



2016

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Rees, James A. Jr. (2016) "How the Ji'kmaq Came to Spiro: Possible Additions to the Inventory of Sound-Making Instruments Depicted in the Spiro Engravings," *Index of Texas Archaeology: Open Access Gray Literature from the Lone Star State*: Vol. 2016 , Article 6. ISSN: 2475-9333

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ita/vol2016/iss1/6>

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HOW THE JI'KMAQN CAME TO SPIRO: POSSIBLE ADDITIONS TO THE INVENTORY OF SOUND-MAKING INSTRUMENTS DEPICTED IN THE SPIRO ENGRAVINGS

James A. Rees, Jr.

Abstract

While doing research on turtle shell rattles the author stumbled onto a photograph of a rare and unusual idiophone whose exact likeness appears twice in one of the engraved shell images from Spiro. This paper describes the instrument and the Spiro image and discusses how an instrument currently found only in the Maritime Provinces of Canada may have come to be portrayed on a marine shell cup found at Spiro.

Several years ago I attempted to do an inventory of all the sound-making instruments depicted in the Spiro shell engravings or at least those included in the sample published by Phillips and Brown (1978, 1984) in the late 70s and early 80s. In doing that inventory I identified a number of sound-makers including idiophones (mostly rattles), membranophones (both vessel drums and hand held frame drums), and a few possible aerophones (2 flutes and a whistle). In addition to those instruments described in the published version of the inventory (Rees 2012), there were several other images that I suspected contained depictions of sound-makers but that needed further study. It was while doing research on these other possible sound-makers that I found the photograph of the instrument that is the focus of this paper (Figure 1).



Figure 1. A ji'kmaq or split-ash rattle (photo by Franziska von Rosen In Diamond et al. 1994).

As soon as I saw the photograph I remembered that something very similar to it appeared in one of the Spiro engravings. A brief search of Phillips and Brown (1984) led me to Plate 310 (Figure 2). The resemblance between the object seen here in Figure 1 and the objects held by the two anthropomorphic figures in the Plate 310 image is quite remarkable, even in details like the small pom-pom which separates the handle from the frayed end. In addition, the two anthropomorphic figures in the Spiro image appear to be striking the serpent-like pole between them with their instruments. This is a significant detail because this is how the instrument in the Figure 1 photo is played, by striking it against something.

However, there is more to the story than mere close resemblance. There are issues of time and space and context to be considered before suggesting that the objects in these two disparate images are the same



Figure 2. Detail of an image on a shell cup from Spiro (after Phillips and Brown 1984:Plate 310).

type of instrument. The principal obstacle to reaching such a conclusion is immediately apparent when you consider that the photo (see Figure 1) appears in a book about the musical instruments of the First Nations Peoples of the Maritime Provinces of Canada (Diamond et al. 1994). It is a sound-maker used today only by the Micmac peoples of Nova Scotia. In order to connect this instrument to the one in the Spiro image, many centuries of time and thousands of kilometers of distance must be explained. The balance of this paper will seek to do that.

The ji'kmaq

In the language of the Micmac the instrument in the photo (see Figure 1) is known as a ji'kmaq. The term ji'kmaq is a generic term, which seems to refer more to the sound of sticks hitting together rather than to this particular instrument. In fact, the term is applied to several different related instruments (Diamond et al. 1994:75). In English the Micmac refer to this particular instrument as a split-ash rattle (Roger Lewis, personal communication) although technically it isn't a rattle.

The Micmac were traditionally a hunting and fishing people who extensively exploited their forested environment for the resources necessary to make tools, dwellings, containers and sea-worthy canoes (Whitehead 1980:8, 31). Early in historic times the Micmac became known for their fine ash splint basketry. Logs of white ash and black ash were cut and carefully split into long billets in which the rings of the wood were parallel to each other. These billets were then pounded, causing the wood to split along the ring lines into small splints which were then further processed and used to make baskets (Bardwell 1986:54-55; Whitehead 1980:54-65).

The process for making a split ash ji'kmaq was essentially the same. A short billet of ash is pounded on one end to start the separation of the splints, leaving the other end as a handle. Notice how the instrument in Figure 3, which is approximately 38 cm long, has been pounded on one end and has split along the ring lines. Also notice how the splints, which are approximately 3 cm wide, separate nicely and splay out. This is necessary for producing a nice sound.

The Micmac use the split-ash rattle to accompany singing and dancing. The instrument is played by striking it against something. Micmac singers usually strike it against their hand or leg, but it can be struck against almost anything. The sound is produced when the splints are made to strike against each other, causing them to vibrate. The air space between them serves to amplify and resonate the sound.

