

The great Prussian military philosopher Carl von Clausewitz (1984:87) wrote that “war is merely the continuation of politics by other means.” However one chooses to define it, with the possible exception of a catastrophic natural disaster, war is the most traumatic agent of change likely to affect a society or group. It has the power to change everything. For people engaged in intergroup conflict, changes may be forced upon them, ranging from where they live, to the technology they use, to the ways in which they hunt, farm, or trade, to their political alliances, to their ideology, to their physical and mental health. The significance of war’s effect on a people is hard to overemphasize and so it must be given its due recognition as a force for change in the past.

If we underestimate war as a force for change we are likely to misinterpret a myriad of cultural phenomena impacted directly or indirectly by war. As archaeologists we typically work with the mundane material residues of the archaeological record—such as lithics, ceramics, and faunal and floral remains—and from these traces we make inferences about more complex, more ephemeral, human behaviors. We inevitably draw conclusions about settlement patterns, trade relations, technology, subsistence practices, and sometimes religion. Now take an average site report that emphasizes these lines of evidence and approaches of inquiry and reread it with an eye to war. If the people being studied were living under the constant threat of war, or were regularly participating in long-distance raiding, or were

*Conflict and Culture
Change on the Plains*

The Oneota Example

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assimilating captives taken from a group very different from their own, or were training their young boys to become warriors through overcoming an enemy, then how accurate would our interpretations really be? Would the choice of where they lived have been based more on defensibility than on proximity to the nearby chert outcroppings? Would the decorations on their pottery have been a result of the potter simply mimicking her mother's work or would it be an expression of an ideology invoking the protection of a deity responsible for war? Would the animal protein they consumed have been a result of dietary and cultural preferences, or would it simply have been a consequence of the only species available in a territory constrained by pressure from a persistent enemy? How we interpret the archaeological record and reconstruct culture history is impacted by whether past peoples were engaged in warfare, and, if so, the nature and intensity of the associated conflict.

Evidence of war can vary greatly (Dye 2009; Hollinger 2005). Obvious signs are the traces of interpersonal violence exhibited on human remains like axe wounds, decapitations, and arrow points embedded in bones, which are typically underrepresented (Milner 2005:150). Yet even these are open to challenge as evidence of feuding or domestic violence if one seeks reasons to doubt explanations of war. Somewhat less-certain lines of evidence of conflict can be found in the archaeological record as defensive fortifications, as settlement patterns reflecting concerns for defense (e.g., LeBlanc 1999), as weapons, as artistic renderings of weapons (e.g., in this volume, Greer and Greer, chapter 2; Keyser, chapter 3; and Sundstrom, chapter 4), as well as captives and victims, and as evidence of intentional burning of houses (Roper 2001) and whole villages (Ewen 1990:84–85; Tanner 1987:30). Even more open to debate is indirect evidence of war, such as the sudden truncation of trade patterns or the existence of no man's lands between territories.

The ethnohistoric studies make it clear that war was a fact of life for Native Americans. One might argue that historic accounts and oral traditions from the time of early contact show extraordinary violence and conflict due to destabilizing disease, firearms, and colonial competition resulting from European encroachments. But the preponderance of the evidence, much of which comes from the Plains and Midwest, reveals that interpersonal violence, scalping, stabbing, shootings, decapitations, mutilations, raiding, and even massacres were happening thousands of years before European contact. There is no question that warfare was occurring in the prehistoric American midcontinent. The questions now surround the nature, intensity, and consequences of that warfare and, of particular interest to me, the question of who was fighting whom (Hollinger 2005).

