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Portable Art in the Great Basin: Possible Insect Stone Artifacts

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Abstract

When we think about archaeology in the Great Basin, we usually don't think about art. If we do it is usually in the form of rock art, which there is plenty, but there is another type that commonly gets overlooked, portable art. There are basically three forms of these small creative objects in the Great Basin: ceramic figurines, incised stones, and small rocks that have had their shape altered into what is believed to mimic some type of anthropomorphic animal. I would propose that some of these items may have been misidentified in the past and would like to put forth an alternative hypothesis, with related evidence for consideration. There are three figurines in particular that this poster will focus on. Two of these effigies are possibly grasshoppers, while a third may be a predaceous diving beetle. In addition, to these re-examinations this study will be adding to the increased dialog concerning insects in the subsistence diets of Native Americans in the Great Basin. The importance of these food resources are then transferred and reflected in these portable art artifacts from these archaeological sites, which provide additional evidence to their significance.

Portable Art in the Great Basin

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Introduction

In the Great Basin, which covers Nevada, eastern Oregon, southern Idaho, a small part of eastern California, and western Utah, a number of objects known as portable art have been recovered from archaeological sites. These have consisted of three basic types: incised stones, clay figurines, and stone effigies that are believed to have been modified by humans and resemble animals.



Figure 1. Map of the Great Basin

This last group has not been investigated or had much attention and may receive only a brief mention within excavation reports. This lack of analysis may have overlooked important details concerning these artifacts and possibly their significance to other subsistence practices within the archaeological record.

Artifacts possibly misidentified?

Stick Cave, Nevada

A small painted granite rock was located at this cave site by Phil Orr in 1952. Originally he identified this artifact as a “legless bear” (Orr, 1952).

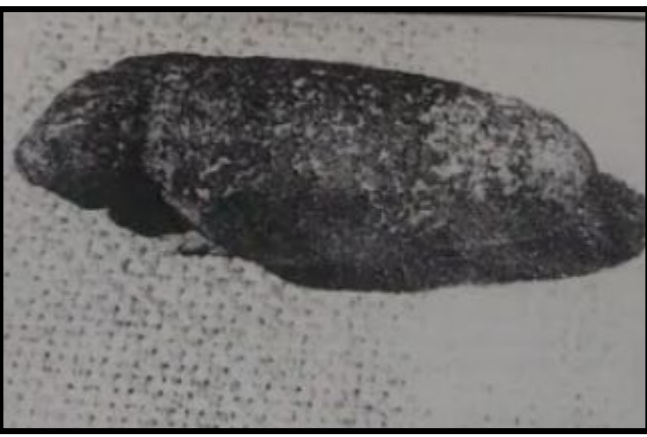


Figure 2. Artifact identified as “Legless Bear” from original report (Orr, 1952)



Figure 3. Courtesy of Nevada State Museum, 2021

Is it possible this object may be a grasshopper?

In 1966, a small painted wooden grasshopper was brought to Robert Heizer by Ethel Hesterlee that had been found at Lovelock Cave, which is less than 50 miles from Stick Cave (Jones et al., 1967).