According to von Hornbostel and Sach's (1961[1914]) instrument classification system the split-ash ji'kmaq is a percussion idiophone, an instrument whose material is made to vibrate by striking it against something or by having it struck by something. In particular it is a type of percussion idiophone known as a clapper. Clapper type instruments appear to be very rare in the Americas (Izickowitz 1970:8-9), but two examples from North America other than the split-ash ji'kmaq will be examined below. The closest thing to the ji'kmaq in a modern orchestra is the rarely used slapstick.



Figure 3. A split-ash rattle in the making (photo courtesy of Roger Lewis, Nova Scotia Museum).

The Spiro Image

In order to determine if there is any possible connection between the instrument described above and those instruments appearing on the Spiro cup (see Figure 2), it will be necessary to take a close look at the Spiro image as it appears in the drawing in Phillips and Brown's 1984 book (Plate 310). Phillips and Brown placed this particular image in their Craig C style phase and also in a particular series of images, which they called dual, confronted figures. There are 16 of these dual confronted images (not counting ones too fragmentary to classify), which feature two anthropomorphic figures facing each other with some version of a pole between them. Ten of these, comprising the most standard version, show the two figures differing only in their facial decoration with a straight pole forked at the top between them. In the standard version one figure has a T-bar facial decoration and the other a wedge-mouth decoration. There are also six non-standard versions of the dual confronted series, and the Plate 310 image is one of these.

There are some unique features in the Plate 310 image (see Figure 2) which need to be examined. Obviously one unique feature is the presence of the instruments which are shown being used to strike the pole. There are no other images of similar instruments anywhere else in Mississippian iconography that I am aware of with the possible exception of Phillips and Brown (1984) Plate 124, which will be examined later.

Another unusual feature, which may help in determining what the instruments are being used for in this image, is the feet. Unlike many other images in this series which have downward pointing feet as if the figures are suspended in the air, the feet in the 310 image (see Figure 2) suggests that these figures are standing on the ground and the bent knee posture of the figure on the left may suggest dancing. In this regard it is worth comparing the 310 image to the one in Plate 309 (Figure 4), another of the non-standard images in the dual confronted figures series.



Figure 4. Image on a shell cup from Spiro now in the University of Arkansas Museum Collections. A version of this image also appears in Phillips and Brown (1984:Plate 309). Drawing courtesy of the University of Arkansas Museum Collections.

In the 309 image (see Figure 4) the figure on the left is in a posture that clearly suggests that he is dancing. It should be noted that the bent leg posture of anthropomorphic figures has been interpreted as dancing in other studies of Mississippian iconography (Reilly and Garber 2011:297, 299). Reinforcing this interpretation in the case of the 309 image is the fact that the dancing figure is holding a conventional rattle in his right hand. The presence of the dancing posture and the sound-making instrument in 309 may provide a kind of precedent for interpreting what is happening in 310 (that is dancing to the sound of idiophones).

Discussion

Now that we have looked closely at the split-ash rattle and the instruments in the Spiro image let me offer three possible ways to explain the resemblance between them:

The first possibility is that this is just a case of accidental resemblance and that the instruments in the Spiro image are not split-ash rattles and perhaps not even sound-makers but some other kind of implement, perhaps a weapon. We know that among some of the Dhegihan Siouan speakers such as the Omaha, the Osage and the Quapaw there were sacred pole ceremonies in which warriors would strike the pole probably with a weapon and recite their war deeds. On the other hand, according to some of the same ethnographic accounts, sound-making instruments such as drums and rattles were also present at these ceremonies sometimes in close proximity to the pole (Fletcher and La Flesche 1992 [1911]:231, 253-256).

It should be pointed out that in the Craig C dual confronted series none of the anthropomorphic figures are holding weapons and none of them are touching their poles with anything but their hands except for the two in Plate 310. The only object held by any of the other figures in the series is the rattle held by the dancing figure in 309.

A second possibility is that the objects seen in the Spiro image in Plate 310 are indeed split-ash rattles like the ones used today by the Micmac people. In order for this to be true a number of issues must be resolved such as the history of the split-ash rattle itself among the Micmac.

There is a controversy among scholars as to when exactly ash splint technology developed in the far Northeast and whether or not wood splint basketry was introduced into the area by Europeans or was indigenous. Some researchers point out that the earliest historical reference to ash splint baskets among the Micmac was in the early eighteenth century (Bardwell 1986:55-56) even though they had been in contact with Europeans since the late sixteenth century.

