

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PROTO-WICHITA SITES IN RICE AND McPHERSON COUNTIES

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Sites attributed to the Wichita abound in southern Kansas and occur as clusters of large village sites in Cowley, Marion, McPherson, and Rice counties and to a lesser degree elsewhere in the state. The relationship of the sites in McPherson and Rice counties, separated by no more than 30 miles, are of particular interest because these have ample evidence of early contact with Europeans and probably represent the villages known as Quivira by Coronado.

INTRODUCTION

The Great Bend aspect was proposed by Wedel to describe sites found in impressive numbers throughout the Southern Plains of Kansas and particularly Cowley, Rice, Marion, McPherson, and Pawnee counties. Using a combination of ethnohistorical and archaeological data, Mildred and Waldo Wedel have convincingly identified this complex as protohistoric Wichita and probably dating between A.D. 1500 and 1750.

Of the major proto-Wichita sites in Kansas, Marion, McPherson, and Rice county have revealed evidence of European contact in the presence of trade goods such as glass beads and metal artifacts. At Marion County, these trade materials are exceedingly rare whereas in McPherson and Rice counties they are relatively common on some sites. It seems plausible at this time to suggest that the sites in Rice and McPherson county where trade goods are commonly found are roughly contemporary and that these represent the terminal expression of the proto-Wichita in Kansas prior to the establishment of Wichita sites in northern Oklahoma in the early- to middle- 18th century.

In this paper I will focus my attentions on examining the relationships between sites in Rice and McPherson counties. Because of their proximity and certain striking similarities, sites in these counties have often been considered together as essentially belonging to the same complex. From recent attention given to these sites, and in particular sites in McPherson County, it now appears that there are profound differences that may affect how we may perceive the relationships between these two areas.

BACKGROUND

Rice and McPherson counties are in central Kansas. These counties are similar for the generally rolling topography of the Smoky Hills region and during the Protohistoric period were on the western edge of the tall-grass prairie.

The McPherson County sites, in particular the Paint Creek site, received what is among the earliest scholarly attention of any site in Kansas. This pioneering work was done at the end of the 19th century by Johan August Udden who, because of the presence of European goods and in particular chain mail on these sites, believed they may have been among those visited by Coronado. Despite this early attention, the next scientific investigations in this area were delayed until work was

initiated in the late 1960s at the Sharp's Creek site. This site was the scene of our annual Kansas Archeology Training Program dig this past summer.

In Rice County, the pedigree of scientific work is considerably more distinguished. Wedel conducted investigations at Tobias, C.F. Thompson, and Malone in 1940. In 1948 C.S. Smith undertook the only work to date at the Major site. In 1965, 1966, and 1967, Wedel returned to Rice County to investigate the Paul Thompson, Tobias, and Hayes No. 2 sites, and in 1970 was back again for additional work at the Tobias site. The Kansas State Historical Society and Kansas Anthropological Association investigated Tobias, now a state owned site, in 1977 and 1978, site 14RC306 in 1981, the Crandall site in 1983, and CF. Thompson in 1988. Additional research on the proto-Wichita in Kansas has been conducted in Cowley, Ellsworth, Marion, Pawnee, and Wilson counties.

GEOGRAPHIC RELATIONSHIPS

There is, to be sure, some justification for the tendency to consider the Rice and McPherson County sites together and as a locus of settlement separate from others in Marion, Cowley, and Pawnee counties. Some of these reasons relate to cultural traits, but perhaps as important is geographic proximity. It is, for example, less than 20 miles from the Sharps Creek site in McPherson County to the Tobias site in Rice County, as compared to 40 miles to the Marion County sites, 110 miles to the Cowley County sites, and 80 miles to the Pawnee County sites.

If we look at Rice County in more detail, however, we do not see just one cluster but three: a cluster along the Little Arkansas River and sites in two areas along Cow Creek. Discarding the county border and adding the McPherson County sites to this distribution, and considering the distance to the next nearest site clusters, alignment of the Rice and McPherson county sites requires little effort.

TRAIT COMPARISON

Despite a massive amount of excavation on Great Bend sites, a comparison of cultural traits between sites and between site areas is difficult because much of what has been excavated remains unreported. Nonetheless, a review of what we do know is informative.

Site Features

Although some proto-Wichita sites are small, those that have received the greatest attention are impressively large. In Rice and McPherson counties as well as in Cowley and Marion counties there are sites that easily consume a section of land. While we have no clear understanding of how these sites formed-whether they are the product of villages of this size or accretions of smaller villages or isolated house complexes-ethnohistorical accounts do suggest high population densities.

