

# RITUAL OBJECTS AND THE RED HORN STATE: DECODING THE THEATER STATE AT CAHOKIA

By Julie Zimmermann Holt

Archaeologists often joke – about other archaeologists – that when they don't know the function of an artifact, they say it must be a ritual object. However, the reality is that rituals are performed in all cultures, and these rituals can leave archaeological evidence behind: that is, some artifacts really were ritual objects. Mississippian peoples clearly had rich ritual lives, and the artifacts they used in their rituals often impress us as beautiful works of art. Not too long ago, archaeologists thought that we would never be able to decipher the symbolism portrayed in these works of art. To the contrary, remarkable progress has been made decoding these images in recent years. We can also draw some conclusions about the rituals in which these art objects were used, and their function in Mississippian culture.

## EPIC TALE OF RED HORN

Many Mississippian works of art depict characters and images from the epic tale of the Siouan hero Red Horn. Cultural anthropologist Paul Radin recorded



The Red Horn panel from Picture Cave, Missiour. Drawn by Richard Dieterle from a photograph in Carol Diaz-Granados, "Marking Stone, Land, Body, and Spirit."

the Red Horn myth in his book *Winnebago Hero Cycles*, published in 1948. According to the Winnebago version of this myth, Red Horn was originally named He-Who-Gets-Hit-With-Deer-Lungs, and he was the youngest of ten brothers. In the first episode of the story, He-Who-Gets-Hit-With-Deer-Lungs

and his brothers compete in a race. He-Who-Gets-Hit-With-Deer-Lungs wins the race by turning himself into an arrow and shooting around the world. In winning the race, He-Who-Gets-Hit-With-Deer-Lungs wins the right to marry the chief's daughter, but instead, he gives the right to his older brother



From the collections of the University Museum, University of Arkansas. Photo courtesy Pictures of Record.

and announces that from now on he will no longer be called He-Who-Gets-Hit-With-Deer-Lungs.

His new names are Red Horn and He-Who-Wears-Human-Heads-as-Earrings, and, appropriately, he now sports a long red braid as well as tiny living human heads in his ears. In the next episode Red Horn and his brothers go on the warpath, and Red Horn wins the first war honor. In the third episode Red Horn marries an orphaned girl. In later episodes Red Horn and his companions win a series of

contests against a group of giants. In one of these contests, the little human heads in Red Horn's ears wink and stick out their tongues, which makes a giantess laugh and causes her to lose the game. Red Horn marries the giantess after the game, taking her



Rogan "bird man" plate, Etowah Site, Bartow County, Georgia. Courtesy of The National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, cat. #A91117.

as his second wife. Red Horn and friends finally lose a contest to the giants, and they are killed.

Red Horn's two wives are pregnant at the time of his death. Both give birth to sons who have red hair. While the son of the first wife has little human heads in his ears like his father, the other son has little human heads in place of his nipples. After they grow up, the two brothers rescue their dead father and his companions from the village of the giants by bringing home their decapitated heads, which then become whole bodies again.

### REPRESENTATIONS OF RED HORN

Robert Hall was probably the first archaeologist to recognize that the story of Red Horn is represented in late prehistoric art. One of the earliest examples was identified by Hall as Red Horn's son, the one with human heads for nipples, painted at Gottschall Rockshelter in Wisconsin. This pictograph

is believed to date to the Late Woodland period (A.D. 900-1000). Carol Diaz-Granados and Jim Duncan have more recently identified Red Horn himself, as indicated by his human head earrings, in a painting at Picture Cave in Missouri. Alternatively, this painting could represent Red Horn's son bringing back his father's head from the village of the giants. This pictograph might also date to the Late Woodland period.

Mississippian period depictions of Red Horn with his human head earrings clearly include a pipe found at Spiro, Oklahoma, and made of red stone known as flint clay. His long braid and the arrow heads on his back identify him as Red Horn rather than his son. Kent Reilly suggests that other Mississippian pipes and figurines of red flint clay depict other characters and scenes from the Red Horn saga. James A. Brown argues that Mississippian "bird man" depictions are also representations of Red Horn; the bird man is portrayed commonly in media including marine shell gorgets and copper plates. Other depictions seen in shell gorgets, for example, include Red Horn's son carrying his head, or bilobate arrows that represent the arrow that He-Who-Gets-Hit-With-Deer-Lungs became to win the race and become Red Horn.

