

A SNAKE "NECKLACE" FROM THE MORHISS SITE

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ABSTRACT

A burial from the Morhiss Site in Victoria County, Texas, contained a group of snake bones subsequently described as a "necklace." A description of these bones and commentary regarding similar grave goods from other burial sites is made and some speculations are made as to the possible significance of the inclusion of these bones in the burial.

BACKGROUND

In 1986, Jim Boone, who was then on the staff of the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory (TARL), brought attention to the presence of an alleged snake necklace that had been recovered from a burial at the Morhiss Site. This information raised several questions. What kind of snake is represented by the bones? Did a snake burrow into the burial site and die there? Did someone kill a snake and bury it with the dead person? Was the snake the cause of death? Were the bones fortuitous inclusions in the burial backfill? Is the group of bones a necklace or did it have some other function? In an attempt to answer the questions the bones were borrowed and copies of appropriate documents were obtained from TARL files.

The Morhiss Site (41VT1 in Victoria County, Texas) was an aboriginal living area and cemetery. The site was completely excavated in 1939 by William A. Duffen as a Works Progress Administration project (Duffen 1939; Campbell 1976). The recovered materials and field notes are on deposit at TARL. No complete report of the excavations has been published. Campbell determined that most of the burials were from the Archaic period.

DESCRIPTION

Burial No. 39 was a male in semi-flexed position with several items of grave goods. Figure 1 is a photograph of the burial. Grave goods include two stones colored with hematite, an antler flaking tool, a marine shell ornament, a deer ulna awl, an intricately carved antler and a group of snake vertebrae. The engraving on the antler consists of intersecting lines that suggest scales and pattern of a rattlesnake. Figure 1 shows that the snake bones were arrayed in a curvilinear manner, draped across the left femur. Examination of Figure 1 suggests that the bones had been removed from the matrix and replaced on a prepared surface prior to the photograph. In 1986, the "necklace" consisted of 97 vertebrae that were secured together with a modern string that was passed through the neural arch of each bone. Many of the bones are reversed in anatomical position and mid-body vertebrae were interspersed between vertebrae from more anterior or posterior positions. Since the relative position of the bones has apparently been altered since deposition, there is no way to recreate the prehistoric arrangement. They probably were strung together, but whether in a closed circle or linear strand can not be determined.

All of the bones are precaudal vertebrae. Since the excavators made no notes of presence of ribs or bones of the head or tail, it is probable that there were none. Thus, the possibility that the snake arrived at the burial on its own motive power can be rejected. The bones were compared with the bones of known snakes. All are from a pit viper that was more than a meter in length. The pit vipers that are now found in Victoria County are rattlesnakes, copperheads and cottonmouths. According to Auffenberg (1965),





Figure 1. Burial No. 39, the Morhiss Site, 41VT1, Victoria County. Photo by Juan Maldonado.

bones of these snakes are difficult to separate but can usually be identified by a combination of characters. Using these criteria and direct comparison, the snake can be identified as a western diamondback rattlesnake (*Crotalus atrox*).

Many of the vertebrae are partially coated with a carbonate deposit. None of the vertebrae are whole as each has lost one or more fragments of processes. Some of the fractures are apparently recent but some have the carbonate on the fractured surface. Some of the fractured surfaces and processes are smoothed. This may have been caused by casual or deliberate contact with some unknown surface. It was probably not from contact with bare skin as such contact is not comfortable. Thus, it is probable that the group of bones is something other than a necklace. The position within the burial also suggests some other function for the bones. It is possible that the bones had been applied to a garment or carried within a bag.

DISCUSSION

Two other instances of groups of snake vertebrae are known from burials in Texas. Two intact strands of snake vertebrae were recovered within a pouch with a flexed burial from the Shumla Caves in Val Verde County (Martin 1933:22). Use of these strands of snake vertebrae in blood-letting rituals has been suggested (Shafer 1986:122). The bones were identified as from rattlesnake and the apparent cause of death was an Ensor dart point (Mock 1984:21). At the Mather Farm Site (41WM7) in Williamson County another snake vertebrae "necklace" was recovered near the feet of a flexed burial along with a "necklace" of snail shells. Cause of death was an Ensor dart point (Prewitt 1974:47).

The aspect of Morhiss Burial No. 39 and its grave goods are quite similar to some of Burial Group 2 at the Ernest Witte Site (41AU39) an Archaic interment in Austin County, Texas (Hall 1981). Similar grave goods include shell ornaments and bone implements with carvings that suggest snake scales and markings. The Ernest Witte Site also yielded numerous snake bones (McClure 1987) but these probably represent food remains. Ensor dart points were recovered from some of the burials of this group as well as from the Morhiss Site.

CONCLUSIONS

The quality and quantity of grave goods that were included with the burials discussed above indicate that the people were important to their peers and the artifacts were important to the person who was buried. The snake vertebrae implements and the snake pattern carvings on bone articles suggest that snakes were of some significance to the person or the group. The question as to function of the string of snake bones has not been answered, but a tenuous suggestion of totemic or religious connection may be inferred for Texas Archaic people from locations that are several hundred miles apart. The association with Ensor points to these burials may be fortuitous or it may imply another clue to pursue.

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