

THE LIAHN II SITE AND
EARLY WOODLAND MORTUARY CEREMONIALISM

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ABSTRACT

Recent excavations at the Liahn II site (AcHo-2) located near Mitchell Bay, Lake St. Clair, in Kent Co., Ontario, has revealed a probable Early Woodland burial area as indicated by the recovery of twelve burials and an assortment of mortuary items. As with other sites of this cultural and temporal period, the use of red ochre is extensive yet its symbolic nature remains unexplained.

INTRODUCTION

This paper summarizes data from the Liahn II site and discusses some symbolic aspects of mortuary ceremonialism as evidenced by this and other Late Archiac/Early Woodland sites in the Northeast.

Excavations at the Liahn site in 1977 yielded in addition to human remains, an assortment of mortuary items including diagnostic Meadowood lithics, copper and textile materials. The site is situated on a low-lying sand knoll within an area of extensive clay plains covering about 2000 square miles adjacent to Lake St. Clair in Essex, Kent, and parts of Lambton counties, Ontario (Fig. 1). In the Chatham region, Glacial Lake Whittlesey and later Lake Warren left deep stratified beds of sediment upon the underlying clay till. The very flat tract of land, known as the Chatham flats, and located east of Lake St. Clair in Chatham and Dover townships of Kent Co., was submerged in a correlative of Lake Algonquin and received a deeper covering of stratified clay and silt. As glacial lakes receded, considerable amounts of sediment and fluvial outwash were deposited. The shallow sand deposits over clay sediments were a result of wave action in the post glacial lakes which left sand bars of one to three feet in depth. Intensive surveys in this region have focused on these sand areas as they have proven to be preferred locations for aboriginal settlement (Chapman and Putnam 1973: 241).

FEATURES AND ARTIFACTS

A total of 10 five-meter squares were excavated in the central portion of the knoll. Features were located in the subsoil approximately 20 cms from the surface. Few artifacts were found in the humus layer and most were recovered from within the features. Twenty-one features were recorded and excavated. Of these, 13 definitely contained skeletal remains in various stages of deterioration and 4 of these features and one of the remaining 8 contained red ochre. A complete and detailed analysis of the Liahn II site features and artifactual material may be found elsewhere (Williamson 1978).

Three of the 13 features containing skeletal remains were of particular interest. One of these features, represented an area previously tested. According to the previous excavator's field notes, an area of 10 square feet was opened revealing a red ochre concentration within a long, irregularly shaped, grey feature. The pit also contained a cache of lithic material and the skeletal remains of an adult and a child, both reportedly in a tightly flexed position with the right hand placed under the skull. The lithics consisted mostly of cache blades that were located in two main clusters. The main group of blades were oriented randomly but in a tight cluster, and possibly were placed in the grave in a container. The second group were also clustered and found 15 cms northwest of the first group. A remaining number of blades were found within

