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## The Skagit River Atlatl: A Reappraisal\*

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Some years ago, H. C. Taylor and W. Caldwell (1954) published a brief note on a remarkable wooden artifact which was dredged from the northwest distributary of the Skagit River, a short distance from where it empties into the Strait of Georgia. The artifact, readily identified as an atlatl, a device for hurling spears and similar projectiles, is embellished with a striking and skilfully executed carving (figs. 1 and 2).

Pertinent to the prehistory of the Northwest Coast is the question of whether the piece is a local product or a cultural intrusive. Taylor and Caldwell leave the question open, although the burden of their comments appears to argue against the possibility of local origin. The atlatl, they point out, "is unknown from the Northwest Coast." Besides, none of the authorities that were consulted "thought the carvings to be at all typical of the Northwest Coast," nor do the authors themselves discern any "clear-cut similarity in design and/or design elements."

The artifact, it is true, does not fit readily into the cultural context of the Northwest Coast – at least not into that of the recent ethnographic coast. However, when certain archaeological finds from the Georgia Strait region are viewed alongside various ethnographic data from the Northwest Coast the possibility arises that the piece may date from an earlier period. Because of this possibility a fuller description and analysis of this unique artifact is warranted to determine more definitely its significance and possible position in the culture history of the Northwest Coast.

Thanks to the generosity of Dr. H. R. MacMillan, the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, was able to acquire the Skagit River atlatl for its collection. Prior to its acquisition, the original appearance of the object had been altered through cleaning, buffing, and the application of preservative. Incredibly, moreover, the original length had been shortened through the removal of about 1.5 cm from the distal end of the implement. Fortunately, through the kind co-operation of Dr. H. C. Taylor, I was able

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to photograph the artifact before these alterations were made. The accompanying photographs show the atlatl in the condition it was in when first brought to my attention.

According to an examination made at the request of Dr. Taylor (personal communication), the artifact is fashioned of wood from the Western Yew tree (*Taxus brevifolia*, Nutt.). This tough elastic wood is especially suited to withstand the great stresses an atlatl is subjected to when propelling a dart, a spear, or a harpoon. When originally found, the object had a length of nearly 41 cm. However, even then the distal end appeared unfinished and fractured, suggesting that a portion had broken off. To this missing business end was once fastened the atlatl hook, which served to engage a depression at the butt end of the shaft of the projectile that was to be hurled. The basal part of the spear shaft would rest in the shallow groove that runs along the undecorated surface of the atlatl. The handgrip at the proximal end is provided with a pair of finger-holes, placed side by side at right angles to the main axis, in a fashion reminiscent of those on atlatls in Central America, Florida, and during the Basketmaker period in the Southwest (fig. 3) (Mason 1928).

In throwing position, the elaborate carving immediately behind the handgrip would hang in an inverted position from the underside of the device. Like the atlatl weights of stone, which are both widespread and ancient in the New World (Butler and Osborne 1959; Neuman 1967; Ritchie 1965), and the magnificent animal carvings on spear throwers from the Magdalenian period in France, the sculpture on the Skagit River atlatl had a mechanical function. When a spear or harpoon is held in throwing position, the anterior portion of the shaft projecting in front of the supporting hand is considerably longer and thus heavier than the short posterior part which rests on the atlatl. Because of this imbalance the front end of the shaft will dip downward unless it is supported by the other hand until the hunter is ready to hurl the projectile. However, a weight attached to the atlatl behind the casting hand tends to correct this imbalance so that the weapon can be held in one hand until the critical moment, thus freeing the opposite hand for other tasks. This important function of atlatl weights is not commonly understood. However, of greater import to our inquiry (and probably also to the original owner) than the mechanical function is the carving itself and its significance.

