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A Pigment Processing Slab from La Crozo de Gentillo (or La Grotte de Combe-Cullier), Commune de Lacave*

By Sophie A. De Beaune, Translated by Randall White

The Sandstone Plaquette

In the first publication on the site, Vire (1908: 416) mentions 10 fragments of fine and hard-grained sandstone probably from the Brive area. The largest piece measured 10 x 7 x 2 cm. They all had surfaces polished by use and, in some cases, sloped toward the center. We assume that the plaquette presented here (and the two others originally acquired by Beloit College) was part of this group of objects. We have no knowledge as to the whereabouts of the remainder of the plaquettes or the limestone grinding stones also mentioned by Vire.

This iron-rich sandstone plaquette, broken in two fragments, was glued back together. It exhibits two other ancient fracture surfaces, which seem to predate the traces of use. The plaquette measures 96.4 x 70.3 mm in its current state, and its maximum thickness is 28.8 mm.

The entire plaquette is coated with red ochre (Figure 2a). The upper surface, perfectly flat, shows numerous traces of scraping easily visible to the naked eye and under the binocular microscope. These stigmata are oriented parallel and oblique to the long axis, which implies that the object was used in a more-or-less constant position. In addition, the plaquette shows some impact scars, most abundant near the middle of the upper surface. These scars were created by a direct, localized blow (Figure 1). The opposing face seems not to have been employed in the same way, but it is missing a fragment and, unfortunately, the part that remains intact has been coated with a deposit of glue, thereby obscuring any traces of use (Figure 2b).

Was this implement used in an active or a passive fashion? Its size does not help us much, being perfectly compatible with use as a working platform or with use as a hand-held, mechanically active implement. Its shape, and more specifically the flatness of its upper face, suggests active use. Normally, in the case of passive use, we expect to see a concave surface. The traces of pigment which penetrate every surface of the piece argue in favor of active use, since an immobile platform has a better chance of remaining pristine on its bottom surface than an object that can be rotated

in the hand, in this case perhaps a hand coated with pigment. The scrapes also suggest an active use, since their orientation corresponds very well to what we would expect of a hand-held implement, in which the longitudinal axis is always slightly oblique to arm movement.

Nevertheless, the impact scars distributed across the surface, but somewhat more abundant near the center of the

