Additional Multi-Holed Tablets from the Fred Aldrich Collection, Bowers Museum of Cultural Art, Santa Ana

Henry C. Koerper and Joe Cramer

Abstract

The primary purpose of this article is to acquaint readers with two previously unpublished multi-holed tablets and two artifacts that appear to be miniaturizations of the type, all residing in the Fred Aldrich Collection at the Bowers Museum of Cultural Art, Santa Ana. Several examples of multi-holed tablets were reported in a recent *Pacific Coast Archaeological Society Quarterly* article (Koerper 2009), one of which had accompanied a remarkable shaman burial excavated nearly eight decades ago at the Buck Ranch site in Wintersburg (now Huntington Beach). One of the tablets described in this study almost certainly originated at the Buck Ranch site; it remains an open question whether the other three multi-holed objects had also been discovered there. We note two other artifacts encountered in our latest perusal of the Bowers holdings, a Great Keyhole Limpet bead necklace and a tubular stone pipe, both from the Aldrich Collection and both likely associated with the Buck Ranch shaman burial.

Introduction

A recent *Quarterly* article (Koerper 2009) addressed a concern expressed in Chace’s (2008) article on the location of the Late Prehistoric Buck Ranch Indian burial grounds excavated by Herman Strandt (see Strandt 1965:30-32) in the winter of 1930-1931. Chace followed a paper trail to place the Indian cemetery near the present day intersection of Edwards and Varsity streets in Huntington Beach, an area that had once been part of the town of Wintersburg, and he wondered about the disposition of missing Buck Ranch artifacts and skeletal remains from Strandt’s dig.

Chace, a former museum technician and archaeologist with the Charles W. Bowers Memorial Museum, anticipated that some of these materials might one day resurface among the collections within the now named Bowers Museum of Cultural Art. Chace was correct; many of the Buck Ranch human remains and certain artifacts described by Strandt (1965:30-32) are indeed curated at the Santa Ana facility (see Koerper 2009).

These materials entered the Bowers with the Aldrich Collection, which had been purchased in 1954 by Roy Gronsky and his business partners for display at the Balboa Pavilion (Koerper 2009:101-103). The Aldrich archaeological holdings were well known to the local public, for Aldrich had displayed them along with sea shells and geology specimens at his private museum on Bay Island at Newport Bay (see Chace 1965; Koerper 2009:111, Note 2). Some of the more spectacular archaeological items had been purchased from Herman Strandt. The Bowers was gifted most of the Aldrich artifacts and human skeletal remains by Roy Gronsky in 1962 (Koerper 2009:103).

A particular artifact presently on display in the Richard P. Ettinger Gallery at the Bowers, “hiding in plain sight” as Koerper (2009:97) put it, proved to be a pivotal clue in partially solving the case of the missing Buck Ranch burial materials. This object had been described in contemporary newspaper accounts covering
the Wintersburg dig (Anonymous 1930a; Anonymous 1930b; Anonymous 1931), as having a constellation of features so distinctive that it could easily be identified if rediscovered. The artifact is a thin tablet possessing 70 drilled holes (Koerper 2009:Figure 2). (Strandt’s [1965:32] reference to the unusual specimen contained a transpositional error that incorrectly recorded but 38 holes [see also Koerper 2009:98-99]). Koerper (2009:Figures 3 and 4) illustrated three additional examples of thin tablets, each with many drilled holes, to support the idea that the genre is a distinct type, the “multi-holed tablet,” assignable to the regional Late Prehistoric portable cosmos.

In searches for additional holed tablets at the Bowers undertaken subsequent to Koerper’s 2009 study, our efforts were rewarded with four additional multi-holed objects; all were from the Aldrich Collection, but none carried provenience. None was previously published. Two of the specimens fall within the normal size range of multi-holed tablets (Figures 1 and 2), but two (Figures 3a and 3b) seem to be miniature versions of the larger objects. Herein, all four are formally documented with descriptions and illustrations.

In these efforts to locate holed tablets at the Bowers, there were two other artifacts recognized as having probably been from the Buck Ranch mortuary site. These too will be described in a separate section. This essay will end with a Summary and Concluding Remarks section.

