

A Zoomorphic Bone Pin
from Dade County, Florida

by James S. Lord

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James S. Lord

On a cool March morning in 1989, while exploring a hammock near a Kendall tomato field, my son Bill Lyons and I walked across the flat prairie onto an elevation, which appeared to be the remnants of a tree island hammock. The elevation was obviously a prehistoric site as evidenced by a scattering of pottery sherds and animal bone refuse. I picked up four pieces of carved bone from a long abandoned vandal's pit.

It was a startling discovery. The carved bone fragments fit together and appear to depict a cat very similar to the Key Marco Cat discovered by Frank H. Cushing (Gilliland 1975). The reassembled pin, while not complete, is 100 mm long and 5 mm in diameter.

In my opinion the carving represents a cat climbing a tree, with the long axis of the pin representing the tree (see Figure 1 photographs and sketches). The animal is carved in bas relief, and is 50 mm in length and 8 mm in diameter. The "cat's" back and legs are speckled with small incisions. Its elongated tail is wrapped around the pin. The tail has an engraved median line running its length and is intersected by short angular incised lateral lines. The head is turned 180° and is looking away from the pin. The eyes are 1 mm in diameter and have a weeping eye motif. The workmanship is expertly executed.

As an alternative, Robert Carr (personal communication) has suggested that the animal represented is an opossum based largely on his observation of the sticking on its back and legs and the separation with a border from the distinctive tail.

To resolve this identification problem, it is helpful to compare the animal depicted on the pin with the Key Marco Cat. However, this comparison must be qualified by the recognition that both are somewhat stylized carvings and most likely crafted by different artists. It also must be noted that the Key Marco Cat is a larger three dimensional wooden carving, while the pin is a bas relief carving on bone.

The following similarities occur:

- * The tails are identical in shape and length, although the opposite side is exposed on the Key Marco Cat;
- * The paws are the same, displaying three toes on each with no claws;
- * The shape of the noses appears to be the same;
- * Both have round eyes with a weeping eye motif; and
- * Both have twin lines running from the forehead to the nose.

However, there are some noticeable differences on the pin:

- * The ticking on the animal's back is curious. I'm not sure what it represents. Perhaps it is seasonal or adolescent fur, or just texturing to distinguish the animal from the rest of the pin.
- * The head seems elongated, and together with the ears, measures 10 mm long. Perhaps the artist had difficulty portraying the stylized face on a convex pin with a limited diameter. In this case we are viewing the whole top of the head.
- * The ears are long and close together (unlike the ears of the Key Marco Cat), which is a major deviation from the other cat-like features. However, after researching

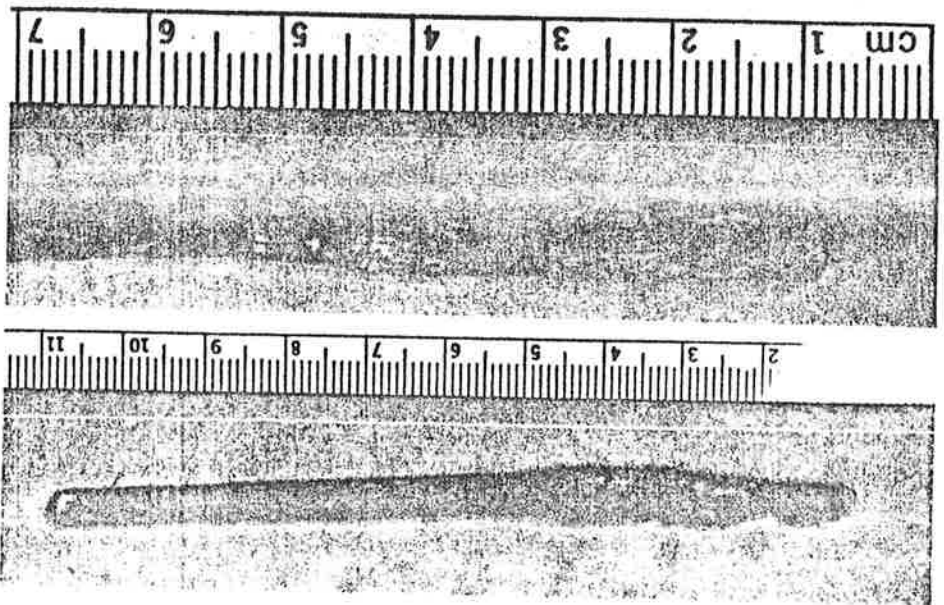


Figure 1. Zoomorphic bone pin from the Lyons-Lord site in Dade County, Florida. (Left). Photograph showing detail of carving. (Center left). Photograph showing overall dimensions of the pin. (Center right and Right). Sketch showing obverse and reverse detail of carving.

pictures of all tree climbing Everglades fauna, I discovered none of the animals have these type of ears. Even the opossum's ears are wide-set and shorter. I believe that the ears have to be discounted to artistic style or impression.

Although the above comparison is limited, I believe that the available evidence supports the conclusion that a cat is represented in the carving. The depiction of a cat, as a power animal, is particularly significant. Zoomorphic representations on bone pins are uncommon, but not unknown. Laxson (1962) records a sculptured ear head on a pin from another

Dade County site.

As a result of this site visit, the discovery was reported to the Dade County Historic Preservation Division, and the site recorded as the Lyons-Lord site. The pin currently resides at the Historical Museum of Southern Florida in Miami.

References Cited

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