Further Notes on California Charmstones.

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Charmstones are some of the more enigmatic objects found in California's archaeological record. These unusually shaped objects are found primarily in the Delta and San Francisco Bay areas pf central California, and in the southern San Joaquin Valley. They appear to have been, manufactured for a period of 4,000 years prior to California's Euroamerican conquest. The late Albert Elsasser, one of California's quintessential scholars, and Peter Rhode address the description, distribution and interpretation of charmstones in their paper, *Further Notes on California Charmstones*. They pay particular attention to a Sonoma County site, CA-SON-371, from which many hundreds of these artifacts have been derived.

Site CA-SON-371 is located in an elevated valley near Petaluma. A little over a century ago, local landowners drained a large seasonal lake (Tolay Lake), thus making the valley bottom accessible for agriculture. After the lake was drained, large numbers of charmstones began to appearing, and continued to be found for years, especially after the fields were plowed each year. A large collection of these artifacts found their way into the Smithsonian around the turn-of- the-century. The site and its charmstones were first mentioned in print by H.C. Meredith in 1900, and soon after by W.K. Moorhead (1910, 1917). No further mention was made of CA-SON-371 until 1954, when Elsasser published a brief article on the site. In 1987, Elsasser and Rhode began the current study so as to more fully describe CA-SON-371 charmstones and the site's significance.

The first chapter of the study is an introduction describing the location and history of CA-SON-371. The authors note that whereas they had originally intended to only address CA-SON-371, and a few other nearby archaeological sites, they ultimately decided to examine all of central California in order to place the Sonoma County occurrences in proper perspective.

Chapter 2 consists of a brief history of charmstone research in North America. In addition to the California examples, charmstones have been found in New England, the Middle Atlantic States, the Southeast, the Midwest, the Northwest Coast and in eastern Canada. Squier and Davis were the first to reference charmstones in their 1848 study of the Mississippi Valley. Important monographs were written about charmstones in the eastern U.S. in the 19th century, but attention shifted to California charmstones in the 20th century.

Chapter 3 addresses the possible functions of charmstones. The authors include the so-called "boatstones" or "atlatl weights" with charmstones, and consider them to be a variant of the latter. Elsasser and Rhode question the use of boatstones to merely provide weight (and thus thrust) to the atlatl, as have Campbell Grant (Grant *et al.* 1968) and other researchers. Instead, they agree with Grant that the boatstones were attached to the atlatl primarily for metaphysical purposes, so as to ensure a successful hunt. However, for the other forms of charmstones, Elsasser and Rhode suggest a more practical

explanation. They bring together various data indicating (to them) that while some charmstones may have been ritual objects, many were probably used for more mundane purposes such as net sinkers and bola weights.

In chapter 4, the authors present a typology for classifying charmstones. In the preface, Elsasser acknowledges that the form of the proposed typology might prove controversial. He and Rhode review earlier classifications, and conclude that while having different emphases, these earlier systems are very similar to one another. Drawing primarily on the work of Richard Beardsley (1948, 1954), James Davidson (1960), and Polly Bickel (1981), the authors then present their own classification as well as their rationale for it:

> "Perhaps the main reason for being is that it avoids a potentially bewildering series of types and subtypes expressed by capital and lowercase letters and numbers. We believe that our fairly lengthy, but open-ended list of special features allows for description of a wide range of specimens, in any region of the Western United States" (p. 11)

Chapter 5 examines the geographical and temporal distributions of charmstones, most of which have been found in central California near coastal or inland lacustrine or riverine beaches or marshes. Charmstones occur in southern California, along the coast, but in relatively small numbers, and only in the earlier sites. Charmstones also occur in far northern California, but are not similar to those of central California, the "core" area for California charmstones.

The authors examine boatstones or atlatl weights, which they believe may be the most ancient of charmstone forms in California. They note that while these artifacts are widely distributed in the American West, they are found in comparatively small numbers. If boatstones were always used as atlatl weights, then it seems reasonable that more of these artifacts would be found. Elsasser and Rhode suggest that perhaps they were only used by important hunters, or shamans in some kind of hunting ritual.

The authors not that the most significant charmstone region in California, and perhaps in all North America, is the Great Central Valley and the central Pacific Coast in the area where the North and South Coast Ranges meet. Charmstones are found in significant numbers here in an area extending from Half Moon Bay to north Bodega Bay. Elsasser and Rhode point out that this is the area in which lived the largest number of Penutian-speaking peoples. Thus, charmstones appear to be associated with the distribution of Penutian groups in California, beginning with the appearance of the archaeological Windmiller Pattern by 500 B.P.

