

Alternative Uses for Early Bifaces?

Alison T. Stenger

Institute for Archaeological Studies, Portland, Oregon

In a recent issue of CAHO, a request for information was posted. It stated that a number of Haskett and similar point types had been recovered from water environments, and that the condition of all of the bifaces was excellent. People were asked to report any of these early types, when the provenienced location was one that was submerged.

The specimens that generated the request had several things in common. All were Western Stemmed types, or variants such as Haskett, and all were reported as being from underwater environments. In every example, the flake scars were clearly visible, there was no evidence of water transport, and the cultural phases represented were stylistically early (Figure 1). Where the specimens differed was in the type of location from which they were recovered.



Figure 1. The styles and technology of these water curated lithics are different, but the types are consistently early. Images provided by Mike Full, Willamette Valley Pleistocene Project: (<http://www.yamhillriverpleistocene.com/photogalleries>).



Figure 2. Crescents may be multipurpose tools, with some related to the processing of waterfowl or fish.

Thanks to responses from AOA members, it is now clear that these large bifaces are associated with a broad variety of aquatic ecosystems. These differences include the types of waterways, altitude, and surrounding landforms. The materials utilized are as varied as the locations from which these tools were documented. What is consistent, however, is the existence of early bifaces types from many different underwater localities.

While the hunting of terrestrial game is most often considered, the condition and depth underwater of some bifaces suggests an alternative use. These data suggest that some Western Stemmed types may have been intended for the hunting of waterfowl. The spearing of large fish or marine mammals that occasionally move upriver, provide additional alternative uses. It is important to note that the technologies are clearly visible on these previously submerged bifaces. The production scars indicate manufacture in the manner typical of their terrestrial counterparts, suggesting that these are not later lithics, made in a style similar to older types. Further, there is no secondary modification evidenced. These tools were not altered to accommodate an alternative use, such as the change to avian or riverine species procurement from terrestrial game hunting.

One of the interesting facts to come out of this preliminary study is that the elevation and type of waterway are probably not significant factors in the use of this tool type within a water oriented environment. These bifaces have been documented at elevations ranging from 100' above sea level to more than 5,500' above sea level. The waterways have included quiet meanders, downcut river channels, and high elevation lakes. Interestingly, more recent lithic types have not generally been reported. This lack of more recent material may be as significant as the occurrence of early material, as it implies several types of changes.

Another early lithic type, the crescent, is also often associated with water (Figure 2). These tools, however, are usually reported near water, and not from submerged environments. It is possible that the crescents had multiple uses. When associated with water, they could have been used in the defleshing of waterfowl, or the preparation of exoskeletal fish. Thus, like the large bifaces, these artifact types may also have been used for multiple purposes.

It is hoped that future work will include an expansion of the database initiated for this study. If you know of bifaces from underwater environments, or if you have protein analysis data from shoreline associated crescents, please contact the author.

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