

THE OLD COPPER CULTURE IN MARYLAND?

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Abstract

Two archeological finds—made almost 70 years apart—in the vicinity of Still Pond, Kent County, Maryland pose an archeological enigma. The recovery of copper spear points and a copper “hoe” from two human burials would, at face value, seem to provide evidence of an “Old Copper Culture” presence in Maryland. This distinctive and exotic material begs the question, what is it doing here—hundreds of miles from the Old Copper core area?

History of the Finds

At the turn of the century, an antiquarian named Francis Jordan (1895, 1906) collected information on Middle Atlantic shell middens. In a chapter of *Aboriginal Fishing Stations on the Coast of the Middle Atlantic States* entitled “Villages on the Eastern Shore of Maryland,” he discusses the “Still Pond Creek Village”—a vast series of shell middens which today correspond to some two dozen reported archeological sites, including the Arrowhead Farm site (18KE29; see Custer et al. 1986). Here, Jordan (1906:36-37) relates a then-recent find by a farmer who “in ploughing in a field adjoining the shell-mounds, turned up an Indian grave, one perhaps of many others in the same area had a search been made.” Found in this grave were a copper spear point and a copper “hoe blade of the conventional type, well shaped and very heavy, seven inches

in length, with a semicircular edge six inches wide” (Jordan 1906:37). Given the description of the latter, it is possible that it might be more accurately termed an axe-form (axe, celt, adze, spud, or gouge). The copper spearhead (Figure 1a) is described as such:

As shown in the engraving a flange extends over the entire length of the blade, forming a double-cutting edge, and terminating at the hilt in a shank marked with deep clear-cut notches for the purpose of securing the shaft. The point and upper portion are corroded and without temper, while the lower half apparently has this quality and retains its original polish. In an effort to restore the temper the apothecary at Still Pond destroyed the symmetry of one of its edges. It is twelve inches long and one and one quarter inches in the widest part. (Jordan 1906:37-38)

The fate of these two copper artifacts is unknown, although Jordan (1906:38) notes that both the Smithsonian Institution and the Archaeological Museum of the University of Philadelphia were unsuccessful in their attempts to purchase the spear point for their collections.

In a 1973 site form filed at the Maryland Historical Trust for the Arrowhead Farm site (18KE29), Steve Wilke and Gail Thompson report that “digging in one grave and several ‘test pits’ are known to have been undertaken by

