

SCULPTURED STONE FROM ST. THOMAS, U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS

by

Katheryne Kay

V.I. Department of Conservation and Cultural Affairs

In 1972, Alfred Chiswell, a resident of St. Thomas, while skin-diving on the eastern end of the island at a popular beach known as Coki Point, noticed something peculiar on the ocean floor some 12 feet below him. This strange form was found to be a stone axe head, or more properly, a petaloid celt. Even more exciting was the figure carved on one of its faces which was undoubtedly human in form. Mr. Chiswell subsequently left the Virgin Islands and donated the specimen to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. where I re-discovered it in the fall of 1974 while examining their collections from the Caribbean. With the kind assistance of Dr. Clifford Evans, Chairman of the Department of Anthropology, we arranged to have this interesting and valuable specimen returned to the Virgin Islands on loan to the Virgin Islands Museum, where it is on display today.

Later, in February of 1975, members of the Virgin Islands Archaeological and Conservation Societies were invited to visit the Corning Estate at Botany Bay, located on the extreme western tip of St. Thomas, to photograph and explore reported Pre-Columbian petroglyphs and historic ruins there. During the course of this visit the late Warren H. Corning brought out several pieces of aboriginal ceramics that had been found during the construction of the beach house there. Shortly, we were shown yet another specimen that was very unusual and of particular interest. I was told that during the summer of 1965 a member of the Corning family had been taking a stroll along the beach and had noticed an odd looking stone among the coral rubble and sand. Having seen the ceramics during the construction of the beach house the family was on the lookout for more evidence of aboriginal habitation in the area. The stone was enthusiastically examined and found to be much more than an ordinary rock. As the family had a personal friend in Dr. Junius Bird of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, it was shown to him and identified as an "Elbow Stone" of the Taino Indians.

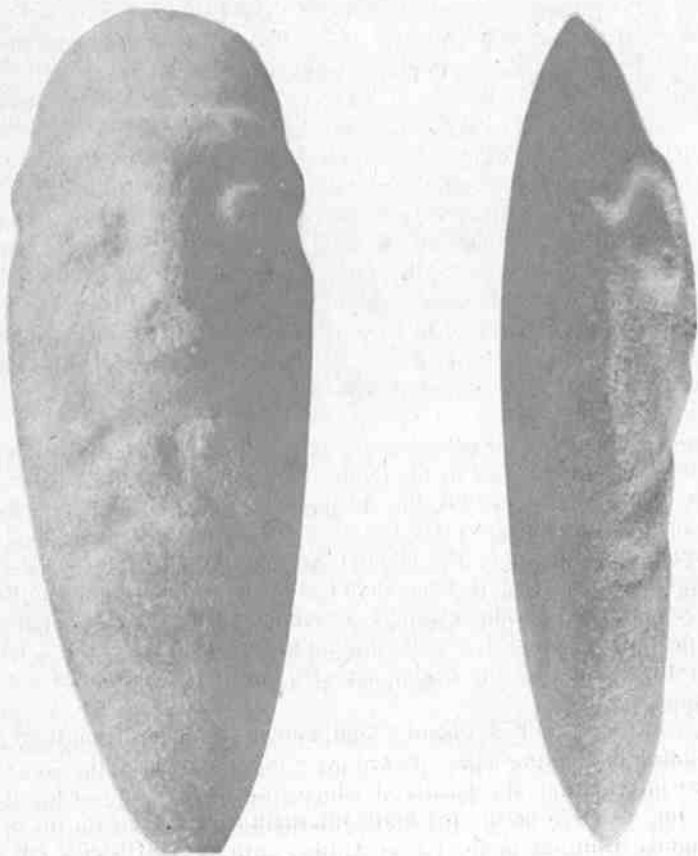
Several archaeologists had been shown the rare "Elbow Stone" over the years, but it had never been mentioned in any publication. The specific use of this type of artifact is still unclear today, but they do appear to have had some political or ceremonial significance and are often found in association with the famed ball courts or ceremonial plazas of the Greater Antilles. This particular specimen exhibits a simple geometric design carved in low relief, although some are found with elaborate anthropomorphic carvings. As reinforced by the associated ceramic style (Elenoid) it should date from around 900-1200 A.D. This is a particularly interesting period as the beginnings of a cultural 'renaissance' are just starting to appear.

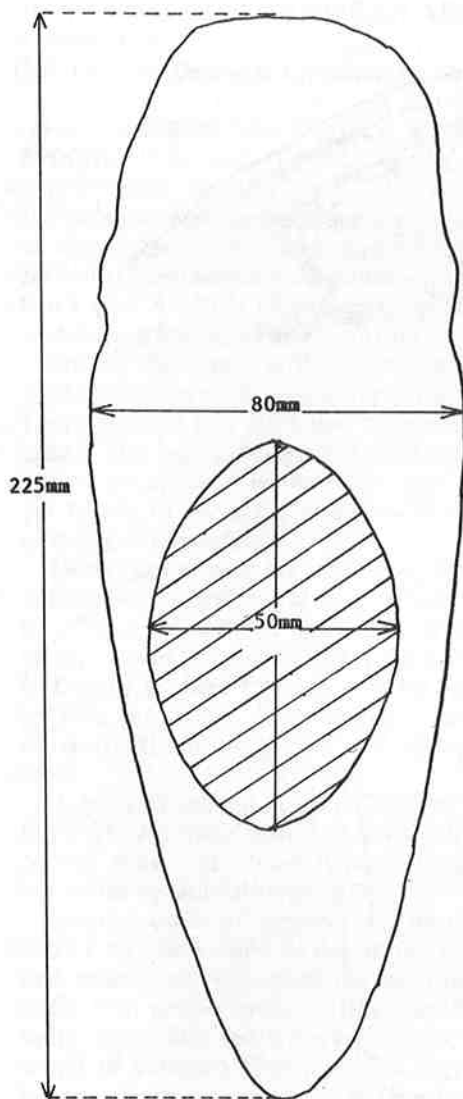
These two very rare, in fact, one-of-a-kind, known specimens from the Virgin Islands are indeed fascinating. They sparked my interest and began the search for interpretative information, the results of which formed the body of my paper delivered in July of 1975 before the Sixth International Congress for the Study of Pre-Columbian Cultures in the Lesser Antilles entitled A SURVEY OF ANTILLEAN SCULPTURED STONE.

