The Power of the Pipe: A Material Case Study on Hopewell Effigy Pipes

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Abstract

The Hopewell were a cultural group of hunter-gatherer-horticulturalists that lived during the Middle Woodland Period, between 1 and 400 CE. The Hopewell culture is famous for their mound sites as well as their effigy pipes. Hopewell effigy pipes played an important role in Hopewell ritual and spirituality. Today, these pipes are displayed in museum contexts and prized by collectors. Yet, to many contemporary First Nations, the act of collecting these pipes is concerning. This paper examines some of the contemporary issues surrounding the collecting of these pipes and discusses my own experience trying to create a pipe to better understand its materiality. This conference paper was adapted from a final project for MSL 2360: Museums and Indigenous Communities.

Keywords

Hopewell, effigy, pipe, museums, spirituality, indigenous, collections, ethics

Who were the Hopewell?

The Hopewell were a cultural group of hunter-gatherer-horticulturalists that lived during the Middle Woodland Period, between 1 and 400 CE (Lepper, 2002; Seeman, 2004). Although they mainly lived in Ohio and Illinois, the Hopewell had a great impact on the economic and ideological life in the surrounding areas (Yerkes, 2002). The Hopewell were involved in a large trade network of exotic materials (Lepper, 2002). Archaeologists also believe that they lived in small scattered settlements and that kin-based groups, such as clans, were the basis of Hopewell social structure (Byers, 2010). Known historically as The Mound Builders, the Hopewell are famous for creating large earthworks, some of which survive to this day (Lepper, 2002). These earthworks were used as centres of ceremony and gift-giving that played important roles in Hopewell life and politics (Miller, 2014; Weets, Carr, Penney, & Carriveau, 2005). The Hopewell were also known for creating effigy pipes (figure 1) (Otto, 1992). This paper looks at the body of knowledge and critical issues surrounding the pipes, and discusses my experience creating an effigy pipe.

What is an effigy pipe?

An effigy pipe is a pipe used for smoking Nicotiana rustica, which is a hallucinogen and can help induce trances and “altered states of consciousness” (Brown, 2006; Romain, 2009, p. 177). Other plant-based mate-
rial may have also been added to the tobacco, including bark and scented leaves (Gehlbach, 2006). Due to their unique design, effigy pipes are diagnostic objects for the Hopewell culture (Romain, 2009). Hopewell effigy pipes are variations of Hopewell curve-base monitor pipes that have been carved to form an effigy (West, 1970). These pipes have a bent base that acts as a platform for the bowl and as a hand rest (Brown, 2006). Unlike other smoking pipes, reed or wooden pipe stems were not attached to the pipe; rather the platform acts as the stem as well (Brown, 2006). With effigy pipes, the bowl is shaped to look like an animal or human (Farnsworth, 2004). The creators of the pipes were highly skilled and used animals that they were familiar with as models for the effigies (West, 1970). The animals depicted are incredibly realistic and are often seen in natural poses (West, 1970). For example, some of the pipes from Ross County, Ohio include an otter eating a fish and a racoon on a tree stump (West, 1970).

Sunderhaus and Blosser (2006) state that the animals depicted in effigy pipes are associated with creation stories of Woodland groups and are linked to the three-tier world system. The lower world, upon which the middle world (where human’s live) floats, is associated with water and is the home of such spirits as the great water panther (Lepper, 2010). Water animals, such as frogs, depicted on effigy pipes are therefore also associated with the lower world (Sunderhaus & Blosser, 2006). The upper world is associated with the sky and is associated with the many types of birds found on the pipes (Lepper, 2010; Sunderhaus & Blosser, 2006). Brown (2006) hypothesizes that the animals represent the protective spirits that shamans were able to bring back from the spirit world. At least one pipe from Mound City depicts the face of a shaman (Romain, 2009). The face has both human and cat-like attributes and is thought to represent a shaman transforming into a panther (Romain, 2009).

What types of effigies are found on the pipes?

Various effigies are found on Hopewell pipes. Although not as common, human effigies have been found on Hopewell Pipes (Farnsworth, 2004; Romain, 2009). More often than not, the effigies are of animals. Since the pipes are etched in such detail, researchers have been able to identify specific species of animals (Otto, 1992). These include, but are not limited to, spoon bills, elk, bears, wolves, panthers, racoons, beavers, otters, squirrels, turtles, frogs, serpents, rattlesnakes, hawks, owls and swallows (Farnsworth, 2004; Greber & Ruhl, 1989; Henderson, 2004). The Tremper pipes alone have 27 different genera of animals (West, 1970). The vast majority of the animals are ones that live within the Eastern Woodlands, yet others instead reflect animals in areas where the Hopewell’s trade network reached (Otto, 1992; Henderson, 2004).