In the midcontinent during the late prehistoric period, I think the people responsible for the Oneota tradition were heavily involved in war. From the time the Oneota archaeological manifestation first appeared in Wisconsin and the Red Wing area of Minnesota as early as the eleventh century AD, there is evidence of conflict with non-Oneota groups. There are a number of Late Woodland villages in the area that exhibit traits suggesting a positive relationship with intrusive Mississippian populations. Many of these sites were fortified with palisades (Salkin 2000). The best-known of these was the heavily fortified temple mound complex of Aztalan in southeastern Wisconsin (Barrett 1933). The ceramics at this site are around 75 percent Late Woodland types and 25 percent Middle Mississippian, mixed in a way that suggests a site-unit intrusion of Mississippians living with cooperating Late Woodland populations (Overstreet and Clark 1995). Who did they fear? No Oneota pottery was found at Aztalan, although contemporary Oneota populations were nearby. A charnel house, a number of houses, and the palisades at Aztalan were burned and human remains found inside the walls included trophy heads, and victims of blunt-force trauma, scalping, mutilation, and burning (Barrett 1933; Holcomb 1952; Sullivan 1990a, 1990b). Burning of charnel houses was a major objective in Mississippian warfare in the Southeast (Dye and King 2007). By AD 1200 Aztalan and the related Late Woodland communities of the region were no more and Oneota populations controlled the region for the next 400 years.

This story of conflict and culture change played out again and again in interactions between Oneota and non-Oneota populations as the Oneota people and/or culture spread throughout the Midwest and eastern Plains. Oneota violence is probably best documented in the central Illinois River valley. In this region between AD 1200 and 1300, Mississippian towns like Orendorf and Larson were palisaded and then partially burned (Conrad 1991; Emerson 1986:15; Harn 1978) and skeletal remains there showed increasing levels of violence (Conrad 1993; Emerson 1999; Goodman et al. 1984:293). Around AD 1300 an Oneota population, known as the Bold Counselor phase, intruded into the region. Bold Counselor villages were located on defendable bluff-tops and some were probably palisaded, and skeletal evidence of violence is common. At the Norris Farms 36 cemetery, one of the earliest Bold Counselor phase sites, 21.6 percent of the 264 individuals excavated exhibited skeletal or contextual evidence of violence, probably the result of intermittent raiding. Men, women, and children suffered scalplings, decapitations, celt and arrow wounds, and mutilations (Milner 1992a, 1992b; Milner and Smith 1990; Milner et al. 1991a; Milner et al. 1991b; Santure 1990). The remains were exceptionally well

preserved. Poorer preservation would have caused much of the evidence of violence to go unrecognized.

Despite moving into a region where they suffered frequent attacks, they did not move away and they apparently began to merge with one of the two regional Mississippian traditions. They began cohabitating and their ceramic traditions began blending (Esarey and Conrad 1998:46). I interpret this as evidence that the Bold Counselor phase people had been invited into the central Illinois River valley by a Mississippian people with whom they had formed alliances and ties through kinship and trade (Hollinger 2005:160). They may have joined their hosts and allies in conflict against other Mississippians farther to the south (La Moine River) with whom their hosts were already fighting.

Even the great town of Cahokia and surrounding towns exhibited a concern for defense during this period. A palisade with defensive bastions enclosing 205 acres of the central precinct was built late in the twelfth-century Stirling phase and was rebuilt three more times over the next century into the Moorehead phase (Anderson 1969; Holley et al. 1990; Iseminger et al. 1990). At the same time, mound construction in the region decreased, the population decreased, and storage huts and houses at Cahokia and the East St. Louis site were burned (Trubitt 2003). By the early fourteenth century, the population at Cahokia, represented by the Sand Prairie phase, had dwindled to a fraction of its former size and Oneota of the Groves phase and the Bold Counselor phase intruded into the American Bottom region (Jackson 1998). Soon thereafter, Cahokia was completely abandoned by Middle Mississippians, probably seeking refuge among relatives in fortified towns of southeastern Missouri and Arkansas, where populations increased (Morse and Morse 1983:262–266; Morse 1990:169) as Cahokia was vacated in the face of Oneota expansion (Hollinger 2005:174–176).

