



Historical Resources

Archaeology of Sarasota County

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BONE TOOLS AND ORNAMENTS OF THE MANASOTA CULTURE IN SARASOTA

About 5,000 years ago the environment and climate in Florida is much like it is today. By about 2,500 years ago, people in Florida began to live a sedentary lifestyle. They lived in villages, hunting animals and harvesting the abundant shellfish along the Gulf Coast. Archaeologists named this group living around present-day Sarasota County around 2,500 to 1,300 years ago the "Manasota" culture. Most of what archaeologists study today of the Manasota culture is their trash. Shell middens, which are basically mounds of trash, usually consist of food remains such as animal bones and shellfish. However, sometimes archaeologists find artifacts such as tools, ornaments, and pottery in these shell middens. The Manasota culture not only hunted animals such as deer, birds, turtles, sharks, fish, and shellfish for food, but they also used many of the animal bones for tools and ornaments. These bone artifacts demonstrate the creativity these groups employed using the natural resources surrounding them for both everyday tools and personal adornment.

Bone artifacts are bone fragments that have been manipulated or changed in some way by humans. There are two major kinds of bone artifacts; bone tools and bone ornaments. Bone tools are utilitarian. In Manasota sites around Sarasota County bone tools such as sharks' teeth, stingray spines, deer bone, and turtle shell have been found. Sharks' teeth have been discovered that were perforated, meaning a hole was drilled through it. Archaeologists surmise these drilled shark's teeth could have been used for scrapers or knives. Archaeological evidence



recovered from a prehistoric site at Key Marco has shown shark's teeth strapped to a piece of wood to presumably be used as a saw. Stingray spines were sharpened to points that may have been used for fishing or as needles.

Awls, which are small, pointed tools used for making holes in wood or leather, have been discovered at Manasota sites that were made from the metapodials, or long foot bones, of deer. In southwest Florida, net-mesh gauges have been found that were made from deer bone and turtle carapace (shell). Projectile points (or arrowheads) as well as barbs or fishhooks made from bone and deer antler, have also been found. Fossilized bones, such as shark's teeth, were probably found along the Gulf beaches in Sarasota by the Manasota people and made into tools. Most of these bone tools reflect the economy of the Manasota, that of hunting and fishing. Archaeologists have also discovered that the production of bone tools increased during the later Manasota culture period, which may reflect an increase in population and, subsequently, in technology.

Bones fragments from fish, birds, and mammals were often carved and decorated and used as ornaments for the Manasota people. Archaeologists have discovered many different types of bone adornments such as pendants, disk beads, tube beads, and hairpins. Pendants and beads functioned primarily as items of personal adornment- either strung together or individually. They may have been worn as bracelets, necklaces, or even attached to clothing. Archaeologists have found shark and ray vertebrae with perforations or holes drilled in the middle of the vertebrae that indicate their use as disk beads.

The metapodial, or long foot bone, of deer were carved and smoothed into long pins. These deer bone pins were about the size of modern chopsticks. These long pins typically had a notch or groove carved into a section almost at the end of the pin. The tip of this long pin was decorated in many instances with beautiful geometric designs. Theodore Morris' artwork in this article shows this long deer bone pin with its grooved notch used to tie feathers and the intricate carving on the tip. His artwork also reflects what many archaeologists in southwest Florida believe was the intended use of these long pins, as hairpins or ornaments.

One wonders at the time and energy invested in the creation of these exquisite hairpins as well as the other bone artifacts. The prehistoric groups of Sarasota County turned what was essentially their trash into both useful and innovative tools as well as delicate and intricately carved personal ornaments.

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Photo Credit: Artwork by Theodore Morris (copyright)

Photo Information: Local artist, Theodore Morris, depicts prehistoric Calusa girls with a hairpin made of deer bone.

** If you would like to learn more about bone tools in southwest Florida, please read *Culture and Environment in the Domain of the Calusa*, edited by Dr.