
A Painted Stone from 41ME274, Medina County, Texas: Documentation and Observations

Thomas R. Hester, Harry J. Shafer, David Calame, and Richard McReynolds

Abstract

In 2016, digging by collectors at a site on Hondo Creek in northern Medina County led to the discovery of a large piece of smoothed and painted limestone. It featured a variety of motifs, all painted in red. Nearby was a much smaller piece of limestone, deeply incised with motifs reflected on the painted stone. Both date to the early Late Prehistoric period. These artifacts are described and illustrated in this article. Comparison of the items to southern Texas and lower Pecos painted pebbles provided a basis for speculation on the meaning or function of the Medina County artifacts.

Introduction

In early summer 2016, a young man digging in midden deposits, near Hondo Creek, discovered a unique painted stone. The painting has linear motifs in the general form of a painted pebble, although it is much larger than those specimens. In this article, we refer to the artifact as a “stone,” although it could be called a “cobble,” in that pebbles are defined geologically as much smaller in size.

The senior author learned of this find shortly after the stone was unearthed, and emails and messages were sent to the person leading the dig. Upon advising him of the stone’s unique status, he talked with the discoverer, and he promptly gave the senior author permission to study and publish the documentation of the artifact. The artifact was subsequently sold to another person, and he reaffirmed permission for research and publication involving the painted stone.

We became involved in the research and documentation. Much was added to the record of the stone by the drawings of Richard McReynolds.

Contexts

The discovery took place within what was the southern end of 41ME147 (Figure 1). This portion of that site was designated as 41ME274. This part of the site was on another property and separated from 41ME147 by FM 462. Participants in the 2010,

2011, and 2013 Texas Archeological Society’s field school (cf. Hester 2011, 2013) will recall the Texas Historical Marker for the “Cow Camp Massacre” standing in the right of way opposite the entry to the Eagle Bluff Ranch, and the excavations noted here took place to the east of that marker. Like 41ME147, 41ME274 was on the north side of Hondo Creek, but in a much thinner terrace deposit.

These excavations in early summer 2016 were non-scientific in nature, organized on a commercial basis for both “machine and screen” and hand-digging. It must be emphasized that the discoverer and his colleagues were very open to sharing information about how the painted stone was found as well as providing many other details (Hester 2020).

Based on these accounts, the painted stone was found while digging in a near-surface midden deposit containing Late Prehistoric artifacts. Indeed, Hester was told that Edwards arrow points were found around and near the painted stone in the midden. The painted stone was discovered “face down” and when exposed, this side had a rich set of red motifs (Figure 2). The upper side had also been painted but perhaps some of that was lost while it lay in the midden, or it had not been painted as extensively as the opposite face.

Photographs taken by the participants in the dig made it clear that the drying of the surface and exposure to the sun was dimming some of the vivid painted designs. It was subsequently better protected, and the person who bought it was advised to follow

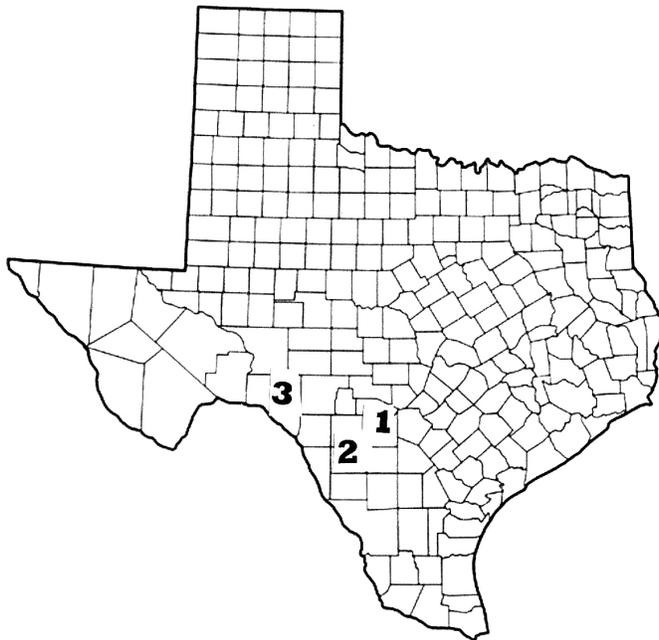


Figure 1. Map of Texas: 1, 41ME274; 2, northern Zavala County; 3, Lower Pecos, general location.

conservation procedures provided to Hester by Dr. Jessica Johnson, Head of Conservation at the Smithsonian Institution (email of August 7, 2016).

