

The

ATLATL

“Too long have I hunted mammoth alone!”

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Atlatl Artifacts at Indian Knoll

By John C. Whittaker



One of the basic sources for our understanding of the archaeology of atlatls is William Webb's excavation of the Archaic shell mound at Indian Knoll, which was published in 1946 as Indian Knoll, Site Oh 2, Ohio County, Kentucky. University of Kentucky Reports in Anthropology and Archaeology Vol. IV, No. 3, part 1.

Although Webb's work is important to most archaeologists for helping to define the Archaic period and way of life in the Southeast US, one of the problems that attracted Webb to Indian Knoll was the controversy over bannerstones and other artifacts found there by Clarence Moore's (1916) earlier excavations. (Moore, Clarence B. Some Aboriginal Sites on Green River, Kentucky. Journal of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia 16: 431-509.) Moore had found artifact sets in burials, comprised of a short length of antler

beam with a drilled socket, a stone “bannerstone,” and an antler tine with a socket drilled at one end and a hook worked at the other (Figures 1, 2).

He discussed the possibility that these were atlatl parts, but preferred to interpret them as netting needles with mesh spacers.



Some of the arguments Moore used against the atlatl theory now sound naive, or reflect the poor quality archaeology of the early 1900s. Despite Moore’s doubts, we now know that atlatls should be expected all over the continent. Moore thought multi-part atlatls would be weak, but we now have lots of experimenters, myself included, who have replicated various versions of these artifacts as atlatls and shown that they work, and they are not too fragile. Moore claimed that there were no points associated with the supposed atlatl parts, but that was not even true for his own excavations, and even less true in Webb’s. In fact, Moore illustrated a human vertebra pierced by an antler point, and a flint point was found inside a perforated skull. One of the notable insights from the burials excavated more carefully by Webb was that a high percentage of the population died by violence, with projectile points in the body, fractured bones, and missing skulls. This is one of the well-documented cases where prehistoric hunter-gatherers engaged in warfare. It is true that Webb did not recognize sets of dart points with the atlatl parts, but this could be because only the atlatl was considered important enough to bury with people, or because Webb’s excavators did not always consider points in the trashy fill around graves as grave goods. In fact, there were two burials with clusters of points as well as atlatl parts, and a couple other graves with both a single point and an atlatl hook.

Warren K. Moorehead (1917, *Stone Ornaments Used by Indians in the United States and Canada: Being a*

Description of Certain Charm Stones, Gorgets, Tubes, Bird Stones, and Problematical Forms. The Andover Press, Andover.) also described the artifacts from Indian Knoll and similar finds elsewhere, considering them ornaments, possibly part of more complex effigies. Moorehead was one of those who could not accept the possibility that elaborate and beautiful objects might have a utilitarian function - they must be “ceremonial.” This has always been a silly argument, weapons being only one of many kinds of artifacts where efficient function is sometimes combined with high symbolic importance and great intrinsic value, in our own society as in the past.

All three of these classic reports have recently been reprinted by Gustav’s Library, Davenport, Iowa (www.gustavlibrary.com). Gustav’s Library offers reprints of many early archaeological publications, particularly for the eastern US. The quality of reproduction is generally very high, and if you want to experiment with Indian Knoll type atlatls for yourself, the illustrations in the Moore and Moorehead volumes are large and clear, including some color plates. Webb’s report did not reproduce quite as well. The many photographs of artifacts and burials, while still useful, have lost some of their detail compared to my original copy, partly because the original photos were small to begin with. (The color pictures of bannerstones on the front cover of the reprint come from Moore’s book, and are not original to Webb’s report.) This is too bad for us atlatlists. Webb was able to convince other archaeologists that the Indian Knoll artifacts were atlatl

components because by carefully excavating burials, he could record the associations of artifacts (Figure 3).