**Descriptions: Two Additional Large Multi-Holed Tablets**

The squarish object illustrated in Figure 1 (Bowers cat. no. 80222) was fashioned of slate primarily by grinding; we believe the finishing was accomplished using a fine abrasive material. None of the surfaces carries a polish. No colorants were observed on any surface.

Maximum thickness of specimen 80222 is about 4.9 mm, with minimum thickness about 2.8 mm. Maximum length is about 76.1 mm, and a maximum width...
is about 70.5 mm. It is clear the slate piece is quite delicate and not appropriate to any utilitarian purpose for which pressure would be required.

Adding to this susceptibility to breakage are 26 biconically drilled holes, presumably decorative, laid out in five rows with the following top to bottom counts: 5, 5, 5, 4, 7. There are 14 incised lines of varying lengths on one face.

Unfortunately, provenience is lacking. However, the tablet arrived at the Bowers Museum with the Aldrich Collection, and thus there is the possibility that it had been a Herman Strandt discovery, possibly from the Buck Ranch site.

Figure 2 illustrates two large fragments of yet another example of an Aldrich Collection multi-holed tablet. These unprovenienced fragments and several much smaller shatter fragments are subsumed under one Bowers Museum catalog number (80308). The inset in Figure 2 indicates how the two big pieces might be refit.

As oriented in Figure 2, the length of the larger section is 105.7 mm. The maximum dimension of the smaller section is 105.9 mm. Maximum thickness of this slate artifact is 4.9 mm. The surfaces have been very smoothly ground, but not quite to the degree that the one would consider the tablet to be polished. There is neither incising nor the application of any colorant to the faces or the edges.

Figure 2. Multi-holed tablet. Aldrich Collection, Bowers Museum catalog no. 80308.
The arrangement of biconically drilled holes creates a design unique for multi-holed tablets. It may be described as two design elements, each made up of paired holes, one longer than the other. They intersect roughly perpendicular to one another at a location equidistant from the straight sides, but along the long axis the intersection is offset from the center of the tablet. The longer cross element is somewhat curvilinear.

After noting the 70-hole tablet, a contemporary news article (Anonymous 1930b) observed that “Another one of smooth white stone was uncovered, but it was broken in two … ” Almost certainly, this was the artifact of Figure 2.

**Descriptions: Miniature Multi-Holed Tablets**

The small multi-holed sandstone object of Figure 3a carries Bowers Museum catalog number 80226. The five-sided piece with 11 biconically drilled holes was crafted by grinding and drilling. It measures 40.5 mm x 39.2 mm. Maximum thickness is 3.9 mm.

It is yet another artifact that had been owned by Fred Aldrich and presumably displayed at his private Bay Island Museum. A fanciful explanation of function, written on a small strip of paper (possibly in Aldrich’s hand), had accompanied the object into the Bowers. It states, “Indians recorded births and deaths by holes in the stone.” Unfortunately, provenience information did not arrive with the specimen.

Assuming that this artifact is indeed a mimic of the large multi-holed tablet type and that the large version was truly ceremonial in nature, one might reasonably guess that it had served as an amulet/charm. Perhaps it had been a child’s toy, but we are far from enthusiastic about such a suggestion since it would probably have been unusual for the imagery of a sacred object to be so treated (see Koerper and Gust 2008:127-128).

Another miniature example, also without provenience and from the Aldrich collection (Bowers cat. no. 80239), was crafted out of mammal bone by grinding and biconical drilling (Figure 3b). It is quite thin, just 2.2 mm. This lozenge-shaped specimen is 35.8 mm long and 28.7 mm wide. Its 12 holes were biconically drilled.

Parenthetically, a small (approximately 30 mm x 21 mm), thin, rounded triangular, ten-holed artifact (Figure 3c) was pictured in Gifford and Schenck (1926:Plate 16r).

**Figure 3.** Miniature multi-holed tablets: (a) Aldrich Collection, Bowers Museum catalog no. 80226; (b) Aldrich Collection, Bowers Museum catalog no. 80239; (c) specimen from the A. F. Meyer collection. After Gifford and Schenck (1926:Plate 16r).
Plate 16r). It was fashioned of black steatite. It had resided in the private collection of A. F. Mayer of Alpaugh, California, but its present whereabouts is unknown (Gifford and Schenck 1926:119). Presumably, it was a local find, and if so, one wonders whether the object had been traded from coastal Orange County, across the Tejon Pass, and into the Great Central Valley. Could it have possibly been transported by Mohave traders (see Koerper and Hedges 1996)? Perusal of the Central Valley prehistory literature does indicate that this specimen (Figure 3c) is probably out of place if it had actually been recovered there. Could Mayer have acquired the item from a fellow collector or relic dealer who had found it in coastal southern California?

