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Ritual economy and craft production in small-scale societies: Evidence from microwear analysis of Hopewell bladelets

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ABSTRACT

Ritual economy provides a powerful framework for examining aspects of the organization of craft production, especially in the absence of a strong, centralized political economy. This paper outlines the basic tenants of ritual economy and describes how this framework can expand the understanding of the organization of production in small scale societies. I apply these concepts in a case study based largely on microwear analysis of Hopewell bladelets from the Fort Ancient earthworks in southwest Ohio. Microwear analysis from many different localities excavated within and near the earthworks demonstrates that craft production was an important activity conducted using bladelets. Each of the localities in which crafts were produced concentrated on media distinct from the others. These findings have important implications for our understanding of Hopewell economy and social structure as well as craft production in general.

1. Introduction

This paper uses a ritual economy framework to study the organization of production in small-scale societies. Specifically I examine the structure of craft production at Fort Ancient, a Hopewellian earthwork, by studying the function of stone bladelets. Ritual economy is the analysis of the economic aspects of ritual and the ritual aspects of economic transactions as they relate to the materialization of ideology (Wells, 2006:284). Here materialization refers to the open process of reproducing and transforming cultural symbols into material objects (Wells and Davis-Salazar, 2007:3). Many scholars view political and ritual economy as complimentary but in small-scale societies ritual institutions can function to direct economic practices in the absence of hierarchical social divisions. Ritual economy provides a means to study the intensification of production in the absence of a centralized political force (i.e. Spielmann, 2002).

Small scale societies are those that contain several hundred to several thousand people united by diffuse political structures organized around kin groups (Spielmann, 2002:195). Recently, Spielmann (1998, 2008; see also Wright and Loveland, 2015) has highlighted the role of ritual contexts as important factors in the organization of craft production in many small-scale societies. Importantly, it is the ritual settings, rather than markets or highly ranked individuals, which attract many craft producers.

The Fort Ancient Earthworks were built and utilized during the Middle Woodland period (100 BC–AD 400) by a small-scale society associated with the Hopewell horizon (Fig. 1). The term Hopewell describes horticultural populations in what is now the eastern United States who lived 100 BC–AD 400, built earthworks, and participated in long-distance exchange networks. Hopewell populations lived in small, dispersed settlements, periodically traveling to earthworks for social/ceremonial gatherings (Dancey and Pacheco, 1997; Pacheco and Dancey, 2006; Ruby et al., 2005). Through their extensive trade networks, Hopewell people in Ohio were able to obtain copper from the Lake Superior region, marine shells from the gulf coast, and mica from the Appalachian Mountains among other things. These raw materials were then crafted into ritual or ceremonial artifacts.

The seminal study of Ohio Hopewell craft production was conducted by Baby and Langlois (1979) at the Seip earthworks. Excavations inside the earthworks in the 1970s revealed the outlines of seven complete and three partial rectangular structures that were associated with something other than mortuary activity (Baby and Langlois, 1979:16). The presence of exotic materials such as mica and sea shells, specialized lithic assemblages, and lack of habitation debris led Baby and Langlois (1979:18) to characterize the structures as specialized craft workshops. Several decades later, N'omi Greber (2009a, 2009b) led a team of investigators bent on thoroughly examining the stratigraphy and finding correlations between artifacts from the supposed Seip craft workshops. The complex stratigraphy described by Baby and Langlois (1979:17)

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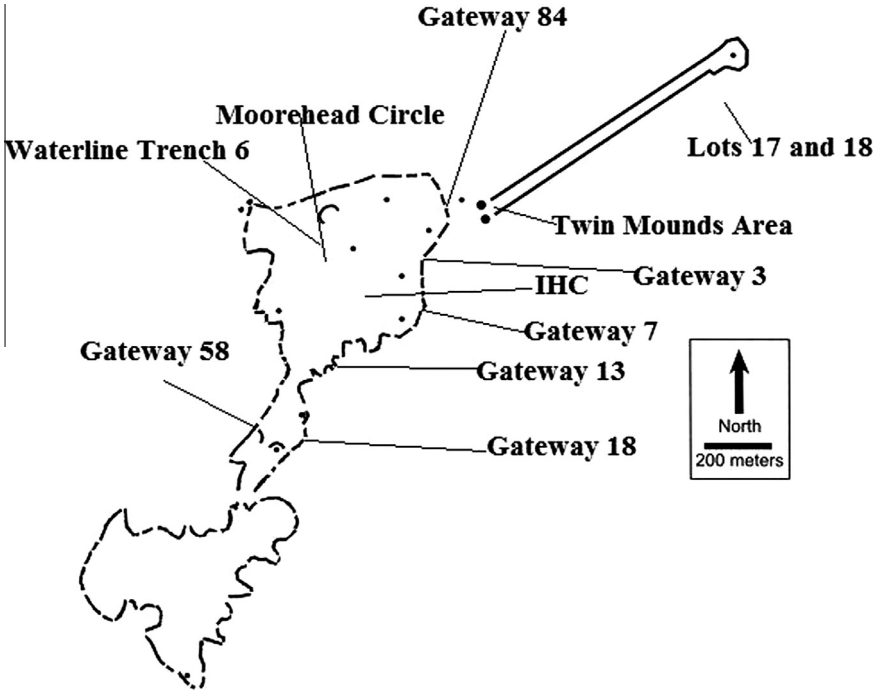

