

ILLUSTRATED NOTE ON ATLATL SPURS IN THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF CUBA

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Abstract

An illustrated note is offered on the spear-thrower (or atlatl) spurs in the context of the archaeology of Cuba. Skinner reported the first spear-thrower spur in the archaeological literature of the Caribbean in 1925. In 1977, the author recognized a spear-thrower spur in Indian Creek, island of Antigua, and these artifacts began to be identified in the rest of the West Indies; except for Cuba. A look at the Cuban archaeological literature shows that they indeed had been reported before, but not identified as such. Also added are data on the efficiency of the spear-throwers or atlatl, and a beginning is made on a typology of their spurs. Observations are made about the spear-throwers or atlatl in other archaeological contexts of the Caribbean. The darts used are mentioned. The spear-throwers are compared to the weak bow used by the Tainos of eastern Cuba.

Key words: composite artifacts, spear-thrower, atlatl, spear-thrower spur, island of Cuba, island of St. Croix, island of Antigua, archaeology, Caribbean, hunting, war, darts, Taínos.

Resumen

Se ofrece una nota ilustrada sobre los ganchos de tiradera (o garrucha) en el contexto de la arqueología de Cuba. Skinner reportó el primer gancho de tiradera en la literatura arqueológica del Caribe en 1925. En 1977, el autor reconoció un gancho de tiradera en Indian Creek, isla de Antigua, y se empezaron a identificar estos artefactos en el resto de Las Antillas; excepto en Cuba. Una ojeada a la literatura arqueológica cubana muestra que sí se habían reportado antes, pero no se identificaron como tales. También se añaden datos sobre la eficiencia de las tiraderas o garruchas, y se esboza el inicio de una tipología de sus ganchos. Se hacen observaciones acerca de las tiraderas o garruchas en otros contextos arqueológicos del Caribe. Se mencionan los dardos usados. Las tiraderas se comparan al arco débil que usaban los taínos del oriente de Cuba.

Palabras clave: artefactos compuestos, tiradera, garrucha, gancho de tiradera, isla de Cuba, isla de Santa Cruz, isla de Antigua, arqueología, Caribe, cacería, guerra, dardos, taínos.

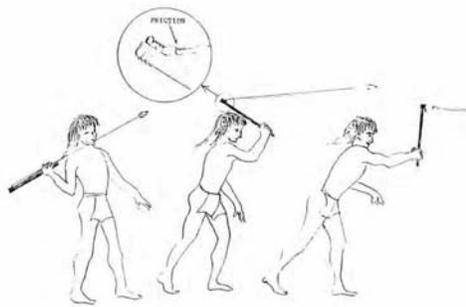


FIG.1

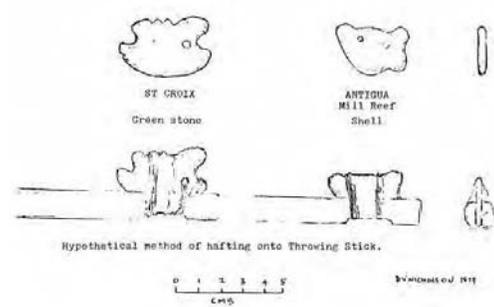


FIG.2

This brief illustrated note deals with atlatl spurs, known in Spanish as *ganchos de tiradera* or *ganchos de garrucha* (and also by other names) in the context of the archaeology of Cuba. These artifacts truly are *parts of artifacts*, since they are an *element* of a *composite artifact*, which includes others, such as the *atlatl* itself, which is in fact a worked stick; the *binding* of the spur itself to the atlatl, consisting of string and maybe glue; and the *strap handle* for the hand and the arm of the individual wielding the atlatl, which may be of leather or of rope, be it of cotton or another material (see Figures 1 and 2 for its use and the spur's position). At times, in some places, another element is incorporated: a *weight*, normally made of worked stone (Nicholson 1980, 399), also with its binding.