Descriptive Notes

The Painted Stone

The painted stone (Figure 3) is made on a cherty limestone cobble (as defined geologically). It has been modified around the sides, in the form of heavy smoothing. The basal edge of the heavily painted front (which was found face down) has been extensively smoothed, and a beveled edge created. It is also possible that the entire painted surface had been smoothed, before red paint was used to execute the motifs.

The overall length of the painted stone is 22 cm and the maximum width is 12.6 cm. In the central part of the stone, thickness was 7.5 cm. In orienting the artifact, we labeled the wide end as “proximal” (the base) and the opposite end as “distal.” The proximal width is 9 cm and at the proximal end it is 4 cm.

A description of the patterns seen on the front painted face of the stone is a fairly subjective matter, and so the careful drawing by McReynolds are



Figure 2. Painted stone from 41ME274, shown just after discovery. Note the deep red paint surviving over much of the stone.

provided for other opinions (see Figure 3). Most notable are the several largely parallel intertwined (“rope” or “chain”) lines, several that seem to have extended the full length of the stone. However, other intertwined lines are much shorter, and were executed at different angles. Triangle-like or chevron motifs are seen on the left edge, but less so on the right. There are also some short straight lines on the left edge. Portions, some eroded, of intertwined motifs are seen, some quite dimly. At the central part of the proximal end is a circle, with two angled lines to the right.

Running through about two-thirds of the face are two straight parallel lines, with a series of seven red dots; below these, three somewhat larger dots are perpendicular to the overall parallel line motif. Two long straight lines extend from (possibly) both of the parallel lines and toward the sides of the piece.

At the bottom of the painted stone, a small part of the basal left corner is missing. Two other chips are

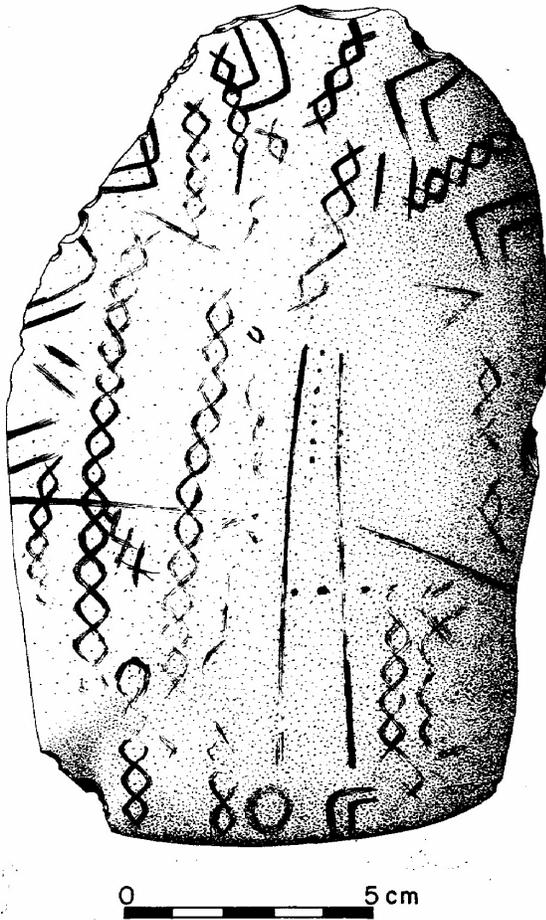


Figure 3. Painted stone from 41ME274. The front face, found lying face down in the midden. All painting is in red. Drawing by Richard L. McReynolds.

seen about midway up the right edge. McReynolds also noted several tiny recent chips, probably caused by the impact of digging tools.

