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Christopher Lintz  
*Texas State University, chrisirenelintz@gmail.com*

Floyd Largent

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Note on a Possible Chipped Stone Grubbing Tool from Upshur County, Texas

Christopher Lintz and Floyd Largent
Geo-Marine, Inc., Plano, Texas

During the period August 6-27, and November 18-20, 2003, archaeologists from Geo-Marine Inc. (GMI), of Plano, Texas, conducted a pedestrian survey of a 51.5 km-long corridor for the proposed Southside Regional Water System in Marion, Harrison, Upshur, and Gregg counties, Texas (Largent et al. 2004). The proposed waterline is intended to draw water from Lake O' The Pines in the Big Cypress drainage system and distribute it to various communities in both the Big Cypress and Little Cypress Creek basins in the aforementioned counties. Specifically, the pipeline will benefit the communities of Ore City, Old Diana, Diana, and James before the pipeline crosses Little Cypress Creek and winds southeastward to a booster pump station for further distribution to other communities through existing pipelines. During the survey, random shovel testing near the community of James found an isolated, expended chipped stone “grubbing implement” made of gray siltstone. Due to the scarcity of such tools, and the desire to call attention to the locus of this unusual item, the State Historic Preservation Office suggested that GMI assign the location an archeological site number, rather than retain it as an isolated occurrence. The purpose of this brief note is to discuss the find location, describe this relatively unusual artifact, and draw comparisons with similar implements.

Site 41UR302 represents the find locality of this single prehistoric chipped stone grubbing tool. The find was made in an overgrown grassy agricultural field approximately 100 m north of a small cemetery on Killdeer Road, in the community of James, Texas, atop a small terrace or knoll some 100 m south of an unnamed eastern drainage of Walnut Creek. While associated remains may lie on lands inaccessible due to lack of right-of-entry, the site, as presently recorded, lies entirely within the project corridor, and covers less than 10 m². Representative natural vegetation occurring adjacent to the agricultural field consists of briars, elderberry, French mulberry, poison oak/ivy, pine, hickory, oak, and sassafras. The site occurs on an area mapped as having Bowie fine sandy loam, 2-5 percent slopes, which is an ultisol (Roberts 1983).

The siltstone artifact was found in a random shovel test placed along the pipeline route on the side slope of a ridge, at a depth between 20-40 cm below surface. Four additional shovel tests were excavated in a cruciform pattern around the initial find, at 10 m intervals. However, no additional cultural materials of any kind were identified. It is possible that associated features and artifacts were present outside the pipeline corridor, but we were not able to determine whether the site extended onto adjacent private land.

This specimen is a “T”-shaped piece of bifacially chipped gray, moderately-coarse siltstone whose blade probably has been extensively reworked down from a broad and presumably ovate spatulate form to a narrow blade remnant (Figure 1). The implement has a wedge-shaped cross-section, which is thickest at the base of the stem or shank. The prominently projecting, haftable stem is bifacially flaked to a relatively rectangular form with moderately straight, parallel edges, which curve rather abruptly outward to form the much wider blade. In contrast to the regular flaking of the stem and lateral edges, the distal blade is short with a ragged, irregularly flaked, and undulating distal edge. No polish or other forms of use-wear are apparent on the faces. The implement appears to have been extensively reworked, crudely resharpened, or perhaps misused by being damaged by being battered against some hard material shortly before discard. No polish is macroscopically apparent on the blade.
The specimen from Upshur County measures 106 mm long, 135 mm wide, 19.5 mm in maximum thickness, and weighs 196.4 grams. The stem dimensions are 48 mm wide, 54 mm long, and 19.5 mm thick. The blade width (perpendicular to the stem) is 135 mm whereas the blade length (parallel to the stem) is about 52 mm.

This bifacially chipped artifact compares favorably in morphology and toolstone material to artifacts called stemmed “grubbing tools” from the Boston Mountains region of west-central Arkansas (Bond 1977; Jurney 1979; Trubowitz 1980:153-154). In Arkansas, Bond (1977) classifies these tools with prominent shoulders and well-defined stems as “Category 1A” forms, which in complete specimens have a well defined stem, prominent shoulders, and a convex or even slightly pointed distal end; many show polish that is accentuated on one face more than the other. The form occurs occasionally in the Boston Mountains north of the Arkansas River (three of 81 specimens studied by Bond [1977]), but is rare in northeastern Texas (Timothy K. Perttula, personal communications 2003). Replication studies by Bond (1977) on the forms from Arkansas suggest that the polish on these tools is comparable to that obtained from digging in soils and sediments.

One intact specimen recovered from a dry cave was still mounted in a short (30 cm long) oak haft with a distinctive crook or bend in the handle. The blade is set roughly parallel to the axis of the handle, suggesting that it was a small axe-like grubbing tool (Jurney 1979; Trubowitz 1980:153-154). Presumably such implements would have served well to dig out tubers and other root crops, or perhaps to harvest yucca heads. Based on the stone head orientation to the hafted handle, these are not regarded as hoes.

Except for the blade length, the size of the specimen from Upshur County, Texas, is very comparable to the Arkansas Category 1A. Three Arkansas specimens available to Bond for study have lengths ranging from 81 to 113 mm, widths ranging from 81 to 99 mm, thicknesses ranging from 19 to 25 mm, and stem lengths ranging from 45 to 56 mm (Bond 1977:36). In the Boston Mountains area of western Arkansas, these items are associated with the Gober complex, the earliest ceramic complex contemporaneous with the Fourche Maline phase and predating Late Prehistoric Caddoan occupations.

Due to the lack of context, and the scarcity of reported specimens from nearby areas, the age and cultural affiliation of the Upshur County specimen remains unknown. The coarse, gray siltstone is not commonly found
in northeastern Texas, but it is the preferred material from the grubbing implements found in the Gober complex of Arkansas. It would seem remarkable that such a utilitarian implement might have been carried from the Boston Mountain to northeastern Texas, a distance of nearly 350 km. Of course, other sources of coarse gray siltstone are present in the Ouachita Mountains of southeastern Oklahoma, and it is possible there could be a much closer source. We simply do not know where this tool was made.

In light of the battered condition to this specimen, there is no assurance that the Upshur County specimen was necessarily contemporaneous with those made by people responsible for the Gober complex. Later people might have found and transported the implement into northeastern Texas. And there is also no reason to believe that this implement was used in the same manner as the grubbing implements of Arkansas. Indeed, the battered nature of the blade and absence of polish on the blade remnant suggests that shortly before abandonment, the implement received some pretty rough treatment in some manner other than that as a grubbing tool. Presently, the implement is an enigma that raises more questions than it addresses. However, its occurrence is worthy of note as a means of recording such specimens in the region.

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