

*Carpenter Brook Revisited: Early Late Woodland Ritual Practice at Watery Places and
Its Implications for Archaeology*

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In this paper, I summarize some aspects of my dissertation research, which focuses on the prehistoric archaeological site at Carpenter Brook in Onondaga County, New York (Ritchie 1947). The site was excavated in 1946 by William Ritchie, who argued that it dated to the end of the eleventh century AD and that it was related to prehistoric Iroquoian ritual practices (Ritchie 1947; 1980:274-275). In light of nearly 60 years of methodological advances and growth in our knowledge base, many of Ritchie's findings and assumptions about the site merit revision. Here, I first assess Ritchie's ideas about what beliefs people enacted through ritual at the brook and propose an alternative more in line with anthropological and archaeological evidence. Second, I discuss the role of objects – specifically pottery – in the rituals at the site and what those functions mean for how archaeologists interpret the ceramics assemblage.

The Carpenter Brook site was located in the bank of the stream after which it was named, which flows into the Seneca River along a turbulent stretch of that waterway called Jack's Reef (Ritchie 1947:56, 67). When Ritchie excavated the site, it was eroding from the bank of Carpenter Brook. Its exposure was caused by the declining water levels that accompanied nineteenth century attempts by New York State to drain the nearby Montezuma Marshes. Ritchie estimates that roughly half of it had been lost to erosion before his excavation (Ritchie 1947:56, 66-67). The site was composed entirely of a

single deposit of artifacts measuring approximately 3 by 12 meters (Ritchie 1947:56).

Although Ritchie tested the surrounding area, he found no other indications that prehistoric people used the land close to the brook (Ritchie 1947:58). The deposit was made up almost entirely of sherds from ceramic vessels – Ritchie recovered roughly 700 fragments from about 125 pots and estimated that pieces from an additional 75 vessels had been lost to erosion (Ritchie 1947:64; Ritchie and MacNeish 1949:118). In addition to the potsherds, Ritchie found 150 identifiable animal skeleton fragments; of these, 90 were from bears predominantly from the head and feet. Other species included: Virginia deer, cottontail rabbit, dog, and puma, among others (Ritchie 1947:62). Besides the potsherds and faunal remains, there were only 19 other objects in the deposit, including a clay smoking pipe, and a fragment from a clay phallic effigy (Ritchie 1947:60, 63-64). Although Ritchie thought the phallic form of the clay effigy was a unique find in the Northeast, Parker (1922:197) found a similar object at the Richmond Mills site that he interpreted as a smoking pipe. Most of the objects from Carpenter Brook were coated to some degree with calcium carbonate which originated in a nearby spring and contributed to the flow of the stream (Ritchie 1947:56-58).

When it came to interpreting the site, Ritchie was struck by its atypical qualities, relative to other large artifact deposits. First, it was far away from the nearest village site or any other places that showed signs of extensive prehistoric use by people. He believed it was formed by people who lived at a settlement at the Jack's Reef site, located half a kilometer away (Ritchie 1947:67). Second, the artifact assemblage from Carpenter Brook was almost entirely composed of potsherds, a rare quality at prehistoric archaeological sites in New York (Ritchie 1947:63). Frequently, single deposits as large

as this were refuse dumps, and comprised of a diversity of artifacts (see Ritchie 1937:35-53). Beyond this, judging from the high number of sherds from individual vessels, as well as the large sizes of the fragments, Ritchie argued that people had transported whole vessels to the brook, and smashed them there (Ritchie 1947:58, 67). Finally, he was also noted the high proportion of bear remains relative to those from other animals represented at Carpenter Brook (Ritchie 1947:62, 73-74). Usually, remnants from fish or deer numerically dominate faunal assemblages from late prehistoric sites in New York (e.g. Ritchie and Funk 1973:186, 210, 219, 235-236). Also, although he does not mention it, the presence of puma is also unusual (e.g. compare with *ibid.*).

