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Sarich, Steven, "Deconstructing the Hopewell Interaction Sphere" (2010). *Nebraska Anthropologist*. 59.
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Deconstructing the Hopewell Interaction Sphere

Steven Sarich

Abstract: It is the intention of this paper to ponder the impetus behind the Hopewell Interaction Sphere and relate it back to the Hopewell society as a whole. I will present a number of models offered by other researchers and find a common theme that connects them all, namely ceremonialism. Socially valued items and ceremonialism are closely tied according to Katherine Spielmann and so through close examination I will find out how close they are. Also, more contemporary cross-cultural examples of ritual exchange will be presented to show its prevalence through time.

Introduction

The Hopewell culture has fascinated and baffled researchers for more than a century and mysteries still abound that have yet to be deciphered. The Hopewell existed roughly between 200 B.C. and A.D. 300, and throughout this time the various groups that inhabited the eastern half of the United States participated in large scale trade or exchange including the Havana Hopewell in the Illinois region and the Ohio Hopewell occupying the Ohio River Valley. Countless exotic goods have been uncovered that have been sourced to various places in and around the breadth of Hopewell lands, suggesting an overarching, dynamic social network. This has been labeled the Hopewell Interaction Sphere, and researchers have examined how and why these various goods came to their final destinations. The major question which I shall address is what the driving catalyst behind this extensive trade network might be and its significance to Hopewell society as a whole. In the course of trying to answer these questions, possible explanations and models have been presented. It is the goal of this paper to present a few of these models and perhaps arrive at the best possible answer through the comparison of each model based on the saliency and source analysis of the objects found. First I will offer background on each respective model followed by a synthesized analysis of all the information later in the discussion portion.

The journey begins with a first look at basic trade throughout the region including western sources. Sourcing such things as obsidian and chert to Idaho and Wyoming gives an idea as to the cultures that are exporting these goods, and gives further insight into the degree of

interaction between two groups (Stevenson et al. 2004). Beyond trade other possible explanations have been presented, including Mark F. Seeman's exploration of conflict between groups. Various goods that have been deemed as trophies have been discovered that may explain how other exotic goods came to arrive where they did. Conflict during the time of the Hopewell seems to be a largely unexplored topic, but it is nevertheless a possibility (as well as a possible means of exchange). A third interpretation given by researchers such as Jane E. Buikstra et al. (1998) and Daniel Pugh (2001) is the possibility of sites like the Aker site being ceremonial or ritual aggregation centers that groups from throughout the Hopewell sphere gathered. Exchange, both ritual and personal, may have occurred giving rise to the exotics found at these sites. Finally, a discussion of possible excursions to more western sources will be presented. These conclusions are largely derived from obsidian samples tested by researchers such as James Hatch et al. (1990). Warren R. DeBoer (2004) draws a similar conclusion based on bighorn sheep representations at Mound City and a large cache of obsidian associated with it. DeBoer is attempting to find support for James B. Griffin's hypothesis of a "one-shot" obsidian expedition (DeBoer 2004).

Ideas on Basic Trade

R. Michael Stewart (1994) in *Prehistoric Exchange Systems in North America* outlines two major types of exchange that may exist congruently: broad-based networks and focused exchange. Stewart applies these to the middle Atlantic region, but I believe they can be applied to Hopewell exchange, because over the span of the sphere's existence many focused exchanges would have eventually supported the much broader exchange network that the interaction sphere eventually grew into. Broad-based networks are characterized by "down-the-line" transactions, defined as goods moving in a particular direction between individuals, as well as involve "web-like" relationships built over an extended period and based on the need of a particular item. There is also evidence of a declining pattern indicating that after 30 to 50 miles a particular good drops off in frequency. On the other hand, focused exchange involves transactions involving objects from outside regions, and a few sources within, flowing to a location (Stewart 1994).

In another contribution to *Prehistoric Exchange Systems in North America* by David S. Brose (1994), social complexity of the groups in the Midwest is considered in light of the large scale trading that is happening throughout the region. He notes, "In an area that never supported hierarchical society, even the most complex Middle Woodland groups have the ethnohistoric pattern of focused, episodic,

and frequently long-distance exchange and ritual structure controlled within extended families” (Brose 1994:225). It is possible the Hopewell groups were to a greater degree more egalitarian than subsequent cultural groups, but it must have taken some sort of leadership or structure to coordinate exchange, whether it was through trade or ritual practices. This should be noted when examining the various forms of exchange that have been uncovered by researchers.

