



Corner-tang knife from
41KR21 near Comfort, Texas
(Benedict & Contreras 2009)

Mystery of the Corner-Tang Biface Artifact

by John Benedict

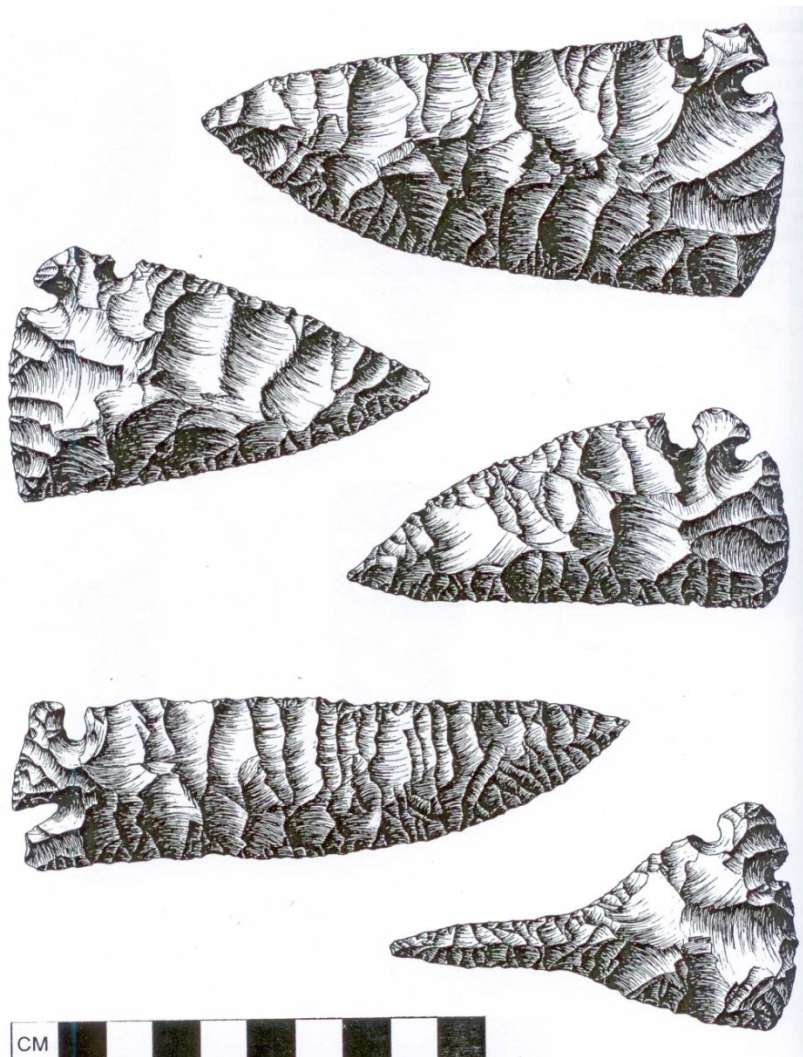
This relatively rare and mysterious artifact, known commonly as the "Corner-tang Knife" or "Corner Tang", or just a "Tang", is much sought after by collectors. What were these unusual chert artifacts used for?

The name is thought to originate from the unusual location of the tang, typically on a corner or side of this knife blade-like artifact (Figure 1). The corner-tang was made in a wide variety of shapes and the tang can be found located on the base of the knife, the side or even in the middle—it was also modified by prehistoric peoples as a drill or perforator (see last image in Figure 1). 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 have been found on the surface and in excavations of Late Archaic sites dating from about 4,000 years ago into Transitional Archaic sites to about 1,700 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 items (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Corner-tang biface illustrations, from Turner, Hester, and McReynolds 2011, p. 288.



They were perhaps exchanged as an item of significance or prestige between the prehistoric peoples of the hill country and groups along the Coastal Plain where the corner-tangs were sometimes interred with burials (personal communication Dr. H. Shafer).

Corner-tangs are found most commonly in central Texas—especially along the Balcones Escarpment—and south central Texas, and westward into the Pecos region (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 (Figure 3). Corner-tangs are associated most commonly with the plains regions of these states. The best sources of information on this artifact type are J.T. Patterson 1936, 1937; and Kraft 1993).

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, Lange, Ensor, and Frio (personal communication with Dr. H. Shafer; Kraft 1993); and a meat cleaver-like cutting tool, known as the Kerrville Biface, or Butted Biface, or Kerrville Knife. 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 and expedient cutting tool requiring much less work to make than the typical bifacial corner-tang.

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.

Figure 2. Corner-tang bifaces as ceremonial grave goods of a 5-6 yr old child, Karnes Co.

