

# Prehistoric Art of the Central Coast of British Columbia

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A glance at any Northwest Coast art book attests firmly to the existence of a highly developed tradition of painting and carving wood during the nineteenth century by the ancestors of the Bella Bella and Bella Coola peoples of the central coast of British Columbia. Similarly, examination of the journals of Sir Alexander Mackenzie and George Vancouver carries this tradition backward into the last decades of the eighteenth century. The reading of McIlwraith's, *The Bella Coola Indians* (1948), or Boas', *Mythology of the Bella Coola* (1900b) and *Bella Bella Tales* (1932), provides some insights into the meaning of this art in the cultures which produced it. But what of the decades, centuries and millenia which preceded both the early explorers and the later ethnographers? What art was produced then? What techniques were employed and what styles were produced? What was the meaning of this art and what were its historical relationships? This paper is directed toward answering these questions, even though in spite of the considerable archaeological research over the last fourteen years, the data base is still very much limited.

## Chronology

Archaeological research on the central coast since 1968 has resulted in the establishment of a cultural chronology spanning almost the last 10,000 years (Carlson 1979, Hobler 1982). Some thirteen sites have been tested by excavation, and others have been sampled by surface collecting. At the top of the temporal scale are the rotting house posts and burial caves of the Ethnographic Period with their mouldering testimonials to the artists creativity

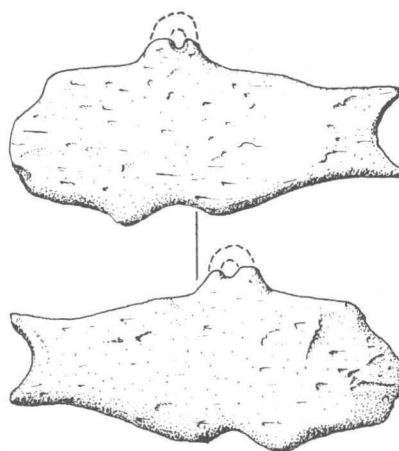


Fig. 7:1. Whalebone pendant resembling a rockfish from the site of Namu dating to about 3,500 years ago.

in wood. At the bottom—the beginning of time for this part of the world—archaeological evidence comes from a single component at the site of Namu (EISx 1). The assemblage from the basal levels of this site is a chipped stone industry with relationships to both the Pebble Tool Tradition and the Microblade Tradition (Ch. 1). The evidence for artistic production in this Early Period assemblage is nil.

The following Middle Period between 5500 and 1500 years ago is almost blank as far as decorated objects are concerned. A single decorated item, a pendant fashioned from whalebone to resemble a rockfish (Fig. 7:1), is the only art object discovered so far. It is from Namu and is about 3500 years old. Such pendants may have represented spirit helpers of their owners. Adze or chisel blades indicative of the knowledge of those same types of tools

	Item	Locality	Site	Phase	Date Estimate	Figure
1	Anthropomorphic figurine of antler	Kwatna	FaSu10 710	Anutcix	AD 200- 1200	7:2
2	Zoomorphic pendant of antler	Kwatna	FaSu 10 978	Anutcix	AD1200	7:4a
3	Bird pendant of antler	Kwatna	FaSu 10 250	Anutcix	AD 200- 1200	7:4b
4	Bone object fragment; line and dot design	Kwatna	FaSu 10 902	Anutcix	AD 200- 1200	7:4c
5	Decorated antler valve, for sealing harpoon head	Kwatna	FaSu 2 3013	Anutcix	AD 1200	7:3b
6	Crude anthropomorphic figurine, stone	Kwatna	FaSu 2 3037	Anutcix	AD 1200	7:4d
7	Shuttle/spindle of whalebone	Kwatna	FaSu 2 2896	Anutcix	AD 1300	7:3a
8	Bone pin with eye design	Kwatna	FaSu 2 2960	Anutcix	AD 1200	7:4e
9	Bone object fragment with dot design	McNaughton Island	EITb 10	Anutcix	?	-
10	Zoomorphic stone club fragment	Kwatna	FaSu 2 695	Kwatna	AD 1500 1800	-
11	Antler harpoon valve with incised line	Kwatna	FaSu 10 1035	Anutcix	AD 200- 1200	-
12	Bone pendant with line and dot design	Kwatna	FaSu 1 514	Kwatna	AD 1500- 1800	7:6a
13	Antler pendant with joined anthropomorphic figures	Kwatna	FaSu 1	Kwatna	AD 1500- 1800	7:6b
14	Stone hammerstone-grinder with anthropomorphic figure	Kwatna	FaSu 1 1905	Kwatna	AD 1500- 1800	7:6c 7:8
15	Bone spoon handle with perforated design	Kwatna	FaSu 10 964	Kwatna	AD 1800	7:6d
16	Wooden spoon handle with perforated design	Kwatna	FaSu 1	Kwatna	AD 1500- 1800	-
17	Circular stone with incised design	Koeye River		Surface find		7:7
18	Soapstone hammer with zoomorphic sculpture	Bella Coola Valley		Found in plowed field		7:5
19	Grooved maul with zoomorphic design	Bella Coola Valley		Found in plowed field		-
20	Frog bowl of vesicular basalt	Kwatna		Kwatna	AD 1500- 1850	7:8
21	Whalebone pendant shaped like a rockfish	Namu	EISx 1	Unnamed	1500 BC	7:1

Table 7:1. Art Objects From Central Coast Archaeological Sites

as used ethnographically in woodworking have been found also beginning about 3500 years ago, and suggest the presence of an art tradition in that medium. No waterlogged site in which specimens might be preserved has yet been found that dates this early.