On the reverse (back) side of the painted stone, only a few elements are shown, again painted in red (Figure 4). A line or series of 19 dots is just above the base, and paralleling it. Additional dots may be missing, due to erosion. There are four sets of parallel lines vertical to the base. Three sets have two short lines, and one set has three longer lines.

Comparisons with South Texas Painted Pebbles

Of great interest, in terms of seemingly shared motifs, is one of several painted pebbles recorded by

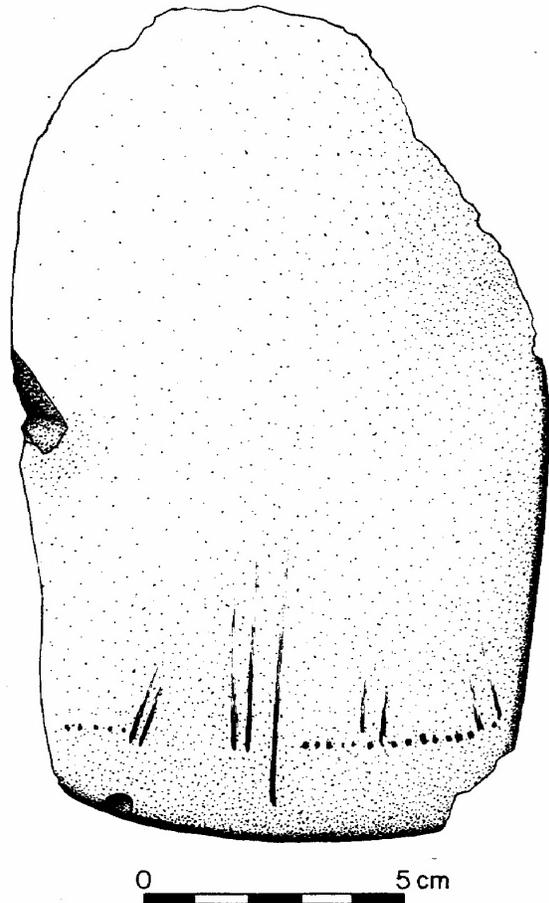


Figure 4. Painted stone from 41ME274. This is the reverse (back). Drawing by Richard L. McReynolds.

H. Ray Smith and Hester in plowed fields in northern Zavala County, as well as at a ranch in the same area. The painted pebble discussed here (Figure 5) was found by the late Elmo Jones on a ranch near Mustang Creek, in northern Zavala County, about 50 miles southwest of 41ME274. Another separate painted pebble was found in the same area by Hester (1977), after it was kicked by cattle using a trail leading down a terrace overlooking the Nueces River.

The painted pebble (see Figure 5) was made on a pebble of limy chert. It is 9.4 cm long, 6.7 cm wide, and 4.0 cm thick. Both sides of the pebble had motifs painted in red, namely feathered parallel intertwined lines, very similar to the painted stone from 41ME274. The intertwining (or chains) seems to show three elements, rather than two as on the painted stone.

