



Index of Texas Archaeology: Open Access Gray Literature from the Lone Star State

Volume 2014

Article 40


2014

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Repository Citation

Walters, Mark and Perttula, Timothy (2014) "41SM53 (P-4) on Prairie Creek, Smith County, Texas," *Index of Texas Archaeology: Open Access Gray Literature from the Lone Star State*: Vol. 2014 , Article 40.

<https://doi.org/10.21112/.ita.2014.1.40>

ISSN: 2475-9333

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ita/vol2014/iss1/40>

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41SM53 (P-4) on Prairie Creek, Smith County, Texas

Mark Walters and Timothy K. Perttula

INTRODUCTION

In February 1957, Sam Whiteside of Smith County, Texas, excavated a burial at 41SM53. This site was designated P-4 in Mr. Whiteside's notes and it was one of several Caddo sites along Prairie Creek in the upper Sabine River basin that he investigated to varying degrees in the 1950s and 1960s. As an avocational archeologist Mr. Whiteside made many important contributions to East Texas archeology (Walters 2004). Dr. Dee Ann Story, of the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory at The University of Texas at Austin, who corresponded with Mr. Whiteside, later obtained the trinomial 41SM53 for the site.

EXCAVATIONS

Mr. Whiteside conducted excavations in what he described in his notes as a midden deposit at the site. The midden and E-horizon soils below the midden were sandy, and a red clay B-horizon subsoil was encountered at 122 cm below the surface (bs). The midden extended from the surface to ca. 46 cm bs and it was designated Zone A. Mr. Whiteside described finding sherds in the midden (although he noted that the number of sherds was small in relationship to the number of animal bones), along with animal bones, ground stone tools made from locally available ferruginous sandstone, chipped stone flakes, charred nutshell, and fragments of charcoal.

Based on Mr. Whiteside's note, the following artifacts were collected from Zone A during his excavations: one deer tooth; one lower mandible of a medium-sized mammal (possible opossum or raccoon); 33 plain body sherds (12 were polished); eight fingernail punctated body sherds; two body sherds with parallel incised lines; and seven engraved sherds (including Holly Fine Engraved sherds, see Suhm and Jelks 1962). The sherds were described as being dark brown, tan, and buff-colored. The cores of the sherds were described in Mr. Whiteside's notes as being black to dark gray, suggesting they were fired in a reducing environment.

The analysis of the 23 sherds (four rims and 19 body sherds) remaining in the 41SM53 collections is provided in Table 1. All of the sherds are from grog-tempered vessels; 22% of the sherds also had burned bone added as a temper. Approximately 96% of the sherds are from vessels that have been smoothed on either one or both surfaces; most of these are from bowls and carinated bowls. The sherds with interior smoothed surfaces are likely from jars. Almost 92% of the sherds are from vessels fired in a reducing environment (firing conditions B, F-H), although many were subsequently cooled in the open air (firing conditions F-H), leaving a thin oxidized lens on either one or both vessel core surfaces (see Teltser 1993:Figure 2). The rims range from 5.6-8.6 mm in thickness, while the body sherds have a mean thickness of 7.24 mm.

Fifteen of the sherds are decorated (see Table 1): one lightly brushed in an overlapping pattern (Figure 1f), two fingernail punctated, one tool punctated, three incised-punctated (Figure 1a-b), five with incised decorative elements (Figure 1c), one pinched sherd, and two engraved sherds (Figure 1d-e). The one brushed sherd in the small assemblage suggests that some part of the ancestral Caddo occupation at 41SM53 took place after ca. A.D. 1200. It has been shown repeatedly in Caddo ceramic studies in East Texas that the proportion of brushed sherds in decorated sherd assemblages steadily increases through time, beginning

Table 1. Analysis of sherds from 41SM53.

