

Transitory Mummies: Hopewell Tombs and the Conservation of the Dead

Della Collins Cook

Department of Anthropology, Indiana University
701 East Kirkwood Avenue
Bloomington, Indiana, 47405-7100 USA
cook@indiana.edu

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Abstract

Many Eastern North American Indians practiced secondary burial, and a wide variety of beliefs were attached to the stages of decomposition of the corpse. Evidence is presented for protracted corpse manipulation at the Lawrence Gay Mounds, Pike County, Illinois. Unfired clay face painting, rearticulation of skeletons, and partial disarticulation of dried corpses were features of mortuary practices at this site. Middle Woodland tombs slowed decomposition, because corpses were protected to such an extent that bodies remained in a mummified state for months or years. Inferences about funeral rites and ritual specialists two thousand years ago are suggested.

Everyone who attends the Mummy meetings is accustomed to distinguishing natural from artificial mummies and mummified from skeletal remains. I'd like to present an example that suggests that there are large gray areas between these categories. These distinctions are by no means cut and dried, so to speak. We may overlook some very interesting aspects of ancient mortuary practices if we rely on them.

The Hopewell or Middle Woodland culture of the American Midwest is well-known for its trade in raw materials extending through most of North America east of the Rocky Mountains and for its elaborate mortuary practices. It dates from 1500BC to 400AD.

The Lawrence Gay mound group in Pike County, Illinois was excavated by the late Gregory Perino in the fall of 1970 and summer of 1972 with assistance Bobby Sudhoff, George Milner, and others. I was responsible for recovering skeletal material. The Lawrence Gay mounds were

floodplain mounds in the foreground here, but had been in cultivation for 60 years, and were plowed essentially flat. The Joe Gay mounds were on the adjacent bluffs and were unplowed. In all likelihood they were used by the same community living in the Sny Bottoms during Middle Woodland times.

Perino recognized the mounds as slight elevations, the best preserved still a meter or so high, following the reports of landowners who remembered them before they were leveled. Eleven mounds were excavated, yielding 58 burials. My interest here is in mound 4.

In his publication on the bone scepter at the top of this photo, Perino describes the log tomb as 8 by 8 1/2 feet – or 2.5 by 2.6m long, with walls consisting of logs that were 30 inches or 80 cm in diameter. The tomb floor was lined with mats secured with bone pins, as was the 3 by 5 1/2 foot, or 90 x 170 cm, pit in the center of the floor. The tomb had been roofed with planks and bark held down with stone slabs (Perino, 1973). All these features are typical of Havana Hopewell mounds.

Extended burials are usual in Middle Woodland tombs. At



Fig. 1 - Lawrence Gay Mound 4.

Lawrence Gay Mound 4 there was a central sub-floor pit with an adult female on the left, and an adult male at the right with flint working tools at the head and a wolf jaw ornament at the pelvis. Such burials are frequently furnished with elaborate grave goods. They are the basis for reconstructions of Hopewell dress (Deuel, 1952).

Both primary burials had ochre deposits on the face and beneath the skull, as did 11 other the burials at Lawrence Gay Mounds. Farnsworth and I have reconstructed them as face paintings. In several instances there was a dark layer separating the pigment from the bone. We have interpreted these as funerary masks applied when the soft tissue of the face was intact (Cook and Farnsworth, 1981). Johnson and Ready (1992) have interpreted similar clay-covered skulls in Hopewell mounds in Minnesota as representations of the Earth Diver myth, using Plains Indian ethnographic materials to inform their interpretation. They also suggest that artificial masks at their site may represent drowning victims whose corpses were not recovered. There are several other examples of clay covered skulls in Illinois and Hopewell and elsewhere (Holland, 1985). Copper replacements for the decomposing nose are reported in Ohio Hopewell (Byers 2004). Trophy skulls and heads curated by Middle Woodland groups (Seeman, 1988). All these examples suggest that it was important for the face of the corpse to remain visible or recognizable for a long period, despite decomposition.

