The Prehistoric Indians of Minnesota

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The McKinstry Mounds of the Rainy River Aspect

ON THE AMERICAN SIDE of the Rainy River, at Pelland, five miles upstream from the Smith Mounds at Laurel, are two mounds of the Rainy River aspect that are known as the McKinstry Mounds.[1] They are on the east bank of the Little Fork River, which empties into the Rainy River at this point. Below the level of the top of the river bank are two distinct terraces, and the larger mound is at the western edge of the upper terrace. It is nearly circular, eighty-three feet in diameter, and it rises eight and a half feet above the level of the upper terrace and twenty feet above the lower terrace. The second mound is on the lower terrace, which is occasionally subject to inundation by floodwaters. It has been lowered by cultivation and is now four feet high, sixty feet long, and fifty feet wide.

MCKINSTRY MOUND 1 was excavated by starting at its eastern edge and continuing westward by levels, with vertical faces along the north-south lines. Digging was stopped when the line of twenty feet west was reached, because an area of extensive disturbance by earlier excavators was encountered there.

There were firehearths in the topsoil beneath the mound; and both in this area and in the fill of the mound proper a large amount of village debris was found, including broken artifacts, potsherds, flint chips, and bones of mammals, birds, and fish, notably sturgeon bones. No skeletons were found, but fragmentary human bones occurred. Two groups of thick shell beads were in the mound proper. One group consisted of twenty-two hundred disc beads lying face to face in rows, as strands of a necklace. With them were five human bones—two neck vertebrae, two kneecaps, and part of a breast bone. This had the appearance of a burial from which most of the bones had disappeared by decomposition,

[1] This article continues the discussion of the Rainy River aspect begun in the September issue of this magazine (p. 163–171). The earlier article describes the type of burial, the artifacts, and the pottery of the culture as revealed by excavations of mounds at Lake Vermilion and Laurel.

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although those present are among the more fragile human bones, and are not those most resistant to decay.

A total of 7,780 potsherds recovered proved to be almost exclusively of the Laurel type. Of the 6,206 body sherds included, 99.84 per cent had smooth surfaces; and the presence of thickened and pointed bases was attested by several sherds. Not one of the decorated sherds was of the Blackduck type. The decorative impressions were like those of the Laurel sherds from Pike Bay Mound and Smith Mound 4, but there were differences in the frequencies of occurrence of the principal types.

These differences may be significant. Pike Bay Mound, might represent an earlier period than Smith Mound 4 because of the much better state of preservation of the human bones in the latter. If so an increase of dentate stamping at the expense of push-and-pull bands is indicated. McKinstry Mound 1, from which the human bones had nearly vanished, is like Pike Bay Mound in showing a low frequency of dentate stamping. Though the use of push-and-pull bands is much less common than at Pike Bay Mound, at McKinstry Mound 1 it is still three times as frequent as at Smith Mound 4. An intermediate position, earlier than Smith Mound 4 is indicated.

Among the more significant artifacts recovered were a few objects of copper, including an open bracelet perforated at each end, twenty-nine socketed antler points, and twenty-five cut beaver incisor teeth. A total of a hundred and twenty-eight objects of chipped stone included twelve arrow points, all of the stemmed variety, and forty-two end scrapers. The two necklaces of shell beads, when strung, averaged a hundred beads to the foot. One string was twenty-two feet long, the other eight.

McKinstry Mound 2 proved to be extremely interesting, as well as rather puzzling. It contained approximately ninety-six skeletons, which gave evidence of a wide variety of treatment in the disposal of the remains, including primary and secondary burial, disarticulation, and cremation in place. Nearly a third of the 8,256 potsherds were of the Blackduck type, and the balance were of the Laurel type, so in this mound there was a very evident admixture of the two cultures.

As the mound was elongated from north to south, digging began at the eastern edge along a front of sixty feet and continued to the west for forty feet, to a line ten feet west of the middle or north-south axis. This area was divided into ten-foot squares. The twelve outer squares, where the mound fill was shallow, were excavated without vertical division, but in the inner squares a division was made between an upper and lower level, the plane of division being placed arbitrarily at two feet below the mound surface.

Covering almost the entire south half of the mound was a layer of clayey earth consisting of hard pellets and fine dust that had been burned brick red by intense heat. In general the layer was about a foot deep, extending from six to eighteen inches below the surface, though thinning out at the edges. Above it in the plowed zone was a mixture of black clayey earth and the burned clay. No ashes or other remains of fire were found; evidently the fires had been above the burned layer, and the ashes had been removed by the plow. Within the burned layer were thirty skeletons in four groups of seven, five, seven, and eleven respectively, as indicated on the accompanying diagram. The group of five was at the base of the layer. It included two adults, an adolescent, and two children, with four small mortuary pots. The bones had been cremated by the intense heat and some were reduced to powder. The pots were much over-fired and brittle, and of a brick red color. One adult and the adolescent clearly had been interred as primary burials, but both adults and the adolescent had the eye sockets filled with clay which had been fused into hard plugs by the heat. With one adult were pieces of a clay mold, hardened by fire, which had been around a skull. The exterior was smooth, but the interior showed the impressions of the teeth and lower jaw, and also the deep impressions of coarse twisted fibers or strings. This group apparently was interred before there was any fire on the mound surface, and it is considered to be the first burial of the upper level. It was twelve feet south and seven feet east of the mound center.