What context are the they found in?

Hopewell effigy pipes are found almost exclusively in mortuary contexts (Farnsworth, 2004). Interestingly, effigy pipes have been found as far away as Tunnacunnhee Mound D in Georgia (Farnsworth, 2004). This demonstrates that Hopewell influence and worldview stretched outside of the traditional Hopewell area. One of the most famous collections of pipes were those found at Tremper Mound. The mound, located in Portsmouth Ohio, was surveyed in the early 19th century and excavated in 1915 (Converse, n.d.). The excavation was done poorly, but two caches consisting of around 80 effigy pipes were found in the remains of a circular room in a multi-room building made of wood (Penney, 2004). Many of these pipes were not found fully intact but were rather broken intentionally—not through smashing them, but rather allowing them to violently burst apart via intense heat (Brown, 2006). Many of these pipes have subsequently been put back together (Otto, 1992). This ritual breaking of pipes was also seen at Mound City in Ohio in Mound 8 (Brown, 2006; Farnsworth, 2004). Squier and Davis found the cache consisting of 200 pipes in 1848 near a cremation container (Penney, 2004; West, 1970). According to them, the pipes were broken and had been exposed to temperatures hot enough to melt the copper artefacts in the cache (West, 1970). Both the Tremper Mounds and Mound City were important locations for the Hopewell (Otto, 1992). The caches in which the pipes were found at both locations were within charnel houses (i.e. places where human remains were stored and in this case cremated) (Otto, 1992). However, some pipes are found in individual burials of both sexes of a variety of ages (Otto, 1992; Snyder, 2004).
Who used them/made them and how were they used?

The makers of the effigy pipes were highly skilled. Otto (1992, p. 5) states that the crafter of these pipes knew exactly what they were doing and did not have any “false starts”, or “practice pieces.” Most scholars believe that Hopewell effigy pipes were made exclusively for rituals and used by shamans. Shamans are believed to have had leadership roles in Hopewellian society due to their ability to conduct rituals (Gehlbach, 2006; Brown, 2006). These shamans were healers, could commune with spirits and were believed to be able to transform into animals (Brown, 2006; Romain, 2009).

Various theories exist as to the precise use of the pipes. The pipes may have been smoked by various members of the community during funerary ceremonies in order to help the souls leave this world for another (Gehlbach, 2006). Through trances, the smoking of the pipe could have also been used to “manipulate time”, whereby the user could go into the past to connect with ancestors (Gehlbach, 2006, p. 131). Many archaeologists believe that breaking the pipes through ritual, as seen at Tremper Mound and Mound City’s Mound 8, allowed the spirit of the pipe to be killed (Gehlbach, 2006). This was needed as the pipes themselves became polluted and needed to be gotten rid of as a form of purification (Giles, 2010). By killing the pipes, their spirits would return to the underworld and could also act as an offering to the spirits who controlled that world (Romain, 2009). This ritual would have been conducted by shamans, as they were the ones who could talk to the spirits directly via trances (Romain, 2009). Although found in mortuary contexts, it is highly likely that the pipes were part of other rituals, including renewal and fertility rituals (Seeman, 2004). Others say that the pipe caches represent the coming together of different clans (Weets et al., 2005). Conversely, Hall (2006) believes the pipes could represent familiars that came to Hopewell people during vision quests.

Since the bowl is positioned on top of the stem, the smoke goes upwards rather than in front of the user (Brown, 2006). As the smoke rises, it carries the smoker’s prayers and offerings to the spirit world (BBC, 2010; Brown, 2006). The hallucinogenic properties of the tobacco being smoked would have allowed shamans to go into trances and connect with other worlds (Romain, 2009). This is supported by the fact that the effigy touches the nose of the smoker when the pipe is being used (BBC, 2010). For many contemporary First Nations cultures, air and breath are associated with life (Romain, 2009). It is thus thought that when a shaman breathed in the smoke of the pipe he/she was mixing his/her breath, and thus life, with that of the effigy (Romain, 2009). The reverse occurs when the shaman blew into the pipe (Romain, 2009). This thus merges the two spirits together. The shaman could then get abilities from the animal and, depending on the need of a situation, shamans could call on a different spirit by using a different effigy pipe (Romain, 2009). The spirits could also give advice during times of trouble, such as war (Otto, 1992).

What are they made from?

