

Appendix

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT THE MORHISS SITE, VICTORIA COUNTY, TEXAS, 1932-1940*

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The Morhiss site, which is on the lower Guadalupe River some six to seven miles south of Victoria, Texas, is one of many archaeological sites that were excavated by American universities in the 1930's with funds supplied by a federal agency known as the WPA (Works Progress Administration). The funds were appropriated by the U. S. Congress primarily to provide jobs for unemployed citizens during an economic depression. Since trained archaeologists were in short supply and the agency was terminated rather suddenly, the results of excavation at some sites were not published. The Morhiss site, excavated by The University of Texas at Austin, was one of these. The following statements, which are mainly descriptive and impressionistic, are based on a study of the various field reports and on a cursory examination of the artifacts that have been sorted according to class and are now stored in trays and boxes at the Balcones Research Center in Austin.

The Morhiss site is undoubtedly one of the key sites in the Victoria area, or will prove to be when the results of excavation have been published. It represents a long human occupation, mainly during the Archaic stage. Some indication of Paleo-Indian occupation appears in its lowest levels, and limited evidence of a late prehistoric or Neo-American occupation appears in its uppermost levels. Few early historic European artifacts were found. Before excavation it was commonly thought that the site was a mound that had been intentionally constructed by man and was of significance to the diffusion of certain complex cultural traits from Mesoamerica into the lower Mississippi Valley. This idea was not supported by evidence acquired through excavation. The Morhiss site represents an ordinary midden accumulation on a river-terrace remnant.

The site is on the eastern bank of the Guadalupe River, a stream which flows southeastward across the Gulf Coastal Plain. From the Morhiss site to the northernmost part of San Antonio Bay the distance is about 20 miles, but to the strand line of the Gulf of Mexico on Matagorda Island the distance is approximately 40 miles. Excavation indicated that the occupational debris covered an oval area with dimensions of 300 and 475 feet. Prior to its removal the site surface rose to a height of some 20 feet above the surrounding lowland, which is subject to flooding

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when the river overflows its banks. However, local residents reported that to their knowledge the site had never been completely submerged by flood waters.

Morhiss first came to the attention of University of Texas archaeologists in 1930. Two test excavations were made, the first in January, 1932, by A. T. Jackson and two assistants, who dug two closely parallel trenches in the central portion of the site. Excavation records indicate that only a few artifacts were recovered, but Jackson was convinced that the site was a midden and not an artificial mound. Later, in June of the same year, A. M. Woolsey and a small group of students spent three weeks at the Morhiss site. They dug a trench 4 feet wide and 160 feet long across one end of the site. This trench cut through 11 feet of cultural deposit in some places. Several burials were encountered and numerous artifacts were recovered. Again the field notes record the same conclusion: this site was definitely not an artificial mound.

Six years later came the final excavation, a complete effort that removed all of the human occupational debris from the knoll-like terrace remnant. This was done during the period October, 1938-January, 1940, under the direction of W. A. Duffen, and it involved WPA-paid field crews whose number at times ranged from 10 to 40 or more. The grid-system records show that over 5,000 five-foot squares were excavated to varying depths.

The stratigraphic records indicate two major zones with a thin transitional zone separating them. The top zone is the midden itself, a dark soil rich in humus and carbon that ranges in thickness from a few inches on the site periphery to 11 or 12 feet near its center. Most of the artifacts and a large number of human burials were found in this zone. The transitional zone below consists of eroded terrace debris with a maximum thickness of one foot. This represents the terrace surface upon which the earliest inhabitants lived. The eroded terrace zone yielded bones of modern as well as extinct animal forms and a few artifacts. Below this is the undisturbed terrace deposit, a zone that yielded bones of extinct animals but no artifacts or any other evidence of man.

The transitional zone contained bones of two kinds of mammoth, several species of horse, camel, sloth, bison, deer, alligator, and wolf. These bones were found scattered and never in anatomical order. Some show the effects of slight rolling, which suggests that they were transported by water from some nearby source. The projectile points found in the transitional zone include Archaic as well as Paleo-Indian types. The most common type of Paleo-Indian points is *Angostura*. Some points are recognizable as *Plainview* variants, and one specimen is a *Meserve* point. It seems probable that these Paleo-Indian points came from the same nearby source as the bones of extinct animals.

The midden deposit and its contents will be difficult to interpret because of so much disturbance by man and by burrowing animals. At

least 250 burials were dug into this deposit from various levels, as well as a number of cache pits. Some 30 to 40 hearths were found still in place, and scattered hearthstones throughout the midden constituted evidence of countless fires and the human trampling that goes on around them. The midden deposit was also riddled with pocket gopher burrows, both filled and unfilled, and in the upper part of the midden there were numerous small pits representing shallow excavations made by artifact collectors.

As has been noted, some 250 burials had been made in the midden. Duffen's excavations revealed 219 burials still in place. Most of these were single burials, but sometimes two or more individuals were included in the same burial pit. A few burials were represented by isolated skulls. Several types of burial are represented. About 55% were flexed burials whose skeletons ranged from semiflexed to fully flexed. About 30% were bundle burials, and some 6% were extended burials. The rest are not classified in the field records. No analysis of burial depths has been made, but random checking suggests that the extended burials came late in the history of this site. Directional orientation of the articulated skeletons was haphazard, although a southerly direction seems to have been favored. Artifacts found in burials were mainly ornaments, principally shell beads, with *Marginella* dominant. A few ornaments of conch shell were also included.

