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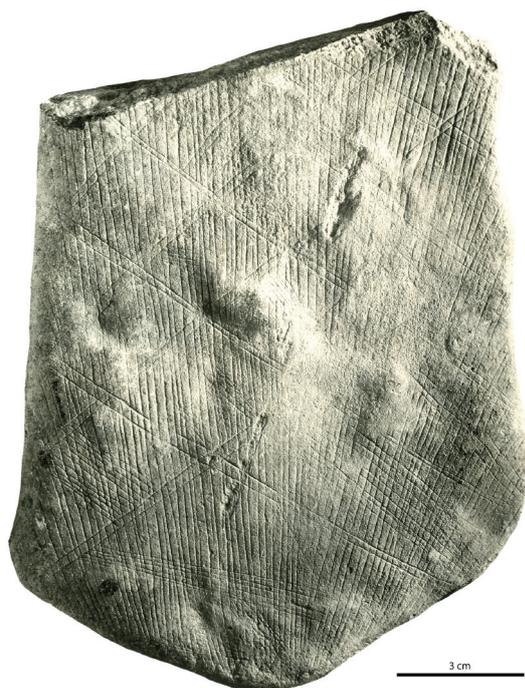
PATTERNS AND PROCESS:

Some Thoughts on the Incised Stones from the Gault Site (Central Texas, USA)

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Engraved stones have been a comparatively minor part of the reported prehistoric record of the Americas (figure). A chance discovery in 1990 of four engraved stones in an early context at the Gault Site in Central Texas (USA) led to increased interest in these objects, particularly those greater than 12 000 calendar years old. Continued investigations at Gault have documented more than 100 stones from this one site and determined affiliations ranging from Early Paleoindian (ca. 13 000-9 000 cal BP) to various periods in the Archaic (ca. 9 000-2 000 cal BP) and perhaps later.

The incisions on stones from the Gault site are made on smooth pebbles and cobbles of soft limestone (ca. 65 specimens) and on the cortex of pieces of chert, mostly flakes (ca. 35). The limestone examples are somewhat larger (up to the size of a human hand) and tend to exhibit relatively complete patterns whereas those on chert cortex tend to be smaller and, because the parent pieces of chert were flaked after being incised, the patterns are generally incomplete. Condition of the incising varies from clear and easily discerned to degraded and sometimes partly obscured by overlying deposits of pedogenic calcium carbonate. All stones were carefully examined visually and under magnification. This reveals that a strong, sharp object (chert flake?) was used to produce the lines most of which were evidently produced by long, single, very straight strokes.



Stone found at Gault by A. M. Wilson
(published in A. T. Jackson's *Picture Writing of Texas Indians*, 1938).

These commonly occur in sets of parallel lines, often intersecting one or more such sets to produce geometric crosshatched patterns. Also common are zigzags and herringbone designs. The intent to create organized patterns is apparent in the more complete designs. When assessing smaller fragments, it is necessary to search for analogous details of line precision and remnants of patterning. A few stones exhibit what are tentatively judged to be representations of such things as a leaf, a group of plants, or multiple fletched darts.

Because Gault has a very large and unusually complex component of Clovis age (ca. 13 300 to 12 900 cal BP) and because art of this age in the Americas is scarce, particular note has been taken of the 8 incised stone specimens that can be confidently attributed to the Clovis component. Of these 8 stones, 6 are cortical chert flakes and 2 are tiny fragments of limestone pebbles. This suggests that whatever meaning engraving on the exterior of a mass of chert may have had, it was either fleeting or trivial because the designs were destroyed when the stone was flaked. This brings us to a critical caveat – we lack any declaration from contemporary participants in the Clovis culture as to the status of these objects as art and we have no contextual or other evidence for their meaning or meanings to those who produced them. The same is true for the later examples from the site as well.

Comparisons of the prehistoric Gault materials with those from elsewhere are discussed as art only on the basis of scholars' views as non-participant observers. Incised stones and painted stones of similar characteristics with similar, non-representational designs are not unusual in the Archaic and Late Prehistoric intervals of Texas prehistory. Similar objects are also found throughout North and South America over a long span of prehistory.

Beyond the Western Hemisphere the practice of incising chippable stone before it was worked is seen in India, France, Spain, Italy, Russia, Northern Europe, and China. This practice may have extended as far back in time as 75 000 to 100 000 years ago and lasted throughout the stone ages. This dispersion over time and space argues against a historical continuity and begs for explanation. Likely there are many explanations.

Geometric designs that were not destroyed in knapping pose another interpretive challenge. Many ideas have been put forward, ranging from doodling or graffiti to utilitarian to the realm of the spiritual and supernatural. Entopic phenomena have been suggested as one means of explaining similarities of designs separated by great distances and long intervals of time. Entopic phenomena are visual effects generated within the eye or the nervous system and may take geometric forms such as zigzags, grids, or lines. These do not require the use of psychoactive drugs. Carl Schuster has observed that a common biological basis inspiring certain design forms offers a parsimonious explanation for far-flung similarities in prehistoric art. Diverse meanings might be attached to the same designs by different peoples, clearly a cautionary factor to be considered when seeking historical connections or shared behaviors.

Incised stones from Gault have many counterparts around the world attributable to numerous different time periods. It may be tempting to impute common origins or shared behaviors to these similarities, and scholars often settle on a favorite interpretation of any given art form. We find the comparisons and suggested meanings of considerable interest, but believe that in all probability the extent of sound interpretation will be limited to knowing that the Gault specimens represent an example of humanity's common heritage – patterns that connect all humans worldwide.





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