

BIRDSTONES: SOME CLARIFICATIONS FROM MARYLAND

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ABSTRACT

A recent article by Marshall Becker stated that “no examples of birdstones are known from Maryland” (Becker 2009:49). In fact, some 20 specimens are currently known for Maryland, and data are presented for each of these.

INTRODUCTION

Marshall Becker’s (2009) survey of birdstones from the northeastern United States failed to enumerate any specimens from Maryland. At first blush, this might be expected, since Maryland lies at the fringes of what has been traditionally considered the core distribution area of these unique artifacts. However, a closer look reveals a fairly substantial Meadowood–Middlesex–Adena presence—including at least two substantial mortuary sites—in Maryland (Ford 1976), especially on its Eastern Shore (Lowery 1988, 1989, 1995). As such, it should not be surprising to learn that a number of birdstones have been reported from the state (see Fig. 1).

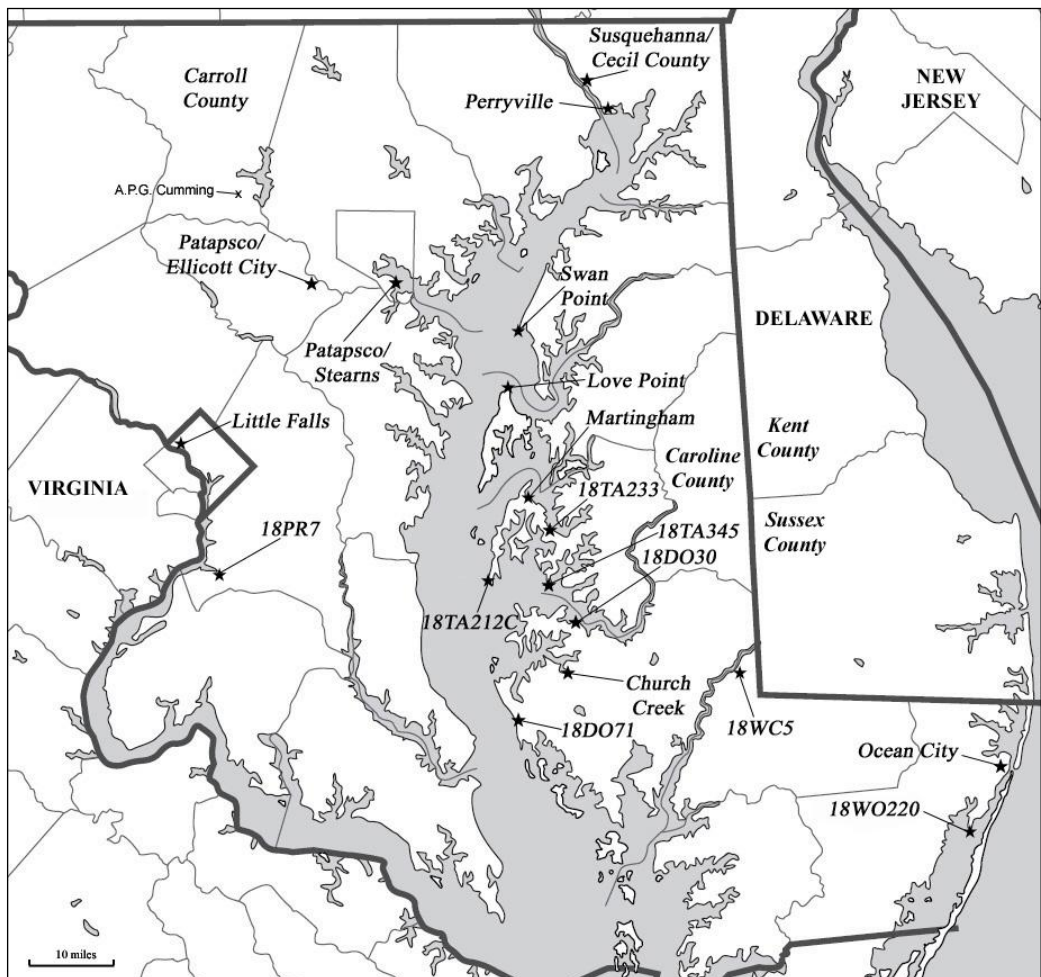


Figure 1. Location of Maryland sites yielding birdstones.