Research has concluded that most of the pipes were not created from pipestone from one source, as previously believed. Instead, chemical analysis has revealed that the Tremper pipes alone come from at least three sources (Weets et al., 2005). As a result, researchers believe that each source represents a different social group coming to the site to deposit their pipes (Weets et al., 2005). An x-ray diffraction analysis by Boszhardt and Gundersen (2003) of Hopewell pipes from Wisconsin concluded that the pipes were made of Minnesota catlinite and Kansas pipestone. This material would have been imported to the Eastern Woodlands, via trade, and subsequently made into pipes (Boszhardt & Gundersen, 2003).

How are they made?

The Scholars agree that the pipes were beautifully hand-carved from stone and polished (Henderson, 2004). A single pipe could have taken up to two months to create (Otto, 1992). The crafter would start by using the hammerstone to remove pieces of stone in order to mark out a rough pipe shape (Otto, 1992). A hole around a quarter inch in diameter would be drilled (using a reed drill) in the end of the base, and an additional hole would be drilled with flint to create the bowl at the top of the pipe perpendicular to the first hole (Greber & Ruhl, 1989). After this, the crafter would use the flint tools to refine the pipe and engrave the carving (Otto, 1992). A polishing tool made of sandstone would then
be used to polish the piece (Otto, 1992). In order to 
harden the stone, the piece would be exposed to heat 
(Otto, 1992). This process also resulted in the pipe 
looking polished and for the stone to change colour 
ranging from red to grey (Otto, 1992). Once the pipe 
was finished, pearls or copper were sometimes placed in 
the eye sockets of the animal effigy (BBC, 2010; 
Henderson, 2004). Even though the crafters were very 
skilled, issues sometimes occurred during the manufac-
turing process. A prime example of this is the racoon 
pipe from Naples III (Henderson, 2004). During the 
process of drilling, part of the base broke (Henderson, 
2004). In order to fix it, the crafter plugged up the hole 
with a piece of the same stone and drilled from the oth-
er side (Henderson, 2004).

**Indigenous Perspective**

Much of what we know about the pipes comes from archaeological studies and ethnographic studies of First Nations (Seeman, 2004). According to archae-
ologists, it is difficult to understand Hopewell symbols, 
such as the effigy pipes, because the Hopewell are “suf-
ciently removed from the present that such historical 
connections are exceedingly difficult to make” (Seeman, 
2004, p. 57). However, for First Nations, this is not the 
case. Many First Nations believe that they have ties to 
Hopewell pipes and earthworks and still consider them 
to be sacred (BBC, 2010). Barbara Crandell, a Cherokee 
woman states that “[The Hopewell] built these things 
[earthworks] so we would remember who we are” (Anc-
tient Ohio Trail, n.d, p. 8). Although this sentiment was 
about mound sites, it can also be applied to the pipes 
found at mound sites. They have the capacity to con-
nect contemporary First Nations with their ancestors. 
Gabriel Tayac, a First Nation historian, does not like to 
consider the pipes as sacred objects, but rather living 
beings that should be treated as such (BBC, 2010). The 
pipes also help First Nations to remember their stories. 
For example, Annette Ketchum, a Lenape storyteller, 
was reminded of a traditional Lenape story, of how a 
turtle saved them during a flood, after seeing an effigy 
pipe shaped as a turtle (Ancient Ohio Trail, 2013).

**Who makes these pipes today?**

It is apparent from many online auctions that 
reproductions of the original pipes are being created. 
This is mainly for the collector market, as there is a de-
mand for these rare pipes (Hart, 2014). Some people 
pass these reproductions off as being real, even going 
as far to have the pipes cremated with human remains 
at funeral homes (Berner, 2015). The presence of casts 
of pipes in museums suggests that casts were also cre-
ated for research purposes (Smithsonian, 2015). Con-
versely, museums, such as the Ohio History Connection, 
make replicas that visitors can buy in their gift shop 
(Ohio History Connection, 2015). It is unclear who ac-
tually produces the replicas for the museums, but they 
are often nowhere near the quality of the originals.