It is only in the Late Period between about A.D. 500 and A.D. 1800 that there is clear and direct evidence for a tradition of decorative and ceremonial art. This evidence comes from three sites at Kwatna excavated by Philip Hobler and myself between 1969 and 1972, from

one object from the McNaughton Island site (EITb 10) investigated by J.A. Pomeroy in 1971, and from surface finds from the Bella Coola valley and the Koeye River. There are only 16 decorated objects (Table 1) out of nearly 7000 artifacts from these four excavated sites. Within the Late Period we have defined two sequent phases, the Anutcix phase followed by the Kwatna phase. Radiocarbon dates on these phases are not entirely satisfactory (Table 2), but do suggest that the Anutcix phase persisted from about A.D. 200 to A.D. 1400, and

Date A.D.	Lab Number	Site	Cultural Association
1 190 ± 90	Gak 4333	FaSu 10	Anutcix phase, oldest layer
2 480 ± 100	Gak 3210	FaSu 2	Below Anutcix phase house floor
3 670 ± 100*	Gak 3207	FaSu 1	Burned wood in Kwatna Phase associations in waterlogged deposit
4 1140 ± 70	Gak 4931	FaSu 10	60 cm deep in Anutcix phase associations
5 1270 ± 75	Gak 4932	FaSu 10	110 cm deep in Anutcix phase deposits
6 1280 ± 80	Gak 3211	FaSu 2	Anutcix phase house floor
7 1590 ± 90	Gak 3208	FaSu 1	Fish weir stake in waterlogged Kwatna phase deposit
8 1710 ± 80	Gak 3209	FaSu 1	Fish weir stake in waterlogged Kwatna phase deposit
9 1620 ± 80*	Gak 3909	FaSu 2	Anutcix phase
10 1920 ± 80*	Gak 3908	FaSu 2	Kwatna phase
11 1950 ± 90*	Gak 3213	FaSu 2	Kwatna phase
12 1950 ± 120*	Gak 3212	FaSu 2	Anutcix phase

\* These dates are unacceptable, and are the result of either contamination or error in the dating system. C<sup>14</sup> dates within the last 500 years tend to be generally unreliable.

Table 7:2. C<sup>14</sup> Dates on Sites With Kwatna and Anutcix Phase Components at Kwatna.

the Kwatna phase from about A.D. 1400 to A.D. 1800. There is continuity in many of the common artifact types between the two phases.

The site of Nutlitliquotlank (FaSu 2) exhibits an Anutcix phase house followed by a Kwatna phase occupation in the upper 60 cm of the site. A C<sup>14</sup> date of A.D. 480 ± 100 from below floor level, and a date of A.D. 1280 ± 80 from the floor itself would appear to date the Anutcix phase (Carlson and Hobler 1972). The Kwatna phase occupation is stratigraphically above this and contains only a single European trade object, a rolled copper bead. There are also several far too recent dates from this site (Table 2).

At Axeti (FaSu 1) there is both a waterlogged midden and a land midden. Since artifacts diagnostic of the Kwatna phase occur throughout, I am considering the site to be solely Kwatna phase in time even though one early C<sup>14</sup> date of A.D. 670 ± 100 is in contradiction to the two younger dates of A.D. 1590 ± 90 and 1710 ± 80.

At Anutcix (FaSu 10) there is an Anutcix phase occupation followed by a short Kwatna phase occupation which extends into the historic period. The oldest C<sup>14</sup> date is A.D. 190 ± 90 which comes from the very bottom of the deposit. The shell layer immediately above produced a date of A.D. 1270 ± 75, and the layer midway in the deposit 60 cm above the preceding date, and 60 cm

below the surface gave a reading of A.D. 1140 ± 70. The dates listed in Table 1 are approximations based on where the listed artifacts were found relative to the accepted C<sup>14</sup> dates in the respective sites.