MARYLAND BIRDSTONES

Patapsco River Finds

Richard Stearns (1949), in his survey of village sites along the Patapsco River, reported a birdstone then in the collection of Charles Hayden from Baltimore County. It is described as “a broken, but well made birdstone from the north bank of the Patapsco opposite Brooklyn.” The specimen exhibits protruding eyes—though not classically “pop-eyed”—and at least one drilled hole is evident in its base (Fig. 2). Today the area is heavily urbanized and many of the sites reported in the past have been destroyed. The Patapsco site lies a mere 25 miles north of—and in a setting nearly identical to that of—the West River Adena site (18AN18) described by Ford (1976).

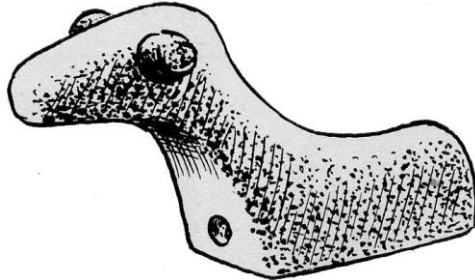


Figure 2. Birdstone from the banks of Patapsco River in Baltimore County (from Stearns 1949:7).

In 1993, an informant reported to the Maryland Historical Trust (MHT) a birdstone from ca. 15 miles upstream from Stearns’ Patapsco specimen, near Ellicott City in Howard County. This pop-eyed artifact (Fig. 3) measures approximately 3 in. (76 mm) high, 3.5 in. (89 mm) long, is made from a spotted/mottled porphyry, and is drilled through the “feet” at its base. Also reported to have come from this bluff-top locality overlooking the Patapsco River are a large 4-5 in. (100-130 mm) rhyolite biface reworked into a drill, a large 4-5 in. (100-130 mm) red rhyolite lobate biface, a large 4-5 in. (100-130 mm) brown chert corner-notched projectile point, a one-inch (25 mm) round quartz scraper, and four stemmed quartz projectile points. Subsequently in 1995 and 2003, the same informant sent photographs of two unique bannerstones that reportedly had been found by the informant’s father decades earlier (these were not mentioned during the initial reporting of the site and birdstone): a 9-in. (230 mm) curved pick bannerstone (Knoblock 1939:489-490) made of a speckled stone material and a 3.5 in. (89mm) double-notched butterfly bannerstone (Knoblock 1939:503-505) made of a pinkish-yellowish material. In the author’s opinion, the piecemeal manner in which these finds were reported, inconsistencies in the various reports of how and when these artifacts were found, and the site’s unlikely geographic setting all introduce an element of uncertainty regarding this birdstone and the associated materials.



Figure 3. Birdstone reported from near Ellicott City, along the Patapsco River in Howard County.

Carroll County

A birdstone fragment from Carroll County was donated to the National Museum of Natural History in 1900 by Joseph D. McGuire. According to accession records, the name Gordon Cumming or Cummings is associated with the artifact, and may indicate either the source from which McGuire acquired the artifact, or the farm on which he found it (James Krakker, personal communication 2010). [J.D. McGuire was a State's Attorney who resided on the family estate, Wilton, just northwest of Ellicott City in Howard County. McGuire was also a student of archaeology and ethnology (he was associated with the Bureau of American Ethnology and was an officer of the Anthropological Society of Washington) who amassed a sizeable collection of prehistoric artifacts—later donated to the Smithsonian—from Howard County and the surrounding region. An examination of the 1877 Carroll County atlas (Lake et al. 1877) reveals one A[lex.].P.G. Cumming, a farmer from Scotland who settled in Carroll County in 1876, located just northwest of Eldersburg. If this property is the source of McGuire's birdstone, it was located a mere ten miles from Wilton, and only about 15 miles from the Patapsco/Ellicott City specimen reported above.]

The specimen (NMNH catalog no. A209039-0) is made from a dark purple slate, measures approximately 90 mm long, and consists of a head with protruding (but not pop-eyed) eyes, which is broken at the neck near the base of the birdstone (Fig. 4). The remnant of a drill hole is evident at the point of breakage.