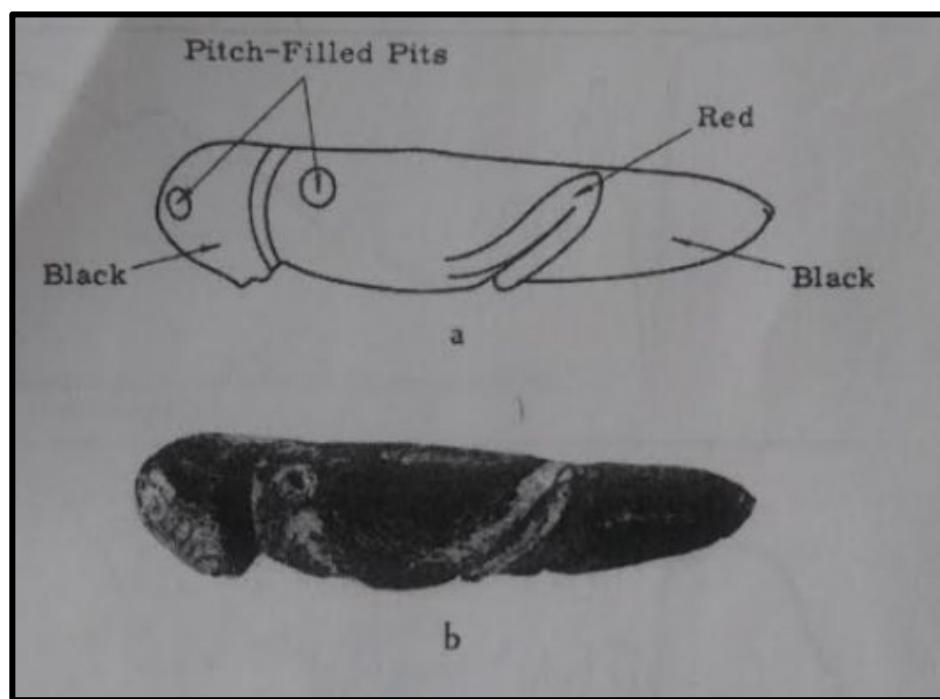


Figure 4. Wooden Grasshopper (Jones et al., 1967)



Figure 5. From grasshopper cache at Crypt Cave, Nevada (Pellegrini, 2016).

Insects in the diets of Native Americans in the Great Basin has been noted previously in the most cursory fashion and in context as starvation food. This may have overlooked their importance as a high protein food along with providing other essential nutrients.



Figure 6. Crypt Cave, Nevada (Pellegrini, 2016).

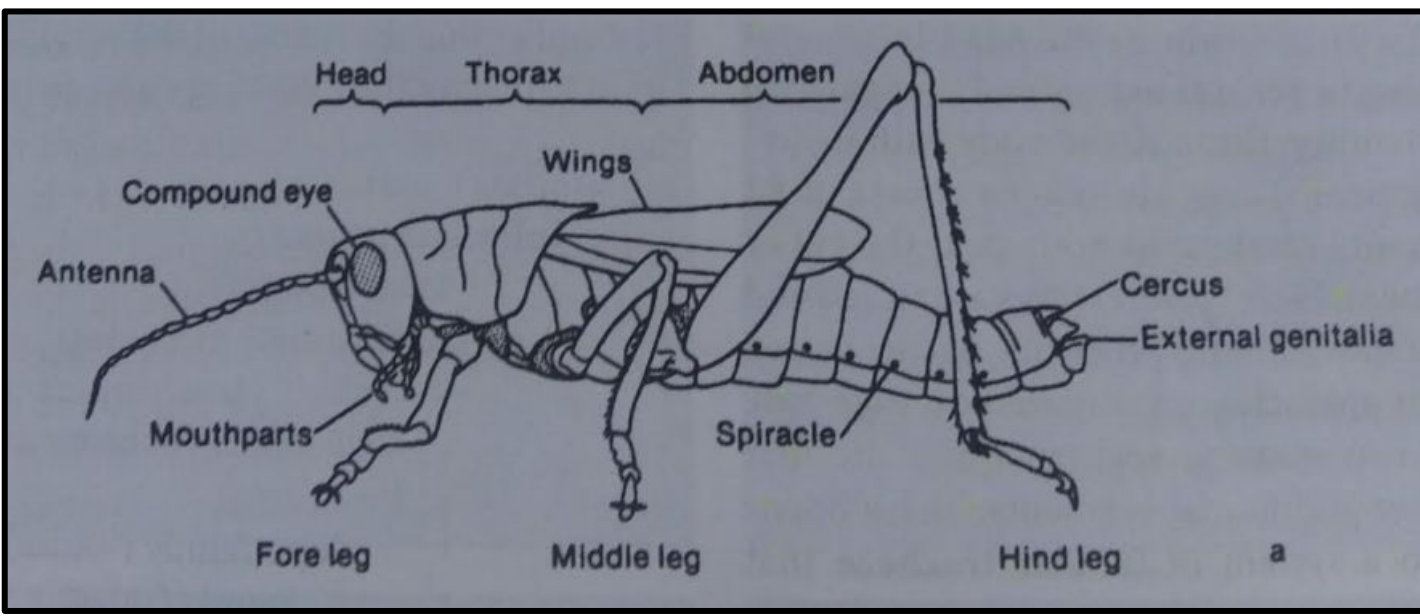


Figure 7. Grasshopper Diagram (Whitfield and Purcell III, 204)

The grasshoppers that were recovered from Crypt Cave were located in a storage pit that was lined with algae or grass. This infers some intentionality, preparation, and forethought. In addition, these insects are only seasonally available during times when other animals would be procured, so conscious choices were being made by Native Americans.