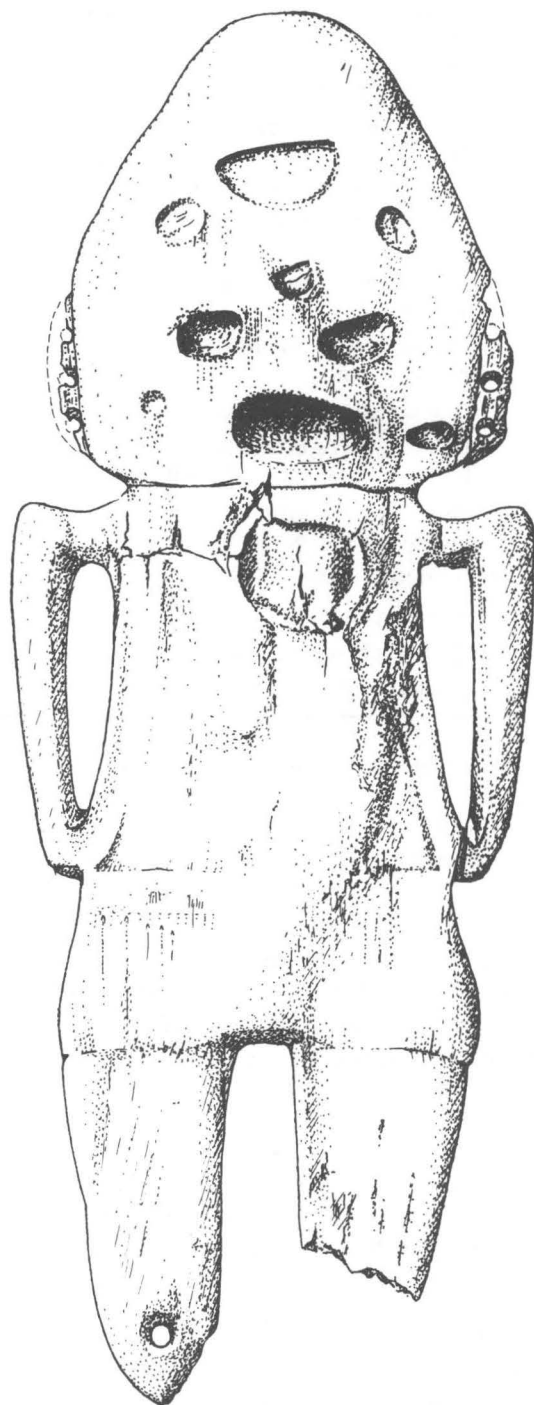
### Late Period Art Objects

Of the 16 decorated objects found in archaeological context, 10 are from the Anutcix phase, and 6 from the Kwatna phase. I will discuss the art of the Anutcix phase first.

#### Anutcix Phase Art

A glance at Table 1 shows that the art of this phase is preponderantly anthropomorphic and zoomorphic as opposed to geometric in style, although both styles occur. The most common material is antler, followed by bone and stone. Several of the objects are utilitarian items, others are ornaments.

The earliest decorated object is an antler figurine (Fig. 7:2) from the lowermost layer at FaSu 10. This layer was dated at A.D. 190 by C<sup>14</sup> although the layer immediately above was dated at A.D. 1280. These dates bracket the potential time span for this figurine, although it actually should date closer to the earlier C<sup>14</sup> estimate. I was very surprised to discover this figurine at Kwatna, as my first



*Fig. 7:2.* Anthropomorphic figurine made of antler from Anutcix (FaSu 10) at Kwatna. This figurine dates between A.D. 200 and 1200 with present evidence favouring the earlier date. Actual size.

acquaintance with figurines of this type was in the San Juan Islands far to the south almost 30 years ago where a similar figurine had been found in a cave on Sucia Island (Carlson 1954). Since that time two other figurines have been found, one by Onat working at the Fishtown site (45-Sk-33) at the mouth of the Skagit River, and one by Munsell at the Conway site (45-SK-59) also in northern Puget Sound. A close look at the figurine found by H.I. Smith (1904) in a grave at Tampico indicates that it is of the same type. Another has been found on the beach at Montague Harbor in the Gulf Islands. Hence there are now six of these figurines with a distribution from near Yakima, Washington through northern Puget Sound to Kwatna Bay off Burke Channel, with the greatest frequency found in Puget Sound. Onat (pers. comm.) estimates the dates of the Conway and fishtown figurine at about A.D. 1000 which is within the time span of the Kwatna figure. The Sucia figure is undated, as is the Tampico figure although Warren (1968) places the grave associated with the Tampico figure in his Plateau pattern of Interior prehistoric culture which begins after A.D. 300 and persists into the Ethnographic Period.

The question of meaning in respect to these figurines is perhaps of greater interest. Three are possibly female, at least they all wear what is possibly a fringed cedar bark skirt (fringed skirts are also worn by Shamens, however). The Montague Harbor Figure is a male. The head shape of the Kwatna and Sucia figures suggests head deformation which would indicate a high status female, although the facial configuration of the Kwatna figure may indicate a mask. From a stylistic viewpoint, the Tampico and Sucia figures are interesting as both exhibit "joint ovals," and as such suggest that they might figure into the ancestry of classic style northwest coast art. Their overall configuration, however, is Salish and the more likely interpretation is that these ovals are the result of influence from northern classic styles. The Kwatna piece may actually be a trade object from the south as I know of no elk remains anywhere nearby large enough to provide an antler for local manufacture of this object. The total style of the Tampico figure is in keeping with Plateau styles of rock art, and as such suggests local manufacture. These figurines are similar to shamanic spirit helpers from Siberia. They are illustrated and discussed further in Chapter 11.

