

HUMAN SPEAR POINTS AND SPEARED HUMANS: THE PROCUREMENT, MANUFACTURE, AND USE OF BONE IMPLEMENTS IN PREHISTORIC GUAM

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ABSTRACT

The procurement, manufacture, use, and discard of Mariana Island bone spear points is discussed on the basis of materials excavated from a late prehistoric and early Contact Period cemetery located on east Hagatña' Bay on the island of Guam. Excavation of the burials in 1990 uncovered the remains of at least 175 individuals in a tightly compact cluster approximately 125 metres inland from the shore. The cemetery appears to be part of the Latte Period native Chamorro² village site of Apotguan³. Latte sets at the site were first recorded by Hornbostel in the 1920s and it is likely that the cemetery itself was associated with no longer extant latte sets. The cemetery contained evidence of the removal of bone from selected portions of the human skeletal remains. Found in association with two burials were spear points made of human bone. The use of bone spear points has been documented at other sites in the Mariana Islands and is noted in early Spanish accounts of contacts with the native inhabitants. However the Apotguan cemetery burials provide the best information to date regarding raw material procurement, methods of manufacture, and ways in which these tools may have been used. This evidence will be presented in detail and compared with evidence from other archaeological and burial sites in the Mariana Islands.

Early Spanish accounts report arrows and spears among the implements used by the Chamorro people of the Mariana Islands of Micronesia. Although some of these weapons had fire hardened wood tips or used fishbone points, others used sharpened and barbed human bone at the tip. As reported by the German Governor Fritz (1989:5), the Chamorro used the arm and leg bones from their own dead, as well as from the Spaniards and missionaries that they

killed, for making spear points. Thompson (1945:19) quotes Cowley's early voyaging report, that

... the sharp ends of their lances [sic] are made of dead men's bones; for upon the decease of a person, his bones make eight lances, of his leg-bones two, of his thighs as many, and his arms afford four, which being cut like a scoop and jagged like the teeth of a saw or eel spear, if a man happens to be wounded with one of those lances, if he be not cured in seven days, he is a dead man.

Mammal bone projectile points, awls and knives have been recovered from numerous prehistoric and early historical period sites in the Mariana Islands, including sites on Saipan (Thompson 1932) and Rota (Butler 1988, 1997; Jones and Tomonari-Tuggle 1994). Excavations on Guam by Hornbostel (Thompson 1932), Spoehr (1957), Reinman (1977), and more recently Graves (pers. comm.), Micronesian Archaeological Research Services (Amesbury *et al.* 1991), and Paul H. Rosendahl, Inc. (pers. comm.) have all recovered plain or barbed spear points. Although many of these points have been positively identified as having been made of human bone, the lack of other large mammals as potential sources has contributed to the assumption that all of the points are made of human bone. The systematically recovered spear points have generally been found in association with inhumation burials; for example at Oleai, Saipan (Graves, pers. comm.) and San Antonio, Guam (Amesbury *et al.* 1991). The excavators and later researchers have interpreted these as grave goods — offerings deliberately placed in the grave with the deceased. They are unusual, because grave goods are seldom found associated with Chamorro burials. However, a few researchers have suggested that the presence of the points is an indication that some individuals died a violent death.

Complementing the historic and archaeological record of the use of human bone spear points is an observed pattern of bone collection from Chamorro burials. Supporting early

barb, and the tip, ending in a sharp point. According to historic sources, the points were barbed so that they would break off inside the victim and be difficult to remove. Tibia is the most common source bone cited in the archaeological literature.

Eleven bone points were recovered from the Apotguan excavations. The points were examined by Douglas to identify the source bone. Five of the points were fashioned from human tibia. Four of these used portions of the anterior spine and the fifth used the medial side. Two of the points were formed of human fibula and one each of human humerus and radius. The remaining points could not be securely attributed to particular elements or species. The ratio of leg to arm elements represented in the points is consistent with the ratio of leg to arm elements removed from the interments, however it is interesting to note that none of the artefacts appears to have been formed from the femur.

In cross-section the Apotguan implements vary considerably, primarily as a function of the raw material; for example, points formed from the anterior ridge of the tibia are V-shaped in cross-section. An incomplete artefact from Rota (Hanson 1997) formed from an adult femur, provides evidence of the early stages of tool manufacture. Preliminary shaping was done, probably with a shell or chert tool, while the bone remained substantially intact, affording the tool-maker a gripping handle. A tip and rows of barbs were then cut, incising added, and the edges and remainder of the point well smoothed, usually on both the exterior and the intracortical surfaces. All of the Apotguan implements are finely barbed, exhibiting several different bilateral or unilateral patterns (Figure 2). The longest point recovered, measuring approximately 25 cm, is from the medial side of the tibia and is flat to slightly oval in cross section. It is barbed and incised along its entire length, however from the mid-shaft onward the point is unmodified on the intracortical surface; its form suggests that it may have been used unhafted, as a dagger. The fine tips of the barbs along the upper 1/3 of the point have all been broken off, presumably as a result of use. Another of the points, although well barbed, is an almost complete human radius — still round and hollow in cross section with the point at the distal end.

