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THE RED DEER RIVER GRAVE: AN HISTORIC BURIAL

by

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CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	3
INTRODUCTION	5
LOCATION AND ENVIRONMENT	6
THE EXCAVATION	7
THE BURIAL	9
The Grave Chamber	
Skeletal Positioning	
Skeletal Remains	
GRAVE GOODS	10
Introduction	
The Upper Body	
The Pelvic Area	
The Lower Body	
SUMMARY	22
INTERPRETATION	23
Dating	
The Red Deer River Fur Trade	
Ethnic Identification	
NOTES	26
REFERENCES	27

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No seams were found in the much larger section of woollen cloth over the left chest and arm. However, this section of cloth is evidently a part of the same garment as the woollen pieces discussed in the previous paragraph. The presence of seams in some portions of this garment suggests that it was a shirt or a coat, rather than a blanket which was simply placed over the body. As there seems to have been no sleeves, this garment may have been a vest.

Fabrics, cotton — A sample of the fabric which was worn over the woollen garment was also submitted to the R.C.M.P. laboratory. This fabric was found to consist of threads of green cotton fibres, interwoven with flat copper strands. It is not known what kind of garment is represented by this material as only a few fragments were recovered (Fig. 33).

Fabric, other — Cloth was also associated with the silver bands which encircled the skull. A fragment of this cloth has been analysed as containing a warp of linen, while the filling is of wool. The appearance of the edge (selvage) indicates that it may have been a piece of ribbon. While the present colour is dark brown, the original colouration cannot be ascertained. Several ribbons appear to have been associated with the head gear.

The Pelvic Area

Glass beads — During excavation, the first objects recovered were white 'seed beads' which were scattered throughout the grave fill. These small glass beads are irregular in size but tend to be roughly round. The length of the beads varies from 2 mm to 3.5 mm with few beads of exactly the same length. However, the average diameter is 3.5 mm and this varies little from bead to bead.

With the exception of 3 blue beads, 2 found in the grave fill and another perched on the right pubis of the pelvis, all of the beads are opaque white. In 1967, a sample of these beads was submitted to Mr. Richard Conn, then of the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, who considered the beads to be of a type prevalent in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is his observation that these glass beads "(a) disappeared from general use about 1830 and (b) . . . must have been associated somehow with the Northwest Company" (Conn 1968: Personal Communication).

In the field, a large mass of over 1,000 of these white beads was the first find in direct association with the skeleton (Fig. 34). No order or pattern was found among these beads and it is likely they were contained in a pouch or a pocket. A portion of this mass of beads had slipped down into the area below the left arm band. In all, some 1,502 beads were recovered from this pelvic concentration.

In laboratory excavation, 2 masses of white beads were discovered beneath each side of the pelvis. Each of these concentrations was carefully exposed. This meticulous cleaning was accompanied by frequent dabs of glue to keep exposed beads in place. Two oblong piles of beads were revealed, each one containing hundreds of beads arranged in superimposed lines (Fig. 35). Because the beads are superimposed, it is unlikely that they were fastened to clothing. A possible explanation is that the beads were in skeins or hanks as purchased from traders. According to W. C. Orchard (1929: 89):

The smaller beads, known as seed-beads, are sold in "bunches" of five or six strings, each four to six inches long, according to the size and kind of beads, and having a weight of four or five bunches to the pound.

Also, John MacDonnell, a writer attached to a Northwest Company post near the mouth of the Qu'Appelle River during the 1790s, mentions in his records the barter of blue and white beads in the form of bunches. This arrangement of beads appears to be what was placed with the Red Deer River burial, in pockets or pouches.

Why nearly all of the beads found in the burial were white is not known. The presence of a few blue beads is significant. It is known that blue and white seed beads were very popular among the plains Indians, especially during the 1830s and 1840s.

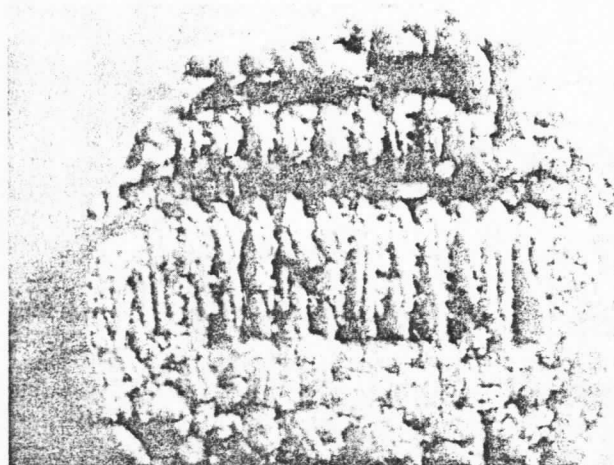


Figure 33 — A fragment of copper-threaded cloth, found 2 inches from the right shoulder.