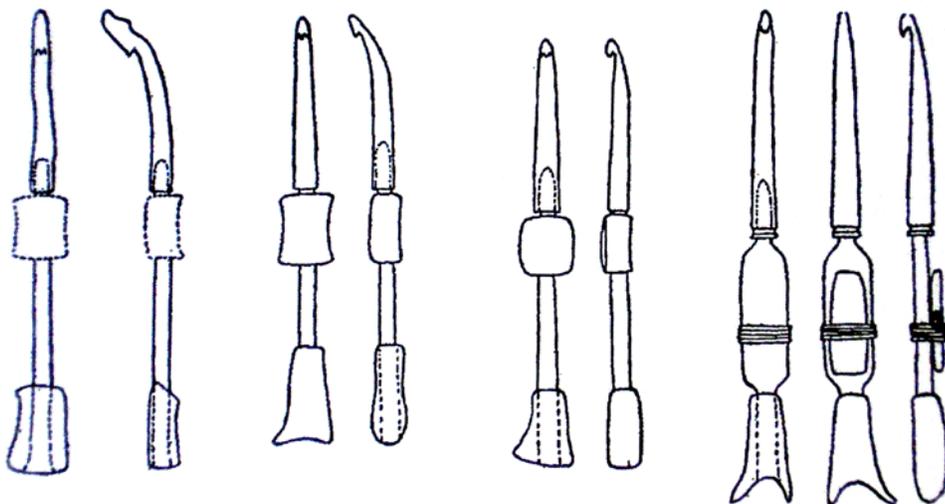


Webb tabulated 44 burials with atlatl parts. Most often these were a hook and either a handle or a weight, but a few had all three. There were 13 instances where at least two parts were in alignment and a reasonable distance apart. Holes of similar diameter in handles, hooks, and bannerstones, and traces of asphalt in the holes, suggested that they had once been linked by a wooden shaft, secured with asphalt. I looked carefully at the photos of 24 of the burials with atlatl parts in Webb's report, and was a bit disappointed. Twelve of these photos are described as showing atlatl parts in alignment, but in only 2 or 3 is this reasonably clear. In most, it is really impossible to see for sure. In the majority of graves with atlatl parts, they were side-by-side, or disarranged. Webb plausibly explains this as intentional destruction of some atlatls, with the wooden shaft snapped before the parts were buried. In other cases, it is clear that decomposition of the body or later disturbance of the grave is responsible for the position of the artifacts. However, for those who doubt that bannerstones were atlatl weights, there is still no completely indisputable clinching evidence in these photos. We might hope that careful modern archaeology could provide it, but most of the Archaic shell mounds like Indian Knoll have long since been excavated, or more often pillaged by looters.

Bob Berg has a different theory explaining why bannerstones occur in graves with atlatl hooks and grips. He suggests (see his webpage <http://www.thunderbirdatlatl.com/newspost/arc5-2005.html>) that the bannerstone was part of a kit to make and repair atlatl darts. It works as a spindle whorl for making cordage for attaching feathers and reinforcing darts, and as a flywheel to turn the dart with a bowdrill while using an abrasive in a leather pad to round and smooth it.

As further evidence for his theories, Webb noted that many of the atlatl parts showed wear and repairs compatible with such use, and that they were found in trash as well as burials (in other words they were not just for symbolic use). There were also numerous stone "bars," also probably atlatl weights. These included a few from graves, and were comparable to the small weights or fetish stones on some Southwestern atlatls. Webb pointed out that many atlatls, like those from the SW, might have been made completely of wood, and only those where a tubular bannerstone was used as a weight would need to have an antler hook attached after the wooden shaft was passed through the bannerstone, explaining why hooks in graves were usually with bannerstones. He provided drawings of his reconstructions (Figure 4), and in fact, went on to publish a longer discussion of the issues elsewhere: Webb, William S. (1957) *The Development of the Spearthrower*. *University of Kentucky Occasional Papers in Anthropology* No. 2. Reprinted 1981, Program for Cultural Resource Assessment, Department of Anthropology, University of Kentucky.

Indian Knoll, Ohio County, Kentucky



Webb had complicated ideas about how spear throwers worked, and the development of different types with different weight systems. These do not convince me, and are too involved to discuss here. However, like most archaeologists, I think it is pretty clear that the bannerstones and other artifacts from Indian Knoll are atlatl parts. Unfortunately, it seems Webb never actually experimented with replica atlatls, or at least never discussed any experiments in print. Many atlatlists have shown that the bannerstone is workable as

an atlatl weight, but the experiments of Berg and Moore show that they also work as spindle whorls and net-making gear. This is a good example of a situation where neither the archaeological evidence, nor experimental replicas, have completely solved the problem yet. If you are interested in these issues, you can give a bannerstone a toss or a whirl, or better yet, try both.

Figure Captions

Figure 1. Indian Knoll bannerstones and antler handles, from Moore.

Figure 2. Indian Knoll antler hooks, from Moore.

Figure 3. My reconstruction of a functional Indian Knoll atlatl, with Archaic points similar to those from the site, and a Giant Ragweed dart.

Figure 4. Webb's hypothetical atlatl reconstructions.

