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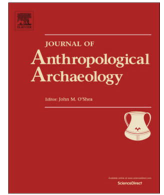

Cultural patterns within and outside of the post-contact Great Plains as revealed by parfleche characteristics: Implications for areal arrangements in artifactual data

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ABSTRACT

For some time it has been recognized that areal arrangements in ethnographic data might help archaeologists understand equivalent arrangements in artifactual data, especially in anthropologically relevant terms. Equally, ethnographic data have shown that material-culture patterns do not necessarily conveniently map discrete "peoples" or ethnolinguistic communities. However, the question still persists as to whether areal patterns in artifactual data represent anthropologically important information, and if so, how. Ethnographically, studies of these issues have tended to adopt two approaches. Some studies have examined areal patterning across broad geographic areas in terms of presences and absences of particular artifacts or suites of artifacts. Alternatively, studies have looked at variation in the stylistic traits of particular artifacts, but over a relatively more discrete geographic range, typically a sub-region defined on the basis of other cultural and/or ecological distinctions. Here, in this study a different approach is taken, whereupon variations in the inter-tribe attributes of a singular artifact class (post-contact-era "parfleches" or decorated rawhide bags) are examined over a wide geographic area (western North America). Multivariate statistical analyses demonstrate that among-tribe variation in parfleche characteristics most strongly conforms to three geographic stylistic regions and, moreover, that these three stylistic regions disregard linguistic affiliations and "culture area" designations. These trait-level patterns conform to documented trade patterns across the study area, explaining why these areal patterns disregard distinctions made on other criteria. Ultimately, the study demonstrates ethnographically the value of contrasting areal patterns based on discrete artifactual distinctions (i.e., presence and absence of particular artifacts) versus broader-scale, but trait-level, patterns in artifacts common across these different areas.

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1. Introduction

There is a long history of trying to discern what spatial arrangements in archaeological data might mean for the identification of past "peoples," "cultures," "tribes," "ethic" or linguistic social groupings, as well as historical and, ultimately, genetic affinities among human communities (e.g., Bellwood and Renfrew, 2002; Childe, 1929, 1951; Clarke, 1968; Hodder, 1978a; Jones, 1997; Roberts and Vander Linden, 2011; Shennan, 1989a). Although archaeology as a field realized some time ago that there is no easy route from areal arrangements or patterning in artifactual data to the recognition of ethnolinguistic groupings (e.g., Hodder, 1978a, 1978b, 1982; Jones, 1997; Shennan, 1989b), the question still persists as to what spatial patterning might mean with respect to broader questions of anthropological interest. Indeed, the issue of connections between historical factors, language, and areal artifactual patterns has recently come to the fore again as workers increasingly consider archaeological data in explicitly cultural-evolutionary frameworks of analysis, whereupon artifactual patterning is considered the result of differential persistence and transmission of information within social networks (see e.g., Buchanan et al., 2017; Buchanan and Hamilton, 2009; Cochrane, 2008; Cochrane et al., 2013; Eerkens and Lipo, 2007; Jordan, 2015; Jordan and Shennan, 2003, 2009; Lycett, 2015a; Shennan et al., 2015).

It has long been recognized that ethnographic data from living or recently living people might help archaeologists make sense of the relationships between issues such as language, ethnicity, or other dimensions of human variability and material-culture patterning, such that a more informed understanding of these issues

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can then be used to better approach archaeological data (e.g., Clarke, 1968; Hodder, 1978a, 1978b, 1982; Jordan, 2015; Jordan and Shennan, 2003; MacEachern, 1998; Wiessner, 1984). The advantage in such studies is that, to some extent, linguistic variation and issues of social identity and community membership or "ethnicity" are known and can be used as a basis for examining how material culture forms areal patterns in the light of these knowns. Several quantitative studies of this type have formally examined spatial (cross-community) variation in assemblages of different artifacts among ethnographically documented communities (e.g., Clarke, 1968; Driver and Kroeber, 1932; Klimek, 1935; Milke, 1949; Jorgensen, 1980; Lycett and von Cramon-Taubadel, 2016; Moore and Romney, 1994; Roberts et al., 1995; Welsch et al., 1992). Indeed, differences in the spatial recurrence of specific cultural traits (including artifacts), frequently in combination with subsistence patterns and ecological considerations, have often been used to group different ethnolinguistic communities into broad, geographically defined, "culture areas" (Wissler, 1917; Driver and Coffin, 1975; Driver et al., 1972; Kroeber, 1939; Naroll, 1950; Murdock, 1951; Sturtevant, 1978–2001). Alternatively, attribute (trait) variations of particular artifact classes (e.g., basketry designs or house styles) within a single localized geographic region (or "culture area") have been examined for spatial patterning across different ethnolinguistic communities (e.g., Hodder, 1982; Jordan, 2015; Jordan and Shennan, 2003, 2009; Lycett, 2014, 2015b; Rogers et al., 2009; Wiessner, 1984). In other words, ethnographically, people have either looked at spatial variation in data composed of multiple artifact classes within or across broad "culture areas," or have looked at trait variations in single classes of artifacts within such geographically localized regions.