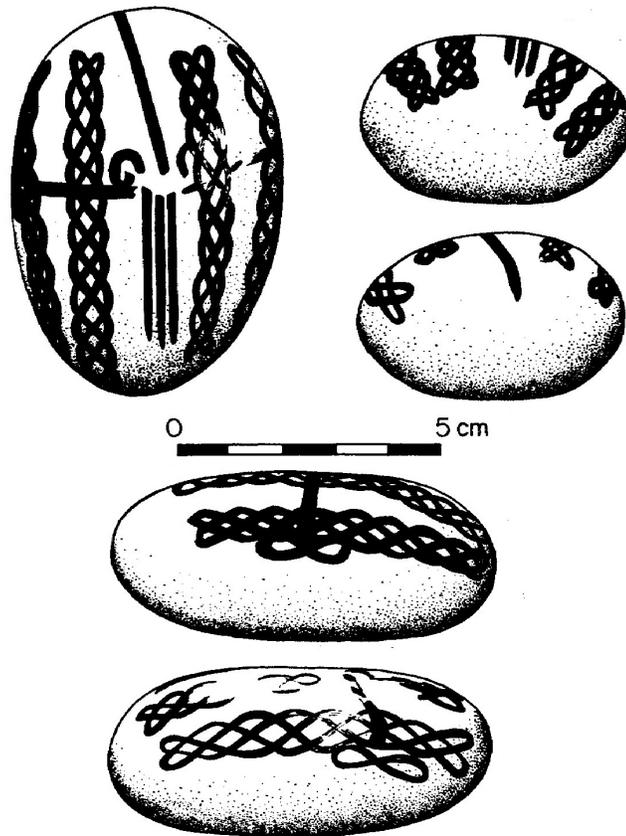


Figure 5. Painted pebble from northern Zavala County. All motifs are painted red. Several views are shown in this drawing by Richard L. McReynolds.

Incised Stone from 41ME274

An incised stone was also found at 41ME274 very near the painted stone (Figure 6). It is not a pebble, but a rather rough-edged, rectangular, piece of dark limestone. It is 10.4 cm long and 7.6 cm in maximum width. At the wide end, it is 8.5 cm thick, and at the narrow end 4.3 cm. The top, incised side, of this specimen is slightly convex and the reverse side is flat, bearing only some very fine cross-hatched incised lines.

The top surface of this artifact is extensively incised, featuring parallel intertwined lines, as on the painted stone. There are also three parallel wavy lines running down the center; we use the term “wavy” as these lines do not seem as sharply delimited as the “zigzag” lines noted on Style 4 of Parsons (1986:183) Lower Pecos painted pebbles. There are also two lines with connected diamond-shaped motifs (possibly a variant of the intertwined loops or “chains” on both edges). Five sets of two parallel straight lines

run across this surface, and another set is perpendicular on one, or possibly both sides. Other isolated motifs can also be seen in Figure 6.

In addition to the similarities in motifs with the painted stone, the incised stone has a motif of rounded-corner rectanguloid shape (15 mm wide), with a line running lengthwise within it, and parallel to the two long sides of the rectangle. There is also a notable deeply incised line that almost divides the specimen, running through the middle of the rectanguloid outline. This line is analogous to the “vertical bisecting element” shown in Parsons’ (1986:184) Style 6 Lower Pecos pebble group. Finally, the rectanguloid motif was incised on a distinct, slightly raised area.

Towards an Understanding of the Artifacts from 41ME274

It is perhaps premature to speculate on the “meaning” of this painted stone and the very small

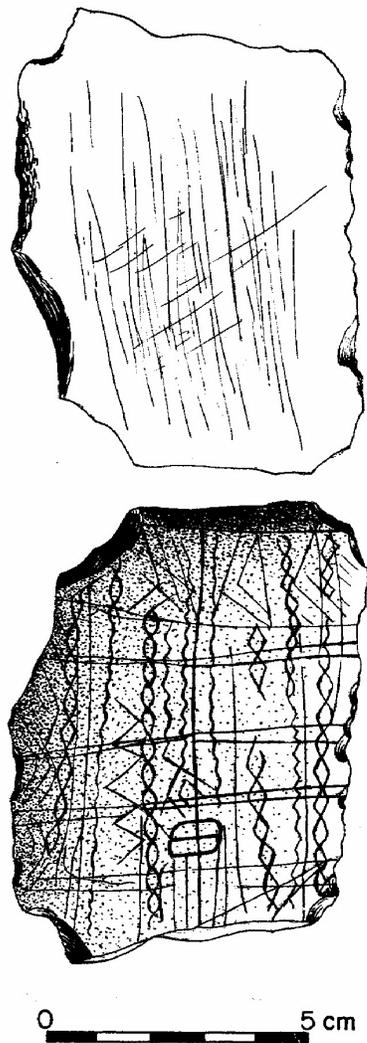


Figure 6. Both sides of the incised stone are shown. The artifact was found near the painted stone. Drawing by Richard L. McReynolds.