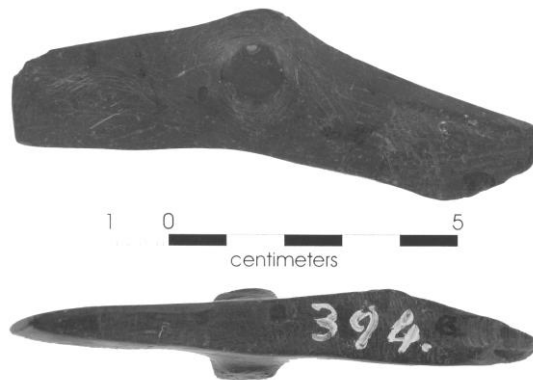


Figure 4. Carroll County birdstone fragment (courtesy of the National Museum of Natural History).

Cecil County (2 specimens)

According to Townsend (1959:436), a birdstone of green slate with darker bands was found in Cecil County, four miles above the mouth of the Susquehanna. The specimen—which is clearly drilled at the base (Fig. 5)—was attributed to the Maryland Academy of Sciences' collections, although it is not listed in the catalog Bennett (1976) prepared prior to the collections' transfer to the Maryland Historical Society in 1976. Based on Townsend's (1959:Plate 162B) photograph, the object measures approximately 105 mm long and 40 mm high.

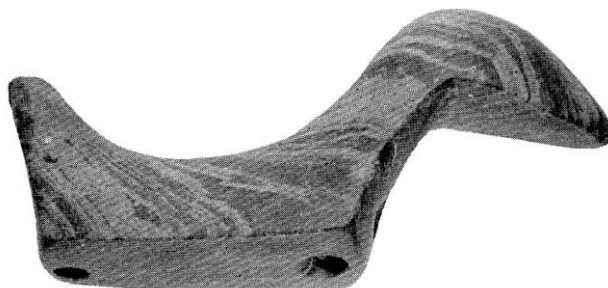


Figure 5. Birdstone reported from Cecil County (from Townsend 1959: Plate 162B).

Lowery (2007) indicates another birdstone was found in Cecil County on the Susquehanna in the vicinity of Perryville. The specimen—in the collection of the late Elwood Wilkins, Sr.—is a black slate “bar-type,” drilled at the base, and lacking protruding eyes (Darrin Lowery, personal communication 2010).

Piscataway (18PR7)

In the late 1960s, a fragment of a pop-eyed birdstone was found during excavation of the multi-component Piscataway site (18PR7), located on Piscataway Creek in Prince Georges County (Woodward and Phebus 1974). The bulk of the site dates to the Woodland period, and the birdstone fragment (Fig. 6), measuring 38 mm long, was said to be made of “purple rhyolite...[and] incidentally intrusive from earlier occupations.” According to Woodward and Phebus (1974), a tabular section of purple rhyolite with striations on both sides—possibly a blank for a gorget—was thought to be associated with the birdstone (both came from a depth of 9-12 inches, but the site provenience of these artifacts is otherwise unspecified). The identification of “purple rhyolite” as the lithic material used in these artifacts is questionable, as admitted by Woodward and Phebus (1974). A more likely lithic material identification might be a reddish ferruginous slate, similar to that described for a birdstone found at Little Falls on the Potomac River in Washington, D.C. (Fig. 1; Townsend 1959:364). The Piscataway site specimen is curated by the National Museum of Natural History, Department of Anthropology (catalog no. A461940-0).



Figure 6. Birdstone fragment from 18PR7 (from Woodward and Phebus 1974:Plate 10,E).

Swan Point

Lowery (2007, personal communication 2010) reports a birdstone from the vicinity of Swan Point in Kent County. The black slate specimen is drilled on the bottom, but the type of birdstone cannot be determined due to heavy damage in both the head and tail areas. The specimen is currently in the Hank Springer collection.

