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The magic of improbable appendages: Deer antler objects in the archaeological record of the American South

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ABSTRACT

In the American South white-tailed deer remains are recovered in abundance from late prehistoric archaeological sites and have been used to identify numerous social and cultural phenomena including status based differences in food consumption, feasting, inter-site transport of foodstuffs, and regional variation in subsistence strategies. Meat, marrow, bone, antler, and hide were important physical contributions of deer to the daily lives of southeastern native peoples. However, deer also play(ed) an important role in self-identity and social structure (Deer clan). In this paper we bring together multiple lines of evidence to offer a nuanced interpretation of white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) antler objects recovered from Native American archaeological sites in the pre-European Southeastern United States in the traditional homelands of the Cherokees of the American South. We review the importance of the culturally appropriate interactions with deer as taught in deer hunting lore and taboos recorded in ethnographic and ethnohistoric sources. With this understanding, we then identify the material manifestations of deer hunting amulets from several archaeological sites in our study area. Ultimately our study of antler objects shows that combining indigenous knowledge with material studies gives us new insights into how humans perceived and interacted with the animals that lived in their shared environment, and fosters new interpretations of material culture.

1. Introduction

At least since Hallowell's (1960) ethnographic work among the Ojibwe, anthropologists have noted that some indigenous hunting groups perceive animals as other-than-human persons. The construction of these non-human animals as people who have agency, morals, and responsibilities forces anthropologists to look beyond the human-animal boundary to understand that culture and nature are not mutually exclusive domains of knowing the world (Choyke, 2010; Overton and Hamilakis, 2013; Russell, 2012). In these relationships, interactions between humans and animals were mediated by socially proscribed actions, thoughts, and material culture. These interactions, when conducted properly according to culturally-specific beliefs, allowed for the agency of the animals to be validated, and in turn resulted in hunting success for the human. While many of the actions and thoughts of hunters do not survive in the archaeological record, the material culture associated with hunting success often does preserve, especially in the form of hunting amulets (Hill, 2011). Data generated from archaeological excavations in conjunction with ethnographic and linguistic records can be analyzed for patterns in the artifact data to uncover the

relationships between humans and animals that move us beyond subsistence-only based interpretations. Past human-animal relationships are most effectively studied through an ethnozoarchaeological lens. We bring together multiple lines of evidence to offer a nuanced interpretation of white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) antler objects recovered from Mississippian and Early Historic period sites that are situated in the traditional homelands of the Cherokee Indians of the American South. Ultimately our study of antler objects shows that combining indigenous knowledge with material studies gives us new insights into how humans perceived and interacted with the animals that lived in their shared environment, and fosters new interpretations of material culture.

Numerous anthropological studies have focused on hunting groups, both in the past and present. These studies explore the themes of food sharing and exchange, the symbolic nature of human-animal relations, sexual division of labor, social and political structure, and the use of hunting magic, among others (Jones O'Day et al., 2004). Typically the study of human-animal relations is based on either a functionalist ecological approach - where animals exist and are classified in terms of their caloric input to human diets, or on a symbolic approach - where

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animals are seen as a mirror, reflecting the structure of human societies (Ewonus, 2011; Overton and Hamilakis, 2013; Shanklin, 1985). Moving beyond this dichotomous approach, we see that in many societies, the relationships between animals and humans intersect at numerous points, so that they are intertwined with one another. Nadasdy (2007) argues that the ways in which humans interact with animals is not only symbolic or based on the caloric needs of the former, but rather is a set of real social relations full of obligations and reciprocity. His understanding of these relationships is based on the premise that animals are people in as much as humans are people, as evidenced by his work with the Klwane First Nation in the southwest Yukon (Nadasdy, 2007).

Many of the existing studies focused on hunting groups who did not practice agriculture as a subsistence strategy, which is unlike the Mississippian period peoples included in our study. We contend that these studies are still relevant as the indigenous peoples of the Mississippian through early Historic periods did not have domesticated animals (other than dogs, and possibly turkeys - see Peres and Ledford, 2016), and thus hunting native animals was a critical part of their subsistence regime. Numerous native taxa are represented in zooarchaeological species lists, but none are as ubiquitous as the white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) (Bogan, 1976, 1980, 1983, 1987; Bogan et al., 1986; Dickens, 1976; Evans and Smith, 1988; Holm, 1993, 1994; Rundquist, 1979). It is accepted that most of the deer remains in archaeological sites are byproducts of food processing and consumption. Our intent in this paper is to show that certain artifact attributes and recovery contexts should signal to archaeologists that some animal remains, and in this case some deer antler pieces, were deposited at sites for other non-food purposes. Considering the vital role deer played in indigenous life, we argue that their relationship to humans was as a counterpart, or other-than-human person. The attribution of personhood to animals affords them the ability to think, speak, and act with intention, in other words 'personhood' equals 'agency'. Other-than-human persons were not objects to be manipulated or acted on, but rather persons that demanded and deserved respectful interaction. As detailed below, prey animals were understood to give themselves to Cherokee hunters. Hunters understood this and acted accordingly through proper (ritual) verbal and physical treatment of the prey's body and spirit after death - how it was transported and butchered, the manner in which remains were disposed of, offerings, and the words spoken to and about the animal. If hunters did not maintain their side of the relationship they would be punished spiritually (personal misfortune until the hunter atoned for the wrongdoing) or physically (the hunter and/or his family suffer from sickness, bad luck, or death). In this way humans and animals were dependent on one another as part of a complex network of physical, social, and spiritual relationships (the human-animal web), often of considerable time depth. Parts of these relationships are expressed through material objects - the purview of the archaeologist. Other parts exist only in names or stories - recorded in ethnohistoric documents and by cultural and linguistic anthropologists.

