forked, denoting its great power. Here the natural features of the rock appear to have guided the placement of this pictograph. This life-line from the head to the heart also appears on depictions of Michipeshu on birchbark Midé scrolls (Rajnovich 1994:103).

In terms of temporal placement, designs etched in stone occur in the Great Lakes archaeological record from as early as the Late Archaic period and continue into the contact period. This temporal range mirrors the age estimated by Rajnovich (1994:41) for pictographs, although it

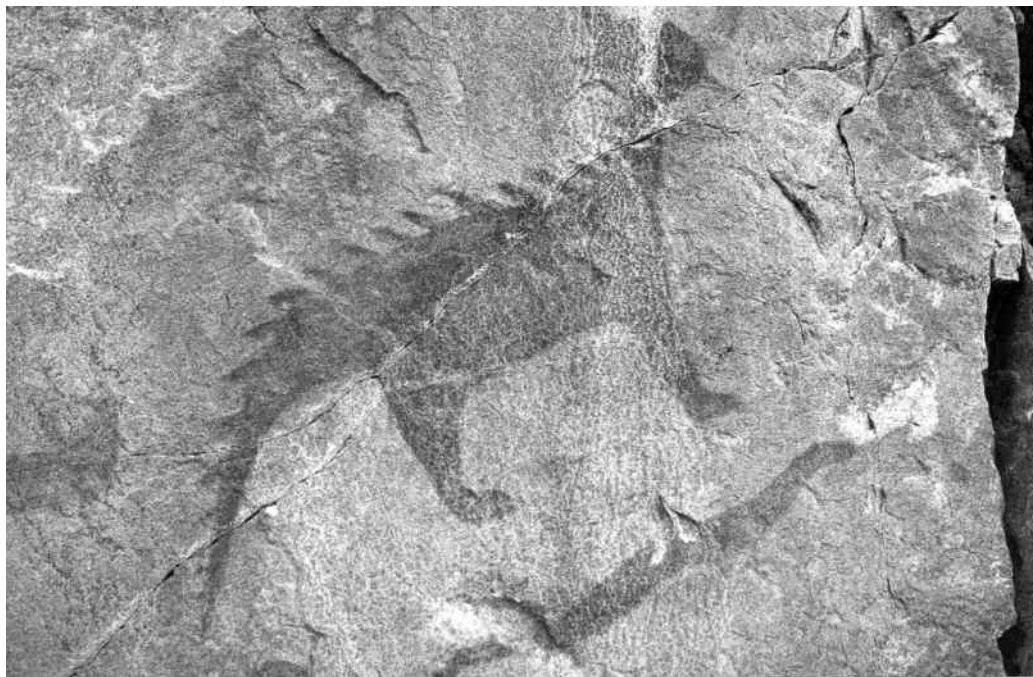


Figure 1. *Michipeshu at the Agawa Pictographs, Lake Superior, Ontario.*

is recognized that the majority of the extant pictographs were painted during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This may be a taphonomic rather than a real phenomenon in that older pictographs are less likely to have survived through time. As the majority of stone artifacts with inscribed designs are found in collections of artifacts without provenience, precise dating of these objects is problematic. Based on style, most etched slate gorgets or pendants appear to date to the Early and Middle Woodland periods.

The design elements have been categorized for descriptive purposes into bird, animal and human forms. In addition, there are designs that appear to represent abstract symbols, some of which may be interpreted as lightning, or lines of power.

The Etched Artifacts

Bird Forms

The thunderbird appears to have been among the most prevalent of animal forms. Thunderbird representations are found throughout the last two thousand years and are also well represented on pictographs. It is clear that the primary

importance of the thunderbird in both the Anishinaabe and Haudenasaunee pantheon (and beyond) accounts for its popularity. The thunderbird is seen as a guardian manitou and its dwelling place atop high cliffs may, in part, account for the placement of pictographs on rock faces. According to Anishinaabe legend, the thunderbird is an extremely powerful creature, believed to be the source of lightning and thunder, and also seen as a guardian spirit; as such, it may have been etched into pendants and gorgets, both to imbue an individual with power and as protection against negative or evil forces (Fox 2004:291-292; Rajnovich 1994:111; Vastokas and Vastokas 1973:91). While the function of gorgets or pendants is enigmatic, their bi-conical and careful placement of holes suggest that they were suspended around the neck. Similarly shaped and decorated items have no holes and may have been kept in medicine bundles (Fox 2004:298; Fox and Molto 1994:38). The general outline is rectanguloid to trapezoidal.