Middle Woodland bundle burials represent extended burials that were allowed to decompose in tombs and were then given secondary burial (Brown, 1979). As is usual for such secondary burials, none of the 18 bundle burials at the Lawrence Gay Mounds had funerary masks or grave goods.

The six adult male secondary burials in the central pit (LG4-3) may have been processed through placement as extended burials, but they were finally buried without elaborate grave goods or pigments. At least one of them had occupied the position in the central tomb floor finally taken by the female burial long enough to leave behind teeth. I want to call your attention to variable disarticulation here. LG4-3A is a fully articulated flexed burial, B an articulated torso with displaced head (mandible still in articulation), F is an articulated, extended leg, G an articulated flexed leg. I infer that these units had soft tissue intact when they were placed in the pit. There are no cut marks on any of these remains, which is particularly surprising for the disarticulated hips and pelvis. The torsos must have been quite decomposed, essentially skeletonized, while the legs and heads retained sufficient soft tissue to remain articulated. The Dickison mound in near Peoria, Illinois had a similar subfloor pit with partially disarticulated remains (Deuel, 1940), as did F^o410 (Wray, 1952), but there have been no detailed studies of the skeletal material.

Citing Jane Buikstra's observation that secondary burials at Gibson mounds showed no cut marks indicating purposeful disarticulation, James Brown has critiqued earlier attempts to differentiate status in disarticulated versus intact burials in Hopewell tombs as follows:

He characterizes tombs like this one as "crypts...box with

moveable roof...[for] storage of the dead and grave goods...distinctions among the graves not promoted...[lacking] social display of the dead."

He suggests practical reasons governed the transition from extended to secondary burial:

"Primary interment of extended articulated burials in mortuary crypts. Later, after decomposition, the skeletons were bundled and placed aside to make way for fresh interments (1979:218)."

This is not what happened at Lawrence Gay mound 4. Corpses were disjoined, perhaps in the leathery stage, when cutting was no longer necessary because the torso had decayed, and segments of bodies were deposited in the central pit, perhaps to make way for fresh interments, but with room to spare. Other tombs in this group are stacked full of extended burials. The partially disarticulated remains were hidden from view with layers of matting.

Such tombs had sod and log walls, and plank and bark roofs. I would like to suggest that the effect of several aspects of tomb construction – drainage, water-shedding and exclusion of sun light and light-dependent insects – will have been to preserve the corpse, or more accurately, to arrest decomposition in the leathery stage by maintaining relatively even temperature and humidity, much like a root cellar, and by excluding animals. The result was a long period during which persons visiting the tomb would have viewed the corpse as a partial mummy, not as a skeleton. Formation of adipocere would be favored under these conditions. These bodies were experienced as mummies, at least for a period of time ending in their secondary burial. What did the slow decomposition of the corpse mean to Middle Woodland people? Several analogs can be found in North American ethnology, for example the charnel structures documented from 16th century Virginia Algonquian peoples in 1585 (de Bry, 1966). Bodies were smoked by an attendant and eventually deposited in the chests at the end of an unrounded building. Surely the most common meaning attached to such preserved bodies is the persistence of the person's social identity. However, there is reason for caution in applying any interpretation too widely. In the western tradition there have been periods during which contemplation of the stages of decomposition was an important aspect of mortuary practices, and indeed raised to a high art, as in the transi tombs of the late Middle Ages (Cohen, 1973). Bodies that decomposed particularly slowly have been viewed as signs of particular holiness, as, for example in the cult of the saints, of particular unholiness in the case of vampire beliefs (Barber, 1988), or as signs of unresolved conflict with the living (Danforth, 1982). In a wide-ranging synthesis of Native American religion and archaeology, Hall (1997) argues that soul release and reincarnation were the core of Hopewell mortuary ceremonialism, an interpretation that fits this evidence for prolonged contemplation of the faces of the dead.

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