Possible Insect Stone Artifacts

NV-PE-67, Nevada

A carved stone artifact was recovered from the surface at this site, back in 1967. The composition of material for this figurine is red scoria (a vesicular volcanic rock) and was identified as a horned toad or frog (Cowan and Clewlow Jr., 1967).

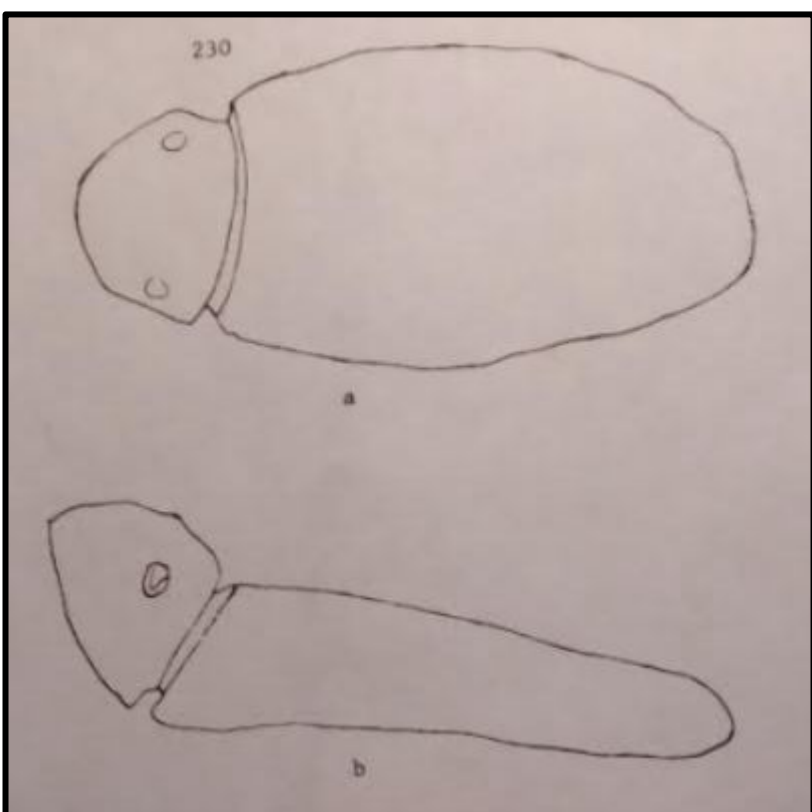


Figure 8. Artifact identified as “Horned toad or frog” (Cowan and Clewlow Jr., 1967).



Figure 9. Lovelock Cave, Nevada



Figure 10, 11, and 12. Red Scoria Artifact photographs courtesy of Walter Brinkerhoff.



In two caves: Lovelock and Hidden, in close proximity to the site, insect remains of the predaceous diving beetle genus (*Cybister sp.*) (n = 4) and (*Cybister explanatus*) (n = 7) respectively have been found in human coprolites. This is direct evidence that humans were eating these insects. Roust even suggests that they were removing the heads before consumption (Roust, 1967).



Figure 13. Predaceous Diving Beetles (Miller and Bergstein, 2016).

Table Rock Cave, Oregon

In Oregon, there is another figurine produced out of brown chert which was located at Table Rock Cave by Stephen Bedwell during excavation work for his dissertation. At the time of discovery Bedwell suggested the object was either a snake or rodent (Bedwell, 1970). This was located in level 10, the lowest level that was excavated (Endzweig personal communication, 2021).

