



The *Cinmar* discovery and the proposed pre-Late Glacial Maximum occupation of North America

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ABSTRACT

Proponents of a Solutrean colonization of the New World, and a pre-LGM occupation of North America's Mid-Atlantic region, cite as evidence a bifacially flaked, bi-pointed stone blade allegedly dredged from the continental shelf by the crew of the vessel *Cinmar*, along with portions of a mastodon skeleton later directly dated to $22,760 \pm 90$ RCYBP. However, our investigations into the discovery found several significant inconsistencies with respect to what is currently reported in the literature and raise serious questions that must be addressed before the *Cinmar* artifact can be considered evidence of anything pertinent to archaeology. In this article we present evidence and questions regarding the history of the *Cinmar* discovery, the location of the *Cinmar* discovery site, and the nature of the *Cinmar* vessel itself.

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1. Introduction

Several researchers have, over the past two decades, proposed a pre-Late Glacial Maximum (LGM) occupation of North America's Mid-Atlantic region by Solutrean foragers from Europe (Bradley and Stanford, 2004, 2006; Collins et al., 2013; Lowery, 2009; Oppenheimer et al., 2014; Stanford and Bradley 2000, 2002, 2012, 2014; Stanford et al., 2014; Stanford and Stenger, 2014). We and others have countered on various grounds that there is no evidence for this controversial proposal and substantial evidence against it (Boulanger and Eren, 2015; Dulik et al., 2012; Eren et al., 2013, 2014; Eriksson et al., 2012; Goebel et al., 2008; Kashani et al., 2012; Meltzer, 2009; O'Brien et al., 2014a, 2014b; O'Rourke and Raff, 2010; Philips, 2014; Raghavan et al., 2014; Raff and Bolnick, 2014; Rasmussen et al., 2014; Straus, 2000; Straus et al., 2005; Westley and Dix, 2008). Proponents continue to cite as evidence a bifacially flaked, bi-pointed stone blade allegedly dredged from the

continental shelf by the crew of the vessel *Cinmar*, along with portions of a mastodon skeleton later directly dated to $22,760 \pm 90$ RCYBP (UCIAMS-53545) (Lowery, 2009; Stanford et al., 2014). As we have discussed elsewhere (O'Brien et al., 2014a,b), this date is ca. 2000 calendar years earlier than the earliest appearance of Solutrean culture anywhere in Europe.

Having graced the covers of two books (Stanford and Bradley, 2012; Stanford and Stenger 2014), the *Cinmar* stone blade has been offered as significant evidence in support of the Solutrean hypothesis because it “resemble[s] Solutrean laurel-leaf artifacts of Southwestern Europe” (Collins et al., 2013: 526; also Stanford et al., 2014; but see Boulanger and Eren, 2015). Despite these superficial similarities, or perhaps because of them, Stanford et al. (2014) state that “the question of whether or not the biface was associated with the mastodon remains is critically important for an accurate interpretation.” We agree, which is why we were surprised to find several significant inconsistencies with respect to the history of the *Cinmar* discovery. We believe that they raise serious questions that must be addressed before the *Cinmar* artifact can be considered evidence of anything pertinent to archaeology.

2. The reported story and initial minor inconsistencies

There are no first-hand accounts of the recovery of the *Cinmar* biface and the supposedly associated mastodon remains, and all published accounts come from proponents of the Solutrean hypothesis. The first

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published accounting of which we are aware is in Lowery's (2009) dissertation and is based on information that Lowery obtained during a telephone interview with the *Cinmar* captain, Charles Thurston Shawn, on August 7, 2008. Lowery conducted this interview roughly four months after having first observed the *Cinmar* biface and mastodon remains in the Gwynn's Island Museum on Virginia's Middle Peninsula. According to Lowery's account, Captain Shawn and the crew of the scallop trawler *Cinmar* were working "approximately 40 nautical miles" (ca. 74 km) east of the Virginia Capes and were dredging at a depth of 70–74 m (Lowery, 2009: 190). Shawn "confirmed that the items were discovered in 1970" and indicated to Lowery that he "took particular note of the water depth" and "plotted the area on his navigation charts" (Lowery, 2009: 190). The only information Lowery provided about the exact circumstances of the discovery is that the biface and the mastodon remains were "discovered at the same time" (Lowery, 2009: 190). He does not indicate how these materials came to be in the museum.

Stanford and Bradley (2012) provide a second account of the recovery, largely reiterating Lowery's account. They add that "[a] label in the [museum] exhibit indicated that in 1970 the crew of the vessel *Cinmar*" encountered the biface and mastodon remains while dredging 100 km east of the Virginia Capes, and that Lowery's later interview with Shawn allowed him to determine that the discovery had been made at a depth of "approximately 75 m" (p. 100). It is unclear whether Lowery determined this depth or whether Shawn specified it. As with Lowery's accounting, no specific information is provided concerning the recovery of these items, and no indication is given as to how they arrived at the Gwynn's Island Museum.

Stanford et al. (2014) provide a third accounting of the recovery of the biface and mastodon remains. In this account, the *Cinmar* is reported to have been dredging 100 km east of the Virginia Capes "at a depth of 70 m" (p. 74). They state that the likelihood is slim that the mastodon remains and the artifact became comingled from two different contexts by the dredge because the *Cinmar* "had just begun a transect" when "the stress caused by the weight of a mastodon skull and associated tusks caused the transect run to be terminated and the dredge pulled and cleaned" (p. 87). There is no indication provided as to the source of this information. Critically, Stanford et al. state that the artifacts "have been on exhibit since 1974" (p. 75). Later they write, "It is important to remember that both the mastodon remains and the biface had also been on display since 1976 with a label outlining the circumstances of their discovery" (p. 88). We'll show the importance of these statements below.