Many other regions of the Midwest and Plains experienced Oneota expansion between AD 1200 and 1300 and many sites of this period have produced evidence of conflict. During the thirteenth century, the populations of the Central Plains tradition living along the Missouri River in small unfortified earthlodge hamlets in Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, and Missouri began to be attacked. Burned lodges (Roper 2001) and skeletal remains, such as were found at the Nebraska phase Cannibal House site, provide evidence of family massacres (Gilder 1913; Hollinger 2005:193). By AD 1300, they had abandoned their homes in these regions and consolidated as the Initial Coalescent tradition in southeastern South Dakota, along the Missouri River in small villages fortified with ditches and bastioned palisades. Oneota people quickly occupied the abandoned homelands of the Central Plains tradition peoples.

Even after fleeing the central Plains, the Initial Coalescent tradition people were not safe, as demonstrated by the massacre of the Crow Creek villagers. Crow Creek was one of the southernmost villages and was nearest the frontier with Oneota populations that had expanded into northwestern Iowa, southeastern South Dakota, and southwestern Minnesota. Excavations at Crow Creek revealed that the village population was massacred while the village and palisade were being rebuilt (Willey and Emerson 1993). Bodies were found inside burned houses and a mass of skeletal remains containing at least 486 individuals was found eroding from the fortification ditch. The bodies of these people had been mutilated, disarticulated, and scavenged by carnivores, and then were collected and deposited in the ditch (Gregg et al. 1981; Willey 1990; Willey and Emerson 1993; Zimmerman and Bradley 1993; Zimmerman and Whitten 1980). As many as 95.4 percent of the 415 observable crania, including men, women, and children, exhibited evidence of scalping (Willey 1990:106). Observed traumas also included arrow and celt wounds, bludgeoning, decapitation, tooth evulsion, and the removal of hands and feet, probably as trophies. I do not think that this massacre was perpetrated by a nearby and closely related Coalescent tradition village in competition for local farmland. Although Initial Coalescent villagers were probably in conflict with their Middle Missouri tradition neighbors to the north (Bamforth 1994; Kay 1996; Lehmer 1971; Winham and Calabrese 1998:316) as they were driven farther into that group's historic territory, the Crow Creek village was on the opposite side of Initial Coalescent tradition territory—the only potential enemies to the south and east of the village at that time were Oneota (Hollinger 2005:212).

By AD 1300, Oneota territories reached their maximum expansion. Oneota sites were found from central Kansas, to central Indiana, and from northern Michigan to central Missouri (Hollinger 2005). Other groups that had previously inhabited these areas abandoned the territories or disappeared completely, either exterminated or assimilated by Oneota.

CONSOLIDATION AND STABILIZATION

By circa AD 1400 the Oneota expansion had ended and populations began to withdraw from many of the recently occupied territories (Hollinger 2005). Oneota groups consolidated into large communities at strategic locales along major rivers and important transportation routes. Areas abandoned by the Oneota included central Indiana, the central Illinois River valley, the Apple River locality, the central Des Moines River valley, the central Plains west of the Missouri River trench, most of southeastern South Dakota, and

southern Minnesota including the Blue Earth and Red Wing areas. Lingering Mississippian populations also abandoned the central Illinois River valley and the American Bottom regions by AD 1400.

At the same time, Oneota populations aggregated at locations of strategic importance around the southern end of Lake Michigan and along the west side of Lake Winnebago in eastern Wisconsin, from which they controlled trade and travel between the western Great Lakes and the west. Along the Upper Mississippi River, the Oneota concentrated in the La Crosse region of southwestern Wisconsin, northeastern Iowa, and southeastern Minnesota. Farther south, the Oneota consolidated in the Mississippi alluvial-plain region of southeastern Iowa and western Illinois, with only small, temporary settlements in the American Bottom and lower Illinois River valley. Along the Missouri River, the Oneota were centered in central Missouri at the 300-acre Utz site complex, with its associated earthwork fortification, and at the Leary site in southeastern Nebraska. In the northwest, the Blood Run site complex, covering as much as 1,200 acres on either side of the Big Sioux River, dominated the region and probably controlled the exchange of red pipestone from the nearby pipestone quarries.

