



The New Albin Tablet



Many of the great discoveries in archaeology occur quite by accident. Such is the case of a pipestone tablet known today as the New Albin Tablet. In the summer of 1915, workmen were excavating a cellar under a house in New Albin, Iowa. This river town has been long known as an important site for early cultures along the Upper Mississippi River.

The sandy soil along the walls of the excavation gave way, revealing a red pipestone tablet with curious figures and inscribed surfaces. Little did the workers realize that one of the most important discoveries in the archaeology of northeast Iowa had literally fallen into their hands.

To understand the significance of the New Albin Tablet, one must understand the cultures of the Upper Mississippi River 750 years ago. Until shortly before contact with European explorers, the Oneota lived along the Great River. The terraces of the Upper Iowa River and Mississippi River near LaCrosse and Lake Pepin, Wisconsin, were centers for the Oneota tradition in the Upper Mississippi River Valley.

The Oneota lived in permanent villages where they grew corn, beans, and squash. Like earlier groups, the Oneota continued to gather food from the rivers and wetlands and to hunt. While no Oneota village sites have been located in Effigy Mounds National Monument, Oneota pottery,

triangular-shaped arrow points and pipes have been found along the river. Pipestone, or catlinite, is a soft stone, quarried in a site in present-day southwest Minnesota, that was carved into pipes and tablets. Today the site is preserved within Pipestone National Monument. The pipestone rock is a softer material sandwiched between layers of much harder quartzite. Sioux quartzite was named for the inhabitants of the site, while “catlinite” recognizes

one of the first Europeans to visit and paint scenes of the site in 1836, George Catlin. Pipestone was used by the historic plains and woodland tribes to make ceremonial pipes in the 19th century; a practice that continues today.

The inscribed images on the New Albin Tablet continue to be a source of both mystery and inspiration for those who study its shape and surfaces. Tablets of pipestone or catlinite were believed to be made by the Oneota to record images from the spirit world and other sacred symbols. Some archaeologists believe the tablets were used in ceremonies to ensure a successful harvest.

Following its discovery, the New Albin Tablet was purchased by R. H. Thompson, and later sold to Harry Orr. Harry Orr and his brother, Ellison, were two amateur archaeologists in northeast Iowa. In October of 1960, the tablet was donated to Effigy Mounds National Monument. It is only through the foresight of the Orr brothers that the New Albin Tablet is preserved today.

In 1937, Ellison Orr described the tablet as being “nearly pentagonal in shape” and having pictographs representing a “thunder god or spirit.” From the body of the image a zigzag line probably representing a bolt of lightning runs diagonally downward. On the reverse face of the stone, the central figure may represent a wand or flower while a lozenge-shaped figure resembles a lance or spearhead. Notches in the rim of the tablet may signify important events or ceremonies.

Much of the story of the New Albin Tablet is shrouded in mystery. Very likely, the pipestone tablet was of great spiritual significance to the early farming cultures along the river.

