

Atlatl Weights

By Richard B. Lyons

North America is the only place in the world where stone weights were added to the shafts of atlatls. They were called Bannerstones, Loafstone, Boatstones, bar weights etc. They add stability, distance, and accuracy to atlatl use. One of the most important examinations of the atlatl and atlatl weights was a book by William Webb.

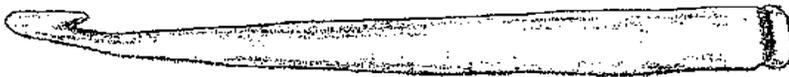
Webb was one of the foremost pioneers in the study of the atlatl. His posthumously published work "The Development of the Spear Thrower", University of Kentucky 1957, has long been considered the Bible on the archeology and physics of the atlatl. His work, however, has recently been reevaluated and come under criticism for both chronologies of the developmental sequence of Bannerstones, atlatl hooks, and the positioning of atlatl weights [Bannerstones etc.] on the atlatl shaft.

Information in a new book called "The Archaic Bannerstone [Its Chronological History & Purpose From 6000 BC to 1000 BC]", written and published by David Lutz, is shedding new light on atlatl prehistory. Mr. Lutz has provided us with an up to date and accurate chronology of Bannerstone sequential development, that is backed up by carbon 14 dating and excavations of stratified archaic sites. His chronology differs from Webb's in several aspects. Webb has bar and Loafstone weights being the first type of weights added to an atlatl shaft, and later evolving to Bannerstones. Mr. Lutz has concluded, from archeological evidence, that the first stone weight used on an atlatl was a fully stylized Bannerstone. It was called the reel type, [carbon 14 dated at 6070 BC by associated materials], and bar and Loafstone weights not occurring until the late Archaic to Early Woodland periods 5000 years later.

An objection is also made to Webb's sequence of antler atlatl hook development. In Webb's sequence he has the crochet type hook occurring first and followed by a "new" shorter type which allows the Bannerstone weight to be positioned closer to the hook.

One of Webb's most important assumptions was that the atlatl weights, over time, were moved closer and closer to the atlatl hook. Webb said that the shorter hook type allowed the weight to be moved closer to the hook than did the crochet type. He finally has the hook actually being incorporated into the atlatl weight, and then eventually the weight was moved beyond the hook.

Mr. Lutz has examined all the archaeological evidence that Webb collected while at the University of Kentucky and he could find no objective data to support this conclusion.



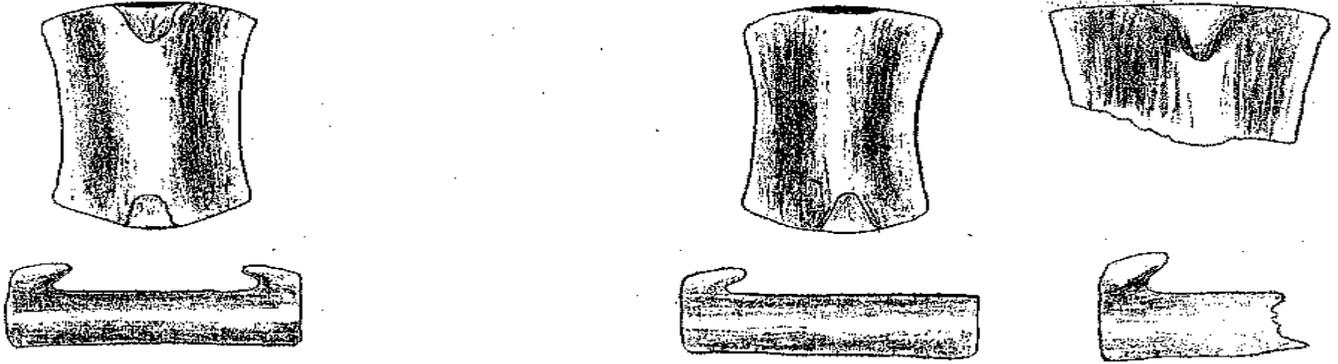
Crochet type



Short type

With new evidence, which has come to light over the years, Lutz has reversed the developmental sequence of atlatl hooks, with the shorter type being the first to occur, and the crochet type being one of the latter types.

In one of Webb's stages of Bannerstone development he describes the hook being carved into the terminal end of the Bannerstone. Mr. Lutz says Webb erred in this conjecture, because the two specimens, of this type Bannerstone, that he examined, were damaged, and actually represented a type that is well known today. It is called the Horned or Hooked type. This style weight has two hooks or horns, one at each end. The two that Webb examined had both been damaged in such a manner that only one hook remained.



Undamaged

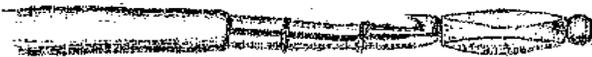
Damaged

With this incomplete information Webb made the incorrect assumption that they were atlatl hooks.

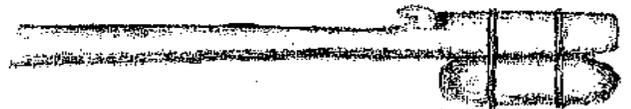
These illustrations do not represent the actual Bannerstones that Webb examined. They are meant to show what an undamaged specimen would look like compared to a damaged specimen.

The last phase of Bannerstone placement that Webb proposes is with the stone placed beyond the hook. Mr. Lutz stated that Webb had no archeological evidence to support this configuration, and the style hook and Bannerstone that Webb links together have never been found in archeological association.

My first impression, when examining Webb's illustration of this atlatl type is that the weight will come down and make contact with the socket end of the dart before it has sufficiently disengaged itself from the hook. I was so sure this would happen that I had never bothered to try it out. That is, until I was writing this article. Not wanting to put into print something that I was not absolutely sure of, I went to my work shop and quickly constructed an atlatl with the hook forward of the weight. I did not have a center drilled weight as Webb had proposed, so I substituted a 2 Oz. Loafstone and tied it to the bottom of the atlatl shaft beyond the hook. The terminal end of the atlatl was 3-1/2 in.



Webb's configuration



My experimental model

beyond the tip of the atlatl hook. I grabbed some darts and headed for the backyard. I found, there was no disruptive contact between the terminal end of the atlatl and the dart. It worked great.

Webb may have erred in his interpretation of archaeological data but his description of the mechanics of the atlatl and associated atlatl weights is one of the best we have today. Mr. Lutz says Webb had a strong background in physics, and that this greatly influenced his findings. This led Webb to search for functional interpretations of atlatl weights and their positions on atlatls, but his knowledge of physics may have misled his conclusions. We must now reevaluate the method by which he came to his conclusions. Was it archaeological data or his knowledge of physics?

Mr. Lutz takes the position that Bannerstones were placed on atlatls as symbols of clan membership and for burial internment but they were not for everyday use. I think he may have a point in regards to the more elaborate Bannerstones, but my own experience using weights and Bannerstones on modern-day atlatls has led me to believe they had a very practical functional aspect. They act as a counter balance, add stability, distance and accuracy.

New investigations and discoveries on atlatl weights and Bannerstones are presently being made. We must use this information to reevaluate the works by pioneers in this field, Webb, Moorehead, and Knoblock, and put their work into perspective. The Bannerstone and atlatl weight debate has been a long one and will continue.

Anyone interested in learning more about atlatls and associated weights should read "The Development of the Spear Thrower", by William Webb, University of Kentucky, and "The Archaic Bannerstone [Its Chronological History & Purpose From 6000 BC to 1000 BC]" by David Lutz, 619 St. Catherine Ct, Newburgh IN 47630.