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## Symbolic Embellishment of Ritual Textiles Used in Native American Burial Mounds

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Honouring the dead is a universal principle that has been evidenced since the dawn of time. Although burial of the dead has not been experienced universally, ritual burial practices have been widespread throughout millennia and it is through examination of burial sites that insight is gained into the manner in which tribute was paid to the dead. When humans became self-aware, understanding that there was a transition between life and the known world, to death and the unknown, those cultures that practiced burial rituals ensured that the dead were well equipped for what may lay ahead.

This paper discusses textile and other surface embellishments found on Native American artefacts. Emphasizing the widespread practice of burying the dead with decorated garments and headdresses for power, magic, and ritual purposes, reference is made to the Californian West Coast Chumash peoples to describe symbolic embellishments found in a Chumash burial site, as well as the Adena peoples whose elaborate burial cult rituals became widespread throughout the Midwestern and Eastern Native Americas through extensive trade and cultural assimilation. Evidential artefacts from the Augustine Burial Mound in Miramichi, New Brunswick shows a strong link with the Adena and illustrates how widespread the Adena (and later Hopewell) burial cult became. Photographs of grave goods magnify the textile materials found within the Augustine Mound and these are compared and contrasted with other artefacts from an historical perspective, the ceremonial and ritual context in which these artefacts may have been created as forms of empowerment and symbolism, and the religious, political and ethical constructs within the selected Native American cultural experiences.

The existence of chiefdoms and stratified social systems is evidenced in prehistoric textiles associated with mummies and burial mounds, through examination of fibre characteristics, dyes, surface embellishments, and style. Burial mound textiles throughout the Americas hold decorative elements that include animal hair, metals, shells, bone, and precious and semiprecious stones to adorn clothing and headdresses, and these embellishments were intended to communicate messages of ritual, magic, and power.

Chief Seattle, in his speech of 1854, echoed the beliefs and values of Native Americans throughout millennia when he said “There is no death. Only a change of worlds.” (Grayson) Through examination of burial mounds like the Augustine Mound in the Miramichi, it is observed that in preparation for this change of worlds, a dead person was laid to rest with clothes and tools to serve him or her in the next world. Strings of small and large copper beads, shell beads, a crescent-shaped earring and finely polished stone artefacts were found at the Augustine Mound site (fig.1).

Not all Native American people were buried. Cremation was practiced widely, and it has been suggested that only people of stature were placed in burial mounds. “A majority of the people were cremated after death, placed in small log tombs and covered with earth. More important people were often buried in the flesh and laid to rest with a variety of artefacts such as flints, beads, pipes, and mica and copper ornaments.” Chiefs, shaman, sacred dancers, craftspeople and

other important community members were among those who were laid to rest with articles of their position, trade and stature.



Figure 1. Courtesy National Museum of Man, National Museums of Canada.

Gamble, Walker and Russell (2001) cite Earle's description of Chumash burials suggesting that it was not uncommon for North American peoples to bestow stature in their burial dress. Whatever the disposition of the dead person's personal belongings, it seems likely that the artefacts the Chumash interred with a body served an important role as a symbolic expression by the living community of the social relationships that have been disrupted through death. As Earle (1994), notes the need to use burial objects to symbolically reinforce social boundaries is likely to be much greater in chiefdoms where social status is inherited. It is likely that the wealth interred with a person served more as a symbolic statement of the dead person's status in life than it did as a straightforward inventory of their personal belongings.

The name *Chumash* originally meant something like *bead money makers*. Gamble, Walker and Russell note that beads were by far the most common embellishments found in Chumash burials and were considered to be objects of wealth or prestige in that society (King, 1990). In 1926, archaeologist David Banks Rogers discovered the remains of a Chumash male buried in a fetal position lying on his left side, wearing a large swordfish headdress that was worn by dancers during the most important dance of all, the swordfish dance. The headdress was created from the skull of a swordfish and the eye and cape was embellished with iridescent abalone beads (Rogers, 1929). Abalone beads were offered as a symbolic gift to the swordfish as this creature was considered sacred because it drove whales ashore, providing food for the Chumash people. It is evident that the man discovered by Rogers was a sacred dancer and by burying his headdress with him, his job and status were carried into the next world.

Status, power and magic was also recognized and transmitted through the burial cult of the Adena people, or Mound Builders, whose fine craftsmanship and elaborate burial customs demarcated people of honour and status in their culture. These mysterious people disappeared from the historical record, presumably replaced by the later Hopewell people. It is possible that the Adena may have been assimilated into other cultures, bringing their customs and beliefs with them. The Adena lived in a geographic area that covers modern day Ohio, New York,

Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Indiana, and West Virginia, but their extensive trade routes and cultural influence reached much further, indeed, all the way to the Miramichi in North-eastern New Brunswick, ancestral home to a group of Mi'kmaq.

