



Echidna Figure

Date

1500 BCE - 1600 CE

Medium

Stone

Description

Little is known about these prehistoric stone items from the Papuan Highlands which have been tested to be up to 3500 years old, the oldest known sculptural artifacts from Oceania. As is the case with this stone figure, these objects are almost always zoomorphic, representing endemic Papuan mammals and birds. Stone items from the Papuan Highlands generally fall into one of a few categories: mortars, pestles, club, or these sculptural pieces. Unlike the other two object types, the function of these pieces is speculative, most likely used for either totem or ancestor worship, in rituals, or as a hunting charm. Stone objects date back to the earliest inhabitants

of Melanesia, growing in specialization over time with the evolution of practices like agriculture and hunting. Mortars, pestles, and ceremonial objects that might be hundreds or thousands of years old are rediscovered with some frequency, especially during construction or from tilling soil, and are used or instilled with a newfound spiritual significance. Utilitarian stone tools tend to be undecorated, but pieces created for ceremonial purposes are highly refined—painstakingly pecked and ground to create figurative or abstract geometric forms.

Dimensions

6 1/2 × 3 1/4 × 2 1/4 in. (16.5 × 8.3 × 5.7 cm)