The sprawling Oneota villages of this period were probably composed of longhouses as much as 65 m in length (Hollinger 1993, 1995). Fortifications were rare during the previous period of expansion and when they did occur they were usually palisades lacking earthworks. Defensive earthworks and palisades during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries have been identified in association with the large population centers and may represent an increased investment in defending the locality. The sheer numbers of people at these centers would have been a considerable deterrent to any possible aggressors, so fortifications may have served as redoubts in the event of a potential raid during times when more warriors were away.

A period of relative stasis ensued for the next 200 years in which no new territories were acquired and none were lost. Trade with non-Oneota groups was almost nonexistent during the period of Oneota expansion but then peaked during this period of consolidation. Although never in great quantities, exchange goods included copper, marine shell, bison and other animal parts, pottery, and lithics such as obsidian, turquoise, and especially red pipestone (Hollinger 2005:265–266). This macroscale pattern of aggregation was repeated among neighboring non-Oneota groups who also concentrated in large villages and increased investment in defense of strategic locales. Wide buffer zones such as the “vacant quarter” of the central Mississippi River valley, formed between Oneota centers and their non-Oneota neighbors (Hollinger

2005:281). In the northeastern Plains among the Extended Coalescent tradition for instance, Caldwell (1964:3) referred to this period as the “Pax La Roche,” and it was characterized by a decreased emphasis on defense in those areas not bordering the territory of the Middle Missouri tradition.

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries mark a Pax Oneota for the midcontinent (Hollinger 2005:253, 299). Conflict did not stop but changes occurred in how it happened. The wholesale invasions of the previous period were replaced by occasional long-distance raids into contested no man’s lands and beyond to enemy territory. Portable art among Oneota sites of this period, including decorated pottery, incised bone, shell, and pipestone tablets and pipes continued to reinforce an ideology centered on war and war-related symbolism (Benn 1989; Hollinger 2000, 2005). Oneota iconography included images of weapons, warriors, bodies of victims, and raptors, commonly associated with warfare in ethnohistoric mythology.

DISINTEGRATION

Beginning no later than the early seventeenth century, European-introduced pandemics began to sweep through the densely populated Oneota longhouse villages. Disease at least minimally destabilized and possibly completely decimated the Oneota centers. Central Algonkian-speaking groups, some armed with guns, were pushed out of the Ohio Valley and Michigan by Iroquois raiders (Hunt 1967) and expanded into the eastern territories of the weakened Oneota. By AD 1640 the Oneota abandoned the La Crosse terrace of southwestern Wisconsin, the southern Lake Michigan area, southeastern Iowa, and western Illinois, and the remaining centers were considerably reduced in strength. By 1690 the historic Oneota in the form of the Ioway Tribe fled the Mississippi River for northwestern Iowa. Other Oneota descendants—the Missouriia, Otoe, and Winnebago tribes—were similarly reduced by warfare and disease. Some of the earliest accounts of the Missouriia noted that they had once been the most powerful tribe along the Missouri River but were “almost reduced to nothing” (Nasatir 1952:I:6) by disease and war. The fur trade and the global economy forced changes in subsistence and settlement patterns, and social and political organization. Out of necessity, remnants of the Oneota formed new alliances with Caddoan, Siouan, and Algonkian descendants of what were once their enemies. In much the same way that Oneota had probably absorbed other peoples three to four centuries earlier, Oneota merged with more powerful groups and contributed to their ethnogenesis in the early historic period.

CONCLUSION

Conflict was an important process in the history of Oneota and other groups of the Late Prehistoric and Early Historic American midcontinent. Conflict was both a context and a cause of cultural change. Patterns of conflict are identifiable at the macroscale of the midcontinent and over periods of hundreds of years. The challenge then for the archaeologist is to identify the material traces of conflict and contextualize it in efforts to understand its origins, directionality, and consequences. Violence and lesser forms of conflict had commonalities among the prehistoric people of the Plains and midcontinent just as it had and has among all humanity. The questions of how those commonalities manifested among various past populations and how they dealt with them or failed to deal with them is where we need to be careful in our interpretations. The simple acts of farming, hunting, and tool-making were not so simple with fear of war looming, so it is crucial to identify conflict in the past and understand its nature.