

An Example of Precision Microblade Technology from the Central BC Coast

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Figure 1: EISx-10 Microblade with a Penny for Scale.

The artifact was found during the microscopic analysis of matrix samples from the site of EISx-10, a coastal shell midden located in the traditional territory of the Heiltsuk First Nation on the central coast of British Columbia. The site is one of several shell midden sites on Fougner Bay, on the mainland just north of Namu. It, along with fifteen other sites in the area, was the subject of core and auger sampling I undertook in 1996 and 1997. Small diameter cores provided intact sections of deposits for radiocarbon dating, while larger matrix samples obtained with a larger diameter bucket-auger were used for the recovery and analysis of fish and shellfish remains. The results of site dating and faunal analysis are described elsewhere (Cannon 2000a, 2000b). The matrix recovered in the auger samples was sufficient to give a good indication of the variety and intensity of marine fishing and shellfish gathering.

The small volume of the samples resulted in the recovery of very few artifacts. One exception was the obsidian microblade shown here, which was recovered from near the back of the midden deposits at EISx-10, some 30 metres from the shore at a depth of 104-117 cm below the surface. A radiocarbon sample from the same level in the adjacent core section yielded a calibrated date of 4245-3965 BC, or around 6000 BP. This date fits within the range of microblade technology

Microblade technology is widespread around the world and is a well known component of early lithic assemblages on the Pacific Northwest Coast. It is recognized for its precision, the skilled craftsmanship it represents, and its efficient use of raw materials. Here I describe a single find of a complete obsidian microblade that demonstrates all of these qualities to perhaps the highest degree possible. Its find does not represent any new insights into regional archaeological history, but it does allow an appreciation of lithic technological skill that is rarely surpassed. I think it is also a thing of beauty that goes beyond its utilitarian or archaeological value.

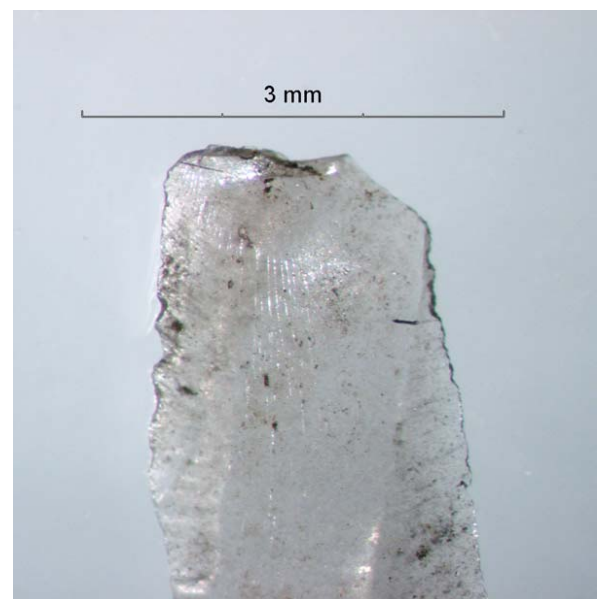


Figure 2: Ventral Surface Showing the Bulb of Percussion and Vertical Stress Lines.

on this part of the coast. Microblades are found in deposits dating from 9000 to 5000 cal. BP at the nearby Namu site (Carlson 1996). What sets this particular example apart is not its presence in this location at this time, or its manufacture from obsidian, the material of choice for microblades at Namu (Hutchings 1996:170), or even the means by which the artifact was recovered and dated. What sets this particular example apart from the majority of microblades recovered from sites on the BC coast, and those found in most other parts of the world, is its very small size.



Figure 3: Dorsal Surface Showing Twin Arrises.

This artifact is nearly complete. Only the very tip of the distal end is missing. It measures a mere 2.2 mm in width and 5.8 mm in length (Fig. 1). It is so small, it can hardly be handled. Its form is typical, with a striking platform on the proximal end, a bulb of percussion on the ventral surface (Fig. 2), and a pair of ridges or arrises on the dorsal surface (Fig. 3). The ridges and resulting trapezoidal cross-section of the blade shows that an even smaller triangular blade or narrow flake was struck from the dorsal surface. Its manufacture is clearly an indication of remarkable skill. What is even more remarkable is that it shows signs of use damage, primarily along one edge (Fig. 4). I initially saw this as an indication it may have been hafted along the opposite edge in some form of composite tool. In preparing the photographs for this article I noticed what appears to be fine retouch on both edges near the proximal end. This suggests the blade was more likely end hafted. Experiments conducted by Karl Hutchings (1996) showed this to produce a more efficient and more precise cutting tool. In every respect, the EISx-10 microblade represents the epitome of precision technology on this part of the BC coast. It is, however, not unique for its small size, though it does lie at the very smallest end of microblades from archaeological sites worldwide.

