

CEREMONIAL TABLETS AND RELATED OBJECTS FROM FLORIDA

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thirty-six years ago, the Florida Anthropological Society chose as its emblem a design derived from an incised aboriginal metal tablet found in Florida in 1878. Since 1878, many such tablets and related objects have been found, but very little information has been published about them. The authors have spent the past year (1983) visiting museums and collectors to catalog these objects. This investigation has resulted in some unexpected and significant interpretations.

Introduction

The artifacts considered herein resemble each other, sharing several common attributes of shape (Fig. 1). In general, the objects are rectangular. They display bilateral symmetry along their longer axis. They also display a "two-partedness," being divisible into two halves along the shorter axis. Usually, one of these halves is thicker than the other. The thicker half usually has a rounded end or spatulate edge, whereas the thinner half usually has a flat end or squared edge which has a projection or "tenon" extending from the "mid-line." Furthermore, the thinner half is usually flat and usually bears a motif on the obverse side. The thicker non-tenoned half usually has a convex obverse surface which often bears a pair of "tear-like" or circular designs.

These common attributes of general form and design are executed upon extremely diverse materials, including metal, stone and wood. The metal examples consist of alloys of silver, gold and copper. Some were cut from sheets, others from blocks or ingots, and others possibly were cast. The designs were carved, incised or painted and vary greatly. The sizes of the objects vary considerably, ranging from extremes of 20 mm to one meter in length. Even the form shows variation. The division between two halves usually consists of either a constriction or "waist" or three narrow "connections" joining the two halves. To facilitate describing these objects, we have developed terms which are explained graphically in Figure 1.

Despite the extreme diversity within this general class of objects, they fall within distinct "sub-groups" or types. Specifically, the types are 1) metal tablets, 2) stone tablets, 3) wood tablets and 4) wood plaques. These four types of objects probably had different functions and may depict different representations, but there are obvious relationships and, thus, all are considered in this paper.

General Type Descriptions

Metal Tablet. "Ceremonial tablet" is the most often-used term in referring to this type of artifact in the literature (e.g., Goggin 1947:275 and 1949, Griffin and Smith 1948:16, Willey 1949:124, and Rouse 1951:233). Other names include "cult tablet" (Smith 1956:54, Smith and Gottlob 1976:13), "symbol badge" (Sears 1982) and "Calusa tablet" (Card 1983).

The metal tablet is a small artifact ranging in size from 20 to 100 mm in length. Designs are usually incised, or occasionally repoussé, and entail variable motifs on the obverse, including concentric circles, the cross, and the cross and circle on the tenoned half and a pair of "tear drop" designs separated by a medial strip which often terminates in nested half-rectangles on the spatulate half. The reverse may have an incised design, often a crescent motif. The two halves are joined by three connections.

Stone Tablet. The stone tablet, previously termed "stone tablet pendant" (Goggin 1949), is a small artifact usually carved from a non-local, fine-grained stone. These objects are bipartite and range in size from 20 to 80 mm. The design is incised or carved in low relief and usually entails a pair of "eyes" divided by a medial line or strip on the rounded half and a quadrilateral and/or triangular device on the tenoned half. The tenon can be grooved apparently for suspension.

Wood Tablet. This artifact is a carved piece of wood which may range from 200 to 300 mm in length. Designs may be carved, incised or painted on both surfaces and entail variable motifs on the obverse, including concentric

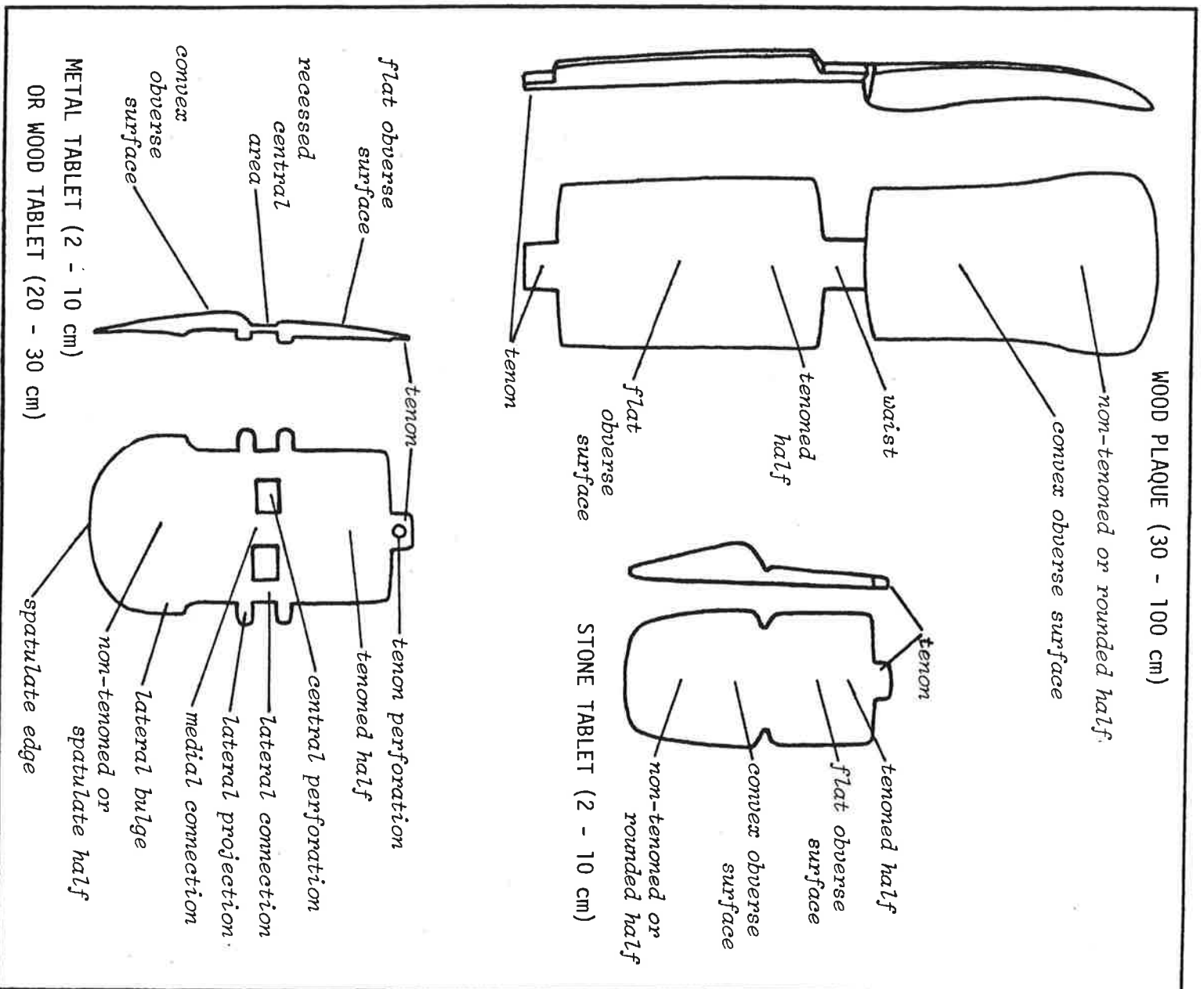


Figure 1.

Diagrams Showing Some Terms Used to Describe Tablets and Plaques. The diagrams show generalized basic shapes from the front and side. Basic shape apparently overrode orientation and the terms "upper" and "lower" have been avoided (some metal tablets may have been suspended sideways). How a tablet or plaque *looked* was very important and hence they share most of the features diagrammed above.