The sculpture depicts a rampant animal, evidently a sea-monster of some sort, surmounting a human head (figs. 1 and 2). Awesome and majestic in appearance, the beast bares a menacing array of teeth. Oval eyes, inlaid with precisely fitting insets made of a whitish stone, seem to scan a distant horizon. A series of closely spaced wrinkles on each side of the neck adds a touch of realism. Prominent are plume-like appendages which rise from the head, neck, and back. The paws of the short forelimbs rest on top of the human head, while the flipper-like rear limbs are extended backward from the body on each side of the tail. Extending from the flanks to the belly of the animal,

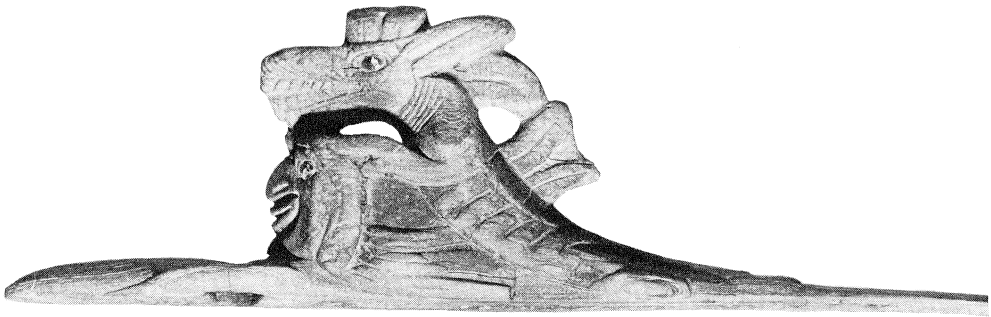


FIG. 1.



FIG. 2.

FIG. 1. Carved atlatl dredged from the mouth of the Skagit River, Washington. Left side.

FIG. 2. Skagit River atlatl. Right side. Note raised grain and long, deep checks in wood.



FIG. 3. Top view of Skagit River atlatl showing handgrip and two finger holes. Note flipper-like rear limbs extending backward from body on either side of sea-monster's tail. The latter terminates in the stylized tail of a whale. The tips of the flukes have been unnaturally lengthened and turned inward. The photograph shows virtually the full length of the specimen at the time of recovery.

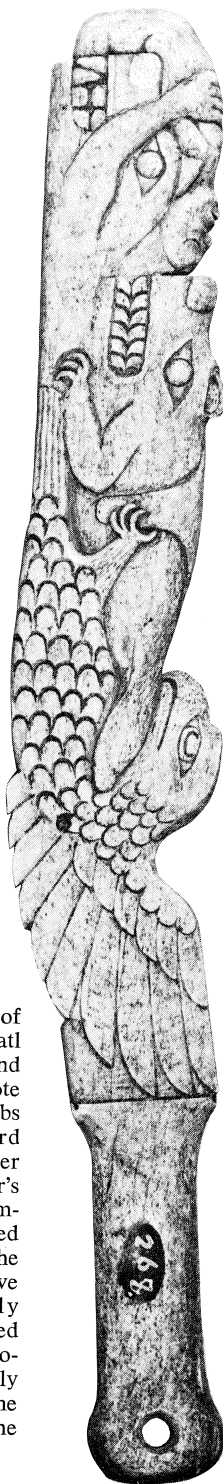


FIG. 4. Nootka whalebone club, illustrating the myth of Chief Too-too-che-too-kwis and the two sea-monsters, one half bear, half killer-whale (on left), the other half wolf, half killer-whale. The thunderbird surmounting the figures has seized the down-folded dorsal fin of the wolf-killer-whale (courtesy Provincial Museum of British Columbia).



FIG. 5. Two mythical creatures from large petroglyph panel near Nanaimo, BC. Note dorsal fin-like and other appendages on back and neck of top figure.



FIG. 6. Nootka painted screen, showing thunderbird flanked by two lightning snakes, each with a pair of forelimbs and with grotesque appendages on the head. The tail of the serpent on the left has attached to it a form resembling the tail of a whale (courtesy Provincial Museum of British Columbia).

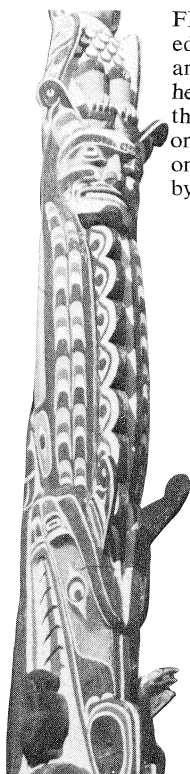


FIG. 7. Sisiutl folded to form single head and body. Note the head of Qomogwae, the Sisiutl's alter ego, on top. The figures are on a totem pole carved by Mungo Martin.



