

# **EVIDENCE FOR EARLY EUROPEAN CONTACT WITH THE WICHITA IN KANSAS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Large Great Bend aspect village sites, known to represent the protohistoric Wichita, are common to south-central Kansas. Some of these sites certainly represent the grass lodge villages visited by the Coronado expedition in 1541. By 1700, however, this core area had been abandoned and the Wichita had begun a migration to the south. Starting in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, occasional artifacts of European origin have been discovered on these sites and, despite extensive scientific excavation since 1940, the total inventory of European artifacts remains small. An overview of these artifacts and the contexts of their discovery is presented. A correlation between the presence of European artifacts and aboriginal artifacts from the Southwest is noted.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Between 1881 and 1889, Johan August Udden collected and studied artifacts from the Paint Creek site (14MPI) on the Smoky Hill River in south-central Kansas. Among these items, which were preponderantly aboriginal in form, was a piece of heavily rusted chain mail armor which Udden correctly concluded "demonstrates that this village was inhabited by Indians after the European race had come over to this continent" (Udden 1900:66). This find, which came from one of many protohistoric Wichita sites in Kansas, figured prominently in a then ongoing debate on the early Spanish exploration of the Plains and, in particular, on the route of Coronado's expedition in Kansas.

Since this initial discovery, substantial research has been undertaken on the protohistoric Wichita. This research has been characterized by occasional finds of European goods. Of these, finds of chain mail have received most of the attention (cf. Wedel 1975) and an overall synthesis has been lacking. This paper presents a synthesis, and further considers the significance and meaning of these materials for an understanding of the protohistoric Wichita.

## **THE PROTOHISTORIC WICHITA**

The protohistoric Wichita are known in archeological terms as the Great Bend aspect. Kansas sites attributable to this aspect have been found principally in four localities: Rice and MePherson counties along the Little Arkansas and Smoky Hill rivers, Marion County around the city of Marion, Cowley County near Arkansas City, and Pawnee County near Larned. Other Great Bend sites are known, however, outside of these "core" areas (see, for example, 14WNI). Chronologically, Great Bend sites are thought to date from AD 1400 to 1700, by which time the Wichita resided in north-central Oklahoma (M.Wedel 1981).

Great Bend sites include many that provide no evidence of European contact and a relatively small number that have such evidence. The material culture of all is largely aboriginal in form and there is no appreciable difference between those with European goods and those without these items. The very low number of European items and the apparent lack of evidence for significant material culture change has allowed the conclusion that Great Bend sites document the earliest of contact scenarios. The material culture of the Great Bend aspect reflects the lifestyle of a sedentary agricultural people. Evidence for pit houses and for surface structures has been recovered. The surface structures include a pattern that can be derived from the grass covered houses known for the historic Wichita and encountered in Kansas by Coronado in 1541. The pit houses have no historic counterpart.

Three sites in Rice County (Tobias, Kermit Hayes No. 2, and Paul Thompson) and two in McPherson County (Paint Creek and Sharps Creek) are characterized by the presence of what have become known as “council circles.” No site has more than one of these circles, which have been described by Wedel as “consisting of a wide shallow ditch some 30 to 60 yards in diameter, with a mounded center” (Wedel 1959:574). Wedel conducted excavations at the three Rice County circles between 1940 and 1967 and found these to be complex features consisting of a series of four kidney-shaped basins surrounding a central plaza (Wedel 1959, 1968). These basins are clearly the remains of structures.

In terms of sheer numbers of artifacts excavated, Great Bend sites are the most impressive American Indian sites in Kansas. This rich inventory comes from site middens and from trash-filled storage pits which extend two to three meters into the ground. Recovered botanical remains show a heavy reliance on horticulture and gathering; the animal bone a strong reliance on the hunting of bison. Elaborate tools utilizing stone, bone, and clay have been documented. Much of the stone used comes from non-local sources in the Southern Plains or beyond, with reliance on sources in northwestern Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. Longer distances and probable trade with the Southwest is inferred from the presence of obsidian, turquoise, and pottery manufactured in the Southwest. It is in this context of an abundant and elaborate aboriginal material assemblage that the occasional European artifacts occur.

