

# The Looting of Prehistoric Caddo Indian Cemeteries in Northeast Texas

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## I. Introduction

In this article, we present archeological information on the recent looting of a number of prehistoric Caddo Indian cemeteries in Northeast Texas. These twenty-nine cemeteries comprising more than 1080 looted graves exist on private, state, and federal lands, and none have received any form of protection from either landowners or state and federal public officials.

Before the middle of the 19th century the term Caddo referred to only one of at least twenty-five distinct but closely affiliated groups centered around the Red River in Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma (see Perttula 1996:887-888). The Hasinai groups lived in the Neches and Angelina River valleys in East Texas, the Kadohadacho groups on the Red River in the Great Bend area, and the Natchitoches groups on the Red River in the vicinity of the French post of Natchitoches, established in 1714 (Swanton 1942: Figure 1). The first European description of the Caddo peoples came in 1542 from diarists traveling with the De Soto entrada. The Caddos, removed from Texas in 1859, today continue to live in western Oklahoma, primarily in Caddo County near the Caddo Indian Tribe's Tribal Complex, outside Binger, Oklahoma (see Carter 1995; Smith 1995, 1996).

In prehistoric and early historic times, the Caddos lived in dispersed communities of grass and cane-covered houses. The communities were composed of isolated farmsteads, small hamlets, a few larger villages, and civic-ceremonial centers. These centers had earthen mounds used as platforms for temple structures for civic and religious functions, for burials of the social and political elite, and for ceremonial fire mounds. The largest communities and the most important civic-ceremonial centers were primarily located along major rivers, such as the Sabine and Red rivers in Northeast Texas, and the Red, Arkansas, Little, and Ouachita rivers in Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana (Figure 1).

The Caddo peoples developed long-distance trade networks in prehistoric times. Important items of trade were bison hides, salt, and bois d'arc bows, as well as copper, stone, turquoise, marine shell, and pottery vessels. Many of the more important trade items were obtained from great distances (for example, copper from the Great Lakes and marine shells from the Gulf Coast), and these items were often placed as grave goods in the burials of the social and political elite (Perttula 1996:887). More commonly, funerary objects consisted of whole pottery vessels, stone arrowpoints, pipes, and other everyday items. The Caddo peoples had a sophisticated technology based on the use of clay, stone, bone, wood, shell, and other media for the manufacture of tools, clothing, ceramic vessels, basketry, ornaments, and other material items. The Caddos are