sample of painted pebbles from southern Texas. A number of researchers, working with the vast numbers of Lower Pecos painted pebbles, have interpreted them as “anthropomorphic,” with certain elements and motifs representing parts of the human body (Parsons 1986; Mock 1987; Elton Prewitt, personal communication, January 22, 2020). Even pioneers of painted pebble research, such as Davenport and Chelf (1941) and later, Kirkland and Newcomb (1967:108), held the belief that many of the painted pebbles were anthropomorphic in nature.

In reviewing the artifacts described in this article, it seems to us that the incised stone has certain

features that could argue that it represents a female human figure. For example, the unusual motif, situated on its raised location, may be of interpretative value or speculation. In many of the Upper Paleolithic “Venus” figurines, the area of female genitalia, or pudenda, is distinctly raised (Rice 1981). The incised stone, unlike the painted stone, has more or less repeated motifs on either side of the deeply engraved line, running through the middle of this raised spot. The wavy lines nearest the lateral edges also serve to set off the middle part of the incised site. One could speculate that this is a representation of a female, by the interpretation of similar motifs as found in research on Lower Pecos painted pebbles that are described as female genitalia (Mock 1987; Elton Prewitt, personal communication, January 21, 2020). Similarly, clay figurines from the Lower Pecos also depict female genitalia. One in particular has similarities to the pudenda inferred for the incised stone (Chandler et al. 1994:348-349).

It may well be that the painted stone displays some motifs that support the same line of thought. In the email noted above from Elton Prewitt, he believes that this artifact has elements supporting an anthropomorphic interpretation. For example, nested chevrons near the distal end (or top) may be symbols for human eyes. Prewitt also suggests that the vertical parallel lines in the central part of the painted stone are a human figure, as do other motifs in Prewitt’s view. It is his opinion that the painted stone falls within the Style 3 painted pebble form defined by Parsons (1986:182-183). From our perspective, we see some shared motifs with that style, but others are not found in Parsons’ depictions of Style 3.

We are quite limited in other areas of functional interpretation by the absence of contextual information. What we know is the temporal context in that the two artifacts from 41ME274 were found in close proximity to one another, and that they date to early Late Prehistoric (Edwards) times, from ca. A.D. 950-1100.

If the painted stone and the incised specimen are indeed anthropomorphs, we argue that they served essentially as figurines. In essence, they may be placed in the same classes of portable art found in the American Southwest and Mesoamerica in the form of clay, wood, stone, or fiber figurines. Lower Pecos painted pebbles, some scholars (Mock 1987, 2013) believe, were associated with women’s roles and were used in curing rituals. However, if we look at the broader function of figurines, other roles may be considered.

The large painted stone with its obviously altered shape was patiently crafted and carefully painted in detail on at least one side. It was not a short-term, hasty, creation. The upper (back) surface may have been more extensively painted, but if so, has not withstood the ravages of time. The details of the heavily painted surface do provide comparative information, as Elton Prewitt has suggested. With the intensive effort in its preparation, we wonder if it (along with the incised stone) might have been part of a “medicine bundle” or a ritual assemblage of some sort. There is some contextual information available for the painted pebbles and figurines from the Lower Pecos region. A cache of clay figurines from Hinds Cave (Shafer 1974, 1975), and a cache of three painted pebbles from Bonfire Shelter (Dibble and Lorrain 1968:62), suggest that both of these kinds of portable art reflect the careful placement of selected specimens, whether in play or in rites. The vast majority of painted pebbles and clay figurines are, however, recovered from midden or rubbish deposits.

We know very little about the placement of the painted stone and the incised stone at 41ME274. But with the shared designs and unique nature of the two being found rather closely together, it is possible that they were part of the same ritual deposit, which was disturbed by non-scientific digging and thus lost its contextual meaning.

