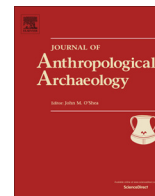




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Identifying ritual structures in the archaeological record: A Maritime Woodland period sweathouse from Nova Scotia, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Hunter–gatherer religious practices often require specialized construction of ritual structures in comparison to domestic dwellings. Specialized placement of the structure itself may be significant to religious practice, and variability in ritual placement may provide important information about social context. However, ritual structures may be difficult to detect archaeologically, as archaeologists tend to focus on developing models for identifying hunter–gatherer domestic and economic features, such as houses, storage pits, and processing features. We argue that archaeological studies of hunter–gatherers should develop more aggressive testing programs that employ ethnographic data to locate, identify, and interpret ritual features. To develop this approach, we consider sweathouses among the Wabanaki of the Maritime Peninsula in northeastern North America. Although sweathouses are ubiquitous in the ethnographic record for the Wabanaki, a prehistoric one had never been located with confidence on the Maritime Peninsula, and they are rare in the entire archaeological record of the Algonquian Northeast. Here we describe a sweathouse feature from Nova Scotia's South Shore, using it to explore methods for locating, identifying, and interpreting hunter–gatherer ritual architecture.

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Introduction

Ritual activities often require a physical separation from the activities of daily life, and often require the construction of special purpose structures and features. Ritual structures may be associated with a variety of goals and prescriptions, and should be considered within the context of prehistoric religious practice. However, ritual structures may often be overlooked in traditional archaeological surveys and excavations, which are often designed to maximize the discovery of artifact-rich domestic deposits. In this paper, we present an approach for the archaeological study of ritual structures by presenting a case study of the identification and excavation of a sweathouse feature on the Maritime Peninsula. We argue that archaeological testing outside of traditional habitation site models, using specific excavation strategies, is necessary to more fully approach prehistoric religion, and begin to account for ritual structures in religious practice.

A study of sweathouses,¹ a common type of ritual structure among traditional societies, offers an opportunity to develop this approach. Throughout North America—and much of the world—sweathouses serve a variety of ritual functions and therapeutic and hygienic purposes (Lopatin, 1960). Despite their prevalence, they are understudied archaeologically (Brown, 1997, p. 475), primarily because they are rarely identified in the archaeological record. One of the characteristics of sweathouse ceremonies is that they serve a multitude of distinct but often overlapping functions, both ritual and therapeutic (e.g., Bruchac, 1993). Cross-culturally, sweathouse rituals appear to be closely related to shamanism (MacDonald, 1988; Paper, 1990). Sweathouses are often task specific structures constructed in prescribed locations, but, with slight modifications, preexisting structures may also be turned into sweathouses (e.g., Mehta, 2007, p. 24). How can we modify our analytical strategies to account for ritual structures, especially in comparison to expedient transformation of domestic dwellings into sweathouse

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¹ In this paper we use the term “sweathouse” to describe a variety of structures in which people use sources of heat to induce sweating. Because our case in this paper is from the Maritime Peninsula, we use this term following Hoffman (1955:306) who uses that, or the term “sweatbath,” as a translation of the Mi'kmaq word “unkunumakun ḡoon.” This translation appears to follow Hager (1896:258).

structures? In this paper we outline strategies for identifying and interpreting these structures in the archaeological record, and outline an approach to this question. We explore these issues through a case study of a secluded Middle Maritime Woodland period sweat-house on Nova Scotia's South Shore.

Archaeological correlates of hunter–gatherer ritual structures

Specialized ritual structures are common components of religious practice among ethnographically described hunter–gatherers and have been discovered in many archaeological contexts around the world (e.g., Galloway, 1997; Gulløv and Appelt, 2001; Scheiber and Finley, 2010, p. 124; see Whitelaw, 1997). The structures can mimic domestic features, but can differ radically in myriad ways, including form and spatial placement (see Bonnichsen, 1973). The activities carried out within such structures also differ from domestic activities in important ways, often leaving unique assemblages and archaeological signatures.

As discussed by Hayden and Adams (2004, p. 86), the placement of ritual structures is often carefully prescribed. In some societies ritual structures are placed within domestic sites in central, visible locations, sometimes in geometric alignments with geographic features (e.g., Pauketat, 2012, ch. 6; Sassaman and Heckenberger, 2004). Moreover, in some societies, ritual structures were placed in unique locations on the landscape, removed from domestic centers (e.g., Buckley, 1988; Friesen, 2007; Pauketat et al. 2012; see Kooyman, 2006, pp. 427–428; see VanPool, 2009). Indeed, Renfrew (1994, p. 51) suggests that special placement of structures in relation to the landscape or built environment is one of the archaeological indicators of ritual generally. Regardless, in some instances, ritual structures are re-tasked or slightly modified domestic structures, and therefore sit within the same footprint and in the same contexts as other structures.