The other Anutcix phase objects are more firmly dated to about A.D. 1200. While the information is actually meagre, it seems clear that classic Northwest Coast art was in existence along this part of the coast by this time, and that even some distinctive elements we see in Bella Coola ethnographic art may also have been present. The evidence for the first statement is based on two items (*Fig. 7:3*), a whalebone hand spindle or shuttle and the valve of a sealing harpoon head, both of which exhibit an artistic device which Holm calls a T-form which in classic

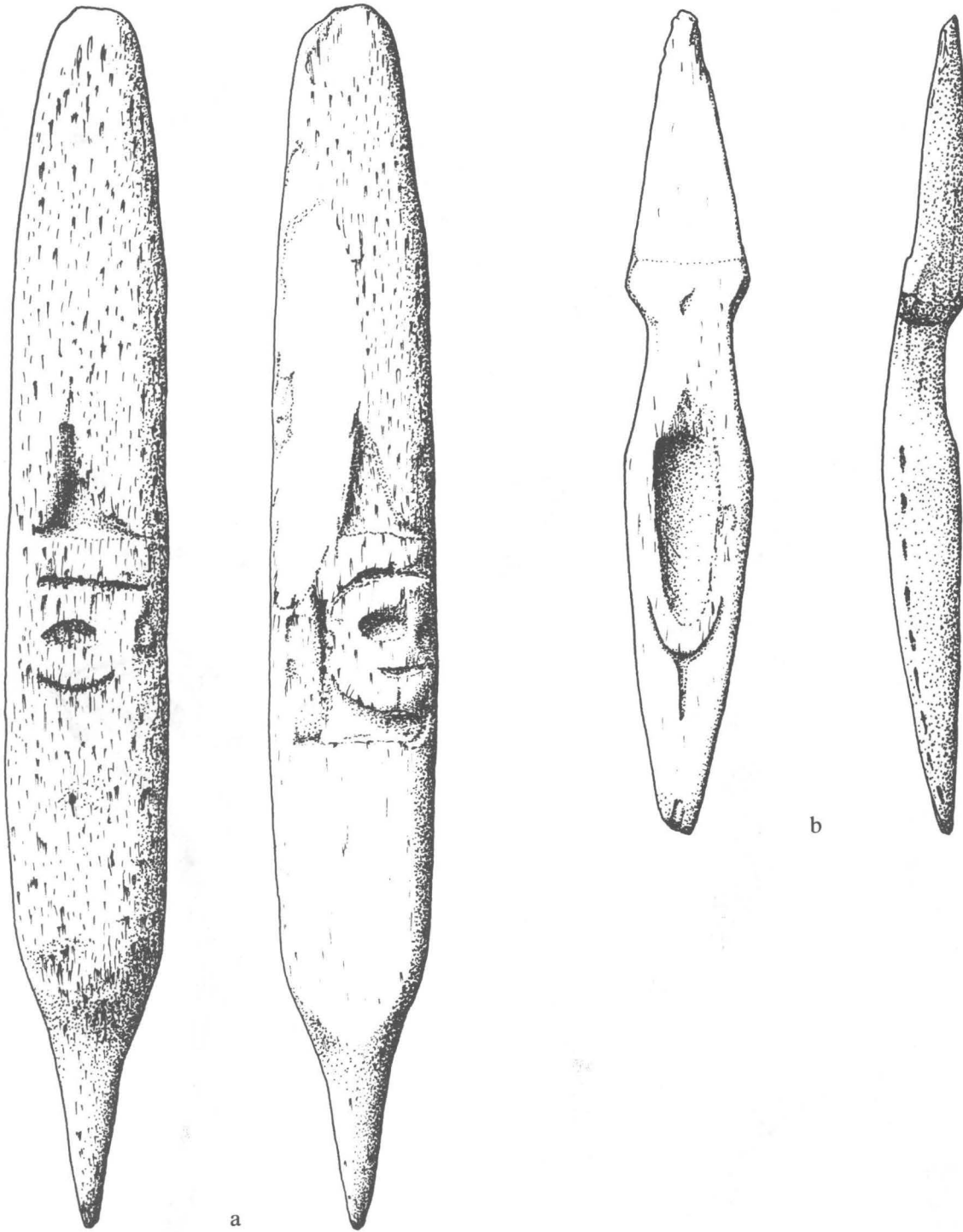
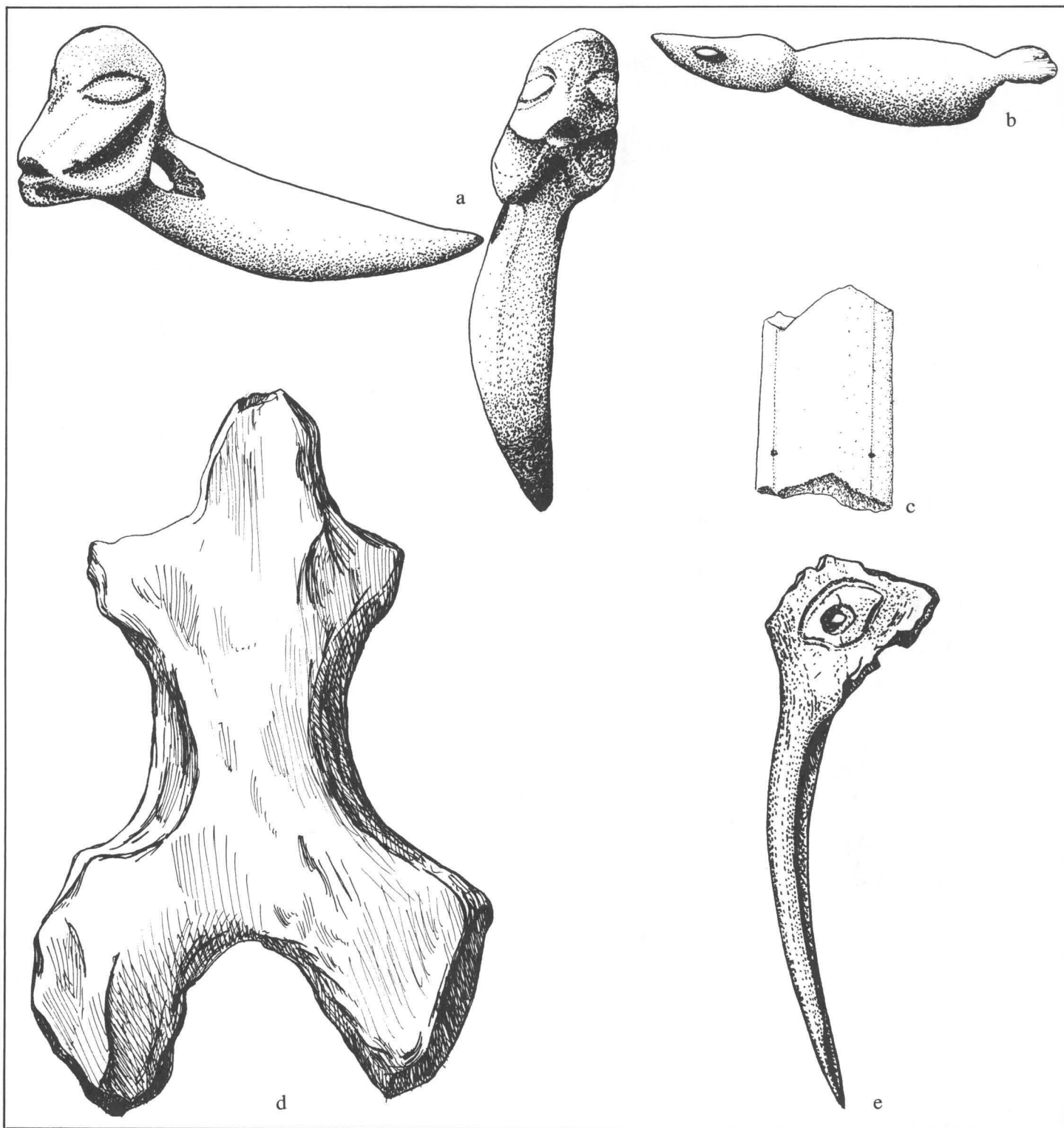