Love Point

A birdstone fragment is reported by Lowery (2007, personal communication 2010) from the vicinity of Love Point on Kent Island in Queen Anne’s County. The gray slate specimen consists of the neck and a portion of the body, and is drilled at the base. Several Meadowood points and a damaged or “killed” turkey-tail preform were observed in the same collection as the birdstone. Such finds are in keeping with other Adena-related finds from this vicinity. As early as the 1930s and 1940s, stone pipes were reported to have washed out of human burials in the area. On the west side of Kent Island, site 18QU54 produced a cremation feature containing a Robbins blade and a bow-tie gorget. Several miles to the south, a clammer dredged up another bow-tie gorget from the vicinity of Broad Creek. And on the east side of the island, sites 18QU346 and 18QU347 have yielded Fox Creek and Jacks Reef points, Adena Robbins and Cresap blades, pendants, gorgets, and Coulbourne ware (Lowery 1992).

Martingham (2 specimens)

A miniature birdstone was recovered from the Martingham site (18TA404) on the west side of Hambleton Cove during excavations by the University of Delaware in 1990 (MHT 1999). The specimen (Fig. 7) is 4.3 cm long, 1 cm wide at its base, and has no eyes. This presumably unfinished birdstone (it is unpolished and the base is undrilled) is made of a grainy gray/tan sandstone or

argillite. It was recovered from the plowzone directly above a shell-filled pit feature which contained Mockley ceramics (Jay Custer, personal communication 2010). This site and the adjacent site 18TA405, each located on the west side of Hambleton Cove in Talbot County, have also produced Fox Creek, Mansion Inn, and Petalas blades, a Hopewell point, paintstones, ovate and reel gorgets, a plummet, a copper awl, and a copper fishhook. A human burial with red ocher was unearthed during construction in this vicinity.



Figure 7. Site 18TA404 birdstone (University of Delaware Center for Archaeological Research).

On the east side of Hambleton Cove, a birdstone and several caches of rhyolite blades are reported from the Thomas Baynard collection (MHT 1999). The bar-type specimen is made of gray/black slate and is drilled at the base (Darrin Lowery, personal communication 2010).

Maiden Point (18TA233)

In 1982, Darrin Lowery (1988, 1989, 1995) found a black flint, red ochre-stained Adena Robbins blade eroding from a high knoll along the shoreline of the Miles River in Talbot County. The Maiden Point site (18TA233; also known as the Miles River Adena site) is a presumed cremation burial feature (based on the presence of red ochre and an apparent “charred or burned area with human bone” [Lowery 1995:7]). Over a period of years following the recovery of the Robbins blade, Lowery collected more than 20 artifacts from this site, including bifaces (e.g., Adena, Cresap, and Fox Creek blades), slate and schist pendants, a hematite pyramid, a fragment of cut mica, shell and copper beads, a freshwater pearl, a fossil shark’s tooth, and a hematite pop-eyed birdstone (Fig. 8). It is described as being 61 mm long, 22 mm high, and 16 mm thick, and is biconically drilled on the underside through both “legs” (Lowery 1989:5).

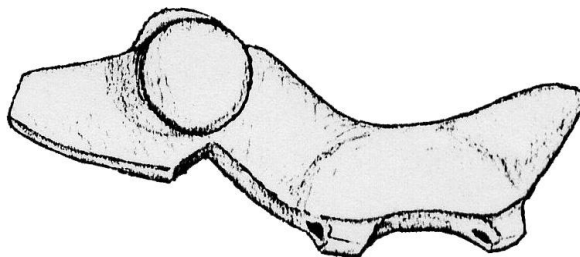


Figure 8. Pop-eyed birdstone from Maiden Point, 18TA233 (from Lowery 1995).

Paw Paw Cove (18TA212C)

A “small birdstone preform” was found by Darrin Lowery along the eroded shoreline at the multi-component Paw Paw Cove site (18TA212C) on Tilghman Island in Talbot County. According to the site survey form (MHT 1985), the specimen (Fig. 9) “is undrilled and is the ‘bar’ type (not the ‘pop-eyed’ type).” The site—which contains components dating from the Paleoindian through Late Woodland periods—has also yielded Meadowood points, Adena blades, gorgets, and a copper awl.

