57. An Antler Point From the Sacramento Valley

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The specimen shown in Figure 4a is of unusual interest because it is made of antler rather than the usual obsidian or chert. It was found in 1947 at site Sac-6, a Late Horizon site on a slough network just north of the Cosumnes River, about 18 miles southsoutheast of Sacramento. All the specific archaeological sites referred to in this paper probably represent former settlements of groups ancestral to the Plains Miwok Indians.

The size of the point suggests that it was made of elk antler. It is 124 mm. long with a maximum width of 35 mm. and a thickness of 7 mm. The side-notches are deep, the base is deeply concave, and the sides are slightly convex. The cross-section is lenticular with greater curvature on the outer or front surface. The sides were ground to a sharp edge toward the base but are slightly rounded toward the tip; the specimen could not have been used for cutting. A portion of the softer, cancellous interior of the antler remains on the back surface toward the base where the specimen is thickest. The point was carefully fashioned by cutting, scraping, and grinding; striations from the scraping tool were not completely obliterated by grinding. Traces of a lustrous polish remain despite weathering.

An oval pit (6x4x3 mm.) was carved on the back surface between the side notches and the basal concavity. Perhaps the intention to perforate the specimen was abandoned because a hole in this section would increase the fragility of the base. If so, this may indicate that the point was to be suspended, rather than hafted.

The sides of the outer (non-cancellous) surface are decorated with incised v's. This incising has been carelessly done with overlapping diagonals and occasional x's. This style of incising also appears on abalone ornaments from this region, most frequently during the Phase 2 period of the Late Horizon, but also rarely in late Phase 1 times at Sac-6. The first appearance of this decorative style can at present be placed in the middle Phase 1 period at one nearby site, Sac-21.

The form of the point is not unusual. Small stone arrowpoints of a similar side-notched, concave-based form are frequently found in Central California sites occupied during Phase 2 of the Late Horizon and rare specimens are known from Phase 1 deposits. Stone spearpoints of similar though more variable form first appear in middle Phase 1 times. However, the occurrence of this form in antler is unique in Central California.

It may be noted that two decorated bone artifacts found on the Santa Barbara coast also have the form of projectile points, though in this case the base is stemmed and barbed.[1] A somewhat similar elongate form also occurs in stone in the same region. Undecorated bone arrowpoints were used in Northwest California, but these were a repeated type and were definitely functional.[2]

The antler point from Sac-6 cannot be dated with accuracy because it was found unassociated in the midden. Both the incising and the standardized form would suggest the Phase 2 period. However, it was found at 40 inches depth in a portion of the site where no burials occurred which could have disturbed it. Clamshell disc beads, simple side-notched arrowpoints and other Phase 2 markers were restricted to the top 12 inches of the trench. Therefore, if the point is not intrusive, it should date from the late Phase 1 period. Burials of this age occurred at the other end of the trench at depths below 39 inches.

The duration of the late Phase 1 period in actual years can only be approximated at the present time. As discussed elsewhere,[3] the inception of Phase 2 is now placed at about 1600 A.D. A burial of middle Phase 1 age from CCo-138, a site at the west edge of the Delta, has a radiocarbon date of 725 A.D. ± 200.[4] The duration of late Phase 1 has therefore been estimated to be from 1100 to 1600 A.D.

Both the decoration and size indicate local manufacture of this antler point. At present, v-incising on abalone is most typical of the Central Valley rather than surrounding regions, and there are suggestions of a derivation of this type from a deep incising style typical of early Phase 1 in the same region. The decoration does occur on the Santa Barbara coast, but the specific point form represented by the antler specimen is extremely rare in that region. There is good evidence to favor a Sierran origin for many of the side-notched, concave-based stone arrowpoints found in the Central Valley, but that spearpoints of similar form were not also obtained by trade is suggested by the absence, to my knowledge, of such forms in the adjacent Sierra. Stone spearpoints of the same basic form as the antler specimen do occur in the Central Valley. A chert specimen of very similar proportions was found at Sac-6,[5] although longer points of obsidian are more typical.[6] Very large spearpoints of more variable form occur with middle Phase 1 associations at CCo-138 (fig. 4d-g); note the serrations which also indicate local manufacture.

