

Trade and Exchange in Prehistoric Mississippi*

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Throughout the course of Mississippi prehistory, there is evidence that individuals or groups obtained non-local raw materials as well as artifacts that were probably not produced locally. Archaeologists infer that these were obtained via exchange. There is evidence that at certain times in prehistory the inhabitants of Mississippi also made items that made their way into exchange networks. One interesting archaeological question is why the evidence for exchange and trade varied over time, with certain time periods exhibiting greater amounts of non-local goods or materials.

To begin to answer the question one needs some understanding of the nature of exchange in small-scale societies. In such societies, households or family units are largely self sufficient, providing for their sustenance by hunting, gathering, or agriculture, and satisfying most other material needs by making their own goods. However, there are always some things that must be obtained by trade, whether they be specific tools, items of personal adornment, ritual objects, or raw materials that cannot be found locally. Unlike societies such as our own where money is used to buy the goods or services we need, in small-scale societies the economic transactions that move goods from producers to consumers are part and parcel of social relationships. The circulation of goods within a society or between social groups can only be understood in terms of the kind of social relationships that are expressed through specific transactions. In other words the kinds of goods that are exchanged between individuals and the context in which those exchanges depend more on the nature of the relationship between individuals than in material necessities. Exchanges tend to be of equivalent goods, or what anthropologists refer to as balanced reciprocity. Exchanges among socially close individuals may take the form of delayed reciprocity, which are cases in which the return of an equivalent item may be postponed until a later time.

Exchanges commonly occur when new relationships are forged, such as part of wedding arrangements. A bridewealth payment to the family of the bride may be required of the groom's family. Individuals from different may enter into trading partnerships, providing not only access to the products of the partner, but in some cases also access to their territory in times of need. Political leaders, such as chiefs or tribal headmen, may create and maintain alliances to reduce the threat of warfare or for mutual protection. Such alliances often are symbolically reinforced through exchanges. The Kula Ring of the Trobriand Islands is an example of a ritual exchange system.

The continual need to express social arrangements in a material way can result in the movement of items far from their place of procurement or manufacture. The distance an item is moved from its source tends to increase its symbolic and social value. While food or locally produced crafts might be exchanged among socially close individuals, exotic goods might be reserved for exchanges with someone more distant, socially and probably geographically speaking.

In some cultural contexts highly valued goods may be exchangeable for local good or even labor. An individual's access to exotic items through participation in an exchange network may provide an opportunity to increase one's material wealth or local prestige by strategic use of those items in local exchanges. Thus, while exchange may serve as a mechanism to enhance intersocietal stability through its role in alliance formation, it may be used locally in a competitive manner by establishing and perpetuating inequality in the social group.

Our earliest evidence of exchange networks in Mississippi date to the Middle Archaic (8000-5000 years B.P.). In northeast Mississippi, large well-made flaked bifaces - Benton and Turkey Tail style points - of high quality stone from Tennessee were apparently traded from north to south. We are not sure what might have flowed in the opposite direction. These points are too large and too delicate to have been used as tools. Rather their importance was symbolic. This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that a number of them have been found in caches accompanied by locally made points. The oversized blades are sometimes purposefully broken into several pieces. Archaeological investigations in the Mississippi Delta and along the Western Bluffs south of Vicksburg, have identified several Middle Archaic sites that served as stone bead manufacturing locations. The best known of these is the Denton Site. Beads similar to those made at these sites have been found in northern Alabama and as far east as Florida. Finally, there is also evidence of the exchange of certain lithic raw materials among Mississippi groups beginning at this time. Among the materials exchanged are Tallahatta quartzite, coastal plain agate, and Kosciusko quartzite. It is likely though unproven that alliance formation played an important role in encouraging exchange as populations began to settle into specific territories.

During the Poverty Point period (4000-2000 years B.P.) long distance movement of raw materials and artifacts at never before seen amounts is a characteristic that defines the Poverty Point culture. Lithic materials for making chipped stone tools from sources in Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, Illinois, and elsewhere, steatite (soapstone) from the southern Appalachians, crystals, magnetite, and other minerals from the Ouachita Mountains of Arkansas, were funneled down the Mississippi River. Tallahatta quartzite, which may have been quarried near Meridian, shows up as a minority lithic material at more than a few Poverty Point period sites. Much of these exotic goods ended up at the Poverty Point Site in northeast Louisiana. Poverty Point is a large mound and earthwork site, thought by some to represent an ancient town supplied by exchange orchestrated by its leaders, and by others to represent a kind of trade fair-ceremonial center that brought together participants from throughout the mid-continent and beyond. One way or another, characteristic Poverty Point artifacts and exotic materials made their way to Mississippi.

They have been recovered from Jaketown and other Poverty Point culture sites in the Mississippi Delta and at the Applestreet and Claiborne sites on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The quantity of material that found its way into the Lower Mississippi Valley during the Poverty Point period suggests that competition for social or political influence must certainly have played a role in the perpetuation of the Poverty Point exchange system.

Archaeological evidence for long distance exchange waned after 3 000 B. P., when until about 2100 B. P. self-sufficiency seems to have prevailed. In actuality, exchange probably involved more closely related individuals and involved more mundane goods such as pottery, and probably subsistence items.

During the early Middle Woodland (ca. 2100-1600 years B.P.), archaeological evidence for participation in long distance exchange networks once again increased as many societies of eastern North America intensified the archaeologically recognizable aspects of mortuary systems through sometimes complex post-mortem burial procedures and the construction of burial mounds. This is known as Hopewell culture, although the shared aspects of the culture were added to local traditions. Burial goods sometimes included non-local items, such as copper earspools, beads and other artifacts; conch shell cups and beads, exotic stone artifacts, and trade ceramics. While the mortuary ritual served to reinforce local social solidarity, in some societies the variable access to long-distance items seems to have resulted in social and political inequality. By the end of the Middle Woodland period some societies may have seen the establishment of heredity based social ranking.

The last 500 years of prehistory is the Mississippian Period. It saw the development of agriculturally based complex chiefdoms. The political and religious centers of these chiefdoms are marked by flat topped-mounds on which were built the temples and homes of the elite. The elite were set apart from the remainder of society in other ways as well, including nearly exclusive access to an exchange network that linked the chiefs of different societies and circulated exotic items that marked and legitimized their role as leader of society. These exotic goods included among other things, copper artifacts, non-local pottery, shell ornaments, and stone palettes. The bulk of these goods have been found at the major Mississippian sites, such as Cahokia in Illinois, Moundville in Alabama and Etowah in Georgia. Although these trappings of the Mississippian elite are not plentiful in Mississippi, they have been found in the Mississippi Delta. Investigations at both Winterville near Greenville, Mississippi and Lake George south of Yazoo City have produced artifacts that certainly marked the elite of their respective societies.

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