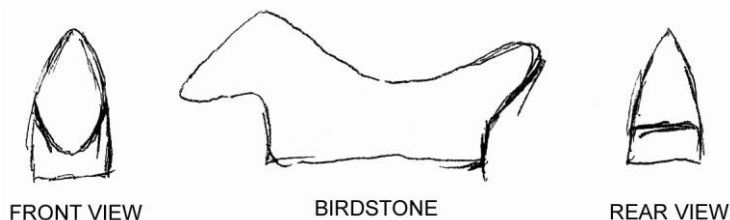


Figure 9. Sketch of the birdstone preform from Paw Paw Cove, 18TA212C (from MHT 1985).

Benoni's Point (18TA345)

“Many years ago” (Lowery 1995:5), a black slate birdstone—currently in the collection of Lawrence and Lorraine Claggett—was found by Joe Valliant on Benoni Point in Talbot County. The specimen (Fig. 10) has a heavily reworked head, is drilled in its base, and has incised cut marks or scratches evident on its surface, while other portions are highly polished. Based on Lowery’s (1995:Fig. 2) scale drawing, the birdstone measures approximately 135 mm long and 30 mm high. A number of Meadowood points and blades, a three-hole gorget, and an Adena biface fragment have also been collected from this area (Darrin Lowery, personal communication 2010).

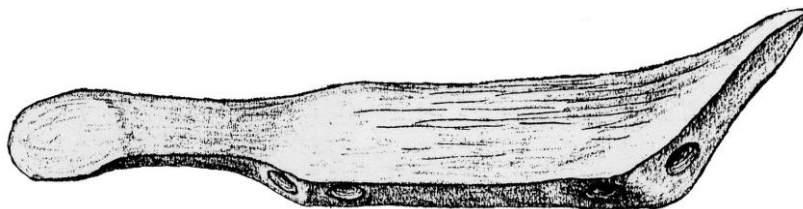


Figure 10. Birdstone from Benoni's Point, 18TA345 (from Lowery 1995:Fig. 2).

Sandy Hill (18DO30)

The Sandy Hill site (18DO30), located on the Choptank River in Dorchester County at the western edge of Cambridge, is one of Maryland’s longest-known archaeological sites. The earliest investigations of this site dealt with a series of Late Woodland ossuaries (Reynolds 1889; Mercer 1897; Curry 1999). However, in the late 1920s and again in the late 1940s, portions of an Early Woodland Adena cemetery were exposed by commercial sand mining activities (Weslager 1942; Jackson 1954; Thomas 1971; Ford 1976). The cemetery contained more than 100 burials, most of which were accompanied by artifacts and red ochre. Among the hundreds of artifacts recovered from the site (many of them “salvaged” during the night by local collectors)—tubular stone pipes, a stone effigy pipe, pendants, gorgets, bar stones (or boatstones), large blades made of exotic cherts, stone and copper paint cups, copper beads, and more—is a drilled birdstone (Fig. 11) that Ford (1976:82, Fig. 33L) states “may have had a head but it has been reshaped.” The specimen is manufactured from Ohio banded slate (Thomas 1971:68) and has two uniconical holes drilled at an angle from its flat bottom (Ford 1976:82). Based on Townsend’s (1959:Plate 162A) photograph, the birdstone fragment measures approximately 83 mm long and 35 mm high.



Figure 11. Birdstone fragment from Sandy Hill, 18DO30 (from Townsend 1959:Plate 162A).

Shoreline (18DO71)

A head fragment of a pop-eyed birdstone, made of steatite, was found by Thomas Phillips on the eroded shoreline of the Chesapeake Bay south of Punch Island Creek in Dorchester County. This specimen (Fig. 12) was apparently broken in prehistory and the “head was salvaged by drilling the head [and] grinding down one of its eyes” to convert it into a pendant (Lowery 1995:5). Based on Lowery’s (1995:Slide 13) photograph, this artifact measures approximately 40 mm long and 25 mm high. The Shoreline site (18DO71) contains extensive deposits representative of the span of prehistory, including a number of chert and jasper Meadowood points (Darrin Lowery, personal communication 2010).

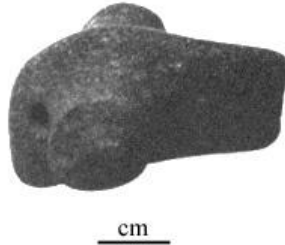


Figure 12. Head of a pop-eyed birdstone pendant from site 18DO71 (from Lowery 1995:Slide 13).

