Review of Transforming the Dead: Culturally Modified Bone in the Prehistoric Midwest

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The subtitle says it all: This volume of collected essays constitutes a review of the surprisingly sparse sample of culturally modified human bone from pre-Columbian archaeology sites in the American Midwest. The editors—Eve Hargrave, Shirley Schermer, Kristen Hedman, and Robin Lillie—present the goals and layout of the book in the first chapter. The chapters included in the volume originated as presentations in a session entitled “Human Bone as Cultural Object: A Midwestern Perspective” at the 2008 Midwest Archaeology Conference. Starting with detailed descriptions of the objects and their contexts, the intent is to “encourage and facilitate further research into the meaning, function, and significance” of the objects and highlight their variability chronologically and regionally. Beyond that, the authors were charged with interpreting the modified elements from a theoretical perspective of their own choosing. The volume is arranged chronologically, with sections covering the (Middle) Woodland, Mississippian, and Late Prehistoric periods, with two chapters in a final section taking a broader perspective.

In the Woodland section, Stephen Nawrocki and Paul Emanovsky examine caches modified human mandibles from the Middle Woodland Mount Vernon (GE) mound in Indiana and similarly processed human and non-human (felids, canids and ursids) mandibles and maxillae from the roughly contemporaneous Tremper mound in Ohio. The authors take a rigorous forensic taphonomy approach which details the perimortem and postmortem modifications to the bone and then extrapolates the causes of those modifications based on comparison to known or experimental cases. They conclude, among other things, that mandibles were obtained and processed within days of death and ground, not cut, to shape. Holes for suspension were drilled at each end of the half jaws, but in at least some cases holes had been drilled in the rami, possibly for suspension during processing. Those sections of the rami were removed during subsequent shaping, leaving only a trace on some of the specimens. The authors refrain from speculating on the specific uses or meaning of the jaws. Dawn Cobb looks at similar objects recovered from Middle Woodland mounds in the central Illinois River valley. She provides detailed descriptions of the modified jaws, but her interest lies more in their contexts and associated material. She also notes some differences with similar objects from Indiana and Ohio, including those that Nawrocki and Emanovsky discuss. Cobb is not quite as reticent in speculating about the meanings of the mandibles and maxillae. In chapter 4, Cheryl Johnston questions the simplistic dichotomy of trophy of war vs. revered ancestors to account for culturally modified human remains in Ohio Middle Woodland contexts, specifically from the Hopewell site. She offers four hypotheses—war trophy, revered ancestor, momento mori, and ritual object—and compares the demography of the modified remains, the individuals with whom the objects are interred, and the general population. Basically, the sample sizes are too
small to arrive at definitive conclusions, although she does note that the objects were drawn from both sexes and there were probably multiple reasons for creating them.

Chris Carr and Anna Novotny take a very different approach. They interpret the arrangement of human remains and associated objects as a set of tableaus relating Ohio Hopewelian beliefs regarding the soul’s journey in the afterlife. Two components are central to their interpretations. One is the notion that these tableaus are ritual dramas, a concept the authors carefully define. The second is Duday’s hyper-taphonomic method of burial analysis, whereby, for example, manipulation vs. decomposition and shifting can be differentiated in the position of skeletal elements in the grave or chamber. Anne Lee and Chery Johnston examine a different class of objects: phallic batons, one definitely and another presumably Hopewell, housed in the collections of the Ohio Historical society. Looking cross-culturally, they suggest such these objects might have been used in fertility rituals, in initiation and defloration rituals, as symbolic substitutes, or, most parsimoniously, as utilitarian devices. The final chapter in the Woodland section, by Shirley Shermer and Robin Lillie, details several rondelles cut from skulls and a drilled or perforated mandible like those in earlier chapters, a drilled canine and a drilled phalanx from eastern Iowa. They also describe a possible pulley type ear spool cut from a human cranium. As in earlier chapters, the authors offer a number of possible interpretations for these objects.

