

ARCHAEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL OF STANDING STONES IN EASTERN OHIO

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Introduction

Standing stones (often referred to as "tea tables") are prominent erosional features that are most often developed on sandstone bedrock deposits of uneven resistance to erosion. These conspicuous natural features evoke interest from Ohioans today and some were undoubtedly used as landmarks, if not gathering places, by prehistoric Ohio natives. With the exception of the massive Mount Pleasant standing stone at Lancaster, Ohio, there remains a considerable question as to the actual amount of prehistoric human activity associated with these geologic features, despite the frequent 19th C. legends to the effect that Indians frequently held councils at or on them and even had maidens dancing atop them in order to lure pioneers to their death (e.g. Schneider 1966).

Fairfield County

The largest and best known undoubtedly is the Standing Stone at Lancaster, Ohio, now part of Rising Park, also known as Mount Pleasant. Prehistoric activity was common here and has left numerous traces (Hothem 1988). Stout (1952) has discussed the geology of the Mount Pleasant Standing Stone, which is an erosional remnant of the resistant Mississippian Black Hand Sandstone, and notes that the historic Wyandot Tarhe Town or Crane Town stood at the foot of this standing stone, at the juncture of two major Indian trails. It is also the site of the fictional encounter of early frontier scouts with the Wyandots and the equally fictional rescue of Forest Rose, eponymous heroine of the much reprinted novel by Emerson Bennett.

Portage County

Most Ohio standing stones are much smaller in size than Mount Pleasant but still impressive enough in their isolation to form conspicuous landmarks. Rusnak (2002) has recently described the well known "Standing Rock" standing stone at Kent, Ohio, an isolated block of Pennsylvanian-age Sharon sandstone (definitely not Mississippian Berea sandstone, as erroneously reported by Rusnak; see Winslow and White 1966), which sits in the Cuyahoga River just north of Kent (Fig. 1). Early references to this standing stone leave no doubt that it was a prominent landmark and rendezvous along the old Mahoning Trail. Although much of the adjacent bank is now occupied by a modern cemetery or consists of bare bedrock, archaeological testing in a small adjacent wooded area might reveal some evidence of prehistoric activity.

Mahoning County

There remains some question, however, as to just how much prehistoric activity, if any, may have been associated with other prominent Ohio standing stones. Another conspicuous standing stone lying in the Mahoning River just between the Lake Milton dam and the site of Shilling's Mill, in Berlin Township, has long been known (Fig. 2, 3). It supposedly bore Indian rock carvings at one time (Davis 1897), but the editor of the *Antiquarian* doubted that the

carving was aboriginal, since it included a rifle and certain "obscene features" which prevented the journal from reproducing Davis' drawing. The Mahoning River standing stone is still standing but only modern graffiti could be found on a recent visit. The landmark consists of a large block of Connoquenessing (Pottsville Group, lower Pennsylvanian) sandstone clearly isolated from the adjoining bluff by a shift in the channel of a small stream that enters the Mahoning River at this point. The only other known published reference to this standing stone is in a list of the ferns of Mahoning County (Vickers 1910: 87), where Vickers describes it as the only station in the county for the rare Mountain Spleenwort (which still grows on it). The "Standing Rock" is described as a "curious boat-shaped sandstone rock [that] has been eroded free from a jutting 'bogi back' through the united action of the [Mahoning] river and a tributary and stands a picturesque mass 15 to 20 ft. high, 82 ft. long, 27 wide at base and 7 to 12 ft. wide at top." Only small patches of exposed soil along a path and a nearby gas pipeline were available for surface survey and examination of this terrain was negative in terms of any evidence of prehistoric activity.

Morgan County

In the rugged hills of southeastern Ohio, standing stones do not occur along the stream valleys but on the ridgetops. They also tend to be smaller in size. The most prominent was undoubtedly the "Devil's Tea Table" which stood on a high ridgetop above the Muskingum River three miles north of McConnellsville, in Morgan Co. (Fig. 4). Twenty-five feet high, its level top of 33 by 20 feet lay balanced on a very narrow base of shaley sandstone. A tourist attraction for many years, the tea table was a favorite picnic spot for visitors traveling by steamboat and skiff along the Muskingum River. Some preposterous legends surrounded the site, including that Indians used signal fires and young maidens dancing on top of the tea table to lure pioneer river travellers to their death. Sadly, after several mischievous attempts to topple the landmark, this was finally accomplished with a charge of dynamite on July 4, 1906. Hundreds of visitors from McConnellsville and Malta visited the site and carried away fragments of the tea table's remnants (Schneider 1966). Whether this standing stone served as a prehistoric landmark remains unknown but it appears that it was visible from the river below. This site has not been visited but should be tested at some point.