Fig. 7:3. Artifacts from the Anutxix phase suggesting the northern style of Northwest Coast art. *a* Spindle or shuttle of whalebone. *b* Valve from a sealing harpoon head of bone. Note the T-forms on both pieces. A.D. 200-1300 (actual size).



*Fig. 7:4.* Decorated objects from Anutcix phase components at Kwatna dating between A.D. 200 and 1300. *a, b* bird pendants of antler. *c* bone object fragment with incised geometric design. *d* crude stone figurine. *e* bone pin with incised eye. *a* twice actual size; *b-e* actual size.

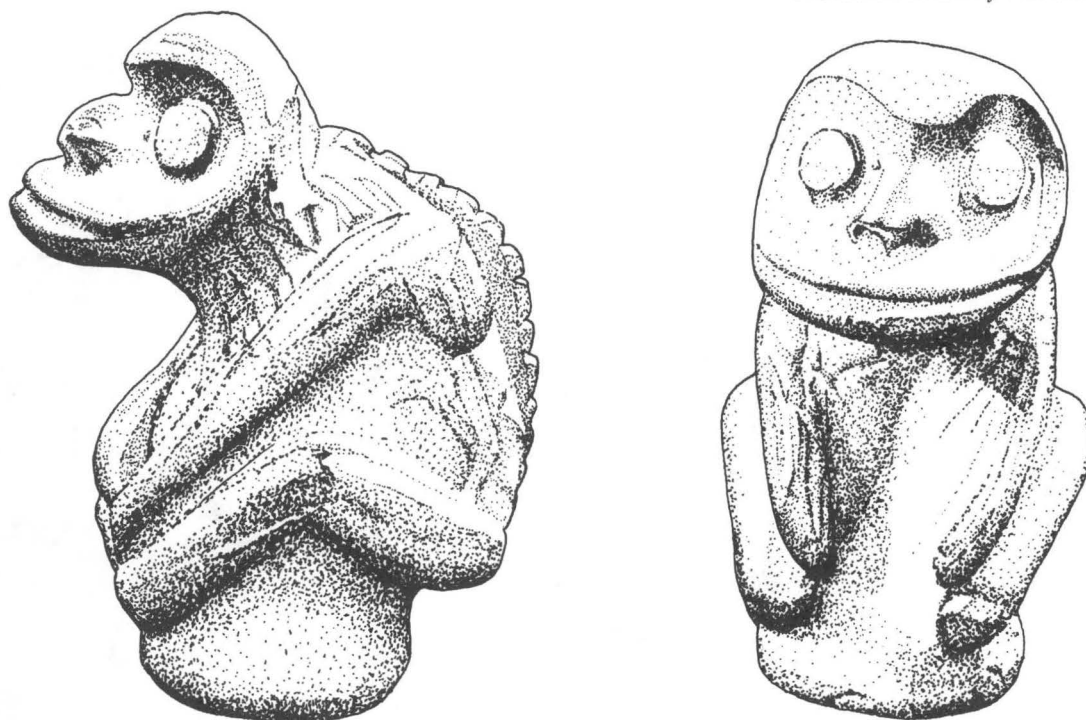


Fig. 7:5. Soapstone hammer from a ploughed field in the Bella Coola valley. This object is about 12 cm tall.