FIG. 8. Side view of the folded Sisiutl illustrated in fig. 7, showing "joint-eye" and vestigial forelimb just behind the serpent's head.

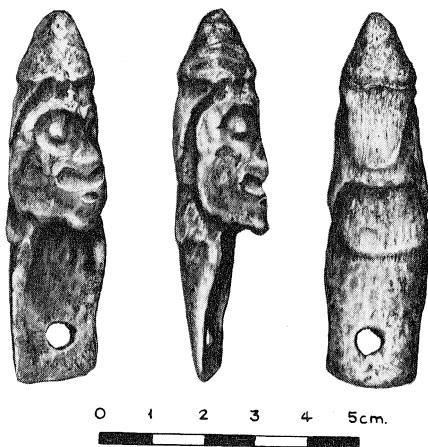


FIG. 9. Anthropomorphic atlatl hook from Locarno Beach site, Vancouver, BC. The figure, carved from an antler tyne tip, wears a conical basketry (?) hat and a medial labret in the lower lip. The projecting chin served as the hook which engaged the depression at the butt end of the projectile shaft. The artifact dates to about 500 BC.



FIG. 10. Two bone knives from the Locarno Beach phase of the Fraser delta sequence embellished with a decorative motif suggesting the bifurcate tail of a whale with the elongated tips of the flukes turned inward. Note resemblance of this motif with the tail on the Skagit River atlatl. See also fig. 3.

in the area between the fore and hind limbs, are incised lines which might be interpreted as ribs, but which may also be intended to suggest the large ventral scales of a serpent.

The tail of the beast is of more than passing interest (fig. 3). It resembles the horizontally oriented bifurcate tail of a whale, and as in the latter there is an indentation in the centre between the flukes. Curiously, the exaggeratedly long tips of the flukes are turned inward so that they nearly touch. A transversely incised line separates the caudal appendage from the rest of the body. The significance of these peculiar design elements will become apparent later.

The human head beneath the sea-monster rises directly from the wooden base as if to suggest that it had just emerged from the sea. In profile, the face shows a prominent, boldly aquiline nose, thick lips, and a strong chin. The eyes, like those of the sea-monster, are inlaid with insets of the same whitish stone. Suggestive of rapid forward motion are incised lines, perhaps meant to indicate hair or seaweed, extending backward from the rear margin of a ribbon-like band which is draped over the head.

All parts of this splendid and powerful composition are executed with consummate skill and careful attention to fine detail. The main figure rises to a height of 10 cm, while the overall length of the sculpture is nearly 18 cm. The entire object – atlatl and the decorative carving – is fashioned from a single piece of wood. The raised grain and long deep checks in the wood, which are particularly in evidence on the right side of the figures, suggest prolonged submersion after the artifact had been completed (fig. 2). This condition of the wood along with the esoteric nature of the carving may be regarded as evidence that the piece is not of recent manufacture, and the possibility of intended fraud can be dismissed.

In considering whether the artifact could have originated in the general area where it was discovered, several points must be kept in mind. The recent art forms in the various subareas of the Northwest Coast are the end products of long evolution, and we must expect profound conceptual, stylistic, and other changes to have occurred in the course of such development. Moreover, the main centre of cultural activity did not necessarily always remain in the same area. All our archaeological findings to date tend to confirm the inference made some considerable time ago by Kroeber (1939:30) on the slender evidence then available that a marked northward shift in cultural intensity had occurred from an earlier centre in the Strait of Georgia to later centres located farther north on the Northwest Coast. A cultural climax, manifested in, among other things, elaborate carving in stone, antler, bone, and, by inference, in wood, had been reached in the Fraser Delta region during the last millennium BC, while later culture phases are by comparison simpler and less complex (Borden 1962 and 1968; Willey 1966: 387-96). Thus, apart from the fact that atlatls are absent in the latest culture phase of the Georgia Strait area, it is difficult to envisage a recent Coast Salish artist as

the author of the intricate carving on the Skagit River atlatl. On the other hand, the sculpture would not seem out of place in the context of the Marpole or Locarno Beach phases of the Fraser Delta cultural sequence (Borden 1962: plate 5; Willey 1966: 390-3).