Belmont County

A very small standing stone, only five or six feet high, was discovered during the course of a Phase I archaeological survey in south-central Section 30 of Warren Township, Belmont Co., Ohio (Murphy 1996). An erosional remnant of Uniontown sandstone, it stood on the edge of a small ridge at the head of a second-order tributary of Spencer Creek. Shovel testing around the base of this standing-stone

revealed only shallow soil filled with numerous sandstone channers. There was no evidence of prehistoric activity. Given its small size and isolated location, these negative results were not unexpected.

Caldwell's history of Belmont County describes another "Tea Table Rock" in Warren Township. Locally known as "Goblet Rock," it stood on the Riggs Farm two miles south of Barnesville and was nine feet high, with a flat top 31 feet in circumference. Despite fairly specific locational information and querying of local residents, this standing stone has not been located.

Harrison County

Adjacent Harrison County contained at least three prominent standing stones, which have been described by Joseph Tecumseh Harrison (1922, 1927). The best known of these was the Standing Stone or "Cadiz Stone" (Fig. 5). It stood on a high ridge about one mile west of Cadiz on the Hedge farm, northeast $\frac{1}{4}$ Section 11, Cadiz Township, and just north of the Standingstone Trail at the head of Standingstone Fork of Little Stillwater Creek, less than a mile east of the late-lamented Mattie Stewart village site. Both the village site and the "Scio Stone," which very likely was a landmark along the prehistoric Standingstone (later Moravian) Trail, have been completely removed by strip mining. According to Henry Howe, the top half of the Cadiz Stone was quarried away by the land owner. "It is said to have been a place of great resort by the Indians." On the other hand, Howe (1900: 888-889) also thought that the standing stone was a glacial boulder brought from "perhaps a thousand miles north" rather than native bedrock.

Very similar in appearance to the Cadiz Stone and also weathered out of a ridge-forming sandstone in the lower part of the Monongahela Group is the "Scio Stone" (Fig. 6), which still stands in a pasture about two miles northeast of Scio, northeast $\frac{1}{4}$ Section 27, North Township, overlooking Dining Fork of Conotton Creek. Although the Scio Stone is surrounded by pasture, a one- to two-foot wide "drip-line" around its base exposes bare topsoil. This was carefully examined for flint chippage or other indications of prehistoric activity but none was found. The Scio Stone is about ten feet high and about twelve by eighteen feet in diameter at the top. The sandstone is very friable and the top is heavily weathered, eliminating the possibility of any rock carvings or petroglyphs having survived. A large vertical block of sandstone stands dolmen-like immediately adjacent to the Scio Stone and was probably derived from it. Unfortunately, it does not show in the view taken by Harrison, so there is no telling whether it was there in the 1920s or not. The Dining Fork is in a fairly isolated area, and no recorded Indian trails are known to have passed nearby.

Even more isolated is the "Indian Watch Tower" north of U.S. Route 22 in Moorefield Township, about 9 miles west of Cadiz. It is about eighteen feet high, about ten by ten feet at the top, and stands on a broad, sloping base (Fig. 7). Strip mining has extended to within a few feet of the landmark, and the

intriguing vertical block that stood behind it is no longer there. Examination of the entire surface of the Indian Watch Tower revealed no evidence of prehistoric petroglyphs, and while the steep hillside on which it lies was partially covered with leaf litter, sufficient ground was exposed to determine that no charcoal, flint chippage, or other indications of prehistoric activity are associated with this standing stone. Despite its name, this is the least impressive of all the standing stones that have been examined.