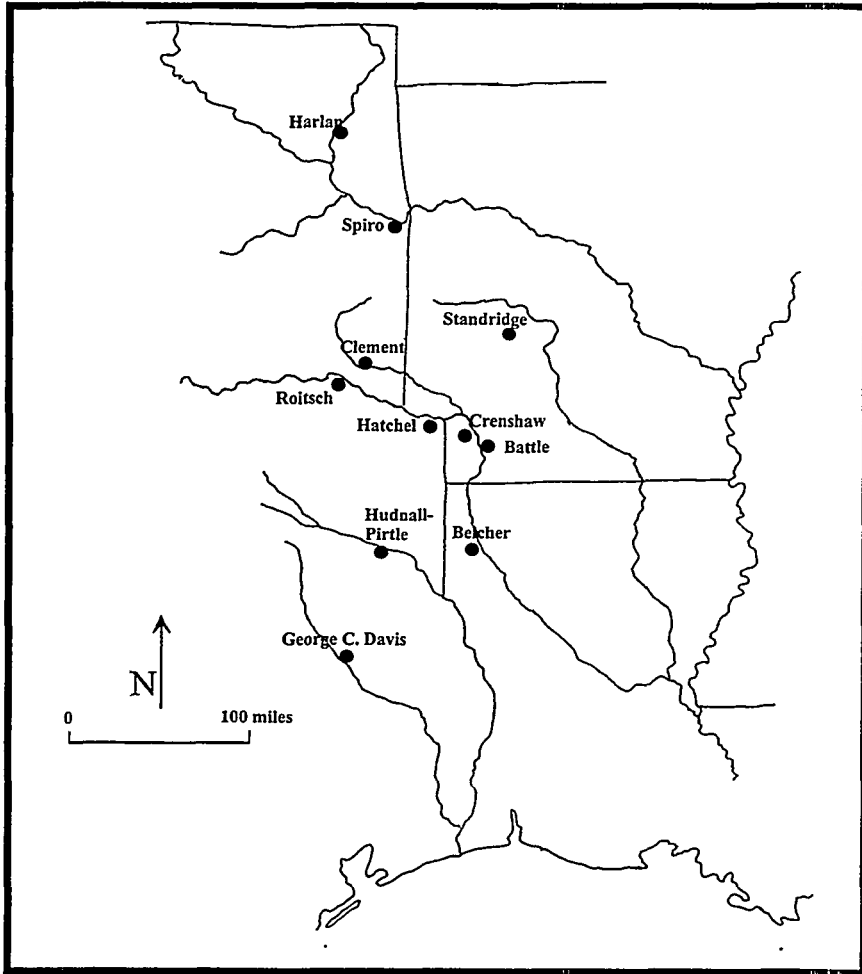


Figure 1. The Location of Important Prehistoric Caddoan Civic-Ceremonial Centers in Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana.

particularly well-known for their beautiful, artistic and useful ceramic wares which they made in many different shapes and which served a variety of functions. The ceramics are considered some of the finest aboriginal pottery manufactured in North America.

## II. The Looting Situation

Prehistoric Caddo Indian cemeteries in Northeast Texas have been repeatedly damaged and destroyed by looters and grave robbers since at least the early 1900s. In an October 1931 letter regarding the looting problems in Northeast Texas, Professor J.R. Swanton of the Smithsonian Institution commented that "there seems to be no way to handle [the looters] except to salvage as much of the material as possible before they get to it." In reply, Professor J.E. Pearce of the University of Texas noted that "unemployed

geologists . . . and farmers are digging up camp sites and burial places all over and selling the returns for whatever they can get . . . . It is exceedingly discouraging. I am working as hard as I can with the funds at my disposal to salvage what I can of the situation." The extent of looting and vandalism, so discouraging to Professor Pearce in 1931, has unfortunately continued to expand, particularly in the last ten to fifteen years as the price of looted grave goods or funerary objects escalates and the number of looters increases. The human remains from these graves are also sold by the looters.

The number of prehistoric and historic Caddo Indian cemeteries that have been looted in modern times is substantial, probably numbering in the hundreds of cemeteries and thousands of graves. A 1993 summary indicated that there were at least 348 known prehistoric Caddo Indian cemeteries in the Northeast Texas region, containing more than 3,000 individual graves (Kenmotsu and Perttula 1993: Appendix 2.5.4). Many of those cemeteries and graves were known only from their looted contents (Kenmotsu and Perttula 1993:128). There is no way to conceive of the vast body of valuable scientific and cultural information that has been lost, as an unfortunate consequence of the looting, to the Caddo Indians and to all Texans interested in the native history of the Caddoan peoples. Since about 1980, many large Caddo Indian cemeteries in Northeast Texas have been looted by "pot-hunters" living in the Texarkana, Longview, and Tyler areas who receive, for their efforts, large amounts of money (see Perttula 1989, 1992a). As a result, almost no reliable data from "pothunter" depredations has become accessible to the professional archeological community in Texas. Curtailing the problem of site looting on public lands appears to the Indian community and to many archeologists—professional and avocational alike—to be beyond the current capabilities or intentions of state and federal agencies responsible for the management, protection, and preservation of prehistoric Indian cemeteries. In addition, archeological sites on private lands are not protected by law.

We have focused our efforts on documenting the deplorable, but extensive, looting of prehistoric Caddo cemeteries in Northeast Texas in lieu of site protection and preservation efforts, and because of the absence of an unmarked graves protection bill in Texas that could help to better protect unmarked Indian cemeteries. Over the years, we have endeavored to identify and document the current condition of prehistoric Caddo Indian cemeteries and the extent of looting in the Big Cypress, Sabine, and Red River drainages (see Nelson and Perttula 1997). More recently, we have been involved in a study of Late-Caddoan Titus-phase (ca. A.D. 1430-1680) mortuary practices in the Big Cypress Creek drainage in Northeast Texas (see Perttula and Nelson 1998), and we have gathered site and intra-site information on 116 Titus-phase cemeteries, fifty percent of which have been looted (Perttula and Nelson 1998: Table 22). In this paper, we summarize our documentation efforts on twenty-nine looted Early-Late Caddoan cemeteries. The Early-Caddoan period concerns the archeology of the Caddo Indian peoples from A.D. 1000-1200, with the Middle-Caddoan period dating from 600-800 years ago, and the Late-Caddoan period from 300-600 years ago (Story 1990:334).

To convey to the reader a sense of the magnitude of the looting that is occurring in Northeast Texas, all of the cemeteries we consider in this paper have been officially recorded and documented in just the past three years.