Some special significance appears to have been attached to the side-notched, concave-based point form. This was not the most common point form in this region, yet, in addition to the occurrence of the decorated antler specimen, there was also a virtual restriction of the use of mottled, transparent obsidian, and ripple flaking, to this form during the Late Horizon. The form variation and size of this type of spearpoint at CCo-138 do not suggest a utilitarian function. A smaller specimen from site Sac-56, a Phase 2 site on the Sacramento River, still retains charred cordage in such a position as to suggest that it was never bound to a shaft but was suspended (fig. 4c).

It is also of interest to note another unique specimen with a point form but made of material unsuitable for a functional projectile point. This specimen (fig. 4b) is made of a fine-grained sandstone with such dull edges and tip that it could hardly have had any penetrating power. It is 46 mm. long, 34 mm. wide, and 7 mm. thick. It is stemmed, barbed, and has three serrations per side, including the barb. The point was found at Sac-113, on the Cosumnes River, about eight miles northeast of Sac-6. It was found on the surface, but in view of the point type and other artifacts

from the mound, the specimen could date from the Phase 2 (1600-1800 A.D.) or less likely the late Phase 1 period. Similar points in obsidian are most common in Phase 2 times but rare specimens are found in Phase 1 deposits. The serration suggests local manufacture.

It is obvious that neither the antler nor the sandstone point were ordinary functional spearpoints. The materials are at present unique in a collection of several thousand points. The dull edges would be unsuitable for penetration or cutting. Only vague suggestions as to the possible use of these unusual points can be found in the ethnographic literature. Little information is available on the Plains Miwok, and few details are given for neighboring groups pertinent to the use of projectile points. The following references have been noted, and are included as an indication that points and knives did have shamanistic and ceremonial associations; in all probability additional instances could be found and others had been forgotten or overlooked when the ethnographic data were collected.

One Northern Pomo (Kalekau) informant stated that bear shamans used a bone "arrow" as a weapon,[7] but he probably meant the antler dagger which was part of the traditional paraphernalia of the bear shaman.[8]

Obsidian and/or chert ("flint") knives were standard equipment for doctor's outfits in Central California. Two classes, for cutting and for touching, appear to be represented but these are seldom described in detail. The cutting tool for curative bleeding was probably a sharp flake rather than a chipped blade. One description[9] indicates that this was of obsidian, about one inch long and very thin, which the doctor made each time he needed one. Most of the "knives" used for bleeding referred to in the Culture Element Distributions were probably of this class.

The second class of doctor's knives appears to have been chipped blades, imbued with curative power. These blades were a permanent part of the outfit, and were pressed or touched against the infected part of a sick individual. These are best described for the Pomo region, where the length appears to have varied from about 3 to 18 inches and the form was usually leaf-shaped.[10] At least one Pomo doctor's outfit contained flint and obsidian "spear blades" which the owner had "found" (i.e. they are archaeological specimens).[11] A Maidu curative knife, worn pendant from the neck of the shaman, was regarded as of great value and mysterious power.[12] An obsidian blade from Miwok territory, labeled a "charmstone" and worn pendant on a neck loop,[13] is presumably of the same class. It would appear quite possible that the antler or sandstone point being discussed might represent a doctor's knife with tactile curative power.

At least one Pomo group had a special cure for ghost-fright which involved a wooden pole with feathers on one end and "flint" on the other, used as a curative spear.[14] The frequency of such special curative practices is unknown, but the unusual points under discussion would be suitable for such uses.

Various groups associated obsidian arrowpoints with the "pains" or spirit missiles which caused sickness. These pains were sometimes called by terms which meant dangerous obsidian or arrowpoint,[15] but the objects themselves are usually described as a variety of things other than points. It seems probable

that the terms originated from the concept of a pain being shot into a body and the general belief that obsidian was dangerous. However, the display of actual arrowpoints is indicated for two Pomo groups, the Maidu, and possibly the Lake Miwok.[16] The Yuki regarded the pains as invisible obsidian points[17] while the Kato and Lassik also considered them to be arrowheads (concreteness not specified).[18] The "arrow-like" "bullets" shot with miniature bows in Nisenan shaman's contests[19] appear to have been only straws without stone tips,[20] but the miniature arrows used in a similar Maidu contest did have stone points.[21] The general impression given is that arrowheads used for pains were smaller than the antler or sandstone point.

