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Archaeological Curved Throwing Sticks from Fish Cave, near Fallon, Nevada

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While attending the 32nd Annual Meeting of the Society for California Archaeologists, April 8-11, 1998, I became acquainted with Dr. Henry C. Koerper who gave a paper with two co-authors, Henry Pinkston and Michael Wilken, and the paper's title was "Nonreturn Boomerangs in Baja California Norte." I asked for a copy of that paper and one other (Koerper 1997) he had previously written, "A Game String and Rabbit Stick Cache from Borrego Valley, San Diego Country, (Koerper 1998: 252-270). I told him about two wooden "Rabbit Clubs" which had been found in Lovelock Cave, (Loud and Harrington 1929:Plate 16a and b) (Figure 1) and the nine so-called "rabbit clubs" found in Fish Cave near Fallon, Nevada by S.M. Wheeler and his wife Georgia [Wheeler S.M. and Wheeler G.N. 1969:68-70; see also Winslow (1996) and Winslow and Wedding (1997:140-150.)] I told Dr. Koerper that I would date four of the nine so-called "rabbit clubs" from Fish Cave by Accelerator Mass Spectrometry. I sent samples off to Dr. "Erv" Taylor at the University of California, Riverside and the results came back a few weeks later. However, before I relate the dates to you, let us look at the site, Fish Cave in which the seven "rabbit clubs" and two "boomerangs" were found by the Wheelers.

Before proceeding with the description of Fish Cave, one must make certain the reader knows what is meant by the terms "rabbit clubs" and "boomerangs". A "rabbit club" or a "rabbit stick" is a slightly curved stick, a curved hurling implement used largely in North America for taking wild rabbits, or a non-return boomerang. Everybody is familiar with the Australian boomerang. It is a severely curved throwing stick, which if it misses the target will come back to the thrower. This presentation will discuss seven "rabbit clubs" and two possible "boomerangs" found in Fish Cave.

The S.M. Wheeler Excavation of Fish Cave in 1940

Fish Cave, the lowest cave in the Fallon foothills of the Stillwater Range at elevation of 4033.1 feet, is a lava tube more than 100 feet long (Map 1). S. M. Wheeler and his wife Georgia excavated deep within Fish Cave and several other sites between June and November 1940 (Map 2) Fish Cave (NAS 1-1E) named for a fossil fish, *Gasterosteus doryssus*, named by Charles R. Eastman, found within the cave's lowest deposits which dated to The Lake Lahontan Period. They, the excavators, had difficulty in protecting the deposit within the cave for the presence of the fossil fish had gained wide notoriety among geologists and their students. At

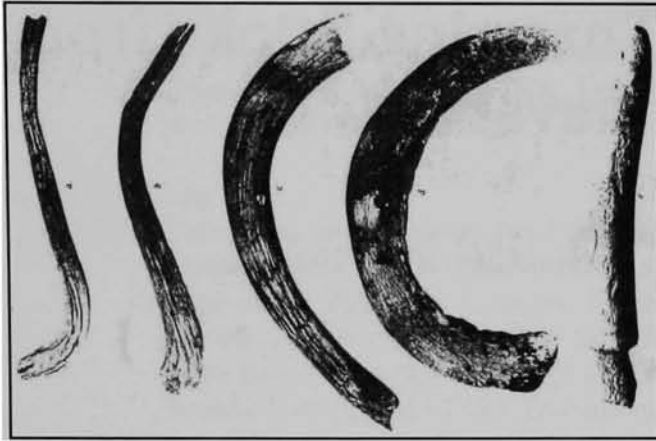


Figure 1. The two rabbit clubs (a & b) found in Lovelock Cave, also shown (c & d) are what looks like two boomerangs.

Figure 2. Burial 1 was found in Fish Cave along with a large circular, three-rod coiled basket that covered the lower extremities. Georgia Wheeler, shown viewing the burial site.

the time of the excavation of Fish Cave, the Wheelers had trouble finding the “lost opening” to the lava tube, which was hidden by guano-hunter’s backdirt. Twenty-two feet from the front of the cave, they hired a man, Joe Aguirre, to clear backdirt from in front of an arch leading to the lava tube proper. Joe Aguirre found a digging stick and a small basketry fragment on top of the pit, which, when excavated, yielded a human female burial, called “Burial No. 1.” The burial, which had a large, circular coiled tray and an animal hide associated with it, is shown as found, in Figure 2. Later on, the Wheelers excavated farther back in the cave and they came across the nine “rabbit sticks” which were not associated with any human burials. The “rabbit sticks” dimensions are shown in Table 3. We published a picture of “Burial 1 from Fish Cave” on page 76 in *Anthropological Papers Number 14* (Tuohy and Rendall, 1969,

however, burial photographs are not published anymore, out of respect for Native Americans.