Surprisingly, despite the probable antiquity of the artifact, the sculpture embellishing it exhibits marked affinities with recent Northwest Coast motifs. Prominent in the folklore and art of several coastal groups are sea-monsters which are composites of various land and sea animals, such as bear and killer-whale (*Grampus rectipinna*) or killer-whale and wolf (fig. 4) (Boas 1951: 198, 199, figs. 183, 184, 231, 235; Inverarity 1950: figs. 4, 146). Representations of such composite creatures in recent graphic and plastic art ordinarily show the front half as that of the land mammal complete with the forelimbs and a fearsome mouthful of bared teeth, while the rear half including the tail are those of the whale. Often present also is the prominent dorsal fin of the killer-whale. The similarity of such composite sea-monsters both conceptually and in detail with the main figure on the Skagit atlatl is evident and need not be belaboured. Since, as was shown above, the tail of the Skagit monster is clearly modelled after that of a cetacean the erect bilobed appendage on the beast's back could conceivably have likewise been inspired by the dorsal fin of the killer-whale, although it differs from the latter in form. But appendages, plume-like or of other shape, are not at all rare on the Northwest Coast. They appear on various mythical creatures in the Nanaimo petroglyphs (fig. 5), which date to an as yet undetermined period of the prehistoric past, and they are regularly found on Kwakiutl representations of the Sisiutl, the double-headed serpent (Inverarity 1950: figs. 13, 78; Hawthorn 1967: figs. 126-9), and on the lightning snake, Hahektok, which the thunderbird hurls down upon the earth (Swan 1868: fig. 1; Inverarity 1950: figs. 10, 11). Interestingly, "lightning snakes" and the Sisiutl are sometimes shown with forelimbs (fig. 6) (Hawthorn 1967: fig. 128, second from bottom). These serpents should, therefore, not be understood necessarily as reptiles without limbs in the strict biological sense. In some instances, lightning snakes on Nootka painted screens have a design near the end of their tail resembling the conventionalized tail of a whale (fig. 6).

Invariably depicted in the centre of Sisiutl representations is a human head with one-half the double-headed monster extending from it on either side. However, the dual nature of the Sisiutl is not always shown so explicitly. This was brought home to me when I asked the late Mungo Martin, the noted Kwakiutl artist, about the figures on one of his totem poles on display at the University of British Columbia. Among the mythological beings carved on this pole is a sea-monster with a long body extending vertically upward and at the forward part a pair of vestigial forelimbs and a single large head with bared teeth and appendages like those of the Sisiutl (figs. 7-8). According to Mungo Martin, this was indeed the Sisiutl. He had folded the beast and combined the two halves into one. The human head, which is always associated



with the Sisiutl, appears on the pole directly above the beast, that is, at its tail end. This representation of the Sisiutl is of extreme interest since conceptually it approximates the group on the Skagit River atlatl: the sea-monster or sea-serpent in intimate association with the bodyless head. Despite peculiarities in representational details the carving on the atlatl very likely represents an early version of the two aspects of the Sisiutl that are still found invariably associated in recent representations of this mythological being. There is, therefore, really nothing in the Skagit River sculpture that is alien to the Northwest Coast. On the contrary, conceptually and artistically it fits completely into the cultural context of the area.