The first atlatl spur reported for the Antilles in the archaeological literature was by Alanson Buck Skinner, of the Museum of the American Indian (Heye Foundation), and it came from an archaeological collection donated to that Museum by Mrs. Louise Hark, of Saint Croix (Skinner 1925; Figure 4). This spur is made from a *greenstone*, probably nephrite. It was found in a multicomponent midden at that lady's plantation, called Estate Richmond, several kilometers west-northwest of the city of Christiansted. It is of a form common worldwide, therefore Skinner, who had much ethnographical experience, had no difficulty identifying it as such.

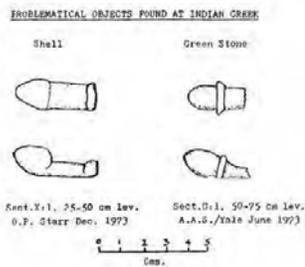


FIG.3



FIG.4



FIG.5.

The second was identified by the writer of this note, on the island of Antigua (Nicholson 1980; Figure 3). It comes from the Terminal Saladoid occupation

(Episaladoid) of the Indian Creek site, in the eastern part of the island, near an estuary and the sea. It is made of shell. Due to its form, at first it was considered by others as a simulation of a phallus, until I compared it with other specimens from California. Now it is defined as an atlatl spur of the ‘snake head’ type. Later, some similar ones were identified from the same island, and also of another types, made of *greenstone*, almost always nephrite or jadeite, and others also of shell.

Additionally, the atlatl themselves have been divided into three classes: *male*, if they do not have a lengthwise groove to accommodate the dart, and have spurs that stick out; *female*, if they have that groove, with the spur inside of it; and *mixed*, if they have a groove and the spur sticks out (Krause 1905).

An ‘Annotated Atlatl Bibliography’ by John Whittaker (2010) has just come out in the Internet. He differs from Krause as to classification, and simply proposes that the *spur* is the effective part of the composite artifact, therefore all atlatl are *male* with or without the added groove of the spur sticking out.

After the presentation of said artifact by means of a paper by Desmond Vernon Nicholson at the VIII Congress of the International Association for Caribbean Archaeology (Saint Christopher, 1979), other delegates also identified atlatl spurs from

the collections of their respective countries. The first were: Kurt von Fischer, from the site of Merger, Haiti; Ricardo E. Alegría, from the site of Luquillo, Puerto Rico; Edgar Clerc, who identified the small spurs from the island of Guadeloupe; Iraida Vargas, a spur dated B.C. 650, from Venezuela; Leslie Suttly, who confirmed another from a site on Mayero, islands of the Grenadines (Nicholson 1980, 404). Until now, no atlatl spurs have been identified coming from Cuban collections.

However, they were indeed reported, as will be seen below, but never identified as such. At times they have a perforation for the binding, and they were thought to be pendants or a kind of trinket or corporal adornment. William F. Keegan told the author personally, that in his experience, any object which would be part of a composite artifact, as long as it has any perforation, is immediately identified throughout the world by the less curious as a bead or a pendant.

Atlatl spurs are not only circumscribed to the 'snake head' type, or the similar 'acorn' type; others are found, such as that in Figure 4, those in Figures 5, 6, 7 and 8, and perhaps others yet to be discovered. Figure 10, below, illustrates the most representative 'snake head' type possible, from the site Concordias Juder on the island of Saint Croix (on top is the fragment of another similar one of the same provenience, lacking a head).

The beginnings of a typology seem to arise already from the literature. The acorn type is not documented for the Antilles. The other similar type, that of the snake head, has an ample distribution. Figure 2 contains other types as well distributed as the snake head type. One (illustrated independently in Figure 4) is very common, and is similar to the atlatl spurs of the extreme north, or arctic, of the Americas, used among the Athabaskans or Na-Dené and the Eskimos or Inuit; Nicholson (1980, 402) calls the form of this type 'leaflike', and they may be called 'folioform'.