In the first chapter of the Mississippian Period section, Eve Hargrave and Della Cook reconstruct the life history of two utilitarian objects made from human bone, an awl made from an ulna and what they interpret as a dibble (digging tool) fashioned from a proximal femur. Both implements were recovered from the large submound 51 deposit at Cahokia, probably the residue from feasting events and the possible dismantling of one or more charnel houses. As is the case for a number of the chapters in this volume, precise forensic and taphonomic description and analysis is followed by a discussion and conclusion characterized by “may have been,” “perhaps,” and “could potentially have.” They primarily focus on the femur dibble, noting that the presence of tobacco seeds, but not maize, in the submound 51 deposits may indicate its use in spring planting of maize or the planting of tobacco. In chapter 9, Katie Zejdlik describes a human tibia modified for use as a flesher recovered from the Aztalan site in Wisconsin. The bone appears to have been broken and gnawed by animals before being sharpened and drilled, presumably for a wrist strap or other attachment. The style is reminiscent of Plains fleshers. The tool maker may not have recognized the bone as human, as discarded and broken human and animal bone are found across the site. If the bone was recognized as human, this raises a number of questions, none of which can be answered at present. While briefly describing three other modified human bones from the Angel site in southern Indiana, Della Cook and Cheryl Munson focus on a fourth bone, a fragment of frontal with a “stepped-fret” edge. They exhaustively review similar design elements from other Mississippian sites, and fairly persuasively conclude that the fragment comes from a rattle, or possibly a mask, in the form of a human skull, imagery relating to Red Horn or Morning Star. Modified human bone was also found at other Mississippian sites in southwestern Indiana and west-central Kentucky. Munson, Cook and Mary Powell detail two (half) mandibles, two clavicles and an ulna from this region in chapter 11. One of the mandibles was drilled through the ramus and clearly suspended, and both were potentially displayed, as was perhaps the ulna. From the cut marks on the clavicles, they infer that trophy arms were possibly removed, the clavicles left behind with the rest of the body. The authors think it more likely these bones represent trophy taking rather than ancestor veneration.
Modified human bone has likewise been recovered from the Late Prehistoric Period, as
documented by Kristin Hedman from two sites on the south side of Chicago. The Hoxie Farm
site produced part of an incised parietal. More interesting objects came from the nearby Anker
site. These included bone tubes made from the shafts of a humerus and a femur, another femur
turned into a rasp (for making sound), and a tibia shaft converted into a pipe stem. Much can be
guessed about these objects based on historic and ethnographic accounts, but in the end we are
pretty much left calling them ritual objects. Kathleen Blue describes grooved/notched human
teeth recovered from four late prehistoric sites from the Red Wing locality in Minnesota and
Wisconsin. Eleven teeth were found with a 4.5-5.5 year old child burial at the Fort Sweney site,
seemingly suspended as part of a necklace or collar decoration. The other teeth, ten in all, were
found randomly isolated in midden deposits at three other sites. Blue surveys the use of animal
teeth as adornments as far back as Neanderthal examples 45,000 years ago, and the first use of
human teeth in the Aurignacian slightly later. While she can place the Red Wing teeth in this
broader context, she doesn’t speculate on why the grooved teeth are found only in Red Wing
locality sites during this period, and nowhere else in the northern Midwest. In the final
descriptive/interpretative chapter, Lillie and Schermer report on a number of incised and
polished cranial fragments from Oneota sites in Iowa. The most intriguing example is a fairly
complete cranium from southwestern Iowa. It was found on a sandbar in the Nodaway River,
apparently eroded from a site somewhere upstream. The design motifs suggest it is Oneota. Of
particular note is the fact that it may offer insight into the modification procedures, including that
multiple incised fragments from sites may come from the same skull.

In the final chapter, Maria Smith provides a very useful overview of the volume and
contextualizes the findings in the broad cosmological traditions of Native Americans known
from ethnohistoric and recent sources. She notes several patterns that emerge from the preceding
chapters, such as the Middle Woodland modified human bone appears to be primarily ritual or
sacred in nature and is found in graves or other specific contexts, whereas Mississippian material
is less common and more generally found in midden contexts. The penultimate chapter by Linea
Sundstrom is the most telling. By focusing on the meaning of scalping, she demonstrates the
chasm to be bridged by archaeologists trying to interpret the objects described in this volume. It
is not a pretty picture. Intriguing objects are described in great detail throughout the chapters in
this book, but what they mean and how they were utilized remain only vague suppositions.
Sundstrom illuminates the reasons for the discrepancy, Smith notes that we need many more
examples, and both argue for deeper engagement with Native American beliefs.