While thunderbird forms vary greatly in their design, some common elements include outstretched wings, a forked tail and the head, in

profile, represented by two small parallel lines. This style of head is found on other kinds of animal depictions. The thunderbird motif has been discussed in detail by Robertson (1997:376-383). A thunderbird-inscribed artifact was recovered in 1995 from the Peace Bridge site in Fort Erie, Ontario, and is one of the few stone etchings to have been found during a controlled excavation (Figure 2). It was excavated from a feature containing maize that was radiocarbon-dated to the latter half of the seventeenth century (Robertson et al. 1997:504). The design is etched into a tabular piece of black slate, possibly a gorget fragment, and consists of what appears to be two different thunderbird designs. If this piece is derived from a gorget (gorgets were in use at least 600 years earlier), then it may represent a curated item. The complete thunderbird is quite stylized, with outstretched and down-drooping wings, a fan shaped tail and the distinctive head in profile represented by two parallel lines. It appears that power lines extend out from the ends of the wings. Opposed to this figure is a second thunderbird,



Figure 2. *Opposing thunderbirds engraved on a slate from the Peace Bridge Site (AfGr-9), Fort Erie, Ontario. Photograph courtesy of Archaeological Services Inc.*

the upper half of which is missing as the item was broken prior to being deposited in the feature. This figure appears to be a different style of thunderbird with swallow-like wings and tail and a more realistic torso.

Also recovered from the Peace Bridge site (Surma area) in the 1960s, but in a burial context, were an inscribed ground slate gorget and a second possible gorget fragment (Emerson and Noble 1966:79-83, Plate 5), both of which were associated with Princess Point Complex burials that predated the Peace Bridge thunderbird by about a millennium (Stothers 1977:67). Both appear to have feather-like patterns. The complete gorget (Figure 3 and Fox 1990:Figure 6.8d, e) is actually shaped like the distal end of a primary feather from a large bird. These designs, too, may be representations associated with the great Thunderbird, although Robertson (1997:385) has offered alternative interpretations of the design, relating them to the World Tree or to the x-ray or skeletalized style of representation.

Wintenberg (1924:Plate 1, Figure 10; Plate 2, Figure 1, 2, and 4; Plate 4, Figure 5) illustrates several ground slate pieces exhibiting thunderbird representations that range from simple, stylized line etching to quite realistic and creative interpretations. The first of them is a simple but elegant line drawing found on a carefully shaped but unperforated slate bar collected near Arkona, Ontario, in the late nineteenth century (Figure 4). It consists of six simple lines—a vertical line representing the torso, outstretched down-drooping wings and a forked tail.

The second thunderbird is on a slate pendant found in a collection of artifacts assembled in the nineteenth century from Oxford County (Figure 5a). It is also a simple line drawing with similar outstretched wings and forked tail. Unlike the Arkona thunderbird, however, this example has a head, which, like the Peace Bridge thunderbird, is in profile and is comprised of two simple parallel lines. On either side of the thunderbird and on the obverse side are zigzag lines, which certainly represent lightning; one of the thunderbird's many powerful qualities is that it emits lightning when it blinks (Vastokas and Vastokas

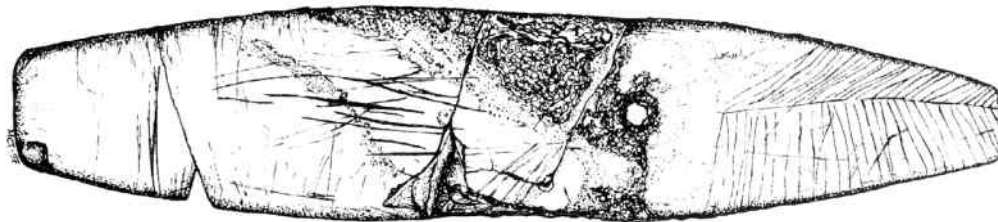


Figure 3. Feather motif on a perforated slate bar from the Surma area of the Peace Bridge site (AIGr-9), Fort Erie, Ontario (Robertson 1997: 384, Figure 8.23b).

