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THE SOPHER CELT: AN INDICATOR OF EARLY

PROTOHISTORIC TRADE IN HURONIA

ABSTRACT

A unique iron bar celt, excavated from the Sopher site Huron ossuary, provides a rare and early example of European trade good in northern Huronia. Analysis also suggests that the Huron protohistoric can be separated into two temporal divisions according to the nature of trade items found.

INTRODUCTION

Excavation within the early protohistoric Sopher site ossuary (Fig. 1.), a half mile north of Bass Lake, west of Orillia, Ontario, revealed a unique form of iron bar celt, which differs from other specimens recovered in southwestern Ontario, New York and Pennsylvania. Recovered in August 8, 1962, at the 71.25-inch depth of the ossuary, the Sopher example lay within an associated bundle burial (Noble 1968: 120,200) deposited on the bark-lined ossuary floor (Fig. 2). The under surface of the celt proved to be more severely corroded (Fig. 3.) than the upper surface, but subsequent cleaning and preservation by the sodium-zinc-wax technique has restored the specimen to its near original form. Currently, the celt and associated site materials reside in the archaeological collections at the National Museums of Canada.

CELT DESCRIPTION

Manufactured by the malleated fusion of two thin slabs of iron, each about 6 mm. thick (Fig. 4), the Sopher celt measures 13 mm. in maximum thickness. The sharpened blade, 55 mm. wide, exhibits the widest portion of the celt and tapers over the length of the specimen to a narrower 34 mm. width at the butt. This proximal end is distinctively indented, a feature not reported to date for other early bar celts in the Northeast. The length of the specimen from the point of indenture at the butt to the distal blade edge is 110 mm., while the maximum length including the proximal "ears" is 113 mm. In its cleaned condition, the Sopher celt weighs 13.25 ounces, and displays no form of hallmark.

TEMPORAL AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Marked by the introduction of European trade goods prior to the actual appearance of Europeans themselves, the protohistoric period in Huronia probably does not commence much before 1580 A.D. In 1583, Captain Christopher Carlile (Haklyut 1965: Vol. 11, 723) noted that European commerce only resumed on the upper St. Lawrence River circa 1580, owing to a relapse in the hostile attitude of the indigenous Indians who had been outraged and provoked by Cartier's 1534 kidnapping episode at Hochelaga. Shortly after 1580, it appears that the Hurons were not in direct contact with the St. Lawrence traders, but rather were bartering through intermediaries, probably neighboring Algonkians or possibly remnant St. Lawrence Iroquois. It was only around 1600 related Lalemant (Jesuit Relations 1959: Vol. 16, 229), that the Hurons themselves actively engaged in direct trading with the French. At this time too, the Hurons apparently changed their trading route to the northerly French and Mattawa River system. Technically, the Huron protohistoric terminates around 1609 when the first European is believed to have entered northern Huronia (Trigger 1961: 14, 24), probably in the person of Etienne Brule. As such, it is within this 1580-1609 temporal span that the Sopher celt is considered to fall.

European trade to Huronia. It is increasingly apparent that there are changes in kind and degree with regard to trade items appearing on protohistoric Huron villages, and the changes occur at slightly differing times.

Early protohistoric Huron-Petun sites invariably produce few and often strictly utilitarian trade items. Exemplary of this is Sopher which yielded a small copper knife tip in addition to the iron bar celt (Noble 1968: 199, 255). Too, a single piece of sheet brass is known from the Sidey-MacKay village (Wintemberg 1946: 154, 156), while at the Benson site (Emerson 1954: 203) a small iron awl and a few rolled copper beads were recovered. Farther to the south, the McKenzie site (Emerson 1954: 142) has also produced a few fragments of trade copper, 2 strips of sheet brass and a rolled brass bead. Originally expected to produce protohistoric trade goods, the Aurora site (Emerson 1954: 165, 185) can now definitely be stated to have such items. A single rolled brass bead was collected from this site in 1935 by Edward J. Case, and the specimen now resides in the archaeological collections at McMaster University. Each of the five components above seriates early in the Huron Petun protohistoric sequence (Noble 1968: 243), and they are estimated to date prior to 1600 A.D. Notable, glass trade beads are absent at this time.

Slightly later in time, as indicated by ceramic seriation and historic dating (Noble 1968:243), are the three sites of McMurchy, Graham-Rogers and Cahiague. Spanning the later protohistoric to contact periods, they produce a more varied and richer complement of trade goods than the earlier protohistoric villages. At McMurchy (Bell, 1953), 3 brass rings, 2 brass awls, 11 brass beads, 15 iron pieces, 2 large white glass beads and other trade items have been found, while Graham-Rogers (Bell 1952: 63) has produced iron hatchets, white glass seed beads and brass awls. The trade goods at the 1615 Cahiague site are even more numerous in variety, but have yet to be described. Clearly, there is a marked change in the types and volume of European trade goods on the later protohistoric villages, which probably reflects the post 1600 direct trading and changed trading route adopted by the Hurons.

That European trade greatly affected the Huron way of life in the historic era is well documented in the ethnohistoric and current research literature (Trigger 1961; 1969). But during the early protohistoric, the initial impact of the few trade items reaching the Hurons appears to have been negligible. Archaeologically, a subtle change in values is reflected in ossuary inclusions of grave goods. Not present in the prehistoric period, individual inclusions of valued items first find their way into ossuaries during the early protohistoric era. Thus removed from circulation, this practice of burying trade goods continued in increasing proportions during the historic period, and proved to be a telling economic expenditure for the Hurons. The Sopher celt provides an early protohistoric example of this developing and costly practice.

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