

## AN ENGRAVED SLATE POINT FROM SOUTHERN ONTARIO

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### ABSTRACT

A consideration and interpretation of a slate point bearing apparently notational engraving suggests that it may have been associated with Late Archaic ceremonialism.

### INTRODUCTION

Some years ago a ground slate point was found north of Blairton, Ontario (Belmont Township, Peterborough County) in the shallow waters of the Crowe River a short distance north of Crowe Lake. It was a fortuitous and isolated discovery by a cottage owner, Mrs. H. J. (Joyce) Armstrong, presently of Peterborough, to whom I am indebted for her having brought the artifact to our attention and for subsequently depositing it in the collection of the Trent University Archaeological Centre (number 7PT23-1 from Borden location BcGk-4). What distinguishes this specimen from other slate points of the region and makes it of special interest is the extensive engraving cut into both faces of the point.

### THE POINT AND ENGRAVING

The point is 124 mm in length, including a small allowance for damage at the tip, and has a maximum width of 32 mm near the base of the blade. The maximum thickness is 8 mm in the center of the midsection of the blade which has a lozenge-shaped cross-section with four flat external faces. The point weights 38.8 g and is made of a dark uniform slate; in terms of Munsell soil colours it would be described as very dark gray, approximating 2.5 YR 3/0.

The form of the point is within the range exhibited by slate points of southern Ontario, although it is longer and narrower than average, while the base could be said to be atypical in that it is not the relatively long tapering or contracting stemmed form commonly seen on slate points. The base is short and appears to have been either essentially straight-stemmed or lightly side notched although damage to the edges below the shoulders precludes a certain assessment. It is possible, even probable, that the base was originally longer and has been reworked into its present shorter form after sustaining damage.

Except at the base of side a and the lower third of side b, the flat prepared surfaces of the point have been ground smooth obliterating any traces of previous working. Across the base and central part of the blade immediately above the base on side a (Fig. 1) transverse tool marks are clearly evident in a groove cut part way across the base and in abrasion immediately above the groove which cuts through the medial ridge at the thickest part of the base of the blade. On the opposite face, side b (Fig. 2), from a point 45 mm above the base, a large chip or spall has come off of the central part of the blade and base. At the edges of this damaged section, parallel to the edges of the blade, across the base and, to some extent, on the rough surface of the damaged area, one may see tool marks and the results of grinding to partially smooth the roughness resulting from this breakage. Since the engraved lines on side b are not interrupted by the breakage and do not extend into the damaged area, it appears that the damage occurred prior to the engraving of the point. That is, at some time a large chip or spall broke off of the lower part of side b, possibly while the point was being formed, and perhaps, to speculate, as a

