



Corner-Tang Biface Artifact

A relatively rare artifact from the Hill Country!

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This artifact, known commonly as the "Corner-tang Knife" or "Corner Tang", or just a "tang", is much sought after by collectors. It was named for the unusual tang typically located on a corner or side of this knife blade-like artifact (Figure 2). The corner-tang was made in a wide variety of shapes and the tang can be found located the base of the knife, the side or even in the middle—it was also modified as a drill or perforator (see last image in Figure 2). Typical size is 5 in long by 2 in wide at the base with a lot of variation—commonly due to resharpening.

Corner-tang bifaces are encountered in excavations of Late Archaic sites dating from about 4,000 years ago into Transitional Archaic sites dating to about 1,300 years ago, especially burned rock middens associated with longer-term campsites. Also unusually large, well flaked corner-tangs have been found in burials where their use was likely ritual or ceremonial (Figure 1).

Corner-tangs are found most commonly in central and south central Texas, and westward into the Pecos region—especially along the Balcones Escarpment (Figure 3). The Hill Country of central Texas is thought to be the birthplace of the tang from which it likely spread widely into Big Bend and on to the plains of west

Texas. There are also records of tangs found outside Texas, mostly in adjoining states—13 other states in total (Figure 3).

During the Late Archaic time period the artifact assemblage in the Hill Country containing a corner-tang might also contain diagnostic dart points like Montell,

Shumla, Marcos, Castroville and Lange; and a meat cleaver-like cutting tool, the Kerrville Biface. These assemblages are usually near burned rock middens. They may be associated with bison bones, and sometimes contain the even rarer unifacial corner-tang. This tool is thought to be a quick expedient cutting tool requiring much less work to make than the typical bifacial corner-tang.

Figure 1. Corner-tang bifaces as ceremonial grave goods of 5-6 yr old child, Karnes Co.



You have to wonder what these corner-tang bifaces were used for by prehistoric Indians? Studies of use wear on corner-tangs bifaces show varying uses, such as cutting soft materials like meat, fresh hides, and plant material. Some studies have found polish around the base of the tang suggesting these knives had a leather or plant fiber cord tied around the tang and the knife may have hung from this cord. Several researchers speculate that these corner-tangs were used to butcher meat and thus the cord was tied to the person that was doing the butchering so that he/she could release the corner tang knife without fear of dropping it or losing it—thus keeping it handy during the butchering process. Some tangs show clear evidence of hafting, such as presence of polish and/or asphaltum (i.e., tar) but many do not.

A fascinating study by Saner and Tomka (2004) showed that most unifacial corner-tangs were hafted, and used to cut soft material such as plant and animal tissue in a push-pull motion. These researchers did not believe they were used as scrapers.

We conclude that corner-tang bifaces were used as a multi-use knife to cut up soft plant and animal materials—they some were hafted or had an attached thong, and for others we do not know how if the tang was used for attachment. This biface was likely used for butchering a fresh kill, commonly at a camp site near an earth and hot rock oven (i.e., burned rock midden). Also they were important enough in daily life that particularly well made biface corner-tangs were placed with the dead as significant grave goods. More studies on use of these beautiful bifaces may tell us more about how they were used.

Figure 2. Corner-tang biface illustrations, from Turner, Hester, and McReynolds 2011, p. 288.