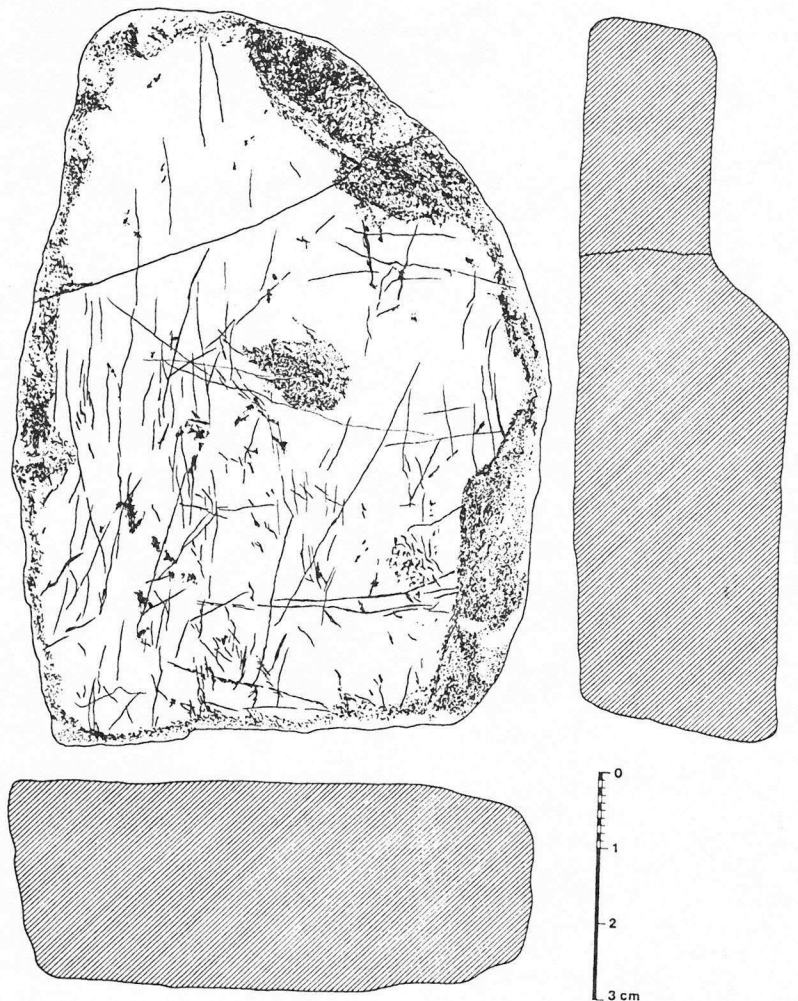


Figure 1. Sandstone Plaquette. Rendering of traces of impact and scraping visible on the upper surface. Longitudinal and transverse profiles of the plaquette are also illustrated. Drawing by S.A. de Beaune.

upper face could just as easily result from passive as active use. If they are related to the use of pigment, as one might imagine, they were perhaps created during the breaking down of pigment fragments, the plaquette serving as a passive platform for the application of a hard, pointed rock such as a hammerstone or a stone pick to reduce the pigment fragments.

One can also imagine the active application of the plaquette (percussion posée) as a mulling implement for treating a particular surface (wood, bone, hide, etc.) with pigment and being used secondarily as a kind of hammer (percussion lancee). This is in line with certain composite implements which combine the two types of percussion (de Beaune 1989).

The relative weight of arguments in favor of one or the other use of this plaquette permit us to conclude that this was an implement mainly used for spreading pigment, perhaps on solid but supple surfaces such as animal hides. In addition, the plaquette was occasionally used in forceful percussion, either as an active or passive element.

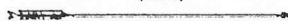
Mullers are well known in the Paleolithic, but never very abundant in a given site. There are several types: Circular or oval ones similar to those found among more recent agriculturalists; Globular pebbles often with intersecting wear-facets; Irregularly-shaped plaquettes, like the one described here, showing use on one or more of their surfaces; Cobbles with one or more of their extremities heavily worn, related to grinding stones when use striae are perpendicular to the long axis of the cobble. Elsewhere (de Beaune 1989) we have presented a preliminary classification of these implements.

Plaquettes of the type presented here, while not abundant, are found in a variety of sites. Their lack of abundance

is perhaps best explained by their irregular and largely unaltered form, which led to their neglect and abandonment during older excavations. As a result, they have seldom been published or even mentioned in the literature.

Small plaquettes covered with ochre are frequently noted,

(more)



A plaquette carrying accession number 12 527 and described as a "molette de ares rouge" is one of three such objects housed in the Logan Museum of Anthropology at Beloit College. We have been unable to locate the other two, but we know that one of the three was displayed in the Museum in 1954. The object studied here comes from the site of Crozo de Gentillo (or the Grotte de Combe-Cullier), commune de Lacave (Lot) and was sold to the Museum in June, 1926 by Armand Vire. The Logan Museum accession card indicates...that the object is Aurignacian.

[Subsequent analysis has determined that] the tool assemblage from this site can be attributed entirely to Magdalenian II to IV, and Lorblanchet notes that this is precisely the chronological position to which it was attributed successively by the Abbe Breuil, Denis Peyrony and A. Cheynier (Lorblanchet 1969: 259). Nevertheless, improvements in excavation techniques allowing for recovery of microliths, which were often passed over in older excavations, have led, in many cases, to a re-examination of assemblages traditionally attributed to Magdalenian II/III. This is especially true of recent findings at Reignac and Gare de Conze. Moreover, new excavations...have yielded two groups of levels, both of them attributable to a late Magdalenian without harpoons.

Thus, the question remains unresolved; and we still do not know if we are dealing with a middle Magdalenian or a special facies of the final Magdalenian. Just recently, Lorblanchet informed us that he still attributes the Combe-Cullier industry, as he did in 1969, to a Magdalenian with triangles, subsequent to the Magdalenian with raclettes but prior to the Magdalenian with harpoons. He added that Carbon 14 dating seemed to confirm this attribution as level 9 has now been dated to 15030 BP + 330, a date that corroborates the presence of Saiga antelope in the faunal assemblage.