Figure 34 — An early stage of exposure of the lower skeleton with bead concentration and sash fragment in the pelvic area.

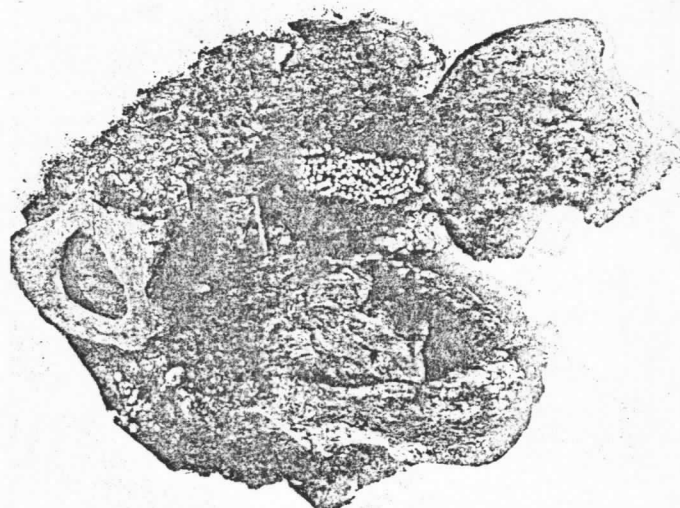


Figure 35 — The pelvic area, with concentration of glass beads found beneath the right side.

SUMMARY

The initial stages of excavation revealed that the burial was lying at an angle, sloping into the river. Since the excavation was kept level, the first skeletal remains uncovered were the lower limbs and the pelvis. The upper portions lay at a greater depth. The grave originally had been dug out to a depth of about 2 feet. It was subrectangular in shape, about 3 feet wide and 5-1/2 feet long. In preparing the grave, birch bark sheets were first laid down over the inside of the grave bottom and sides. This lining was then covered with a layer of moss. Over the moss, another layer of birch bark was placed. The body was laid on this uppermost layer of birch bark.

The exposure of the lower half of the skeleton resulted in the immediate discovery of a mass of small white beads in the pelvic area. These beads were probably once placed in a pouch. Similar white glass beads were frequent finds, scattered throughout the grave fill. This suggests that they were thrown in randomly as the grave was filled.

Near the bead mass, a fragment of cloth was recovered. Composed of linen with copper strands, this strip was all that remained of a sash tied about the dead person's waist. Hawk bells were found to the right of the pelvis and clumps of these were also recovered from the knee area. Animal disturbance made interpretation of the use of these bells difficult. It is likely though, that they were attached to bands of cloth and were fastened about the legs as garter decorations. With these bells were many white beads. A small piece of silver also may have been attached to a garter.

Beneath the pelvis, several concentrations of artefacts were present. Two compact masses of white seed beads were found beneath each half of the pelvis. Evidently, these masses were originally skeins or hanks of beads. In this same area, the birch bark liner was found to be covered with 65 small lead balls.

A flint was found early in the excavation, wedged firmly against the birch bark liner to the left of the pelvis. A silver brooch was recovered to the right of the pelvis. The flint, probably for striking fire, appeared undisturbed, while the brooch, found in a nest, had been displaced by some animal.

The upper body was more complex with a profusion of associated artefacts. Over the rib cage, 4 separate layers of materials were found. These layers were particularly clear in the large sections of matted, felt-like material that were removed from the left shoulder and rib cage. Beneath this dark organic mat, the blackened and dessicated skin of the left side of the body was well preserved. Examination of this felted layer revealed that a garment of thick woollen cloth lay next to the skin of the youth. Over this was a layer of cotton cloth with copper threads. The third layer was made up of a red pigment in some areas and white beads in others. This miniature stratigraphy was topped by a sheet of birch bark.

While the layers of wool and cotton represent the remains of cloth garments, the layer of beads and pigment probably represent the remains of a leather garment. If so, the leather was decorated with an open work design of white beads with the open areas painted red. However, no bead pattern could be discerned, nor was any leather found. Open work beading was practiced by several groups, including the Ojibwa and Iroquois (Densmore 1929: 183).

A gorget was present over the upper chest (Fig. 38). This was encircled by a hoop of brass rod hung about the neck. Adjacent to the gorget and surrounding the neck was a wide wampum belt. This belt had been wrapped about the throat twice. In the front, silver crosses, ear bobs, and hearts had been suspended from the belt. The importance of wampum to the Ojibwa is discussed in the section dealing with ethnic identification. The Northwest Company traded wampum with the Ojibwa and this

trade is mentioned in the journals of the period; for instance, Charles Chaboillez has left the following record (Hickerson 1959: 373):

— they Traded Wampum for Six Skins — say 8 Branches
P S: (our South Neighbours gives Ten) Silver Works four
Skins 1 Blanket 3 Points — 3 Skins —

Initial excavations in the skull area revealed a small bone tube between the tobacco container and the mandible (Fig. 16). Also found was a small cylinder of silver, near the ramus. On each side of the skull, a silver ear wheel was present, and on the left side, the silver ear wheel was paired with one of brass (Fig. 38). A mass of ear bobs, strung on a loop of cloth, was suspended from each ear wheel.