## **PREVIOUS RESEARCH**

The last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a significant amount of interest in the archeological remains of south-central Kansas and the first scholarly attention to the Great Bend aspect. This resulted in the acquisition of collections from Marion County for the Peabody Museum and Smithsonian Institution (Wedel 1959:498-500) and in Udden's pioneering study of artifacts, including chain mail, from the Paint Creek site in McPherson County (Udden 1900).

This flurry of interest ended by about 1900 and was not picked up again until 1940. In that year, Waldo R. Wedel of the Smithsonian conducted investigations at a number of sites in south-central Kansas and proposed the term “Great Bend aspect” to describe these sites. Based on this work, Wedel concluded that the Great Bend aspect represented the protohistoric Wichita and that the Rice County sites were the best candidates for those visited by Coronado in 1541 and that the Cowley County sites may have been those observed by Oñate in 1601 (Wedel 1942).

Between 1948 and the present, extensive research has been conducted by the Smithsonian, the Kansas State Historical Society, and the University of Kansas in Rice County (Smith 1949; Wedel 1968; Witty 1977, 1986; Rowlison 1981); by the Wichita State University and the Kansas State Historical Society in Marion County (Rohn and Emerson 1984; Lees 1989); and by Earl Monger in Pawnee County (Monger 1970). Formal work during this period was supplemented by several important discoveries by amateur archeologists.

This long history of excavation has provided a significant volume of data on the Great Bend aspect. Unfortunately, much of the later work by the Smithsonian and the Kansas State Historical Society remains unanalyzed and unreported. Despite the importance of the European manufactured items in these collections, the only synthetic treatment has been a consideration of chain mail fragments published by Wedel in 1975 (Wedel 1975).

### **ARTIFACTS MANUFACTURED IN EUROPE**

To date, artifacts of European origin have been recovered only in Rice, McPherson, and Marion counties: in Rice County at the Major (14RC2), Tobias (14RC8), C.F. Thompson (14RC9), Paul Thompson (14RC12), Kermit Hayes No. 2 (14RC13), and Saxman (14RC301) sites; in McPherson County at the Paint Creek (14MPI) and Sharps Creek (14MP408) sites; and in Marion County at the Mem site (14MN328). European made artifacts from these sites include chain mail, an iron awl, iron knife blade fragments, an iron axe blade, glass beads, a copper-alloy tinkler, copper-alloy beads, and a necklace of glass, turquoise, and bone beads. Many of these items are in the collection of the Smithsonian or at other institutions and were not examined for this paper. These artifacts are reviewed below.

#### Chain Mail

Fragments of iron chain have been discovered at the Major, Tobias, C.F. Thompson, and Saxman sites in Rice County and the Paint Creek and Sharps Creek sites in McPherson County. Probably the most important specimen is that found at the Paint Creek site in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and described by Udden in 1900 (Udden 1900). Probably the largest sections of mail are two specimens found at the Saxman site. The first measured 17 by 13 inches and was recovered by amateur archeologists Kenneth and Ina Terry in 1960 after it was exposed during a flood (Terry and Terry 1961). The second piece measures 7 by 5 inches and was found in 1974 by Bryan Beamer and Jim Linden (Wedel 1975:192-193). A large mass of mail was found at the Major site by amateur archeologist Parker Parish after the site was partially destroyed by the county road department in 1977. Substantially smaller pieces, down to individual links, have been found by amateur archeologists at Paint Creek and Sharps Creek (Wedel 1975:190-191); by Wedel at C.F. Thompson and Tobias (Wedel 1975:191); and by Witty at Tobias and C.F. Thompson (Witty 1977,1986).