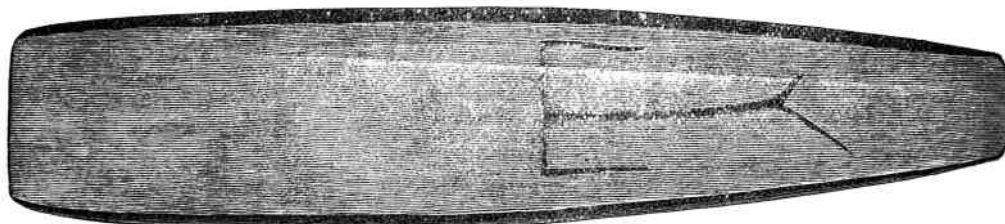


Figure 4. Thunderbird image on a slate bar from Arkona, Ontario (Boyle 1891:43, Figure 98).

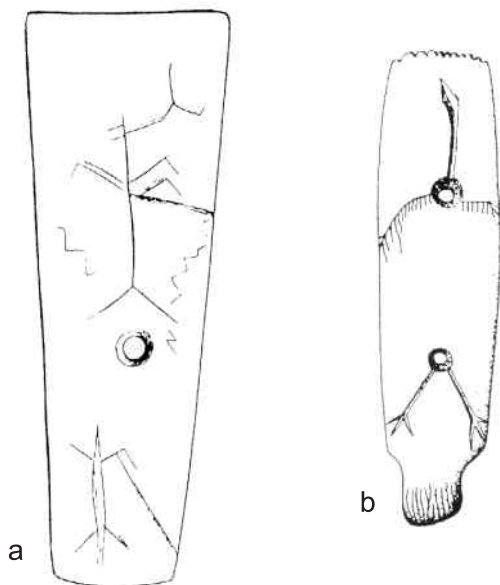


Figure 5. Thunderbird engraved on a perforated slate bar showing lightning or power lines emanating wing (a) and depicted as crane-like image on a two-hole slate gorget (b). Reproduced from Wintemberg 1924).

1973:91). A second etched creature on the pendant appears to be a slender animal that is reminiscent of an otter. Lines emanating from one leg indicate that this creature has considerable power. The association between Midé shamans

and bags made from otter skins is well established in pictographic images, some of which have accompanying power lines (Rajnovich 1994:123-5). The otter bag carried by the Midé shaman contains a sacred medicine bundle holding great power.

The third item is also a slate gorget, found near Guelph, Ontario, at the turn of the twentieth century (Figure 5b). This example is remarkable in that the design emanates from the gorget's perforations: the down-curved wings and neck generate from the upper hole; the legs from the lower hole. A tail has been fashioned at the base of the gorget. Unlike other representations, the Guelph bird is more crane than raptor. The thunderbird need not, however, be a raptor. In the first half of the seventeenth century, the Jesuit Jean de Brebeuf stated that the Huron described the thunderbird as being part-human and part-turkey (Tooker 1967:82). This may explain the significance of a possible turkey effigy pipe recovered from the fourteenth-century Iroquoian Robb site (Williamson et al. 2001).

The fourth example illustrated by Wintemberg (1924: Plate 2, Figure 4), which resembles an inverted candelabra, is etched into a Huronian banded slate pendant from a Late Iroquoian village in Elgin County (Figure 6). The thunderbird

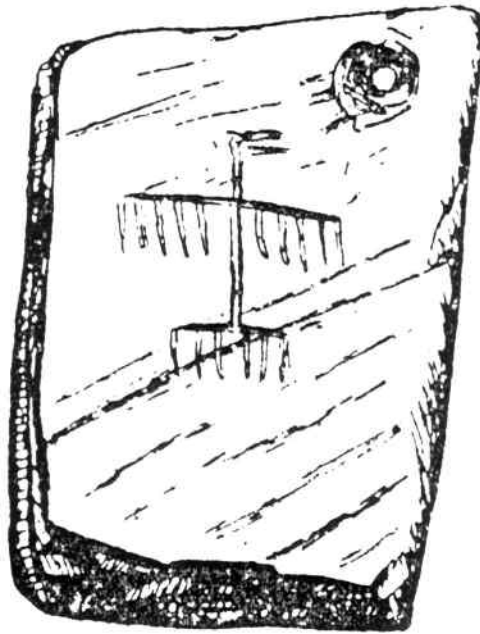


Figure 6. “Candelabra” thunderbird on a perforated slate piece (Wintenberg 1924).

figure consists of a simple vertical line and two horizontal lines that form the wings and tail. Trailing from the wings and tail are small, incised lines that represent either feathers or lines of power. The head appears in profile and consists of two parallel lines.