To counter that argument, others point out that wood splint technology was being used in the construction of dwellings and canoes much earlier. Prior to the arrival of Europeans the Micmac were making long voyages in their large birch bark canoes lined with cedar and/or ash splint ribs (Bardwell 1986:61; Whitehead 1980:55).

There is some archeological evidence for the early use of ash splint basketry in New England. Ash splint fragments including ash splint basket fragments have been found in four Seneca burial sites in western New York dating from 1565 to 1670. Although all of these sites had European trade goods, they were too remote from European settlement at the time to have been much influenced by European culture. Certainly these artifacts predate the 1712 date often given as the first historic reference to ash splint basketry in the Northeast and suggest an indigenous origin for wood splint technology (Bardwell 1986:58-60).

Whether or not ash splint baskets were made early on, people in the Northeast in Pre-Columbian times were exploiting the splitting properties of ash and other woods through pounding. Early European colonists did not use the pounding technique to make basket splints and indeed used types of wood that could not be split in this manner (Bardwell 1986:56-58). The knowledge of which types of native trees could be split by pounding seems clearly indigenous. Bardwell (1986:54) lists the following species as being pounded for basket splints: black ash (*Fraxinus nigra*), white ash (*Fraxinus americana*), red maple (*Acer rubrum*), and hickory (*Carya ovata*). Of these black ash was preferred in the Northeast, but had a limited range and set of

growing conditions. With the exception of black ash all of the other trees on this list are found widely across the eastern United States as far west as eastern Oklahoma and Texas (Kirkman et al. 2007; Moore and Sundell 2014).

In the Southeast split cane was the preferred material for basket making. However, pounding wood to make basket splints was also used. A Creek informant described to Swanton (1987 [1946]:605) how hackberry wood was sometimes pounded to make basket splints if no cane was available. Hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis*) is another tree species readily available in the Trans-Mississippi Southeast. Therefore the materials and possibly the pounding technique for making a split-wood rattle could have been known to the people who built the great mortuary at Spiro. However, at present, the only evidence for the existence of this instrument in the pre-Columbian Southeast is the 310 image itself. Further, there is no clear ethno-historical or ethnographic evidence for split-wood rattles outside of northern New England and eastern Canada. The only explanation for this is that these instruments which would not have preserved well in the archeological record once had a much wider distribution than they do today.

One piece of possible evidence supporting a wider distribution for the split-ash *ji'kmaq*n is language. The Micmac and many of their immediate neighbors speak an Algonkian language. In fact, many tribes to the south and west of the Micmac like the Shawnee, the Illinois, and the Ojibwa also spoke Algonkian languages. To the extent that material culture can be said to shadow or track the spread of a language family, then it might lend some credence to the idea that the split-ash rattle once had a much wider distribution.

There is growing evidence that beginning in the eleventh century the Cahokia phenomenon attracted immigrants and perhaps pilgrims from a wide area (Pauketat 2013:159-160). This surely included many Algonkian speakers who no doubt contributed to the religious movement that in turn spread from Cahokia to places like Spiro. As evidence for this, I need only point to the recent scholarship of George Lankford (2007a, 2007b) who often uses Algonkian mythology and cosmology as sources for interpreting Mississippian iconography.

The third and final possibility I would like to examine is that whereas the split-ash rattle may not have had much of a presence in the Mississippian world some other instrument looking and sounding very much like it may have existed and that it is this instrument we see portrayed in the Plate 310 image from Spiro. There is in fact some very scant ethno-historical and ethnographic evidence for this.

In 1699 Piere LeMoyne D'Iberville spent time with Houma Indians near the mouth of the Red River in Louisiana. The Houma were apparently a band of Choctaws who had recently moved west of the Mississippi. D'Iberville described an all night dance he witnessed which was accompanied by the sound of two "sticks" being struck together (Swanton 1911:287). There is no description of these sticks, but at the very least they constitute a type of clapper (Izikowitz 1970:8) and may have been some version of a split-wood rattle.

In the early twentieth century the photograph seen in Figure 5 was taken by ethnomusicologist Francis Densmore (1932:Plate 22) in Southwest Arizona. The photo is of a Yuma Indian drum set. The basket is the drum. The Yuma are one of several tribes in the Southwest who use basket drums. The Yuma don't make baskets and their neighbors the Papago don't make pottery. So, the Yuma trade pots to the Papago for baskets. The custom of using them as drums came to the Yuma from the Papago along with the baskets. However, instead of playing their basket drums only with their bare hands like the Papago, the Yuma also play them with sticks and bundles of arrow weed. It is these bundles that are of interest here because they are clappers and produce sound in a similar way to the split-ash *ji'kmaq*n. They also somewhat resemble the instruments in the 310 image from Spiro. One can imagine such instruments comprised of bundles of sticks, reeds, or cane culms having a wide distribution from the Southwest across the southern plains and into the Mississippi valley.