#### Iron Awl, Knife Blade, and Axe

An iron awl, knife blade fragments, and axe were discovered by Wedel in 1940 in one of the basins making up the “council circle” at the Tobias site. According to Wedel, “the awl appears to have been 4-sided, either square or diamond-shaped in cross section, at the middle, whence it tapered to

a point at each end” (Wedel 1959:295). The items interpreted as knife blade fragments were described by Wedel as “bits of thin sheet or strap iron suggestive of knife blade fragments” (Wedel 1959:295). The axe was “broken vertically through the eye, with the poll missing” (Wedel 1959:295). Based on its form, Wedel concluded that this axe was probably of Spanish origin (Wedel 1959:296).

### Glass Beads

Glass beads have been discovered at the Tobias and Kermit Hayes No. 2 sites in Rice County and the Mem site in Marion County, and were also noted by Udden at the Paint Creek site (Udden 1900:67). Unfortunately, Udden notes only that ‘one or two perforated beads of blue glass’ were found on the surface of one of the refuse mounds. No further description of these beads was provided.

Wedel found five glass beads at the Tobias site in 1940. These are described as “slightly asymmetrical, but basically are subspheroidal in form with flattened surfaces at right angles to the perforation. They are of pale-blue glass, slightly iridescent, with finely pitted surface” (Wedel 1959:296). A single blue tube type glass bead was found by Witty at Tobias in 1977 in the upper fill of a cache pit (Kidd and Kidd 1970 Type Ila39, 40, or 43). This bead appears to be essentially identical to those discovered by Wedel at this site. In one of the basins making up the “council circle” at the Kermit Hayes No. 2 site, Wedel found “some 30 pea-sized blue glass beads, spaced in the ground at intervals of about an inch and suggesting a necklace” (Wedel 1968:381). Although no further description was provided, these appear similar to those from the nearby Tobias site. A single tube type bead (Kidd and Kidd 1970 type Ila40?) was found by Ina Terry on the surface of the Saxman site; this is similar to those from Tobias and Kermit Hayes No. 2 (Witty 1979).

In 1986, an opaque, “black” glass bead was found in the upper fill of a cache pit at the Mem site. This tube type bead is ovoid in shape (Kidd and Kidd 1970 Type IlaS). That this bead differs from those found in Rice County in color and shape is clear even with the poor descriptions available for many of the Rice County finds.

### Composite Necklace

At the Tobias site in 1940 Wedel found what he has interpreted as a necklace consisting of “some 250 beads and pendants” (Wedel 1959:296). This complex was discovered on the floor of one of the basins making up the “council circle” and was discovered in a configuration that proved to Wedel that this had indeed been a necklace. Recovered were 144 whole glass beads, several fragments of glass beads, 38 bone beads, a single shell cylinder, a polished oblong turquoise pendant, a pierced shell disc, and 32 flat circular turquoise beads. Of these, the glass and bone beads were strung together in alternating groups to form the necklace and the shell and turquoise combined to form a pendant:

At the lower end of the original necklace both strands came together and passed through a shell cylinder. Immediately below this was a polished oblong turquoise pendant...with a perforation at the smaller end. Below this, in turn, was a short loop

with 32 flat circular turquoise beads. A thin circular centrally pierced shell disk...divided the turquoise beads into two groups [Wedel 1959:297].

The glass beads are described by Wedel as “dull whitish, irregular in size, and have pitted surfaces; but when wet, and while immersed in a preservative, they have an attractive light-blue color” (Wedel 1959:297). These beads are described by Wedel as identical to individual beads found at this site, and are probably similar to those from Kermit Hayes No. 2.

### Copper-Alloy Tinklers

A single rolled copper “tinkler” was found at the Tobias site during Witty's 1977 excavations. This tinkler tapers to a point and is about 59 mm in length. Analysis indicates that it is of a manufactured copper-alloy.

### Copper-Alloy Beads

Wedel discovered three rolled copper artifacts at the Tobias site in 1940. These are described only as “small strips rolled, or with the ends folded over, to form tubular beads or beadlike pieces” (Wedel 1959:296). These were relatively small, measuring from 12 to 5 mm in length and from 9 to 3 mm in thickness. Wedel speculated that these may have been “fashioned around a thong or cord as a ‘dangler’” (Wedel 1959:296).