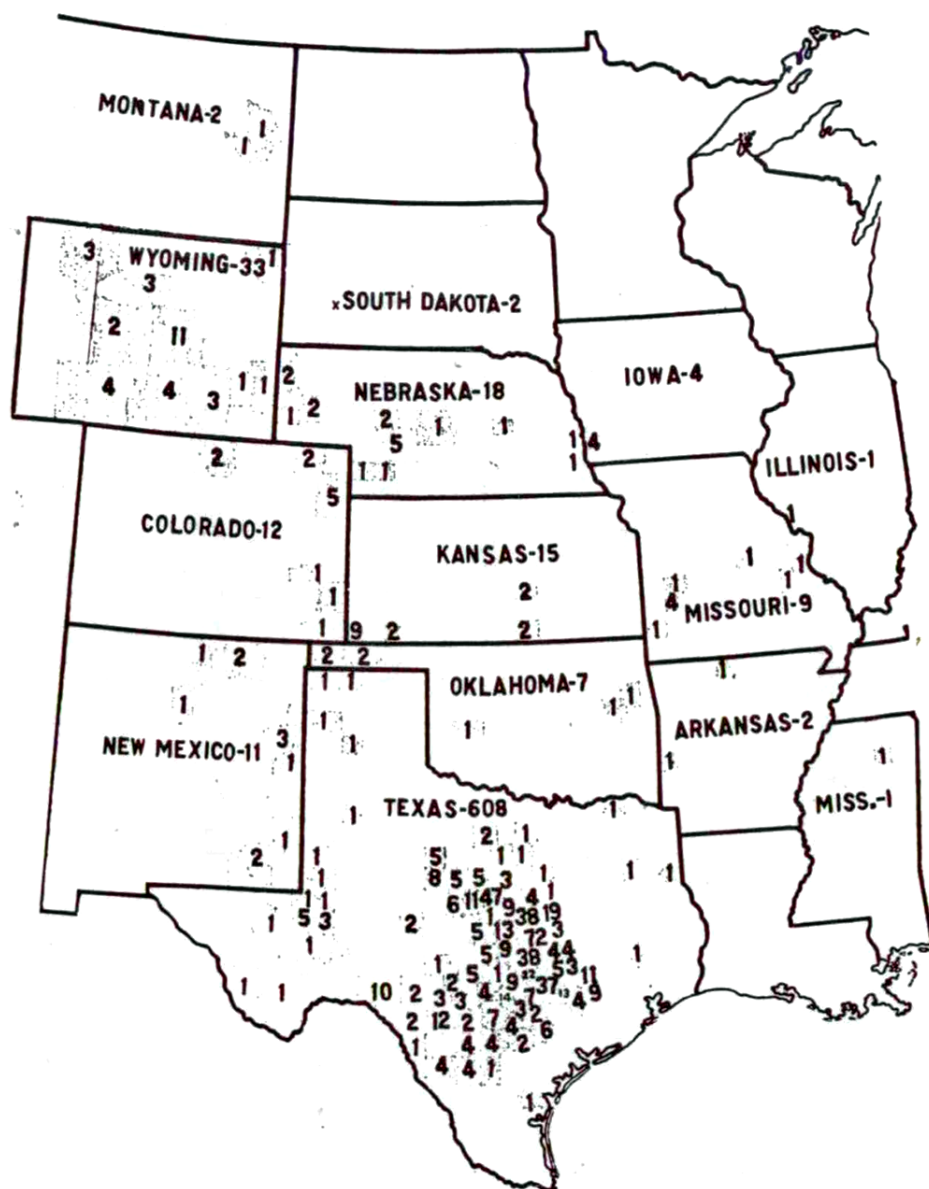


Some studies have found polish around the base of the tang suggesting these knives had a leather or plant fiber cord tied around the tang and the knife may have hung from this cord. Several researchers speculated that these corner-tangs were used to butcher meat and thus the cord was tied to the person 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 (i.e. a wooden handle being attached to the tang), such as the presence of polish and/or asphaltum (i.e., tar) on the tang, some corner-tangs have even been found hafted, but many do not show evidence of hafting.

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, they are too thin and fragile, especially with a handle to be used to scrape hides.

In summary, corner-tang bifaces were likely used by prehistoric peoples as a multi-use knife, throughout the plains states and especially in the Texas Hill Country. They were used from the Late Archaic through Transitional Periods, perhaps from 4,000 to 1,300 years ago. Moreover some were used hafted or had an attached thong, and others we do not show how the tang was used. This biface was likely used for butchering a fresh kill, and cutting up soft plant material, commonly at a camp site near an earth and hot rock cooking oven (i.e., burned rock midden). Also these knives were significant enough in daily life that particularly well made biface corner-tangs were placed with the dead as significant grave goods. Further studies on these beautiful bifaces may reveal more of the mystery of how they were used.

Figure 1. 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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