In Chapter 6, the authors examine the raw material used to manufacture charmstones and address the possible relationship between these artifacts and rock art. They note that past researchers were not always careful in their mineralogical identifications. Some of the materials used for charmstones include alabaster, amphibolite schist, andesite, basalt, claystone, chlorite schist, diorite, gabbro, greenstone, granite, limestone, marble, quartz, sandstone, serpentine, silicified wood and steatite.

A possible association between charmstones and the Pecked Curvilinear Nucleated Petroglyph Style (PCN) is examined. PCNs normally occur on schist outcrops and are characterized by a raised nucleus with an oval groove around it. At some of the sites, the PCNs have been defaced by the removal of their nuclei. Haslam (1986) and Parkman (1993) have hypothesized that these sites were used as fortuitous soft stone quarries by later peoples. Upon rediscovering the sites, the newcomers may have slabbed off the nuclei from the parent rock, so as to create blanks for manufacturing small artifacts such as charmstones.

The symbolism of the charmstone is discussed in Chapter 7. The authors conclude that while there can be no certainty in the

matter, charmstones were almost certainly considered sacred. They are especially interested in phallic charmstones, which were prevalent in the Delta and San Francisco Bay regions. They see these artifacts, and in some ways all charmstones, as being representations of the phallus. As such, Elsasser and Rhode speculate that the charmstone tradition was born of fertility magic. They note that:

> "We believe the suggestion is warranted that the Central California charmstones, and especially the phallic types, represented a remarkable efflorescence of an art in stone which followed a migration from an extremely arid zone, probably the northern or western Great Basin. The sudden appearance of sophisticated stone carving art in the Delta and San Francisco Bay, some 4,000 years ago, in our view, could have been a sort of celebration as well as a plea for continuing fertility in the new land. The subsequent (and evidently rapid) increase in human population in these regions could thus have accompanied an increase in the production of charmstones" (p. 39).

The authors summarize their findings in Chapter 8. They note that charmstones could have served both practical and spiritual purposes. They use the charmstones from CA-SON-371 to suggest a practical use for many of these artifacts. The charmstones from CA-SON-371 suggest to the authors that the artifacts were used for some kind of hunting or fishing purpose. However, they go on to counter their argument with the observation that:

> "The area may have represented a sort of shrine, to which, annually, people in the surrounding region came and actually threw charmstones into the lake, as a form of ritual sacrifice, in order to ensure a good life for the coming year" (p. 44).

To this end, they note that an early farmer described the site area as a lagoon, where a large number of California Indians came in the fall to fish in an outlet creek at the south end of the site, stayed for several days, and held some kind of ritual gathering while there. We might infer that while some of the charmstones found their way into the lake as net weights and bola stones, others were thrown into the lake during the ritual gatherings.

While the authors note that the ritual throwing of charmstones can neither be discounted nor confirmed, I would add that both the Coast Miwok and Pomo used charms for fishing (Gifford and Kroeber 1937: 200; Kelly 1991:134; Loeb 1926:309). It is conceivable that some of the charms were thrown into the water as part of a fishing ritual. It is also conceivable that the charmstones were thrown into the water in order to ritually dispose of them. For example, among the Pomo, the tools of a dead doctor were washed in stream until the strong medicine (potency) was removed (Wilson 1982:8). No one could drink water downstream while this was going on as it would harm them. Additionally, a Coast Miwok informant described how a charmstone (in this case a natural stone that resembled a turtle), which had caused sickness, had been thrown into the water in order to "drown" it (Kelly 1991:462). Thus, for both the Pomo and Coast Miwok, it appears that immersing powerful objects in water was thought to have a neutralizing effect on them.

In Chapter 8, Elsasser and Rhode conclude by reiterating several of their earlier observations. First, they feel that the central California charmstone tradition effectively began with the arrival in the region of the Penutian speaking peoples, especially the Utians, in central California.

Besides the eight chapters, the authors have included three appendixes. Appendix 1 contains additional descriptive and distributional data. Appendix 2 consists of

selected quotations regarding the archeological and ethnological use of charmstones. Appendix 3 is an annotated bibliography pertaining to charmstone symbolism.

As originally stated, charmstones are some of the more enigmatic objects found in California's archaeological record. Elsasser and Rhode have done a good job in discussing the description, distribution and interpretation of these artifacts. I enjoyed reading this report and I will find it a useful reference for future use.

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