The skull was encircled by 2 silver head bands, one wide and the other narrow (Fig. 38). One other band was present as well; this was composed of a strip of cloth to which a line of silver brooches had been fastened. Ribbon fragments, recovered beneath and on each side of the skull, were evidently fastened to the silver head bands.

Shell and bone hair pipes were numerous and were concentrated to the left of the skull. A total of 3 shell and 10 bone hair pipes were recovered. These seem to have been fastened in the hair. Also to the left of the skull were 2 knives, a crooked knife and a clasp knife, as well as a mirror, 2 fragments of silver, a tube of German silver, a bell, an ear bob, the teeth of a comb, and fragments of cloth. About a foot above this area, a pipe was found. Hawk bells and white beads were associated with it.

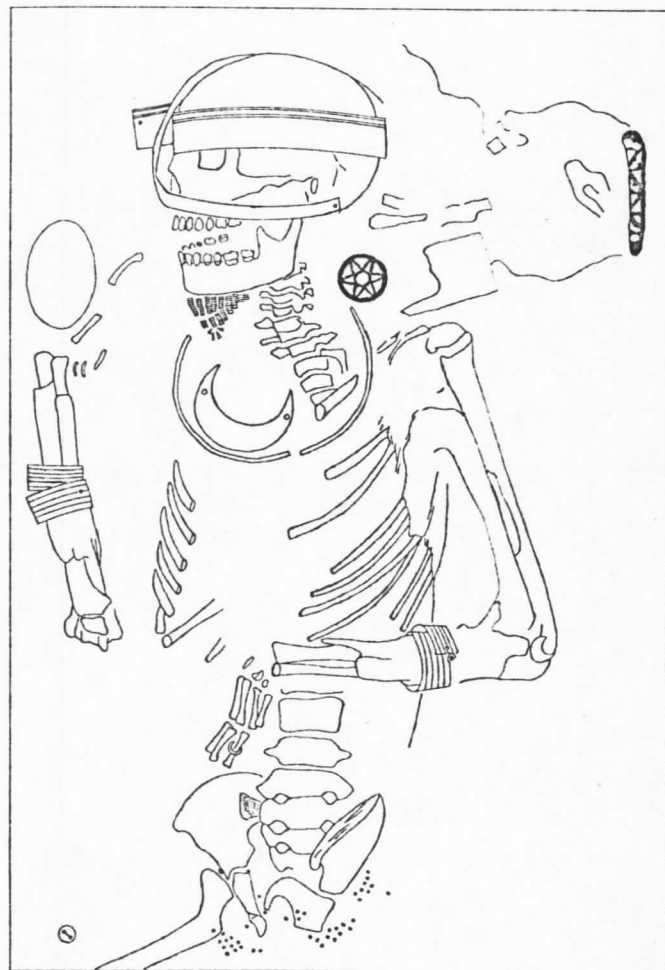


Figure 38 — Final stage of field exposure; also showing lead shot concentration in the pelvic area.

cing evidence of ethnic identity. One of the most useful accounts in this regard is Peter Grant's description of Ojibwa clothing styles of the period (1960: 317):

The dress of the men consists of a molton capot, or coat, in the Canadian fashion, which comes down to the knees; a gun screw or a small peg of wood is sufficient to fasten it about the breast and serves in place of buttons; they tighten it around the body with a worsted belt, in which the cassetete and knife are occasionally worn. For breech clout, they pass a narrow slip of bleu cloth between the thighs and fix it on by means of a string, curiously ornamented with the joint bone of a swan's wing, which they tie around the naked waist; the ends of the breech clout fall down behind and before for modesty sake.

This quotation describes a clothing style to which the Red Deer River individual may have conformed, although the evidence is not complete enough to verify the details. Certainly, joints of bone were not found about the pelvic area, although they were found associated with the skull. However, the coat may have been similar, although at the Red Deer River one of the garments did have brass buttons rather than pegs to fasten it.

No evidence of the breech clout was found, although it may have been worn. Remains of the sash, "worsted belt", were recovered. Grant continues (1960: 318):

The leggings are made of moltons, strouds, or scarlet cloth, without any particular regard to the shape of the leg, but a narrow wing, or border, projects the whole length of the outside of the leggin and curves about the ankle into the shoe. This border is garnished with gartering riband and beads, and is fixed by means of tape to the breech clout string above the hanches and secured below the knee with garters.

