

The Gottschall Site: 3,500 years of Ideological Continuity and Change

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The Gottschall Rockshelter, located in southwestern Wisconsin, has been excavated for more than twenty years, resulting in discoveries that are far greater in number and significance than the size of this small sandstone rockshelter would suggest. For at least 1700 years, the “cave” was the site of ritual activities. Excavated data allow us to define a “core ritual” that was performed during the period from at least 500 B.C. until about A.D. 1100. Those rituals are described. The implications of the associated culture history and change in local, regional and broader events in eastern North American prehistory are explored.

After more than 150 years, archaeologists have successfully outlined the prehistoric culture-historical sequence in eastern North America. The sequence is predicated on changes and continuities in material culture assemblages. Surely, this sequence will be refined in the future. This paper will explore the evidence for an alternative culture history based on *ideological* rather than *material culture* changes and continuities that is emerging at a small rockshelter in southwestern Wisconsin.

Background

The Gottschall site has produced a number of rock paintings, including a composition that has human and animal figures that have been identified with the Ho-Chunk and Iowa story of a culture hero called “Red Horn,” as recorded by Radin (1923, 1948) and Skinner (1925) (Figure 1). In addition, a truly remarkable carved and painted sandstone head (Figure 2) was recovered during excavation in undisturbed and datable deposits (Salzer and Rajnovich 2000).

Excavations beneath the paintings have revealed a long sequence of amazingly clear, albeit complex, strata (Figure 3). Inclusive diagnostic artifacts and radiocarbon assays range from (at least) 1500 B.C. to as late as A.D. 1400. These data indicate the presence of Late Archaic (Madison, Preston and Durst phases), Middle Woodland (Early and Late Millville phases), early Late Woodland (Lane Farm phase), Late Woodland (Easton phase [i.e.,

“Effigy Mound”]) and Kekoskee phase, as well as Early Oneota (McKern phase). The stratigraphic complexity of the deposits demanded the attention of a sedimentologist, so the dirt was analyzed by William Gartner (1993).

Among the various alluvial deposits and roof fall, we were surprised to discover a new class of anthropogenic sediment (“anthroseds”). These remarkable sediments were manufactured inside the shelter. In descending order of abundance are: ashes from coniferous trees and grasses (including sweet grass); burned and powdered limestone (the nearest source of which is 15 miles south); crushed clam shell (the nearest source of which is eight miles north); marl; and, crushed and ground animal bone (Gartner 1993). Phytoliths also suggest the presence of corn (Glen Fredlund, personal communication). The whole concoction has the feel of talc and it reacts violently to dilute hydrochloric acid, making its field identification certain in this sandstone shelter.

The Core Ritual

Because we have repeated episodes of the making and laying-down of these man-made dirt, we have noted and can describe a “Core Ritual” assemblage. Although elaborated on during some time periods, this Core Ritual contains some unchanging features: (1) subsequent to a flood, a small fire was built on top of this new alluvial sediment and tended for a sufficiently long time to cause the underlying sand to achieve a high degree



Figure 1. *The Red Horn composition, A.D. 850-950.*

of oxidation (and reduction); (2) all ashes and charcoal (perhaps representing the ingredients for the anthrosed) were carefully removed; and (3) a “cap” of pure anthrosed was made and laid down on the area that was burned. The Core Ritual includes feasting on deer meat (James Theler, personal communication; Reber 2003) and, occasionally, dog.

Elaborations on this ritual include the creation of a large burned floor containing enough anthrosed to cover it entirely (Early Millville Phase). Projectile points (arrows?) were at times repeatedly associated with the burnings. During the Effigy Mound period, the anthroseds were laid down in such a way as to create the appearance of a “bird” and points were repeatedly placed in the right “wing pit” throughout the several construction episodes.

By the end of our last field season, we were able to excavate a number of adjacent squares down through 20 cm of culturally sterile undisturbed water-lain sediments. At this depth, we were amazed to observe a large number of large and small repeated burnings with anthrosed caps.

Elsewhere at the site we have found that these features date to the Late Archaic Durst Phase.

The Core Ritual was practiced from at least 500 B.C. (Late Durst Phase) to A.D. 1100 (Late Effigy Mound), a period of 1,600 years.

