Chapter 2

Historical Insight into the Directions and Limitations of Recent Research on Hopewell

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The nature of “Hopewell” has not easily been defined through archaeological study and discussion. The term, “Hopewell”, has been used professionally in multiple ways over the last century, and this remains the case today, even as Americanist archaeology has become more systematic and sensitive in applying sociocultural anthropological concepts to archaeological patterns. Modern anthropological archaeologists have sought to identify and understand Hopewell in the wide sharing of certain material traits and cultural practices over eastern North America (e.g., Caldwell 1964; Seeman 1995; Struver 1964), in their local cultural manifestations (e.g., Greber 1976, 1997; Pacheco 1996), and in the local and interregional ecological–evolutionary foundations of Middle Woodland cultures (e.g., Braun 1986; Dancey 1996a; Ford 1974; Struver 1964:96–105; Wymer 1987a). The most basic issue of whether Hopewell was an interregional, a local, or a multiscalar phenomenon has yet to be settled, let alone its specific sociocultural features and the particular cultural, historical, and natural factors that led to it.

Although a consensus on what constitutes Hopewell remains at a distance, in recent decades, one professional view of it has become especially popular. In that view, Hopewell is seen as the practices, ideas, and material–symbolic representations, especially religious and social ones, that were shared widely among Middle Woodland societies of eastern North America. These widely distributed cultural forms are contrasted with more variable, local secular and domestic cultural traditions. The dichotomy is rooted historically in Caldwell’s (1964) and Struver’s (1964, 1965) definition of Hopewell as an interregional, religious or socioreligious phenomenon apart from local cultural ways, especially subsistence and settlement practices.

Significantly, by conceiving of Hopewell in interregional terms, and as different in kind from local culture, modern archaeologists have often inadvertently constrained the scope of Hopewellian research. Three trends are apparent. (1) There has been a tendency to decontextualize Hopewell—to take it out of its local contexts. (2) There has been a stronger trend to impersonalize Hopewell—to remove it from the social actors and roles that produced it at given locales. (3) As a consequence of both of the first two constraints, the ability of archaeologists to generate
panregional Hopewell from local dynamics, and to understand it in a bottom-up fashion, has been diminished.

This chapter has two goals. First is to provide a conceptually broad, historical review of what has been said about the nature of Hopewell in anthropological terms in recent decades. This review serves as a backdrop to the chapter’s second goal: to delineate some research issues in Hopewell archaeology that remain largely unexplored and that seem fundamental today. Especially key here are topics that locally contextualize and personalize Hopewell and that generate its interregional manifestations from local scenes. Both discussions, of historical viewpoints and of current fundamental issues, provide a context for understanding why the studies presented in this book have been undertaken and their significance.

This chapter begins by expanding the currently popular definition of Hopewell to include not only interregional socioreligious practices, ideas, and material forms, but also their local socioreligious counterparts and variant expressions. An “interregional Hopewell” and a “local Hopewell” are defined, and significantly so as to overlap in their cultural characteristics rather than be qualitatively distinct. This inclusion of certain local socioreligious ways within the concept of Hopewell is reasonable when one realizes that the specific means by which Hopewellian practices, ideas, and symbols came to be disseminated across multiple traditions—possibly through pilgrimage, travel to buy ceremonial rites from distant peoples, and intermarriage, to name a few—by definition were aspects of local cultural practices as much as they were interregional forms of interaction, and involved persons who were motivated by local cultural ideas, practices, and natural conditions. A conceptual framework that acknowledges both the local and the interregional faces of Hopewellian ways also naturally encourages the investigation of local peoples originating, following, and/or modifying interregionally known practices and beliefs—the active generation of interregional Hopewellian patterns from local cultural contexts.

In light of this revised, locally sensitive conceptualization of Hopewell, previous understandings of it are then reviewed for whether they have been personalized with actors in roles, have contextualized Hopewell in local society, culture, and history, and have generated Hopewell in its interregional guise from local human needs and motives. The review shows that although some research over the last 40 years has contextualized Hopewell in local practices and ideas, rarely has it been personalized with social actors in known roles, relations, and numbers, and seldom have interregional cultural distributions been explained with reference to actors and motivations at the local level, other than generalized ecological matters like subsistence risk (Braun 1986; Ford 1974; Hall 1973) and surplus (Stuever 1964). For example, absent or rare from the literature are attempts to empirically establish the particular roles of Hopewellian leaders in ceremonial and secular affairs; the gender, totemic group, community, or rank group affiliations of leaders; the social compositions of ceremonial gatherings; or the social, political, religious, and/or personal agendas of those individuals who, by one means or another, came to spread Hopewellian goods, practices, and ideas interregionally. Such omissions in the personalizing and generating of Hopewell cannot be attributed to a silent archaeological record, for Hopewellian mortuary, architectural, and artifact stylistic data are ripe with sociological details. Instead, these kinds of lacunae can be shown to have originated in Caldwell’s and Stuever’s influential definition of Hopewell as an interregional phenomenon separate from local culture.

At the same time, certain modern studies are found here to have given Hopewell local expression, and these help to identify key topics for further work through which a locally contextualized, personalized, and generated “Hopewell” can be explored. The studies include ones by Buikstra, Carr, Charles, Greber, Griffin, Pacheco, Prufer, Smith, and Wymer. The fruitful topics to which their works point are local community organization, local social organization, ceremonies and other activities that were performed within and around ceremonial centers, the nature of ceremonies in the daily domestic sphere and their relationships to those in the corporate sphere, the organizational diversity of Hopewellian societies