In each of these accounts, Captain Shawn is said to have taken note of the water depth and location of the encounter. The remains were divided among the *Cinmar*'s crew, and Shawn retained for himself a tusk section, a complete tooth, and the biface (Lowery, 2009: 190–191; Stanford et al., 2014: 75). Here, however, the three stories diverge and, in at least some of the details, become contradictory. Neither Lowery (2009) nor Stanford and Bradley (2012) indicate how Shawn's artifact and the mastodon remains came to be on display at the Gwynn's Island Museum. Shawn is said to have had little interest in artifacts or fossils. Stanford et al. (2014) report that at some point Shawn sold the specimens to Dean Parker, an artifact collector living in the area. The sale of the artifacts by Shawn to Parker is not mentioned by either Lowery (2009) or Stanford and Bradley (2012). Parker's involvement in the story seems pertinent to us, both because he was the individual who loaned the items to the Gwynn's Island Museum, where Lowery observed them in spring 2008 (Lowery, 2009: 187; Stanford and Bradley, 2012: 100; Stanford et al., 2014: 75), and because he was an artifact collector. Thus, the omission of any mention of Parker's involvement in earlier accounts of the *Cinmar* finds seems odd.

Jeanne Tanner, director of the Gwynn's Island Museum, provides a fourth accounting of the *Cinmar* discoveries in an on-line interview available on YouTube (PalisadesPrehistory, 2013). To the best of our knowledge, this is the only account of the materials that is publicly available and not given directly by advocates of the Solutrean hypothesis. In it, Tanner notes that Captain Shawn retained the *Cinmar* finds for

"several years" after their discovery around 1972. The finds were then sold to "a local Mathews County [Virginia] man," a reference to Parker, who kept the finds "for a while." Parker loaned the artifacts to the museum, where they stayed for "about another five or six years" before being observed by Lowery. The timeline reconstructed from Tanner's account directly contradicts that given by Stanford et al. (2014). We also note that Tanner specifically mentions that Lowery and Stanford came to the museum one week after Lowery first observed the artifacts. According to her account, this visit concluded with Lowery and Stanford requesting permission from the owner for them to take the materials with them, and that "the owner had no problems with that." Thus, according to Tanner's account, both Lowery and Stanford were aware of Parker's involvement with and ownership of the artifacts before any information about the *Cinmar* materials had been written.

3. Questions

3.1. Question 1: what is the actual history of the find?

In our minds, the first question that must be addressed is: When were the biface and mastodon remains found, and when were they actually loaned to the Gwynn's Island Museum? Lowery's initial reporting of these materials states that the ship's captain "confirmed that the items were discovered in 1970" (Lowery, 2009: 190). Stanford, in his October 8, 2008 address to the Nobel Conference 44 at Gustavus Adolphus College, also gives 1970 as the date of the find (Gustavus Adolphus College, 2012). Stanford and Bradley (2012: 100) indicate that a label in the museum indicates that the materials were found in 1970. Stanford et al. (2014: 75), however, state that the materials were dredged in 1974. Though this may appear to some readers to be minor quibbling, we stress that there are clearly differing accounts here that are neither reconciled nor even acknowledged by the authors. Either the label in the museum and Captain Shawn's memory are precise or they are not.

Given Tanner's recounting, we suspect that the *Cinmar* materials could not have been on display since either 1974 (Stanford et al., 2014: 75) or 1976 (Stanford et al., 2014: 88). This supposition is validated by the following facts: The Gwynn's Island Museum was not founded until 1991 (Gwynn's Island Museum, n.d.-a; McCloud, 1991); it did not occupy its present space until 1995 (Marble, 1995); and the second floor—where Tanner recalls having placed the point and the tooth shortly after Parker brought them to the museum—was not renovated and usable until 1997 (Lewis, 2007). Indeed, the Gwynn's Island Museum's own Web site states that the *Cinmar* materials (the biface, the tooth, and a section of tusk) were purchased by Parker and loaned to the museum in 2002 (Gwynn's Island Museum, n.d.-b). How, then, could the *Cinmar* finds have been on display since either 1974 or 1976, as stated by Stanford et al. (2014)? Simply put, they could not have been.

Tanner's account, local newspaper articles of the time, and the Gwynn's Island Museum's own Web site clearly indicate that the *Cinmar* finds were donated at least three years after the trans-Atlantic pre-LGM Solutrean crossing was proposed (Preston, 1997; Stanford, 1999; Stanford and Bradley, 2000), despite claims to the contrary (Stanford et al., 2014). Further, if the artifacts were not donated until 2002, it begs the question of who wrote the museum's label outlining the circumstances of the discovery, when the label was written, and how that person got the information outlining the circumstances of the discovery.

3.2. Question 2: how do pre-LGM advocates know where the *Cinmar* discovery site is located?

Stanford and Bradley (2012) and Stanford et al. (2014) provide detailed information on the underwater location of the *Cinmar* finds. However, as discussed above, both sources state that the vessel was working 100 km east of the Virginia Capes, whereas Lowery (2009) as

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