In this paper we take an ethnozoarchaeological approach to study the sustained physical, social, and spiritual relationships between ancient and modern Cherokee and the most common prey animal, white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*). We combine multiple lines of evidence, including material objects, archaeological contexts, Western science biological literature, ethnohistoric documents, ethnographies of the Cherokee, and linguistic data, to more fully understand the relationship between humans and deer. We limit the archaeological focus of our study to the late prehistoric Mississippian period (1000 CE-European contact) and to sites located in the traditional Cherokee homeland of the American South, comprised of the contiguous regions of Appalachian Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee and Alabama (after Mooney, 1902) (Fig. 1). The ethnohistoric, ethnographic, and linguistic records of the Southeast indicate that elements of the human-animal web have persisted into the present through oral histories, sacred stories, and native science

systems (Altman, 2006; Hudson, 1978; Pluckhahn and Ethridge, 2006). These aspects of traditional culture incorporate the same sets of native animals across time and in similar ecological settings. However, at present most research on the late pre-European contact Mississippian period depends heavily on material culture interpretations of native people's intent, relationships, and experience by modern archaeologists. Our goal is to show that animal remains recovered from Native American archaeological sites in the pre-European Southeastern United States, while in many cases are evidence of past foods eaten, offer insight into the social world inhabited by indigenous humans and animals in the past, and that parts of this worldview persist into the present. We illustrate the importance of hunting amulets to Cherokee hunters across time as evidenced by accounts of hunting formulas and deer hunting lore and taboos in the ethnographic and ethnohistoric records. With this understanding, we then identify the material manifestations of deer hunting amulets from several archaeological sites in our study area.

2. *Anikituwah* 'People of Kituwah' and *Anikahwi* 'Deer People'

James Mooney (1902) and others have documented the traditional Cherokee region as consisting of the contiguous modern states of Appalachian Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee and Alabama. Although the Cherokees have been known to outsiders by various names, and even though archaeology distinguishes pre-contact peoples from contemporary peoples, we see this region as the past and present home of the *Anikituwah*, the people of Kituwah. Kituwah is the Mother Town of the Cherokees and a site of deep spiritual significance (see Fig. 1). Its location in North Carolina puts it at the epicenter of the emergence of Cherokee culture and we trace the beliefs and practices of the Kituwah people as a connecting thread over time. This work is unique among other Mississippian archaeological projects in that the Cherokee people are culturally and linguistically distinct from their neighbors and we look to demonstrate that distinctness by documenting the cultural contexts for the faunal materials. Archaeological projects that document the many Mississippian period communities that populated the Cherokee homeland provide a basis for building connections among the histories and ethnographies that have been written about Cherokee communities.

Cherokee social structure is clan based with membership determined by matriline, meaning a person's clanship is the same as her/his mother's. Today Cherokee society is comprised of seven clans: Long Hair, Blue, Wolf, Wild Potato, Deer, Bird, and Paint. Members representing each of the seven clans resided in every Cherokee town. Cherokee clans are matrilineally exogamous but ideally a person marries out of their father's clan as well. The observance of clan rules is becoming less and less common, however, people still recognize the significance of clans. Perhaps the most significant clan rule still observed by some is the exogamy rule, since its violation was traditionally thought to be tantamount to incest.

In addition to the clan rules, animals play a central role in the social and cosmological life of Cherokee people, even in the contemporary era. Cherokee people are known to have had a wealth of beliefs about animals and their relationships to humans as documented by Payne and Butrick (2010), Mooney (1902), Mooney and Olbrechts (1932), Speck and Broom (1951), Fradkin (1990), Altman (2006), and Altman and Belt (2008, 2012). In each of these ethnographic sources, we witness the web of life in which Cherokee people see themselves enmeshed. Animals, like deer, exist in both this world and in a preceding spirit world in which:

they had chiefs, councils, and townhouses, mingled with humankind upon terms of perfect equality and spoke the same language. In some unexplained manner they finally left this lower world and ascended to Galun'lati, the world above, where they still exist. The removal was not simultaneous, but each animal chose his own time. The animals that we know, small in size and poor in intellect, came

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