

Native American Soapstone Bowl Quarries

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After several recent TCHS presentations on the subject of Native American history in our area, I thought it might be interesting to discuss one of the larger but lesser known artifacts that can be found locally. Many folks are familiar with the arrowheads, points and stone tools that have been found in the ground over the decades, as well as rock art (petroglyphs and other carvings) that can be seen at locations such as Track Rock Gap. But another reminder of the Native American history in our area is the frequent occurrence of stone bowl quarries and workshops that can be found in Towns and adjoining counties.

Background

In much of what is now the Southeastern USA, the introduction of pottery didn't occur until sometime around 1000 B.C. Prior to the invention of pottery, containers for cooking and storage consisted of baskets, wooden bowls, things such as gourds and turtle shells, and carved stone bowls. Despite their weight, the stone bowls had many advantages over the other vessel types.

The use of carved stone bowls seems to have been most common during the Late Archaic period, between about 4,000 and 1,000 B.C., although it probably continued sometime later, into the Woodland period. Archaeological studies have shown that stone bowls manufactured in the Southeast were traded or transported throughout the eastern U.S. Stone bowls and fragments have been recovered at archaeological sites from the Midwest to the southern tip of Florida.

Once pottery was introduced, the manufacture of stone bowls decreased. It was once thought that production stopped altogether after pottery became available, but recent studies show that both types coexisted for centuries in many areas. In spite of their weight, the stone bowls were used long after pottery bowls were common, perhaps due to the excellent heat retention qualities of the stone. In many households, a finely produced stone bowl was a valuable commodity that would remain with the family for many generations.

Geology

Soapstone, an impure talcy rock which occurs in many parts of the Piedmont and Southern Appalachian mountains, was a common raw material for carved stone bowls. The stone is easily carved into bowl form, and was also used for making smoking pipes and other small ornaments. The stone was quarried from natural outcrops using stone chisels and axes. Smaller stones, antler, and bone tools were then used to scrape out the finished bowl.

Stone bowl quarries have been located in both the Piedmont and the Blue Ridge Mountain areas of north Georgia. The Chatuge-Brasstown Ultramafic Sill is a well-studied geologic zone, and includes several areas with soapstone outcrops.

Some Native Americans in the Archaic Period were apparently very astute "geologists". Almost anywhere that appropriate rock outcrops are found, there was bowl production. Sometimes the outcrop might be only a single small boulder. Originally, many Native Americans probably produced their own bowls, but it is likely that over time, bowl production became more of a "craftsman" vocation for the more skilled artisans.

There are several common names for the rock that was utilized: soapstone, steatite, altered ultramafic, etc. Generally, rocks that contain a percentage of talc are referred to as soapstone, and we will stick with that term here. The rock at many of our local sites is a chlorite-talc schist. It is soft but has good integrity so it can be carved into bowl preforms and later into finished bowls. Soapstone has two advantages over many other rock types. Being softer, it is relatively easy to carve it with harder rocks. Secondly, it has heat retention properties that are advantageous for cooking.

Terms

Before continuing, definition of a few commonly used terms should be understood:

Bowl Quarry - any soapstone deposit where stone bowls were processed and removed from the rock. This can be anything from a single boulder to a series of large soapstone outcrops.

Bowl Scar - the (sometimes shallow) protuberance on a parent rock that remains where a bowl preform was removed.

Parent Rock - the larger rock/boulder from which a bowl is carved/chipped.

Preform - a roughed-out bowl shape which has not yet had the interior chipped out. Preforms may be found still attached to the parent rock, or removed.

Workshop - a site where the bowls were finished once the preform had been removed from the parent rock. Sometimes this will be at the Bowl Quarry site.

Stone Bowl Manufacturing Process

Figure 1 illustrates (in rather crude form) the soapstone bowl production process. Evidence from around the Southeast shows that all bowl manufacturing was done using basically the same process. (Note that in these illustrations, scars from earlier bowl quarrying are shown on the boulder.) The various stages of bowl production are as follows:

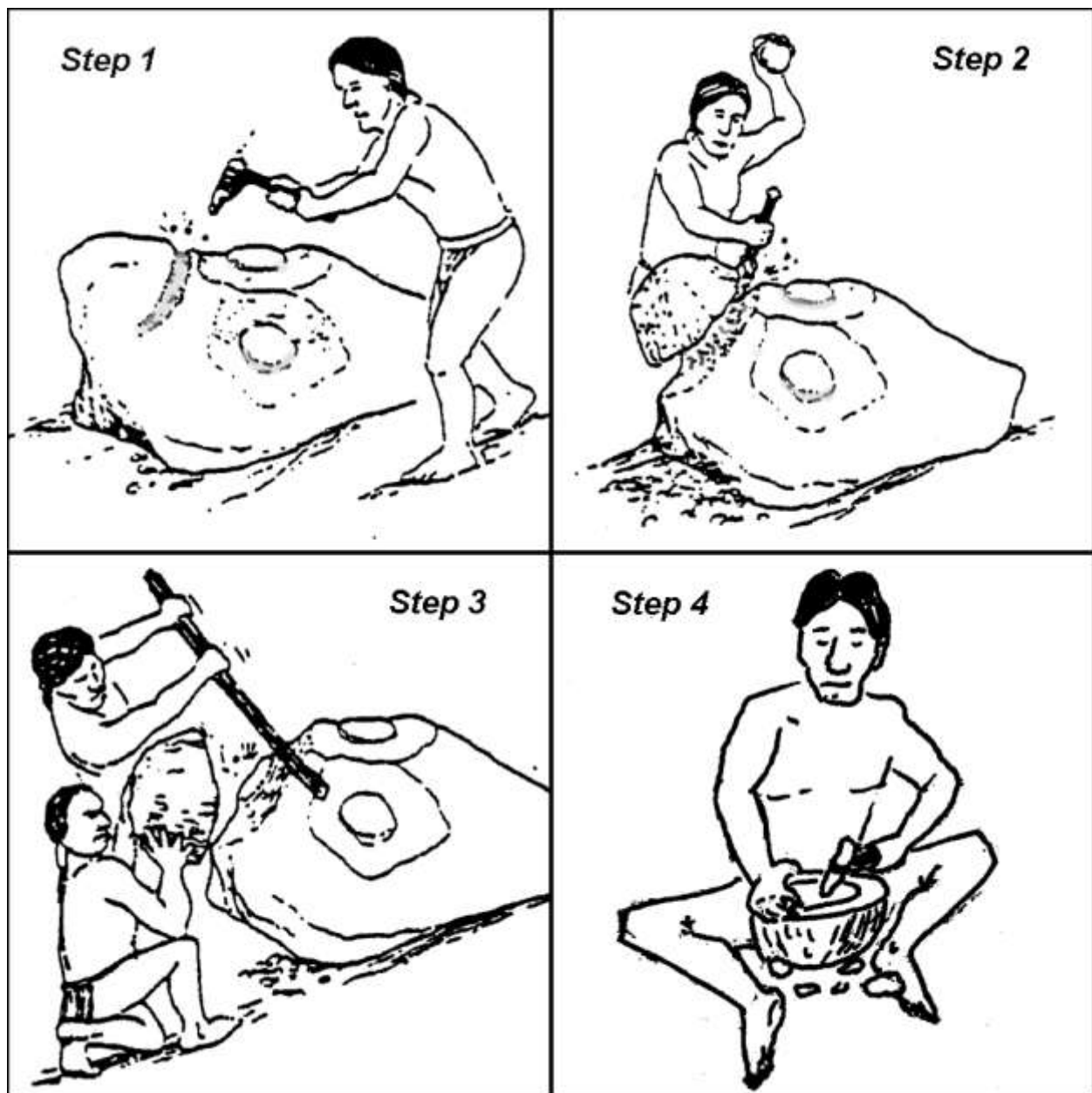


Figure 1 - Soapstone Bowl Production

Step 1: Once a suitable soapstone boulder is located, the worker found a rounded protuberance and/or chipped away at the rock (using stone tools) until a roughly rounded bottom of the bowl took shape.

Step 2: Once the preform exterior is roughed out, the worker chipped around the circumference to undercut the preform, readying it for detachment from the parent rock.

Step 3: The preform is detached, using some combination of additional chipping, wedges, or a wooden pry bar.

Step 4: The inside of the bowl is now chipped/carved out. Wall thickness, presence of handles and the amount of finishing on the bowl depended on planned use and other factors.

Examples

As mentioned earlier, a number of bowl quarries and workshops are found in our area, both on private property and on USFS land. The locations aren't usually publicized, due to the vandalism and theft which these sites sadly seem to attract. If you, the reader, knows of any, and maybe has visited them, please be respectful of the historic significance of these interesting locations.

A few examples from several local Soapstone quarries follow; these illustrate some of the features described earlier in the article:



Figure 2 - Bowl Preform



Figure 3 - Bowl Preform

Figure 2 shows an excellent bowl preform attached to the parent rock. Figure 3 shows the same preform, viewed from above. Note the skillful workmanship in achieving a nicely rounded shape for the bowl bottom. I often wonder why these bowls were abandoned before being removed and finished, with so much work already accomplished.



Figure 4 - Bowl Scar

Figure 4 illustrates a classic example of a bowl removal scar on the parent rock. The flat rounded segment is where part of the inside of the bowl detached and remained when the bowl preform was pried off.



Figure 5 - Quarry boulder

Figure 5 shows a boulder of almost 6 foot length, with indications of at least three bowls being made. On the left is a bowl removal scar, while the middle and right side show two preforms in their early-mid stages of manufacture.



Figure 6 - Large Quarry Ledge

Figure 6 is a photo of an outstanding large quarry boulder, approximately 12 feet wide by 8 feet high. It was obviously used as a bowl quarry for a long period of time. We counted 19 bowl preforms and/or removal scars on the face of this rock. Doubtless there were many more bowls produced from this boulder, but their evidence was subsequently removed as new bowls were carved from the underlying rock.



Figure 7 - Boulder with Preforms

Figure 7 illustrates a boulder with several unusual bowl preforms in work.

These are just a very few examples from the Native American soapstone bowl quarries to be found in our area. I find it fascinating to come across these remnants of ancient American civilization, and gaze upon articles that were worked by the hand of man some thousands of years ago. And I wonder what caused these individuals to lay down their tools and abandon these workshops with so many works still in progress.