

Bluff Shelters of Union County

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In the conglomerate and underlying sandstones of Union county, Illinois, are numerous perpendicular bluffs of varying heights. The several forces of erosion have produced indentations in these bluffs, commonly in their bases. Many of these indentations are so formed and situated that they are natural shelters. In some cases, water runs over their floors, while in others their interiors have been perfectly dry for great periods of time.

In practically all of these shelters some bits of evidence of prehistoric human occupancy can be found on the surface. Over the past fifty years or so, the surfaces of the dry cave floors have been scratched by collectors in search of Indian relics. Three or four years ago the writer and his brother became interested in these places as anthropological sites.

These grottoes evoked, no doubt, in a condition very near their present one, when the first human entered them. Why then, is there not a possibility of finding, somewhere in the debris of their floors, some evidence of the earliest as well as the latest human occupant?

With this in mind, the writer and his brother excavated a shelter, four miles north of Cobden, in 1935. It is 67 feet long by 2 1/2 feet deep at its greatest depth. It was found that the dust and soil was accumulated therein, to a maximum depth of 3 1/2 feet. This entire dust layer was removed and passed through a 1/8-inch mesh screen, and was found to be heavily impregnated with flint chips, bones, shells and potsherds. Flint chips were most abundant near the surface and decreased as the bottom was approached.

Among the artifacts encountered were seventeen war points; several of these had delicately serrated edges, the others were of the plain triangular type. There were about fifty complete and numerous fragmentary arrow heads. They were mainly of the stemmed variety; a few were notched, and all were very blunt. Six complete bone awls and four fragmentary ones represented the work in bone. There were a half dozen mortars, made of unshaped creek rocks. One mortar weighed several hundred pounds and contained an unusually deep basin. A number of tips of deer antlers were found; these had been cut from the horn by man, and three had holes bored in their bases. There were three beads or ornaments. One was a delicate arrow head with a notched base and serrated edges; it was slightly over an inch in length, and made of mussel shell. The other was an imitation animal tooth made of stone. Both were drilled for stringing. There was, also, an antler tip, highly polished, with a notch cut around its tip, and one half of a crude gorget. No agricultural artifacts were found in any condition.

The potsherds represented both shell and grit tempered pottery. They were generally roughened on the outside by a sharp instrument or a corded stick. Many of them were burned on the inside and not on the outside. Rims were mostly straight, sometimes slightly flaring. Few attempts at decoration were in evidence.

The above material is more or less typical of that found in other shelters of this locality and the neighboring ones, judging from cursory examinations and the reports of others.

One remarkable feature of this shelter was the fact that fragmentary human bones were incorporated throughout the mass of animal and bird bones in the same condition. There were fragments of lower jaws, upper jaws, with teeth worn to the bone; skull fragments; toe and finger bones, knee caps, shoulder blades, and fragments of the pelvic bones and arms and

leg bones. At a depth of $5\frac{1}{2}$ feet, a test hole in the hard clay beneath the dust, revealed fragments of a human skull and a lower mandible. There was absolutely nothing more in association with them. The skull fragment had a very heavy brow ridge. Other brow fragments, found at higher levels, showed no brow ridges and were structurally delicate in comparison. They were, also, white in color, while the lowest jaw and brow fragments were a deep brown. There was no indication of these bones ever having been buried. In only one instance were bones found grouped together; at a depth of two feet, against the wall of the shelter, a few vertebrae and two femurs were found together. From the fact that the bones showed no signs of decomposition, it would appear that the bones were deposited there in their present condition. It was, indeed, a conglomeration hard to account for, and was suggestive of cannibalism.

Practically nothing concerning cultures among these bluff dwellers has been defined; and it appeared to the excavators that this shelter contained the remains of more than one cultural division of prehistoric man. What was suspected here might be confirmed in others.

In a bluff 3 miles east of Cobden there is a series of large shelters. Ancient and recent rockfalls cover their floors, until excavation is impossible without the removal of tons of rock. Test holes between these rocks reveal a profusion of remains of ancient occupation. One test pit dug to a depth of 5 feet exhibited no bottom in the dust strata, nor any decrease in remains. Across a spur of one of these bluffs is built a so-called stone fort. There is known to be, in southern Illinois, 8 of these rock walls built in prehistoric times. It has been noted that habitable shelters are near each of these structures. Their builders might have been bluff dwellers.

No doubt, judging from the similarity of remains found in various bluff shelters, one cultural division of ancient man occupied them more than any other kind; yet, considering the length of time they have been available for habitation, the writer believes it is possible to find within them, some information concerning prehistoric man in this locality, from his beginning to and including the last nomadic bands of the American Indian.