TROWEL AND PEN

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE KENTUCKY ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY

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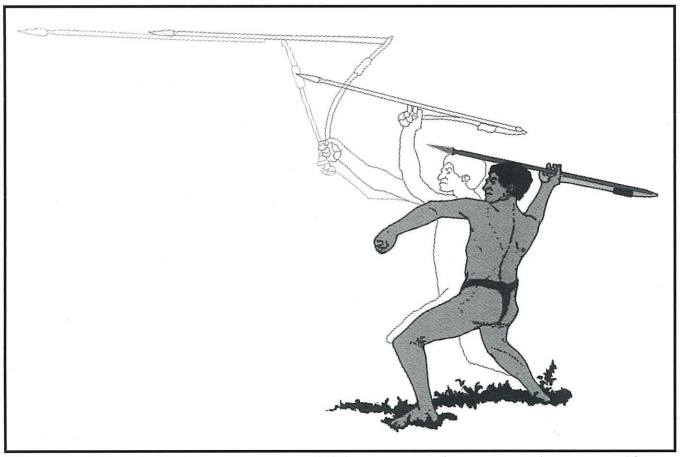
THE ARCHAIC ATLATL - NOT JUST FOR BREAKFAST ANYMORE!

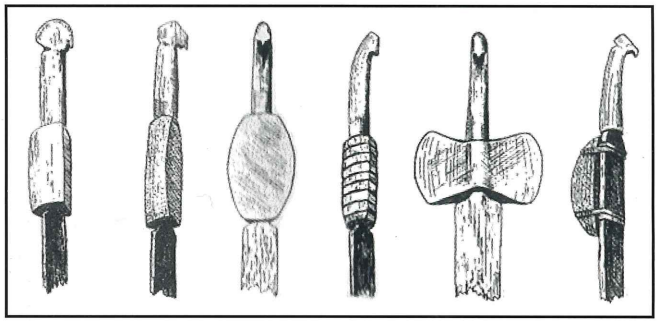
In Kentucky, prehistoric hunters used the atlatl or spearthrower as a weapon for over 7,000 years. It consisted of a wooden spear fitted with a chipped stone spearpoint, and the spearthrower itself: a handle and a hook made of wood, bone or antler, and a counterweight. This tool extended the range and accuracy of the unaided human arm, and it required skill to make and to use.

Only those Archaic hunters living in the Mississippi River valley and North America's Eastern Woodlands from about 7,000 to 4,000 years ago outfitted their spearthrowers with large, elaborate groundstone counterweights, called bannerstones. Until recently, archaeologists thought the spearpoint, with its variations in shape and size, was the only part of this tool that held any information about Archaic peoples in this region. But research carried out by a University of Kentucky graduate student on over 400 bannerstones from west-central Kentucky, southern Indiana, and southern Illinois has shown that these groundstone tools have their own stories to tell.



How an Archaic hunter would have used a spearthrower (from The Development of the Spearthrower, by William S. Webb 1957).

Archaic bannerstone makers used many different kinds of rocks as the raw material for their counterweights, such as granite, banded slate, jasper, and quartz/quartzite. They made bannerstones in a variety of different sizes, shapes, and styles, too. Researchers have defined over 16 different types in all, including rectangular, butterfly, winged, tubed, and bottle-shaped forms. Some types of bannerstones also were made in different varieties. For example, rectangular bannerstones can have diamond or triangular cross-sections as well as other features, such as hooks, horns and central ridges.



Examples of different types of bannerstones and hooks (from The Development of the Spearthrower, by William S. Webb 1957).

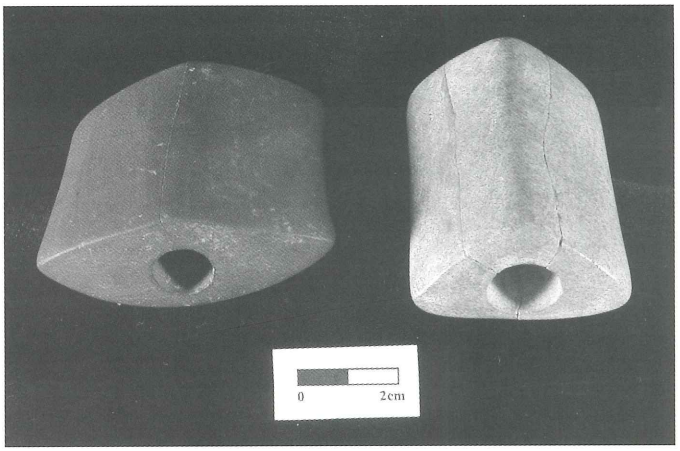
But this isn't the whole story. Because even if using a counterweight improved the spearthrower's efficiency slightly, this study shows that the bannerstone did much more than that. It appears that during the latter centuries of the Archaic period, around 5,500 to 4,000 years ago, the style and shape of a bannerstone, perhaps even its color, reflected important information about its maker and his social group.