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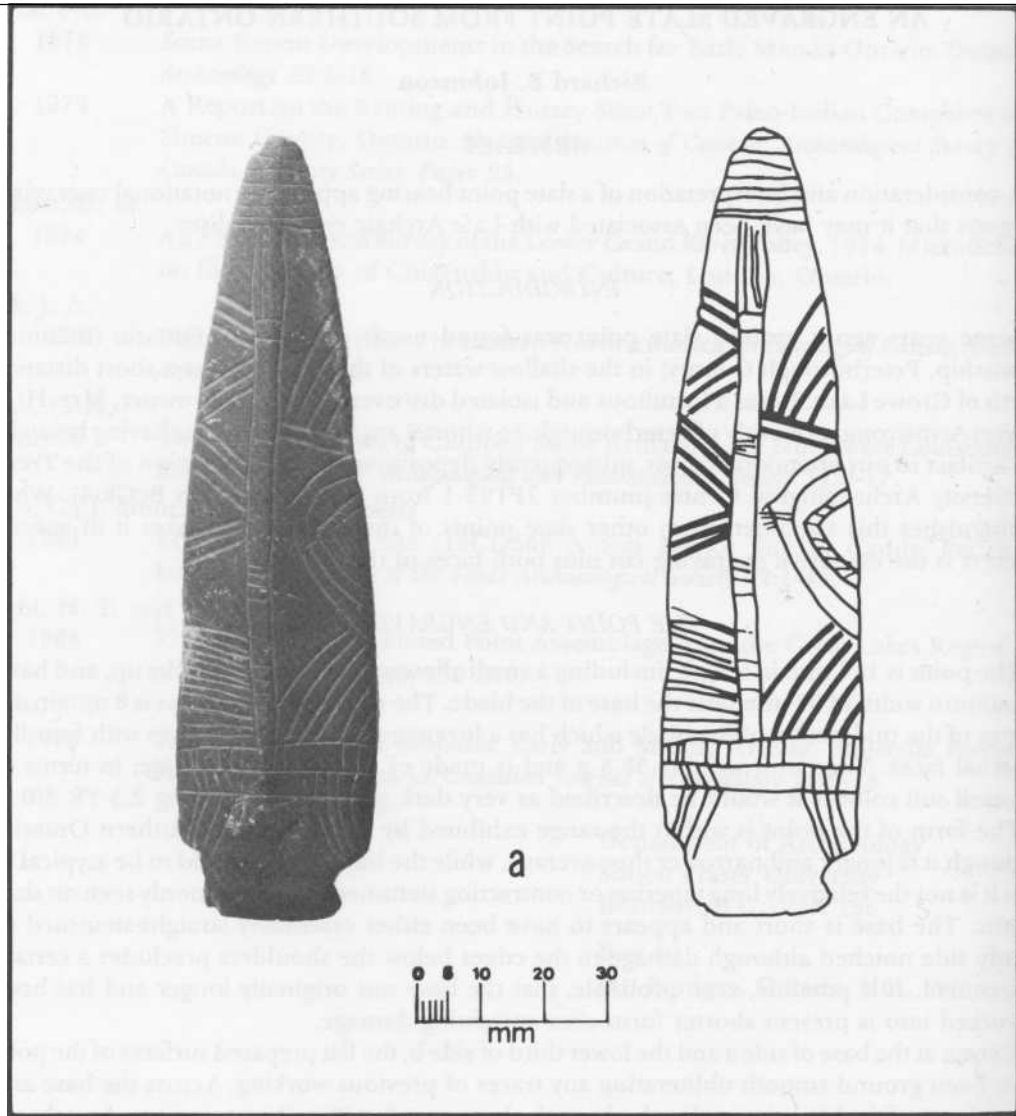


Fig. 1. Side a of engraved slate point 7PT23-1.

consequence of an accident that also broke the once longer-stemmed base. This damage notwithstanding, the maker persisted and finished the point by somewhat smoothing the rough area of the break and reworking the shortened base. Subsequently the engraved lines were added; on side b the lines were cut into only the smoothed upper part of the blade avoiding the rough damaged lower section, another indication that this breakage occurred before the piece was engraved.

The engraving is most extensive and prominent on side a of the point where there are both heavy groove-like lines and lighter "scratch" engraved lines (Fig. 1). The heavier engraving, indicated by heavier lines in the illustration, is quite uniform in breadth, approximately 1 mm, and depth, revealing considerable skill and care in its execution. The lighter scratch-type lines