The Sisiutl occupies a central position in the complex mythology of Northwest Coast peoples, especially among the Wakashan speakers, the Kwakiutl and Nootka. One Kwakiutl myth relates how Qatenats, in his quest for supernatural power, descends to the bottom of the ocean to the house of Qomogwae, god of the underworld and of the sea. Qomogwae is described as a "stout man." Presently, however, Qatenats recognizes that Qomogwae is the Sisiutl, the double-headed serpent (Boas and Hunt 1904: 22-7). It is this man-serpent duality of the Sisiutl that is reflected in recent Kwakiutl representations and evidently also in the Skagit River carving. However, the Sisiutl had the power to assume other shapes. It could appear in the form of a whale, a composite sea-monster, such as bear and killer-whale, or even as a self-propelled canoe. As ruler of the sea and of the underworld the dual divinity had the power to work both good and evil, to give and to take life. The god also controlled wealth, for that is the meaning of the name Qomogwae (Locher 1932). Food and wealth of the Northwest Coast peoples came from the sea. What was more appropriate for a sea-mammal hunter than to enlist the aid of the powerful god, who controlled the resources of the sea, by having the divinity represented on the atlatl that was to propel the hunter's projectiles?

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, one would not ordinarily associate an intricate carving such as on the Skagit River atlatl with recent Coast Salish culture. This, and the fact that atlatls were not used in historic times in the Strait of Georgia or elsewhere on the Northwest Coast, except far to the north among the Tlingit, suggests some considerable antiquity for the Skagit River specimen. Our investigations in the Fraser Delta region have produced no convincing evidence for the use of atlatls in culture phases of the last two millennia. Yet researches in Oregon and Washington indicate that atlatls had a long history in the Pacific Northwest (Cressman and Krieger 1932; Cressman *et al.* 1960: 43; Osborne and Butler 1959). Moreover, clear-cut evidence demonstrating that spear throwers were employed in the Georgia Strait area at least during the Locarno Beach phase of the last millennium BC comes from the Locarno Beach site in Vancouver, which only minutes before its destruction by a bulldozer yielded an anthropomorphic atlatl hook (fig. 9). This hook is unlike those recovered by Cressman and his

associates in very ancient horizons in Oregon, but resembles rather the hooks of the eastern Archaic which are fashioned from the tip ends of antler tynes (DeJarnette 1952: fig. 147). However, while the eastern specimens are invariably plain and undecorated, the Locarno Beach hook is carved in the form of a small human figurine wearing a conical basketry (?) hat and a medial labret. The jutting chin of the figure served as the hook that engaged the pit at the butt of the projectile shaft. A perforation in the basal portion for the insertion of a peg and a broad lashing area on the back of the tyne indicate how the hook was fastened to the distal end of the atlatl. Significantly, the 1.9 cm width of the lashing area corresponds closely to what the width of the business end of the Skagit River atlatl would have been before breakage. The harpoons of the sea-mammal hunters who occupied the Locarno Beach site were armed with toggle heads and their spears or darts with ground slate points of which many were recovered (Borden 1950: 15-16; 1951: plate 1, 2, 4; plate II, 1-4; 1962: plate 2, 1, m, plate 3, a-h).

The Locarno Beach site produced further evidence hinting at contemporaneity and close affinity between the culture of the Locarno Beach phase and that which produced the Skagit River atlatl. Present in the assemblage are well-made bone knives decorated at the handle end with a distinctive ornamentation which despite its stylized form suggests the bifurcate tail of a whale with the tips of the flukes turned inward. To my knowledge, there is nothing in Northwest Coast art which duplicates this decorative motif more closely than the tail of the sea-monster on the Skagit River atlatl with its similarly shaped flukes (fig. 10). Three parallel lines, placed transversely below the decoration on each of the bone knives, correspond to the single transverse line across the tail of the Skagit River sea-monster.

According to radiocarbon dates, the culture of the Locarno Beach phase was in operation in the Strait of Georgia during most of the last millennium BC (Borden 1968: 17-18). The question as to whether it is likely that a wooden artifact could be so well preserved over such a long period need not trouble us. Objects more delicate than this and dating back to even earlier periods have been recovered from the silt of lake bottoms and streams and the estuaries of rivers in many parts of the world.

Although it is not possible to terminate this paper with a *quod erat demonstrandum*, the evidence presented suggests the probability that the Skagit River atlatl is a genuine product of the Northwest Coast and that this masterpiece of wood sculpture originated somewhere in the Georgia Strait area, most likely during the Locarno Beach culture phase.

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