THE MYSTERY OF RED SLATE

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The exact origin of the slate from which many Midwestern pendants, gorgets, bannerstones, ornaments and birdstones are made is somewhat of a mystery. To begin with, there are no slate quarries in Ohio or the Midwest that we know of which were exploited by prehistoric people. Undoubtedly, this slate was brought to the Midwest by the glaciers. In the early days I recall that it was believed that slate originated in the Huronian Shield of northeastern North America and was transported to the Midwest by glacial action. Thus, prehistoric people had only to search outwashes and deposits of glacial debris for siate raw material. However, if slate is common in glacial deposits, it would have been rolled, scraped, ground and smoothed to the extent that we don't recognize it.

Examples of raw slate have been found on ancient sites in cultivated fields but they are usually rough, angular slabs or chunks of raw material and show little evidence of glacial action. It seems that they most often occur in farm fields of Ohio's "boulder belts." Of course these could be the remnants of glacial boulders after early craftsmen had broken them apart. Whatever the origin of slate and the prehistoric method of obtaining it, vast quantities of this intriguing stone were fashioned into countless artifacts. Although the mechanics of how it was obtained are not clear, this stone was one of the most widely exploited materials in prehistoric North America.

What attracted prehistoric people to slate? The allure was its workability for shaping and drilling, color variation, its contrasting bands, texture and all around eye-pleasing appearance. Far and away the banded varieties were most often employed and banded slate can be seen in nearly every kind of bannerstone known in Ohio. Often there were attempts to fashion these sometimes elaborate artifacts so that the banding matched the contours of the piece. In birdstones, for example, one side of the head was shaped so that the banding formed an eye.

Besides gray and black banded slate, there are varieties which are tan, brown, dark green, light green, maroon and red. But these are rare and artifacts made of such stone are highly prized. Occasionally there are white or cream-colored streaks in slate which collectors call "worm holes." Strangely, this description is accurate since these inclusions were actually made by primitive worm-like creatures that crawled through the primordial deposits of silt and mud which later turned into slate.

What is called red slate is one of the most pleasing varieties. It varies in color tone from pink to bright red (not a true scarlet – but nevertheless red) – and is seen most often in a variety of gorget and pendant styles. It has been argued among avocationalists that the colors in slate are not natural but were attained from minerals, chemicals, weathering or other environmental causes. If this were the primary reason for slate turning from black or gray to red, for example, then it stands to reason that large pieces of it would remain gray on the inside and red on the outside. I have shown in figures 1 and 2 field-found chunk of banded slate found in Champaign County by the late Ottie Cowan. From its outside appearance part of it is red and part gray. Assuming that this piece of slate had metamorphosed from gray or black to red because of outside influences, then the interior of this thick piece should have remained gray. However, Ottie (being a lapidarist) sawed the piece in two – and as can be seen from the pictures the inside is red and not gray. This enforces the fact that there is indeed red slate naturally formed and not necessarily the result of chemical change. This is not to say that outside environmental influences do not alter the colors of slate because there are examples whose colors have obviously been changed by outside

Figure 1 (Converse) Fragment of field found slate from Champaign County. Note that part of the outer surface is red while the interior seems to be gray.

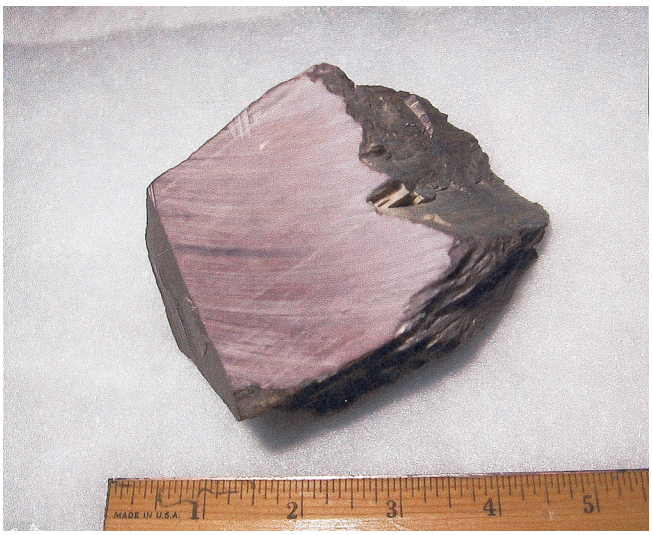

Figure 2 (Converse) After being sawed in two, the interior is shown to be red.

Figure 3 (Converse) Fifteen red slate artifacts. From top left – Wellington, Lorain Co – Lorain Co – Franklin Co. – Crawford Co. – Butler Co. – Logan Co. – Summit Co. – Franklin Co. – Ohio – Hocking Co. – Scioto Co. – Spencer Co., IN – Madison Co. - Ross Co. – Allen Co. Humped bannerstone – 1st in second row – is very rare in red slate.