Northwest Coast art is used for relieving monotony on plain surfaces. This element seems simple, which indeed it is, but it is also highly sophisticated and not an element which would come about at the very beginning of stylistic development. The eye form of the bone pin (Fig. 7:4) is suggestive of classic art also, but is too crude to be definitive.

Evidence for the statement about the presence of a Bella Coola style at this time rests on this smiling antler pendant (Fig. 7:4a) from Anutcix which dates to about A.D. 1200. The deep relief carving is more reminiscent of Bella Coola than of any other art style with which I am familiar. The head is clearly skull-like and somewhat bird-like. There is a circular hole in the top of the head. Is there a Bella Coola myth about a bird skull with a hole? (I haven't found one, yet.) A soapstone hammer (Fig. 7:5) found in a ploughed field in the Bella Coola valley is reminiscent in style of this pendant, but is obviously not a depiction of the same being. Who this smiling creature, this prehistoric Mona Lisa is, I don't know, but I'll bet he/she's somebody.

The other Anutcix phase art objects (Fig. 7:4) consist of a small bird-form pendant of antler, a crude anthropomorphic figurine of stone, the valve from a salmon harpoon head with an incised line outlining its edges, a bone object fragment with a series of drilled dots and another fragment with a line and dot design. These objects offer little in the way of information beyond their mere presence, although if one can imagine these motifs combined and recombined in wood and on a grander

scale than that in which they survive in bone, one would probably have a truer picture of the art of the Anutcix phase than that shown here.

#### Kwatna Phase Art

The majority of the art objects of the Kwatna phase come from the waterlogged midden at Axeti (FaSu 1) (Hobler 1970:87; Carlson 1972:41). Even though this is a site with excellent preservation of wood and basketry, the only decorated wooden objects are portions of two spoons, one with a textured surface pattern produced with a porcupine or beaver tooth incising tool, and one with incised outlining on the handle with a perforated slit down the centre of the handle. The circumstances of the waterlogging phenomena at Axeti are not absolutely clear, but we seem to have been excavating trash caught in the silt at the end of the fish trap, which likely emanated from houses on the island directly above the end of the fish trap.

Bone objects from the Kwatna phase consist of a pendant with an incised line and drilled dot design, and a bone spoon handle (Fig. 7:6) with the same kind of T-form perforated slit as the wooden one.

The single antler object from the Kwatna phase is a pendant with two anthropomorphic figures, back to back, and holding hands. The style is more naturalistic than anything else. As with the earlier anthropomorphic beings, it is difficult to speculate as to the meaning of these figures. Are they the twins widespread in North American Indian mythology, and here associated with procuring