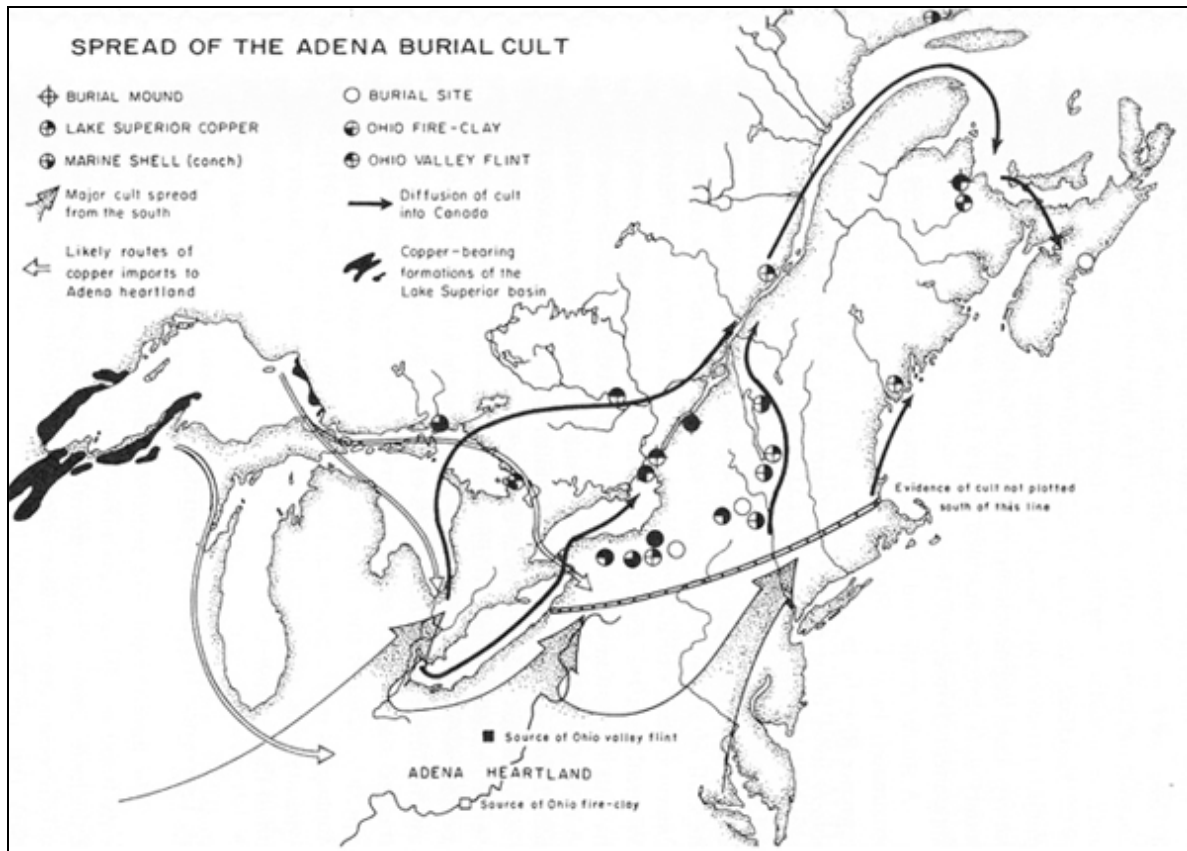


Figure 2. From Plate 14, *Historical Atlas of Canada, Vol. I*, Harris and Matthews 1987, Drawing by Mr. David W. Laverie.

Although it has long been accepted that trade routes existed along the vast waterways of the East Coast (fig. 2), it was not until a burial mound was examined that the Adena's expansive influence was truly understood. "The Augustine site came to light in 1973. Careful excavation revealed an elaborate mound feature. As the layers of earth were removed, burial caches were uncovered. Interred with the human remains were tools and a wide array of weapons and ornaments." (Keenlyside) This elaborate burial mound, with its similarities to the Adena Mounds found in the US, is located on a remote hillside at the junction of the Northwest and Southwest Miramichi River in New Brunswick. The Augustine Mound is located about 30 miles from the Gulf of the Saint Lawrence into which the Miramichi River drains and 'sits on a terrace about 15 meters above the river' (Turnbull 1976). The mound is surrounded by a number of other burial sites in the area and at least 11 burial pits were dug into the prepared surface (Turnbull 1976).

For more than 2,500 hundred years the body of a man lay shrouded in his formal burial costume, surrounded with artefacts of whale bone, flake scrapers, bifaces of quarts, beaver incisor tools, gorgets and copper trinkets. He bore a finely crafted headdress of leather and "pieces of well preserved fabrics" (Turnbull 1976), with fibres woven into a crown, decorated with fur pelt strips and over 1,000 tiny copper beads. The excellent condition of the 2,500 year

old textiles discovered in the mound is due to the integration of the copper beads evident in the design of the headdress (fig. 3). The copper acted as a preservative for the delicately twined, braided, and woven fabrics and has enabled a rare glimpse into the fine craftsmanship of the period.



Figure 3. Headdress. Photo: Stephen A. Taylor, 2003.