### III. Looted Early Caddoan Period Cemeteries

We documented an Early-Caddoan period cemetery in the White Oak Creek drainage in Titus County at the Morris Mounds (41TT724) site. The site has two earthen mounds, and covers about ten acres of the floodplain. The west mound, two meters in height, contained burials from the Early-Caddoan age (ca. A.D. 1000-1200). Large numbers of ceramic vessels along with stone tools from the burials are in the landowner collections. The east mound was also looted although no burials were present in this cultural feature. Profiles of the mound suggest that it probably capped important structures that would have been used by the prehistoric Caddo for "public building-oriented ceremonialism" (Schambach 1996:40).

A possible Early-Caddoan cemetery has been looted at site 41FK50. The cemetery is on private land along the shoreline of Lake Bob Sandlin. Thirty burial pits have been documented from the site, which appears to have been looted some years ago. The grave robbers left their screening equipment on the site.

### IV. Looted Middle Caddoan Cemeteries

The Coker Mound (41CS1) is on a high alluvial terrace along the Sulphur River. About three years ago, looters dug into one of the four mounds at the site and encountered burials (supposedly in three layers within the mound), ceramic vessels, and Gulf Coast conch shell artifacts (Perttula et al. 1997). Our documentation of a small portion of the looted collection indicates that the burial mortuary deposit dates to the latter part of the Middle-Caddoan period (ca. A.D. 1300-1400). One of the looters kept a skull because it had pronounced cranial modeling (Derrick 1997).

The Vasturtium site (41UR209) is a looted Middle-Caddoan period cemetery on a floodplain island in the Little Cypress Creek valley. At least twelve to eighteen burials have been looted from the site which was exposed by timbering activities. Grave robbers and looters continue to destroy the site as of the writing of this paper. The only artifacts we were able to document as definitely coming from this looted cemetery include a plain ceramic jar and a small carinated vessel with a large, engraved pendant triangle decoration. This kind of motif has been identified with Middle-Caddoan period contexts in the Big Cypress Creek and Sabine River drainages (Nelson and Turner 1997; Perttula and Cruse 1997).

### V. Looted Late-Caddoan Titus-Phase Cemeteries

Late-Caddoan period Titus-phase settlements and associated cemeteries are common between the Sabine and Sulphur river drainages in Northeast Texas, particularly along Big Cypress Creek and some of its eastward-flowing

tributaries (Perttula and Nelson 1998: Figure 137). These cemeteries are known to range in size from a few individuals in family cemeteries (in proximity to habitation features and middens) to large community cemeteries containing from 160 to as many as 300 graves. The latter cemeteries are well-separated spatially from the main Titus-phase habitations. This spatial separation by the prehistoric Caddo peoples likely represents the physical manifestation of the sacred and spiritual nature of the souls of the deceased in the cemetery (e.g., Sabo 1998: Figures 9-2 and 9-3).

Based on the density of settlements, Titus-phase mounds, and large cemeteries, the "heartland" for Titus-phase Caddo societies covered a thirty-five mile stretch of Big Cypress Creek and tributaries, from the confluence of Brushy Creek and Big Cypress Creek in Titus County on the west to roughly the Lake O' the Pines dam site in Marion County on the east (Perttula and Nelson 1998:375 and Figure 159). Most of the looted Titus-phase cemeteries that we have documented are within that "heartland" (see Nelson and Perttula 1997:6-12).

The twenty-five looted Late-Caddo Indian cemeteries contain from as few as eight graves to as many as three-hundred graves, and average between forty to fifty interments. The burials contained a wide assortment of grave goods or funerary objects, including ceramic vessels, ceramic elbow pipes, caches of stone arrowpoints once held in quivers, stone earspools, and celts (Figure 2), as well as long (15-60 cm in length) chipped bifaces (see also Perttula 1992b; Thurmond 1990; Turner 1978).

The majority of the recently documented looted Late-Caddo Indian cemeteries are on private land, but two (41MR122 and 41UR144) are on land owned by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Fort Worth District at Lake O' the Pines. Looting at both of the cemeteries appears to have begun as long as ten years ago and continues today (Perttula et al. 1996; Nelson and Perttula 1997:9). The looted Camp Joy Mound (41UR144) burials occur in mound contexts, which is a rare Titus-phase mortuary practice (Perttula and Nelson 1998: Table 24). A large portion of the mound has also been trenched by looters. This looting exposed a burned 16th-17th century Caddo structure that had been covered by mound fill.

