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A BLUFF-SHELTER SITE IN PONTOTOC COUNTY, OKLAHOMA

H.R. Antle

In the wildly rugged hills near Canyon Springs, in southeastern Pontotoc County, Oklahoma, a unique sandstone formation has produced evidence of once sheltering a prehistoric people.

Technically, the sandstone is of the Wilcox series, and is faulted to a position above the McLish limestone beneath which it normally lies. The fault line runs from the north southward a distance of 25 yards, then runs at right angles to the east for 40 yards. The sandstone ranges from 6 feet in height on the northern extremity to 35 feet along the southeastern portion. Multiple fractures, generally parallel to the fault lines, have been recemented with dissolved siliceous material to make a

highly resistant formation. Erosion takes place by exfoliation, giving to the rock mass, at a distance, a granitic appearance. Because of slanting fracture lines, the foot-wall of the fault, overthrust as it is, has broken off in places to form huge over-hangs that afford plentiful protection from the weather. It was in such an area evidence of a prehistoric habitation was found.

A preliminary excavation of the site disclosed the majority of archaic material lay within a 55 foot mass. This area included two fair-sized shelters with a kitchen-midden fronting each, the latter merging into the shelter debris. [*ed. note: see Figure 1 and Table 1*) On the wall of

Table 1. Measurements of Shelter.*

Shelter depth †	25	24	29	30	20	23	16	30	17	12	11
Roof overhang †	17	16	14	15	14	14	15	13	12	10	9
Height (front) ‡	7	8	7	9	6	5	3	10	8	4	1
Height (back) ‡	1	3	4	2	4	1	2	3	3	3	3
Midden (ash) †	1	0	0	2	2	3	7	4	4	6	3

* measurements apparently in feet

† horizontal measurement

‡ vertical measurement

the lesser shelter was a pictograph, one of the main points in identification of the culture here represented.

Figure 1. Map of Pontotoc County Shelter Site.

The kitchen-midden varied in depth from an inch at its eastern extreme to 1.5 feet within the shelter proper. On the surface, its limits were easily discerned by blackened ash showing in sharp contrast to the white sandstone. Excavation of this entire area yielded bones, shells, charcoal, nuts, and various artifacts throughout the

deposit. As excavation approached the rear of the shelters it was marked by an increase in the number of artifacts recovered, and a corresponding decrease in bone and ash. Rock detritus made digging quite laborious, because fragments of considerable size often overlaid cultural materials, a fact which clearly indicates antiquity. No burials were found, but perhaps exist in the unexplored areas.

MATERIAL CULTURE: Under no conditions can a complete picture of the material culture of any group be presented from meager information gained by excavations which yield only the least perishable objects, such as stone and polished bone. Centuries of seepage tend to disintegrate most items of every-day existence, such as baskets, clothing, and wooden artifacts. Only by a comparison with recovered materials from better preserved sites of corresponding age and culture, can a true appreciation be had. As the more antiquated cultures are sparsely represented by cultural remains, interest should lie in their antiquity, unprepossessing though they may be.

BONEWORK: Deer, turkey, rodents, turtles, terrapins, and mollusks were represented in the 108 bone fragments found. Of this group, 20 or more were identified as having served as some sort of implement. Bone implements were made by splintering the long bone and utilizing the splinters. The cannon-bone of the deer, naturally grooved and easily split, and with its divided articular surfaces for a handle, served well in the production of awls and punches. Bones of lesser animals were merely sharpened, the

condyles serving as handles.

Antler-tips, whose rounded points could hardly have been used for penetrating purposes, were found in association with flint chips and rejects. It is assumed they were used as flaking tools. Roberts (1), and other investigators, offer this theory of usage through observations of more recent Indians who employ this means of producing concoidal fractures in the finer dressing of projectiles.

The scapula, mandible and pelvis of a deer were found in the shelter debris. The first two were unmistakable implements, their worn edges showing use as scrapers. The pelvis, the right half, was too gnawed by rodents to determine whether it had been used. However, the broad, sharp edge of the ilium could have served the purpose of a dressing tool. The mandible contained four well-preserved teeth, polished by rubbing.

SHELL-OBJECTS: Several fragments of fresh-water mussel shells were found. They were so crumbly that any surface markings would have long since been obliterated. Hardly more than the thickened area about the hinge-line remained on most specimens. Their probable use was as "spoons", scrapers or pendants. Generally the shells were lying within each other, stacked, perhaps, for future use.

A few land snails, perforated and in a position to suggest having been strung, were obtained within the confines of the larger shelter.

Among the shell-group will be mentioned the finding of a number of fossil brachiopods. As fossil-bearing formations are some distance away, it is surmised that they appear among the finds through human agencies (2).