Others (Figure 6: 40, 62; Figure 7, 1-3) seem to be a more simple and less tabular version; 40 is very eroded. There are some which are very sculptoric in the round (Figure 6: 88), but these are very rare. More frequently is tabular type with a superimposed head worked in the round, more or less human (Figure 5; Figure 8). These might be called 'skull spurs'.

Types similar to the folioform are also frequent, which are not tabular, and have very artistic forms, more or less rounded, but which approximate its basic function as to

position and use (Figure 7, 4-5). Since there is a similarity to the shape of the shields of the peltasts or light infantry of ancient Hellas, the folioform type and these may also be called 'peltamorph'.

Recently, on the island of Vieques, artifacts made out of semi-precious or precious stones such as serpentine and jadeite have been found, in the form of birds of prey (condors?) each bird grasping an object in its talons; at times, it seems that some of these objects are human heads, and the others represent them (*cf.* Chanlatte Baik and Narganes 1980; Boomert 2001; *vid.* Figure 9).

My impression, ever since I saw them at the VIII Congress, is that these artifacts are atlatl spurs, and the condors with human heads in their talons represent a culture that not only used atlatl, but also practiced head-hunting. We are talking about the problematic Huecoid Series, until now limited to the east of the Greater Antilles, above all Puerto Rico and Vieques, and the more-or-less northern Lesser Antilles, and, as to time, to the beginning of Period II, or more or less from B.C. 500 to A.D. 150 (Chanlatte Baik and Narganes, 1980).

In summary, we have seen with the illustrations that Mark Raymond Harrington (1921) was seemingly the first to find atlatl spurs in a Cuban archaeological context, but that he did not recognize them as such. A little more than a third of a century later, José Álvarez Conde (1956) in his synthesis *Arqueología Indocubana*, illustrates several atlatl spurs, but does not identify them either. Finally, a contemporary postcard publishes an atlatl spur from Potrero del Mango, Banes, Holguín (Figure 5), almost identical to others published before by Fewkes (1903; Figure 8) found in the Dominican Republic, and Harrington (1921; Figure 6: 26) found in Cuba.

Krause (1905) states and Whittaker (2010) evaluates, that the efficiency of atlatl, pursuant to ethnographic reports, is from '3 or 4 times farther than throwing the dart with the hands alone', or rather, from '200 to 300 feet' [63 to 94 meters] 'with the hands alone'; the Australian aborigines obtain, with atlatl, a range of '150 yards, with good aim up to 40 paces' [142 meters; the 40 paces could be a little less than 40 meters]. We see that $3 \times 63 = 189$; $4 \times 63 = 252$, and $3 \times 94 = 282$; $4 \times 94 = 376$, so that the Australian aborigines did not manage to propel their darts with atlatl '3 or 4 farther than throwing the dart with the hands alone', even though they did obtain a better range.

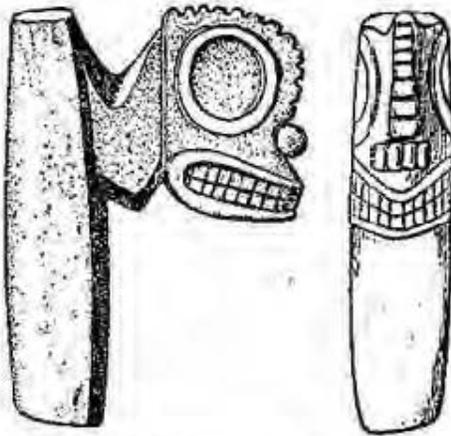


Figura 26.

Escultura en concha (Taino), procedente de Hoigufu. Museo Montañés (Longitud: 2 pulg.)

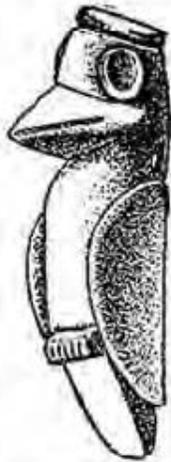


Figura 33.