Two similar copper-alloy artifacts from the Mem site in Marion County are interpreted as beads. The first of these was discovered during Wichita State's 1976 excavations and the second during Kansas State Historical Society excavations in 1986. The 1975 find is a small fragment that measures no more than 10 mm in length and is 9 mm in diameter. The 1986 find is whole and measures about 6 cm in length but is only 3 mm in diameter. Both have been formed by rolling a thin sheet into a tight cylinder. Both were thought to be of native copper but analysis of the 1986 bead indicates it is manufactured alloy.

### Iron and Brass Scrap

It is not further identified, but Wedel noted that the “council circle” basins at the Paul Thompson site contained “small metal scraps identifiable only as iron and brass” (Wedel 1968:378).

### European-Influenced Pottery

The final artifact that I will discuss is one that I am the least confident in my interpretation. This is a sherd of aboriginal pottery from the Paint Creek site that I believe may show elements of European design. Pictured in Udden's manuscript on the Paint Creek site is a base sherd that stands in stark stylistic contrast to other Great Bend vessels and to Plains Indian vessels in general. This sherd has a small raised ring of clay entirely reminiscent of a footring on European pottery. According to Udden:

On the sherd from the bottom of one vessel there was a circular raised ring. This seems to be too small for increasing the stability of the vessel on the ground and was

perhaps rather intended to secure its equilibrium when placed on the head, where Indian water carriers are in the habit of supporting them [Udden 1900:28-29].

This footring departs from typical Great Bend vessels that have either a rounded base, a flat base, or a slightly concave base. The small size of the footring generally corresponds to the traditional size of resting points on Great Bend vessels. It is suggested here, keeping in mind that I have not examined this artifact, that this may be an adaptation by a Wichita potter of an element seen on a European vessel.

Such adaptation is not unusual in early contact situations, and has been documented in various settings in the Southeast. Although Udden probably is correct in his conclusion that this would not provide an effective resting point, this is not important if the intent of the potter was stylistic or symbolic borrowing.

### **CORRELATION WITH SOUTHWESTERN ARTIFACTS**

The origin of the European trade items in Great Bend sites is an important question. Trade with European explorers visiting the Southern Plains or with settlements in the Spanish Southwest are obviously the best and most often cited examples. Trade interaction between Southern Plains Indians and the Southwest is well documented during the late prehistoric period. A positive correlation between European trade goods and native Southwestern items such as obsidian, turquoise, and Puebloan pottery should therefore not be expected and does not exist in most Great Bend localities. Although items from the native Southwest are found on sites where European-made items are absent, it is important that, except for Paint Creek, sites where European items have been found have also been characterized by the presence of turquoise, obsidian, and/or Puebloan pottery.

More informative in examining the relationship between the Southern Plains and the Southwest is the evidence from Marion County. Here, there is a perfect, contextual correlation between European and native Southwest items. At the Mem site, a single cache pit contained the only glass bead ever found in situ in a Marion County Great Bend site, one of only two copper-alloy beads, the only turquoise bead, and one of only two small flakes of obsidian. The only other European item, a fragmentary copper-alloy bead, and the only other flake of obsidian from the area were also found on this site. In Marion County, then, evidence for contact with the native Southwest and with Europeans is equally meager. It is therefore of utmost significance that the correlation between these groups of artifacts is so striking in this area. The deposition of these artifacts in the same site and within the same site context thus presents a compelling argument that their travel to the site was the result of similar processes.