Guernsey County

An undated (after 1918, based on AZO photographic paper mark) "real photo" postcard (Fig. 8) led to the re-discovery of the Birds Run Standing Rock. This standing stone lies on a narrow, north-south trending ridge between two small tributaries of Wills Creek, about a mile north of the settlement of Birds Run, in the SE ¼ of Section 12, Wheeling Township, Guernsey Co. and is the only one that can be reached by car. It currently provides an impressive view of the valley of Birds Run, but the view has been artificially enhanced by recent strip mining. Comparison with a recent photograph (Fig. 9) shows very little erosion in some eighty years. Examination of bare ground along the adjacent access road and around the base of the Birds Run Standing Stone revealed no evidence of prehistoric activity. Its prominent ridgetop location along the valley of Birds Run suggests that it may have been a prehistoric guidepost if not trail marker.

Only two and a half miles to the north of the Birds Run Standing Stone, a series of four prominent standing stones lie along a narrow ridge overlooking a small tributary of Wills Creek, in the northwest quarter of Section 1, Wheeling Township. Recent timbering rendered these standing stones highly visible from Prider Road (Fig. 10). They lie at approximately the same elevation as the Birds Run standing stone and all are probably formed by erosion of the underlying Buffalo sandstone of the lower Conemaugh Group (Fig. 11-13). The Prider Road standing stones offered a unique opportunity to examine the surrounding area for associated prehistoric activity, for directly to the south of them the ridge provides a very level area suitable for a camp site. The entire area had been timbered, and this activity provided considerable ground surface exposure. The whole area was examined at ca. 1 m. intervals, without revealing any flint chippage or other indications of prehistoric activity. Nonetheless, with permission of the landowner, a series of four 1 meter square shovel test units was excavated along

the axis of this level portion of ridgetop, spaced ca. 10 m apart. All of these revealed extremely shallow eroded topsoil filled with sandstone channers. Careful trowelling to the subsoil revealed no artifact material or other indications of prehistoric activity. Inspection of the four Prider Road standing stones revealed no prehistoric petroglyphs, although a crudely pecked "1850" date was noted.

Athens County

Further afield, Peters (1947) has described several standing stones or "tea tables" in Athens Co., Ohio. The most impressive is known as the Mineral Tea Table and lies on a high, narrow ridge overlooking Raccoon Creek, just northwest of the village of Mineral (Fig. 14). It has eroded from the massive Lower Freeport sandstone, here more than sixty feet thick, and stands at the end of a steep ridge along the north side of the valley of Raccoon Creek. Peters also illustrates a pair of twin standing stones near the village of Beebe, along the south side of the Hocking River in easternmost Athens County.

The ground surrounding the base of the Mineral Tea Table is well exposed by erosion and careful survey revealed no flint chippage or other indications of prehistoric activity. The top of the ca. 20 foot high tea table was not examined, but a few historic graffiti decorate the adjacent sandstone outcrop.

Conclusions

Careful examination of nine of the better known standing stones remaining in eastern Ohio, including surface survey and some shovel testing, has failed to discover any archaeological evidence of prehistoric activity. In the case of the McConnellsville Tea Table and the Cadiz Stone, examination is not possible, since the sites have been destroyed, although the locale of the McConnellsville standing stone still exists and can probably be located and surveyed.

That several of these prominent features did serve as landmarks along prehistoric trails seems certain, as in the case of the Kent Standing Rock (Rusnak 2002) and very likely in the case of the Cadiz Stone and probably the McConnellsville Tea Table, even possibly the Mineral Standing Stone. These four all stood along documented prehistoric trails or major waterways. The question of their visibility from any significant distance during prehistoric times is a real one, but any similar geologic features are deserving of serious archaeological consideration whenever encountered today.

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Figure 1. A rare 19th century stereoscopic view of the Kent "Standing Rock," by Kent photographer James Wark, ca. 1871.



Figure 2. Circa 1909 postcard view of the Mahoning River Standing Rock.



Figure 3. The Mahoning River Standing Rock as it appears today.



Figure 6. The "Scio Stone" as it appears today.



Figure 4. An early postcard view of the Morgan County "Devil's Tea Table."



Figure 7. The "Indian Watch Tower" near Nottingham Church, Harrison County. A ca. 1920 postcard view



Figure 5. An early postcard view of the "Standing Rock" near Cadiz, destroyed by strip mining.



Figure 8. An early real photo postcard view of the Bird's Run Standing Stone.



Figure 9. The Bird's Run Standing Stone today. Guernsey County.



Figure 10. Distant view of the Prider Road Standing Stones. Guernsey County.



Figure 14. The Mineral Standing Stone, Athens County.



Figure 11-13. Nearer views of the Four Prider Road Standing Stones.