

Reconsidering the Late Woodland: A Critical Reassessment of Perception and Periodization in the Ohio Valley, 400-1000 CE

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ABSTRACT

The Late Woodland period in eastern North America has traditionally been conceptualized as a cultural hiatus between the region's Hopewell and Mississippian traditions. As a drastic (though not complete) reduction in the practices of monumental architecture and art produced with nonlocal materials occurred during this time, the end of the preceding Hopewell tradition (and its related Interaction Sphere) has been depicted as a "collapse" or "devolution" by multiple researchers. However, the Late Woodland also saw a rise in population, intensification of agriculture, and technological innovation. Although the combination of these factors and the period's architectural and artistic reduction appear contradictory, I argue that this contradiction stems from improper applications of evolutionist thought and outdated notions of cultural progress. The ways in which archaeologists (and the communities with whom they can interact) perceive this period in the chronology of the Eastern Woodlands must be reassessed. Through an examination of the connections between archaeological theory and the material record of the Late Woodland, I reconsider the period as a dynamic and crucial transition central to the history of the region.

SETTING AND CHRONOLOGY

- Eastern Woodlands region of present-day United States
- More specific focus on Ohio Valley
- Some corroborating evidence brought in from surrounding areas (e.g., Lake Erie)
- Late Woodland period in project areas is ~400-1000 CE (Figure 1)

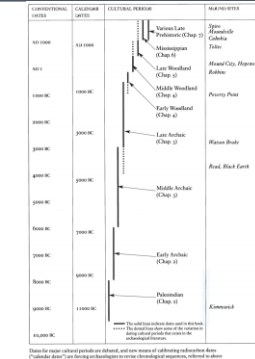


Figure 1. Regional chronology of the Eastern Woodlands (Milner 2004:9).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How has the Late Woodland period in the Ohio Valley and wider Eastern Woodlands traditionally been understood?
- Does this perception adequately reflect the archaeological record and current theoretical models?
- Can a more complete understanding of the Late Woodland be developed and, if so, how?

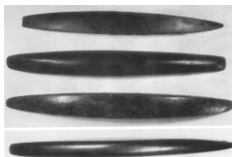


Figure 2. Ceremonial groundstone picks (Converse 1978:90).

THEORY

Examination of harmful legacy of unilineal evolutionary and neoevolutionary theory

- Unilineal theory ultimately rooted in colonial project of 19th century
- Elman Service's sociopolitical typology is stated to culminate in state-level organization (1971:170)
- Service ultimately contributed to an overemphasis on a unilineal approach to sociopolitical evolution

Critique of culture-historical archaeology

- Tendency to overemphasize distinctions of artifact morphology
- Developed chronologies that were largely heuristic in nature

Integration of queer theory

- Used to critically evaluate perception of Late Woodland and its relationship to bracketing Middle Woodland and Late Prehistoric periods
- Guides research into marginalization of the period in question and its reassessment as vital for study – both on its own terms and for understanding the entire history of region



Figure 3. Opossum gorget from Newton Firehouse site (Seeman and Dancy 2000:Figure 22.10).

METHODS AND DATA

Published Academic Literature

- Incorporation of variety of published academic works ranging from early 19th century to last several years
- Works assessed for both archaeological data about Late Woodland and bracketing periods, as well as their perceptions and theoretical groundings
- Additional incorporation of CRM data and unpublished records would be useful for future research

Late Woodland Data Categories

- Monumental architecture and funerary programs
- Portable art and symbolic artifacts
- Nonlocal material procurement and use
- Subsistence strategies
- Transitions in projectile weaponry

ANALYSIS

The reduction of practices such as monumental architecture and long-distance trade have traditionally been overgeneralized as complete elimination. However, high-quality portable art and symbolic artifacts requiring considerable investment continued to be produced and acquired during the Late Woodland period. The variation and reduction in the continuation of earlier cultural practices suggests societal adaptation and different cultural needs instead of the traditional narrative of incapability. In addition, transitions to maize agriculture and the adoption of bow and arrow must be considered better in particular contexts and not universally superior to existing technologies (i.e., the Eastern Agricultural Complex and spear thrower). It is important to engage with these categories of evidence, as they have been traditional markers of complex/developed societies.



Figure 4. Pendant and gorget styles associated with early Late Woodland period (Seeman and Dancy 2000:Figure 22.12).

CONCLUSIONS

- Late Woodland period has traditionally been viewed as a "dark age" between the Middle Woodland and Late Prehistoric periods in the Eastern Woodlands of North America and, as such, has remained largely understudied (see Munson 1988:7)
- This narrative arose from social contexts surrounding the development of various bodies of archaeological theory
- For many aspects of Late Woodland "dark age" narrative, simple presence of material evidence provided more than sufficient grounds for refutation of this perception
- Elaborate funerary programs, portable art, and nonlocal materials procured through exchange networks all directly demonstrate that Late Woodland peoples were not somehow incapable of producing the same kinds of cultural materials and possessing similarly "impressive" social systems as their predecessors and successors
- Transitions that have typically been associated with the Late Woodland (i.e., the widespread adoption of maize agriculture and the introduction of the bow and arrow) can still contribute to a narrative of cultural incapability and unilineal evolution when left underexamined
- Extreme complexity present in fragmentary reconstruction of Late Woodland period, demonstrating that it is crucial to study and deserving of far greater attention

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