Artifacts known as "long-nosed god masks" look like little human heads, and the placement of these in Mississippian period burials indicates that these human heads were in fact worn by people as earrings. Robert Hall argues that these earrings were made and given out by Cahokians at adoption ceremonies. Adoption ceremonies were common among



Castalian Springs gorget, Sumner County, Tennessee, at the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution. Drawing by Herb Roe.

Native Americans in eastern North America. When a loved one died, for example, someone might be adopted to take his place. Thus, mourning rituals were linked with adoption ceremonies, and like the Red Horn saga, adoption ceremonies linked death with rebirth. They also functioned to create fictional kinship ties between communities, as did the historic calumet ceremony. The calumet was a smoking pipe, or “peace pipe,” and the calumet ceremony of course involved smoking these pipes. As Kent Reilly notes, many red flint clay figurines were later turned into pipes, so they quite literally were smoked at ceremonies that probably resembled the calumet ceremony.

Many of the artifacts I’ve described are believed to have been made at Cahokia. For example, Thomas Emerson and colleagues have identified the source of the red flint clay in Missouri near Cahokia. Both copper and marine shell are not local to Cahokia, but copper workshops and marine shell workshops have been found at Cahokia. Jim Brown argues that the so-called Braden style of art originated at Cahokia. Evidence of this is found in Braden style pictographs located near Cahokia, and in the distribution of Braden style artifacts. Braden style pictographs and artifacts center around Cahokia, but Braden style artifacts were distributed far from Cahokia.

Red flint clay figurines, for example, are found in the south at sites ranging from Spiro, Oklahoma to Etowah, Georgia. The long-nosed god masks (human head earrings), like Ramey pottery from Cahokia, tend to be found at sites north of Cahokia, some as far away as Wisconsin.

### CAHOKIA AS THEATER STATE

In sum, evidence suggests that long-nosed god masks and red flint clay figurines were made at Cahokia and given out at ceremonies similar to later adoption and calumet ceremonies that served to create fictive kinship ties. Braden style shell gorgets, copper plates, and other artifacts were also likely made at Cahokia, and we might speculate that they too were given out at ceremonies that tied the recipients to Cahokia. Red Horn was clearly a central figure in these ceremonies, but I would argue that these artifacts represent more than just some

sort of Red Horn cult. I believe that through these rituals the recipients from sites far and wide literally became Cahokians. The cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz offers an idea that I think is useful for understanding the nature of Cahokia, and the deeper meaning of these artifacts. Geertz argues that a “theatre state” is spread not by the power of armies; it is spread by attracting supporters to the state through the power of theatrical rituals. I think the evidence suggests that Cahokia was the center of a theater state.



Long-nosed god maskette, marine shell, grave good excavated from the Yokem Mound Group, Pike County, Illinois, now in the collection of the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution.

Clearly, Cahokians were masters of dramatic ritual. For example, the scale of human sacrifice at Cahokia is unmatched anywhere north of Mexico. In addition to the 250 or so people, mostly young women, sacrificed for interment in Mound 72, the primary burial was of a bird man – an actor portraying Red Horn, as Jim Brown suggests? Or perhaps even Red Horn himself? Regardless of the interpretation, it is clear that Mound 72 was the scene of a breathtaking drama. Cahokia was also the stage for countless less dramatic rituals, from chunky games to monumental constructions in wood and earth.

Large numbers of people moved to Cahokia during the Mississippian period (A.D. 1050-1400) to be part of the dynamic social experiment that took place there, but the power of Cahokia spread far beyond the limits of the city. I think we can look beyond Cahokia,

and see in the far-flung spread of Cahokian-made artifacts the spread of a Cahokian state. Several decades ago, archaeologist Patricia O’Brien argued that Cahokia was a state, referring to it as the Ramey state. I am arguing that Cahokia was a different kind of state, a theater state, which spread its influence from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico through rituals rather than war. Given the predominant role the Red Horn cult apparently played in these rituals, I think a more appropriate name than the Ramey state might be the Red Horn state. The many Red Horn ritual objects left behind provide tangible clues that can be decoded to reveal this forgotten but magnificent past. These beautiful works of art were indeed ritual objects, and those rituals created the threads in the social fabric of Cahokia.

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