

Archaeologists find native cache

Obsidian pieces found by a Willamette Valley landowner have been identified as a collection of Native American artifacts currently estimated to be 1,000-4,000 years old. The landowner has asked that his name not be shared.

The cache of 15 bifaces is important for several reasons, said assistant State Archaeologist John Pouley with the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO).

“For starters, we wouldn’t know the site existed if the landowner hadn’t reached out to our office to report the find,” Pouley said. “Aside from the importance of his stewardship, the biface cache is additionally a rare type of archaeological site.

“Of approximately 35,000 recorded archaeological sites in Oregon, few, likely less than 25, consist of biface caches, he added. “Of the known biface cache sites, it is believed to be the first recorded in the Willamette Valley.”

The cache is primarily comprised of what appear to be blank trade bifaces: hand-sized, unfinished stone tools, largely unmodified from when first created by early Native Americans flintknapping at the distant quarry. The Willamette Valley obsidian bifaces have been sourced to obsidian cliffs in the Central Oregon Cascades and were roughly shaped at the cliffs, likely for easier transport. Once traded, they would be worked into a finished tool, or provide an expedient source for making sharp flakes. Most of the previously documented cache sites in Oregon contain finished tools such as knives, spears, or arrowheads, according to Pouley.

“The archaeological site provides information on not only what prehistoric biface blanks brought into the Willamette Valley looked

like, but also on the knappable properties of the stone, which may assist with developing hypotheses on their intended use,” he said. “Unmodified trade items of any kind typically do not survive in the archaeological record.”

Information gathered from the cache will add to the knowledge of prehistoric trade networks. To obtain a better understanding of the context of the cache, Pouley led an archaeological excavation at the site in June 2016.

“We were pleased to find one biface in possibly its original position, referred to as ‘in situ,’” he said. “Many times things are moved beneath the ground, whether by later human impacts, burrowing animals or repetitive freeze/thaw cycles. A biface in situ assists with establishing context, which allows for comparison with other items recovered during the process of a controlled excavation. The information can help us address a number of research questions, such as possibly refining the estimated age of the site.”

Because of the importance of the site, Pouley received support from the archaeological community including local universities, private archaeology firms, and Native American tribes. The site is in the traditional territory of the Santiam Band of the Kalapuya. The Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde, the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz and the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation were consulted. The contributions include completed analyses; donated time and expertise to identify the source of the obsidian,

3-D scanning, replication studies to better understand how the bifaces were made, ethnographic references that includes a tribal place-name in the immediate vicinity, a magnetometer survey to provide data to assist with the excavation, illustrations and donated gear for the excavation.

“This site makes you wonder how many archaeological sites with the potential to shed light on the history of human occupation within Oregon have been found before, and never reported,” Pouley said. “We encourage anyone that finds artifacts on their property to contact us.”

“When we study the history of ancient native peoples of this area, we can now speak more fully to a complexity of culture ... and then point to artifacts like those found here and show our students the evidence.”

— John Pouley

Archaeological sites found on private land are owned by the landowner and the land remains in the owner’s possession. At the conclusion of any state permitted archaeological excavation, all recovered artifacts remain the property of the landowner unless they consist of Native American human remains, burials and associated funerary objects, and



PHOTO PROVIDED

Assistant State Archaeologist John Pouley shows the Native American bifaces found in the cache.

objects of cultural patrimony. Often, landowners choose to donate recovered artifacts to a museum or tribe. No one is allowed on private land without owner consent, regardless of the presence of an archaeological site.

After the excavation and analyses are completed, Pouley will produce a professional archaeological report on his findings with the intent to have it later converted into a peer-reviewed publication. Pouley and many of the archaeologists that contributed to the study plan to present their findings at a symposium during the 2017 Northwest Anthropological Conference in Spokane, Wash.

He and others involved in the excavation also will share their findings with Abiqua Academy, a pre-kindergarten

through 12th-grade independent school. Middle school students watched a portion of the excavation at the request of the landowner, who is associated with the school. The curriculum challenges students to think critically and creatively and teaches students the concepts of honor, empathy, accountability, respect and teamwork (HEART).

The cache gave them a tangible piece of history, said a teacher who accompanied the students to the site. Adding, “When we study the history of ancient native peoples of this area, we can now speak more fully to a complexity of culture—trade routes, the manufacturing of goods, migratory patterns—and then point to artifacts like those found here and show our students the evidence.”

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