

SACRED RAIN-ROCKS OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

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An inspection of the published works on California Indian ethnology shows that in most areas of the state shamans were credited with the power of weather control. They professed to be able to cause rain or to coerce the elemental powers to stop rain. Various material objects figure in the paraphernalia which rain shamans employ, but it is not my intention to detail these here.

In the area where the distinctive Northwestern California type of civilization prevailed practitioners of magic were, in Indian belief, able to influence precipitation almost at will. Driver (1939, p. 364) cites data showing that the following tribes associate rain-making with actions performed at particular rocks or boulders: Tolowa, Karok and Hupa. The Yurok of the lower Klamath River, although neighbors of both the Hupa and Tolowa, seem to have made rain by means of a spoken magical formula (Driver, 1939, p. 364).

Hupa rain-making is described by Goddard as follows: "At the fishing place in Sugar Bowl valley, [south of Hoopa Valley proper] is a boulder not over four feet in diameter and not at all conspicuous. This is called by white people the rain-rock. The Hupa call it *mī* or *kenūxoitse*, "Thunder's Rock." By this rock dwells a spirit who sends frost when he is displeased, prolongs the rainy season, and brings on drought. When hard frosts or unusual sickness occur it is thought some one mourning the loss of a relative has passed by on the road above and displeased the *mī*. Some one of the *Medildiñ* division who knows the "medicine" gives notice of a feast. All are expected to attend, although few do so now-a-days. They leave their homes in the morning without breaking their fast and collect at the southern end of the valley. Just north of Campbell creek above the road they build a fire on a rock. On top of the mountain where the wagon road crosses a mining ditch they build a second fire. By the rain-rock the last fire is built. The food for the feast is cooked over this fire and all the remains of the feast are burned in it. The priest makes a prayer for warm winds and gentle rain to melt the frost, while sprinkling the rock with water in which incense root [*Leptotaenia Californica*] has been put. If cessation of undue rain is wished the root is sprinkled on the rock dry. The one who has offended is expected to attend and make public apology for his wrong-doing in passing near the god's dwelling in such unholy condition.

There are many venerated stones on the east bank of the river between *Tsewenaldiñ* and *TakimiIdiñ*. Some of these stand in rows, while others lie scattered about. They are called *Tcexōltcwe*, "story people." One account says they were placed there by the *TakimiIdiñ* man who went to the home of *Kixunai* and established the Jumping Dance and the acorn feast on his return. He placed them there that they might conform to the arrangement in the world of the *Kixunai*. They are to watch the acorn feast. When

frosts come in the fall some one from the TakimiLdiñ division, a man or a virgin, takes a basket of water with incense root and washes all these stones, praying, as he does it, that gentle rain may come and that the frost may go away. The Chinese miners made a ditch beside these stones and removed some of them. One of these, the Indians say, looked like a woman with a baby on her lap. They add that the Chinaman bled to death soon after he removed this stone,"

Driver (1939, p. 364) verifies Goddard's more lengthy account. Goddard (1904, texts XXIII, XXVIII) gives two Hupa weather-making formulae and their translations.

Tolowa rain-rocks occurred, but details about them are lacking. Driver (1937, pp. 364, 421) records that any person can stop or produce rain by pointing at a rain-rock, and Drucker (1937, p. 229) mentions two rocks which were used to produce storms by reciting the proper formula and throwing pebbles at them.

Karok rain-rocks are mentioned but not described by Driver (1939, pp. 364, 421). Shamans trained at a certain rock near Katimin, and "ultimately make rain by singing there." Voegelin (1942, p. 247) notes that the Karok pay the person who makes rain, thus implying that intentional rain-making is practiced.

The Shasta also had rain-rocks. What is mentioned by Dixon (1907, p. 449) as a boulder petroglyph can now be identified as a rain-rock. Dixon says, "At Gottville, on the Klamath River, there was formerly a large boulder, on which were cut or scratched, according to the various accounts, many figures. Some are said to have resembled bear's feet; and others are described as 'like hieroglyphics,' whatever that may mean. A local photographer once took several negatives of the rock, which is well remembered by some of the older settlers; but not the slightest trace of these can now be found. Search for the boulder itself has also proved unavailing, as it had probably been either washed down by the river, or at least turned over and partially buried by debris, during a period of unusually high water which occurred a few years ago."