Amuleto de concha (Taino), en forma de pájaro, procedente del asiento de pueblo en Laguna Limones. Maisí. (Altura: 1.2 pulg.)



Figura 40.

Pendiente de concha gastada por el agua (Ciboney) hallado en la "Cueva del Pueblo", cerca de Jaico. (Longitud: 1.4 pgs.)

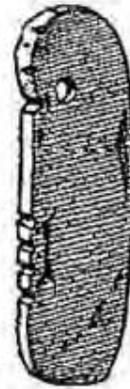


Figura 62.

Ornamento de concha (Taino) procedente de la finca Caridad, cerca de Maisí. (Extensión: 1.2 pulgadas.)

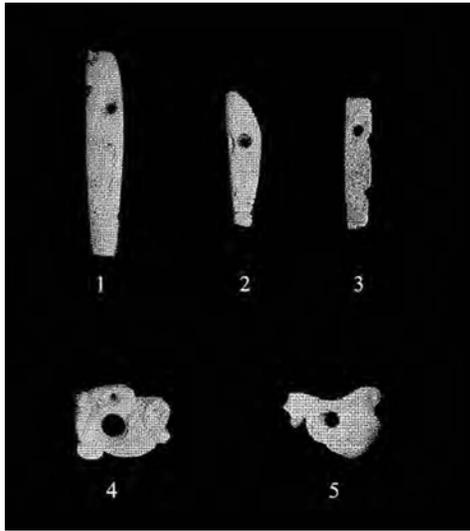


FIG.7



FIG.8

FIG.9



FIG.10



Nicholson (1980, 397) likewise deals with this, and estimates that the average distance reached by a dart propelled by an atlatl is around 100 meters; but with a good aim, it is about a fourth of that distance. The Eskimo or Inuit used small light darts to hunt seals with atlatl at a distance of from 30 to 50 meters, 'with considerable aim and force'. In

experiments, it has been demonstrated that an atlatl increases by some 58% to 60% the range of a dart or a javelin (*op. cit.*).

Nicholson (1980, 400) adds that, in his opinion and that of others he cites, atlatl had a double purpose: to hunt men (or war), and to hunt aquatic or semi-aquatic animals. The Aztecs or Mexica came to Anahuac with only bows and arrows; once in the region of the great lakes, they adopted the *atlatl*, as they themselves called it, for hunting in the lakes, and also, naturally, for war. Of the three considerations set forth by Nicholson (*loc. cit.*) in order to favor the atlatl over the bow and arrows, the two first are inconsiderable.

Nicholson proposes, in the first place, that bow and arrows are impossible to handle in a canoe, and the atlatl gives no problems. In the second place, that water could weaken the string of the bow. This is contradicted by the many cases reported of Indians firing bows and arrows from canoes, whether in the Caribbean or in Amazonia. In the third place, he is right stating that the atlatl is more adequate than a bow in order to propel a dart (or harpoon) tied with a string in order to recover the quarry. Even today, the Tarasca or Purupecha hunt ducks and geese in the Lake of Pátzcuaro with atlatl (Nicholson, *op. cit.*), and we already saw the hunting of seals by the Eskimo or Inuit.

Sven Edvard Lovén (1935, *passim*) followed several historians of the Indies by calling the atlatl by the name of *garruchas*. He was convinced of the origin of these

garruchas in Colombia, thence diffusing slowly towards the east and north. Nicholson (1980, 396) coincides with other authors by inferring that atlatl began to be used during Period I, or the Palaeo-Indian or Palaeolithic Epoch. This is an inference based upon very few data, but it is possibly so.

It is very early to say much about the chronology of these atlatl spurs. We see that Iraida Vargas identified one dating to B.C. 650 in Venezuela, and a very eroded sample found by Harrington (Figure 6: 40) seemingly is from an 'aceramic' or 'archaic' context (however much these ideas may have value as to time!). Atlatl spurs appear in Saladoid contexts, and they seem to continue right up to the end of the ceramic sequence, since Figures 5 and 6: 26 adhere to the canons of classic Taíno art. Naturally, a seriation may be made, which would be the topic of another study.