Church Creek

In August 1880, Henry R. Bennett shipped two boxes (400 pounds) of his collection of stone implements to the Peabody Museum (Susan Haskell, personal communication 2009). Included in this collection is a birdstone (catalog no. 26019; see Fig. 13) which was found with a grooved axe near Church Creek in Dorchester County (Peabody Museum 2009). Townsend (1959:436) describes the birdstone as a “salvage job from a long-headed pop eye” made of light green slate, weathered gray; the body has a triangular cross-section, and there are tally marks on the tail. Diagonal holes are drilled through to the birdstone’s underside from both the base of the “neck” and from the base of the tail (Susan Haskell, personal communication 2009). The specimen measures 162 mm long, 40 mm high, and 35 mm wide (Peabody Museum 2009).

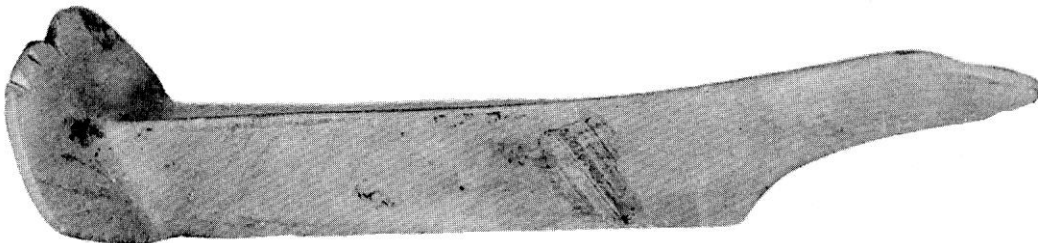


Figure 13. Birdstone from near Church Creek in Dorchester County, now in the collections of the Peabody Museum (from Townsend 1959:Plate 162; compare to Peabody Museum [2009] image).

Riverton Mound (18WC5)

Prior to its destruction by gravel quarrying in the 1950s, the Riverton Mound site (18WC5) was located on the Wicomico County side of the Nanticoke River, about four miles downstream from the Delaware line. Details about the site are sketchy (MHT 1955), with most of the information provided secondhand from either quarry workmen or a number of looters (one of whom sat atop the mound with a shotgun to protect it from other diggers). It is unknown whether or not the “mound” was man-made or merely a topographic high spot used for the site. Reportedly the graves uncovered at the site were covered in red ocher. Artifacts said to have come from the site include Jack’s Reef projectile points, five or more stone platform pipes, gorgets, pestles, and “Bird stones” (note plural). Little

additional information is available regarding the reported birdstones, but one specimen (Fig. 14) was documented in the collection of Judge William B. Yates in the early 1970s. This example has protruding—but not pop-eyed—eyes and is made of a light green banded slate; it has been drilled in the front basal section, but the rear section has been heavily ground, thereby removing any evidence of drilling (Darrin Lowery, personal communication 2010). The Yates collection is currently in the hands of Richard Robinson.



Figure 14. Birdstone from Riverton Mound, 18WC5, from the collection of Judge William B. Yates.

Ocean City

A birdstone in the Ralph W. Jackson collection is labeled in ink on its base “in shell heap, Ocean City, Md.” The specimen (Fig. 15), made from what appears to be a banded slate, is drilled at either end of its base, and has an incised mouth and drilled eyes. Such incised/drilled features are rather atypical on birdstones, although they seem slightly more common on specimens of this body type, referred to by Townsend (1959) as “chunky.” Based on a number of photographs, this specimen measures approximately 105 mm long, 40 mm high, and 26 mm wide.