Metric data are not always available for microblade assemblages recovered from Pacific Northwest sites in BC and Alaska, and when provided do not always include the size range of individual blades. Sufficient examples are available to show that this particular example is at the smallest end of blade size distributions. The dimensions of the smallest microblades yielded from a sampling of sites

in BC, Alaska, the Yukon, and Alberta are provided in Table 1. The EISx-10 example is near or well below the size of the smallest examples reported from these sites, though there may be other examples not included in Table 1, or still others as yet unreported. The EISx-10 blade is also at or near the smallest extremes from sites reported worldwide. In a study of more than 9500 microblades from 60 sites from the North American Arctic and the European Upper Palaeolithic, Linda Owen reported an average smallest width of 3.8 mm. Only seven sites yielded blades as narrow as 2.5 mm, and only three sites produced blades as small or smaller than the EISx-10 example.

While it may not earn honours as the world's smallest, the EISx-10 blade is among the smallest examples recovered from archaeological sites of microblade using cultures worldwide. It shows the highly developed skills of its makers, and deserves some recognition for that reason alone. It may represent a level of precision that is even more common than we presently know. Only the finest recovery methods are likely to find such small tools, but the opportunity to further appreciate the skills of ancient lithic technologists may make finer scrutiny of excavated deposits worth the extra effort.

<u>Site</u>	<u>Number of Blades</u>	<u>Smallest Width (mm)</u>	<u>Smallest Length (mm)</u>	<u>Reference</u>
Lawn Point, BC	168	2.0	–	Fladmark (1986)
Kasta, BC	?	2.0	–	Fladmark (1986)
Paul Mason, BC	116 (16)	3.3	9.6	Coupland (1996)
Namu, BC	39 (6)	3.0	11.6	Luebbers (1978)
Shoemaker Bay, BC	91 (28)	3.5	10.0	McMillan and St. Claire (1982)
Whalen Farm, BC	17 (5)	4.0	25.8	Sanger (1968)
Lochnore-Nesikep, BC	677	2.4	–	Sanger (1968)
Campus, Alaska	604 (39)	2.0	7.8	Mobley (1991)
KbTx-2, Yukon	137	1.8	–	Clark (1992)
Bezya, Alberta	105 (11)	2.5	8.1	Le Blanc and Ives (1986)

Table 1 - Dimensions of the Smallest Microblades reported from Selected Sites in BC, Alaska, the Yukon, and Alberta (length is for complete microblades only, number in brackets).

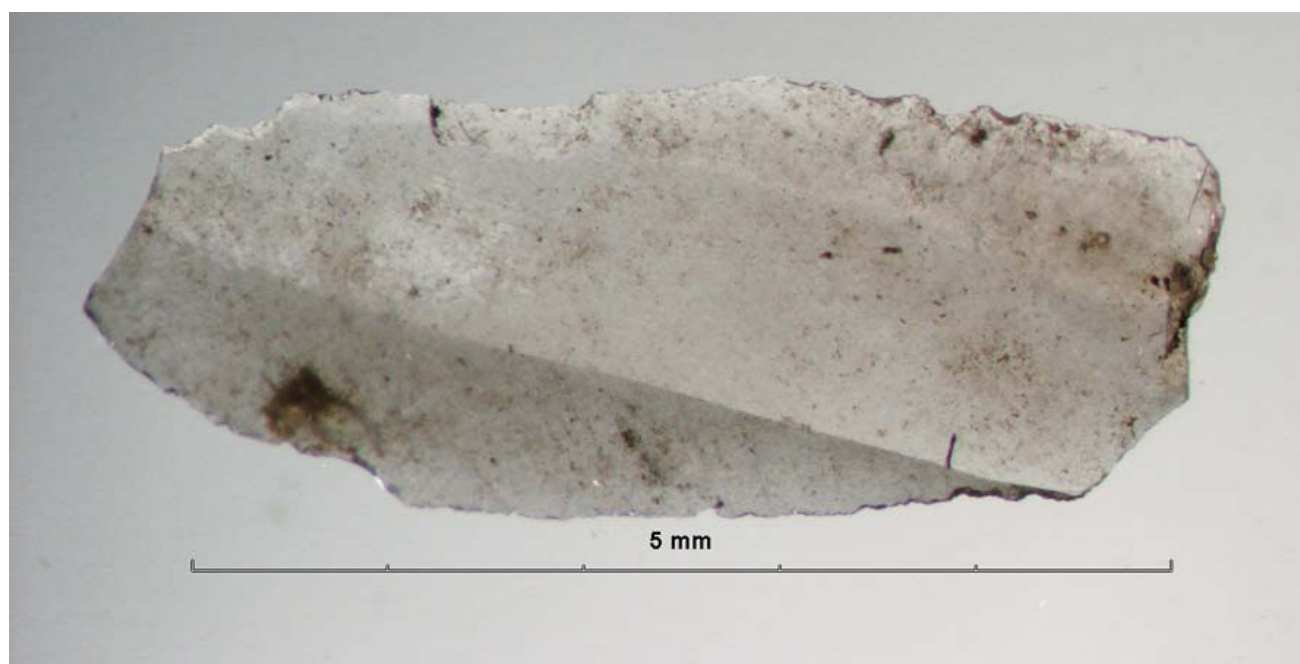


Figure 4: Use Damage on the Upper Edge.

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