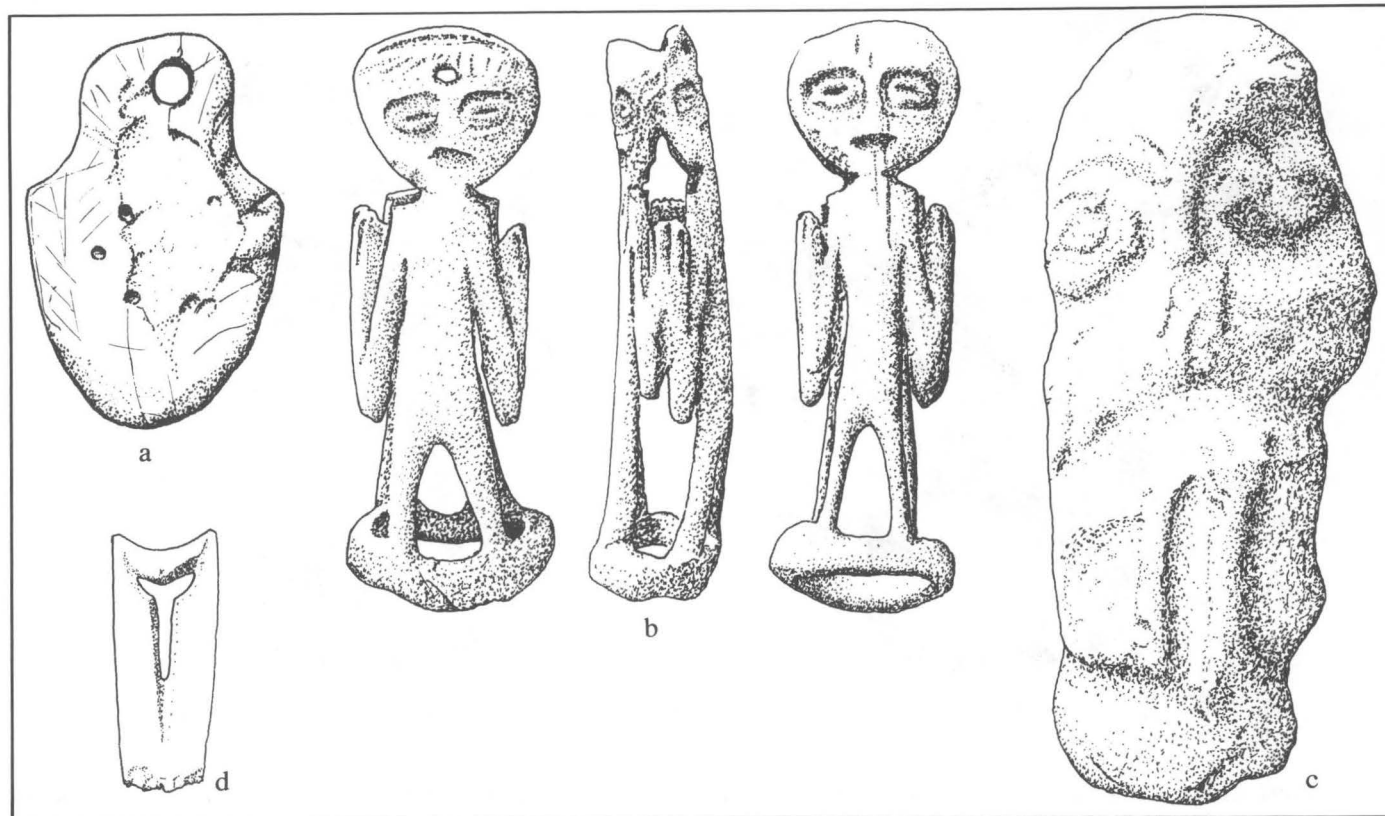


Fig. 7:6. Decorated objects from Kwatna phase components at Kwatna dating between about A.D. 1400 and 1800. *a* bone pendant (2 times natural size). *b* antler pendant (actual size). *c* stone hammerstone-grinder (actual size). *d* bone spoon handle (actual size).

salmon? Or is this simply man (any man or all men) and the fact that there are two of them, only to balance the composition? What they remind me of are the little men one sees in the rock art of this part of the coast. We don't know what he means in those contexts either.

Mobiliary sculpture in stone is also present in Kwatna phase associations. The head of a club from FaSu 2 is nearly identical to the head of a complete club from Powell River (Duff 1975, #113). The source of these clubs is unknown. A hammerstone-grinder from FaSu 1 (Fig. 7:6c) bears a sculptured figure reminiscent of coastal petroglyphs; it is quite surely local in origin as the hammerstone-grinder is a typical Kwatna implement. Inverarity (1950 Fig. 50) illustrates a stone figure of similar style from the Bella Bella region. This completes the description of those items with good archaeological context. There are a few pieces without good context: a grooved zoomorphic maul from a ploughed field in the Bella Coola valley which is possibly a trade item from the north at least it would be more at home there; a perforated stone (Fig. 7:7) found by a logger at a site on the Koye River. The style on the latter with its little stick men also occurs in pictographs in the central coast region, and belongs to what Lundy (Ch. 5) calls the Interior Intrusive Style. We have yet to find this style in

an archaeological context, but consider it quite recent.

The final piece of art from this area is a large stone bowl of vesicular basalt shaped to represent a frog (Fig. 7:8). This bowl is known only from a photograph in the Smithsonian Institution. The bowl can be ascribed to the Kwatna phase as objects of vesicular basalt are found only in that phase.

## Conclusions

In terms of the questions posed in the introduction to this paper, some conclusions can be offered. The first and most obvious is that, although limited in quantity, there indeed is art from the central coast that is definitely prehistoric. The earliest art, the fish pendant from Namu, is characterized more by crude realism than by any definable style. The next art to appear (A.D. 200-1200) is related to both classic northern coastal art, and to Salish art to the south. The final art style of the region attested to by painted and sculpted objects of the Ethnographic Period is in northern classic style. Considerably more archaeological research is required to augment this small, but fascinating sample of prehistoric art from the central coast of British Columbia.



