Choctaw 'arrowheads' capture interest

Archaeological sites of arrowhead finds should be recorded and protected for future generations

Hello,

I would like you to please tell me anything you can about Choctaw arrowheads.

Thanks,

Ed

Dear Ed,

This is a great question because arrowheads capture the interest of so many people, and also because answering the question requires us to look at Choctaw traditional lifeways and history in a way that can help dispel a few common misconceptions. Opening this discussion might even raise awareness to help Tribal members better protect our ancestral sites. Thank you!

Let's begin with a couple of quick facts that may surprise some of our readers. First, 99.9 percent of the arrowheads found in southeastern Oklahoma were not made by Choctaw people, but rather by the ancestors of indigenous tribes, such as the Caddo and Wichita, who lived here for millennia before the Choctaw arrived on the Trail of Tears. In Oklahoma, Choctaw arrowheads, particularly stone ones are very, very rare. Second, the majority of the stone "arrowheads" that people find in Oklahoma really have nothing at all to do with arrows, but were actually used as spearheads and knife blades. Only the smallest ones, often called "bird points,"

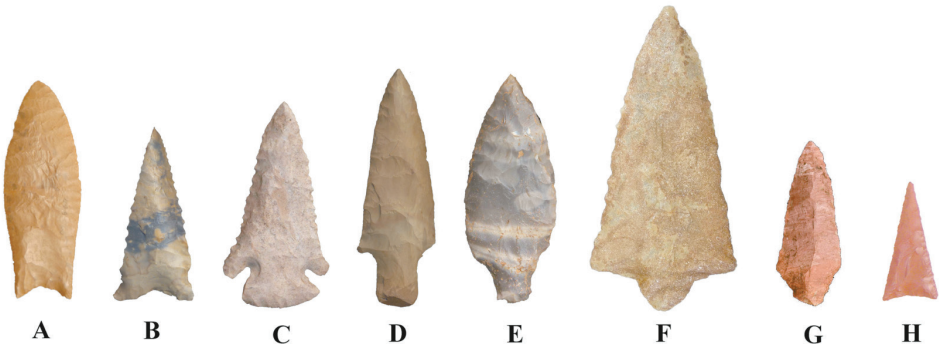

Photo provided

Different types of stone projectile points made through time in the Choctaw homeland.

Photo provided

Choctaw arrow points, left to right; stone, deer antler (Type 1), deer antler (Type 2), gar fish scale, wooden fishing point, sharpened river cane, blunt wooden point, rolled metal point.

were put on the end of arrows.

Through time and space, our ancestors and the people around them made their projectile points (spear and arrowheads) from a variety of available raw materials including wood, river cane, bone, antler, and stone. Most of the old projectile points that people find today are stone. This is because this material is hard and durable, and the projectile points made from it have survived, while most of the points made from the other materials have long ago turned to dust.

Stone projectile points are made only from special types of rocks; many of these are very generally to as "flint" in English, or "tasvnnuk," in the Choctaw language (Byington 1915:342; also see Swanton 1998:24-25). These types of stone have a high silica content, a very small grain size, and an amorphous internal structure. This gives them the glass-like properties of being hard, brittle, internally consistent, and smooth to the touch.

Like glass, these rocks also break with a conchoidal fracture. This means that long, thin, sharp flakes can be chipped from the stone. All of these characteristics allow a skilled person to sequentially chip the stone in a predicable way in order to shape it a projectile point or other tool (This complex process will itself be the topic of an upcoming Iti Fabvssa article).

Photo provided

A probable Choctaw/ Chickasaw arrow point from Boggy Depot, Atoka County, OK. (Confederate Memorial Museum)

Our ancestors collected rocks for making projectile points in several different parts of the Choctaw homeland. One of their favorite types of stone, today called "Tuscaloosa chert," comes in the form of yellow or brownish cobbles found in the gravel bars of streams located in northeastern Mississippi and northwestern Alabama, such as the Tombigbee River. A second type of stone, which they commonly used, is today called Tallahatta Quartzite. The word "Tallahatta" actually comes from a Choctaw term "tvli hatta," meaning "white rock," and is probably the original name by which our ancestors called this particular type of stone.

