# Effigy Mounds

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Effigy Mounds National Monument

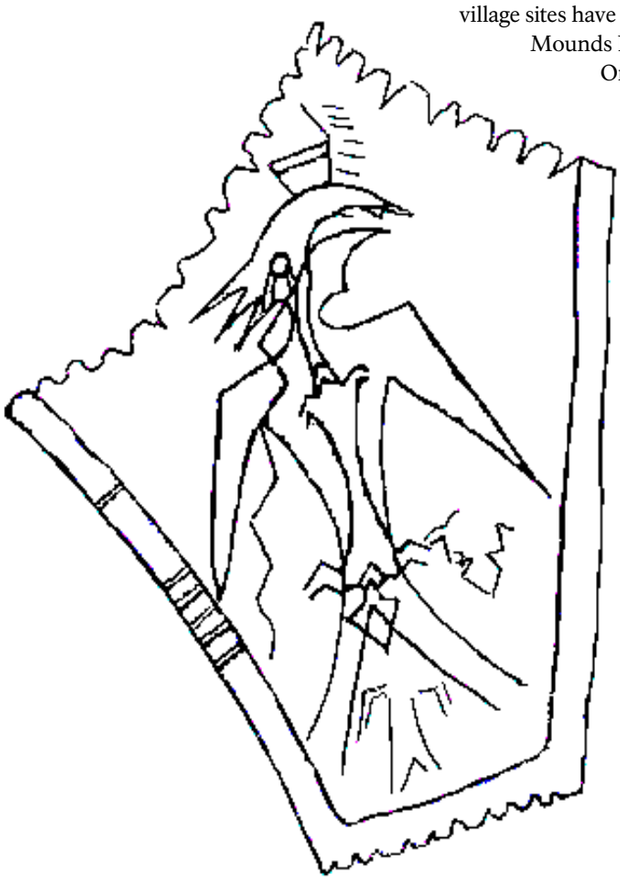
## The New Albin Tablet

Many of the great discoveries in archaeology occur quite by accident. Such is the case of a pipestone tablet known today as the New Albin Tablet. In the summer of 1915, workmen were excavating a cellar under a house in New Albin, Iowa. This river town has been long known as an important site for early cultures along the Upper Mississippi River.

The sandy soil along the walls of the excavation gave way, revealing a red pipestone tablet with curious figures and inscribed surfaces. Little did the workers realize that one of the most important discoveries in the archaeology of northeast Iowa had literally fallen into their hands.

To understand the significance of the New Albin Tablet, one must understand the cultures of the Upper Mississippi River 750 years ago. Until shortly before contact with European explorers, the Oneota lived along the Great River. The terraces of the Upper Iowa River and Mississippi River near LaCrosse and Lake Pepin, Wisconsin, were centers for the Oneota tradition in the Upper Mississippi River Valley.

The Oneota lived in permanent villages where they grew corn, beans, and squash. Like earlier groups, the Oneota continued to gather food from the rivers and wetlands and to hunt. While no Oneota village sites have been located in Effigy Mounds National Monument, Oneota pottery, triangular-shaped arrow points and pipes have been found along the river. Pipestone, or catlinite, is a soft stone, quarried in a site in present-day southwest Minnesota, that was carved into pipes and tablets. Today the site is preserved within Pipestone National Monument. The pipestone rock is a softer material sandwiched between layers of much harder quartzite. Sioux quartzite was named for the inhabitants of the site, while "catlinite" recognizes one of the first Europeans to visit and paint scenes of the site in 1836, George Catlin. Pipestone was used by the historic plains and woodland tribes to make ceremonial pipes in the 19th century; a practice that continues today.



The inscribed images on the New Albin Tablet continue to be a source of both mystery and inspiration for those who study its shape and surfaces. Tablets of pipestone or catlinite were believed to be made by the Oneota to record images from the spirit world and other sacred symbols. Some archaeologists believe the tablets were used in ceremonies to ensure a successful harvest.