Over the whole, they wear a white blanket, with which they wrap the body from the shoulders down to the ankles.

Ornamented garters were a part of the costume of the Red Deer River individual. Whether or not they were placed over "garnished" leggings is not known, although the many white beads associated with the lower limb bones may once have been sewn on leggings.

Grant writes nothing about the wearing of silver head bands. He does state that during the winter, "they wear a cloth cap resembling a turban, but in other seasons they generally go bareheaded, except for a few . . . , who wear a piece of the skin of an otter, or of some other favorite animal, wrapped about the head, merely as an ornament, or out of some religious whim" (Grant 1960: 318).

The hair of the Red Deer River individual appears to have been left free and long, with only 2 small strands braided and ornamented. Peter Grant has noted that the men utilized a variety of different hair styles. Some let their hair grow long while others cut it short, leaving a long tuft at the top of the head. The hair style of the Red Deer River individual may have been similar to one of the styles described by Grant (1960: 316):

The young men allow several long locks to fall down over the face, ornamented with ribands, silver broaches, &c.; they gather up another lock from behind the head into a small club wrapped up with very thin plates of silver, in which they fix the tail feathers of the eagle, or any other favorite bird.

The buried individual certainly did have decorated "locks", although a "small club" does not seem to have been present.

The great importance of silver goods to these Ojibwa of the late 18th and early 19th centuries is clear from the accounts of Northwest Company men of the period. Again, the writings of Peter Grant provide valuable information. Grant (1960: 316) describes the great pains the Ojibwa took to stretch their perforated ear lobes. These frequently hung to the shoulders and were ornately decorated:

Brass wire is in much repute for this purpose; the whole rim of the ear is encircled with this wire, which projects out from the side of the head like an arch and from which hang various ornaments of different forms; the most fashionable are made of silver, resembling a wheel and rather larger than a Spanish dollar. They wear silver bracelets, either on the naked arm or over the sleeve of the coat. The ornaments for the nose hang down about half an inch and nearly touch the upper lip. They put great value on wampum beads and wear several strings of them about the neck, or suspended from the hair and ears.

Grant's description of individuals wearing silver ear wheels, bracelets, and wampum beads is remarkably similar to the ornamentation of the individual in the Red Deer River grave.

In addition, John Tanner frequently mentions the love of his people for silver ornaments. Tanner was particularly distressed to lose all of his silver when his lodge accidentally burned. He also describes a robbery in which a woman's silver-covered dress was stripped of its finery. It is evident that women as well as men wore silver:

They wear silver bracelets on their wrists, rings on their fingers, beads about the neck and a profusion of silver crosses and other ornaments dangling down upon the breast. Their ear and nose ornaments are the same as the men's, though not in the same profusion; their ears are not distorted to such an unnatural size, nor encumbered with silver wheels and brass wire. (Grant 1960: 319)

Clearly, the presence of ear wheels and the great profusion of silver ornaments mark the Red Deer River burial as that of a male. Of course, the pipe and tobacco container, as well as the gorget and wampum belt, are also male-oriented artifacts. Both the burial characteristics and the bodily decorations are consistent, therefore, with those of the Ojibwa. The likelihood that this burial is not Cree is strengthened by a statement made about them by John MacDonnell (1960: 277):

Silver works and wampum are of no value in trading with them, and they never wear any of these articles as ornaments. They dress generally after the Assiniboine manner, all in leather shirts and leggings, a buffalo robe or a blanket, by way of covering, over the whole.

All of this information indicates that the Red Deer River burial is that of a young Ojibwa male, a member of a group which had moved into the region just a few years earlier. This teenage boy died sometime within the first two decades of the 19th century. The style of his burial, his clothing, and his ornaments is characteristic of the Ojibwa of this period.

NOTES

1. The following note on the grave-foot profile was submitted by Morgan J. Tamplin, presently at the Department of Anthropology, University of Arizona, Tucson.

"The description and diagram of the profile at the foot of the grave indicate the presence of a normally developed soil profile in a sandy parent material, resting discontinuously on a layer of gravel.

Lacking information on the vegetational cover, particle size or chemical composition of the soil, it would be misleading to attempt a formal classification, especially as no soil survey has been conducted in this region, to my knowledge. However, the profile seems to correspond closely to the Orthic Dark Grey soils of the Davidson Series described by Ehrlich, et al (1962: 38-39) for the Swan River Map Area south of the site. This may be similar to the Grey-Podolic soils described at the same latitude as the site in Saskatchewan by Mitchell, et al (1950). These classificatory systems are not strictly comparable, but there is enough overlap between them to describe the profile fairly closely. Note that the use of the terms Dark Grey, or Grey, in the formal classification is descriptively misleading, as is the term Podsollic as the soil is not a true podsol. Besides sample analysis, a Munsell colour description of the horizons would be required.