It has been argued that the elements of the headdress including the copper beads, and the possible use of buffalo hide suggest the involvement of trade. If so, were the artefacts imported as finished goods bringing spiritual meaning with them, or as raw materials which were worked by a local craftsperson into textiles and ornamentation, and bestowed with sacred meaning? Whether or not the woven fibres were brought in as trade goods, it is unlikely that anyone will be able to fully establish the material used or its harvesting location.

*Perfect specimens of plant tissue from ancient fabrics are rare, since they are almost inevitably damaged by the processes to which they have been submitted. Moreover, the difficulty of identifying one of a number of varieties of a species of a genus is sometimes increased by their extinction, their rarity, or their remoteness (Grant, 1954).*

While it is known that objects of trade up and down the East Coast included grave goods as the Adena burial cult practice was assimilated into other cultures, it may serve to suggest that the wearer either came to the Miramichi with the goods, or traded for the goods for their sacred function. One argument in support of the trade theory can be found in a study conducted by Dr. Virginia Wimberley, of the University of Alabama. Dr. Wimberley examined sophisticated Hopewell textiles dating to around 200 BC to 200 AD.

*These textiles were of a high thread count and two-ply...that may indicate multiple spinners supplying one textile creator with necessary volumes of yarns to create high thread count textiles more rapidly for ceremonial purposes... Usually the twist would be consistent through the fabric if the same person was spinning the yarn for the fabric and there was no variation of fibre content. This may point to multiple spinners providing yarn to produce ceremonial fabrics that were needed in large quantities and quickly (Wimberley, 2002).*





*Figure 4 (left). Photo: Stephen A. Taylor, 2003.*

*Figure 5 (right). Close-up detail of textile fiber. Photo: Stephen A Taylor, 2006.*

In the summer of 2003 Stephen Taylor was granted special permission by the Red Bank Band Counsel to record the Augustine Mound artefacts for educational purposes, and upon analysis the textile fragments were found to contain similar thick and thin characteristics (Fig. 4) as those reported by Dr. Wimberley. By digitally photographing these fragile textile fragments at high resolution Taylor was able to magnify areas for closer examination (figs. 5, 6, and 7). The fragments display finely twisted, multi-ply yarns, and are identified as plant material. There is a number of plaiting and basketry techniques, as well as weave structures including an example of plain weave.



*Figure 6 (left). Copper stained woven textile. Photo: Stephen A. Taylor, 2006.*

*Figure 7 (right). Textile detail of S twist fibers. Photo: Stephen A. Taylor, 2003.*

The headdress and bag contains a variety of materials from plant and animal fibres as well as the copper beads. The beads may have embellished the headdress as a plaited veil enshrouding the eyes to ward off evil spirits from entering the body. Beads were found also within the pouch compartment of the bag indicating possible medicinal or amuletic properties. The embellishments most certainly contributed to the sense of symbolic power ascribed to these objects. Power is attributed to artefacts, and places their use in the realms of the physical and spiritual worlds, for the living as well as the dead. It is through the use of symbolic materials like



Figure 8. Detail, copper beads. Photo: Stephen A. Taylor, 2003.

fur, copper, (Fig. 8) and fibrous grasses, fine craftsmanship, indeed, perhaps the act of making itself that attributes deeper meaning to the work as well as its original function within the burial rites. In describing the use of textiles in particular within these cultural contexts, 'not only is cloth catalytic in consolidating social relation; easily invested with meaning, it (may) also communicate identities and values.' (Schneider) Weiner describes this attainment of power by the handling of goods:

*Certain objects acquire a charisma that lasts beyond one person's ownership. Through time, these objects become monuments of past fame, or they may become curiosities; they may become tarnished, or their charisma may become heightened or contested (Weiner, 1994).*

Among the artefacts found in the Augustine Mound the headdress has been bestowed with a spiritual power, even though it lends no clarity in determining who the wearer may have been, and the original meaning is no longer known. The Augustine Mound is a sacred site and has been since it was saved from demolition road crews in the 1970's by Chief Joseph Augustine.

The remains of the man who was interred with the elaborate headdress and tools may have been a Mi'kmaq ancestor, a traveller from a distant land, or an Adena person who chose to make his home in this beautiful region. We sense the authority of this man, the dignity of his burial and the symbolic power of the entombed artefacts. We know, largely because of ritual practices within the archaeological record, that the symbolic embellishments found within this burial mound identify an important community figure. Regardless, as his loved ones honoured him with this elaborate burial over 2500 years ago, the trees may have whispered a prayer like this Native American prayer (author unknown):

*Do not stand at my grave and weep;  
I am not there. I do not sleep.  
I am a thousand winds that blow;  
I am the diamond glints on snow.  
I am the sunlight on ripened grain;  
I am the gentle autumn's rain.  
When you awaken in the morning's hush,  
I am the swift uplifting rush  
Of quiet birds in circled flight.  
I am the soft star that shines at night.  
Do not stand at my grave and cry.  
I am not there; I did not die.*

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