Here, in this study a different approach is taken, whereupon variations in the attributes of a singular artifact class ("parfleches" or decorated rawhide bags) are examined over a wide geographic area (western North America). Importantly, this singular artifact class is distributed across a broad geographic range cross-cutting different ecologies and communities of diverse linguistic (and ultimately genetic) affinities. Indeed, this singular artifact class was common across various documented ethnolinguistic communities, which on the basis of other artifactual, technological, subsistence, cultural, and ecological distinctions have frequently been regarded as belonging to different geographic "culture areas."

1.1. Parfleches and the post-contact Great Plains

The Great Plains of North America stretch from Southern Alberta and Saskatchewan in the north, to the Rio Grande of Texas in the south (Gilbert, 1980). Extending westward from approximately the 98th meridian, this sprawling expanse of grassland supports tallgrass-prairie species in the east, while beyond the 100th meridian where precipitation averages less than 50 cm per annum, the semiarid landscape gives rise to shorter-statured and more drought-resistant species (Vinton, 2004; Wedel and Frison, 2001). The foothills of the Rocky Mountains delimit the western extent of the region (Gilbert, 1980). Prior to the end of the 19th century, the grasslands of the Great Plains were famously home to large herds of migratory buffalo (*Bison bison*), whereupon their numbers were reduced to a point of near extinction (Hornaday, 1889; Isenberg, 2000).

Following the (re)introduction of horses to the region in the early 1700s (Roe, 1955; Mitchell, 2015), a series of historically documented changes led to the formation of what has internationally become known as the "Great Plains culture" (Carlson, 1998; DeMallie, 2001a; Kroeber, 1939; Lowie, 1954; Taylor, 1994; Wishart, 2016). Indeed, these communities of equestrian, buffalo-hunting people have often been held up as the stereotypical image of what it is to be Native American (Ewers, 1965; Bird, 1996) and yet ironically, such a way of life was in many respects atypical and temporally constrained, owing its existence to a unique set of historical circumstances. The factors leading to this situation included new opportunities for more extensive pursuit of buffalo provided by the introduction of the horse, as well as the introduction of firearms, which became increasingly desired for use in inter-tribal conflicts (Secoy, 1953; McGinnis, 1990). Accordingly, new groups of people were being drawn onto the plains at this time, joining and displacing others that had been in the region during preceding centuries (Hämäläinen, 2003; Haines, 1976). Such migratory episodes were, however, also precipitated by European migrants in the east, which increased agitations between indigenous peoples, fueling a westward migration (Holder, 1970; Hämäläinen, 2003). Hence, the backdrop to the development of the "Great Plains culture" was a combination of both internal and external factors.

By the time explorers, artists, and missionaries of European origin began to more extensively document the peoples of the Great Plains during the 19th century (e.g., Catlin, 1844; Kurz, 1937; Maximilian, 1843; Ronda, 1984), the multiple tribes distributed across this region were exhibiting visible material (and other) traits that united them as a particularized cultural phenomenon. This, in combination with its distinct ecological features, led to the region being defined as one of the great "culture areas" of North America (DeMallie, 2001a; Kroeber, 1939; Scaglion, 1980). Incredibly, such seeming cultural "homogeneity" was, however, the product of groups of people that spoke over 15 distinct languages or dialects from at least six different language families (Hollow and Parks, 1980; Campbell, 1997). As one linguist has put it, "the general picture that is suggested is of diverse peoples retaining their distinct ancestral languages while adopting new and to a large extent shared lifeways after coming into contact with each other" (Goddard, 2001: 61). Indeed, the dynamics of the period have long been recognized as inducing a cultural "melting pot" (Underhill, 1953: 144) leading to the widespread sharing of cultural traits among ethnolinguistically diverse tribes. Inevitably, the general sharing of many cultural features masks diversity and difference between the various ethnolinguistic groups. This is perhaps most readily appreciated in distinctions between the fully nomadic equestrian tribes and several tribes in the eastern portions of the Great Plains, who only partly embraced the new equestrian lifestyle, and continued to occupy semi-permanent villages of earth-lodge houses and based their economy around horticulture (Holder, 1970). These and other factors (see e.g., Lycett, 2014, 2015b) meant that while tribes on the post-contact Great Plains shared many general features in common, there were also marked "regional and tribal variations" (DeMallie, 2001a: 9).

At least in part, some of these cross-community ethnolinguistic distinctions are visible in items of material culture such as clothing, ceremonial and storage items, which were decorated with polychrome geometric designs by means of quillwork, beadwork, and painting (Greene, 2001; Lowie, 1954; Penney, 1992; Robinson, 2011). One prominent example of this are parfleches (Fig. 1), which are folding rawhide cases that were decorated with painted geometric designs and long-noted for exhibiting recognizable intertribal distinctions (e.g., Spier, 1925). These carrying cases were used to transport and store food, goods, and household items (Douglas, 1936: 108; Torrence, 1994). Parfleche manufacture and decoration were tasks undertaken by skilled craftswomen, and along with beadwork and quillwork, were part of an array of visually decorative and manufacturing skills that were learned from other women (Greene, 2001; Morrow, 1975: 40; Schneider, 1983). The majority of parfleches are 56–74 cm in length and 30–41 cm in width (Torrence, 1994:63). They were typically manufactured and decorated in matching pairs, due to them being tied to either side of a horse or mule during transportation (Ewers,

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