Sherd No.	Sherd Type	Temper (mm)	ST*	FC	Th	Decoration
1	body	g	I/E SM	F	6.1	plain
2	body	g	I/E SM	B	7.0	plain
3	body	g	E SM	F	7.1	plain
4	body	g	I/E SM	B	8.1	plain
5	body	g	I/E SM	F	7.6	plain
6	body	g	I/E SM	G	6.4	plain
7	body	g	I/E SM	B	6.8	plain
8	body	g	I SM	G	7.4	overlapping brushed
9	body	g/b	I/E SM	G	9.2	2+ rows fingernail punctates
10	body	g	I/E SM	B	9.0	fingernail punctates
11	body	g/b	I/E SM	G	7.2	2+ rows tool punctates
12	body	g/b	I/E SM	B	7.2	straight incised lines and tool punctated zone
13	body	g	I/E SM	F	6.5	incised rectangles filled with tool punctates
14	rim	g/b	I SM	B	5.9	diagonal incised lines and zoned tool punctates, D-RO, 16.0 cm OD
15	rim	g/b	I/E SM	H	7.0	2+ opposed diagonal incised lines, D-RO
16	body	g	I SM	G	6.2	cross-hatched incised lines
17	body	g	I/E SM	A	5.8	diagonal incised line, carinated bowl
18	body	g	I/E SM	B	8.8	3+ parallel incised lines
19	body	g	I/E SM	F	8.4	single horizontal incised line, carinated bowl
20	body	g	I SM	B	6.4	pinched row
21	rim	g	I/E SM	A	8.6	plain, D-RO, thinned
22	rim	g	I/E SM	B	5.6	engraved concentric semi-circles, D-RO, 16.0 cm OD
23	body	g	E B	B	6.4	engraved ladder, bottle

g=grog; b=bone; ST=surface treatment; I=interior; E=exterior; SM=smoothed; B=burnished; FC=firing condition; Th=thickness; D=direct rim; RO=rounded lip; OD=orifice diameter

around ca. A.D. 1200. By the early 15th century A.D., in particular, Caddo potters in parts of the upper Sabine River basin began to manufacture considerable numbers of jars with brushed vessel bodies and rims. The low percentage of brushed sherds at 41SM53 is primarily consistent with a Caddo occupation that may have ended shortly after ca. A.D. 1200. The incised and incised-punctated sherds are probably from Canton Incised jars (see Suhm and Jelks 1962:Plate 12). The engraved sherds cannot be identified with any known East Texas ceramic types, but the styles of the decorative elements are more consistent with upper Sabine River basin Middle Caddo period (ca. A.D. 1200-1450) ceramic assemblages (Walters 2008:30-32) than they are with pre-A.D. 1200 engraved ceramic types in East Texas (see Suhm and Jelks 1962).