Animal Forms

Various animal figures are also occasionally found etched into stone. Recently, Chris Ellis (2002) described a particularly interesting example found in the large Garnham collection from southwestern Ontario (Figure 7). According to Ellis (2002:24), this artifact is a portion of a banded slate gorget dating to the Early or Middle Woodland period. He interprets the animal figures as either dog or wolf based on their long up-curving tails and he explains their significance in reference to the sacred nature of dogs in both Iroquoian and Algonquian ritual (Ellis 2002:34). Like many other figures etched on stone, these ones are simple line drawings, the bodies represented by a horizontal line, simple stick legs and the characteristic head in profile consisting of two parallel lines. Extending up from the head

are ears, or possibly horns. There are, in total, seven figures inscribed on both surfaces. While they appear to be remarkably similar, Ellis believes they were executed by two different artists (Ellis 2002:31).

Similar animal figures were also inscribed on a piece of slate, possibly a pendant or broken gorget, that was found in the Edwards collection assembled in and around the Komoka area west of London and now housed in the Museum of Ontario Archaeology (Figure 8). The Edwards pendant has been described and illustrated by Wintenberg (1924: Plate 2, Figure 2) and more recently by Ellis (2002:33). It has two animal figures that have been variously interpreted as cervids and canids. Given the long tail and what could be interpreted as horns these figures may represent Michipeshu, the great lynx. In addition to the animal figures, there are also a series of what appear to be abstract images. They include a centrally placed horizontal zigzag that appears to be important to the composition. This zigzag line may represent lightning, and lines emanating from it at right angles may be power lines. Alternatively, the zigzag could represent the path of life as outlined in the Midé teaching scrolls (Rajnovich 1994:136). There is also a double zigzag or lightning symbol separating the two animal figures. It is significant that the zigzag lines are forked, like lightning, perhaps representing an expression of extreme power. This is comparable to the aforementioned forked fissure passing through the Agawa Michipeshu (Figure 1). Most compelling are similar paired zigzags at the bottom of the piece that appear to frame two parallel horizontals crossed by a vertical. Similar designs have been interpreted from rock art and birchbark scrolls as a Midé lodge, although the usual pattern depicted appears to be more ladder-like.

It is possible that the Edwards slate pendant served a similar function as either a teaching or guiding reference although in a recent article Vastokas (2003) has made a distinction between pictography of rock art sites and the later emergence of pictography on Midé teaching scrolls. According to Vastokas, while the meaning of the images may be the same, the scrolls were a