Regarding the darts (which may also be called javelins) propelled by these atlatl or *garruchas*, there are several possible samples in archaeological collections. A dart (illustrated by Harrington 1921, Figure 103) was found in the muck of Laguna de Malpotón, Pinar del Río, Cuba, and is pretty complete; it measures 41.2 inches [*ca.* 1.2 m.]. Its discoverer (*loc. cit.*) identifies it as an arrow, but it could also be an atlatl dart. The historical sources mention points fashioned from the spines of stingrays (*cf.* Figueredo 1974; Figure 3) and from flint (*op. cit.*, Figure 2), or from the same stick by burning and sharpening (*cf.* Las Casas, *passim*), as seems to be the case with the one reported by Harrington.

The bows and arrows used by the Taínos of eastern Cuba, according to Las Casas, were among the worst in the Antilles, much inferior to those of Jamaica and of the Macorix and Ciguayo, of Higüey and Puerto Rico (Las Casas 1559/1951, *passim*), and the illustrious bishop estimated that their effective range was 50 paces, or only some 10 paces more than an Australian aborigine atlatl (*op. cit.*).

Nicholson (1980, 400) follows Lovén (*op. cit.*) considering that the 'dark wood' for making strong bows was lacking in some parts of the Antilles, and this means that in certain regions, the weak bows made from other woods could not compete with the atlatl. Naturally, such a statement is an opinion or inference without any basis on available data.

Even so it is probable, according to the sources, that in Cuba and in other places, the missile weapon preferred for the hunt and for war was the dart or javelin propelled by an atlatl.

Acknowledgment

I would be lacking in courtesy not to remember my dear friend and colleague Desmond Vernon Nicholson in this space, a true English gentleman, sadly deceased, and all the enthusiastic archaeologists (whether professional or amateur) of the island of Antigua and its Archaeological Society, who received me so well that summer of 1977, and again (thirty-two years later) last summer of 2009, on the occasion of the XXIII Congress of the International Association for Caribbean Archaeology. And, already regrettably deceased, Fred Olsen, a Connecticut Yankee or Nutmegger of the good ones, and Benjamin Irving Rouse, illustrious scholar from Yale University, who patiently, along with Nicholson, and later, when Rouse suffered an infarction, by means of the collaboration of the Frisian archaeologist Ep Boerstra, also my friend, made the excavations at Indian Creek.

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Figures

Figure 1:

Drawing taken from Nicholson 1980.

Figure 2:

Drawing taken from Nicholson 1980.

Figure 3:

Drawing taken from Nicholson 1980.

Figure 4:

Peltamorph atlatl spur reported by Skinner 1925. Estate Richmond, island of St. Croix.

Figure 5:

Shell atlatl spur found at Potrero del Mango, Banes, province of Holguín. Photo taken from *Coleccionables* of the *Boletín del Gabinete de Arqueología*, No. 5, año 5, 2006..

Figure 6:

Figures 26, 40, 62 and 88 from Harrington 1921. We have preserved the original numbers of the Figures for ease of reference. 26 is a skull spur.

Figure 7:

Atlatl spurs illustrated by Álvarez Conde 1956. Numbers 1-3 are more-or-less tabular, numbers 4-5 are peltamorph.

Figure 8:

Atlatl spur from the Dominican Republic, Archbishop Meriño Collection; illustrated by Fewkes 1903. A skull spur.

Figure 9:

Probable atlatl spurs from the site of La Hueca, Vieques, Puerto Rico, illustrated by Chanlatte Baik and Narganes 1980.

Figure 10:

Fragment without the head (above) of an atlatl spur, and a snake head type atlatl spur (below), from the Concordias Juder site, island of St. Croix. Photo courtesy of Richard T. Gartley.