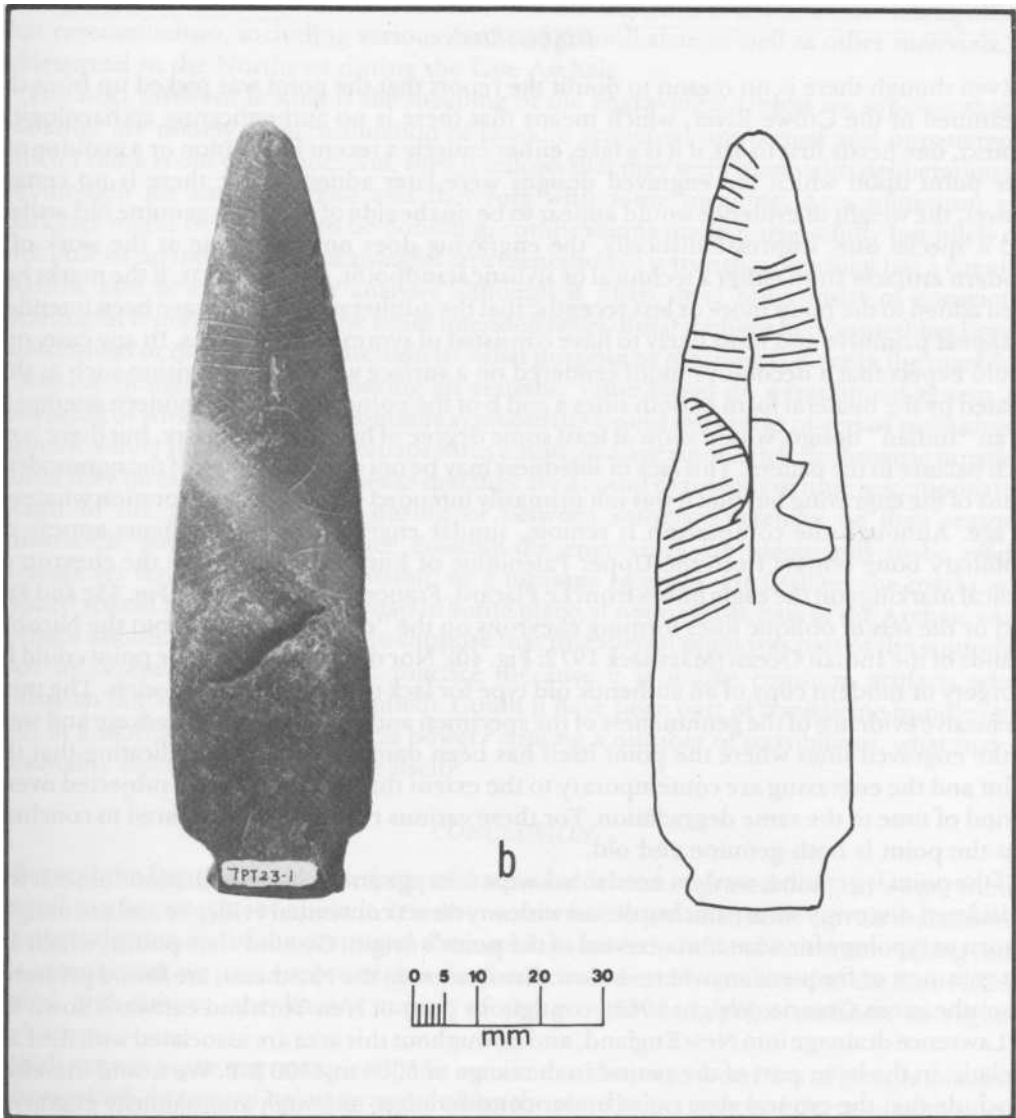


Fig. 2. Side b of engraved slate point 7PT23-1.

seem to have been made somewhat less meticulously (more irregular spacing, incomplete lines, etc). Where the point is broken at the tip the lines are interrupted or broken and where the lateral edges have been crushed the engraved lines have also been damaged; as well, parts of the lateral edges are rounded from wear and here also the lines are worn down. What all this indicates is that the engraving was made on the point when it was in a more pristine condition, before the tip was broken or the edges worn, and that both the point and the engraved lines have been subjected to the kind of wear commonly seen on slate artifacts. On side b all of the engraving is of the scratch type and is confined to the smooth upper portion of the blade (Fig. 2). The lines are much fainter on side b than on side a and give the impression that the b face of the point, including the partially smoothed surface of the broken section, has sustained considerably more weathering, wear, or abrasion than opposite face a.