Following its discovery, the New Albin Tablet was purchased by R. H. Thompson, and later sold to Harry Orr. Harry Orr and his brother, Ellison, were two amateur archaeologists in northeast Iowa. In October of 1960, the tablet was donated to Effigy Mounds National Monument. It is only through the foresight of the Orr brothers that the New Albin Tablet is preserved today.

In 1937, Ellison Orr described the tablet as being "nearly pentagonal in shape" and having pictographs representing a "thunder god or spirit." From the body of the image a zigzag line probably representing a bolt of lightning runs diagonally downward. On the reverse face of the stone, the central figure may represent a wand or flower while a lozenge-shaped figure resembles a lance or spearhead. Notches in the rim of the tablet may signify important events or ceremonies.

Much of the story of the New Albin Tablet is shrouded in mystery. Very likely, the pipestone tablet was of great spiritual significance to the early farming cultures along the river.

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## The Atlatl

The atlatl (AT-lat-ul or AT-ul-LA-tul), or "spear thrower," was the first complex weaponry system invented by humans, and has been used by people all over the world. Using this tool, a spear, or dart, can be launched in excess of 100 miles per hour, and over 300 yards away. The development of the atlatl increased the hunter's range and speed. Prehistoric American Indians took a stick, added a rock around the shaft, a spear, and completed a weapon that gave them deadly accuracy. It first appeared approximately 30,000 years ago on the Eurasian Continent, and arrived in North America thousands of years later. The atlatl and dart system is still used today by tribes in Papua New Guinea, South America, northwest Mexico, and Australia.

The structure of the atlatl is very simple, although each atlatl was custom made for every hunter and every spear the hunter used. The shaft can be made from a variety of materials and has a diameter of approximately one-half inch. A rock, or banner stone, is sometimes placed around the shaft and secured with sinew, a dried tendon of an animal. A hook, often made from the tip of an antler, is secured at the top end with sinew. The dart is notched at one end which will rest on the antler tip. The atlatl is held in the palm of the hand, and the forefinger, middle finger, and thumb secure the spear. As the atlatl is "whipped" through the air, the spear is released and pushed off of the end of the atlatl.

Atlatls come in a variety of lengths, shapes, and materials, but there is one innovation that truly stands out from all the rest: the banner stone. The banner stone gave the atlatl more weight, which increased the force behind the spear. It also acted as a timing mechanism. The hunter could place the stone higher or lower along the shaft and could coordinate the transfer of energy between the atlatl and the spear, thus optimizing its speed and distance. Over time, butterfly-shaped rocks were fixed around the shaft of the atlatls. The butterfly shape of the banner stone acted as a silencer, reducing the "whooshing" sound that the atlatl made as it pushed the spear through the air.