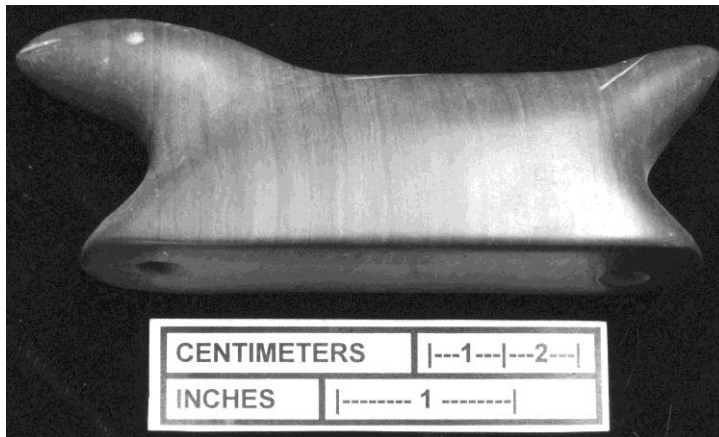


Figure 15. Birdstone from the Jackson collection (courtesy of Jack Hranicky).

South Point (18WO220)

Lowery (2007, personal communication 2010) reports a birdstone from the South Point site (18WO220), located about 10 miles south of Ocean City. The specimen (Fig. 16) is a polished banded slate birdstone with a fantail and a drilled base. This site has also yielded a potentially Adena-related stone pipe and a “beavertail” point, although the assemblage is dominated by Meadowood points and cache blades made of Onondaga chert. Early in the century, human skulls and a carved stone pipe were eroded from nearby site 18WO179.



Figure 16. Sketch of birdstone from the South Point vicinity (adapted from Lowery 2007).

Yet Another Maryland Birdstone?

As a final example of the elusive nature of birdstone finds in Maryland, Darrin Lowery (personal communication 2010) reports an example in the Frank Arthur, Jr. collection from a site near the Caroline County, MD–Kent/Sussex County, Delaware line. This purple/black slate bar-type birdstone is missing most of its neck and all of its head, and is drilled at the base. The surviving portion of the body is over 5 in. (130 mm) long.

CONCLUSIONS

Maryland has produced a number of birdstones, traditionally presumed to date to the Adena period, although they likely originate in earlier cultures such as Meadowood and Glacial Kame (Becker 2009; Darrin Lowery, personal communication 2009). The specimens described here share a number of traits. Four (18PR7, 18TA233, 18DO71, and Patapsco/Ellicott City) represent classic “pop-eyed” styles, while three (Patapsco/Stearns, Carroll County, and 18WC5) have protruding eyes, but not the large, exaggerated pop-eyed variety; the Ocean City specimen has drilled eyes. All of the observable finished specimens with basal portions preserved were drilled at the front and rear of their bases; the unfinished preform found at 18TA212C and the presumably unfinished miniature birdstone from 18TA404 were not yet drilled. The head fragment from 18DO71 was drilled during its conversion into a pendant. Known materials of manufacture include slate (at least 12 examples), porphyry (Patapsco/Ellicott City), hematite (18TA233), steatite (18DO71), sandstone or argillite (18TA404), and perhaps rhyolite (18PR7). All finished examples appear to have been polished.

As for the distribution of Maryland birdstones (see Fig. 1), nearly all are located along the embayed waters of the Chesapeake; in fact, only the locales producing the specimens from Carroll County, Patapsco/Ellicott City, Ocean City, and South Point fail to offer a view of—or ready boat access to—the Bay. This suggests use of the Susquehanna River/Chesapeake Bay as a pathway for both materials and ideas, serving as a link between Maryland and one of the birdstone “core areas” identified in New York (Becker 2009:48, personal communication 2009).

While birdstones do occur in Maryland, they remain rarities—much as is the case throughout the eastern United States except for perhaps New York. Nonetheless, the Delmarva Adena (and earlier) sites currently known—and those yet to be discovered—are likely to produce additional examples in the future. And while large mortuary sites (such as Sandy Hill and the smaller Riverton Mound and West River sites) may be unexpected discoveries, smaller Adena burials (such as 18TA233) and features (such as perhaps 18TA345) are more likely to be encountered, especially along the eroding coastlines of Maryland’s Eastern Shore and perhaps beneath the Chesapeake Bay’s waters (cf. Lowery 2006).

It is hoped that this brief review of Maryland birdstones helps dispel the notion that this unique artifact type is not found in the state. To the contrary, given the likelihood that additional birdstones may sit unknown in both personal and public collections, and the probability that other specimens will be unearthed in the future, the Chesapeake Bay region may prove to be a focal point of the cultures that produced these “least understood” artifacts.

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