With this in mind it may be worth looking at another Spiro image from Phillips and Brown (1984) mentioned earlier, Plate 124. This image appears on a shell gorget and depicts an anthropomorphic figure with both legs bent at the knees suggesting motion, perhaps dancing. In his left hand the figure holds an

object, which has been variously interpreted as the end of his long hair, a fan, or some other object. This object very much resembles the reed bundle clappers seen in Densmore's photograph (see Figure 5). If the figure is indeed dancing, then the context is perfect for this object to be a clapper type sound maker.

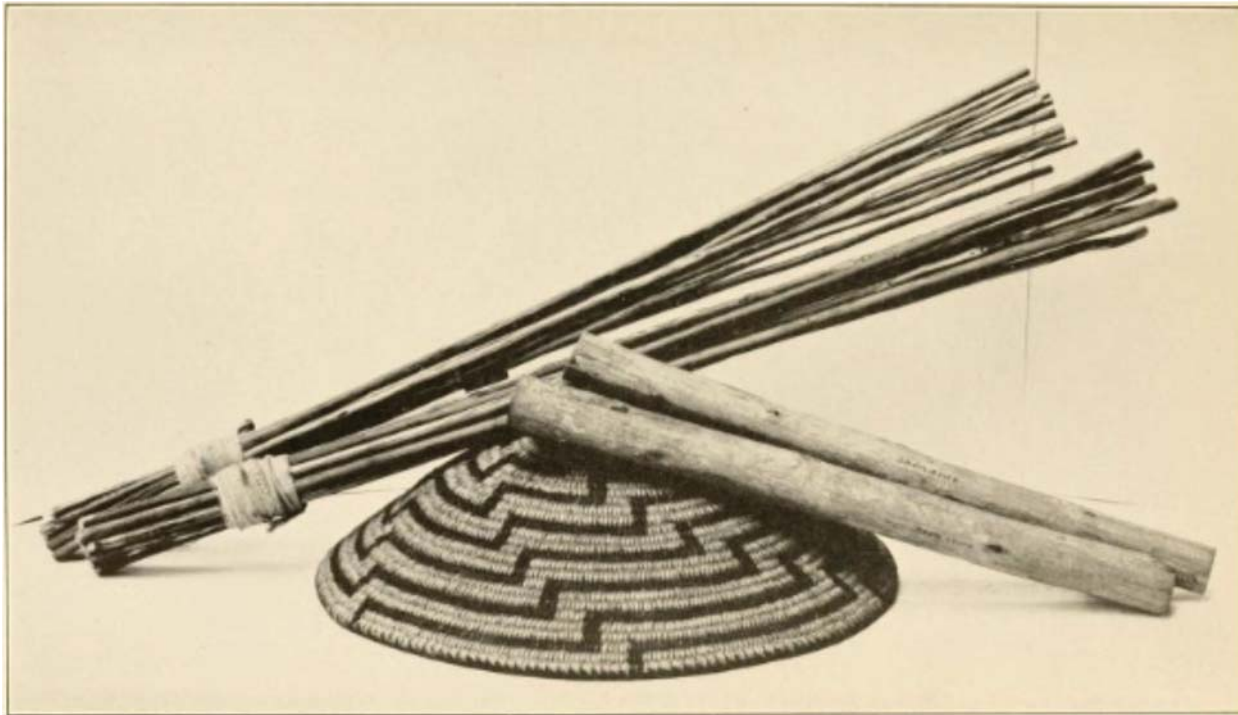


Figure 5. Plate 22 from Densmore (1932).

Conclusion

Phillips and Brown (1984:Plate 310) offered no serious interpretation of the implements wielded by the figures in Plate 310 even jokingly suggesting that they were some sort of futuristic outer space weapon (light sabers?). However, considering the strong resemblance of these instruments to ethnographic examples and their association with what appears to be a dancing anthropomorphic figure it is quite likely that they are indeed clapper type sound-makers, and perhaps even split-ash *ji'kmaqns* similar to those still used by the Micmac. A more definitive conclusion awaits further evidence.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Roger Lewis, Curator of Ethnography at the Nova Scotia Museum in Halifax, for the photo that appears in Figure 3. Special thanks go to Franziska von Rosen for permission to use the photo in Figure 1. I would also like to thank Jarod Pebworth for making a split-wood rattle for me to experiment with.

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