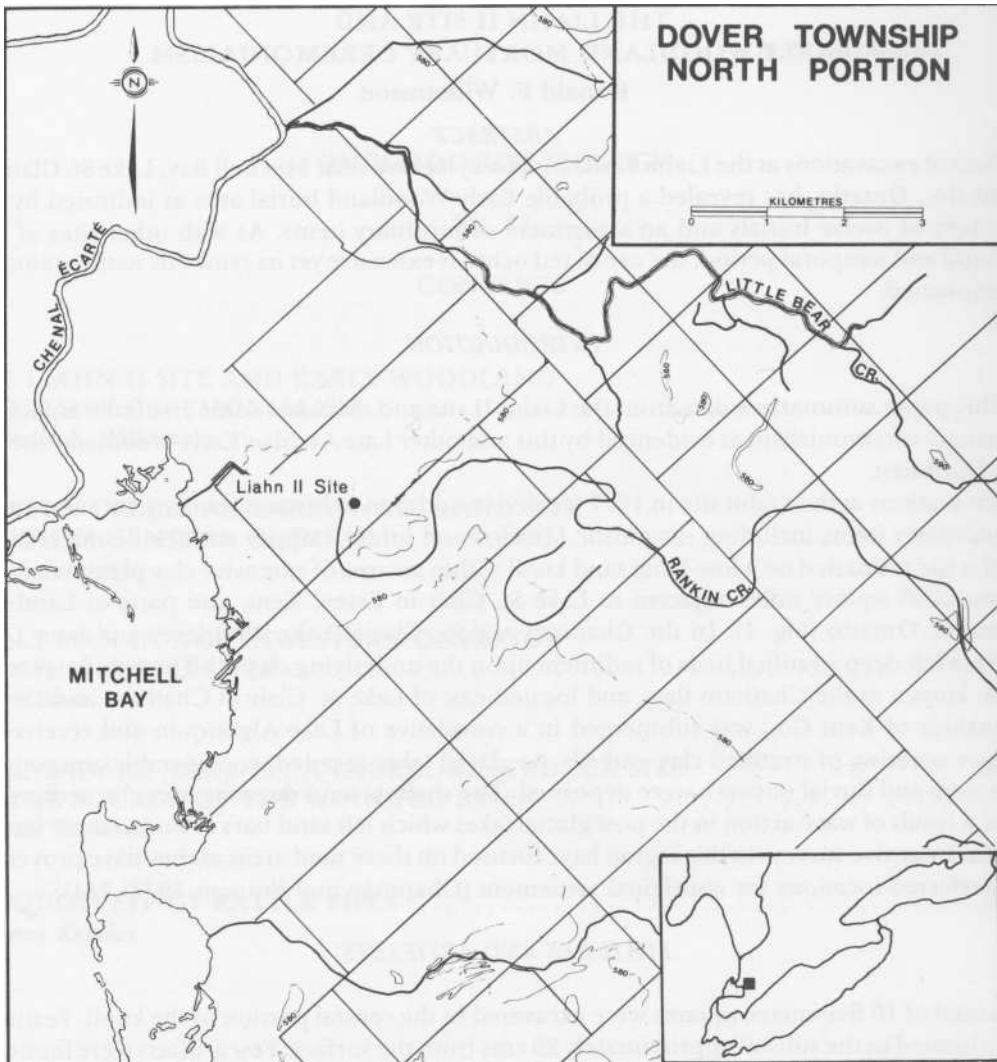


Fig. 1 Map of Dover Township showing Liahn II site location.

the plough zone and during surface collecting. Of 37 complete and analyzable blades, 6 were surface blades, 15 were plough zone and 16 were found in the original cache context (Fig. 2). These blades were then analysed to determine the likelihood of a common cache origin. As well as length, width and thickness, the distance from maximum breadth to base was taken. This measurement aided in the delineation of shape and the deviation therein. The analysis also included an indicator of basal concavity or convexity and a ratio of obliqueness calculated by dividing maximum basal obliqueness by basal width. Aside from a comparison of the means and standard deviations of these measurements, which in themselves indicated a high degree of similarity, t-tests were scored for the 3 groups in size and shape categories. Mean length was used to define the size category and a breadth over length ratio for shape. Results indicated that there were no statistical differences between the groups at a .05 confidence level. When this evidence is matched by the similarity in provenience and stratigraphic position, membership in a single assemblage is probable.