Background and Analysis of Respective Models

In terms of trade between Hopewell societies, Carol A. Morrow (1998) offers an interesting assessment of this interaction. Morrow studies blade technology at the Twenhafel site in southwest Illinois, as well as samples of nonlocal chert. She desired to know if these samples corresponded to the other Havana Hopewell artifacts discovered, or if the samples arrived before or after the Hopewell appearance. She states that “data presented here suggest that the use of both prismatic-blade technology and non-local cherts actually preceded the appearance of typical Hopewellian traits and then persisted into post-Hopewell times” (Morrow 1998:281).

The samples found that were determined to be nonlocal were primarily the Crescent chert. It was determined to be nonlocal based on debris analysis that further allowed her to determine whether the blades unearthed at the site were reused or recycled. Crescent chert is highly visible throughout the Twenhafel site and is speculated to be a marker of social interaction with the Hopewell groups to the north. Morrow further notes, “The high visibility factor of Crescent chert would have served to illustrate the ability to negotiate exchange across relatively large distances” (Morrow 1998:297). This idea of goods preceding Hopewell leads to the possibility of assimilation of other group’s ideas as well as techniques and perhaps through more violent means than previously thought.

Further exploring Hopewell conflict, Mark F. Seeman (1988) takes a look at so-called human trophy skulls uncovered in the Ohio Hopewell region, primarily along the Scioto and Illinois Rivers. The skulls themselves present various forms of manipulation including drill holes and cuts, and though it has been suggested that these features may have a more “revered ancestor” function, the positioning of the modifications are such that they are better suited for display. This need to display these skulls is evident in staffs that have been found with attached skulls, positioned in various ways. These artifacts are found in two contexts which are “burial accompaniments and as nonburial deposits or offerings” (Seeman 1988:569). Displaying the skulls is indicative of individuals signaling their prestige, and further suggests that a great deal of social value was placed on these items, an idea

significant to the views presented by Katherine Spielmann (2002) discussed later in this paper.

To further support the idea that these skulls are associated with warfare, age and sex were determined and showed that they were primarily those of young adults and that they were also primarily male. This collection of skulls reflects the general use and modification of bones in Hopewell societies. It has been argued that the skulls were modified to honor a specific ancestor or group of ancestors, however because of the context in which they were found, burial accompaniments and deposits, it is more likely that they were a result of conflict. Seeman (1988) in his conclusion argues that the idea of cooperation amongst Hopewell groups has been “overemphasized” and that these skulls give a greater perspective on Hopewell exchange, interaction and ceremonialism. Though the skulls analyzed by Seeman were from the Ohio Hopewell region, a larger number of them were also discovered south of Lake Michigan near the Mississippi and Illinois rivers, territory largely occupied by the Havana Hopewell that Morrow was studying. With their location and their association with Hopewell conflict, these skulls could show that previous occupants of the land were conquered and their materials and ideas were assimilated into Hopewell groups. War may be a greater catalyst of exchange during this time period than previously imagined, and is a subject worthy of further analysis.

This leads into the theories presented by Jane E. Buikstra et al. (1998) which are tested by Daniel Pugh (2001) in his paper on the Aker site near the Missouri and Platte rivers in Platte County, Missouri on the Missouri floodplain. Buikstra et al. (1998) has concluded that the Aker site was a ceremonial gathering place or “ritual aggregation loci” (Buikstra et al. 1998:94). Pugh decided to compare this theory to one given by Stuart Struever (1968) who found that many occupation sites were located near a waterway which allowed access to several resource zones (Pugh 2001). And as mentioned above, the manipulated skulls were found near the Mississippi, Illinois, and Ohio rivers, giving credence to the idea of waterways being movers of goods or perhaps in the case of these skulls, the spoils of war. Because these sites were occupied even after flooding, the area must have been favorable enough to offset the cost of staying there.

