Hopewellian Copper Earspools from Eastern North America

The Social, Ritual, and Symbolic Significance of Their Contexts and Distribution

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Hopewell ritual is preserved today only in the physical remains encountered archaeologically. The variety and complexity of such remains suggest that a number of kinds of ritual practices were observed by Hopewell peoples. In order to reconstruct even some aspects of these rituals, their remains should be studied on many different levels. One approach is through detailed analyses of specific ritual objects.

In recent studies (Ruhl 1996; Ruhl and Seeman 1998), I have considered one particular class of objects: the bicymbal copper earspool. An earspool consists of two circular disks, roughly 40 mm in diameter, joined by a central stem (see below, Figures 19.3 and 19.4). Components are formed from native copper sheet. Earspools have been found in Hopewelian traditions throughout Eastern North America, and in several different kinds of ritual contexts. The conditions under which earspools would have been seen and their roles in ritual occasions are suggested by these contexts.

In this chapter, I make stylistic and contextual studies of a very large sample of currently curated, copper earspools from Hopewelian mounds in Eastern North America. The earspools total 686 and derive from 64 sites in the northern Scioto, Havana, Goodall, Crab Orchard, and Trempeleau Hopewelian traditions, as well as the southern Copena, Miller–Porter, and Marksville traditions. The chapter begins with a brief review of earlier studies of earspools by others. I then summarize significant variation in the contours of earspools as a similarity seriation, which is found by independent lines of dating to be chronologically sensitive. The seriation extends a previous one, limited to earspools from Ohio and the Southeast (Ruhl and Seeman 1998), with new information on earspools from the Havana, Crab Orchard, Goodall, and Trempeleau traditions. The seriation results imply the regular sharing of styles and symbols across the East over several centuries, and the contemporaneity of eastern and western variants of the Copena Hopewelian tradition. The seriation also suggests that earspools may have had their stylistic and symbolic origin in the Havana or Copena areas rather than Ohio, although Ohio is the center of concentration of earspools by number. Later, stylistic drift and perhaps loss
of meaning of the earspool form appear to have occurred in the Southeast, again, rather than in Ohio.

Next, I compare poorly visible attributes of earspool morphology and construction within and among regions and sites. Differences in these attributes among regions indicate localized production networks and minimal exchange of earspools, themselves, across regions. A discussion of the symbology of earspools and its consistency over time and across regions ensues. Although earspools differ formally in some ways among regional traditions, they nevertheless invariably display the same, visually apparent, symbolic image of a ring, and a contrast of light and darkness seen in many kinds of Hopewellian material culture. These and other visible stylistic attributes also follow time trends that are similar across all studied regions. This fairly continuous integration of linguistically distinct societies over the regions and over centuries of time, yet without much earspool exchange, suggests a metaphorical, nonverbal form of interregional communication using a material symbol of some very basic worldview theme(s) (see Seeman 1995; Carr and Turff, Chapter 18).

Finally, intrasite contexts of deposition of earspools are described and interpreted, leading to understandings of the social and ritual significance of earspools. Contextual analyses suggest the conspicuous consumption of earspools in Ohio in ceremonies of cooperation and/or competition, beyond the marking of social position found there and in other Hopewellian traditions. Ceremonies of several kinds and scales are evidenced. Changes in the size and durability of Ohio earspools over time may reflect a shift in the use of earspools from long-term wear to short-term conspicuous display in ceremony, and the increasing size of audiences at rituals over time. Contextual patterns also suggest that earspools in Ohio marked membership in some kind of corporate group with particular social rights and duties, beyond individual prestige.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

The first investigations of mounds and burials in southern Ohio uncovered earspools, which initially were identified as the remains of historic artifacts. Caleb Atwater (1820) reported silver-covered “bosses” from Marietta to be ornaments from a sword belt, although they had been found at the head of a burial. Likewise, Squier and Davis (1847) excavated crushed earspools at Mound City near Chillicothe and described them as ornamental bosses joined in pairs. In the late 19th Century, ceramic figurines of people wearing bicymial ear ornaments were excavated by a Harvard investigation at the Turner site near Cincinnati. The director, Frederick Ward Putnam, realized that the copper artifacts found at the same site were in fact earspools (Putnam 1882, 1883). Putnam (1883) was also the first to examine earspools for evidence of construction methods, but Charles C. Willoughby, Putnam’s successor, made a more thorough study of earspool fabrication techniques. Using “primitive” methods, Willoughby (1903, 1916) also experimented with producing copper sheet and replicated part of an earspool. However, he did not attempt to evaluate the relative frequencies of the various techniques, nor did he analyze variability in the size and surface contours of the artifacts. Decades later, after examining earspools from the Snyders and Knight mounds (Braun et al. 1982; Griffin et al. 1970), Griffin (1979:277) suggested that further investigation of temporal and regional variability in these artifacts would be warranted.

My initial study (Ruhl 1992) of earspools focused on ones from Ohio, totaling 544 from 20 sites. The study distinguished between “construction” variables, as discussed by Willoughby, and other variables that seemed to relate primarily to the appearance of earspools. Based on the latter, I defined nine stylistic types, arranged in sequence from a funnel-shaped surface contour, through a smooth concave–convex profile, to one in which the concave–convex transition becomes increasingly abrupt. A chronological significance was postulated for this sequence. When sites were arranged according to their median earspool stylistic type, the resulting order of sites corresponded quite well to that suggested by other criteria (Prufer 1964a; Seeman 1977b). I concluded that earspool style could, in fact, be useful to infer a relative chronology.