Evolution of Banner-stones

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The skillfully carved relics of the mound building people show a remarkable workmanship and display an art and a simplicity of design surprisingly similar to the so-called "modern art" of today. Most of these relics can be definitely classified and their uses determined, yet there are problematical forms that can not be connected with any practical use. Banner-stones come under this heading. There is no doubt but that they were of vital importance to the Indians for their range of distribution indicates that they were very widely adopted tribal or ceremonial symbols.

I shall advance a few observations which lead me to believe that banner-stones had their origin in the southern states and which may help to prove that the southern states were the first area east of the Mississippi River to be occupied by the Indians. First may be cited the stone and copper relics, found in scattered sections of these southern states, that are typical of Mexican cultures and that were evidently carried into this area by migratory Indians from Mexico. Second is the fact that so many simple shaped banner-stones are found in Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. Or, to state it differently, in tracing banner-stones back through their "blending forms" to the simple forms from which they were developed, we are led back to this particular area.

It seems evident that the origin of all banner-stones began in the simple perforation of water-worn pebbles. Some of the early specimens show no attempt to alter the shape of the pebble, others show a slight amount of work but only to true up the shape. As the use of banner-stones became more popular, the Indians began to work the pebbles down into shapes that were more attractive, and from a few simple designs all banner-stones of the culture were developed.

As the southern tribes migrated in different directions they left a trail of scattered specimens in the territories that they occupied. These specimens not only establish a means of tracing their origin and evolution, but also establish, fairly well, the migratory routes of the Indians from the southern area.

Some writers have advanced the theory that the crescent shaped banner-stones so common throughout the New England states originated as effigies of the tail of the whale. As a matter of fact, crescent-shaped banner-stones of granite also occur in the lower Ohio and Mississippi

Valleys, too far from the seaboard for such an origin. To consider them as symbolic of the moon would be more reasonable. It is more logical to consider the crescent-shaped banner-stones from these two widely separated areas as having all been derived from the early crescent shapes which originated in Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. Their separate occurrence thus may well represent two northward migrations from a common center, one along the Atlantic coast and the other into the lower Mississippi Valley and hence gradually into the lower Ohio River valley.

I have come to the conclusion that the specimens of bannerstones showing the highest stage of development in design should be referred to as "types"; all other specimens that lead up to the "types" are referred to as "blending forms".

My entire theory of the evolution of types and the means whereby the varied shapes of banner-stones can be classified is based wholly on the similarity of lines and planes. On this basis there are but 24 distinct classes that developed 32 "types," which can be classified by certain characteristics. This number includes four new types that, as far as I know, have never been named or described in any book. Many other specimens may appear to be independent but are not and merely belong to some particular class in which they are but blending forms that establish the evolution of some type. Of course further research may uncover other authentic types which should be added to this list.

The highly specialized types of the 24 classes developed from approximately eight "primary" forms that, in turn, were developed from simple perforated pebbles. A dozen or more specimens can be arranged to form the blending series of many classes of banner-stones. For purposes of classification I have divided the blending series into three classes, called "A", "B", and "C" classes, or the A, B, C system. "A" class designates the simplest forms; "B" class designates the blending forms that show the evolution of types; and "C" class designates the type specimens.

From the constructional angle there are but two groups of banner-stones, the "bi-faced" and the "single-faced" groups. All bi-pennate, or winged, specimens belong to the "bi-faced" group. Their lines and planes are symmetrically balanced. The wings, extending from each side of the hole, are the same in outline, with both sides of the same construction, and double-faced or "bi-faced".

Single-faced banner-stones are those that are not symmetrical in lines or balance, but are constructed in such a manner that one side is of one shaped plane while the other side is entirely different. For example, consider the "hour-glass" banner-stone. The one side is a flattened plane and the other side is shaped to a sharp ridge, giving this side of the stone two planes. The flattened plane may be called

the "back". The ridged side, with the two planes, may be called the "face". The fact that these shapes have but one face places them in the "single-faced" group.

In my opinion, the so-called "saddle-back" types were wrongly named years ago. According to my method for naming the planes, the flat plane of these particular specimens is the "back", the ridged or "saddle" surface is the "face". On this basis they should be called not "saddle-back" but "saddle-faced" banner-stones.

The foregoing conclusions have been reached after exhaustive study of many large collections and are based on facts. The courteous and helpful cooperation of the museums, universities, and private collectors over the country has aided me materially by allowing me to study many specimens and hundreds of fine photographs.