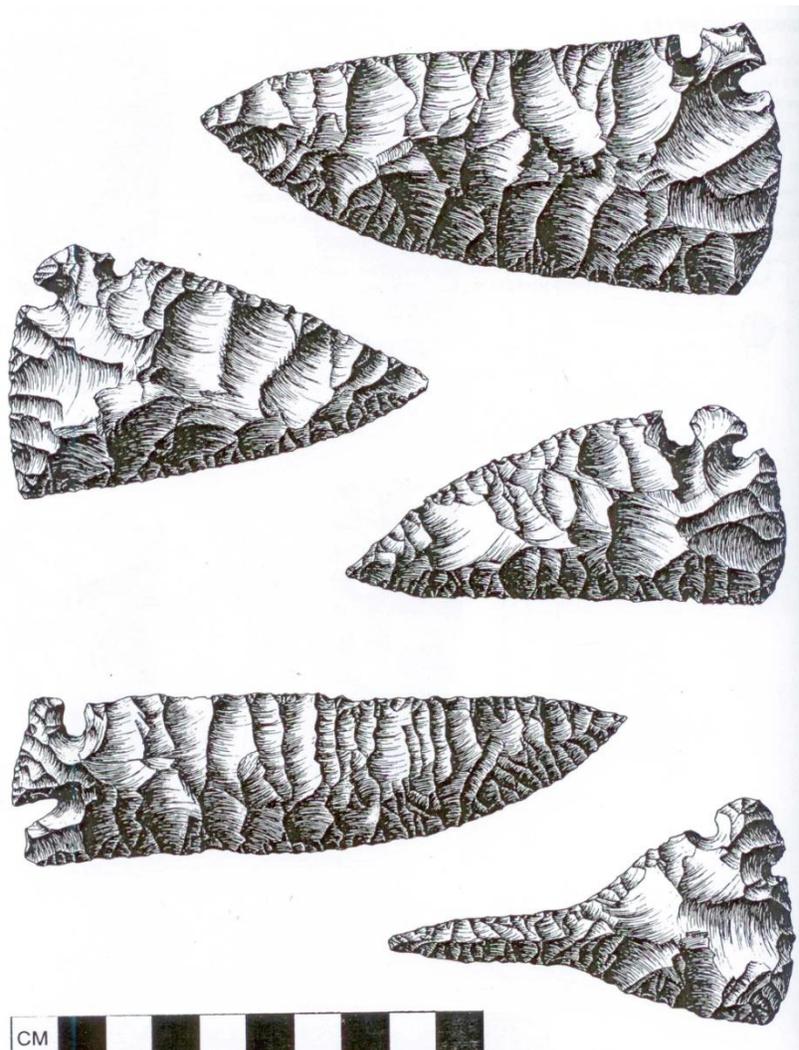
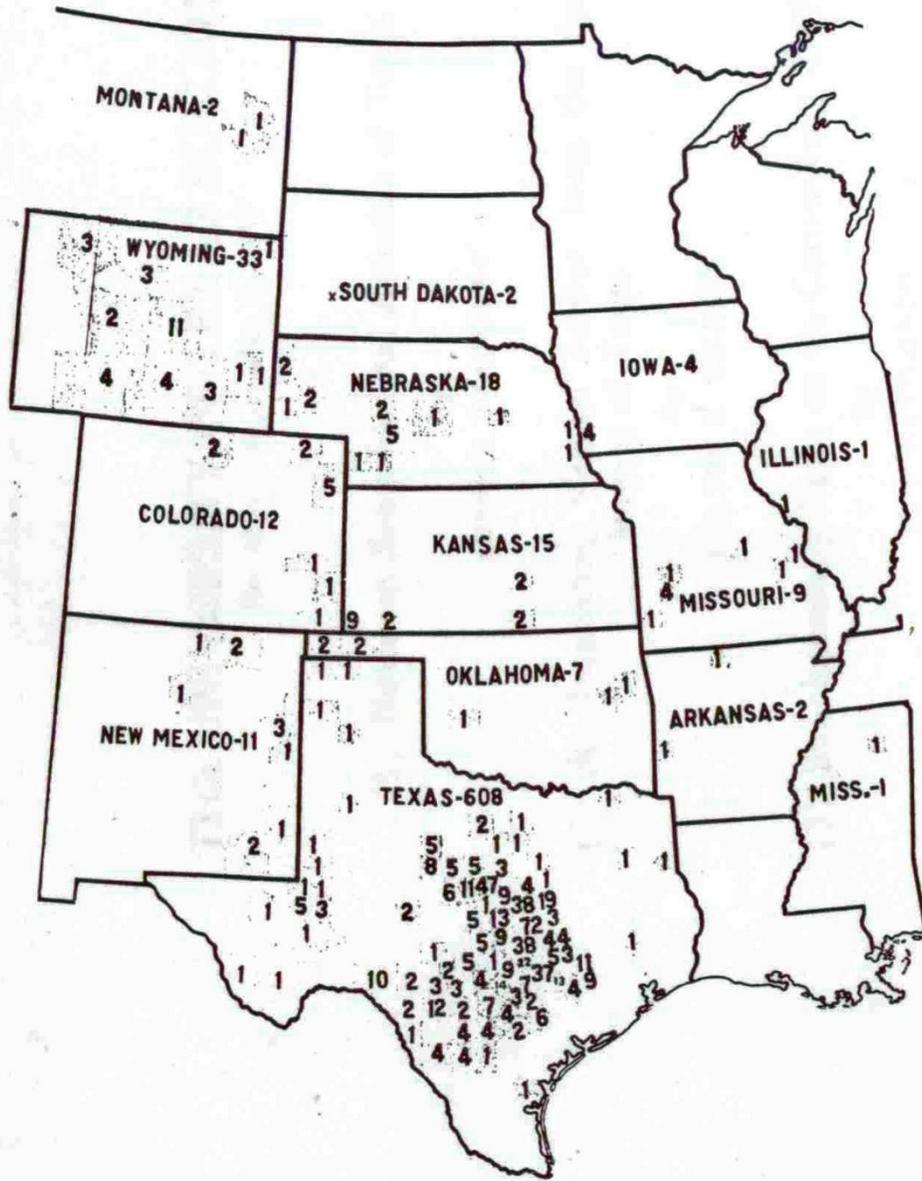


Figure 3. Distribution of Corner-Tang Bifaces, from Patterson 1937, p. 38.



Map showing the distribution of 725 corner-tang pieces in central United States. The figure after the name of the state represents the number of records from the state.

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