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The contexts of previous finds of bone projectile points did not clearly indicate the nature of the association between the points and the individuals with whom they were found

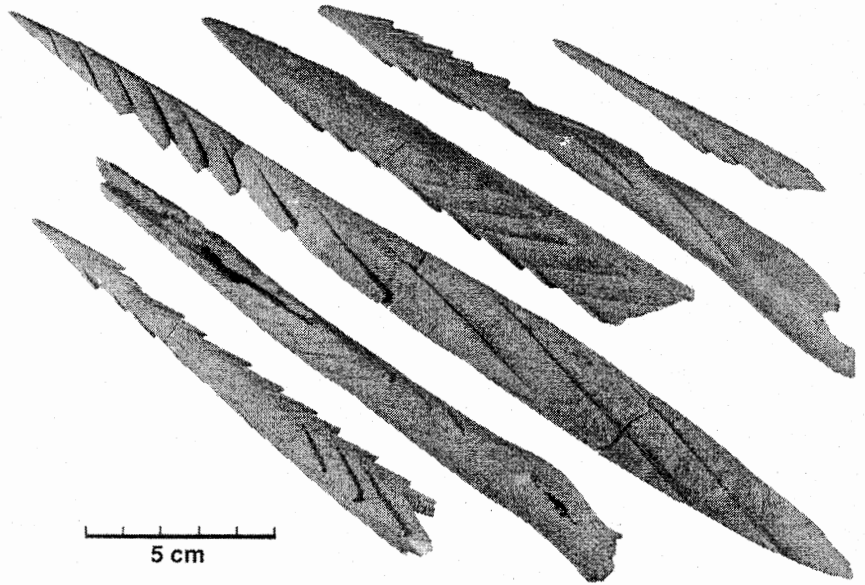


Figure 2: Six human bone points recovered with Burial 57 at Apotguan.

— whether these were grave offerings or the cause of injury or death. At Apotguan, the 11 recovered points come from two burial features. Burial 1 was identified during backhoe trenching at the site in the testing phase of investigations. This feature produced a single, fragmentary point. As at other sites, no clear association between the point and the individual interred, a young adult male, could be made. However, since grave goods are uncommon at the site, the point cannot be assumed to represent an intentional offering.

All of the remaining 10 bone points were recovered from Burial 57; a male, aged 25 to 30 years. This is the first, and I believe only, case archaeologically documenting the use of human bone implements as weapons in prehistoric Micronesia. All of the points were found *in situ* within the body of this individual (Figure 3). Based upon the positions of the points it appears that this individual received five wounds in the back, one in each side, one in the groin and two, most likely lethal, wounds in the head. After examining the skeletal remains, the osteologists concluded that "... the lack of bone reaction suggests that this individual died within 12 days of injury, if not at the time of the injuries" (Pietruszewsky, Douglas and Ikehara-Quebral pers.comm.).

Knowing the cause of death in this instance still leaves us with questions regarding how to interpret this death. Other than the presence of the 10 points, nothing distinguishes this individual from those around him. His interment is one of an alignment of 10 supine, extended burials (Subgroup A2) which I have interpreted as having been interred directly under a now missing latte structure. If the common interpretations are valid, this should be a marker of enhanced,



Figure 3: A close-up view of Burial 57 showing several points *in situ* within the chest cavity.

not diminished, status. The lack of other victims among the large Apotguan population eliminates warfare as a likely cause. All indications are that he was killed by an unidentified "them" rather than by members of his own kin group. The number of points and the location of the wounds suggest that his killer (or killers) truly wanted him dead — that he was perhaps executed. The rarity of the points and their high production costs would suggest a ritual or other special significance for this death.

CONCLUSION

Mammal bone artefacts were recovered from some of the earliest archaeological excavations in the Mariana Islands. These bone implements included projectile points that were usually found associated with human burials and that were presumably manufactured from human bone. The source and context of these finds raised research questions for archaeologists that have remained open to the present. Although there are early European accounts of the use of human bone spear points as weapons, archaeological research has, until now, failed to produce unequivocal evidence of the nature of their use.

With the recovery of human bone spear points *in situ* within the body of an adult male identified as Burial 57, the Apotguan research has for the first time documented the use of these artefacts as weapons used to kill a human being. This find, coupled with the general paucity of burial goods associated with prehistoric Chamorro interments, suggests

that previous finds of bone projectile points associated with human interments may best be explained similarly, rather than interpreted as grave offerings.

According to Spanish sources, the bones of Chamorro ancestors were felt to have supernatural powers. Perhaps in obtaining the bones of one's ancestors and refining these into beautiful barbed spear points the Chamorro were able to concentrate or magnify the power of the ancestors. While these points obviously served a practical purpose as weapons, their almost exclusive association with dead people and their high "value" as a function of the efforts required to produce them, should lead us to consider more carefully the context of future finds. These are not implements that served subsistence-based utilitarian functions, rather their function lies within the ritual or judicial realm.

NOTES

1. Hagatña is the official spelling of the locality previously identified on maps as Agana or Agaña, it will be used throughout this document.
2. *Chamorro* is the term given by the Spanish to the native inhabitants of Guam and the Mariana Islands and is still in use today.
3. Apotguan is the official spelling of the locality previously identified on maps as Apurguan or Apotguan, it will be used throughout this document.

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