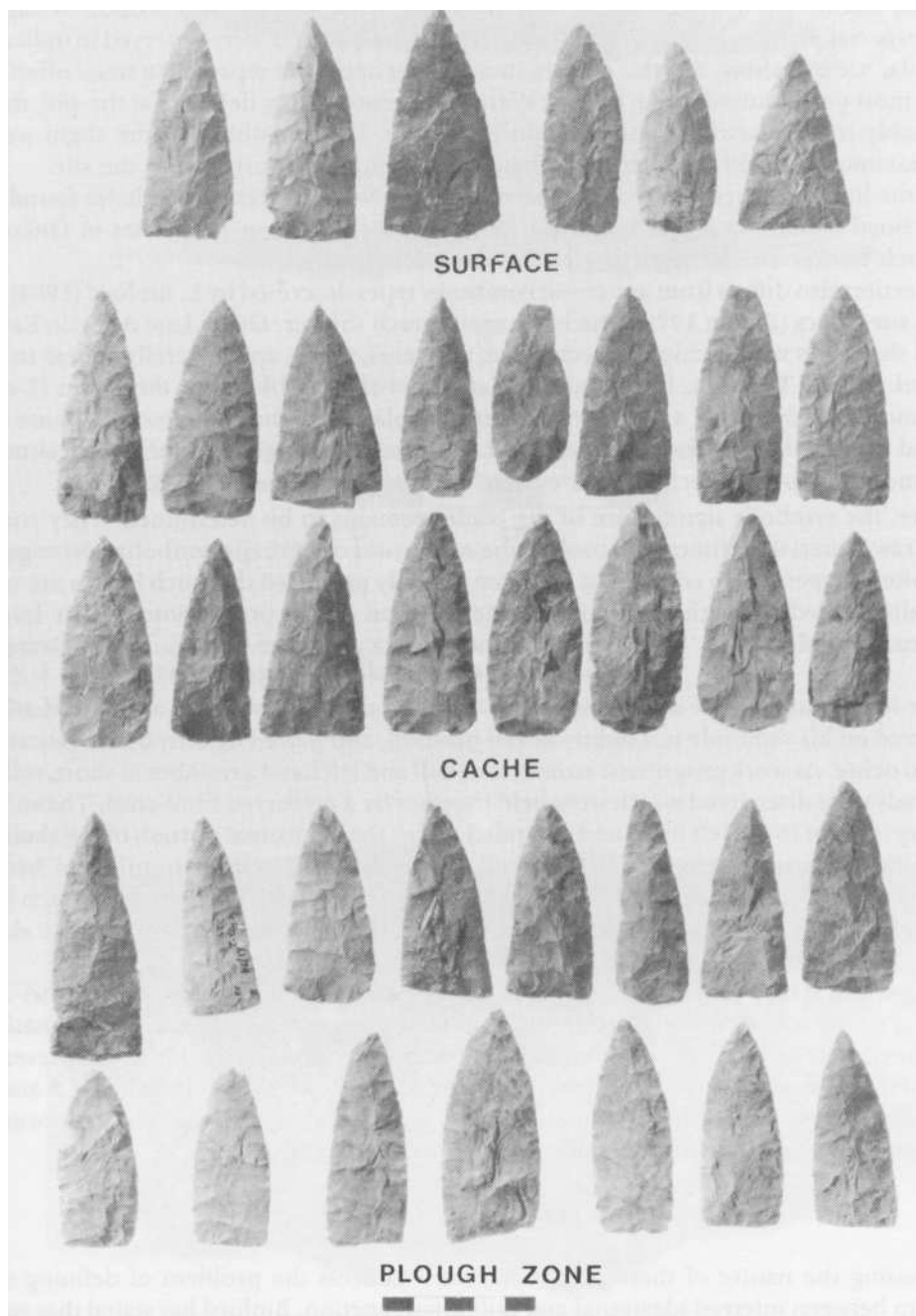


Fig. 2 Lithic collection from Liahn II.

The blades, made of Onondaga chert from a primary outcrop, were also subjected to a microscopic examination in search of wear patterns. Most lateral edges exhibited slight rounding especially in the region of maximum breadth. No patterns were observed to indicate either regular use or hafting. For this reason, these blades appear to represent a small offering of, for the most part, unused cache blades. With the absence of any debitage at the site, they were probably made elsewhere and brought to the site. It is possible that the slight wear towards maximum breadth resulted from handling during transportation to the site.

Finally, the lithics were compared to those of relevant Northeastern sites. Blades found at the Bruce Boyd (Spence et al 1978) and the Dawson Creek (Jackson 1977) sites in Ontario appear much thicker and less well made than the Liahn group.

The collection also differs from any of the Pomranky types described by L. Binford (1963) or the Shultz site lithics (Fitting 1972) which are again much thicker. Other Late Archaic/Early Woodland site lithics vary in chipping technique, thickness, width, and generally appear to be smaller and cruder. The thin, finely-flaked, trianguloid-shaped blades of the Liahn II site compare most closely in all aspects with mortuary blades of the Meadowood phase as represented by Ritchie's Muskalonge and Red Lake sites. The ranges and means are almost identical and the masterful technique is evident at all sites (Ritchie 1955: 42-45).

However, the symbolic significance of the blades remains to be determined. They could represent raw material for functional tools in the next world or perhaps symbolize prestige or status as often suggested. In contrast, it has been recently proposed that such blades are tool blanks redistributed through trade among Meadowood phase populations. Their burial associations are explained by "surplus retirement" when a producer-individual dies (Granger 1978).

Another interesting feature of the Liahn site included the remains of an articulated adult male interred on his right side in a tightly flexed position, and placed directly on an extensive layer of red ochre. As work progressed around the skull and left hand a number of short, rolled copper beads were discovered which were held together by a preserved fibre-cord. The string of beads lay inferior to the left hand and extended under the left frontal portion of the skull to circle around the entire right half of the skull. Surprisingly, this large number of beads preserved portions of a textile object. It was likely made of bark and at least one cross stitch has been identified. It appears that a quantity of red ochre, then the beads, and finally the skull were placed within this textile object.