Continued on Page 2.

Continued from Page 1.

The regional distribution of bannerstones shows that distinct cultural traditions were beginning to develop at this time. Prehistoric groups living in Kentucky's Green River valley made only a few different kinds of bannerstones, and preferred rectangular bannerstones with a triangular cross-section. On the other hand, groups living in south-central Indiana along the Ohio River made many different kinds of bannerstones, some of which were quite fancy. Unlike the Kentucky groups, these groups were partial to rectangular bannerstones with a diamond cross-section. A few groups in Kentucky and Indiana made rare bottle and butterfly types out of quartz.

Thus, during the Late Archaic, bannerstones distinguished one group from another, like certain colors and symbols today identify different fraternities. These objects, just like spearpoints, held important information about their users and their communities that was immediately recognizable to anyone who saw them. This is why we cannot think of Archaic spearthrowers as "just for breakfast" anymore.



Examples of rectangular bannerstones with diamond (left) a d triangular (right) cross-sections (courtesy of W. S. Webb Museum of Anthropology).

DID YOU KNOW...

that it took more than a lot of patience and time to make a bannerstone?

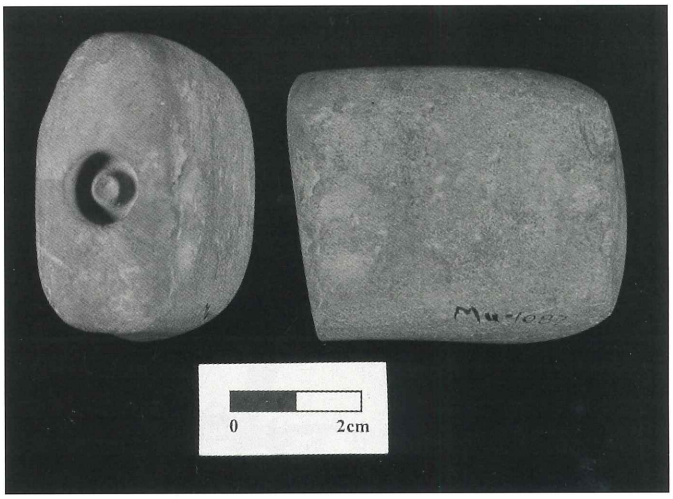
A Late Archaic Kentucky craftsman had to know what kind of stone he needed and where to find it. Some rock, like tough, black and white speckled granite, may have been locally available. But if he wanted to use glassy, yellow and red marbled quartzite, he traded for it. This kind of stone does not occur naturally in Kentucky.

To make a bannerstone, he had to know all the techniques and possess the skill to make one that worked. The first step was to rough-out the basic shape. Using a hard, hand-sized hammerstone, the bannerstone maker chipped and/or pecked off the excess rock by hitting or tapping the bannerstone-to-be.

Next he drilled a hole down the center of the rough piece. This is where the wooden atlatl handle would slip through. Working with a short length of dry, hollow river cane, he twisted it back and forth against the hard stone. Wet sand sprinkled into the hole worked as a pasty abrasive. The river cane, too, had its own scouring power.

Then came the grinding to finish the tool. The bannerstone maker used a variety of stones: sandstone rocks with different degrees of coarseness worked best. Back and forth, across every surface, he ground away all the bumps and lumps. If a particular lump just wouldn't smooth away, he got out a hammerstone again and pecked off the lump. Sometimes he polished the bannerstone to give it a smooth, shiny surface.

The whole process took at least 40 hours for a single bannerstone. But if the toolmaker was an artist as well as a craftsman, his finished tool was as beautiful as it was useful.