Though at least one of the more “traditional” painted pebbles from Zavala County shares design motifs with the painted stone, it is clear that the others Smith and Hester have recorded do not fall into this category. All were found as isolated specimens at several sites. We do not see anthropomorphic elements in these other stones and can only say that they all are painted red, and that designs on some are minimal (but well executed). Their age is unknown, and it is impossible to say if they were part of the same cultural or ritual link as the painted stone from 41ME274.

Assuming that anthropomorphic painted pebbles could have functioned as figurines, we very briefly note the number of functions in non-literate societies. Some represented humans, deities, ritual episodes, or animals used in various roles in curing, as amulets, or even as dolls. Kachina figures (dolls) served to inform and educate children regarding the spiritual realm (Adams 1991).

It is thus unfortunate that these portable art objects from 41ME274 were found in uncontrolled conditions, without specific functional context. We can only speculate, of course, as to their function

they served for peoples living in early Late Prehistoric South Central Texas times. They might have had ritual purposes, such as divining, educational storytelling, female fertility, or healing.

References Cited

- Adams, E. C.
1991 *The Origin and Development of the Pueblo Katsina Cult*. University of Arizona Press, Tucson.
- Chandler, C. K., T. R. Hester, and H. J. Shafer
1994 New Data on Clay Figurines from the Lower Pecos Area, Texas. *Bulletin of the Texas Archeological Society* 65:347-353.
- Davenport, J. W. and C. Chelf
1941 *Painted Pebbles from the Lower Pecos and Big Bend Regions of Texas*. Bulletin 5. Witte Memorial Museum, San Antonio, Texas.
- Dibble, D. S. and D. Lorrain
1968 *Bonfire Shelter: A Stratified Bison Kill Site, Val Verde County, Texas*. Miscellaneous Papers No. 1. Texas Memorial Museum, The University of Texas at Austin.
- Hester, T. R.
1977 A Painted Pebble from a Site on the Nueces River, Southern Texas. *Bulletin of the Texas Archeological Society* 48:139-144.
2020 A Future for Texas Archaeology? Thoughts and Suggestions. *Bulletin of the Texas Archeological Society* 90:197-202.
- Hester, T. R. (assembler)
2011 A Summary of the 2011 Texas Archeological Society Field School. *Texas Archeology, Newsletter of the Texas Archeological Society* 55(4):1, 3-11.
2013 Archaeology at Eagle Bluff (41ME147) and Other Studies; the 2013 TAS Field School, Hondo. *Texas Archeology, Newsletter of the Texas Archeological Society* 57(4):6-14.
- Kirkland, F. and W. W. Newcomb, Jr.
1967 *The Rock Art of Texas Indians*. University of Texas Press, Austin.

Mock, S. B.

1987 The Painted Pebbles of the Lower Pecos; A Study of Medium, Form and Context. Master's thesis, Department of Anthropology, The University of Texas at San Antonio.

2013 Painted Pebbles: Lower Pecos Women Take Charge. In, *Painters in Prehistory, Archaeology and Art of the Lower Pecos Canyonlands*, edited by H. J. Shafer, pp. 223-250. Trinity University Press, San Antonio.

Parsons, M. L

1987 Painted Pebbles: Styles and Chronology. In *Ancient Texans, Rock Art and Lifeways Along the Lower Pecos*, edited by H. J. Shafer, pp. 180-185. Texas Monthly Press, Austin.

Rice, P. M.

1981 Prehistoric Venuses, Symbols of Motherhood or Womanhood. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 37(4):402-444.

Shafer, H. J.

1974 A Clay Figurine Cache from the Lower Pecos Region of Texas. *Plains Anthropologist* 19(65):228-230.

1975 Clay Figurines from the Lower Pecos Region, Texas. *American Antiquity* 40:145-158,

Disclaimer:

This article is reprinted from volume 91, Bulletin of the Texas Archeological Society, with the written permission of the Texas Archeological Society, and the Editor of the Bulletin (c) 2020. Texas Archeological Society may not be reproduced in whole or in part without the permission of the Texas Archeological Society.