One other red ochre-filled feature proved interesting. Two bi-pointed copper awl-like objects were recovered associated closely with adult skull fragments (Fig. 3). Close examination revealed the objects had fibre around their midshafts and care was taken in the field to preserve them in their entirety (Fig. 4). The objects measured 122 and 106 mm in length and 8 and 9 mm in width respectively. Both were square in cross section and in an extremely deteriorated condition with most of the outer metallic surface virtually dissolved.

INTERPRETATION

In discussing the nature of these items, one must address the problem of defining the relationship between inferred ideational and utilitarian function. Binford has stated that such objects are status-elevating artifacts or socio-technic items, as most exhibit wear patterns and are associated with burials (Binford 1962: 221-222). On the other hand they have been viewed as primarily functional or utilitarian objects as they exhibit wear and are mostly surface finds. It has been stressed by Penman (1977) and others that better functional classifications through competent wear analysis are needed to adequately explain burial associations.

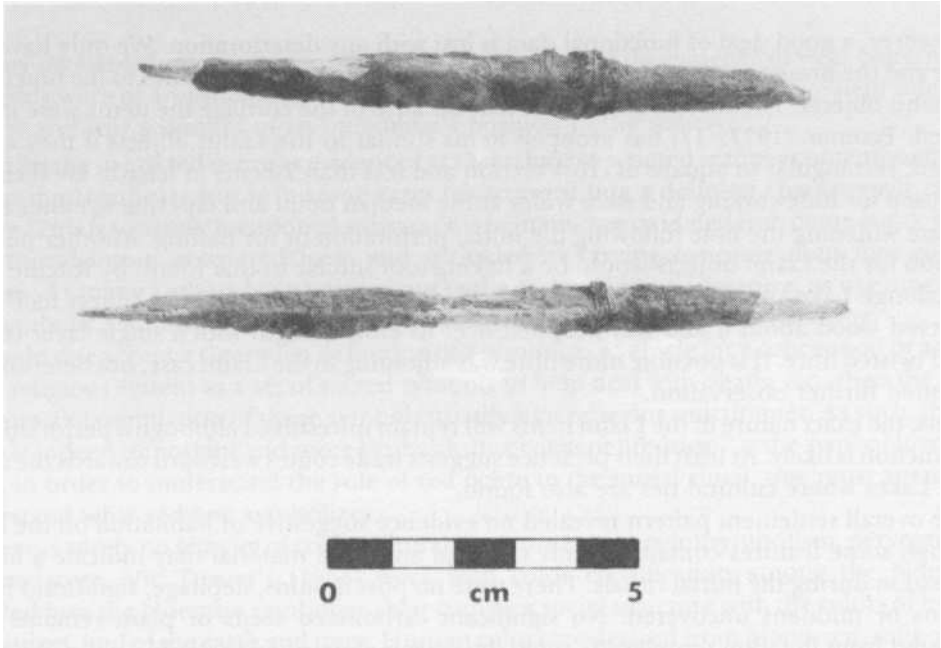


Fig. 3 Bi-pointed copper awl-like objects from Liahn II.

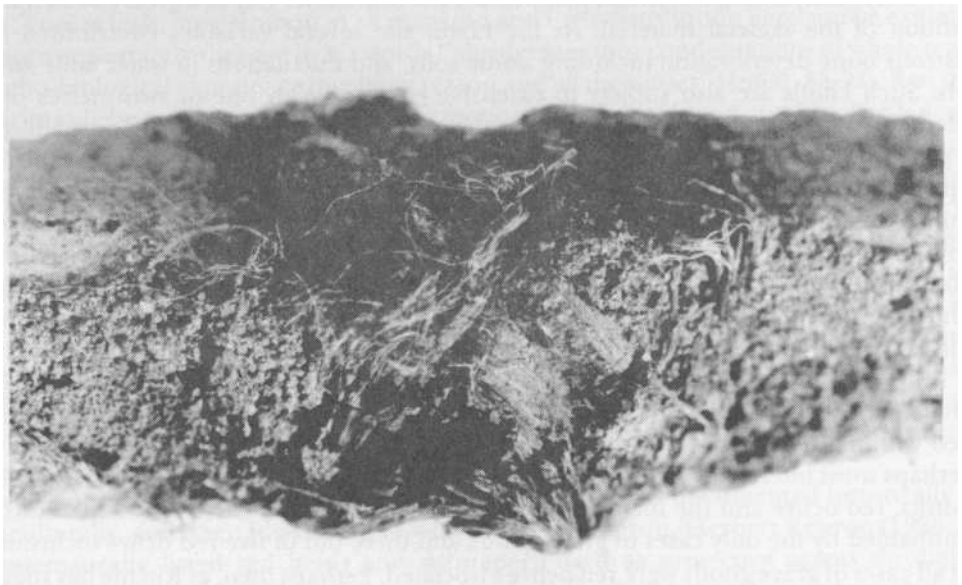


Fig. 4 Close up of fibre on midshaft segment of copper object from Liahn II.