By the term 'sculpture' I mean the ART or process of carving (or modeling, in the case of ceramics) in three dimensions as opposed to painting, engraving or incising which would appear in only two dimensions. The sex-based and therefore selective transmission of ceramic traditions makes religious art in general, and stone sculpture in particular, a more valid indicator of this cultural 'renaissance', or period of vigorous artistic and intellectual activity, which seems to have taken place in the Greater Antilles beginning possibly as early as 700 A.D. and extending up until the time of the Discovery.

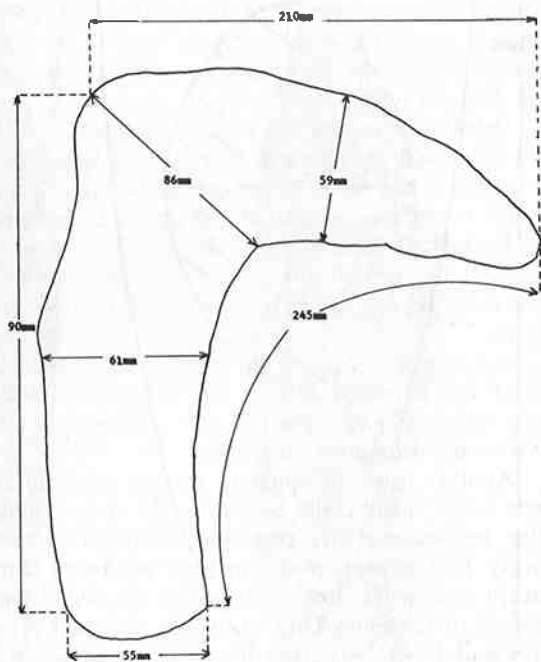
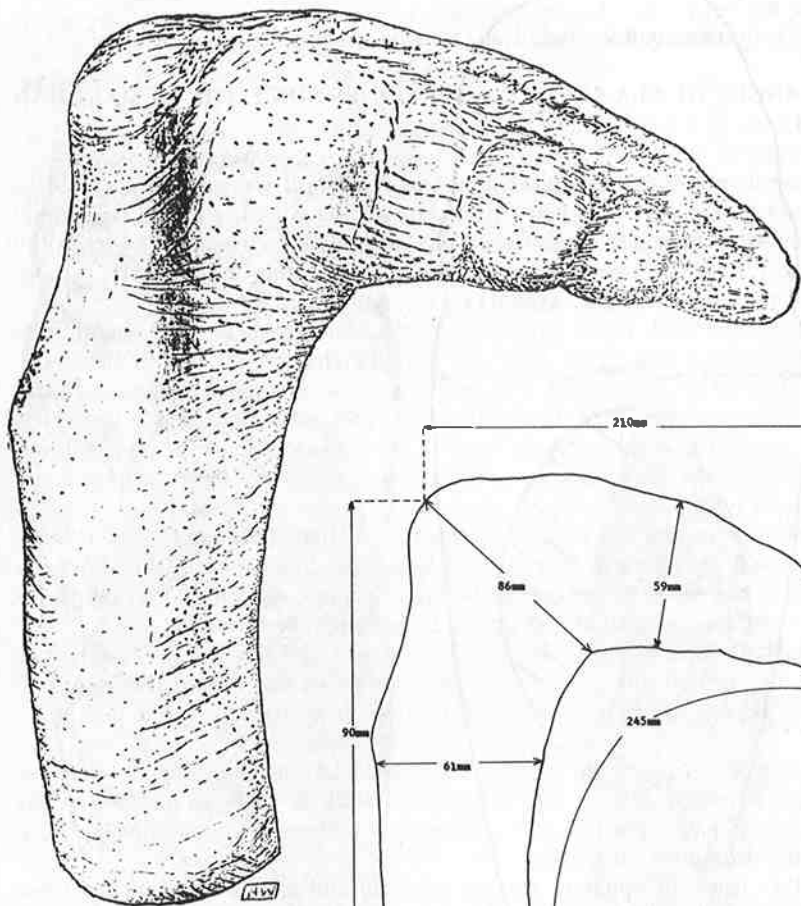
AUTHOR'S NOTE/ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: It is hoped that future articles or publications will include a comprehensive listing, catalogue of known specimens, and their attributes; specific distributional charts and maps; and correlations with associated absolute dates.

This article was produced, at least in part, under the auspices of the Virgin Islands Government, Department of Conservation and Cultural Affairs, Bureau of Libraries and Museums, Office of the Territorial Archaeologist.





V74 (SI 472-992)
"Chiswell Celt"



V75 (VIAS WHC-1776)
"Cornier Elbow Stone"