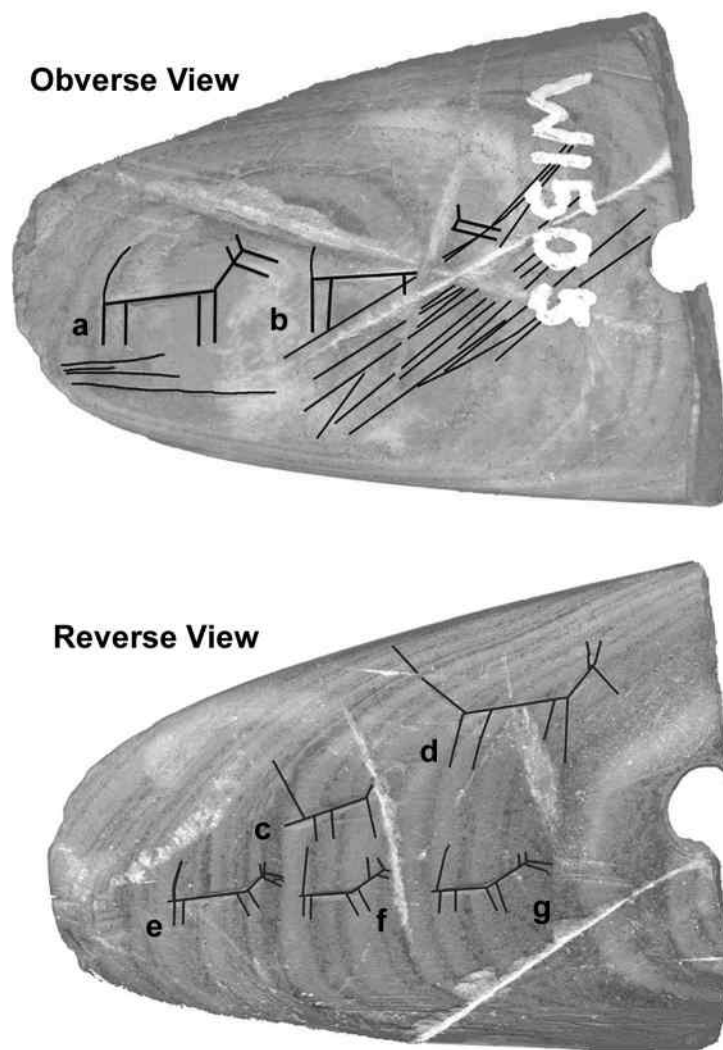


Figure 7. Depictions of animal figures engraved on slate gorget from the Garnham Collection, South Norwich Township, Ontario (Ellis 2002:24, Figure 2).

mnemonic device for teaching. Perhaps the Edwards pendant should, therefore, be viewed as a composition of symbols much like a panel of rock art. Dating of the Edwards pendant is difficult, although it certainly dates prior to European contact. The Edwards collection includes a substantial Middle Iroquoian component but also contains much earlier Archaic and Woodland material.

While the figures on the gorget described by Ellis and the Edwards pendant may be representations of Michipeshu, perhaps the most compelling and convincing Michipeshu etched on

stone comes from the early nineteenth-century La Ronde fur trade post on Lake Nipissing (Barnes 1997). This etching is on a flat piece of catlinite, a soft reddish stone also used for making smoking pipes. The figure is clearly Michipeshu, having the characteristic horns as well as spines extending down the length of its back. According to Ojibwa legend, Lake Nipissing is one of the many dwelling places of the great horned panther, as its calm water can whip up with no warning.

William Fox (2004) has outlined the potential significance of Michipeshu to the people who



Figure 8. Engraved slate piece from the Edwards collection, Komoka Ontario, now part of the Jury Collection, Museum of Archaeology, London Ontario (Wintemberg 1924).

lived around Lake Erie and has suggested that the presence of slate and shale pebble pendants may symbolize the scales of Michipeshu. He further suggests that the name of the Iroquoian group, the Erie, who were also known as the Nation of the Cat, may be derived from the great underwater lynx. The pendant illustrated in Figure 9 has what appear to be symbols representing the jagged spine of Michipeshu.

Human Forms

Human forms etched into ground stone occur very rarely. Three of them are illustrated by Wintemberg (1924:Plate 2:Figure 8; Plate 4:Figures 4, 9). The first of them is on a stone pendant found near Iroquois, Ontario, on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River (Figure

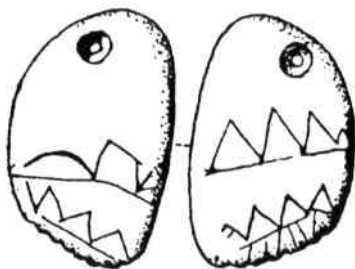


Figure 9. Pebble pendant with engraved triangles possibly representing the spine of Michipeshu (Wintemberg 1924).

10). The symbolism or theme of this piece is death. One side of the pendant has a human skeleton that hangs upside down when worn. Over the right shoulder of the figure is a star, which may represent night. The skeleton and its orientation are symbolic of death. Among the Anishinaabeg, figures representing totems were placed upside down on grave posts. The star, too, is associated with death, as it was along the Milky Way or the path of souls that one traveled to the village of the dead. On the other side of the pendant is the image of an owl, which, when suspended, would be right side up. While owls are commonly found adorning Late Iroquoian effigy pipes and do appear on Midé birchbark scrolls, this owl is the only example I have seen etched in stone. To the Anishinaabeg, the owl is a symbol of death and also a transmitter or carrier of medicine (Dewdney 1975:101-102; Densmore 1979:114). What appears to be the sun shining brightly over the head of this night bird may mirror the night imagery of the opposite side. The parallel zigzag lines on either side of the owl may represent lightning bolts and their associated power. Alternatively, Robertson (this volume) has interpreted similar chevron-like designs as entoptic images related to altered states of consciousness. Williamson and Veilleux (this volume) describe a bone pendant with an owl's head engraved on it that, when suspended, would be inverted like the skeleton on the pendant described above.