Serendipitous Encounters

In this latest seek-and-find effort at the Bowers Museum of Cultural Art, we located two other interesting items once belonging to Fred Aldrich, both of which had possibly been excavated by Herman Strandt on the Buck Ranch property. Strandt’s (1965:31-32) description of a medicine man’s grave listed much burial furniture including the seventy-holed tablet noted above as the pivotal clue in partially solving the case of the missing Buck Ranch burial materials. The man had been laid to rest with a greater variety of goods than any other Native person documented in the published literature of Orange County prehistory. For instance, around his neck, this shaman wore a necklace of 210 limpet shell beads (Strandt 1965:31). A clear plastic curation bag bearing Bowers catalog number 80190 and information that attributed it to the Aldrich Collection contains 173 unstrung Great Keyhole Limpet beads (Figure 4). Given the rarity of such kinds of necklaces, we cautiously assume that this is probably the said necklace, but, for whatever reasons, it was missing 37 beads, assuming Strandt’s count of 210 had been accurate. Strandt (1965:32) further mentioned a tubular pipe of red stone. The smoking pipe pictured in Figure 5, bearing Bowers catalog number 80297, also came with the Aldrich Collection donation. Its dark red surface is quite smooth and was polished. There is a circumferential incision towards the large end, the maximum diameter of which is 30.4 mm. Length measures 76.3 mm.

Figure 4. Limpet shell bead necklace, Bowers Museum catalog no. 80190. Aldrich Collection. Courtesy Bowers Museum of Cultural Art.
Summary and Concluding Remarks

Our article has focused on describing and illustrating two multi-holed tablets, each having biconically drilled perforations decorating their surfaces, and two objects that appear to be miniature mimics of the multi-holed tablet type. All, like the 70-holed Buck Ranch shaman’s burial specimen (Koerper 2009:Figure 2), are from the Aldrich Collection which entered the Bowers Museum in 1962.

The two larger specimens are further testimony to the existence of a formal type, the multi-holed tablet, that had functioned within the Late Prehistoric portable cosmos of coastal southern California. Lack of use wear and the delicate nature of their constructions, which makes them quite vulnerable to breakage, are among the considerations that help belie any utilitarian purpose.

The two smaller specimens appear to be scaled down copies of the larger multi-holed items (see also Koerper 2009:Figures 2-4). Perhaps these might be regarded as a subtype, the “miniature multi-holed tablet,” more probably an amulet/charm and/or ornament than a toy.

Since these four artifacts entered the Bowers with the Aldrich Collection through the generosity of the Gronsky family (see Koerper 2009) and that collection contained much Buck Ranch material, we anticipated that any one or all of the holed items might have been recovered during Herman Strandt’s operations. Strandt’s (1965) cursory recollections of the Buck Ranch investigations lacked hints of any holed item other than that example perforated 70 times (Koerper 2009:Figure 2). However, a Huntington Beach News account (Anonymous 1930b) convinces us that Bowers artifact 80308 (Figure 2) is most probably from the Buck Ranch site. The limpet shell bead necklace shown in Figure 4 and the red stone smoking pipe of Figure 5, both from the Aldrich Collection, may be the necklace and pipe described by Strandt for the shaman who had been provided with so many mortuary artifacts including the tablet having 70 holes.

Acknowledgments

We are especially grateful for the cooperation and assistance offered by Jennifer Ring, Bowers Museum of Cultural Art. We thank Karen Koerper who typed the drafts of this article. We appreciate the comments of Dr. Paul Chace, several anonymous reviewers, and members of the Pacific Coast Archaeological Society Quarterly Publications Committee.

References Cited

Anonymous
1930a 500 Attracted to Old Indian Burial Ground. Santa Ana Daily Evening Register, 29 December:3.

Chace, Paul G.

Gifford, Edward W., and W. Egbert Schenck,

Koerper, Henry C.

Strandt, Herman F.