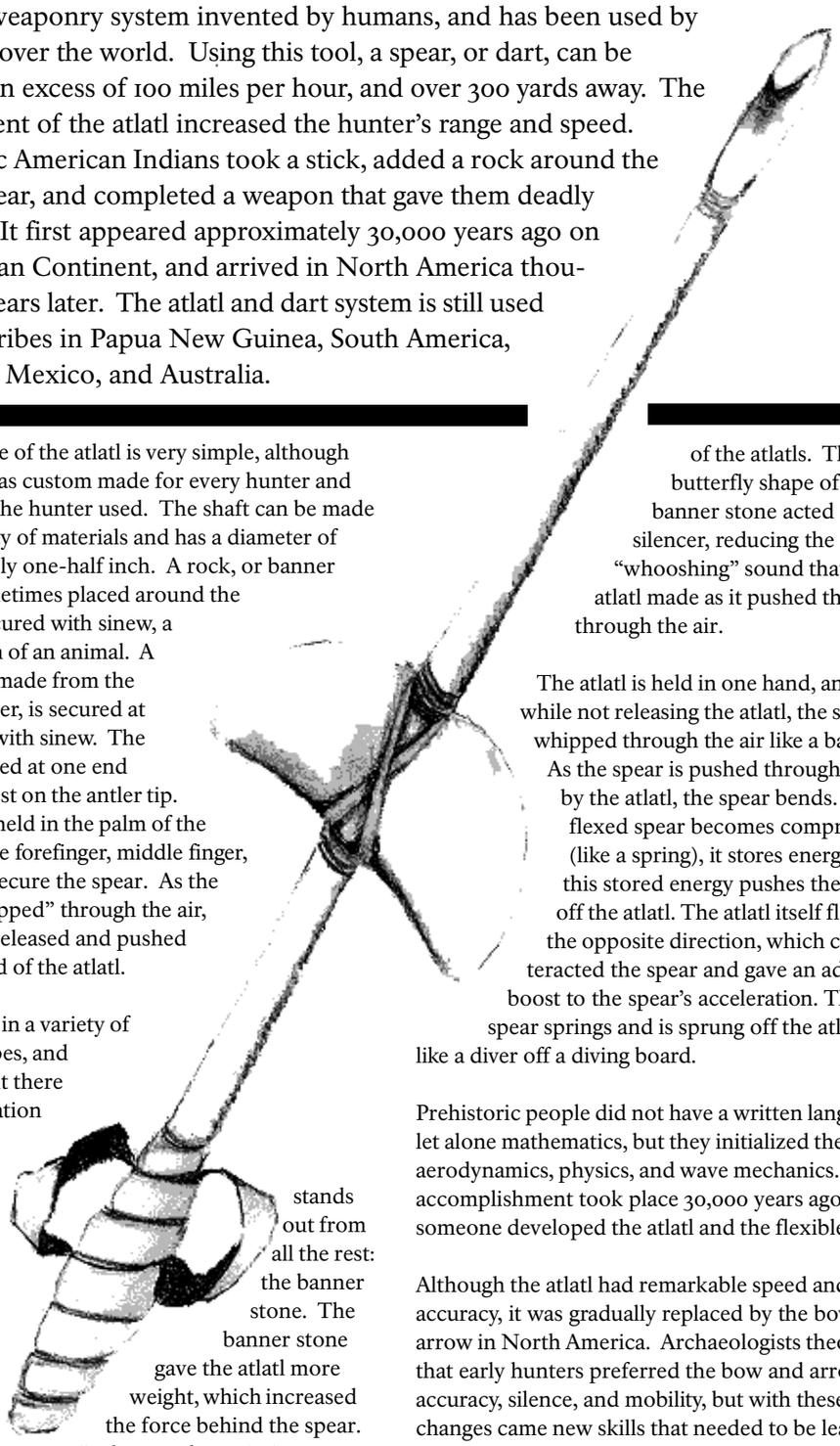

Illustration by
A. Harkrader

The atlatl is held in one hand, and, while not releasing the atlatl, the spear is whipped through the air like a baseball. As the spear is pushed through the air by the atlatl, the spear bends. The flexed spear becomes compressed (like a spring), it stores energy, and this stored energy pushes the spear off the atlatl. The atlatl itself flexes in the opposite direction, which counteracted the spear and gave an added boost to the spear's acceleration. The spear springs and is sprung off the atlatl just like a diver off a diving board.

Prehistoric people did not have a written language, let alone mathematics, but they initialized the use of aerodynamics, physics, and wave mechanics. This accomplishment took place 30,000 years ago when someone developed the atlatl and the flexible spear.

Although the atlatl had remarkable speed and accuracy, it was gradually replaced by the bow and arrow in North America. Archaeologists theorize that early hunters preferred the bow and arrow for accuracy, silence, and mobility, but with these new changes came new skills that needed to be learned. The time, energy, and skills needed to make a bow were more involved than to create an atlatl. Throughout time the bow and arrow system became widely accepted and atlatl use in North America ended.