*DISCUSSION*

Even though there is no reason to doubt the report that the point was picked up from the streambed of the Crowe River, which means that there is no authenticating archaeological context, one needs first to ask if it is a fake, either entirely a recent fabrication or a genuine old slate point upon which the engraved designs were later added. While there is no certain answer, the weight of evidence would appear to be on the side of it being a genuine old artifact and a special one. Impressionistically, the engraving does not strike one as the work of a modern artificer from either a technical or stylistic standpoint. One suspects, if the marks had been added to the point more or less recently, that the adulteration would have been intended to appear primitive and most likely to have consisted of symmetrical designs. In any case, one would expect that a decorative motif rendered on a surface with medial division such as that created by the bilateral form of both sides a and b of the point, especially a modern attempt to do an "Indian" design, would show at least some degree of bilateral symmetry, but there is no such balance in the pattern. This lack of sidedness may be not only suggestive of the nonmodern status of the engraving but that it was not primarily intended or laid out as decoration whatever its age. Although the comparison is remote, similar engraved design elements appear on mobiliary bone objects from the Upper Paleolithic of Europe, for example the chevron or conical markings on the eagle bones from Le Placard, France (Marshack 1972: Fig. 43c and Fig. 52c) or the sets of oblique lines forming chevrons on the "calendar sticks" from the Nicobar Islands of the Indian Ocean (Marshack 1972: Fig. 40). Nor does it seem that the point could be a forgery or modern copy of an authentic old type for lack of known earlier models. The most persuasive evidence of the genuineness of the specimen and engraving is the damage and wear to the engraved lines where the point itself has been damaged or worn, indicating that the point and the engraving are contemporary to the extent that both have been subjected over a period of time to the same degradation. For these various reasons I am prepared to conclude that the point is both genuine and old.

If the point is genuine, we then need to ask what is its age and cultural affiliation? Since it was an isolated discovery we are not burdened with any direct contextual evidence and are obliged to turn to typology for what it may reveal of the point's origin. Ground slate points, which are not common or frequent anywhere in their distribution in the Northeast, are found primarily in southeastern Ontario (Wright 1962), contiguous parts of New York and eastward down the St. Lawrence drainage into New England, and throughout this area are associated with the Late Archaic, in the latter part of the period in the range of 3000 to 4500 B.P. We would therefore conclude that the ground slate point under consideration, although anomalously engraved, should be assigned to that period and cultural status. There are a few published examples in the Northeast of other engraved artifacts, some of which are demonstrably or presumably Late Archaic and others which are only possibly or certainly not (Boyle 1891, 1907; Chadwick 1969; Converse 1976; Fowler 1966; Taylor 1975; Tiell 1978). Perhaps the best known Late Archaic complex including ground slate, red ochre and other features is what Moorehead (1922) and Willoughby (1935) referred to in the northern New England area as Red Paint, and which is now known to extend northward into the Canadian Maritimes where Sanger (1973) has more recently called it the Moorehead Burial Tradition. Sanger's report of the Cow Point site in central New Brunswick is one of the few published investigations of this distinctive cemetery assemblage. Grave goods at Cow Point included 69 long, narrow "bayonet" slate points, 13 of which were decorated with fine, symmetrical geometric engraved patterns (1973: 42-49, Pl. 9-12a). A mean radiocarbon date of 1785 B.C. was associated with the most recent group of burials at the site (Sanger 1973: 109). While I do not wish to imply a specific or direct link

between these east coast practices and those of southern Ontario or elsewhere, it is significant that ceremonialism, including various forms of ground slate as well as other materials, was widespread in the Northeast during the Late Archaic.

The next problem is what is the meaning of the engravings? Unless we suppose that the markings are merely an accumulation of random scratches, unplanned and unpatterened, which I think is out of the question, then it follows that they were made with deliberation and forethought for some purpose and therefore with some meaning. At a minimum such markings might be thought to be doodling, compositions made purposefully but idly and with little or no intention of meaningful representation (it is true that doodling has a cognitive element and is amenable to analysis although it often does not consist of consciously meaningful representation in the sense intended here). But if we have here something beyond randomness or doodling, the question is: what purpose or meaning is there in the markings?