Tallahatta quartzite outcrops in an area spanning from southwest Alabama to eastern Mississippi and can be quarried in large blocks. Other types of stone that our ancestors sometimes used for making projectile points include petrified wood and certain types of quartzite from local river deposits, Fort Payne chert from the middle Tennessee valley, Coastal Plain agate from southern Alabama, Bangor chert from northern Alabama, and clear quartz crystal (Allan 1983:139; Ensor 1981:9-11). Choctaw people living in Mississippi in the early 1900s told John Swanton that their ancestors also collected a "hard yellow or white flint" on the Pearl River in Mississippi and other stone from the Tallapoosa in central Alabama (Swanton 2001:49-50). According to a second hand account given to a WPA recorder in the 1930s, after the Trail of Tears, some Choctaws living in Oklahoma traveled to the Sallisaw area to collect stone for making arrow points (Kelly 1937(2):391).

Just like car styles and shoe styles today, our ancestors designed and adapted their projectile points to meet available raw materials, needs, tastes, and developing technology. This means that through time, projectile point styles have changed. The oldest stone projectile points regularly found in the Choctaw homeland are referred to by archaeologists as "Clovis points." These are medium to large sized lancelet shaped projectile points with concave bases, and flutes, or large flake scars that travel from the base towards the tip of the point (see Clovis point labeled "A" in photo).

Clovis points are also found in Oklahoma, and across the United States from coast to coast and from Canada down to Central America (Collins 1999:35). They date to about 12,900-12,300 years ago (BP) and were made by people who lived in small groups that traveled great distances by foot, making their living by hunting and gathering. The world that they experienced was quite different from today's, with giant animals such as mastodon, ground sloth, cave bear and glyptodont living and sometimes being hunted in the Choctaw homeland.

As time passed, different projectile point styles were developed in different areas of the country. Around 9,200-12,000 years ago Dalton points (labeled "B" in picture) became the most common style in the Choctaw homeland, and across most of the southeastern U.S. These points are finely pressure flaked. Heavy resharpening suggests they were often used as knife blades.

After Dalton, a proliferation of different projectile point forms began to be used in the Choctaw homeland and surrounding areas. A few of the most common point types include the Kirk Corner Notched point ("C" in the photo), which dates from 8,500-6,500 BP; the Little Bear Creek point (D), which dates from 4,500-3,000 BP; the Mulberry Creek Point (E), which dates to around 4,000 BP, the Wade point (F), which dates from 3,200-1,500 BP, and the Flint Creek point (G), which dates to 3,000-1,700 BP.

Most, if not all of the types of these projectile points were made for use as knife blades, spearheads or the heads of a kind of throwing spear known as the atl-atl (the atl-atl will itself soon be the topic of an Iti Fabvssa article). Archaeological evidence suggests that the bow and arrow is not something that Native Americans have always had, but rather that our ancestors imported it or invented it, possibly several times in the past. Although debate surrounds the exact timing and location of the bow's first appearance in North America, it is clear that it did not become the dominant weapon in the Southeast until around 1,300 years ago. How do we know this?

Around 700 AD, Native American communities in the Southeast began to mass-produce a new type of stone projectile point. These points were much smaller, lighter weight, and narrow than most of the point styles that had come before. Experimental research has shown that these points work efficiently on arrows. Attach one of the earlier, heavier point styles to an arrow, and it will drag the light arrow to the ground a short distance after it is fired. Independent studies of the rare surviving early stone-tipped arrows confirm the connection between small stone points and arrows.

In Choctaw country, the thin, corner notched Collins points and Jacks Reef points may represent the first true arrowheads. Thereafter, unnotched, triangular Madison ("G" in the picture) and Hamilton points began to be produced in great numbers. These were the type of stone points that tipped Choctaw arrows up into the early 1700s.

