Copper Artifacts from Caddo Sites in the Southern Caddo Area

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Repository Citation


ISSN: 2475-9333

Available at: https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ita/vol2016/iss1/8

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Keywords
American Southeast, Caddo

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COPPER ARTIFACTS FROM CADDIO SITES IN THE SOUTHERN CADDIO AREA

Jeffrey S. Girard and Timothy K. Pertulla

Abstract

Copper artifacts have been found at only 18 Caddo sites in the southern Caddo area of Southwest Arkansas, Northwest Louisiana, southeastern Oklahoma, and East Texas. Most of these exotic copper artifacts are found in burial mound context in important civic-ceremonial centers, or in burials in non-mound cemeteries. About 80 percent of the known copper artifacts occur in contexts in sites that date to the Early Caddo period (ca. A.D. 1000-1200). These copper items likely are linked to the Cahokia exchange system, and represent prestige goods with ritual status acquired and displayed by leaders in different Caddo communities. By Late Caddo period times (ca. A.D. 1400-1680), copper items tend to be ear spools, especially copper-covered stone ear spools. Copper continued to be used as personal ornaments linked to specific Caddo individuals, but they no longer served for objects that may have been involved in public ritual, as there are no effigies, sheet copper hand cutouts, or maskettes from Late Caddo contexts as there were in Early or Middle Caddo period contexts.

Introduction

Copper artifacts are amongst the rarest of items found on ancestral Caddo sites in the southern Caddo area. In over 100 years of archaeological investigations they have been documented from only 18 different sites in Southwest Arkansas, Northwest Louisiana, southeastern Oklahoma, and East Texas (Figure 1). Although a few have been recovered from habitation contexts at Caddo mound sites, most copper artifacts have been found in burial mound contexts, or in burials in non-mound cemeteries.

There are no local sources of copper in the southern Caddo area, and the copper artifacts must have been obtained in exchange or trade with groups in the Midwest (particularly Cahokia) or Southeastern regions of North America with access to workable Lake Superior copper and with the artisans that could manufacture the copper objects (see Girard et al. 2008). The copper artifacts on Caddo sites represent prestige goods with ritual status, “items widely recognized as imparting power or wealth” (Girard et al. 2014:32) that were acquired and displayed by leaders in different Caddo communities. These same artifacts were then placed in close association with individuals in single graves or with groups of individuals in large tombs.
Copper Artifact Finds

The 18 ancestral Caddo sites with copper artifacts occur primarily in East Texas (56 percent), followed by sites in Southwest Arkansas (28 percent), Northwest Louisiana (11 percent), and southeastern Oklahoma (6 percent) (Table 1). Most of these sites are in the Red River drainage basin in all four states, but other Caddo sites with copper artifacts are known in the Ouachita River basin in Southwest Arkansas, and the Big Cypress, Neches, and Sabine River basins in East Texas.

There is a wide range of copper artifacts on ancestral Caddo sites (see Table 1). Included are ear spools of stone, wood, or shell with a copper covering; effigy hairpins; effigies; sheet copper cutouts; celts; copper needles and pins; bangles; beads and copper-covered beads; a copper cylinder; long nose god maskettes (see Girard et al. 2014:Figure 2.3); copper-covered wood rattles; and perforated or embossed copper strips (Figure 2).
Table 1. Inventory of copper artifacts from Caddo sites in the southern Caddo area.
In terms of the temporal context, copper artifacts have been recovered from ancestral Caddo sites dating as early as the tenth century A.D. to as late as the late seventeenth - early eighteenth century A.D. About 44 percent of the sites with copper artifacts were occupied during the Early Caddo period, including Bentsen-Clark, Bowman, Crenshaw, Gahagan, George C. Davis, Hudnall-Pirtle, Boxed Springs, and Mounds Plantation (see Table 1). With the exception of the Bentsen-Clark site, where copper artifacts were found in non-mound shaft tombs (Banks and Winters 1975), the other Early Caddo sites are large mound complexes in the Red, Neches, and Sabine river basins (Webb and Dodd 1939; Durham and Davis 1975; Webb and McKinney 1975; Story 1997; Bruseth and Pertula 2006; Pertula 2011). One of the few non-mortuary contexts yielding copper is at the Crenshaw site in the Great Bend region of the Red River in Southwest Arkansas. Small copper bangles or studs, likely part of a head dress, were recovered from the ash-laden floor of a large house, probably a ceremonial or priest’s house. This house has been radiocarbon-dated to ca. A.D. 1190 (Samuelsen 2014).