Given all these singular characteristics, Ritchie (1947:69-73; 1950; 1980:298, 300) argued that the site was the result of prehistoric Iroquoian ritual acts during which people left food at the stream as a sacrifice. He stated that, although ceramic vessels were abundant, they were not intrinsic to the ceremonies people performed there (Ritchie 1947:67). Food was the most important sacrificial item. When it came to explaining the specific rituals – as well as the beliefs that motivated them – that people enacted at the brook, Ritchie's hypotheses focused on the abundant skeletal material from bears. He argued that the people who left food at Carpenter Brook had conceptions regarding bears and their treatment after death that were similar to beliefs held by nearby Algonquian groups in historic times (Ritchie 1947:69-73). Ritchie was influenced by Hallowell's 1926 paper, in which that author observed that Algonquian groups throughout the Northeast held broadly similar ideas regarding the disposal of bears they consumed during feasting (Hallowell 1926). Among these was the belief that they should dispose of ursine remains – usually just the skulls – at specific hallowed places some distance from

their settlements (Hallowell 1926:135-140). Given Carpenter Brook's distance from the nearest contemporaneous village and its relatively large number of bear skeletal elements, Ritchie argued that the prehistoric Iroquoians who visited the site had beliefs about disposing of bear remains that were analogous to those of Algonquians in historic times (Ritchie 1947:69-73). Within this framework, the bear remains at the site were from animals people had consumed during feasting (Ritchie 1947:71). These people disposed of what remained at the brook and offered food there in order to propitiate the bears' spirits (Ritchie 1947:69-73; 1950; 1980:298, 300).

I agree with Ritchie that prehistoric peoples' beliefs about the exceptional qualities of bears played some role in their activities at Carpenter Brook. At the same time, however, I also think his interpretation leaves many questions about the site – and the beliefs of the people who visited there – unanswered. In the remainder of this paper, I address two related issues his interpretation overlooked. First, using evidence from the ethnohistoric record, I consider how late prehistoric Iroquoian people might have experienced Carpenter Brook within their conceptual landscape, and how this perception played a role in their actions there. Second, I briefly explore the possibility that the ceramic vessels from the site were much more closely related to the ideas people enacted there than Ritchie suspected, and I address what this might mean archaeologically.

One question Ritchie's interpretation of the site does not answer is, why was that place so special that people repeatedly visited it and left bear remains there? He notes that people probably returned to Carpenter Brook over a period of 9 to 15 years (Ritchie 1947:71). If their only requirement for a location to dispose of bear remains was distance from their village, why did they repeatedly go to the same spot, and why did they chose

that place to begin with? I think some of the answers to these questions involve ideas native people throughout the Northeast linked with watery places. In the traditional worldviews of both Iroquoian and Algonquian groups, the underwater world is inhabited by dangerous and powerful spirit grandfathers, including giant horned serpents, panthers, and other creatures – all of which, as Hamell (1987:78; 1998:264) has pointed out, have the common quality of long slender bodies. Some of these beings are among the most hazardous creatures within the cosmologies from which they come (Lankford 1987:96). Places where our own world and the watery underworld meet, such as at waterfalls, springs, and lake bottoms, are portals to the homes of these beings (Hamell 1987:78). As such, people should avoid them and, if contact is necessary, should placate the creatures that live nearby with material offerings. One way the underwater creatures manifest their power is the degree to which they can affect the waters' surface and even the land around it. In the late nineteenth century, Connelley (cited in Barbeau 1915:313) reported that the Wyandot believed the rivers joining the Great Lakes were “only the worn ways made by these monsters in crawling from one lake to another.” In another instance, Peter Clarke (1870:153) mentions that the actions of underwater creatures could cause a pond's surface to rise up and boil. Dangerous rapids in rivers were another manifestation of the underwater beings' malevolent powers.