However, Pugh (2001) determines that the evidence in fact supports to a greater degree Buikstra’s et al. (1998) conclusion, though Struever’s (1968) theory still plays some role. A large hub like the Aker site would have brought together many Hopewell groups and “this cohesiveness may well have been maintained through periodic re-aggregation at sites in strategic locations along the water ways...” (Pugh 2001:279). The flooding mentioned earlier may have caused these sites to be abandoned in the spring months and then

aggregations would occur during the summer and fall months for planting and harvesting, though this is just speculation by Pugh (2001). As groups dispersed unique goods may be collected then brought back to the aggregation loci. Exchange of exotic goods during these times would have inevitably occurred, both on a ritualistic level and on a personal level of that would cement the relationships of various people.

On a side note, in Pugh's (2001) paper he mentions that he found "low numbers of Permian artifacts" and that could have been acquired by excursions in the west and encounters with the people populating those areas. This brings up an interesting issue regarding the amount of goods that were procured from the west, as well as the levels of interaction with those peoples.

This topic was given attention by James B. Griffin et al. (1969) and subsequently reexamined. Warren R. DeBoer (2004) defends Griffin's claim that the obsidian at Mound City was acquired in "one-shot", a single trip to Yellowstone, based on the discovery of a bighorn sheep representation found alongside the obsidian. He argues, "The putative bighorn traces at Mound City and their absence in regions between Ohio and the animal's homeland suggest that at least one sojourner on the Scioto had been to bighorn country" (DeBoer 2004:92). However, DeBoer fails to provide any solid chronological data to support the claim that the large cache was deposited in one massive move.

This conclusion is further undermined by obsidian hydration dates ranging from A.D.150 to 309 that were determined by James Hatch et.al (1990) from 31 samples. This implies that the obsidian found throughout the Midwest may have been acquired over the course of many years from various sources (Hatch et al. 1990). This also suggests a greater degree of interaction with western groups than perhaps was previously thought. With the utilization of waterways and the insatiable desire for exotic goods, it seems far more likely that there would have been a great many excursions to the west.

Discussion

When looking at the sources compiled within this paper, an overarching theme seems to emerge; a great deal of importance being placed on ceremonialism and ritual. The human trophy skulls discussed by Seeman (1988) are tied to this theme, though they are viewed within the context of conflict between groups. The skulls are manipulated and decorated in such a way that suggests they were meant to be displayed (especially when they are used as ornaments on staffs), and these skulls are used in some cases as offerings in the context of burial accompaniments. This suggests some greater ceremonial significance beyond their being simple trophies acquired through the course of group conflict.

In the cases of expeditions to the west, the representations of bighorn sheep that were perhaps inspired by the sights and experiences of the adventurers may have become part of the overall ethos of the Hopewell culture, and perhaps given rise to stories that faded into legend. The bighorn sheep was not an animal seen in the east, and its rarity and odd features would perhaps be highly desirable to the Hopewell, who put so much value on exotic goods (DeBoer 2004).

Perhaps the most significant contributor to this ceremonial linchpin theme is the discoveries by Buikstra et al. (1998) and Pugh (2001) at the Aker site. The strategic positioning of the site along the waterways that could be used as a means of transportation is perhaps telling of its significance to the greater Hopewell culture throughout the eastern United States. Furthermore, its use as a ceremonial aggregation point perhaps increased the relevance of ceremonialism within these societies, because there were large movements of people leaving their settlements and livelihood behind to journey to this place.

This may be a significant impetus for the movement of goods across the Hopewell Interaction Sphere and the exchange of goods in itself may have been in some cases ritualized. A potential example of this is noted by Christopher Stevenson, Ihab Abdelrehim, and Steven Novak in their paper stating, "...significant quantities of obsidian rarely occur as a grave offering in Hopewell society. The progressive accumulation of obsidian and its very limited distribution suggest it was highly coveted ritual paraphernalia. Control over these artifacts may have served as a 'pathway to power'..." (Stevenson et al. 2004:566). Furthermore, the idea of the progressive accumulation of obsidian goes against the ideas presented by DeBoer, and serves to encourage Hatch's idea of pulses of interaction with western groups.