Copper items are by far most abundant in sites that date to the Early Caddo period (Table 2), and their presence likely is linked to participation in the Cahokia exchange system. Regarding Cahokia, Girard et al. (2014:60) note—“Although it is not likely that interactions with Cahokia involved tribute, military threats, or
direct economic influence, the presence of this massive place undoubtedly was known by Caddo Area peoples, and visitations, pilgrimages, and kinship connections with emigrants likely took place on a regular basis. A diverse array of objects occur in Early Caddo period contexts, but Late Caddo period copper items tend to be ear spools, especially copper-covered stone (see Tables 1 and 2). It appears that copper continued to be used as personal ornaments linked to specific individuals, but no longer had the same ritual significance, as there are no effigies, sheet copper hand cutouts, or maskettes from Late Caddo contexts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object Class</th>
<th>Number of Contexts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Early</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bangles/studs</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beads/cylinders</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>celt</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sheet copper on wood</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ear ornaments, copper on bone</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ear ornaments, copper on shell</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ear ornaments, copper on stone</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ear ornaments, copper on wood</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ear ornaments, copper on unknown material</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>effigies</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>needles or pins</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rattles</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sheet copper cutouts or strips</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unidentified fragments</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Context of copper artifacts in Caddo sites of Early, Middle, and Late Caddo periods.

The Gahagan Site

Within the southern Caddo area, copper items from the Gahagan site in Red River Parish, Louisiana, appear to be especially numerous and of exceptionally high quality. Among the recovered specimens are two long nose god maskettes, a cut sheet copper human hand symbol, and embossed copper ear ornaments pressed onto both cypress wood and stone. Other items include copper-covered wood and stone ear spools, a second sheet copper hand symbol, copper-covered wood beads, copper-plated marine shell fragments, cut strips of sheet copper, rolled copper cylinder fragments, and polished bone ornaments with copper staining.

All of these items were recovered in deep shaft graves sunk into a single burial mound (designated Mound A) that was destroyed during the 1940s by a shift in the Red River. The Gahagan site was first described by C. B. Moore in 1912, who stated that large numbers of mound remnants were scattered throughout the fields in the area (Moore 1912). However, in 1938, Clarence Webb and Monroe Dodd noted only one substantial mound (Mound A), two low rises (Mounds B and C), and numerous circular sandy areas that contained pottery (Webb and Dodd 1939). Mound A had been cut in half at the time a visit to the site was made by Webb and Alex Krieger in 1947, and subsequently the mound was completely destroyed by the river. It is not certain that the two low rises were constructed earthworks. One rise apparently was taken by the river and the fate of the other is unknown.

C. B. Moore excavated Burial Pit 1 in the center of the mound. The pit contained the remains of four individuals, one of which with arms and legs splayed out in a distinct position that is replicated in several other Early Caddo period shaft graves. This is the only individual with clearly associated grave goods. Other grave goods were placed along the northwest side of the burial pit. Several copper-covered wood and cut sheet copper ornaments were included among the grave goods, most of which were in too poor condition to identify as to form. The presence of Holly Fine Engraved and Hickory Engraved ceramic vessels indicates an Early Caddo period date for the grave.
In 1938, Webb and Dodd excavated two more burial pits in Mound A before its destruction by the river. The largest was Burial Pit No. 2, which extended down ca. 2.4 m from the summit and had a level floor of white and yellow sand. Across the center of the pit was a row of six individuals, with a seventh skeleton laying perpendicular to the row. The central figure in the main row appeared to have been interred later than the others and was in the distinctive bow-legged position. Artifacts associated with the individuals were sparse, consisting only of copper-covered stone or wood ear ornaments and two caches of arrow points. As in Burial Pit No. 1, however, the northwest edge of the pit contained multiple clusters of items, including many of the distinctive stone bifaces now known as Gahegan bifaces. Among the burial goods were a human effigy pipe carved from distinctive CBP Missouri flint clay (Emerson et al. 2003; Emerson and Girard 2004), two human hand effigies of sheet copper, and two copper long nose god maskettes.