Several sandstone concretions had been worked into useful objects. They were somewhat egg-shaped and ranged from 2.5 inches to 6 inches in length. Their surface was slick and shiny from rubbing, from this appearance, receiving the classification of rubbing-stones. Although carefully examined, not the slightest trace of painted decoration was found upon the surface.

Far back in the greater shelter, a pitted hammerstone was found. It was nearly 3 inches in diameter and about 1.75 inches thick. The edges showed multiple chipping unintentionally produced by pecking at resistant objects. The small pits at the centers of the flat sides were purely of human origin, the scars resulting from abrasion at that point being quite visible.

It would be interesting to know the distribution and range of this latter type of artifact. The writer has found it in several cultural horizons. Kidder and Guernsey (3) report it in remains superimposed upon materials akin to the finds herein reported.

Within the lesser shelter a red-stained, typically-shaped mano was found. It has probably been used in the reduction of hematite into powder suitable for use as paint. The ochre is identical with the substance used in painting the pictograph on the wall. A similar find was reported

from the rock shelters of Val Verde County, Texas (4).

A dozen small concretions, about the size of a marble, made up the remainder of the unchipped stone objects. Only a conjectural use could be applied to them.

CHIPPED IMPLEMENTS: In this group are included spearheads, scrapers, knives and other artifacts produced by intentional flaking. The flinty material comes from the Woodford Chert, an outcropping of which occurs near-by. It has a fine conchoidal fracture and was much used by primitive Indians of this region.

There are some 50 objects that could fall, tentatively, into the category of use as scrapers. A secondary chipping along the edges and a generally rounded arelliptical [*ed. note:* or elliptical?] shape removed them from the class of rejects. Some of this group may have served the purpose of knives. The scrapers varied in size from 1 to 3 inches in length. As a rule, the centers were relatively thick. Many more flakes, receiving no classification as some form of tool, may have been used by the aboriginals for one purpose or another.

One definitely-formed scraper will be described to typify this class of implement. It is a little over 2 inches long, 1.5 inches wide at its greatest width, and 0.5 inch thick at the middle. The elliptical form is somewhat off balance, the constant of one edge resulting in the dissymmetry.

The knives found fall into four distinct types. The first, large, and with a rounded

base, suitable for use without being hafted. Second, a long and slender blade with a square base which, when hafted, would be a fair dagger. Thirdly, a blade resembling a spear point but with a stem on one side; this type, when hafted, resembled greatly the paring-knife of modern culinary use. The fourth type is a small triangular form that may have been used as a skinning knife. The knives were the best worked of all the chipped implements found.

As in the case of the scrapers, some of the unclassified sharp-bladed chips may have been utilized as knives. Their association with the definitely-shaped tools, and their occurrence, would indicate they might be more than mere unused chips or rejects.

According to Roberts (5), the chief distinction between spear and arrow points is based largely upon size. By this classification, the projectiles found at the site under discussion, with one exception, would come under the heading of spear points. The exceptional specimen was removed from near the surface (2 inches deep); this fact, coupled with its superior workmanship, removes it to a later and more advanced culture.

Most of the projectiles were approximately 2 inches in length; the ones less than 2 inches had originally been longer but, due to breakage of the point and a subsequent resharpening, were reduced in blade length.

Because of the nearly standard size of the points, it is assumed the short throwing spear, and its accompaniment, the atlatl,

was the chief weapon. As these two implements, especially the latter, have been amply described in previously published literature, it will not be discussed here. No traces of an atlatl were found; as mentioned before, only the most unperishable of materials were found at this site, the climate being not at all suitable for preservation due to the prolonged seasons of rain.

Only the projectiles removed from a decided subsurface position will be considered as having an undisputed relation with the culture responsible for the other materials found. These artifacts, though the crudest of any points yet found in the East Central Oklahoma area, still follow familiar patterns of design. The flaking process involved shows best the lack of finesse generally distinctive of later cultures. Often in the primary flaking, a third or fourth of the projectile's face would be chipped at a single stroke. The rule followed was to shape the point, then dress the edges by a secondary chipping. The result was a serviceable, though somewhat thick, projectile.

The spear points were sorted and grouped into 5 distinct classes; distinctions were made according to shape, form and size of the various parts. The classification was carried through from the simple to the complex forms.¹

PROJECTILE CLASSIFICATION CHART: Class I. Wide neck, tapering to a

¹ The author's, not a standard, classification.

somewhat pointed base; no notch; small barb formed by union of stem to blade; stem slightly less than one-half total length; edges of blades straight to point.