The Gottville boulder came again to light in April, 1948 during the bulldozing of the highway along the Klamath River. The boulder was shallowly buried in recent alluvium on the edge of a large archaeological site at the mouth of Lumgrey Creek in the SE 1/4 of the NE 1/4 of Sec. 2, T. 46 N, R. 8W. (UCAS site Sis-183). It was immediately recognized as an Indian artifact, and shortly afterwards identified as a rain-rock by local natives and removed to its present location as an exhibit at the Fort Jones Historical Museum. After it was brought to Fort Jones a Shasta Indian stated to Mr. W.T. Davidson, County Supervisor, that the rock had been used in the First Salmon ceremony ¹ since time immemorial until early January, 1890. In the fall of 1889 the salmon run was extremely late due to deficient rain and low water in the Klamath River, and the rock was "uncovered" (apparently it was ordinarily kept covered to prevent rain) and a very great rain followed. According to the Indian, the rock had remained covered until the highway crew uncovered it in 1948, some 59 years later. ² It was, at any rate, covered in 1904 when Dixon worked among the Shasta.

The practical certainty that the "petroglyph" mentioned by Dixon is the one now at Fort Jones derives from both its location and the engraved "bear's feet" on the rock.

Information was gathered by James Bennyhoff and Albert Elsasser of the UCAS staff from local Caucasians who had heard stories about the Gottville rock from the Indians. The rock, which is of tan-colored low grade soapstone or talc, was scratched, presumably with a hard, pointed stone. A white dust or powder was thus produced. If the series of long straight parallel grooves were scratched snow would fall, and to stop a snowstorm a scratch was made across (i.e., at right angles to) the parallel grooves. The shallow conical pits were made to produce wind and rain, and the rock, as intimated above, was covered to stop the rain.

The Gottville rain-rock measures 62 inches long, 43 inches wide and stands 27 inches high. It weighs almost exactly two tons. The upper surface, as may be seen in Pl. 2a is covered with a large number of shallow conical pits and short grooves. One side, also with pittings, is dominated by a series of four deep vertical grooves which are presumably those connected with snow (Pl. 2c). On one end, and clearly visible in the photographs (Pl. 2a, b), are the bear's feet. These are incised, and have 5 toes and two or three lines running across the sole area. There are 6 of these which occur in 3 pairs. One pair is large, the individual prints measuring 6 inches wide and 8 inches long; the others are smaller, measuring 3.5 by 5 inches. What is most remarkable about these is the fact that they are clearly naturalistic, and as such are the only known instance of representative inscriptions from this area. Petroglyphs, in fact, are extremely rare from the Klamath River area, the only recorded instance of pecked designs being that in Steward (1929, p. 57, Pl. 22b) referring to a boulder on the river's edge two miles below the mouth of the Trinity River. This site is called by the Yurok aate'mr had'g "writing rock" or "marks picture" and is located and described by Waterman (1920, p. 257, locality No. 10). The Indians claim that the simple geometric figures (6-pointed star, zigzag, spurred line) are the source and origin of all basket designs.

Several pitted stones similar to the Gottville rain-rock, and locally believed to have served the same purpose, have been recorded. Imbedded in the north wall of the Fort Jones Museum is a boulder of brown talc (Pl. 2d) containing about a dozen and a half conical pits. This stone, of indeterminate thickness, measures 32 by 20 inches. It was collected on the north slope of Scott Canyon in a small meadow on the old Lighthill Ranch (UCAS site Sis-176). Four other brown soft talc rain-rocks remain here. They vary in size (56 inches long by 27 inches wide by 20 inches high; 23 by 26 by 27 inches; 40 by 43 by 10 inches; 36 by 34 by 22 inches) and in the number and size of conical pits. Some have short incised grooves. These rocks lie scattered on the slope to the east of the midden area.