One of the looted Caddo cemeteries is on state lands owned by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department at Lake Bob Sandlin. Another Caddo cemetery was exposed during dam construction for Lake Bob Sandlin. Construction workers were allegedly paid by the looters to stay out of the cemetery area until all the Caddo Indian burials had been removed. Burials continue to wash out of the site along the eroding Lake Bob Sandlin shoreline. Two other Caddo cemeteries were discovered by looters in a county road right-of-way in Titus County, while two more were discovered on lands owned by a large private power company at Lake Swauano in Titus County.

The looters found several of the cemetery sites through their own devices, but in other cases the Caddo Indian cemeteries were exposed during various construction activities. These kinds of construction activities will continue in the future to expose unmarked and unprotected Caddo Indian graves, such as:

- (a) two were exposed during the re-routing of a county road in Camp County (41CP225 and 41CP244);



Figure 2. Late-Caddoan Period, Titus-Phase Artifacts Commonly Found as Grave Goods in Unmarked Caddo Indian Cemeteries. Top row: neck-banded, brushed, and engraved jars and carinated bowl; Middle row: engraved compound bowls and bottles and stone arrowpoints; Bottom row: plain and engraved clay pipes and ground stone celts.

- (b) another was discovered in Titus County during removal of dirt for state highway road fill (41TT716);
- (c) four were initially disturbed by oil well pad construction (41GG50, and 41GG53-41GG55) and then further looted (41GG53 had also been worked in the 1950s by a well-known looter from Longview);
- (d) two were brought to the attention of looters during new house construction (41FK96 and 41TT730); and
- (e) barn construction exposed two others (41TT717 and 41TT723) that looters subsequently vandalized.

## VI. Concluding Remarks on Trends in the Looting of Caddo Cemeteries

The information we have presented on looted prehistoric Caddo Indian cemeteries in Northeast Texas represents only the tip of the looting and grave robbing iceberg. Our initial efforts have been to record the locations of looted cemeteries and compile as much scientific information about the contents and character of the cemeteries as possible. Unfortunately, most of the information

we have about Caddo Indian cemeteries in Northeast Texas, as limited as it is, has come from the activities of looters.

The activities of some looters are better known than others, particularly those living in the Texarkana and Longview areas. Although we are aware of looter groups from Marshall, Harleton, Gilmer, Tyler, and other cities in Northeast Texas, we presently are not able to document their looting activities. Even the information we have obtained is quite sketchy, due in part to the speed with which looted grave goods are sold by antiquities dealers—with any site provenience information being lost in the process—and then locked away in private collections here in Texas and out of state. As an example, the large chert bifaces (45-60 cm+ in length), or “swords” (in the looter’s parlance) from the Sword site (41UR208) cemetery were taken by the looters to be authenticated and assessed by a well-known Oklahoma antiquities dealer on the same day they were found, and they were sold the next day by the looters for several thousand dollars to a collector from Minnesota.

Looting of Caddo Indian cemeteries began many years ago, but the rate of destruction of the cemeteries in the Northeast Texas region (many of them previously unknown) has reached truly alarming levels. Sites known to have been looted years ago on U.S. Army Corps of Engineers property at Lake O’ the Pines—such as McKinney (41MR12), Pleasure Point (41MR63), Big Oaks (41MR4), Southall (41UR3), and Gold Star (41UR107)—continue to be re-looted as the grave robbers search for artifacts overlooked during previous activities or for artifacts that have since increased in monetary value to collectors, relic dealers, and artifact authenticators/assessors.

In the absence of adequate protection of unmarked Native American cemeteries on private, state, and federal lands in Texas, and in light of the difficulties involved even in the prosecution of known looters (see Mallouf 1996; Martin 1997), it is very doubtful that any Caddo Indian cemetery in Northeast Texas can be protected or preserved from the actions of grave robbers. Pearce and Swanton reached the same conclusion more than sixty-five years ago, and nothing has been done to change the situation! It is critical therefore, that identification and documentation efforts in the area not only continue but be greatly expanded. We are working with the Caddo Indian tribe on developing a broader effort. We intend to continue acquiring new scientific and cultural information about unmarked Caddo Indian cemeteries and to use that information to try to raise awareness of the looting problem among private landowners and public officials entrusted with the protection of these important and sacred Caddo Indian sites.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Alston Thoms for his useful and insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper, and Nancy Reese for her assistance with Figures 1 and 2.

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