Immediately northwest of this group was another consisting of the skeletons of two adults, an adolescent, two children, and two infants, six of which were found in a pit dug into, but not through, the burned layer. The pit had been refilled with mixed materials and a fire made above it hot enough to char the bones but not to cremate them or to produce a uniform color in the mixed earth. The seventh skeleton, one of the two infants, was in a separate shallow pit at the southwest edge of the group burials. It had not been affected by the fires above the charred bones and was apparently buried later.

Adjoining this group on the northwest was a third in a pit containing four adults, three adolescents, and four children. This group was immediately south of the center stake. A group found in a pit southeast of the others included two adults, four children, and an infant. Both pits were dug into the burned layer and were refilled with mixed earth, but there were no further fires, hence no charring of the bones, and no change in the color of the mixed earth.

Among groups 1, 3, and 4, as indicated on the diagram, were five skulls having clay plugs in the eye sockets, and at least three with a

portion of the occiput removed. The skeleton of one child was wrapped in birch bark, and three more individuals had pieces of birch bark beneath them. Red ocher was found with several skeletons, and small mortuary pots, copper ornaments, and a few other objects were associated with the burials.

In the lower level of the south half of the mound, eighteen feet south and a little east of the center, was a formal burial arrangement where three rocks had been placed on a floor of red ocher. Clam shells were arranged around the rocks, and three stone scrapers were found, one within a shell. Only a few fragmentary bones remained. This burial was below the layer of burned earth and clearly had preceded it. A second burial on the lower level was at the center of the mound, where a pit had been dug into the subsoil. It contained the body of an old male buried on his back, fully flexed, and accompanied by red ocher. The disturbed character of the soil above the pit indicated that at least part of the mound was built before the pit was dug.

Burials in the north half of the mound were concentrated in a circular area about nine feet in diameter, centering at a point twelve feet north and four feet west of the mound center. In the lower level were thirty skeletons, which are not shown on the diagram, as they were directly below group 5. The lower burials are designated as group 6. For their burial the original topsoil had been removed, and the bodies placed on the subsoil. They had been shallowly covered with earth. Then in a circular area somewhat south of the burial group, but extending northward to cover its southernmost one-third, a fire had been built and the resulting accumulation of ashes and charred wood had been left in place. The fire had burned the soil beneath it to a brick red for a maximum depth of one and four-tenths feet, and had caused the cremation of two skeletons and the partial charring of four more. Later a platform was made on the soil above the burial group by placing side by side a single layer of small poles, all lying east and west. The platform was covered with a thin layer of yellow clay, and thirty-five bodies were buried there, directly above the group of thirty. In the two groups were thirty-two adults, seven adolescents, twenty-one children, and five infants. The bones of thirty-five skeletons had been more or less scattered, presumably because many bodies had been added after the limited space was already crowded. The type of burial represented was therefore doubtful, but nine of the thirty-five apparently were interred in the flesh as primary burials. Twenty-eight skeletons were in proper anatomical order, representing true primary burials, twenty-four were flexed, and four were extended at full length. Some of the flexed skeletons appeared to have been origi-

nally in a sitting position. The bones of two individuals may have represented bundle burials.

On many of the skulls, especially those of the adult males, part of the occipital bone had been removed, and many had the eye sockets filled with clay plugs. Some skeletons were liberally supplied with red ocher, and twenty-seven mortuary pots as well as other artifacts accompanied the burials. Baskets of birch bark were found with the charred burials of the lower group. As birch bark was found with the charred burials in group 3, it is possible that the heat acted as a preserving agent.

Though the usual form of burial in this mound was primary — a Blackduck trait as opposed to the typical bundle burial of Smith Mound 4 — the mutilation of the skulls and faces is so unusual as to definitely point to Laurel people. The small pottery vessels appeared to point the same way, for with the exception of six pots treated with the cord-wrapped paddle, all of which were associated with the lower level burials, the body surfaces were plain. The decorative treatment, however, belied this appearance. Twenty-eight vessels had punctate impressions, a trait common to both cultures; but sixteen had cord-wrapped stick impressions, a Blackduck trait, and only one had the distinctive Laurel push-and-pull band. No dentate or wavy-line stamped impressions occurred. Furthermore, the use of small pots as mortuary offerings is a well-established Blackduck trait, but there is only one known case of a pot accompanying a Laurel burial, and that was a large cooking vessel.

