

AN UPPER-MISSISSIPPI HOUSE-PIT FROM THE FISHER VILLAGE SITE: FURTHER EVIDENCE

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The Fisher site is located on the east bank of the Des Plaines River, which is one mile above the Kankakee River into which the Des Plaines flows, both forming the Illinois River. The Fisher site was formerly a large Indian village.

Formal archaeological work was begun by George Langford in 1906, 1927; and later work was done from 1931 to 1941 by the Illinois State Museum and the University of Chicago. Wheaton college excavated a house-pit (No. 48), located in the northwest portion of the village during June-July 1946.

Wheaton's purpose for excavating this house-pit was two-fold: (1) To contribute to the general knowledge of the site, and (2) To make further study into the sequence problem relating to Langford grit-tempered ware and Fisher shell-tempered ware.

METHOD

Our excavating technique was to stake the house-site area, in five-foot squares, using transit, level, and stadia rod. The base-line ran approximately north to west with the center-line extending north to east at a right angle from the center line. Digging began five feet behind the base-line (square —5R1), and the resultant trench, four feet deep, proceeded southeast on a ten-foot face, until the 25R1-25-0 squares were reached. The glaciated limestone, over which

the village was built, made excavating exceedingly difficult. A similar procedure was repeated starting on the north-east line, at square 20L3-25L3. This trench continued to the southwest, on a ten-foot face, until the 20L1-25L1 squares were reached.

A field notebook record was kept of each day's proceedings, recording the bench-mark, recovered objects, and other data pertinent to excavation procedure and interpretation. Photographic records in black and white, color, and colored motion pictures were made as the excavation progressed. Recovered objects were kept in paper bags, each bag marked to represent a square. Triangulation was measured on all recovered objects. The entire house-pit was not excavated.

For those unfamiliar with the term "house-pit," we define it as a shallow foundation, 12 to 18 inches deep, made by clearing the top-soil, providing a clean level place for the floor of the dwelling. The soil from the floor was piled around the edges of the foundation, giving it an appearance of greater depth.

House-pit No. 48 was rectangular in shape and approximately 30 feet long and 25 feet wide with the long axis extending north to south. The pit revealed two house walls, one inside the other, similar in construction to house-pit No. 15, excavated by the University of Chicago and described by J. W. Griffin

(1944). The function of the double walls has not been determined. Inside the walls, on the floor of the house, were twin post-holes set at opposite angles suggesting uprights to support the roof. Other posts were recovered by the party. All were completely charred and partly disintegrated. It was not possible to take any of them out intact. The average post was five inches wide and 18 inches long. The broader butt ends showed incisions, probably made by a stone axe. Quantities of charred wood were found scattered over all of the floor. Such a large quantity may indicate that the structure was destroyed by fire. This wood has been identified as sulfur-budded or bitter-nut hickory (*Carya cordiformis*) by John Leedy of the botany department of Wheaton college. There is a modern stand of this variety of hickory about nine-tenths of a mile south-east of the village site.

There were no stone artifacts recovered except for one small triangular projectile point, fashioned from buff-colored chert, and two rejects of similar flint. A stone pestle (red granite) and mortar was found on floor level in the center of the house-pit. It seemed to have been used to break and grind flint into grit as an a-tempering for pottery, rather than to produce flour. Unusually large amounts of red and yellow hematite (ocher) covered the house floor. Its use has not been determined.

The clay industry was well represented by more than 680 pot sherds. A larger proportion of the pottery was found within the house walls, on the house floor, and in the eleven refuse pits. A smaller proportion

was recovered outside of the walls. Inasmuch as the house-pits have been disturbed by cultivation and consequent erosion, no particular significance can be attached to pottery distribution except at floor level which was below the plough-line. Here, as in the pits, a careful analysis did not uncover any particular distribution pattern.

Of the total pottery—687 sherds—565 or 82 percent were plain sherds; 63 or 9 percent were decorated sherds; and 45 or 7 percent were rim sherds. Of the total sherds, 409 or 60 percent were a color which ranged from buff to orange-buff, and 270 or 39 percent were gray in color (not including the smoke stains). Both the gray and buff sherds were well mixed in both horizontal and vertical distribution. Of the non-decorative techniques, paddle-cord impression was predominant. Of the decorative techniques incision by "antler horn" was predominant with "thumb" impression following.