As Brinton (1885:166-167) noted in the nineteenth century, native people throughout the Eastern Woodlands had very similar beliefs linking liminal watery places like springs and waterfalls with very specific dangerous, powerful, and horned slender-bodied beings (see also Hamell 1998:281-282; Lankford 1987:96). He suggested this widespread geographic distribution was an indication that these beliefs had an ancient

prehistoric origin (Brinton 1885:166-167). More recently, Lankford (1987:96) and Hamell (1987:79; 1998:281-282) have each echoed this assertion. In this light, the people who visited Carpenter Brook probably had ideas about watery places analogous to those of Native Americans in the Northeast during historic times. Before the nineteenth century, the brook had a turbulent flow with a much higher volume than it does now – possibly with rapids (Ritchie 1947:58). Also, there was a spring nearby, from which water flowed into the stream (Ritchie 1947:56, 58). These qualities would have stood out in the minds of people who believed that powerful and dangerous creatures entered and exited their under-earth homes through springs, and traveled in rivers, forming disturbances at the surface as they moved. In this way, these characteristics also might have influenced peoples' decision to visit this specific place and leave offerings there.

Understanding Carpenter Brook's role in shaping how nearby people experienced their landscape and how it influenced their decisions to leave offerings at the site does more than shed light on their reasons for selecting that location. To some extent, this kind of insight also permits reconciliation of several discrepancies in Ritchie's 'bear cult' interpretation – particularly in regards to Carpenter Brook's large ceramic assemblage. In his explanation, Ritchie argued that the primary intent of the people who visited the brook was to sacrifice food in order to placate the bears' spirits. The pots were only "incidental" to this primary offering (Ritchie 1947:67). This raises two questions about the vessels' presence. First, in light of the fact that the Jack's Reef village was half a kilometer away, why wouldn't the people have used baskets or some other method for bringing food to the stream? Prehistoric Iroquoian ceramic vessels were heavy and awkward to move, whereas baskets were much lighter and easier to carry. Second, why

would the people deliberately smash their pots instead of returning home with them?

From a pragmatic standpoint, the answer to both these questions is that people intended to destroy their pots at the brook and that therefore the vessels must have been at least as much a part of the activities at the site as were their contents. As such, for the people who left them, they were not as extraneous in whatever rites they performed at the brook as Ritchie had argued. In this light, however, the large number of vessels smashed at the site seems incongruent with the small number of bear remains. In all, Ritchie (1947:73-74) found evidence for nine bears, but there were potsherds from roughly 200 vessels. Thus, if people had intended to offer the pots to the bears' remains, then there would have been over ten vessels per ursine individual. In his survey of how native northeasterners treated bears' skulls after feasting in historic times, Hallowell (1926:136-140) mentions that, among some groups, men decorated the heads or give them offerings of red ochre or tobacco. However, there is no ethnohistoric parallel to the sacrifices that would have been lavished on the bears at Carpenter Brook if all the items left there were intended for them.

Instead, I believe it is more likely that the large amount of pottery from Carpenter Brook is another manifestation of the site's special qualities in the eyes of the prehistoric individuals who lived nearby. In historic times, Euro American observers witnessed numerous events throughout the Northeast in which Native Americans offered sacrifices to underwater spirit beings at the springs and other places near the entrances to their homes (e.g. *JR* 10:159; 50:265; 51:181-185; Champlain 1911:12-13, 38-39; 2000:47; Colden 1747:16-17; Coleman 1937:38; Hamilton 1899:310; Haviland and Power 1994:193; Henry 108, 175-179; O'Callaghan 1866:592; Sagard 1939:171, 189). For

example, the Jesuit François Allouez, who lived among the Ottawa in southern Ontario, wrote in 1667 that “at perilous places in the Rivers, they propitiate the eddies and rapids by offering them presents” (*JR* 50:287). Among the ‘presents’ that other observers saw Native Americans offer to underwater spirit beings, were: tobacco, smoking pipes, copper, arrows, clothing, china cups, prayer sticks, and dogs. At some places, writers noted that items had accumulated through time, indicating that Native Americans were returning to the same watery location and repeatedly leaving items for the creatures beneath (Dewdney and Kidd 1967:2). The large amount of artifacts at Carpenter Brook correlates much more closely with this ritual behavior than it does with ceremonies native northeasterners performed to accompany the disposal of bear remains. Unfortunately, I have not been able to find any sources historic recounting incidents in which people left ceramic vessels at the special watery places in their landscape. This is probably a reflection of the fact that Native American production of clay pots in the Northeast declined relatively soon after contact with Europeans, as they adopted lighter and more durable imported copper kettles (Wonderley 2002:34). James Wright (1999:683-685), however, argues that there is archaeological evidence – such as that from the Woodland Period Red Horse Lake Portage site in southeastern Ontario – to suggest that people there sacrificed ceramic vessels to underwater spirit beings in the prehistoric past. Also, Wonderley (2002) has recently emphasized the symbolic importance of clay pots to their Iroquoian makers and users. Given these premises, along with the great range of items Native Americans have left to spirit beings in historic times, I believe ceramic vessels would have been legitimate candidates for sacrifice at Carpenter Brook. In this light,