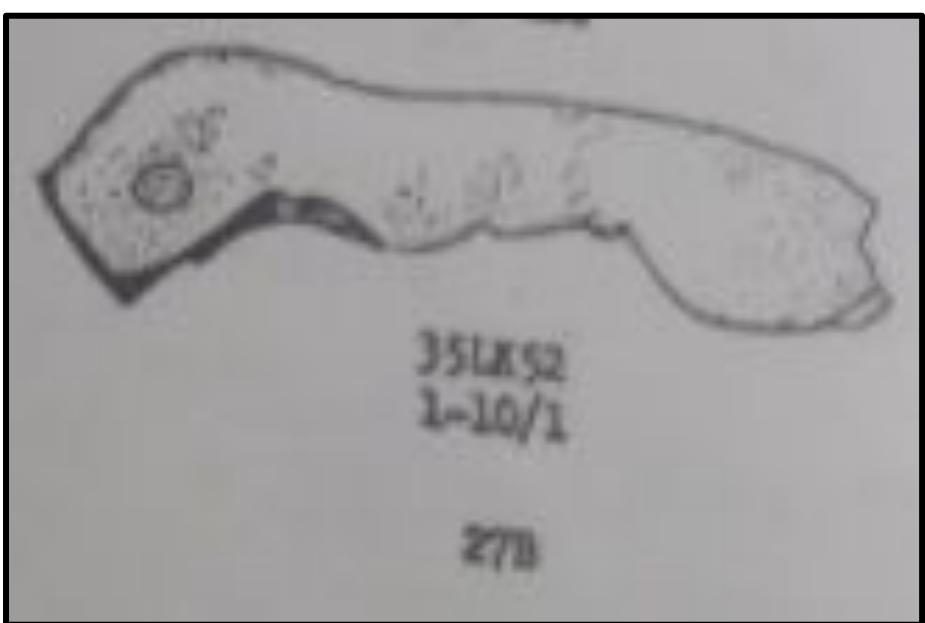


Figure 15. Snake or Rodent (Bedwell, 1970)

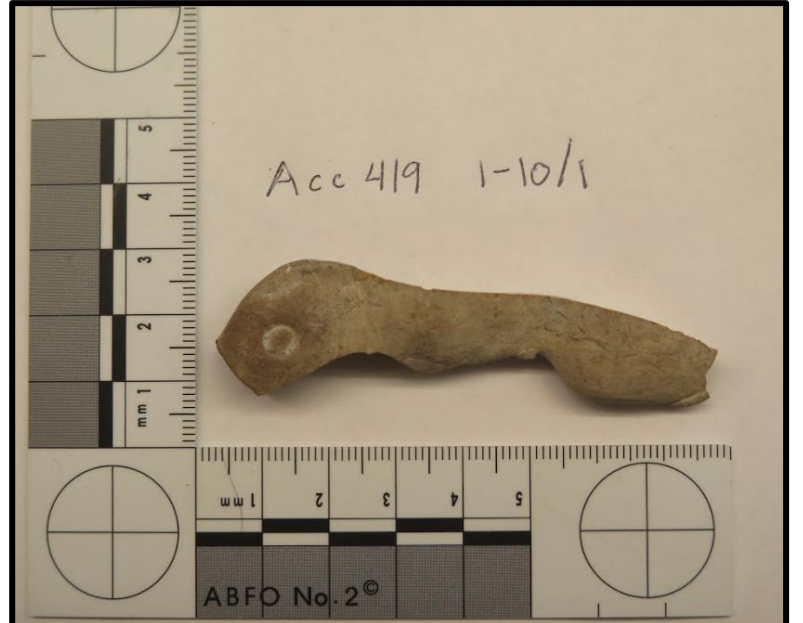


Figure 16. Courtesy of University of Oregon Museum of Natural and Cultural History 2021.

There are some striking similarities between the effigy found at Stick Cave, the wooden grasshopper, and this item. Could this item also be a grasshopper?

Discussion

This research has focused on three different portable stone effigies representing animals from the archaeological record in the Great Basin and proposes alternative identifications of two effigies possibly being grasshoppers and one being a predaceous diving beetle. 700 grasshoppers were found in a storage pit within the same general vicinity as the effigy in Stick Cave. While the figurine located at NV-PE-67 appears to mimic the image of a predaceous diving beetle, more than a horned toad. In two caves not far from this archaeological site 11 human coprolites contained parts of these same beetles. This provides us with direct and indirect evidence that insects were part of the subsistence diets of Native Americans. The importance of insects in the Great Basin as a food resource has been minimized or completely ignored in the past, even though we have evidence in excavation sites and through ethnographic data. These portable art objects may shed new light on the significance of these food resources.

References