Material Culture and Context

Except for the carved and painted stone head, the associated material culture is not “fancy.” Rather, the pottery and stone tools are rather “utilitarian” (Figures 4-6). On closer examination, however, the pottery vessels exhibit an unusually fine quality. Many vessels are exceptionally thin, ranging down to 1.5 mm in thickness. Most of the vessels have burnished surfaces. None of these characteristics is unusual in assemblages from what are presumed to be household contexts at habitation sites.

The size of the shelter provides clues to the scale of the rituals. Since a large part of this space is devoted to ritual activities, it does not seem likely that there were more than two dozen individuals involved. The best guess is that shamans



Figure 2. Late Effigy Mound (A.D. 1000-1250) carved sandstone head with blue-grey painted lines and central dot on the chin.

or priests were present, rather than large congregations of believers.

Understanding the Core Ritual can also be approached by examining its local setting. Observations made on local effigy mounds provide the best source of information. Maps made by T. H. Lewis in the 1880s allow us to identify a huge cluster of such mounds in the environs of the shelter along the Wisconsin River. Lewis was unable to survey all of the mounds. It appears, however, that effigy forms were dominant and among these were high concentrations of human and bird forms (Figure 7). Estimating the density of mounds is difficult due to destruction from ploughing, house construction and roads, but the “super cluster” may have contained the highest concentration of such mounds known to have existed anywhere. It seems reasonable to infer that this phenomenon is related to the presence of the Gottschall site and its rituals.

Analyses of lithic artifacts are relevant to understanding the regional context. Overwhelmingly, lithic artifacts are made from locally available cherts. Exotic materials include one tiny flake of Knife River chalcedony and, surprisingly, only two equally small flakes of Hixton silicified sandstone. Even the carved and painted head is made of local St. Peters sandstone. Clearly, the rockshelter and its rituals do not have anything to do with a trade in lithic materials.

Our best information about the regional context for the Core Ritual is the evidence of ceramics associated with the ritual, especially vessels from nearby sources. Among the ceramics are those relating to Millville, Lane Farm, Effigy



Figure 3. Stratigraphy of the south wall of S18W10. The scale is 30cm long.

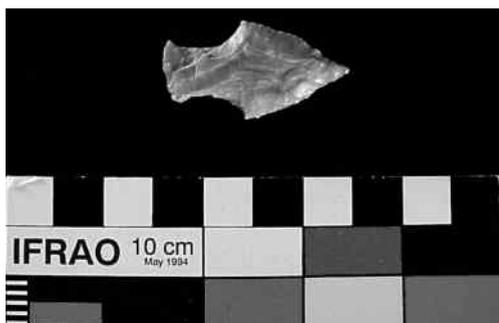


Figure 4. *Durst-stemmed projectile point (Late Archaic, 900-500 B.C.).*



Figure 5. *Marquette-stamped ware (early Millville phase, circa A.D. 200-300).*



Figure 6. *Madison Cord-impressed ware (Effigy Mound culture, A.D. 800-1050).*

Mounds and Kekoskee phases. Broader contexts are implied by the remains of vessels that relate to northern Wisconsin and Minnesota peoples (e.g., St. Croix Stamped, Laurel Incised and Lake Nokomis Trilled). This implies that shamans, possibly, made pilgrimages from such northern areas to participate in performances of the Core Ritual. In turn, this implies that shamans returned to their homes, bringing with them knowledge that heightened their status among their peoples.

Other ceramics, such as those associated with Red Ochre (Indian Isle phase), Black Sand (Prairie phase), Hopewell (Trempealeau phase) and Mississippian, are remarkably and conspicuously absent. All of this is puzzling, since expressions of these phases are known for the nearby area (Stoltman 1997).

Explanation

Empirical data indicate that the Core Ritual at the Gottschall site persisted for more than 1,600 years. The ritual can be described as being focused on local resources. Its broader context includes contemporary culture-historical groups to the north and not those found to the south, such as Hopewell and Mississippian. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Core Ritual expressed at the site is a reflection of a stable and tenacious ideological system that is not shared by peoples to the south. This may explain the absence of material culture relating to those southern groups.

The best explanation for the Gottschall site is that the Core Ritual is distinct from the ideologies that are expressed by the elaborate burial patterns, sumptuary “prestige” artifacts and evidence for long distance trade that is frequently present in such “climax” cultures as Hopewell and Mississippian. That is, we are looking at two very different ideological systems—one to the north and the other to the south. Each of these ideological systems seems to have resulted in distinct culture-historical trajectories of change and continuities.