their presence at the site was probably more closely related to how the people who left them there perceived that place than it was to the bears among which Ritchie found them.

This interpretation of the pottery from Carpenter Brook – that it was an intrinsic element of the acts people performed there, rather than an incidental byproduct – has implications concerning the conclusions archaeologists derive from the assemblage. the perspectives with which archaeologists approach the ceramic assemblage. When he excavated Carpenter Brook in 1946, Ritchie was working under the assumption that changes in the attributes of ceramic vessels were due almost entirely to the passing of time (see Ritchie and MacNeish 1949). Because of this, he was able to put New York State sites – including Carpenter Brook – in chronological order, on the basis of how the frequencies of pottery types changed from one site to another. To make Carpenter Brook fit, however, he did need to invent a new kind of pot to account for 65% of the site's vessels (Ritchie and MacNeish 1949:118). When archaeologists began using radiocarbon dating in the 1950s, Ritchie did not revisit the sites he had excavated before. Instead, he continued to rely on the assumption that changes in pottery were only a reflection of the passing of time and simply fit the old sites around the new absolute dates he acquired from radiometric techniques. If radiocarbon dates did not match with what he expected, he frequently rejected them, rather than change his established order of sites (e.g. Ritchie and Funk 1973:148, 251). Recently, however, a series of studies – mainly those by Hart, Brumbach, and Schulenberg – have challenged some long-accepted elements of Ritchie's chronology for the beginning of the Late Woodland Period, from roughly AD 1000 to 1300 (Hart 1999; 2000; Hart and Brumbach 2003; Schulenberg 2002). By directly dating cooking residue adhered to ceramic vessels, they have demonstrated that there are

actually far fewer discernable patterns in how decoration on the pots changed through time during those three centuries than Ritchie believed. Also, they have shown that the site chronology is very different than that in his framework, with people even occupying some sites more than once – a possibility Ritchie seldom considered. In order to determine how old the Carpenter Brook site actually was, I acquired two samples of charred encrusted matter from sherds from the site for AMS dating. The calibrated results are: AD 980 to 1050 (Beta-193706) and 880 to 1010 (Beta-193707), respectively – about 80 years older than Ritchie had estimated (Stuiver and Reimer 1993; Stuiver, *et al.* 1998). This puts the site close in time to several nearby villages (such as Maxon-Derby, Sackett, and Bates), the ceramic assemblages from which Ritchie had contrasted with that from Carpenter Brook (Hart 2000). The differences he noticed, however, can no longer be attributed to changes through time or across space. Given this, the possibility that the pots from the brook were important parts of ritual devoted to that place might account for some of the differences between those vessels and the ones from the village sites. As another part of my dissertation project, I have been comparing attributes from the pots in the two assemblages to explore this possibility. Preliminary results indicate there are significant differences in the diameters and wall thicknesses between the two lots of vessels, but that there are no concomitant variations in the size or complexity of their decoration. This might indicate that people were aware they were going to smash some of the pots, and avoided time consuming aspects of their manufacture, but made them to superficially resemble other vessels.

In this paper, I have discussed how the Carpenter Brook site can be interpreted in terms of Native American ideas about watery places like springs and river rapids.

Although Ritchie's explanation of the site, with its emphasis on bear ritual, might be partially correct, it leaves many questions unanswered. Understanding the site as it might have been perceived by the people who visited it accounts for the abundant ceramic remains in ways that Ritchie's interpretation does not. Instead of people wasting their pots by smashing them for no reason, they probably intended to sacrifice them just as much as any other item they brought to the brook. This kind of explanation might also account for differences between pots from Carpenter Brook and those from village sites.

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