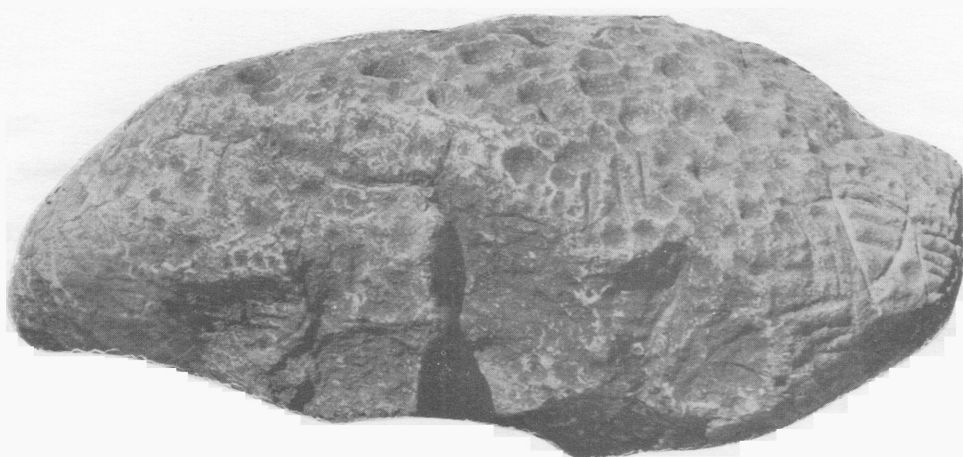
Stones of similar mineralogy, and bearing incised grooves and pits occur abundantly in territory occupied by the Pomo Indians. These are generally referred to by Indians as "baby rocks," and were resorted to by women desirous of conceiving children. Accounts of such baby rocks are given by Barrett (1952b, pp. 385-387), and illustrations of several are shown by Steward (1929, Pl. 22d), and Barrett (1952a, Pl. 20). Data on

these and other rocks embellished with grooves and pits from the Pomo area are contained in the UCAS files concerning sites from Lake, Mendocino, and Sonoma counties, viz: Lak-28,-29,-30,-32,-34,-124,-125,-139,-143,-145,-161,-162; Men-433,-438,-441,-442,-484,-511; Son-268,-269,-373. Mr. Henry Mauldin of Lakeport has recently deposited with the UCAS an extensive site survey of Lake County, and in his records are those of several serpentine rocks covered with grooves and pits. We take this occasion to express to Mr. Mauldin our appreciation for his generous contribution to the central site record file.

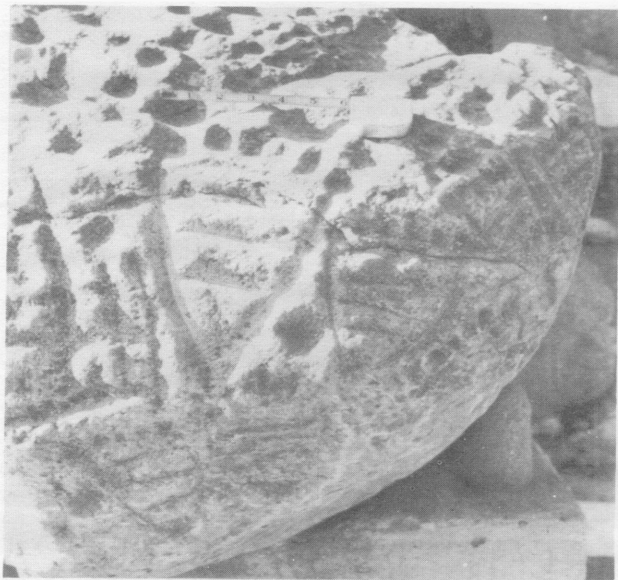
Whether the Klamath River and Pomo area talc and steatite boulders which are similarly engraved are both parts of the same complex of petroglyphy cannot be decided with the evidence at hand. A particular feature of Northwestern California is the supernatural importance of stones or boulders both in rituals³ and as minor geographical features to which some story is attached.⁴ That the Pomo share this habit of attributing supernatural significance to miscellaneous detached rocks with equal intensity may be doubted. At any rate, since we could only speculate without any conclusion on the culture historical significance of similarly marked talc boulders in these two non-contiguous areas, such theorizing had best be omitted.⁵

EXPLANATION OF PLATE 2

- a. The Gottville rainrock now at Fort Jones Museum. Note "bear paws" at right end, grooves and cupped pits. Length, 5 feet.
- b. Detail of "bear paws".
- c. Long and deep grooves which were scratched to cause snow to fall.
- d. Rain rock from site Sis-176, now at Fort Jones Museum.
- e. Cupped and grooved soapstone boulder from Lake County (UCAS site Lak-34).