One Pomo informant, presumably not a shaman, found a 12 inch obsidian blade and kept it as a charm.[22] Since both the antler and sandstone point are clearly contemporaneous manufactures, relative to the Late Horizon, the use of these specimens as personal charms seems unlikely. No references to the use of points for hunting charms have been noted.

Spears were featured by various groups in the initiation rites of the Kuksu and Ghost Societies,[23] while arrows were sometimes used in these rites or merely carried in various dances.[24] The brief ethnographic descriptions give no implication that special spears or arrows were used, though the special poisoning of the other dance regalia used in the Kuksu ceremonies suggests that there may have been some selection of spears and arrows. The uniqueness of the antler and sandstone points does not favor these specimens for dance regalia, but certain of the well-made, side-notched, concave-based stone points as well as some of the elaborately serrated forms would suggest such possible ceremonial use. At the same time it is obvious from the quantity of specimens that most of the stone point types were used for hunting, while points with multiple serrations have been found embedded in human bone.

Despite the lack of a specific parallel in the limited ethnographic accounts available, one may conclude with some certainty that the antler and sandstone points did have some shamanistic or ceremonial function.

Notes

1. Gifford, 1940, type L1.

2. Kroeber, 1925, p. 90. Specimens in the University of California Museum of Anthropology.

3. Beardsley, endnote 168. One radiocarbon date has been obtained from site Sac-6 (Libby, 1954a, p. 138, sample C-691; two runs). The charcoal came from a housepost in the 36-48 inch level of Trench Z, Unit 8. The surrounding midden yielded artifacts assignable to the Phase 2 period of the Late Horizon. However, the average age for this charcoal sample was 2410 + 200 years (456 B.C.), instead of an expected 400 years or less. This date is thus so discordant with other radiocarbon dates from the Central Valley and San Francisco Bay regions, which are consistent with the archaeological sequence, that it must be rejected as applicable to the Phase 2 period.

4. Libby, 1954b, p. 739, sample C-689.

5. Schenck and Dawson, Pl. 91c.

6. Ibid., Pl. 94a, b. Both specimens from Sac-6.

7. Gifford and Kroeber, No. 893, p. 201.

8. Barrett, Pl. 60, No. 6, p. 188.

9. Freeland, p. 64, Pomo; see also Loeb, 1926, p. 308, Pomo.

10. Freeland, p. 59; Loeb, 1926, p. 321; Gifford and Kroeber, No. 532, pp. 145, 185; No. 871, p. 200.

11. Gifford and Kroeber, No. 871, p. 199.

12. Dixon, Fig. 11a, and pp. 139, 271, 272.

13. Barrett and Gifford, p. 213.

14. Loeb, 1932, p. 11.

15. Kroeber, 1925, p. 361, Patwin; Du Bois, p. 113, Wintu. This concept was probably more widespread; the Nisenan and Miwok references to the pains as "bullets" (Faye, p. 46; Aginsky, No. 2201a, p. 445) are probably modern equivalents of arrowheads.

16. Gifford and Kroeber, No. 864, p. 199, Pomo; No. 862, p. 156, Lake Miwok; Dixon, p. 270, Maidu.

17. Kroeber, 1925, p. 197.

18. Essene, No. 1880, p. 42.

19. Kroeber, 1929, p. 274.

20. Faye, p. 47.

21. Loeb, 1933, p. 163.

22. Gifford and Kroeber, No. 532, p. 185.

23. Dixon, p. 289, Maidu; Gifford and Kroeber, No. 991, p. 208, No. 1031, pp. 162, 210, Pomo; Loeb, 1926, pp. 356-358, Pomo; 1932, p. 129, Pomo; 1933, pp. 186, 193, 209, 216, 225, Valley Maidu, River and Hill Patwin; Kroeber, 1932, pp. 326-328, River Patwin. The blades used by the Yuki in their obsidian dance appear to have been large, unhafted blades which were not manufactured, but found as archaeological specimens (Kroeber, 1925, pp. 193, 194, 199; Loeb, 1933, p. 71).

24. Dixon, pp. 289, 304, 306, Maidu; Gifford, 1927, pp. 232, 236, 238, Nisenan; Gifford and Kroeber, No. 996, p. 208, No. 1032, pp. 162, 210, Pomo; Faye, p. 48, Nisenan; Loeb, 1933, p. 170, Maidu.

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