These sites are composed of a variety of features, including structural remains, cache pits, low earthen mounds, and features known as "council circles." Structural remains are known for Rice, Marion, Pawnee, and perhaps Cowley counties; they have yet to be documented in McPherson County. Small pit houses have been documented for Rice and Marion counties and one was probably excavated by Wedel in 1940 in Cowley County. Evidence for surface structures

interpreted as grass houses and arbors have been documented for Rice, Marion, and Pawnee counties.

Cache pits abound in sites in all areas except Pawnee County. The Pawnee County evidence is also lacking in bison scapula hoes and it has been suggested because of this that proto-Wichita sites in this area were seasonal hunting camps. Elsewhere, cache pits include a combination of relatively small straight-sided pits and more typical deep, bell-shaped pits. In Marion County, pits were found in association with structures in a pattern that would suggest the placement of these features in the actual habitation area.

Low earthen mounds, once thought to represent house mounds and now generally interpreted as refuse mounds, are known on sites in Rice, Marion, Cowley, and McPherson counties. While these may in some cases be refuse mounds, excavation of a low mound at the Sharps Creek site this past summer seems to argue against this as a primary use. Mounds may have formed as the result of the stockpiling of spoil from the excavation of cache pits with some mounds also receiving a large quantity of refuse in the process. Such mounds may reflect communal spoil/refuse areas and their distribution on sites may thus reflect community structure of a village of some size.

By far the most intriguing features present on proto-Wichita sites are the so-called council circles. These are known for five sites in Kansas: the Tobias, Paul Thompson, and Kermit Hayes No. 2 sites along the Little Arkansas River in Rice County, and the Sharps Creek and Paint Creek sites in McPherson County. A similar feature may also have been present at the Neodesha Fort site in Wilson County, Kansas, and earthworks of questioned similarity are present in 18th-century Wichita sites in Kay County, Oklahoma.

These council circles are by far the most prominent features visible on the surface of proto-Wichita sites in Kansas and the presence of definite council circle features only on sites in Rice and McPherson counties may be among the primary reasons that sites in these areas have been considered to be essentially similar. Large site size and the presence of low earthen mounds are also common to both counties but are also known for Marion and Cowley Counties. Although scientifically excavated cache pits have only recently been documented for McPherson county, pothunters made it well known that McPherson county abounded in these features and was thus no different than Rice County and all other proto-Wichita complexes except for Pawnee County. Since structural evidence is still lacking for McPherson County, a situation that will hopefully be resolved this next summer, no comparison is possible here.

Site features, therefore, do point to a greater similarity between the sites in McPherson County and those on the Little Arkansas River in Rice County. The prevailing wisdom that this region should be considered as one proto-Wichita complex distinct from others is therefore, at this level, justified and justifiable.

Trade Goods

Proto-Wichita sites in Rice, McPherson, and Marion counties have yielded, in good contexts, artifacts of European origin in the form of glass beads, iron chain mail, brass beads and tinklers, iron tools, etc. These are extremely rare in Marion County and more common—in a relative sense only—in Rice and McPherson counties.

In Rice County, European artifacts are known only for the Saxman site, located on Cow Creek, and from several sites along the Little Arkansas River. European artifacts are found commonly on sites in the vicinity of the three council circles in Rice County and were common finds during Wedel's excavations of these features. In McPherson County, European artifacts appear to be common at the Paint Creek site and have been found in excavations at the Sharps Creek site; both sites are also characterized by council circles. No scientific excavation has occurred on the council circle features, however.

Although also known for the Saxman site in Rice County and the Mem site in Marion County, the strong association of European goods at sites with or in the vicinity of council circles tends to support an association between the sites in Rice and McPherson counties. In particular we may draw a tight circle around the Sharps and Paint Creek sites in McPherson County and the sites along the Little Arkansas River in Rice County.

Aboriginal Material Culture

More than pottery or forms of bone or stone tools, lithic sources used by occupants of the sites is emerging as the most striking and easily digestible information on the aboriginal assemblages. We can unfortunately talk only in terms of impressions; although the data exists in quantity from Rice County it has not been analyzed and quantified, and while such a process has begun for McPherson County we do not currently have the quantitative results.

In both Rice and McPherson counties, a relatively small number of lithic sources account for the majority of the debitage and tool assemblages. In Rice County sites, Smoky Hill Jasper and Alibates are extremely common with Flint Hills cherts occurring as well. The Smoky Hill Jasper is found in northwestern Kansas and southwestern Nebraska, Alibates comes from the Texas panhandle, and the Flint Hills cherts are found to the east throughout the Flint Hills region. In McPherson County, Jasper and Alibates are found as minority constituents only; predominating are Tahlequah and Flint Hills cherts. Tahlequah comes from a band from northeastern Oklahoma to southwestern Missouri. The Flint Hills cherts include a sizeable quantity of Kay County varieties, from the southern Flint Hills, as well as the more generic gray permian cherts found throughout.