Conclusion

The Core Ritual identified at the Gottschall site survived and resisted ideological challenges and pressures for change over an incredibly long period of time. Possibly, the apparent conservatism being expressed played a role in curtailing the northward expansion of Hopewell and Mississippian ideas (and peoples?). Ideology rather than climatic change or other environmental, social or economic factors, appears to have played a pivotal role in this instance, at least, of culture history. Perhaps other examples of the power of ideological systems in the shaping of eastern North America culture history will be found. But for the present, we can only stand in awe of just how complex culture history can be.

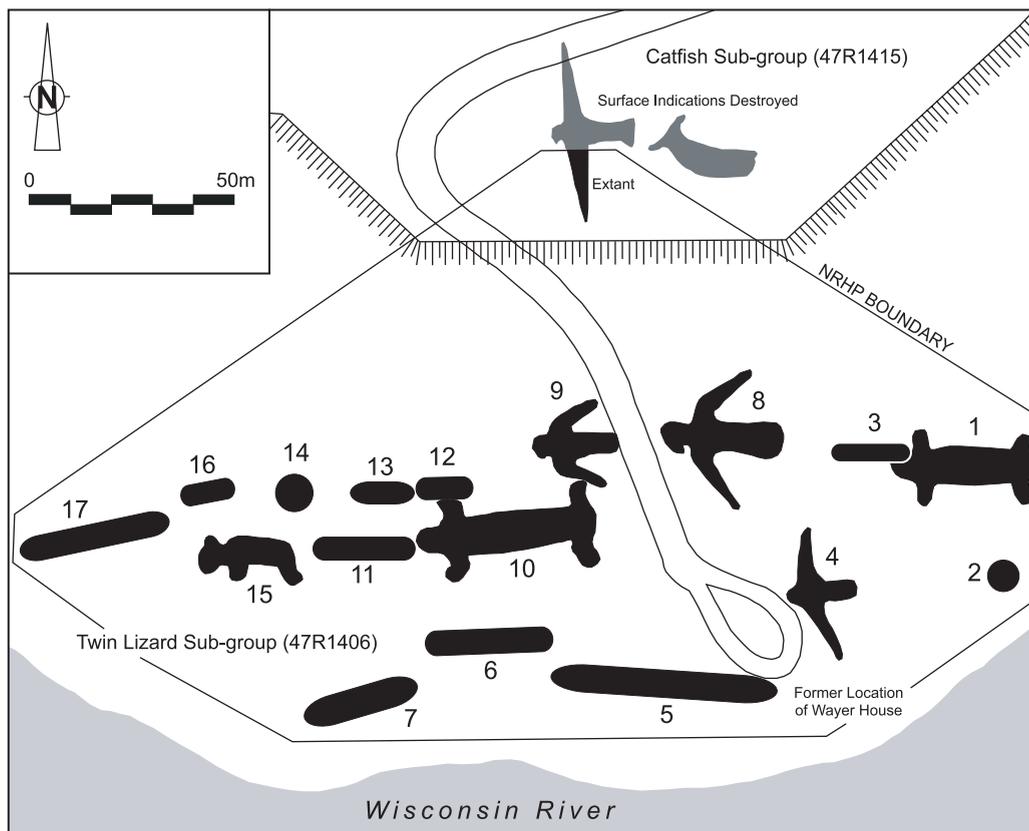


Figure 7. Bloyer site mound group, Richland County, Wisconsin, located 12 km north of the Gottschall site. The mound group is located in an area rich in food and raw materials (clams, shell, stone derived from till) used in the Core Ritual.

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Le site Gottschall : continuité et changement idéologique au cours de 3500 ans

Les fouilles au Gottschall Rockshelter, situé au sud-ouest du Wisconsin, au cours des vingt dernières années, ont abouti en de nombreuses découvertes, surpassant le montant et la signification que suggéreraient la grosseur de cette petite grotte de grès. Cette "caverne" était un site d'activités rituelles pour au moins 1700 ans. Les données archéologiques nous permettent d'identifier un « rituel de base » qui fut pratiqué durant la période d'entre environ 500 av. J.-C. et 1100 apr. J.-C. Ces rituels sont décrits. Les implications de l'histoire culturelle et de la transformation des événements au niveau local, régional et au-delà dans l'est nord-américain sont examinées.
