Hopewell Culture Research Paper

Emily Cebrowski

Salt Lake Community College

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Tiffany Collins

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Most of what we know about the Hopewell Culture of North America is found in the elaborate burial mounds left by the people who built them (Engberg, 2013). From the construction of the mounds, the artifacts found around the mounds, and the grave goods within the mounds, we can determine how the sites were used and how mound culture changed over time. Within the mounds we see a repetition of symbols that help us understand how the Hopewell viewed the world and how their beliefs mirrored those views. Grave goods found with Hopewell remains also help us understand the behavior patterns of the Hopewell and point to a vast geographic trade network (Chazan, 2014).

The Hopewell Culture emerged in North American along the banks of the Ohio and Mississippi River Valley during the Middle Woodland periods, 100 BC to AD 400 (Wright, 2015). Although the Hopewell have no known written language, we can determine a great deal about their day to day life from the burial mounds they left (Abrams, 2009). From mound excavation we know that the Hopewell constructed their burial mounds in a variety of ways—some were built up around the dead in layers, other were built using a wood framework, and in some the dead were buried by excavating existing mounds (Chazan, 2014). At the Sugar Run Mound in Pennsylvania, McConaughy found that three mounds were built during three different and distinct times. The first mound featured a cobblestone bird effigy on its surface and the second and third mounds overlapped the first. This overlapping is a good indication that the builders of the second and third mounds came at a much later date than the first mound and may not have known that it existed because it is a much shorter and smaller mound than two and three. This clustered mound building leads us to believe that the Hopewell people built burial mounds in sacred or spiritual places (McConaughy, 2011). Likely the Sugar Run Mound site had
HOPEWELL CULTURE

great spiritual significance to inhabitants in the area across multiple generations (McConaughy, 2011).

The large bird effigy fashioned out of cobble stone on top of mound one at the Sugar Run site is a reoccurring symbol in the Hopewell culture (McConaughy, 2011). Bird effigies were found in Hopewell burial mounds in varying forms. A pipe with a swallow tailed bird carved into it was found at a burial site in Vermont (McConaughy, 2011). Copper bird effigies, possibly a flying peregrine falcon and flying raptor, were found in Hopewell mounds located at Ross, Ohio (National, n.d.). Disarticulated human skeletons buried at the Scioto site in Greene County, Illinois were arranged in the shape of birds, and raptor bones used as grave goods have also been found in Hopewell burial mounds (McConaughy, 2011). Based on his research of modern Native Americans, McConaughy postulates that the reoccurrence of the bird effigy in the Hopewell culture may reflect the more contemporary Native American idea of the Thunderbird and the afterlife (2011).

Using symbols as an attachment to the afterlife is seen in a variety of other grave goods including large lightning whelk ocean shells and shark teeth found at the Ross, Ohio site (National, n.d), and blue-gray chert disks fashioned as burial “furniture” in the Neteler Mound of Havana, Illinois (Daniels, 2010). Although we are less sure about the implied meaning of the thousands of chert disks found at Neteler or the ocean shells found in Ross, they do tell us that the Hopewell Culture not only believed in an afterlife but operated a vast trade network. The chert disks used at the Neteler site were not locally produced but came from Indiana and we can tell they were transported to Illinois for the sole purpose of grave goods or burial furniture because the only wear they show is rub wear from transportation (Daniels, 2010). The ocean shells and shark teeth found at the Ohio site were imported from the Pacific Ocean (National,
n.d.). Objects made from mica are found throughout Hopewell burials mounds as well. Most of the mica originates from the peripheries of Hopewell society along the Appalachian Summit in North Carolina and was imported into the Hopewell core (Wright, 2015). The geographic vastness of the mounds and similarity in burials and grave goods tell us that, as the Hopewell dispersed up and down the Ohio and Mississippi River Valleys, they continued to meet regularly to trade goods and ideas (Abrams, 2009).

This vast geographically vast trade network is a good indication that the Hopewell had some sort of political structure in place. Abrams discusses three possible political structures for the Hopewell: small allied clans based on lineage; a political system featuring larger local leaders, like chiefdom; and a political council of leaders (2009). The variation in burials and grave goods points to a divide between the elite and common among the culture, but the exact form of leadership practiced by the Hopewell is unclear. However, one thing that is clear is that the culture did have shamans or religious leaders (Abrams, 2009). These shamans may or may not have had political power but their power in relationship to the afterlife is evident in grave goods featuring carved shaman and the large number of pipes used as grave goods (Abrams, 2009).

In most cases the Hopewell Mounds were used for ceremonial purposes and burials, not as primary living spaces (Chazan, 2014). It is presumed that much of the Hopewell provincial living sites have been obscured by centuries of silt and flooding from the Ohio and Mississippi rivers (Abrams, 2009). Still more have been destroyed by urbanization, farming, and early archaeological and hobbyist excavation (Elhard, n.d.). However, the burial mounds of the Hopewell still tell us a great deal about the cultures day to day life and what was important to them. From religion to trade we learn from the burial mounds that the Hopewell were a unified
people who shared ideas freely for hundreds of years across a large portion of North America during its Middle Woodland period.
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