Although speculative and non-quantified, the differences between the predominant lithic sources for these two areas that appear so similar in other ways is nothing short of striking. If lithic sources are an indication, the orientation of these two areas is decidedly different with the Rice County sites having a westward procurement focus and McPherson County a southern or southeastern focus. The importance of lithics in terms of procurement and thus in terms of territoriality or trade relations is significant; the other aboriginal traits that I have reviewed provide no real insight into this aspect of culture.

Looking at other proto-Wichita complexes in terms of the source makeup of the lithic assemblage, parallels could most easily be drawn between the Rice County sites and the sites to the west in Pawnee County and between the McPherson County sites and those sites to the southeast in Marion County. Understandably I suppose, Cowley County sites appear to draw extremely heavily from local sources in Kay County and it is as a result difficult to relate these sites to those in other areas.

One other aspect of the aboriginal assemblage deserves note. Items traded from the Southwest are very common on the Little River sites in Rice County and include Puebloan sherds, obsidian from New Mexico, and turquoise. The Puebloan sherds date both prior to and after Spanish contact and thus illustrate the presence of an established trade with the Southwest prior to the arrival of the Spanish. In McPherson County, obsidian is found in reduced quantity, turquoise is not reported, and Southwestern sherds are unusual. It should also be noted that evidence for trade with the proto-Pawnee is present in the McPherson County sites in the form of Lower Loup pottery found in cache pits.

INTERPRETED RELATIONSHIPS

To date, less attention has been paid to the relationships between Rice and McPherson counties than to the relationship between these counties and other areas further removed. I believe that understanding the relationships of sites within this small area is currently among the most intriguing questions that we have to address about the proto-Wichita in Kansas.

This brief overview has broken the Rice and McPherson county sites into at least four loci, including sites in McPherson County and in Rice County the Saxman site, sites near Lyons on Cow Creek, and sites near Little River on the Little Arkansas. A review of characteristics including features and material culture suggests that the strongest similarities exist between those sites along the Little Arkansas River and the sites in McPherson County. This similarity arises due to the presence of council circle features only in these two areas and due to the common occurrence of European trade goods there as well. Consideration of predominant lithic sources would not, however, lead to such a conclusion of similarity and would instead see the McPherson County sites more closely aligned with sites in Marion County and the Rice County sites with Pawnee County. Put differently and perhaps more appropriately, the Rice County sites have a procurement focus oriented to the west whereas the McPherson County sites are looking to the southeast.

Because of the similar occurrence of European goods at the Saxman site, on the Little River sites in Rice County, and in McPherson County, I have elsewhere suggested that these are probably roughly contemporary sites that represent the terminal expression of the proto-Wichita in Kansas. Other sites complexes such as those in Marion, where a very few trade goods were found, and Cowley and Pawnee counties, where trade goods have not been reported, would presumably predate certain sites in Rice and McPherson counties. It is also of note that in Rice County and in the complex along Little River there are sites without trade goods that probably represent earlier expressions of proto-Wichita in that area.

At this point, I will offer an interpretative hypothesis concerning the relationships between the Little River sites in Rice County and the sites in McPherson County. I suggest that proto-Wichita settlement on Little River substantially predates Spanish contact and that these sites were significant in the establishment of a strong trade relationship between the proto-Wichita and the Southwest; this eventually became a trade with the Spanish Southwest. This is based on the presence in this area of numerous sites lacking European trade goods but with Southwestern trade items, the strong focus of lithic procurement toward the west, and the common presence of aboriginal items from the Southwest on sites clearly post-dating Spanish contact. I would further suggest that as this trade increased in importance the McPherson County sites were occupied by a

proto-Wichita band, perhaps formerly residing in Marion County. Proximity was achieved in order to take advantage of an increasingly important European trade through closer association with the Little River sites. Territorial distinction was maintained, however, because the two site complexes were located in different major drainages and through maintenance of previously established procurement relationships. I would also suggest that the council circle features developed at this time in reaction to these events but am not prepared to say why.

The European trade had few notable effects on proto-Wichita culture in Kansas but its establishment among this group was significant; there can be little doubt that it was the structurally different and very lucrative trade with the French that drew the Wichita to abandon their sites in Rice and McPherson counties, perhaps as late as the early 18th century, and relocate along the Arkansas River in Kay and Tulsa counties, Oklahoma. Here the trade had an indisputable importance and effected major changes in the Wichita material culture.

In closing, I caution that we really have a poor understanding of the various proto-Wichita site complexes in Kansas and northern Oklahoma. It is apparent from my research that much remains to be done before we have even a basic framework for understanding how sites and site complexes may relate to one another. What I have seen hints at the possibility of an emergent seriation of sites and site areas that may relate to the movement of as few as two distinct groups of proto-Wichita in the region. Before any attempts are made to assign historic affiliations on site complexes, our comparative understanding of the proto-Wichita needs to improve markedly.