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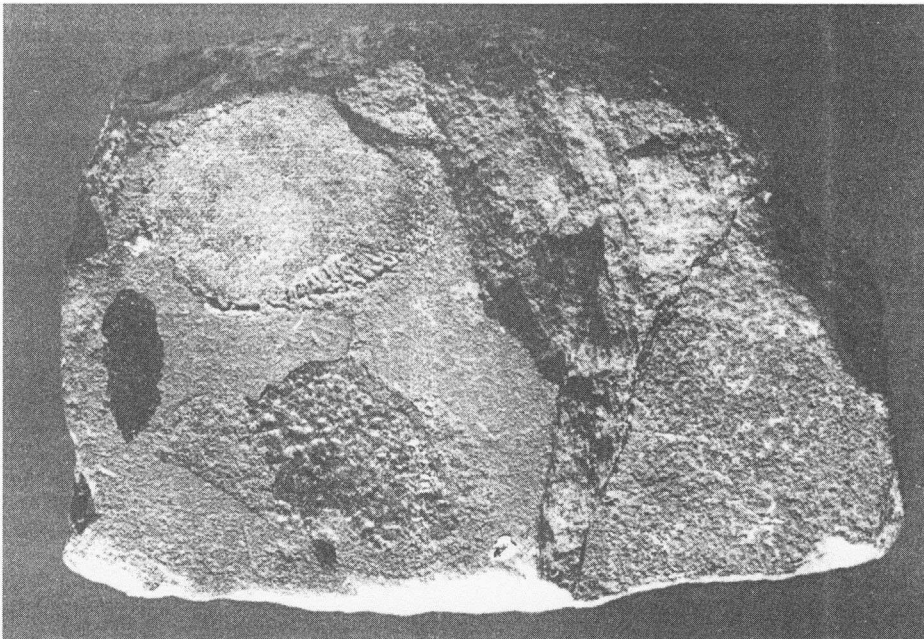
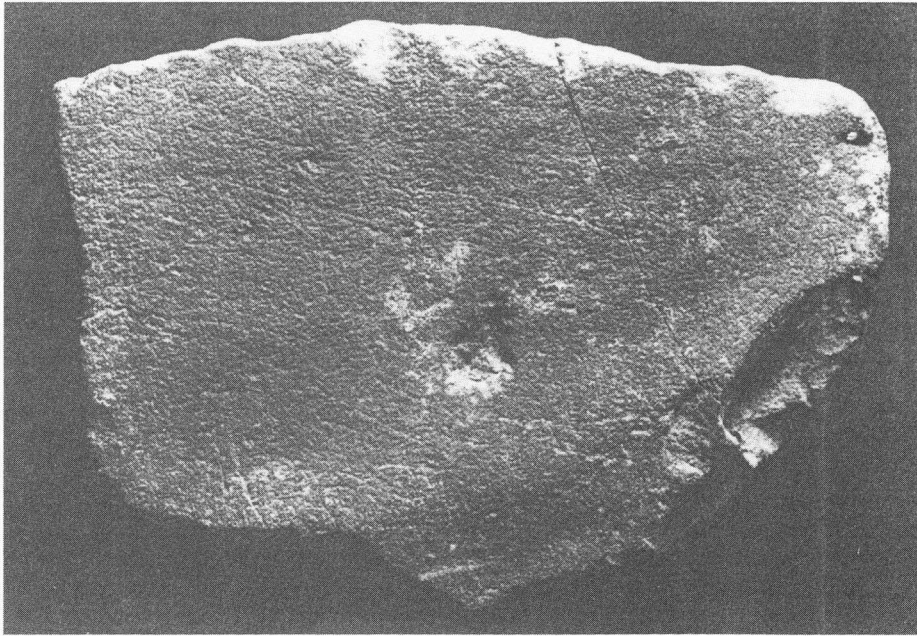


Figure 2. Sandstone Plaquette. Top and bottom surfaces. Traces of scraping and impact are visible on the upper surface, as is the ochre which impregnates the entire surface. Photo by R. White.

and we have seen many unpublished examples in public and private collections during previous research on Paleolithic lamps and bowl-like stone objects.

End Notes

1. I wish to thank Randall White, who gave permission

to study and publish this object (and who was kind enough to translate this article).

2. Since the present analysis was done, L. Matthews has located several more of these sandstone fragments, which had been misplaced at the Logan Museum. They will be studied and described in the near future.