A preliminary study of the skeletal material by T. W. McKern revealed that 63 measurable individuals are represented in the Morhiss series. Of these, 27 are male and 36 are female. The average age at death of adult males was 43.8 years; the average age of adult females was 37.5 years. McKern made a comparison of Morhiss males with males from the Caplen site near Galveston Bay and also with males from several sites of the Edwards Plateau Archaic. He found that the Morhiss males resembled the Caplen males. This is of some interest because the Archaic artifacts from the Morhiss site indicate a technological orientation similar to that of the Edwards Plateau Archaic.

Over 40 recognizable site features were recorded by Duffen, and most of these were either hearths or remnants of hearths. Some hearth building units were rock, but many were merely hand-sized lumps of clay. Most hearths involved the use of both rock and clay lumps, which may reflect the scarcity of stone in the vicinity. A few caches were also recorded -- unworked flint (stream-bed cobbles), lumps of asphaltum, and small clusters of bone and stone artifacts.

Most of the artifacts from the midden are clearly Archaic forms. The most common types of dart points are *Morhiss*, *Lerma*, and *Tortugas*. Fairly common, but not so common as the three just named, are *Refugio*, *Kinney*, *Pandora*, *Nolan*, *Travis*, and *Darl*. Among those that are relatively rare are *Abasolo*, *Catan*, *Matamoros*, *Kent*, *Palmillas*, *Marcos*, *Lange*, *Uvalde*, *Bulverde*, *Pedernales*, and *Enzor*. It is evident that the Morhiss site shares many dart point styles with other Archaic sites of central and southern Texas.

Knife forms include the expectable ranges of ovate, trianguloid, and lanceolate forms. Several corner-tang knives were recovered. End scrapers and side scrapers occur in the usual forms, but relatively few of these are well made. Drills with prepared bases are represented, mainly by T-shaped and paddle-shaped forms, and some gravers are included in the laboratory collection. Gouges are particularly numerous and occur in a variety of forms. Many of these are of *Clear Fork* type, both unifacially and bifacially chipped. Others are elongated, pick-like specimens with the cutting bit formed by a single transverse fracture, a form sometimes referred to as the *Guadalupe* gouge (or adz) because of its common occurrence in Archaic sites along the valley of the Guadalupe River. Heavy bifaces and hammerstones are also numerous. Manos and metates are represented, and there are a few stone pestles. Other forms of stone artifacts are rare, although some, such as bannerstones and plummets, are of special interest because they suggest connections with Archaic cultures of the eastern United States.

Bone and antler artifacts occur in some quantity, particularly flaking tools, awls (some of these bear incised designs), and beads. Most bone beads are tubular, but one burial yielded snake vertebra beads.

The shell tools and ornaments from the Morhiss site link it with the coastal Archaic culture known as Aransas. Large, heavy conch shells show extensive battering and presumably were used as hammers. Conch columella gouges and triangular or quadrangular sections of conch whorl with beveled edges, both of which are diagnostic forms of the Aransas Archaic, occur in considerable numbers. There are also tubular beads and circular gorgets of conch shell, and some of the latter bear designs formed by rows of shallowly drilled pits. Some marine bivalve shells were marginally chipped for use as scrapers or knives.

Materials from the Morhiss midden assignable to the late prehistoric Neo-American stage are not abundant. *Fresno*, *Perdiz*, and *Scallorn* arrowpoints occur in small numbers. Potsherds were found, but these have not been examined. One receives the impression that Neo-American occupation of the Morhiss site was both light and sporadic.

Of some interest is evidence of the use of asphaltum as an adhesive in hafting artifacts. Some dart points bear black stains and bits of asphaltum on their stems, and a few *Clear Fork* gouges show similar discolorations at their proximal or pointed ends. From this it may be inferred that the gouges were set into some sort of socketed or cleft handle.

In conclusion, it may be said that intensive excavation at the Morhiss site has yielded abundant evidence of a long occupation, mainly during the Archaic stage. Paleo-Indian groups were obviously the earliest inhabitants, but excavation failed to reveal their artifacts in unquestionable primary positions. The occupation during the Archaic stage was long enough or frequent enough for the accumulation of some 12 feet of midden deposit, and the range of dart point styles suggests that the

entire Archaic sequence may be represented. The Archaic populations at the Morhiss site seem to have had contacts with Archaic groups farther inland, both in central and southern Texas, and contacts with nearby coastal Archaic groups also seems to be indicated. It is difficult to interpret the relationships with the coastal Archaic groups. Face-to-face trade may have been involved, or the Morhiss site may at times have been occupied exclusively by coastal Archaic groups. The abundance of cutting tools suitable for manufacture of dugout canoes suggests that the coastal peoples may have been interested in the large trees that grew along the lower Guadalupe River. Since Neo-American occupation of the Morhiss site was so limited, it is doubtful if the artifact sample recovered will throw much light on the Late Prehistoric period of the lower Guadalupe Valley.