These decorative techniques are typical of the Upper-Mississippi pattern; for example, a thumb impression around the shoulder of the pot, or simple geometric motifs of parallel or curved lines. However there is *one* most significant exception: all of the sherds are Langford grit-temper with no known sherd containing Fisher shell-tempering. This should be noted with particular significance.

No human osseous material was recovered, although we recovered large amounts of animal and fish bones as well as clam shells. These have not been identified. None was fashioned into cultural objects. In

a brief account, the foregoing is a resumé of the type of objects recovered.

PROBLEMS

Although there are a number of problems suggested by the excavation, this paper considers only the problem of sequence based upon pottery tempering. It remains as one of the large problems at the Fisher site.

Does Langford grit-tempered precede, follow, or is it contemporary with Fisher shell-tempered ware? Or stating the problem as a cultural equation: What is the relation of Woodland culture pattern to the Upper-Mississippi culture pattern?

DISCUSSION

Investigators George Langford and James B. Griffin, the latter basing his discussions on the notebooks of the former, established a sequence according to the levels inside of the mounds. According to them the upper level (the top of the mound) contained both shell-tempered and grit-tempered ware; below, there was shell-tempered ware but no grit-tempered ware. From their conclusions shell-tempered ware preceded grit-tempered ware at the Fisher site.

However Deuel (1940) as quoted by John Griffin (1944) felt that grit-tempered pottery preceded shell-tempered pottery, and according to John Griffin, Langford and J. B. Griffin interpreted the material incorrectly.¹

John Griffin (1944), from a report of the pottery from house-pit 15, states: "that only Upper-Mississippi sherds were found within the

house, in the wall trenches, and in the postholes." The aplastic isn't defined but we assume that the pottery of the two types is meant—shell and grit temper—and that these found together are typical "in part." House-pit 15 is quite near the West mound and is apparently contemporary with its upper level.

According to the conclusions of former archaeologists we have one of two choices in relation to house-pit 48: (1) Either the house-pit represents a pre-shell-temper or early culture manifestation; or (2) it represents a post-shell-temper or late culture manifestation.

CONCLUSIONS

Considering all of the traits diagnostic to the Upper-Mississippi pattern, evidence from the investigations of Langford and J. B. Griffin, and the added evidence of house-pit 48, it would certainly seem that shell-tempered pottery preceded grit-tempered pottery at the Fisher site. The sequence from bottom to top is:

3. grit
2. shell and grit
1. shell

This does not exclude the possibility of a very early Woodland culture, before the Mississippian, for this general area; it has not shown up yet at the Fisher site.

What can be inferred beyond this is difficult to say. House-pit 48 and the cluster of nine other house-pits seem to form a nucleus apart from the main village area built around the two large mounds according to the map published by the University of Chicago (1940) of the site. One notes that this smaller nucleus had

¹ Personal communication to the author from J. B. Griffin, 1946.

two small mounds of its own; the northwest and the north-northwest mounds. If this map is accurate (there are no recognizable traces of those mounds today), this group of house-pits apart from the main group, may well represent a later period for this part of Fisher site, with this section belonging to the Oneota aspect. However, one must be cautious in making generalities from pottery evidence alone.

A clarification of the movements of the proto-historic Woodland tribes from the East into this general area (Illinois) may help to clear some of the problems in conjunction with this site, particularly in connection with the seemingly strong late woodland culture penetration which may have caused the "Fisher people" to give up shell-tempering for grit-tempering.

Some of these problems may be solved if further excavations can be made in the "Woodland" section bordering the river area, as well as in the "historic village" section where sequence problems could be nailed down at this end of history.

None of these problems will be solved unless the archaeological work can be completed within the next five years. The present owner of the site, in line with his business

—sand and gravel—will reduce this area, one of the most important sites in Northern Illinois, to a hole in the ground.

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