However, a good deal of functional data is lost with any deterioration. We only have size, shape and the preserved organic material (possibly basswood fibre) as clues to the function of the Liahn objects. The first assumption is that because of the cordage the items were indeed utilized. Penman (1977: 17) has grouped items similar to the Liahn objects if they are bi-pointed, rectangular or square in cross section and less than 20 cms in length. He feels they were used for hideworking and were wider at the median point and tapering at either end to facilitate widening the hole following the initial perforation or for hafting. Another possible function for the Liahn objects would be a flaking tool similar to that found by Ritchie at the Muskalonge Lake site. Ritchie (1955: 36-37; Pl. 8) stated that his awl-like object had much preserved wood about it and was wrapped over its entire length with a single layer of one-strand twisted fibre. It is possible more fibre was adjoining in the Liahn case, but deterioration prevented further observation.

Thus, the exact nature of the Liahn items will remain unresolved although a perforator awl-like function is likely. At least their presence suggests trade routes westward towards the upper Great Lakes where cultural ties are also found.

The overall settlement pattern revealed no evidence suggestive of habitation on the knoll, although some features containing only charcoal and fired material may indicate a limited occupation during the burial rituals. There were no post moulds, debitage, significant faunal remains or middens uncovered. No significant carbonized seeds or plant remains were recovered from flotation samples. As such, the season of occupation could not be identified.

No habitation site has been located in the area but Ritchie and Funk (1973: 348) have suggested that riverine and lacustrine resources were exploited by such societies. In such an environment, fishing, hunting and gathering were presumably subsistence activities, while a more stable pattern of living is reflected in small cemeteries.

Inferences concerning interment patterns at such cemeteries rely to a great extent upon the condition of the skeletal material. At the Liahn site several variables contributed to the disastrous bone deterioration including acidic soils, and fluctuations in water table and lake levels. Such knolls are also subject to extensive erosion. With one or two metres of sand eroded, the burials are nearer the surface within an active soil zone, and are thus affected by soil processes. Such erosion also increases vulnerability of the bone to agricultural activity. Despite such conditions, some comments should still be made regarding interment patterns at Liahn. Most forms of interment known for Northeast societies in Late Archaic/Early Woodland times were encountered, including bundle, flexed, multiple and perhaps skull burial. The only exclusion is cremation, although one of the features included a skull fragment of an immature individual that had been burned while fresh. Both adults and children were buried at Liahn; all three cases of multiple interment involved the two age groups. Sexing was uncertain due to poor preservation, although two individuals were determined to be male. One young adult male was interred in a bundle form while the other individual was flexed within a red ochre layer.

Perhaps most interesting in terms of interment patterns is the relationship between flexion of adults, red ochre and the inclusion of grave goods. The only cases of flexed adults were accompanied by the only cases of grave goods and three out of five red ochre inclusions. At least all cases of grave goods were red ochre associated. Perhaps then, as Ritchie has suggested for Meadowood, status in the society may have been attained with adulthood, although not all adults achieve status. Grave goods, a particular form of interment, and red ochre were signs of status as manipulated through the burial ritual. Grave goods may not represent items to be used in the next world, but symbols of status. On the other hand, perhaps only adults who had status were given items to be used in or transported to the next world. As such, only the awls

had any probable functional use in life. The blades showed no evidence of wear patterns and the beads were of an ornamental nature. Perhaps copper itself was a prestige item due to its scarcity and was a symbol of an individual's position in the society.

Finally, the use of red ochre as evidenced at Liahn has been noted at many contemporaneous sites in the Northeast and is in some cases felt to constitute a defining characteristic of that culture. This frequently mentioned substance is hematite, an oxidized iron compound, which was ground into a powdered form and sprinkled in varying concentrations into cultural features. As many authors have pointed out in the archaeological literature, its use must have had symbolic significance. However, discussions of that importance are lacking.

Should one accept a Geertzian definition of a symbol as a vehicle for a conception or an idea and a religious system as a set of sacred symbols to help deal with death, etc., then the ritual becomes a manipulation of those symbols usually by a religious practitioner. As such, the red ochre is indeed important and more probably, the concept "redness" is the symbol involved. Thus, in order to understand the role of red ochre in the burial ritual, one must attempt to understand what redness symbolizes.