Fig. 1. Fort Ancient (33WA2).

is a result of the decommissioning of several of the structures. This involved capping dismantled structures with, sometimes several layers of, mound fill that was subsequently disturbed by historic plowing (Greber, 2009a). The fill materials used in the mounds were borrowed from unknown areas of the site and were largely responsible for introducing many of the craft materials and specialized tools to each structure. Additionally Baby and Langlois' (1979:18) assertion that different crafts were produced in each structure cannot be upheld due to lack of evidence from primary context, nor do all structures appear to be contemporaneous as originally argued (Greber, 2009b). Greber (2009b) concludes that while the Seip structures were special places and that craft production activities probably occurred somewhere in their general vicinity, they were clearly not specialized workshops. Similarly, Yerkes's (2009) microwear analysis failed to identify substantial evidence of craft production within the chipped stone artifact assemblage. While Spielmann (2008:66) argues that craft production largely took place at earthworks she admits that little archaeological evidence exists as to how production was organized in these contexts.

In order to further characterize Hopewell craft production, this study examines the organization of production at Fort Ancient by studying the function of a particular class of chipped stone artifact, bladelets (Fig. 2). Hopewell bladelets are defined as the product of a prepared core technique with a length to width ratio of at least two to one, roughly parallel margins, and a triangular, trapezoidal, or prismoidal cross section (Greber et al., 1981; Nolan et al., 2007; Pi-Sunyer, 1965:61). Bladelets are often invoked as important components of Hopewell ritual production (e.g. Byers, 2006; Odell, 1994; Spielmann, 2009) but relatively few large-scale, systematic studies have been conducted to study this role (but see Kay and Mainfort, 2014; Odell, 1994).

The examination of bladelets is ultimately aimed at gaining insight into the organization of production at Fort Ancient. Bladelets offer unique insight into Hopewell craft production because (1) they are a diagnostic marker of the Hopewell horizon (Greber et al., 1981); (2) they were multipurpose tools serving as a proxy measure of all stone tool use (Yerkes, 1990, 1994); (3) bladelets regularly comprise over 75% of the formal tool assemblage at most Hopewell sites (Genheimer, 1996); (4) they were relatively expedient tools thus largely eliminating the interpretive problems caused by artifact curation.

2. Ritual economy

Economy and ritual are often falsely dichotomized with the former viewed as rational and the latter non-rational (McAnany and Wells, 2008:1; Wells and Davis-Salazar, 2007:2). However, the work of Mauss (1990[1925]) in *The Gift* was an early and highly influential examination of the rationality of ritual behavior in reciprocal exchange. Similarly, Malinowski (1961[1922]) recognized the inherent cultural rationality of ritual behavior. Ritual economy builds on this scholarship by recognizing the interconnected nature of economics and ritual. Watanabe (2007:313) argues for the importance of a ritual economy framework in studying relatively egalitarian societies where kinship largely defines social roles and obligations. Similarly, Spielmann (2002:203) argues that, in small-scale societies, "ritual and belief define the rules, practices, and rationale for much of the production, allocation, and consumption". Thus, any discussion of the economics of a small-scale society must include a consideration of ritual economy.

Most discussions of ritual economy analyze what Watanabe (2007:301, see also Wells and Davis-Salazar, 2007) describes as the *economics of ritual*, or the economic acts necessary to properly participate in or host ritual events. Ritual production is often surplus production with raw materials composed of exotic items (Wells and Davis-Salazar, 2007:1). These items are often used in communal ritual events such as festivals, feasts, and fairs which provide opportunities to reinforce and/or renegotiate social relationships. In this way ritual may be a major factor in regulating the production, distribution, and consumption of craft goods.

For example, Swenson and Warner (2012) argue that diverse groups of commoners were included in the production of copper objects at the Moche site of Huaca Colorada. Copper processing and production took place at this important ceremonial center in conjunction with other social/ceremonial gatherings (Swenson