The distribution of the potsherds proved to be significant. Blackduck sherds comprised 32.5 per cent of all sherds from the mound, but in the southern half they were 22 per cent of all sherds, and in the northern half 42 per cent. In the ten-foot squares excavated at two levels, 22.8 per cent of lower level sherds and 62.2 per cent of upper level sherds were Blackduck. In the squares to the north where the two large burial groups were found, however, the percentage of Blackduck sherds was 73.3 in the lower level, and 87.7 in the upper. These differences lead to the conclusion that the earth of the mound fill was taken from a habitation site on which peoples of both the Rainy River and Headwaters Lakes aspects had lived. As the relative proportion of Blackduck sherds is nearly three times as high in the upper levels of the mound as in the lower, it follows that the Headwaters Lakes people were the later arrivals, and that the higher level of the mound was added by them after they had lived at the site long enough for their cultural debris to exceed in quantity that of their predecessors. It also follows that all the group burials were made by Headwaters Lakes people.

It is not certain that all portions of the mound were erected by the

Headwaters Lakes people. The single burial in the southern end of the mound, described as a formal burial arrangement, had every appearance of being considerably older than the group burials. Blackduck sherds constituted 50 per cent of all sherds in the upper level of the square in which this burial was located, but only 2.6 per cent of the lower level. In the lower levels of this square and of the four immediately adjoining it, the frequency of Blackduck sherds was only 6.2 per cent. Thus in a fairly large area at the south of the mound the frequency of Laurel sherds was 93.8 per cent. It is logical to believe that people of the Rainy River aspect had constructed a low mound there, probably about thirty feet in diameter, above a single burial. The presence of Blackduck sherds in this original mound may be accounted for by the later activities of the Blackduck people, and by the artificial stratification employed in digging the mound. The pit burial at the mound center was probably dug through the northern edge of the original mound by Headwaters Lakes people. Later they extended the mound to the north and increased its height. Group 6 may be the oldest group burial, as all the pots with cord-wrapped paddle markings were associated with this group. Group 2 would appear to be the oldest of the group burials in the south half of the mound.

Though the mound yielded a rich treasure of artifacts, a discussion of the objects which accompanied the burials and are presumed to be of Headwaters Lakes origin is not pertinent to a study of Rainy River culture. Objects in the mound fill included nineteen socketed antler points and twenty-six pointed beaver teeth. These artifacts are characteristic of the Rainy River culture, and it is significant that only two of each type were found in the upper level. In McKinstry Mound 1 all the arrowheads were stemmed. In Mound 2 nine were stemmed and five were of the small triangular type. The presence of the triangular points may be credited to the Headwaters Lakes component.

If the group burials are those of Headwaters Lakes people, how is the practice of the removal of a portion of the occiput to be explained? This was a common practice of the Rainy River people, but it is not found in pure Headwaters Lakes mounds. When the people of the latter culture camped on habitation sites of the earlier people they doubtless became familiar with Laurel pottery and this may have influenced them to adopt plain surfacing rather than the cord-wrapped paddle treatment of the mortuary vessels. In intruding the bodies of their dead into mounds of the Rainy River culture they probably noted the custom of removal of part of the occiput and may have imitated it. But they did not puncture the long bones as their predecessors did. The ancient Egyp-

tians removed the brains to aid in the preservation of the skull. The replacement with clay of the eyeballs and, in at least one instance, of the soft parts of the face suggests that like the Egyptians the Headwaters Lakes people were attempting skull preservation, and they removed the brains for that purpose. The Rainy Lakes people are believed to have punctured skulls and long bones to secure the brains and marrow for food or for industrial uses and activities, such as tanning.

The explanation suggested above should not rule out the very real possibility that the two peoples were in contact with one another. The time interval between the two successive occupations of the site is not known, and the Rainy River people, after abandoning the site, may not have moved far from the vicinity. Direct contact between the two groups may have influenced the Headwaters Lakes people to modify their burial practices.

How THE FRONTIER community of St. Paul celebrated New Year's Day in the 1850's has been recalled by many a pioneer, but few descriptions have the life and color contained in Judge Charles E. Flandrau's account. It is quoted here from his "Reminiscences," published in volume 9 of the *Minnesota Historical Collections*. He recalls that "The early settlers brought out with them the old fashioned way of celebrating New Year's day, and when that event occurred, the whole town was alive with sport. Everybody kept open house and expected everybody else to call and see them. No vehicle that could carry a party was allowed to remain idle, and from morning until late in the night the entire male population was on the move. The principal houses were those of the Ramseys, the Gormans, the Borups, the Oakeses, the Warrens, the Coxes, the Robertsons, and the Rices. . . . We also had Fort Snelling, with its Old School Army officers, famous for their courtesy and hospitality, and the delightful household of Franklin Steele, the sutler; and there was Henry H. Sibley, at Mendota, to whom the finest amenities of life were a creed: all of whom assisted on New Year's day. There was great strife among the entertainers as to who should have the most elaborate spread, and the most brilliant and attractive array of young ladies to greet the guests. A register of the callers was always kept, and great was the victory of the hostess who recorded the greatest number."