Class II. Wide neck, tapering to a somewhat pointed base; no notch; width of neck proportionally less relative to greatest width of blade than as in Class A, resulting in a more prominent barb; edge of blade with suggestion of a curve to point.

Class III. Base of stem notched and nearly as wide as neck; small barb produced by disproportional union of stem to blade; edge of blade slightly curved to point.

Class IV. Stem rounded at base; base as wide as greatest width of blade; wide notch at right angle to long axis of blade, resulting in a very large tang on stem; blade tapers inward below barbs, then widens to taper again to the point; body of blade thick and heavy (6).

Class V. Stem with slightly curving base; tang sometimes narrower at neck; notch at acute angle to long axis of blade; barb sharp and generally long.

Sub-class a. Blade edge curved to point.

Sub-class b. Blade edge straight to point.

The structural parts of the projectiles are taken from the Handbook of the American Indian, by Hodge, *Bulletin 30, Bureau of American Ethnology*, page 90-.

Classes II and V predominate among the

Figure 2. Pontotoc Pictograph.

finds.

PICTOGRAPHS: On the north wall of the lesser shelter was the square-shouldered, triangular-figured pictograph of a man. [ed. note: see Figure 2]. The left arm pointed downward, while the right arm was bent, holding aloft, at the extreme, a narrow triangular object. The whole figure was 14 inches high and 5 inches across at the shoulders.

The ochre used was of powdered hematite. The paint had penetrated the sandstone to a marked depth, thereby preserving itself from the ravages of time.

Red stains at other places on the wall indicate probability of other pictographs having adorned the walls; erosion has

since effaced them, should they have existed.

BASKETRY: A small mass of very badly decayed grass fibers from the larger shelter was the only indication of any thing remotely suggestive of basket or sandal work. Were it not for the fact that fibers lay criss-crossing, the specimen would have been discarded entirely. Absence of such destructible material does not mean it failed to exist; on the other hand, the culture may have been so far removed into antiquity that weaving and basketry were as yet unknown. The fragmentary evidence shall merely raise the question of existence.

POTTERY: Not a vestige of a shard, or even a remote suggestion of pottery-making was found. Although the whole area about the site was examined carefully, the same results were to be had. It is therefore a positive conclusion that ceramics were unknown to this particular group.

FOOD STUFF: In addition to animal food, some charred acorns and hickory nuts were disclosed during investigation. Agricultural products were entirely lacking. By the food matter, the people appeared to be at least a semi-nomadic type, seeking shelter among the rocks, foraging afield to search for food.

SUMMARY:

1. The archaeological site was situated in a rock shelter.
2. A square-shouldered, triangular figure

- of a man was painted, as a pictograph, on a wall.
3. Kitchen-midden deposits showed use of native animal and some plant life as food.
 4. Evidence of agriculture not shown.
 5. No pipes or indication of use of tobacco.
 6. No evidence of use of bow.
 7. No evidence of knowledge of ceramics.

CONCLUSION: From a comparative study of this site with material from the

Southwest, stressing heavily the presence of the pictograph and its distinctive shape (7a & b), the writer concludes his find is perhaps cognate with the Basket Maker culture of the Southwest; by the apparent semi-nomadism and the absence of pottery, it would fall into the phase termed by Roberts (8) and Morris (9), Basket Maker II. More recently Roberts has suggested that reclassification be made and the terms Basket Maker and Modified Basket Maker used (10). In that case, the find herein discussed would be listed under the Basket Maker.

REFERENCES

1. Roberts, H.H., 1928, Shabik' eshchee Village. *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin* 92:129-130. Washington.
2. Pearce and Jackson. *Prehistoric Rock Shelter in Val Verde County, Texas*. Pp. 68-69, reports the finding of fossils among the beigabe excavated.
3. Kidder and Guernsey, 1919, Archaeological Explorations in North East Arizona. *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin* 65:130, plate 52. Washington.
4. Pearce and Jackson, op. cit., p. 88.
5. Roberts, op. cit., p. 138.
6. Roberts, op. cit., Plate 28, specimen g, is listed as a single find of this type of point; the writer, however, obtained duplicates of this form from Pontotoc County.
- 7a. Roberts, op. cit., p. 121, asserts that the square shouldered, triangular-bodied human figures are very characteristic of the Basket Maker culture.
- 7b. Pepper, G.H., *Ancient Basket Makers of Southwestern Utah*, pp. 13-15 places the use of life figures, such as this, as a forerunner of the pottery designs of later phases.
8. Roberts, op. cit., pp. 3-4.
9. Morris, A., *Digging in the Southwest*.
10. Roberts, H.H., 1937, Archaeology in the American Southwest, *American Antiquity* 3(1):11.