Architectural form may vary between ritual and domestic architecture, sometimes in subtle ways. In some cases, architectural form may be diagnostic of non-domestic occupations, while in other cases, ethnographic evidence suggests that ritual activities were conducted in structures that were similar in form to domestic ones, or even in re-tasked domestic structures. For instance, shaman's houses or menstrual seclusion houses might be structurally similar to ordinary houses, and may only be distinguishable based on location or contents (see Galloway, 1997; Ruggles, 2007).

One archaeological example of a formal distinction is the Mid-Atlantic phenomenon of “keyhole structures” in which the unique size and shape of such structures has been employed to interpret them variously as sweat-houses, storage pits, and winter dwellings (MacDonald, 2008). Similarly, the presence or absence of a particular sub-feature may serve to define the feature. For instance, Pauketat (2012, p. 123) notes that the distinction between Southeast medicine lodges and sweat-houses is determined by the presence or absence of a central hearth. Similarly, the artifacts within a structure (or absent from a structure) may suggest ritual use.

This brief review suggests that ritual features can differ in placement and form, from domestic features; therefore this difference in archaeological visibility requires specialized survey methods and excavation strategies to recognize them archaeologically, and to maximize the recovery of information from such structures (e.g. Hayden and Adams, 2004). In the following section we review the literature for ritual structures in the Northeast and consider their likely archaeological correlates. We then proceed to a case study which documents our identification and excavation of a ritual sweat-house structure in Nova Scotia.

Introduction to sweat-house features

The use of sweat-house-like structures has been documented among many hunter–gatherer societies around the globe (Lopatin, 1960). Sweat-house structures were particularly prevalent among North American Aboriginal groups (Driver and Massey, 1957, p. 314; Fisher, 1951; Lopatin, 1960). As Lafferty (2007, p. 153) succinctly describes, “the distribution of sweat lodges or sweat houses has been documented as being utilized by cultures ranging from the Eskimo of Alaska to the Maya of Mesoamerica.” Lopatin's (1960) summary of both the North American and European literature emphasizes similarities in sweating practices, notably that they can variously involve ritual, hygiene, and therapeutic goals, often in combination. However, one commonality among many groups is that sweat-house ceremonies are closely linked to shamanistic practices (MacDonald, 1988; Paper, 1990), and that their use often contributes to the achievement of shamanistic trances or altered states (Ludwig, 1969). Implicitly, most intensive archaeological studies of sweat-houses (e.g., Egghert, 2003; MacDonald, 1988; Mehta, 2007; Morin, 2010) stress local variability in sweat-house practices, and rely on ethnographic analogy for interpreting them. This follows a general trend in studies of prehistoric religion in North America (Brown, 1997).

Some researchers (Driver, 1961; Lopatin, 1960) have proposed a fundamental distinction between dry heat and water vapor sweats, although ethnographic evidence suggests that many groups practiced both types, and some practiced indirect methods of heating that did not involve integrated hearths or water sources (Mehta, 2007). In short, the picture that emerges is one of myriad types of structures employed for a wide variety of purposes. These would in turn be represented by a wide array of archaeological features, ranging from expediently employed domestic structures to special purpose structures of various sizes and shapes. Similarly, structures might contain hearths, or not, and might include evidence for heating with steam or dry methods.

Though ethnographically ubiquitous, North American sweat-houses remain relatively underexplored archaeologically on most of the continent (Brown, 1997, p. 475). As Mehta (2007, p. 90) points out, specialized sweat-house features located in habitation sites, or multi-purpose structures (e.g., sweats in houses) are the most commonly detected archaeologically. However, as suggested by the ethnographic record, many ritual structures may have been located away from domestic areas, and in fact there are a variety of ethnographic cases where isolation of ritual structures might be preferable (see Mehta, 2007). Although some attention has been paid to sweat-house features on the periphery of habitation sites (Mehta, 2007), little consideration has been given to sweat-house features located away from habitation sites.

For instance, Iroquoian sweat-houses are among the best described ritual features in the Northeast's archaeological record (e.g., Bursey, 1989; MacDonald, 1988; MacDonald and Williamson, 2001; Steckley, 1989). This is likely due in part to the archaeological visibility of semi-permanent horticultural villages and an apparent prevalence of sweat-house features within habitation sites. However, there has also been a trend in Iroquoian archaeology to expose large horizontal areas, precisely the kind of excavations that may yield clearer pictures of architectural features (e.g., Finlayson, 1985; see Bamann et al., 1992; Hrynich et al., 2012).

In areas where large horizontal excavations are not common, the literature suggests frequent incongruities between the ubiquity of ethnographically known sweat-houses on the one hand, and a relative absence of them archaeologically. Some of this may be attributable to a tendency among many societies to use ephemeral or multi-purpose structures for sweats. However, it is

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