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# ATLATL

“Too long have I hunted mammoth alone!” Rich McWhorter

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## Clovis Atlatls?

### Hemmings' Evidence from Florida Rivers

By John Whittaker

When did atlatls reach the New World? Most archaeologists assume that the Pleistocene Clovis culture (ca 11,000-10,500 BC), until recently considered the earliest humans to enter the Americas, used atlatls. There were good reasons to believe this, but little real evidence. Clovis projectile points are found among the bones of butchered mammoths, and although some Clovis points are oversized, most would be usable on either an atlatl dart or a thrusting spear. Prudent primitives prefer to perforate pachyderms with projectiles from a distance, and experiments have shown that atlatl darts armed with Clovis points could make killing wounds on elephants. The anatomical position of points in mammoth skeletons at Naco, Arizona, and other sites also suggests atlatl use. Spearthrowers occur much earlier in the Upper Paleolithic of Europe, and although we lack evidence, ought to be present in the Asian populations that crossed the Bering Straits.

Andy Hemmings is now an archaeologist at the University of Texas, working on the Gault Clovis site. His earlier work was in Florida, and provides the first convincing documentation of Clovis era atlatls. In his 2004 doctoral dissertation, *The Organic Clovis: A Single Continent-Wide Cultural Adaptation* (University of Florida), he compiles information on Paleoindian bone and ivory tools from Florida rivers. The context of these artifacts is often poor, because most were collected by scuba divers looking for stone points and other artifacts. However, they include forms found in more secure Clovis contexts, and are often made on the bone of extinct animals, including mastodon and mammoth.

There are three atlatl hooks of probable Clovis age. All of them are stubby pegs with one end beveled and grooved for lashing onto the shaft of the atlatl, and polish in the expected places on the tip of the hook. They resemble some of the hooks from Australian woomera.



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Figure 2. From the Ichetucknee River comes a



*Mastodon* vestigial tusk hook. It's a short stubby miniature tusk a couple inches long, split and exposing the root interior, then scored for hafting, and beveled to elevate the spur tip, 5 cm long.

Figure 3. A *Proboscidian* (most of the Florida ivory pieces are mastodon) ivory shaft fragment was reworked into atlatl hook found in the Santa Fe River. It is 7.5 cm long and



similar in form to others, but not only is it made on elephant tusk, but it appears to be a recycled piece of a long beveled rod, known from several Clovis sites and usually interpreted as spear points or foreshafts. Hemmings prefers to see these rods as points, with a short form that was presumably “launched” and used like the smaller stone points, and a long, slightly curved form that could have been used as a lance for repeated thrusts to finish off prey. Such bone points would be tougher and perhaps more reliable than stone points.

There is also a possible bannerstone made from a chunk of the spongy centrum of a proboscidian vertebra. It is a tapered bun shape, 13.5x1.5x5.4 cm, with a hafting hole (mentioned

but not measured) and broken in the middle with two drill holes for mending. This piece resembles later Archaic forms from Florida sites such as Windover, so it may be a later piece made on old bone rather than Clovis. To be fair, this could be true of the atlatl hooks as well, and direct radiocarbon dates have so far not been successful. However, Hemmings argues that the tools fit a wider pattern of Clovis bone and ivory manufacture and use, were probably made when the bone was fresh, and come from locations well known for Clovis point finds. Later sites do not show much use of old Pleistocene bone.

Surveying data from 246 Clovis-era sites with organic remains from all over the continent, Hemmings documents associations with 352 species of plants and animals. Although the faunal bone shows a repeated occurrence of mammoth and mastodon, and only 6 species are documented for tool use: mammoth, mastodon, paleolama, dire wolf, horse, and deer. According to Hemmings, the Clovis people developed a unique adaptation as mobile forager-hunters in the Pleistocene environment of North America, using a wide range of resources but with a focus on the largest game for both food and tool stock. Clovis culture was widespread and relatively homogeneous, and “technologically focused” - they had an effective hunting strategy of pursuing predictable big game with new and more effective weaponry, an adaptation for which there is no modern analog. The direct evidence for the use of many species also argues against human “overkill” of Pleistocene megafauna, but the effect of preferential hunting on proboscidiens could have been an important factor in their extinction, since they were doing very well just before Clovis times.

All photographs courtesy of Florida Museum of Natural History and C. Andrew Hemmings, William O. Gifford photographer.