The second human figure is from the St. Lawrence Iroquoian Roebuck site and is a simple drawing of a person wearing what appears to be a sash and some kind of headdress, or possibly

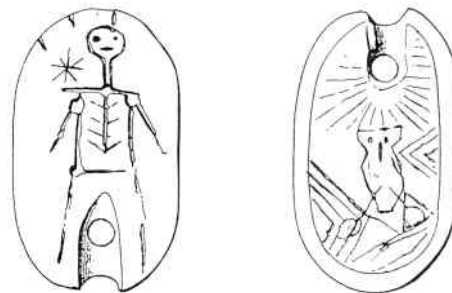


Figure 10. Slate pendant showing human figure on one side and owl on obverse (Wintemberg 1924).

lines representing power (Figure 11a). The heads in both this figure and in the one discussed previously face the viewer.

The third human form, engraved on a pebble, is from southwestern Ontario and consists of a simple stick man drawing a bow (Figure 11b). Lines emanating from the area of the head may represent power. Pictograph images of archers found on Burntside Lake along the Ontario-Minnesota border have been interpreted by Rajnovich (1994: 54) as symbols denoting war medicine.

Conclusions

The majority of etched designs share similarities, despite temporal, spatial and possibly ethnic differences, that suggest these etchings were not idiosyncratic or random. Indeed, almost all of them occur on slate gorgets and pendants, which Ellis (2002: 37) argues may be the equipment of religious practitioners. With the exception of the Garnham gorget, all of the images are oriented along the long axis of the artifact. The recurring use of symbols imbued with power, such as thunderbirds, Michipeshu, and lightning bolts, indicate they were intended either to bestow power or protect an individual from malignant forces. The ways in which certain features are represented appear to be patterned or guided by convention—the use of two parallel lines to represent the thunderbird head in profile, for example, or the use of simple lines to represent the legs, torso and wings. Of course, given the hardness of the medium and the tools at hand; simple straight lines are probably the most efficient way of executing a design.

What is the meaning of these symbols etched into stone? In reference to pictographic symbols, Vastokas (2003:7) points out that “a few have already been recognized as conventional signs in both form and meaning...many other pictographs, however, are arbitrary and idiosyncratic, meaning one thing in one context and another in a different context.” Perhaps the most important aspect of these rare artifacts is that they extend Aboriginal pictography in the Great Lakes region back some two millennia and, specifically for

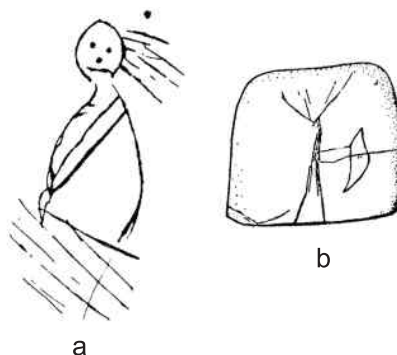


Figure 11. Human image (a) engraved on a stone from the Roebuck site, eastern Ontario (reproduced from Wintemberg 1936: 86, Figure 3) and (b) human figure drawing a bow, engraved on a pebble, southwestern Ontario (Wintemberg 1924).

those items found around the lower Great Lakes, they provide a glimpse of the iconic images in a region where there are few or no rock-based pictographs.

Finally, even though many of these etchings on stone have been in the literature for well over a century, like the Michipeshu at Agawa, we must frequently return to look carefully at these objects to elicit their constantly changing meanings.

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Gravé sur pierre : pierre polie comme moyen symbolique

Les interprétations visuelles sur pierre, qui apparaissent occasionnellement dans le record archéologique, offrent un aperçu rare dans les abstractions et les idées de leurs créateurs. Cet article examine la présence de ces objets dans la région des Grands Lacs et tente d'identifier des motifs stylistiques ainsi que leurs significations symboliques. Ces objets sont examinés dans le contexte d'une interprétation anthropologique ainsi qu'autochtone de l'iconographie rupestre retrouvée au travers du Bouclier canadien.

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