Burial Pit No. 3 contained a row of three individuals. Although most artifacts were placed along the northwest margin of the pit, found on the south side were a large Gahegan biface and a stone effigy pipe (a frog holding a rattle) also made of CBP Missouri flint clay, a likely import from the Cahokia area. The eastern portion of the grave was empty, apparently intended for persons not yet deceased who never were placed there.

Although excavations at Gahegan were conducted prior to the development of radiocarbon analyses, Emerson and Girard (2004) obtained permission from the Caddo Nation of Oklahoma to submit for dating small pieces of charred wood and leather that had become detached from three specimens recovered from Burial Pit No. 2. The results indicate that the items date to the late eleventh or early twelfth centuries A.D., suggesting direct contact between the southern Caddos and American Bottom populations during the Lohman or Sterling phases when Missouri flint clay figures were manufactured and in use at Cahokia.

George C. Davis Site

Mound C at the George C. Davis site is a special mortuary where the social, political, and religious elite of the Caddo community were buried in large and elaborate shaft tombs (Story 1997:64-65). Some of these burials had grave offerings of copper artifacts (see Table 1).

Six stages (I-VI) of tombs were found within the mound. The first stage (Feature 134) is a sub-mound burial, and Stages II-VI represent mound surfaces from which different shaft tombs originated. Although the burial features and construction of Mound C are not well dated by radiocarbon assays, the six stages of burials and mound surfaces may have been in use for ca. 250 or more years, from perhaps as early as 1010 ± 80 years B.P. (cal. A.D. 903-1157 at 2 sigma) to at least 770 ± 80 years B.P. (cal. A.D. 1163-1299, 2 sigma).

Copper artifacts were found as grave goods in Stage I-IV burials; most are from the Stage II burials: Feature 119 and Feature 155. The Stage I burial feature (Feature 134, with eight individuals) had a wood artifact with a copper covering. Both Stage III and IV burial features (Features 161 and 118, each with one individual) had two copper-covered earpools, and small fragments of copper were found around the skull of Feature 118, suggesting that a copper ornament had been in the hair of the deceased.

Feature 119 (with four individuals) in Stage II of the mound had two layers of burial offerings (Story 1997:29-38), both with copper artifacts. In the first or upper layer of offerings were a disc-shaped wooden object covered in thin sheet copper, fragments of thin sheet copper, and a small disc-shaped piece of copper. The second or lower layer of offerings in Feature 119 included small pieces of copper adhering to turtle shells, possibly part of a turtle shell rattle, an unidentified copper-covered object, two copper-covered earpools, sheet copper associated with a bone pin, a disc-shaped ornament made of shell, wood, and copper, and a possible copper-covered wooden earpool. Copper salts identified around the skull of one of the individuals in this tomb suggests that this individual had a hair ornament containing copper.

Feature 155 (with one individual) in Stage II had several copper artifacts placed in the tomb as funerary offerings (Story 1997:41-42). These included two copper-covered earpools, a bone pin with a copper-covered bone ornament fitted over one end, and a small wood object overlain with a mosaic of cut mussel shells and copper pieces.
Three pieces of copper were also recovered in the platform mound (Mound A) at the George C. Davis site (see Table 1). Two came from the floor of Feature 31, a large (15.2 m in diameter) and likely special purpose circular structure that lay under the south end of the first mound platform in Mound A (Newell and Krieger 1949:32-35). This structure in turn was constructed over two smaller oval to round houses built and then burned in a ca. 0.6 m deep depression. The other piece of copper came from floor deposits of Feature 9, another special purpose structure that was built along the north side of Mound A (Newell and Krieger 1949:179). This unique structure, 11.3 m in diameter, was built in a ca. 35 cm pit and had post-filled trenches and a clay floor as well as a clay-filled extended entranceway (Newell and Krieger 1949:Figure 11) pointing towards the central crest of Mound A.

Also at George C. Davis, four small fragments of copper were recovered during excavations in domestic areas in Units 65 and 109 between Mounds B and C. Baskin (1981:250) suggests they may be fragments of manufacturing debris.