Other Archaeologist who visited Fish Cave

After the Wheelers left the Fallon area to guano hunters and collectors, the next professional archaeologist who visited Fish Cave and wrote about it was Dr. Lewis K. Napton from whose report was titled “Report of archaeological investigations in western Nevada, Summer, 1971, made under authority of Antiquities Act permit.” Napton was looking for a cave to excavate and he said the following about Fish Cave (Napton 1971:16):

“One is most favorably impressed with the enormous size and great depth of this cave, which resembles a great railroad tunnel driven straight into the mountainside, penetrating to a depth of

**Table 1
AMS DATES ON BURIAL 1, FISH CAVE**

Fish Cave (267-Ch-le; AHUR-2-63)	hair	no pretreatment	UCR-3259A/CAMS-10910	2350±100
		water only	UCR-3259B/CAMS-11357	2450±60
		detergent treated	UCR-3259C/CAMS-10911	2530±60
		total amino acids	UCR-3259D/CAMS-11348	2390±60
	bone	total amino acids	UCR-3258/CAMS-14231	2660±60

Table 2
AMS DATES BY UCR, RABBIT STICKS AND BOOMERANGS FROM FISH CAVE

UCR lab #/CAMS #	Submitter's #	Age (Years BP)	ID
UCR-3672/48259	1-1E-70	4800±40	rabbit club
UCR-3674/48261	1-1E-81	5280±40	rabbit club
UCR-3674/48258	1-1E-69	5290±40	boomerang?
UCR-3673/48260	1-1E-71	5690±40	boomerang?



Figure 3. The polychrome potsherd picked up by Dr. Ruth Gruhn at the entrance to Fish Cave. Dr. Richard Ambler identified the potsherd as a Kayenta Polychrome Potsherd dating to A.D. 1255 to 1292 in Northern Arizona.

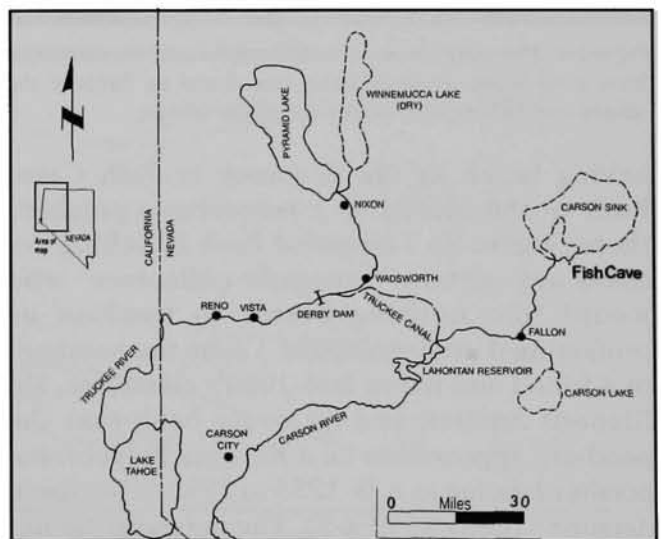
more than 100 feet. The exterior (exogene) Rockshelter is more than 50 feet wide and 20 feet high, and it was considerable larger in the past, a large part of the roof fell at some time following the final withdrawal of Lake Lahontan.”

Dr. Napton put in three test pits finding empty cache pits in two of them as witnessed by fragments of cordage and matting, and pieces of coprolites. He found thirty-one artifacts none of them “diagnostic” of any given culture, so he abandoned the area to study in other parts of Nevada and California.