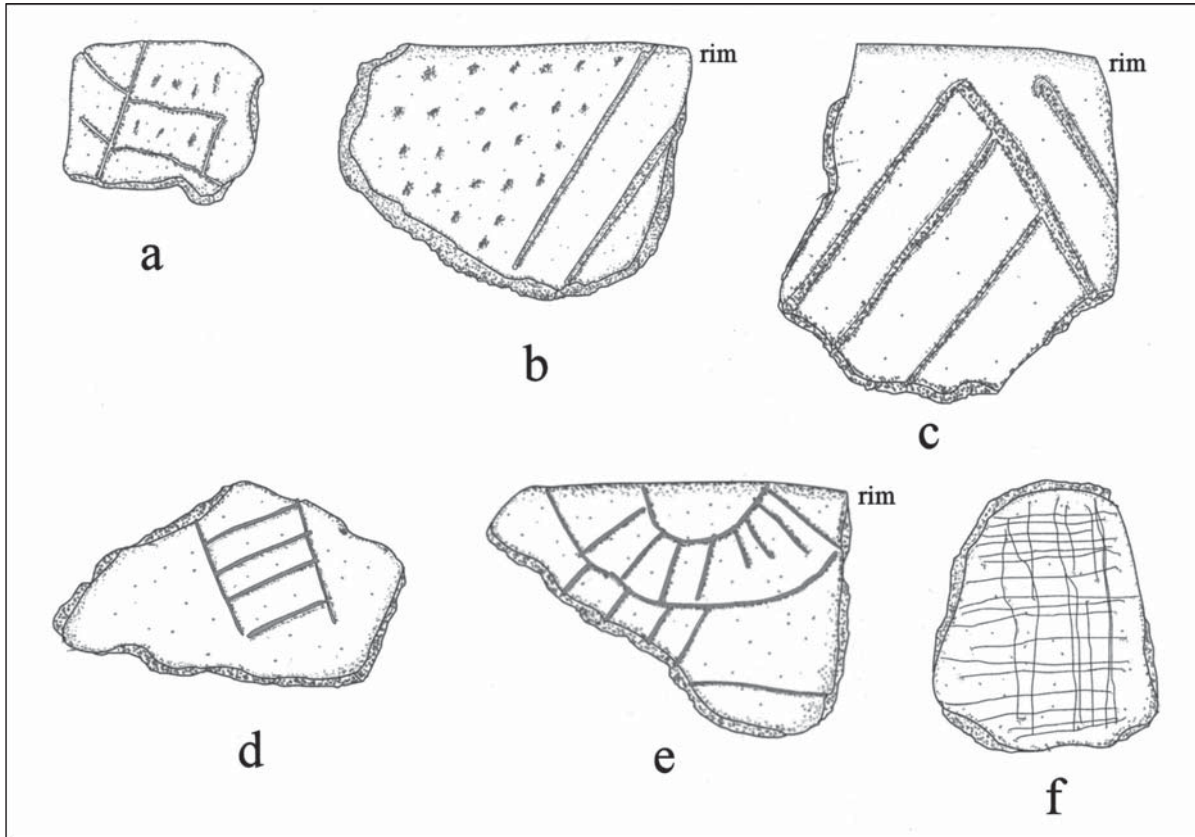


Figure 1. Decorative elements on sherds from 41SM53: a-b, incised-punctated; c, incised; d-e, engraved; f, brushed.

Also among the artifacts from 41SM53 are two arrow points made from a heat-treated quartzite, and a piece of quartzite lithic debris. The first is 17.0 mm wide, 22.0 mm in length, and 3.7 mm thick. The base is missing and the edges are serrated. The second arrow point is 21.4 mm in length, 13.6 mm wide, and 3.8 mm thick. The base is slightly expanding. A red quartzite tested cobble was recovered in the excavation of Burial 1 (see below) along with a deer tooth and a sandstone fragment; the quartzite cobble is 26.0 mm in length, 17.0 mm in width, and 9.0 mm thick.

BURIAL FEATURE

Burial 1 was located ca. 13-15 cm below Zone A, with 61 cm bs given as the bottom of the burial. Soils at this depth were light yellowish-brown sandy loam and Mr. Whiteside could not determine the exact outline of the burial pit as it did not extend into the clay sub-soil. Mr. Whiteside noted fragments of charcoal in the burial fill, but no midden material from Zone A was in or around the burial, suggesting that it predated the formation of the midden.

The burial was placed in a flexed position lying on its left side, facing south (Figure 2). It was 66 cm from the top of the skull to the lower part of the pelvis. The skull was intact and measured 16.8 cm in length. The rest of the skeleton was fairly intact and based on its robust appearance Mr. Whiteside surmised that the individual was a male about 13-16 years in age.

The skull of Burial 1 was resting on a cluster of fire-cracked sandstone rocks (see Figure 2), and there were other rocks around the skull. Photographs of Mr. Whiteside's excavations show other nearby fire-

