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A Comment from Mark G. Plew on Kir'yak's Portable Engravings of the Northeastern Paleoasiatics

Mark G. Plew

Jan Kee and I published a note on incised stones from Idaho (Kee and Plew 2015). The paper was based on a presentation on portable art of Western North America presented at the 2014 SAA meetings and published in *JONA*. We described four distinct types that occur in different geographic settings in association with different site types and over a period of several thousand years, though more common in the Late Holocene. These included stones with parallel lines located on the face or margins of stones with horizontal, vertical, or diagonal lines—or a combination. A second type was characterized by centrally placed hachure, while a third type consisted of irregular/multidirectional lines lacking discernable patterning. A final type included what appeared to be more decorative—combining zig-zags, ladders, parallel lines and chevrons. Reviewing the Kir'yak paper, there appear some similarities in design motifs to those in Idaho—though all would fit our Type 4 (Figures A, B, and C)—being more decorative items.

Kir'yak views portable or graphic art as a mnemonic device by which knowledge and memory are communicated across generations. Though I find this interpretation and her specific interpretations of the individual items to be a bit of a reach, I find her assertion that these “graphic formula” reflect a “certain stage in human perception of the surrounding world” more so. This is not to argue that prehistoric peoples were not capable of abstraction and the creation of universal ideological concepts, as there are many good examples of non-portable art that substantially pre-date the time of these items. We found ethnographic documentation of the use and importance of incised stones in ceremonial/ritual contexts in Northern and Southeastern Idaho—some in Northern Idaho associated with waterways and in one instance, a design has been interpreted as possibly reflecting a landscape feature. This speaking to the likelihood that portable art served multiple functions not all relating to cosmos. The dilemma we commonly face when thinking about the meaning of and the underlying functions of non-portable art is clear in this paper. Although some motifs common globally are undoubtedly reflective of common human abstractions, I am uncomfortable with the author's attempt to decode these “graphic formula.”

Figures from Kee and Plew 2015 are shown below for comparative purposes.

Note from the Editor—Readers may interested to know that an article on incised stones recently appeared in *American Antiquity*.

Thomas, David Hurst

2019 A Shoshonean Prayerstone Hypothesis: Ritual Cartographies of Great Basin Incised Stones. *American Antiquity*, 84(1):1–25.

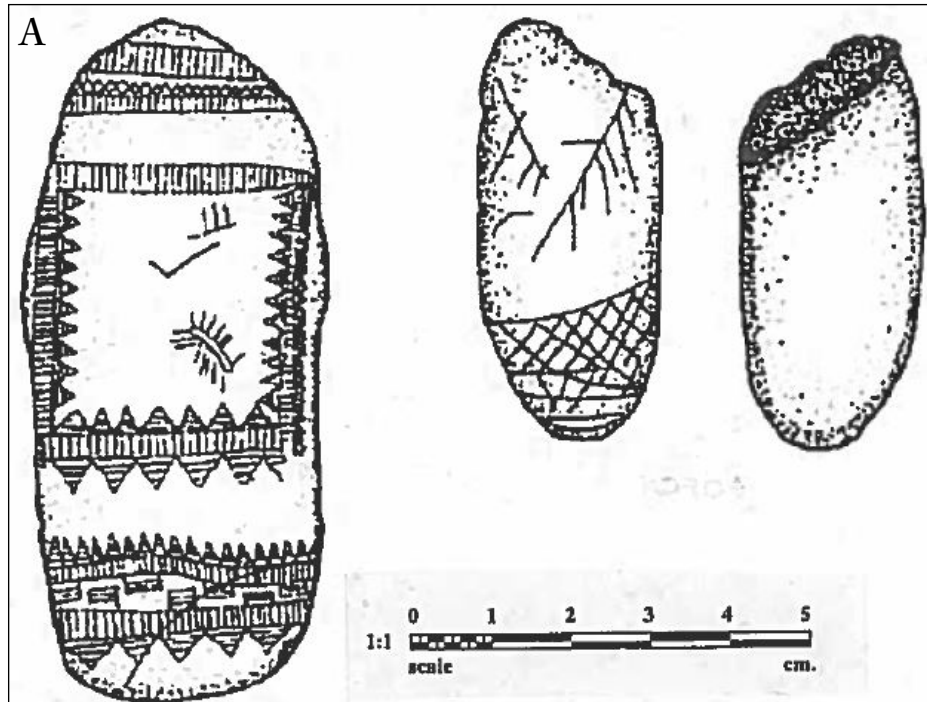


Figure A. Type 4 incised stones, Pend Oreille River, northern Idaho. This item measures 5.5 x 2.0 x 0.3 cm (Kee 2004).