Later Contexts

Only about 17 percent of the Caddo sites with copper artifacts were occupied primarily in the Middle Caddo period (ca. A.D. 1200-1400). These are the Mineral Springs, Ozan Site 1, and Sanders sites in the Red and Ouachita River basins (Harrington 1920; Bohannon 1973; Jackson et al. 2000). All are multiple mound sites. Objects from these sites include circular copper ornaments and an embossed copper band or headdress from Ozan Site 1, copper-covered stone earspoons at the Sanders site, and copper ear pendants, covered-covered stone earspoons, and a wood parrot or parakeet head coated with copper (Figure 3) from the Mineral Springs site.

Six sites with copper artifacts were occupied in the Late Caddo period (ca. A.D. 1400-1680), including the Clement, Foster, Sam Kaufman, Tuck Carpenter, Hatchel, and 41SA13 in the Red, Big Cypress, and Neches drainage basins. These sites include both mound centers (Moore 1912; Bell and Baerreis 1951; Skinner et al. 1969; Regnier et al. 2013) as well as non-mound cemeteries (Turner 1978; Perttula 2015b).

Finally, the Peterson Ranch site (41HS253) in the Little Cypress stream basin in East Texas is a large non-mound cemetery (Perttula 2015a) that was used by ancestral Caddo peoples in the early historic period, from ca. A.D. 1680-1720. One of the burials at the site was accompanied by two copper-covered ear spools with cypress wood backing.

Summary and Conclusions

Copper artifacts of various forms and types have been found at only 18 Caddo sites in the southern Caddo area of Southwest Arkansas, Northwest Louisiana, southeastern Oklahoma, and East Texas. Items include copper long nose god maskettes, cut sheet copper symbols in the form of human hands, copper ear ornaments, copper-covered bone needles or hairpins, embossed copper head ornaments, beads and bangles, a small copper celt, copper-covered wood and turtle shell rattles, a wood parrot or parakeet plated with copper, copper-covered wood and shell items in the shape of animal claws and teeth, and fragments of rolled copper tubes or cylinders. By far the most common kind of copper artifacts on Caddo sites, regardless of age, are copper-covered ear ornaments or ear spools.
Most of these exotic copper artifacts are found in burial mound context in important civic-ceremonial centers such as the Gahagan site on the Red River in Northwest Louisiana and the George C. Davis site on the Neches River in East Texas, or in burials in non-mound cemeteries like that excavated at the Bentsen-Clark site on the Red River in East Texas. There are only a few instances where copper artifacts have been found in non-mortuary contexts, most notably in the ca. A.D. 1190 ash bed of a possible ceremonial or priest’s house at the Crenshaw site on the Red River in Southwest Arkansas and in post-A.D. 1500 contexts in the large Nasoni Caddo platform mound at the Hatchel site on the Red River in East Texas.

About 80 percent of the known copper artifacts in the southern Caddo area occur in contexts in sites that date to the Early Caddo period (ca. A.D. 1000-1200). These copper items likely are linked to the Cahokia exchange system, and thus they represent prestige goods with ritual status acquired and displayed by leaders in a number of different Caddo communities. By Late Caddo period times (ca. A.D. 1400-1680) and in post-A.D. 1680 Historic Caddo period times, copper items tend to be ear spools, especially copper-covered stone ear spools, recovered in mortuary contexts associated with individuals.

Although the role of copper in the Caddo world may have changed through time as a result of shifting relationships of Caddo Area groups with those in surrounding regions, as well as from transformations in connections between, and leadership roles within, Caddo societies, copper appears to have continued as a symbol of the elite status of a limited number of individuals into historic times. The demise of the Cahokia exchange system may have resulted in declining access to copper ornaments for Caddo Area communities and their leaders. Symbolically laden items probably displayed in public ritual such as the long nose god maskettes and cutouts of sheet copper no longer were available after the thirteenth century. However, these items never were abundant and most have been recovered from only a few sites, particularly the Gahagan site located along the southern margin of the Caddo Area. It is interesting that Gahagan does not appear to have been a particularly large or important regional center, and the reasons for burial of multiple exotic ritual items at that location remain mysterious.

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