### **ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS**

In the balance of this paper, I would like to examine the meaning of these artifacts in the context of Wichita contact and culture change. It is initially important to note that the European trade goods are known for only two of the four main localities of Great Bend settlement: the Rice/McPherson county area and Marion County. In Marion County, European materials are limited to three items and these are from a single site. In Rice and McPherson counties, significantly greater numbers of

European artifacts have been found but occur at only eight sites which are tightly clustered. In McPherson County, European goods are found at the Sharps Creek and Paint Creek sites and these are within 2.5 miles of one another. Occurrences in Rice County are at the Major, Tobias, Kermit Hays No. 2, C.F. Thompson, and Paul Thompson sites, located within 2.5 miles of each other, and at the Saxman site, located about 12 miles distant.

This distribution of contact sites in Rice, McPherson, and Marion counties clearly shows the location of Wichita villages in Kansas that were occupied after European contact had been made. This distribution becomes particularly interesting when the occurrence of the five known "council circles" is also considered. These correspond with the cluster of contact sites in McPherson County and with the large cluster of contact sites in Rice County. That "council circles" are in themselves contact period cannot be questioned because the three that have been excavated have contained significant amounts of contact materials.

At the Tobias site, an iron awl, axe blade, knife blade fragments, a mass of iron, three copper beads, five loose blue glass beads, and the necklace made of glass, turquoise, and bone beads were found during Wedel's 1940 excavations of the "council circle." It is not known if other European artifacts were found during Wedel's later excavations at the Tobias circle. It is nonetheless significant that the only European goods found by Wedel came from the circle features. From the Kermit Hayes No. 2 circle, 30 blue glass beads in a pattern suggestive of a necklace were found; no mention was made of other trade goods from this site (Wedel 1968:381). Similarly from the Paul Thompson site, Wedel noted the contents of the circle closely paralleled the Tobias site, including "the finding of small metal scraps" (Wedel 1968:378).

Most of the known European trade goods found on Great Bend sites have thus been recovered from the "council circles." Important exceptions exist in the chain mail and in the glass and copper-alloy beads from Marion County, the glass bead and copper-alloy tinkler found at Tobias in 1977, and the glass bead found on the surface at the Saxman site. Several conclusions are possible.

First, the "council circles" are obviously important contact period features; they are prominent not only in their design but in their significant association with European goods. It is here suggested that these circles are not an indigenous aspect of Wichita culture nor a persistent one. Instead, they are presented as a reaction to initial European contact. This is supported by the lack of a prehistoric Plains antecedent to the "council circles," their clearly contact period association, the significance of their contact association, and the lack of similar features in later Wichita sites.

I would here note that earthwork features are known for the Neodesha Fort site in Kansas (14WNI), possibly dating to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century (W.Wedel 1959: 527-534); the early 18<sup>th</sup> century Deer Creek site in north-central Oklahoma (34KA3)(M.Wedel 1981); and the 18<sup>th</sup> century Spanish Fort sites along the Red River in Oklahoma and Texas (W.Wedel 1961). These all differ from the "council circles" (M.Wedel 1981), but it would be presumptuous to suggest there is no relationship given the lack of detailed information on the Neodesha Fort and Deer Creek sites.

Second, the distribution of chain mail is different from that of other European goods. It is noted that chain mail does not occur in the features making up the "council circles." In the contexts

where it does occur, chain mail is much more common than other types of European made artifacts such as beads.

The “council circles” were thus the primary recipient of European goods other than chain mail. In this light, the frequency of European goods in Marion County is not significantly lower than in most site contexts in Rice or McPherson counties. The lack of “council circles” in Marion County, and the very localized occurrence of both European and native Southwestern goods is probably, however, important in understanding these sites and especially Mem, the only contact site in the county. It is possible that the Marion County area was very peripherally affected by European contact.

In conclusion, the careful study of the available information on European trade goods in Great Bend aspect sites has resulted in the identification of distinct patterning that has not been previously recognized or articulated. These patterns help to identify the contact period settlement pattern, differences in the occurrence of different types of European goods, and significantly identifies a prominent archeological feature, the “council circles,” as a significant contact period feature. The interpretation of the “council circles” as a limited duration cultural response to contact is admittedly speculative, but is not unreasonable considering the significant impact that first contact must have had on the Wichita living in south-central Kansas.

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