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Evidence for the Use of Hopewell Ceramic Vessels as Water Drums: The Previously Unpublished Research of Richard Zurel

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Barnes and Lepper (2018; see also Lepper 2018) presented an argument that five steatite spheres recovered from the Seip-Pricer Mound represented components of a Hopewell water drum. Unbeknownst to Barnes and Lepper, Richard Zurel had proposed this idea more than a decade earlier in a brief manuscript, copies of which were distributed at the 2004 Midwest Archaeological Conference. But the paper was never subsequently published. Neither Lepper nor Barnes were aware of this research until it was brought to our attention by Vincent Barrows.

Upon learning of Zurel's research, Lepper contacted him and he provided us with a copy of his unpublished manuscript. We here present a brief summary of his preliminary conclusions both to acknowledge that Zurel was the first to propose this interpretation for the Seip steatite spheres and to provide independent and potentially corroborative evidence of the proposition that the Hopewell culture made water drums and used such drumhead anchors in their construction.

Zurel (2004) documented numerous ethnohistoric as well as historic and recent examples of American Indian water drums that were constructed with a ceramic shell. In order to test the hypothesis that some Hopewell ceramic vessels might have served as shells for water drums, Zurel examined a sample of Hopewell ceramic sherds in the collections of the University of Michigan's Museum of Anthropology. He proposed that repeatedly assembling, disassembling, and using ceramic water drums likely would result in distinctive patters of wear on those parts of the vessel in contact with the leather-wrapped stone drumhead anchors as well as with the cordage used to secure them to the vessels.

Zurel examined fragments of Hopewell tetrapodal vessels and reported that he observed the expected wear patterns (abrasion and polish) on four feet from separate vessels. Each exhibited abrasive wear or polish in areas where lashing to secure a drumhead would have passed underneath the vessel while being constrained by the feet so as not to slip off the base of the vessel thereby reducing tension on the drumhead. As one example, one of the feet exhibited a heavily worn area with striations on the bottom edge of the vessel adjacent to and on the inside edge of the foot.

Zurel also identified a body sherd exhibiting polish in three distinct areas, which he argued represented the paths of the cordage used to lash down a drumhead. In addition, he observed a deep groove worn across a body sherd from an unpainted quadrilobate vessel that he also suggested could represent wear from cordage associated with a drumhead anchor.

Finally, Zurel noted that the five steatite spheres from the Seip Mound Burnt Offering would have been eminently suitable for use as drumhead anchors for a water drum. He also

observed that they had been "originally identified rather ethnocentrically as 'marbles'" (Zurel 2004:4).

These data provide suggestive evidence that some Hopewell ceramic vessels may have functioned as ritual water drums much like the ceramic drums documented by numerous historic accounts; and that the small steatite spheres recovered from the Seip-Pricer Mound could have served as drumhead anchors for drum shells regardless of whether the shells were made from clay, wood, or metal. Thus, Zurel's arguments provide support for Barnes and Lepper's (2018) independently derived conclusions.

The Burnt Offering at Seip Mound included numerous "potsherds, both utility and ceremonial" (Shetrone and Greenman 1931:379). Shetrone and Greenman (1931:432) indicated that they recovered "593 sherds of ceremonial pottery," including "some" vessels with "four short, thick and bluntly pointed legs." One avenue of potential future research could include an examination of the ceramics from Seip Mound to see if wear patterns similar to those documented by Zurel can be identified. It is unfortunate that, even if such wear patterns are identified on sherds from Seip Mound, it likely will be difficult or even impossible to determine whether or not those sherds were directly associated with the five steatite spheres.

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