Hopewellian vs. Mississippian Peoples of the Midwest United States

In the period before the Midwestern United States was settled by Europeans, the people existing in the area were a vast and developed people. Not of one culture, there were many ways of life spread throughout the area. Two of the larger followings in the heart of the Midwestern area were the Mississippian and the Hopewellian people. While their strategies and ways of life differed greatly, a few common threads tied them together, more so than probably expected.

The Mississippian peoples and period that first appeared somewhere between 700 and 800 AD and flourished from approximately 1000 to 1600 AD. The area affected was intensively from the Ohio River Valley all the way north through the southern Great Lakes, while their influences persisted further in all directions, especially to the south in areas such as the Carolinas and upper Deep South. The Hopewellian period refers to the people of a slightly earlier time whom appeared to flourish from about 300 BC to 300 AD and gradually faded out into the Mississippian era. These people inhabited much of the same land areas, though their influences are hard to distinguish due to the time differences. While a lot of the evidence provided for the comparisons is debatable, it originates from multiple archaeological surveys and patterns found over multiple locations and time, and are therefore not simply random theories. However, due to the very nature of the studies, they are somewhat prone to error and personal interpretation. Hard evidence and concrete finds pave the way to further understanding the people and societies of these periods.

One of the most prevalent and well-known societal patterns of people during these eras are the process and construction of earthen mounds.

The earthen mounds erected by both people of these periods are believed to have been primarily used for burials and ceremonies of the time due to archaeological finds within the mounds themselves. As James Fitting explains in his article ‘*Regional Cultural Development*’, the mounds usually were “marked by numerous … inhumations, usually in log tombs, with the occurrence of several secondary burials…” (Fitting, 5). Both cultures would use manpower and labor to cultivate, reconstruct, and redefine the land into shapes they had planned out for their needs. The locations and grouping of the mounds also suggest that, for both societies, the mounds were used for extended periods of time and not intermittently, as suggested by the fact that the mounds exist both “in small groups, suggesting that burial areas were used for several generations…” (Fitting, 5) and that “some of the mound complexes and associated earthworks [are] so great as to suggest reuse of the main burial areas for a number of generations…” (Fitting, 5). In the case of the Mississippians, Fowler suggests that “most of these mounds appear to have been platforms…may have served as residences for important persons…” (Fowler, 5) which indicates thought and planning prior to mound construction regarding the long-term usability and organization of the area.

While the main perceived purpose and goal of the mounds was similar in direction for both cultures, they had significant and impacting differences, as well. The Hopewellian mounds were more geometrically extensive in shape, forming intriguing and unique shapes and patterns such as [CITE]. Mississippian areas, on the other hand, were generally flat-topped and appear to have been used for cultivation and other economical developments. They seemed to build upon their past work, instead of leaving the areas alone or as dwelling places for those in roles of importance. This is explained by Fowler stating that “…Monks Mound had a large structure on the top terrace. This was undoubtedly a public-function building but whether a temple, chief’s residence, or council house is not known…. The western one-third of the first terrace was also the location of a group of public buildings during this phase…” (Fowler, 5) which indicates usage of the mounds to not only preserve their societal values, but server as a platform to further growth and development.

While mounds were a large part of both cultures; they were only a piece of the societies themselves as a whole. Based on the artifacts, size, and locations of the mounds, inferences can be made about more detailed specifics of the society.

A major difference between the societies appears to have been the living arrangements of the peoples involved. Mississippian areas seem far more developed on a larger scale, and planned to a greater degree which leads to the idea that large groups of people would dwell in the same locations during that time. This is exemplified in the Cahokian site area “with their platform mounds, plazas, gardens, burial precincts, and residences. Population estimates for the site during this period suggest a figure of 10,000 or more…” (Fowler, 5). On the other hand, the Hopewellian people have many smaller and more scattered areas of identifiable development, leading to the inference that they instead preferred smaller and more closer knit communities as opposed to larger ‘cities’ such as in the Ohio Hopewell areas where “The greater wealth in the chiefdom area is a reflect … of the ability of a society to mobilize and concentrate this wealth in the hands of individuals holding high status positions… within such a society, every individual would have a place within the social framework and there would be a tighter geographical clustering…” (Fitting, 6). A good analogy to understand the distinction here is the idea of a town versus a city, or even divisional distinctions between collegiate athletics. As such, Hopewellian areas are generally regarded as chiefdoms, while Mississippian groups appear to have been more hierarchically in structure.

While their social organization approaches differed, the existence of organization is a definite similarity between the two eras. Instead of being solitary or distinct and different bands of people, the social structures helped tie the cultures together as a whole and promote growth and change, albeit through different means and methods. A major similarity between the two groups is exemplified by the obvious and fairly extensive trade routes used. An important sign of this lies in the technology, artifacts, and pottery found at many different sites that are not natural to the areas in which they currently exist such as “Agriculture, as an example, may be best interpreted with a diffusion model. It seems to be a trait with a southern origin that spreads northward over time. Ceramic manufacture and certain stylistic elements appear to follow the same pattern….” (Fitting, 13). Mississippian culture has been shown to have done similar things, especially regarding “the flint hoe made of material from the Mill Creek quarries in Union County, Illinois…” which have been found to have spread with Oneota culture and have “appeared in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, and Illinois.” (Fowler, 7).

One of the major considerations for any historical surveys and understanding depends upon the sustenance available and produced by those peoples. Members of the society in leadership positions were generally responsible for the supply of this necessity.

The Mississippian peoples appear to have relied heavily upon the cultivation and production of agricultural goods, especially in regards to “Maize agriculture, present but of unknown importance during Hopewellian times, emerged by A.D. 900 to be a staple in the economic base of the Mississippian period.” (Fowler, 1). The Hopewellians somewhat inverted this tactic, as they tended to rely more upon collection, or hunting, and less on horticulture explained by the possibility “that maize agriculture played some part in the Hopewell economic base, [although] it seems to have been a small part at best… the evidence to date from the lower Illinois River valley indicates… a collecting subsistence and occupied nucleated communities accessible to all micro-habitat zones from which their natural-food resources were drawn.” (Fitting, 5). While both groups tended to approach food in opposite tactics, a fallback in both cases appears to have been Maize.

Though the two groups prospered at different periods in history, the fact remains that both groups managed to not only survive but also to develop culturally through many of the same techniques. Some of the key techniques included mound construction, trading networks, societal organization, and horticulture. However, while the similarities are existent and quite pronounced in many cases, the differences still exist. The Hopewellian people appear to have developed more independently of other groups, while taking examples and learning techniques from each other. On the other hand, Mississippian peoples appear to have grown and developed with a more universal and single-minded goals in mind.

Works Cited

Fitting, James E. "Regional Cultural Development 300 B.C. to A.D. 1000."

Fowler, Melvin L., and Robert L. Hall. "Late Prehistory of the Illinois Area."