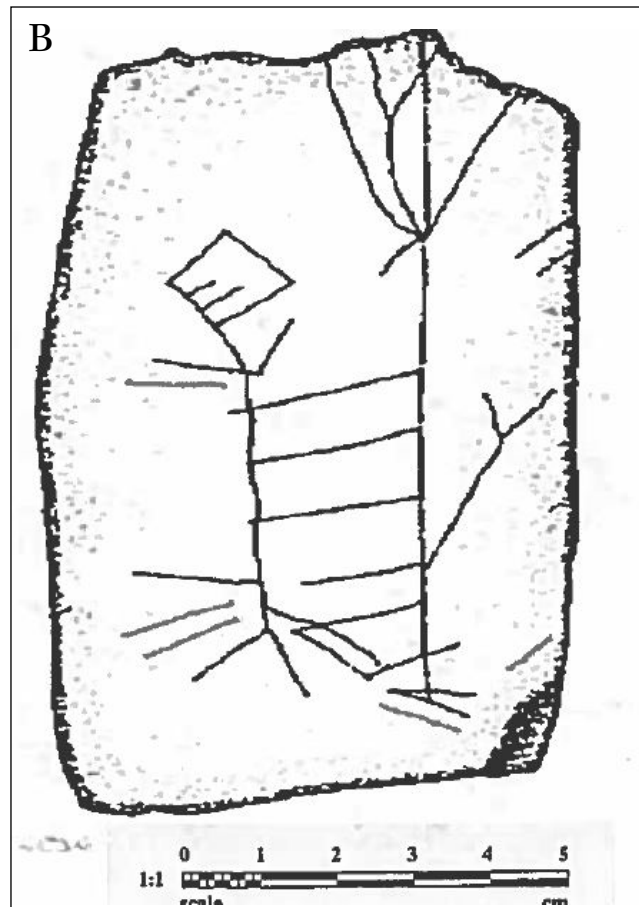


Figure B. Type 4 incised stones, Pend Oreille River, northern Idaho (Kee 2004).

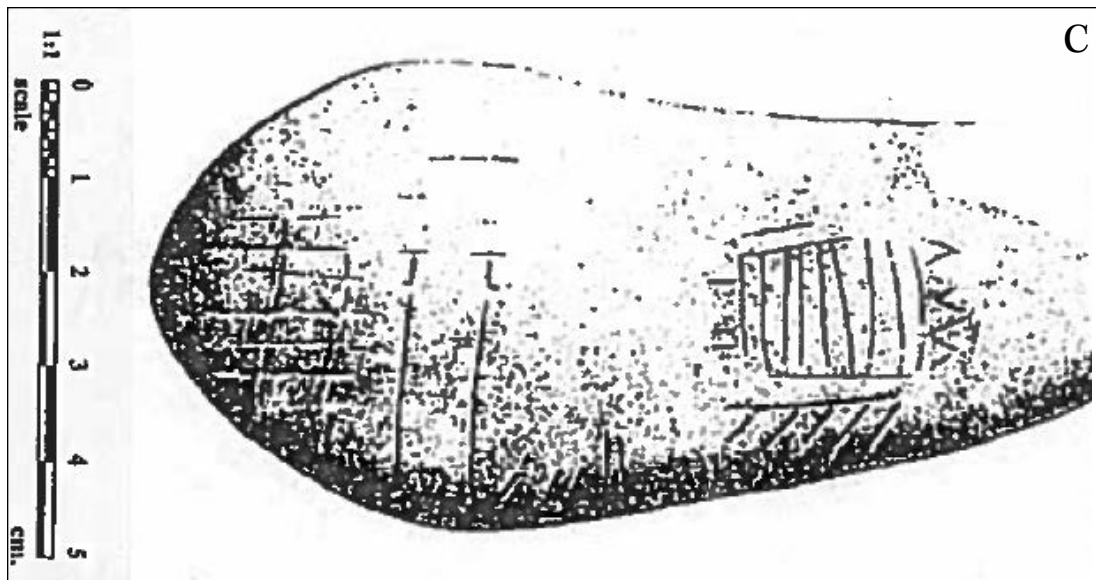


Figure C. Type 4 incised stone, Bliss Site, southwest Idaho. Artifact measures 8.5 x 4.1–2.0 x 1.2 cm (Plew 1981).

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2004 Incised Stones from the Pend Oreille River in Northern Idaho. *Idaho Archaeologist*, 27(2):23–29.
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