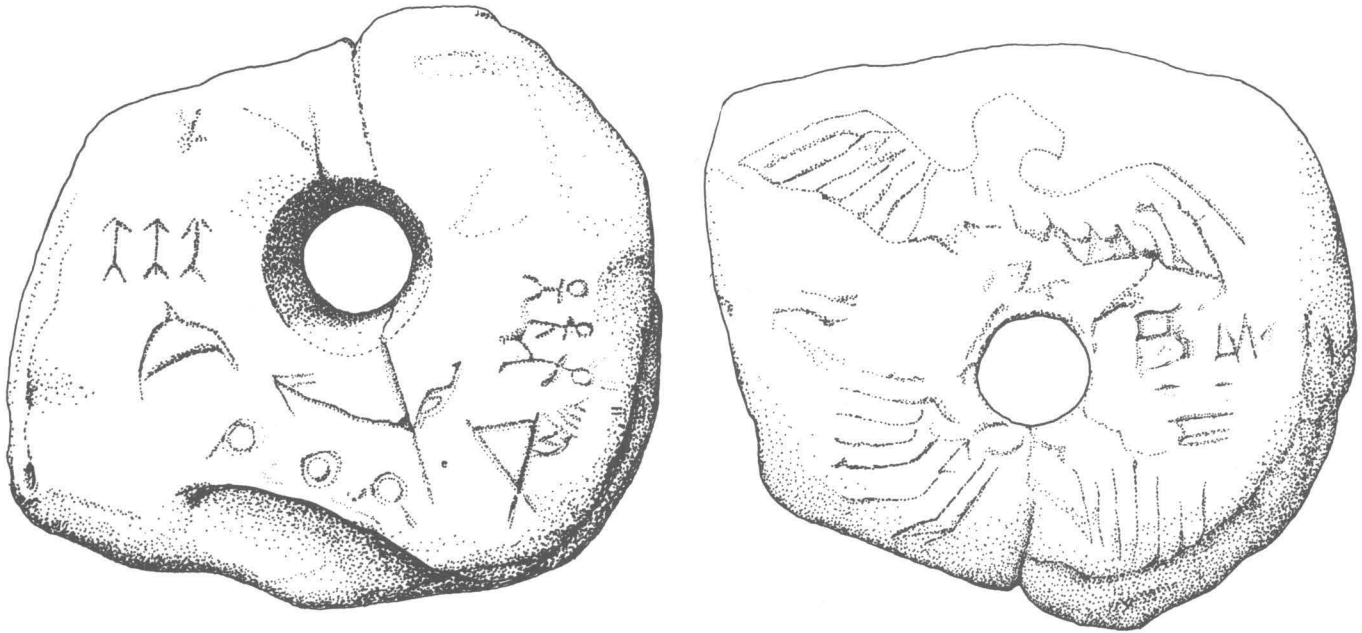


Fig. 7:7. Circular stone from the surface of a site on the Koeve River. The incised design is reminiscent of Interior pictographic style which also occurs on this part of the central coast.

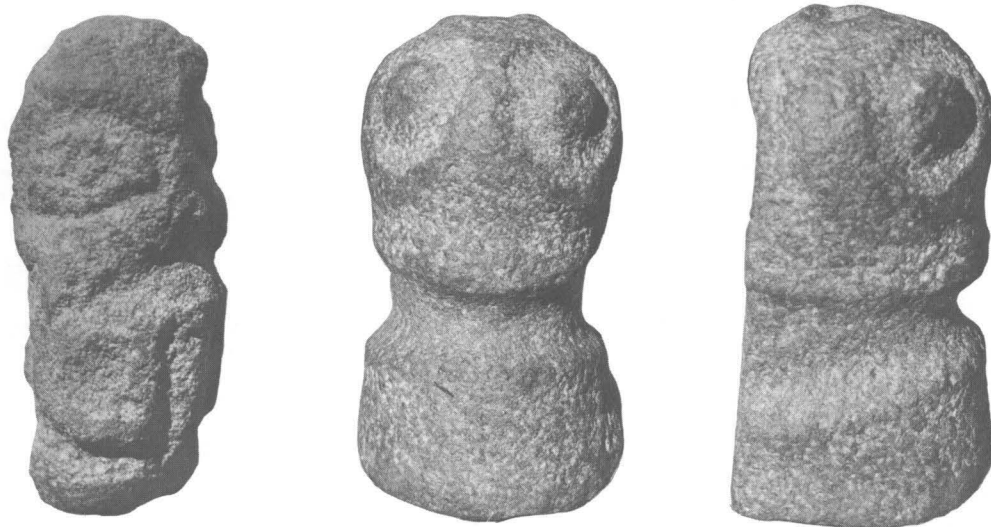
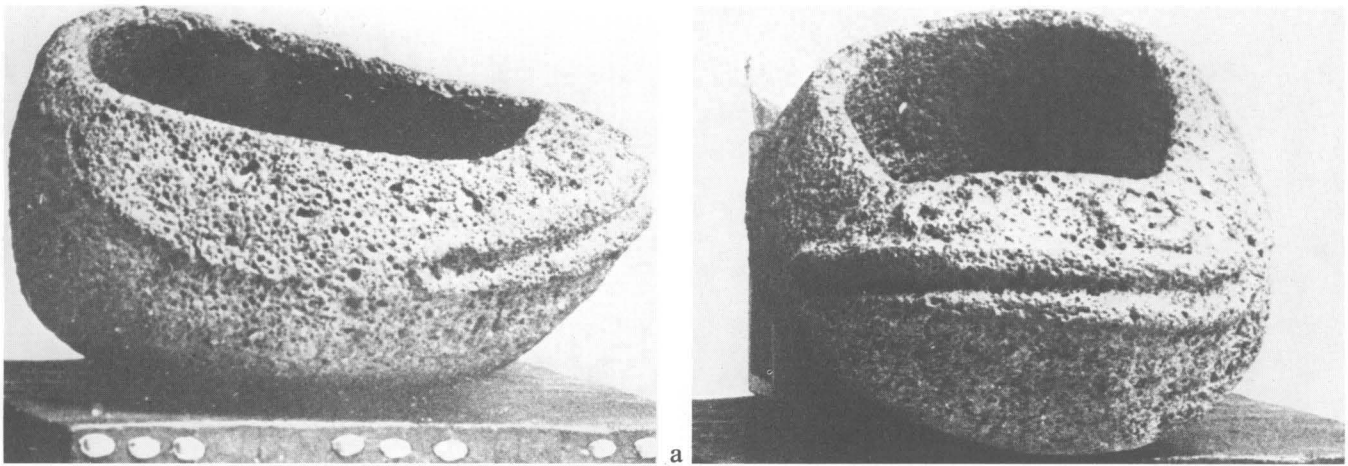


Fig. 7:8. Pecked stone artifacts. *a* Frog bowl and *b* hammerstone-grinder from the late prehistoric or early historic period at Kwatna. *c* Grooved maul from the Bella Coola valley. Variable scale.