Are the designs decorative, having an aesthetic value based on a traditional system and consisting of what is now unfathomable symbolism? Could the marks or sets of marks have a numeric value, be tally marks, perhaps form a sum, or have some other arithmetic function? Could they be calendrical in the sense that they are a count of periods of time (e.g.:moons) or a record of the passage of time during or between some occurrences be they seasonal, economical, social, ritualistic, etc? Possibly the engravings are ideographs to be read, a message set down or for transmission, or a message received. Or perhaps the marks are a stylized spatial representation, a map of some place, if not of some part of the Archaic world perhaps another world. It is easy to suppose that this special point was part of the equipment used in ceremonial or ritualistic practice (because it is unlike common artifacts whose utilitarian function has been identified). Could it have been part of a medicine bundle or an item in a shaman's kit with mystical power? Among a number of possibilities, what may we reasonably discern from the piece itself?

#### CONCLUSION

Beyond the fact that we have a slate point upon which are engraved designs, we are frankly limited in what we can say about it. It is not even certainly genuine, although an evaluation of the physical character of the point and the markings has led to that conclusion. Having made this assumption, we next supposed that the point could best be attributed to the Late Archaic period and culture, the known carrier of the ground slate point tradition in regional prehistory.

With respect to the engraving itself, it is certain that the pattern consists of groups or subsets of lines which, in spite of being arranged along the two distinct opposed facets on both sides of the point, are not symmetrical. We have also concluded that the lines and patterns were not random, accidental or decorative but rather intentional, organized, and probably therefore notational. The lack of symmetry indicates at a minimum that it was not the intention to create a balanced composition and this in turn supports the idea that we are looking at a record of something (notation) rather than simple decoration, that the marks are a visual abstraction or a symbolic record of something.

The most difficult question of course is what was the something, what was the meaning? We may add yet another assumption at this point, namely that the meaning must have been generally understood in the cultural context in which it was promulgated, that the point and engraving were not unique, idiosyncratic or aberrant but arose out of established, traditional knowledge and behavior. Given the rare and seemingly cognitive embellishment added to the point, it may also be assumed to have had some special meaning and consequently meant to

serve some special purpose. Obviously we wish we knew more about Archaic circumstances and needs in this realm in order to help us answer such questions, some clues to the notational or graphic tradition of the period from which to project an interpretation. But since we do not we must fall back on plausible (near) analogy, reasonable inference and other forms of temperate speculation in the hopes that one day evidence will surface allowing more firmly-based conclusions. Some archaeological data but especially the ethnographic record point to the conspicuous, constant role shamanism played in the lives of hunter-gathers. It is certain that we do not yet adequately appreciate this vital and largely intangible aspect of past life on the basis of the preserved, tangible archaeological evidence. On the same grounds we know that much of the graphic expression or art of native North America had a magico-religious basis (apparently the principal exception would be depictions, on rock walls or bison hides for example, of notable past events recorded explicitly or solely for historical purposes), and that the spirit world is commonly expressed archaeologically in the symbolism usually referred to as art. The extensive Peterborough petroglyphs of southern Ontario are an excellent example (Vastokas and Vastokas 1973).

In light of all of the above I think that it would not be unreasonable to propose that the engraved slate point was a part of Late Archaic ceremonialism compatible with what is known of such practices, an element of ritualistic paraphernalia, perhaps a shaman's amulet, an item imbued with the importance or potency associated with the symbolic notations engraved on it. It is the type of special device that would be placed in a grave to accompany, identify and assist a deceased person of status in the afterworld. Whatever it was, it is now a small window opening on the Archaic world, and it is only necessary for us to view it with understanding.

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