The next archaeologist to study at the Grimes Point area was by Karen Nissen. She did her dissertation on six petroglyph sites in Churchill County, one of which was a huge petroglyph site (Nv-Ch-3) located on Grimes Point. She studied 9,288 designs on 1,920

boulders at the six sites. She was able to discern forty-six design types and four major styles, “Pit and Groove, Curvilinear, Rectilinear and Representational.” Without the latest dating techniques from the nearby caves excavated by the Wheelers in 1940, her 1982 dissertation was able to discern that prehistoric humans had been in the area since about 8,500 years ago. Her study, “Images from the Past: An analysis of Six Western Great Basin Petroglyph Sites”, was proven correct when the burials and the grave goods from one of Wheeler’s caves, Spirit Cave, had a mean date of 9,415±25 BP. (Tuohy and Dansie 1997:25).

In 1996, Fish Cave was visited by Dr. Alan Bryan, Dr. Ruth Gruhn and the author. While



Map 1. A general map showing the Carson Sink and Fish Cave on the right center of the page.

Table 3
MEASUREMENTS OF SEVEN RABBIT CLUBS AND TWO BOOMERANGS (Figure 4)

Number	AMS Date	Part	Decorated	Shaft	<i>l</i> cm	<i>w</i> cm	<i>th</i> cm
1-1E-73		rabbit club handle	incised lines (10.0cm)	missing	29.1	2.8	1.8
1-1E-74		rabbit club handle	incised lines (9.0cm)	missing	30.4	2.5	1.2
1-1E-75		rabbit club handle	incised lines (10.0cm)	missing	19.9	2.0	1.4
1-1E-81	5280±40(UCR-3674)	rabbit club handle, plus shaft	painted black incised lines (6.0cm)	curved shaft	38.7	2.9	1.4
1-1E-69	5290±40(UCR-3671)	Boomerang, curved	150°	club present	27.0	2.8	1.7
1-1E-70	4800±40(UCR-3672)	rabbit club, curved	painted black	curved shaft	27.3	4.2	1.7
1-1E-72		rabbit club, curved		curved shaft	28.9	2.2	1.4
1-1E-71	5690±40(UCR-3673)	Boomerang, curved		club present	21.6	2.7	1.2
1-1E-76		rabbit club handle	unmarked	straight	13.9	2.3	1.5



Figure 4. The nine pieces of rabbit clubs and boomerangs from Fish Cave. Four of them are dated in Table 2 the others are believed to be pieces of the above.

having lunch at the entrance to Fish Cave, Ruth Gruhn picked up a polychrome potsherd there (Figure 3). I consoled Ruth by telling her there are certain “renegade collectors” who would like nothing better to confuse us professional archaeologists. I sent the potsherd to a friend and fellow late-1950’s classmate, Dr. Richard Ambler, and he wrote back that the potsherd appeared to be a Kayenta Polychrome potsherd dating to A.D. 1255 to 1292 in Northern Arizona (Tuohy 1997:4-5). The potsherd did not belong in Fish Cave.

Dating of Burial No. 1, Fish Cave

About the same time as Bryan and Gruhn were looking at Fish Cave as a potential site to dig, Dr. “Erv” Taylor of the University of California, Riverside, asked if we had any mummies with hair on their heads to use in dating project on human hair. He personally visited the State Museum, chose his specimens, one of which was the Fish Cave Burial No. 1, and he got five AMS dates on hair and bone as follows which were published in “Radiocarbon Dating of Biochemically Characterized Hair” by Taylor, R.E., P.E. Hare, D. Kirner, L. Wan and R. Burky (1997).

Dating the Fish Cave Curved Throwing Sticks

These AMS dates do not apply to the nine rabbit sticks, which were found farther back in Fish Cave. We object to calling them “rabbit sticks” and two of them may have been used as “boomerangs” and are so indicated in Table 2. As a further explanation of Table 3, four of the carved sticks had carved handles. The handles had incised v-shaped lines carved diagonally about 10 cm up from one end, and on one, the design ended at 6cm up the handle. Two of these artifacts were painted black in color, and No. 81 is the only “stick” that has a complete