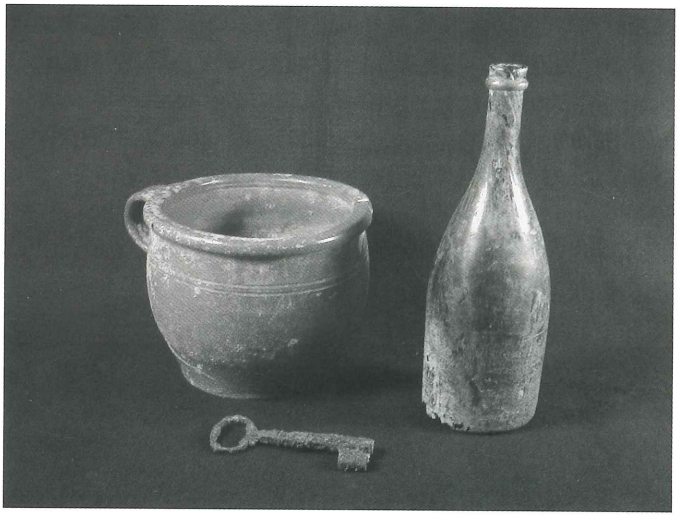
Unfinished bannerstone, showing the beginning of a cane-drilled hole (courtesy of W.S. Webb Museum of Anthropology).

ASHLAND'S OLDEST PRIVY (SO FAR!)

Thanks to continued support from the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet (through TEA-21 enhancement funds) and the Henry Clay Memorial Foundation, investigations at Ashland, the Henry Clay Estate continued in 2003.

Located in Lexington, Ashland is well-known for its surviving outbuildings, including an exceptionally large and finely finished brick privy or "outhouse." Imagine our surprise when last year we located the remains of an *older* privy not far from the one standing today! This older privy was associated with the original house at Ashland, which was torn down in 1852. During the rebuilding episode that followed, the Clay's built the privy that stands today, apparently filling-in the old privy vault with household trash.

Henry Clay's privy vault boasts finely laid limestone walls.



A redware chamberpot, olive-green wine bottle, and iron key: all objects found in the older Ashland privy.

The old privy vault extends about 8 feet below ground. A single row of bricks laid atop the limestone walls suggests that a brick superstructure once sat over the vault. The evidence also suggests that this older privy was much like the one still standing today, which is a little bit bigger and a little bit closer to the house.

KAS archaeologists found a variety of household goods in the older privy vault, especially broken dishes, wine bottles, fine drinking glasses, animal bones from cooking, seeds from the foods they ate, and personal items like buttons, beads, and combs. These items will help us understand the dining and legendary entertaining that took place while Henry Clay and his family lived at Ashland. We also can make comparisons to the materials excavated from inside the still-standing privy in 1991, which we think were thrown away by subsequent Ashland residents.

The sixth booklet in the Survey's Education Series, entitled *Bringing the Past Into the Future: The Reconstruction of the Detached Kitchen at Riverside* was published in 2003. Written by Patti Linn and M. Jay Stottman, it describes the discovery, reconstruction, and interpretation of Riverside's first (circa the late 1830s) detached kitchen. This 34-page booklet is illustrated with current and archival black and white photographs. Cost is $5.00. Other booklets range in price from $3.00 to $5.00. Contact us if you would like to purchase a booklet(s).

PARTNERS FOR THE PAST AT RIVERSIDE

Over the past eight years, a strong partnership has developed between KAS and Riverside, The Farnsley-Moremen Landing, located outside of Louisville.

Our research at Riverside focuses on finding and interpreting former outbuildings. To date, KAS archaeologists have studied several mid-to late 19th century structures, including a detached kitchen, a washhouse, a slave/tenant house, and a barn. Our most recent discovery is the remains of an 1830s brick kiln. Bricks made there were used to build the main house.

The archaeological information we recovered was crucial to the accurate reconstruction of Riverside's detached kitchen. This project is described in our new publication, *Bringing the Past into the Future* (see Box on the bottom of Page 3). Plans are now being laid to reconstruct the slave/tenant house and the barn.

The newest addition to Riverside's public programming is an exhibit in the Visitor's Center. It tells the story of this plantation and displays artifacts that have been found at this site. The award-wining *Building Blocks of History* educational program continues to involve school children in the process of ongoing archaeological research.

Students help excavate at Riverside's barn.

Rich interpretations of the past, and innovative public and educational programming will continue to characterize the Riverside-KAS partnership.

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It is the mission of the Kentucky Archaeological Survey to provide technical assistance to state and federal agencies, to work with private landowners to protect archaeological sites, and to educate the public about Kentucky's rich archaeological heritage.

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