

Figure Stones and Primal Imagery – a First Attempt at Deconstruction, Part 1

By Alan Day

I have been investigating "Figure Stones" since 2003, when the reality of this phenomenon became undeniably apparent to me on my wilderness hilltop property in Guernsey County, Ohio, registered archaeological site #33GU218. The site is tentatively estimated to be of Early to Middle Woodland age (roughly 1500 to 3000 years BP) in its upper artifact layer, judging from the architecture of a long true-north-south-oriented linear earthwork with a passageway aligned to the top of the hill. In 1987 I had quite accidentally noticed several clearly human-worked rocks of the hard local limestone (flint does not occur naturally here), bifacially edged and contoured for a comfortable right-hand grasp, in one case complete with distinct ridges and indentations for four fingers on one side, and the thumb on the other. These were at or eroding from the surface of the access road up the knob, recently graded to a depth of about 25 cm below the surrounding terrain. Living and working away from home most of the time, I was unable to pursue all this beyond occasionally collecting and cataloging other such artifacts from the same depth. Upon semi-retiring in 2003 I went after it in earnest, becoming aware of certain consistently recurring sets of shapes among the worked stones. To make a long story short, I noticed a preponderance of rather abstract but quite recognizable bird forms, as often as not with carved or pecked eyes in the anatomically appropriate locations, like this simple example from 50 cm beneath the current terrain surface:



As if this were not unsettling enough in itself, upon closer inspection I saw, in many of these, repeating patterns of subcomponents that typically included simple anthropomorphic or quasi-anthropomorphic face images both profile and frontal, in their patterns geometrically quite humanlike in the relative positions of eyes and mouth, sometimes even nose. Altogether, it seemed I was seeing the leitmotif of a "morphing" of bird and human, with sub-themes of reproduction and regeneration. Being a classically boring engineer type and not given to flights of fancy, I began to question my sanity and backed off for a while to gain a more objective frame of mind. But upon revisiting what I had collected, and closely inspecting the

details under magnification, I realized this was not a dream but something quite real that had to be dealt with. And having had, earlier in my life, some academic training and fieldwork experience in archaeology, as well as coursework in related fields (geology, anthropology, history, etc.), I knew this could possibly be of considerable importance.

I traveled to nearby cities to show the artifacts to professional/academic archaeologists, only to be patronizingly dismissed with obviously scripted recitations about "images in clouds" ("pareidolia"). While a few admitted to seeing the apparent imagery, even pointing out some features without prompting, these insisted it must somehow be of natural origin since "Indians" just did would not have done that sort of thing. It became clear that the archaeologists were both mired in preconception and lacking in technical savvy, so I changed course and turned to actual physical scientists, including geologists and petrologists, with a very different outcome. A case in point is this deeply incised birdlike figure with a quasi-human head, a hybrid creature or "*Mischwesen*":



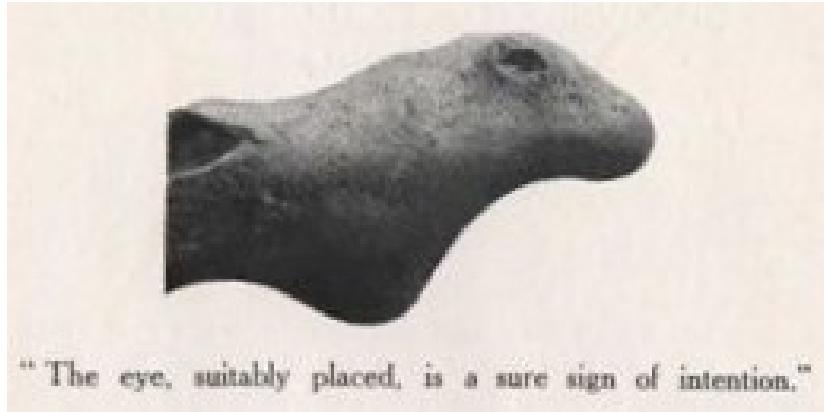
Thematically quite typical, it was carved from an adjacent limestone boulder and recovered from just beneath the surface of a steep bank on the apparently artificially terraced east (sheltered) side of the knob. Five experts identified this piece as human-modified, these being geology professors Dr. Eric Law and Dr. Roy Mapes, forensic science professor Dr. Scott Moody, and rock art specialists Dr. Arsen Faradzev and Dr. James Harrod who visited the site in 2005. Dismissed by archaeologists as glacial striations, a fossil, or natural fractures, the vertically V-profile grooves were determined to have been formed by a hard sharp-edged object drawn forcefully and intentionally across the stone's surface. This experience was repeated on several occasions with other worked stones from the site, rejected by archaeologists but identified by one or more geologists/petrologists as definitely or quite probably human-modified. Some of these are shown below:



On the day in 2003 when I recognized that I had not become any less sane than usual, and that the stones' essential bird-human motif and its several repeated sub-themes and variations were quite real, I resolved to categorize these for an attempt at deconstructing the whole – a sort of “reverse engineering” from which I could form hypotheses to be disproved (“falsified”) one after the other until those remaining could be further tested for “replicability”, i.e., consistent repetition. Of course professional verification of human agency was part of the process, and, as related above, this was quickly forthcoming. Dark brown (when not faded) verified human presence. (Unfortunately, a laboratory at the University of Arizona detected no surviving mitochondrial DNA in a dozen samples.)

Early in this venture I began work on <http://www.daysknob.com>, a website (currently still rather disjointed) to facilitate presenting my material from a distance. The website did not serve the intended purpose of engaging the interest of the professional/academic archaeology community, but it did elicit a flood of responses from people who had been seeing the same sort of thing (notably stone birds), mostly in the USA but also in Europe. Since this time, several of the respondents have launched their own websites on the same topic, with widely varying interpretations of the material that are usually much more intuitive than my own. (No matter – at least the phenomenon is being widely recognized, and if everyone agreed with me on everything I would have to suspect that we are all wrong.) One of these, PCN contributor Kenneth Johnston, contacted me to show me his “crude stone tools”, then came to see the simple characteristic imagery incorporated into some of these, and developed a good eye for it. He has presented, in the Jan.-Feb. 2011 issue, a general introduction to this topic and its associated pitfalls, sparing me the necessity of doing so. Richard Wilson of Watford, England showed me bird and other figures he was finding in verified Pleistocene deposits, and has since made considerable progress in a properly (and uncommonly) objective physical-properties-based assessment of the probabilities of human agency.

After compiling the basic image components, I searched the internet for illustrations or discussions of similar small iconistic artifacts. From the USA I found only James Harrod's superb website <http://www.originsnet.org>, which displayed many zoomorphic and anthropomorphic stones from the European Paleolithic. From Europe I encountered only Kurt Kocher's <http://www.hekoverlag.de> and Pietro Gaietto's <http://www.paleolithicartmagazine.org>. Among the motifs I had stumbled upon myself, I saw that Gaietto had long recognized the ancient janiform (two heads facing in opposite directions) human and bird image, and I found elsewhere in Europe passing references to the face with one eye open, one eye closed, and (in German) mention of "Atemgeburt" (literally breath birth), one creature emerging from the mouth of another. Clearly, some of what I was seeing repeatedly in Ohio's stone figures was far from unprecedented. Shortly after my website, Mrs. Ursel Benekendorff's (now <http://www.schafftwissen.de>) came on line quite independently. It displays her huge collection of iconistic artifacts from verified Paleolithic strata, assembled in a continuation of the work of her acquaintance the late Prof. Walther Matthes of the University of Hamburg, whose own large collection the university had hauled off to a rock crusher following his death. Much to my surprise, I also came upon accounts of the true pioneer Boucher de Perthes' nineteenth-century discovery of "Figure Stones" ("Pierres Figures") among his paradigm-changing Paleolithic artifacts, apparently quite real but rejected to this day by the archaeological establishment. I decided to adopt and revive his term "Figure Stones" in presenting my own finds, and the name seems to have since become more or less the standard in this still rather arcane line of inquiry. Incidentally, Boucher de Perthes had, like me, noted the prevalence of birds with the appropriately placed eye. Here is one of his finds, with his comment, published in W. M. Newton's 1910 book [Light on Paeleolithic Flint Figures and Boucher de Perthes](#):



"The eye, suitably placed, is a sure sign of intention."

In Part 2 of this article I will describe and try to illustrate what I have so far seen as the characteristics, subcomponents, and thematic permutations of the central human/animal hybrid motif. No doubt presumptuously, I am calling this Primal Imagery, since it seems to have persisted from deep in the Paleolithic to the present day, judging from my finding that it is clearly present in modern but traditional Inuit/Yupik "transformation art". (In the truly ancient manifestation of this in the Figure Stones, I do not call it "art" as we understand art within our

own culture, but rather hypothesize that it is a routine expression of a primal animistic, and, from somewhere along the time line, shamanistic world view in the manufacture of at least potentially utilitarian stone objects.) And apparently it covered a lot of territory over time, since it also appears in verified sandstone artifacts from Australia, of unknown age.

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