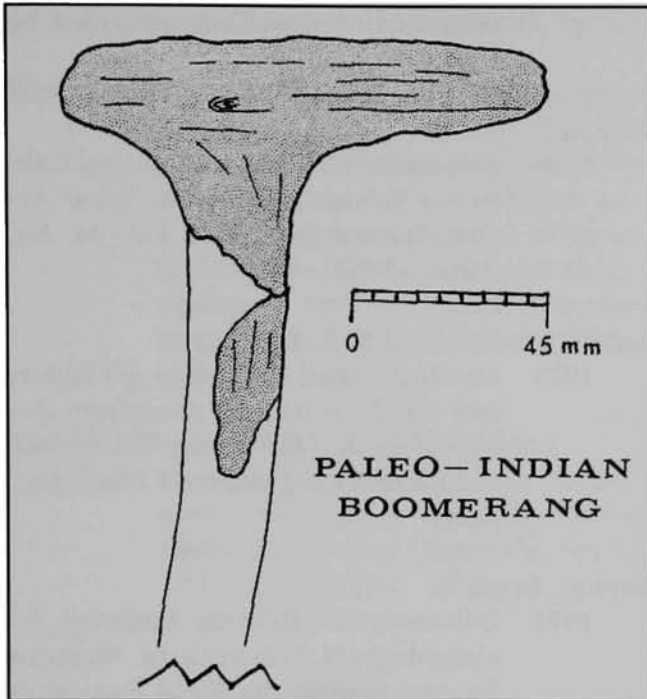


Figure 5. The drawing represents a reproduction of the boomerang that was found at Little Salt Springs in southwest Florida. It was made of oak and dates to 8500 to 9000 years ago or to the Paleo-Indian Period of eastern North America.

but broken curve left on it. There were four handles in the group and the rest were made up of blades or partial blades. We expected them all to date together, so we were surprised to learn that the AMS dates spanned a total of 890 years. Here are the AMS dates of UCR laboratory.

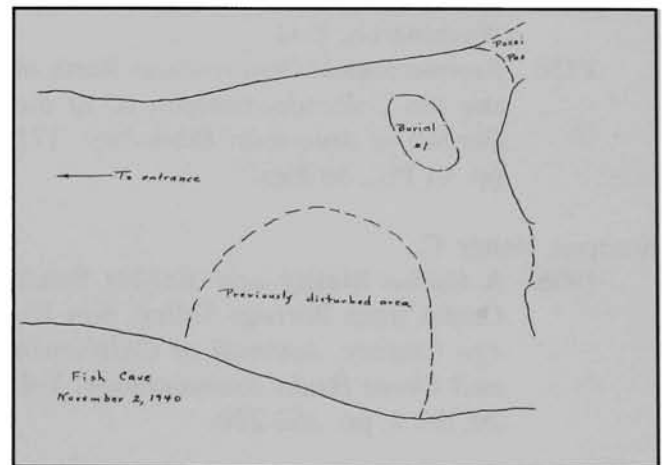
CONCLUSION

We follow Koerper's two papers (1997,1998), which give the distribution of curved throwing sticks. He states the antiquity of curved throwing weapons extends minimally into the mid-Upper Paleolithic (Koerper, Pinkston and Wilkin, 1998:1). He quotes Bahn (1987) as stating straight-on boomerangs, or non-return boomerangs have been employed on five continents by diverse peoples. He notes that the rabbit stick is virtually extinct in North America in the 20th century. He also notes the ethnographic documentation of rabbit sticks for

northern Baja California, coastal and desert southern California, the extreme southern Great Basin, the Colorado River Yuman and some Upland Yuman peoples, as well as the Puebloans and some Athapascan speaking peoples (Koerper, Pinkston and Wilkin, 1998:3). We have not included one photograph of a Hopi rabbit hunter with a typical Southwestern rabbit club, (after Judd 1954:Plate 12, right), which was already published by Koerper (1998:cover Vol. 20, No. 2 JC and GB Anthropology).

As for archaeological occurrences out of the Southwest and present in the Great Basin we noted the two Lovelock Cave occurrences and the nine occurrences from Fish Cave near Fallon, Nevada.

The two so-called boomerangs from Fish Cave do not resemble the boomerang found at Little Salt Springs, in southwest Florida (Figure 5). This non-returning oak boomerang displays the thinned lenticular cross section with a right-angled top resembling some of the same weapons found in Australia in the Northern Territory (Clausen et al 1979:611). This broken oak boomerang dates to 8500 to 9000 years or to the Paleo-Indian Period of eastern North America, making it one of the oldest boomerangs found anywhere in the world. The curvilinear boomerangs from Fish Cave look



Map 2. A partial map of the interior of Fish Cave made by S.M. Wheeler in 1940 showing the position of Burial 1 and the previously disturbed area.

more like "rabbit clubs" than the one found in Little Salt Spring, Florida deposits.

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