There is surely no scarcity of cross-cultural data concerning color symbolism, perception or nomenclature. Vic Turner's (1968) work with color classification among the Ndembu revealed how the Ndembu symbolize their complex social structure with the colors of human body juices, and of the earth and trees. Human colors are derived from blood-red, milk-white, and feces-black while natural colors are found in trees with white sap or the earth in black and red clays. From these colors the Ndembu perceive male vs female, power structures, health, purity, luck and danger, all in a complex symbolization. Turner concludes that the three colors representing bodily emission are associated with a heightening of emotion and are powerful symbols capable of transcending the experiencer's normal condition. These three colors, Turner feels, are common to all mankind and their distribution need not be explained and more importantly they are in his words "abridgements or condensations of whole realms of psychological experience involving reason and all the senses" (1968: 88-91). Red then, may primarily be referred to as a powerful emotional symbol of blood and life. The Ndembu informants claimed red things were of blood and have power, as blood is power, for if an animal does not have blood, it will die. Also, Radcliffe-Brown has suggested for Adaman Islanders that red was the color of blood and fire. As such, blood was associated with warmth and life and fire with activity and mental excitement. Red paint was applied to sick people as a symbol of well being and to a homicide as a purification symbol. Radcliffe-Brown even wondered whether redness-blood-fire may be a universal symbol of a psychophysical kind (Firth 1973: 135). Brenda Beck (1969) has written about color and heat in South Indian ritual, where red symbolizes heat or fire in opposition to white. South Indian rituals often include blood sacrifices which always mark a ritual boundary or transition point. Beck claims such transitional ritual points, for example burials, are often cross-culturally characterized by redness.

The use of red as a universal, protective power has also been documented historically and cross-culturally, and often in association with blood symbolism. Herbert Kenyon (1926: 29-35) systematically listed red items and substances used as protective agents throughout historical times beginning with lamb's blood to protect the Children of Isreal, through the use of hematite for soldiers suffering from loss of blood in battle, to the extension of protection to inanimate objects. He also noted redness was a distinguishing mark of shamans and that more importantly the power of red was due to its obvious association with fire. He concluded red through fire became a representation of divine power, a sacred symbol, and thus the one color having "the greatest magical properties" (1926: 35). Such magical powers have also been

observed for Northwest coast societies. McLaren (1978: 18) has stated that red paint was a "principal media of restoring the dead to life" and that "red as a color symbolized supernatural intervention and curing." Ritchie suggested much the same for the use of red ochre in burial features of the Northeast. He felt that red ochre, in its representation as blood, perhaps acted as a magical restorer of life or vitalizer (1955: 64).

In summary then, color symbolism should be viewed as a complex system often having several color symbols in opposition. Red though, has been documented as a symbol of blood, fire, protection for both animate and inanimate objects, ritual transition from one state to another, and restoration of life. As a natural symbol, its sacred power likely derives from its origin within the body.

However, there are many questions which remain unanswered regarding its archaeological association. For instance, why are only some individuals interred with red ochre; or why within some sites are there areas or features of red ochre containing no skeletal remains? At least, there is the realization of red as a natural, powerful and sacred symbol, perhaps with blood-giving or life-giving properties, ensuring entrance to, or life in, the next world.

SUMMARY

The Liahn II site clearly fits into the Late Archaic/Early Woodland horizon as characterized by the Meadowood phase of New York, some of the Red Ochre burial sites of Michigan, Ohio, and the Midwest, and related Glacial Kame sites of the Upper Great Lakes region. What is certainly important in terms of the relationship between Liahn II and Meadowood, Boyd, or some Red Ochre sites is the absence of ceramics. However, these cultures all share similar interment methods, copper artifacts, gorgets, birdstones, tube pipes (stone in the earlier cases) and cache blades. The mortuary blades from Liahn best relate to Meadowood, while the absence of ceramics and cremation adds to the complexity of the issue. None of the supposed nuclear traits of Red Ochre or Glacial Kame appeared during excavation. At the present time then, it is impossible to assign specific cultural affiliation for the Liahn II population. More importantly however, as has been suggested elsewhere (Spence et al 1978: 44), it seems clear that among Liahn and similar Northeastern populations, there was an increasing participation in trade and ritual spheres that were oriented towards the expression of social variables such as status. The presence and repeated use of small cemeteries for burial rituals suggests the growing importance of the band as a social unit.

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