In the 1700s, some Choctaws started using a new raw material, bottle glass obtained from Europeans, to chip tools (Voss and Blitz 1988:133), and probably also arrow points. Nevertheless, during this cen-

Photo provided

Choctaw youth at Culture Camp (2007), learning to chip stone points.

tury most Choctaw people quit using stone arrow points all together. Only a few stone arrow points are known to have been found at Choctaw settlements in Mississippi dating to the 1700s and early 1800s, (e.g., Ward 2004:39), while they are common on contemporary Chickasaw sites just to the north (Johnson 1997:226).

A few Choctaw individuals probably continued to make stone arrow points after the Trail of Tears in Oklahoma. Today, a number of Choctaw people are part of a nation-wide renaissance in the art of stone-tool making, and Choctaw-made stone projectile points have become more common than at any other time in the last 200 years.

Choctaw arrow points were and are made from many other types of material besides just stone. Garciliso De la Vega, gives us a unique look into a Southeastern Native quiver in the 1540s:

> "… the Indian took his quiver and, placing it in front of him, drew out very slowly, one by one, the arrows which were in it, which were admirable for the refinement and skill that had gone into their making. They were all made of reeds: some had heads made of the points of deer's antlers finished to extreme perfection, with four corners like the points of a diamond; others had fish bones for heads, marvelously fashioned for use as arrows. There were others with the heads of palm wood and other strange and durable timber that grows in that country. These arrowheads had two or three barbs as perfectly made in the wood as if they had been of iron or steel." (1993:190-191 [1596]).

Arrow points of all of these types have been found on Choctaw archaeological sites dating to the period, and on Choctaw arrows that survive in museums. In addition to these, flaming arrows were probably also sometimes employed in warfare (Thompson 2008:250-328).

Other less common arrow tip materials used pre-colonially in the Southeast include native copper, bones from large mammals and fish (Verazzano 1841:45 [1524]), turkey spurs (e.g., Adair 1775:457), viper teeth (Spark 1906:121 [1565]), shell, shark's teeth (Barlowe, reproduced in Swanton 1946:572), and stingray spines (see Alley and Hamm 1999:71).

Finally, from at least the mid-1500s on, some Southeastern arrows were tipped with points made from iron, brass, and steel obtained from Europeans (Spark 1906:121 [1565]). The most common type of point on surviving Choctaw arrows in Oklahoma, dating to the late 1800s and 1900s, is a rolled conical point made from metal. Simpson Tubby, one of Swanton's Choctaw consultants mentioned metal arrow tips being fashioned from women's corsets (2001:49). Sometimes Choctaws also obtained metal arrow points from blacksmiths.

Today, people often see or find projectile points, and naturally begin to wonder what tribe made them. Unfortunately projectile points made in the variety of styles just described are not specific to one tribe, but were shared by different groups living in, and sometimes far beyond the Choctaw area. However, because projectile point styles can often be dated fairly accurately, other information can sometimes be brought into play to help make some educated inferences about their tribal origin. For example, a rolled metal arrow point dating to the 1850s, found in Pushmataha County, has a good chance of being Choctaw, because Choctaws were living in the area at the time, and are known to have used arrow points like these. Similarly, a 3,000-year-old stone point found in the same county is not likely to be Choctaw, because our ancestors were living several hundred miles away in the Southeast at this time.

One final, and very serious note: "Arrowhead" collecting is a hobby for many and a business for some. However, every time a point is picked up and carried away, a little bit of the sacredness of that ancestral spot is forever lost. If no permanent record is made of where the point was found, a little bit of the record left by our ancestors is also permanently destroyed, along with the knowledge that we could have gained about them.

Collectors and looters have and still are destroying Choctaw sacred sites and burial grounds all too frequently, often arrowhead by arrowhead. It is illegal to collect arrowheads from the surface on most federal lands and on all tribal property; digging them up is a felony.

If readers know of archaeological sites, we strongly encourage them to contact the Choctaw Nation Historic Preservation Department (1-800-522-6170 ext. 2216), so that the site can be recorded and protected for future generations of Choctaws. Please contact this same number for a list of the works cited in this article.

If you have any questions concerning Choctaw history or culture, please mail to Iti Fabussa c/o BISKINIK, P.O. Box 1210, Durant, OK 74702, or e-mail to biskinik@choctawnation.com with "Iti Fabvssa" in the subject line.