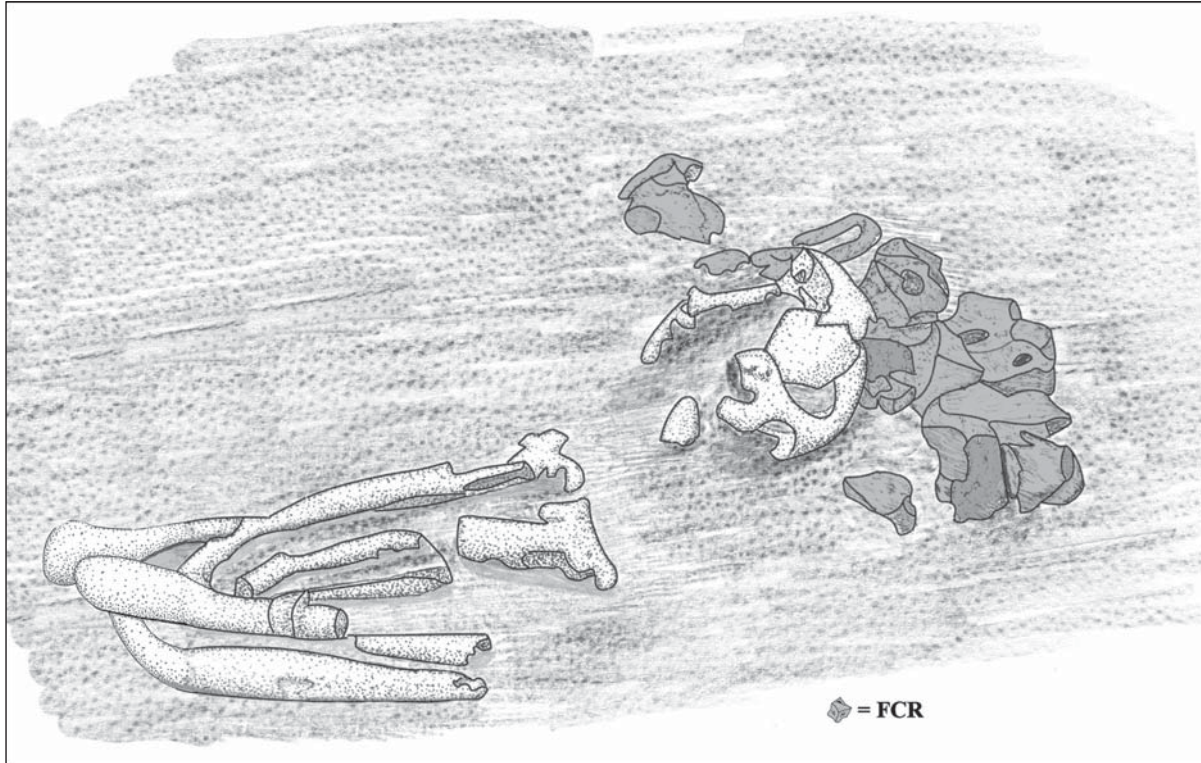


Figure 2. Drawing of Burial 1 at 41SM53. Figure prepared by Lance Trask.

cracked rock concentrations; none were investigated and thus it is unknown if they mark the locations of other flexed burials at the site.

Significantly, there was a dart point resembling a Late Archaic Bulverde point recovered beneath the pelvis, with a straight and thinned base. It was made from a translucent non-local chert. The point was 67 mm in length, 40 mm in width, and it was 10 mm in thickness. The blade portion was convex. The stem was 17 mm in length and 21 mm in width. The point is no longer in the collection. The Bulverde dart point type (Turner et al. 2011:67) has been dated by Turner et al. (2011) from 1500-2000 B.C. and from 3710-4480 cal. years B.P. (1760-2530 B.C.) by Lohse and Cholak (2011).

A 2 sigma calibrated radiocarbon age range of A.D. 970-1040 (Beta-204578) was obtained on an animal bone found in the fill of Burial 1. It is an open question whether this calibrated date has any relevance in interpreting the age of the burial, as it may well represent nothing more than a date from an animal bone from the overlying Caddo midden and not the age of the burial itself. There are no collected human remains from the site that could be submitted for a corroborative date, and thus the possible Late Archaic age of Burial 1 cannot be determined.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Excavations at 41SM53 on Prairie Creek in the upper Sabine River basin in East Texas by Sam Whiteside encountered a prehistoric midden deposit from an ancestral Caddo settlement. The one 2 sigma calibrated radiocarbon date of A.D. 970-1040, as well as sherds of Holly Fine Engraved, a brushed jar sherd, and sherds with narrow hatched engraved decorative elements from several distinctive kinds of decorated Caddo ceramic vessels suggests that the Caddo settlement was occupied during both the Early (ca. A.D. 1000-1200) and Middle (ca. A.D. 1200-1450) Caddo periods.

Of particular significance during the excavations was the exposure of a flexed burial (Burial 1) that rested below the midden deposits and apparently predated the formation of the Caddo midden deposits. The skull of the individual rested on a concentration of fire-cracked rock; there are other uninvestigated fire-cracked rock concentrations at 41SM53. Found underneath the pelvis of the burial was a Bulverde point, suggesting that the flexed burial may have been interred at 41SM53 during the Late Archaic period (ca. 5000-2500 years B.P.). Unfortunately, the age of the burial has not been definitively established through the radiocarbon dating of the human remains, and no human remains were apparently collected by Sam Whiteside from Burial 1 that can be radiocarbon-dated at this time.

Flexed burials have been reported from other upper Sabine River basin sites, including the Osborn (Bruseh and Perttula 1981) and Yarbrough sites (Johnson 1962). The flexed burial at the Osborn site had Woodland period (ca. 2500-1150 years B.P.) ceramic sherds in the fill of the burial pit, but those from the Yarbrough site (n=6) appear to date to the Late Archaic as they lacked associated burial goods (Burial 7 did have ceramic beads, but Johnson [1962:223] suggests it also dated to “the preceramic occupation of the site”). The flexed burials at the Yarbrough site rested on their right sides, and the heads generally faced south (Johnson 1962:220-223), like the flexed burial at 41SM53. None of the flexed burials at the Osborn or Yarbrough sites were associated with concentrations of fire-cracked rocks like the 41SM53 burial, and we are aware of only one other upper Sabine River basin site where a prehistoric burial was identified with significant concentrations of fire-cracked rocks. This is at the Woodbury Creek site (41RA49), where an extended burial of Middle Caddo period age (a Maxey Noded Redware bottle was one of the grave goods in the burial, along with a Canton Incised jar) was encountered resting on clusters of fire-cracked rock (Shelton et al. 2011).

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