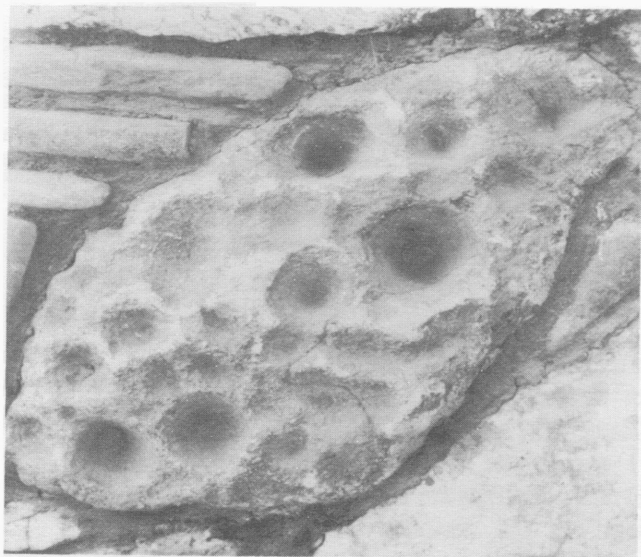
a



b



c



d



e

NOTES

1. For the First Salmon ceremony see Kroeber and Gifford, 1949.
2. Information, in part, from newspaper accounts (see Sacramento Bee, May 19, 1948). The great Klamath River flood of late 1889 and early 1890, according to a quasi-historical account by Graves (1929, pp. 68-76), was caused by an Indian, Big Ike (probably a Karok) who made rain for the placer miners working the auriferous terrace gravels of the Klamath River. Big Ike went to "Medicine Rock" (unidentifiable, but because a small cave is mentioned, probably a sacred outcrop along the river) and made the rain, but difficulty arose because a miner refused to pay Ike his share and insulted him. Ike then made it rain harder and longer to avenge the insult. The story sounds as though it has a kernel of truth -- perhaps the identification of the rain-maker, the location of his activity, and the great 1889-90 flood. Beyond this, fact probably does not go, Big Ike's anger and intentional causing of the flood being local folkloristic embroidery. Graves' book, while well-intentioned, is a Caucasian's second-telling of local events and "lore." It does not, for example, rise to the level of Lucy Thompson's To The American Indian (Eureka, 1916) a Yurok's account of the Yurok.

As detailed in the body of this paper, the 1889-1890 flood is alternatively attributed to the intentional uncovering of the Gottville rain rock, now at Fort Jones Museum. It would appear that great floods do not simply happen -- they are due to human interference in the minds of the Indians.

3. This can be readily verified by reading Kroeber and Gifford, 1949.
4. On this see Waterman, 1920, passim.
5. For the benefit of future students, it should be pointed out that in Karok territory there are large steatite boulders which have pitted surfaces resulting from the working out of material for pipe bowls (Harrington, 1932, pp. 151-154). Harrington (1932, Pls. 31-32) illustrates such boulders at Katimin and Sihtirikusam in Yurok country. Externally these appear rather similar to the pitted rain rocks from Shasta territory. The Shasta area rock, however, is quite obviously of too poor grade to use as pipe bowls.

Spier (1930, p. 21) describes holes in the rocks at Squaw Point on Klamath Lake, Oregon, in which the Klamath pounded in order "to make the wind blow." Here again is the generic trait of holes in stones connected with weather control.

Boulders covered with hundreds of small conical pits are reported elsewhere, but there is no hint that they functioned in a context of weather control. There is one, locally called the "Indian Map Rock" near Richardson Springs in Butte County (UCAS site But-8), and a similar one about 20 miles east of Farmington in Stanislaus County (UCAS site Sta-44). In western Nevada about 10 miles southeast of Fallon is a series of pitted boulders (UCAS records; this is Steward's (1929, p. 143) site No. 207, but is very incompletely documented and illustrated by him). From further north in the state of Washington, stones with small cupped depressions are illustrated by Strong, Schenck and Steward (1930, Pl. 27).

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