Similarly, Katherine Spielmann (2002) has presented a theory regarding socially valued items. These types of items are utilized during gatherings and feasts to demonstrate prestige, political power, and strengthen relationships between groups and individuals. She argues that the goods themselves are only part of the equation, and "it is the sustained demand for these socially valued goods by women and men, by whole populations and not just aspiring leaders, that underwrites the intensity and scale of craft production in small-scale societies" (Spielmann 2002:196). Economics and ceremonialism are tightly woven together. Goods are imbued with a higher meaning or value, followed by a culturally reinforced obligation to respect the person who is in possession of these goods. Leaders, however, were not the only ones to see the benefits accrued from owning certain desirable objects. The exchange of all sorts of goods, services, and even food encouraged relationships, steering people toward mutually beneficial goals. Spielmann finds that communal feasting exemplifies this idea of intensification of subsistence and ritual. She has argued that growing

populations intensified subsistence because of the demands of communal feasting, wherein desirable foods would be presented and socially valued items exchanged (Spielmann 2002). She concludes that ritual defines a society and steers the individual into their niche within that society.

Ritualized exchange, ceremonialism, socially valued items, etc. can be seen in more contemporary societies cross-culturally. Traveling back in time to the days of Bronislaw Malinowski and his research on the Trobriand Islanders, one can see an example of ceremonial exchange embodied in *Kula*, a practice that still continues. In the pages of *Argonauts of the western Pacific* the *Kula* “is a form of exchange, of extensive, inter-tribal character; it is carried on by communities inhabiting a wide ring of islands, which form a closed circuit” (Malinowski 1922:80). Red shell necklaces travel in a clockwise direction and white shell bracelets travel counter clockwise from island to island. This exchange is characterized by set rules and public, often magical, ceremonies. Just as Spielmann describes, these socially valued items exist across the globe and the *Kula* demonstrates how ceremonialism is often a defining aspect of society as well as what a powerful mover of goods it can be. Though a similar *Kula*-like style of transaction cannot be seen with the North American Hopewell groups, it nevertheless demonstrates that ritualized exchange and ceremony exist across cultures, and that this sort of exchange can nurture social cohesion within cultural groups, thus stimulating the emergence of sites like Aker.

Exchange, though, is not limited to material goods only, as is the case of certain marriage transactions. In Alice Schlegel and Rohn Eloul’s (1988) article on marriage transactions they describe various forms of exchange found cross culturally that become the catalysts for marriage. Perhaps most pertinent to this discussion are gift exchange and dowry. In the case of gift exchange, goods are received by both families of roughly equivalent value, but a child is lost on one side. Dowry passes goods to the bride from her family which she subsequently takes to her new household. Schlegel and Eloul (1988) conclude that these transactions are ways for families to rectify their need for labor, deal with the transmission of property and adjust their status. All of this ultimately entails the circulation of goods and people in a ritualized fashion that promotes this theory of ceremonialism as a means of interaction, exchange, and social cohesion.

Conclusion

Interaction and exchange characterized the Hopewell people and this gave rise to a wide array of exotics that often came from far off places, often finally coming to rest with an interred citizen buried under

mounds of earth. The true mystery lies in the journey of these objects. What motivated the Hopewell to exchange goods? Perhaps the answer lies not so much in the desire for the objects themselves, but with the people interacting with one another.

The Hopewell Interaction Sphere is far more organic than the name might suggest. It is a name that belies its true nature as a whirlwind of activity and accomplishment. Materials of the period may be assimilated, perhaps through the occupation of a previously inhabited site or perhaps through the conquest of a group. Conflict, right alongside ritual, has a great deal of influence on the movement of people, and thus all the goods and ideas they carry with them. Furthermore, nature can be utilized as a means of transportation, especially the major waterways that crisscross the North America reaching into countless resource rich zones. The Hopewell travel out to seek these resources, and were pulled back to participate in culture defining rituals wherein socially-valued, specially crafted items were exchanged. Material goods, however, were not the only things being circulated. Life-ways, techniques for subsistence and crafting, or ideas regarding cosmology would have flowed along with these goods, bonding individuals and groups together. On the other hand, these artifacts may tell a darker story of conflict, with manipulated skulls on display as trophies.

Nevertheless, the Hopewell Interaction Sphere spread across the eastern United States, and perhaps reached into the west, where adventurous souls found riches to impress those that were left behind. The Hopewell have left their mark on North America and stand as monuments to human potential.

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