**What issues resonate with the pipes?**

One of the biggest issues that resonates with the 
pipes is the fact that the pipes have been excavated at 
all. There is a belief by many First Nations people that 
the pipes were never meant to be unearthed (Penney, 
2004). This is due to the fact that the pipes were only al-
lowed to be used by certain members of the community 
(Penney, 2004). Furthermore, since they were ritually 
killed, the pipes should remain dead and not put back 
together again, as is the case with the Tremper pipes 
(Otto, 1992; Penney, 2004). Therefore, like many First 
Nation’s items, there is a question of whether the pipes 
should be kept for the sake of learning more about the 
Hopewell people, or if they should be reburied in order 
to respect First Nation belief systems and worldvies. 
Similarly, there is a question of whether a reproduc-
tion of a pipe would have the same spirit as an original. 
Many people making the pipes today are trying to make 
thousands of dollars off of them, by pretending that 
they are authentic (Berner, 2015). This can be consid-
ered an act of cultural appropriation for monetary gain. 
Moreover, if reproductions do have the same spirit as 
originals, by having pipes in their gift shops, museums 
are going against First Nations worldvies by allowing 
people to have pipes that are alive and only meant for 
certain members of society. Museums do not have the 
right to reproduce sacred objects like the pipes just be-
cause the originals are ancient and not used by modern 
groups.

For many of the same reasons as discussed 
above, collecting is an issue for the pipes. Hart (2014) 
discusses how he would go field walking to find arte-
facts, especially pipes. This form of collecting promotes
the disturbance of archaeological remains and has caused an increase in reproductions that are fraudulently being passed off as real pipes at auction (Berner, 2015). However, the mere fact that any of these pipes are on auction in the first place is a problem as they were never meant to be circulated, or even taken out of the ground, in the first place (Penney, 2004).

**Making a Hopewell Pipe: My experience mobilizing my knowledge**

In order to mobilize my knowledge, I decided that I would create a bird effigy pipe. Before I begin to discuss my experience making a Hopewell Pipe, I feel that it is important that I write a quick disclaimer. Creating a Hopewell effigy pipe is not something that should be done by the general public as a museum activity. My attempt at making one of these pipes is for educational purposes only and was conducted in order to gain insight and a greater appreciation into the process of creating a pipe. This process would not only help increase my understanding of making the pipe, but would also help me better inform museum visitors about the pipes—whether it be through text, or docent work. In many instances I was unable to use traditional techniques and resources to create my pipe, but I still believe that creating the pipe proved valuable in enhancing my phenomenological understanding of the process.

Unfortunately, I was unable to procure catlinite and instead used soapstone as it has similar properties. Using a drill, I created the hole a few centimetres from where the base would be. Using a saw, I cut some of the excess stone around the bottom of the piece to form a rough base. I then started on the bowl. I used a sculpting tool to create a small indent and then used my sculpting knife to start making the indent larger and more circular. I then used a file attached to my drill to bore a hole for the bowl. I continued boring until I reached the hole in the base. This proved easier said than done. On my first attempt, even though I measured as best as I could, I missed the hole in the stem, bypassing it and creating a hole in the side of the pipe. After starting again with a new piece of soapstone, I was able to get the bowl to intersect with the hole in the stem. I again used my saw to take away more stone to make the basic shape of the pipe. One of the most difficult parts about creating a bird is the beak. To make the beak, small slivers of stone had to be taken off to make a cone. On more than one occasion, the beak broke off and I had to start whittling the stone down again. Once the basic shape of the bird was created, I used sandpaper to further refine the shape of the pipe. After this, I used a small tool to add details to the bird. I then re-sanded the piece in lieu of the sandstone buffer to make it as smooth as I could. Finally, I placed it in an oven at 60 degrees Celsius for 10 minutes. It was at this point that I realized I was not supposed to drill through the entire base of the pipe. In order to fix the problem, I made a plug out of the stone. I then applied some stone powder mixed with water over the plug, as a sort of cement, and re-sanded the area.

In total, it took me around eight hours to create one pipe (figure 2). This process made me realize how much work really goes into making such a small pipe. Hopewell crafters would have to really know their material in order to create such beautiful pieces. When I tried, I had very little luck drilling by hand; these crafters were able to make holes using reeds or wood (Greber & Ruhl, 1989). Even the smallest tasks, like lining up the hole in the base with the hole in the bowl, can actually be extremely difficult to accomplish. I had to try several times before making a full pipe. Overall, the process of creating a Hopewell effigy pipe gave me a great deal of insight into the things that a Hopewell carver may have experienced and allowed me to better appreciate these important Hopewell objects.

**References**


Badame, Anthony  The Power of the Pipe


Smoking Pipe Compositions and Styles as Evidence of the Social Affiliations of Mortuary Ritual Participants at the Tremper Site, Ohio. *Gathering Hopewell* (pp. 533-552) New York: Springer.


Figure 1. The typical attributes of a Hopewell Effigy Pipe (Townsend & Sharp, 2004).

Figure 2. Finished pipe