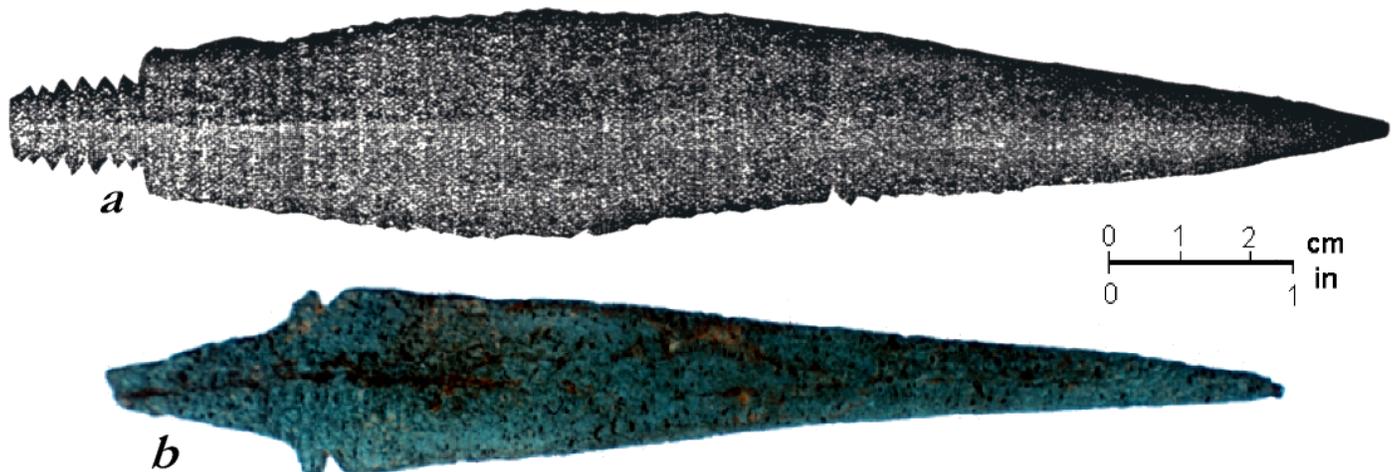


FIGURE 1. Copper spear points from Still Pond. *a*—point reported by Jordan (1906:Plate IV). *b*—point found by Gregory Dick ca. 1972. Note that the scale is accurate for specimen *b*; specimen *a* is shown at the size of the original published engraving, and the width (1¼ inches) matches Jordan’s description, but the length (reportedly 12 inches) does not. Using Wittry’s (1957) copper artifact classification, specimen *a* belongs to Group IF, and *b* belongs to Group IE.

Gregory Dick, address unknown.” (They also report having found one rolled copper bead.) In 1977, Wilke and Thompson updated the 18KE29 site form, again noting that a burial had been excavated at the site “about five years ago” (i.e., circa 1972), and that Gregory Dick had reportedly found a “bronze spear point.” Apparent confirmation of this find is provided in a 35 mm color slide in the collections of the Maryland Historical Trust, which shows a 6½-inch side-notched copper spearhead with a contracting basal tang (Figure 1b). The slide is labeled “KE29 ... Still Pond Cr., Kent Co., Md. ... Gregory Dick coll. ... Photo by Clifford Lefferts, Office of State Archeol., Dover, Del. ... Mar 72.” No other information on this artifact is available.

Discussion

In addition to the finds described above, there are reports of a 4-inch notched-tang spearhead and a tanged copper crescent from the Still Pond area, and other diagnostic copper artifacts (spearhead, crescent, fishhook) from the Eastern Shore in general (Darrin Lowery, personal communication, 2003). The material and form of the spear points described here, as well as the copper crescents, are uniquely characteristic of the Old Copper Culture, a Late Archaic mortuary complex of the western and upper Great Lakes region. (The copper “hoe,” if it really is an axe-form—and possibly the rolled copper bead found by Wilke and Thompson—would likewise represent typical Old Copper artifacts.) The Old Copper Culture is most recognizable through a variety of heavy, mostly utilitarian, copper artifacts including socketed and tanged spear points, axes (including a socketed version referred to as a “spud”), adzes, celts, knives, fishhooks, and awls (Stoltman 1986; Quimby 1960). Ornamental copper artifacts are largely limited to rolled beads, although C-shaped bracelets are also known to occur. Copper crescents have been argued to be either utilitarian (hafted, ulu-like knives) or ornamental (akin to pendants). The geographic range of Old Copper sites includes Minnesota, Illinois, Michigan, and adjacent portions of Ontario, with Wisconsin traditionally considered the core. More isolated finds help define the extremes of distribution: Saskatchewan (west), eastern Ontario and northern New York (east), and Kentucky (south). Aside from numerous fortuitous surface finds, the complex is best known from a limited number of burial contexts. In terms of cultural manifestation, the Old Copper Culture appears loosely related to other circa-1000 B.C complexes including Adena, Laurentian, Glacial Kame, and Meadowood (Tuck 1978:43; Martin 1999:185ff).

Conclusions

So what are these Old Copper artifacts doing in Maryland? There are no clear answers. However, the trade networks operative in eastern North America during Late Archaic times—and cross-cutting a variety of “com-

plexes” and “cultures”—indeed were vast (cf. Pleger 2000). Could they account for Old Copper materials being found in Maryland? Almost certainly. And support of this notion is found when examining Old Copper sites from the Old Copper heartland itself. Of the few professionally excavated Old Copper cemeteries, two (Oconto and Reigh in Wisconsin) each yielded pieces of marine shell, including lightning whelk (Martin 1999:196). The occurrence of Atlantic coast shell in these Upper Great Lakes graves—albeit very rare—indicates potential ties to the Eastern Shore. And the occurrence of marine whelk in Wisconsin is perhaps no more unlikely than the presence of Old Copper artifacts in Maryland.

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