

Curator's Choice

A Carved Bone Figure from the Rosenstock Village

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The Rosenstock site (18FR18) is a large Late Woodland village located in Frederick County, Maryland. Staff from the Maryland Historical Trust's Office of Archeology, in cooperation with the Archeological Society of Maryland, Inc., carried out exploratory testing at the site in 1979, and undertook more extensive excavations in 1990-1992 (see Curry and Kavanagh 2004). During the 1979 testing, a small portion of a trash-filled pit was uncovered and partially excavated. This trash pit - filled with Shepard pottery (collared ceramics similar to Owasco ware in New York), stone artifacts, and animal bone, and radiocarbon-dated to between A.D. 1125 and 1460 - ultimately proved to be a deep, double-bottomed feature containing some 12 cubic meters of fill which required three field seasons to completely excavate. It was during flotation of the feature fill excavated in 1991 that an unusual bone carving was recovered (Figure 1).

The figure is carved in bas-relief on bone (presumably a deer epiphysis) and appears to represent a headless human effigy. The artifact is broken along its left side, following the carved edge of the figure's torso. The perforating holes surrounding the figure are drilled from both sides, although two (near the figure's "calf") were started only on the carved face and not completed. It is unclear whether the large hole on the right was intentional, or if it was an intended small hole that "punched out." It is also unclear whether the holes were intended as part of the decorative motif, or whether they were drilled in preparation for removal of background material in filigree fashion.

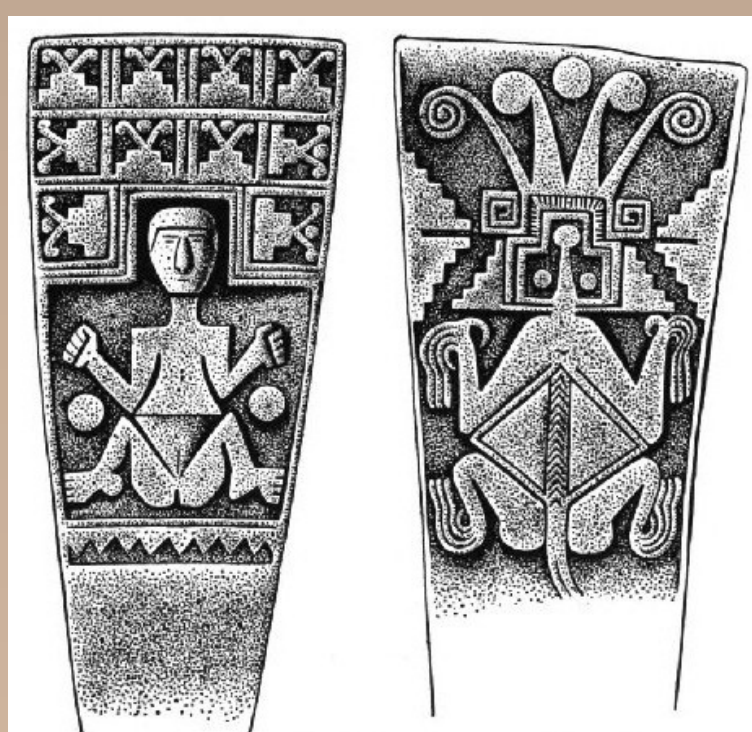


Figure 2: Two examples of "hockers" carved on stone slabs from Manabi, Ecuador (Covarrubias 1954: Fig. 5).

Intrigued by the unique nature of this artifact, and unable to find comparable specimens in readily available literature, we sent a sketch and description to several dozen colleagues in eastern North America, asking for information on similar examples. The answer came from Robert Funk and George Hamell of the New York State Museum. The squatting figure is termed a "hocker," and is found throughout the world (Covarrubias 1954) (Figures 2). Hockers are apparently rare east of the Mississippi River, although they are common in Seneca Iroquois art (especially on bone combs) during the period from A.D. 1670 to 1700 (Wray 1963; Hamell 1979) (Figure 3). Funk reports that - even at ca. A.D. 1460 - our specimen would represent one of the earliest hockers ever found in the East. Hamell reports that the earliest known example - from a Canandaigua phase Owasco site in New York - consists of continuous bas-relief hockers around the bowl of a ceramic elbow pipe and dates to ca. A.D. 1130.



Figure 3: A bone comb with "hockers" from a Seneca Iroquois site (Wray 1963: Plate 3[13]).



Figure 1: Bone carving from the Rosenstock site.

In their study of ancient symbolism, Schuster and Carpenter (1996:82-83) view hockers - especially when used as part of a repeated design - as an element depicting genealogy. Each hocker represents an ancestor, and the headless nature of some hockers is seen as deliberate and symbolic, i.e., ancestors, in general, are dead. They (Schuster and Carpenter 1996:104, 113) also discuss the use of "excerpts" where a single figure taken from a genealogical pattern is used as a medallion and, in some societies, assigned the name of a deceased person. Other interpretations suggest that the Rosenstock hocker might represent the Iroquoian notion of a "doorkeeper," or that the drilled holes were "joint marks" used in divination (Hamell, Carpenter, personal communication 1992).

While it is interesting to speculate on the possible social symbolism of the Rosenstock hocker, in truth, the meaning of this carving may never be known.

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