Red-Wing

Larry J. Zimmerman  
Archaeology Laboratory  
University of South Dakota  
Vermillion, SD 57069

SUMMARY

Red-Wing is comprised of two linked vignettes. In the first, the Indian, Kills, examines his sister’s bones while burying them in a mound. To him, the bones point toward a natural future, a journey to the spirit world. Eleven hundred years later, the archaeologist excavates the remains. To him, the bones are objects of science and clues to the information he seeks from the past. Yet the common humanity of grief speaks to the archaeologist in a meaning not dissimilar from that of the Indian.

As Kills examined the bone under the death tree, he knew it to be from her shoulder. So much smaller than the shoulder of the bison she had fashioned into a hoe to tend her small garden. He had wrapped her in the bison robe two winters ago and bound her body to the wooden platform to face the great circle of the sky. The flesh on the now white bone had been food for Crow and the small crawling brothers who helped a person on the journey to the spirit world, a path his sister now journeyed.

Calls Hump had told him the time had come to gather the bones so that his sister might lie with the ancestors to be with Mother Earth. He felt no fear. All make the journey to Old Woman ....

The fourth year of the project had been the most successful. The sampling scheme had worked well. Three lodges had been excavated and the activity areas pretty well doped out. The project was important because the early Plains Village Tradition along the Big Sioux was so poorly known. Apparently these people were in transition from hunting and gathering nomadism to the use of cultivated plants and fully sedentary life. And the project was documenting that transition.

All that remained for this season was completing the testing of the last two of the fourteen mounds above the village on the river terrace. With that done, the season would be over and it would be back to the classroom to chant the liturgy of the Plains archaeology to a new batch of graduate students. Nowdays students were enthralled by “the new archaeology.” They were more interested in the twisted pathways of “middle-range” theories and eigenvectors than in the past and the people who made it.

Although it was late afternoon, and cool air blew up from the Big Sioux, Ben sweated from the effort
of removing the last bit of mound fill over what was going to be another small ossuary of six or seven “bundle” burials. The other mound, which seemed paired with this one, had had eight, one of which was a male buried with a badger claw necklace.

He wished the volunteer from the local archaeological chapter would get back with the iced tea thermos he had sent to be filled from Stuckeys, just off the nearby interstate. A large thermos of tea was something Sarah always used to bring to the site. But those days were gone. The shovel nicked a solid object so he knew it would be trowels from here on.

A long thirty minutes later he had uncovered a cord-roughened, globular vessel with incised triangles on its rim. Though it was slightly smaller than most of the pots in the village debris, it was whole, and a rarity. The surface treatment and rim decorations linked the mounds to the village.

The bones near the vessel he'd turn over to osteologists and paleopathologists. The pitting in the orbits of two skulls recovered in the other mounds suggested cribra orbitalia. A shift to corn and beans might have caused the villagers to suffer a lack of protein and iron, a deficiency common to early horticultural life on the eastern Plains. But that was for the dry bones folks to dope out. They could piece together the necessary information to relate disease patterns to nutrition and make the reconstruction more complete. This information was useful, and that pleased him. Even after a dozen excavations he was still excited about the prospect. Ben wondered if Sarah’s cancer had worked long enough to show on her skeleton. He was angry with himself that he thought such thoughts. He forced them from his mind by photographing the vessel.

The pot safely photographed, he turned it over and noticed a bone awl beside it. The awl showed polishing from wear. He gently pressed the tip into his thumb. It was still sharp. Burial 3 appeared be a young, adult female. To be buried with her, the awl and pot must have been objects she had used and treasured.

A rich, musical “O-Ka-LEEIEEE” startled him. A red-winged blackbird perched on the tall thistle that had invaded the prairie around the mounds. *Agelaius phoeniceus*, he thought. He liked the song of the bird. It reminded him of Sarah’s laugh. She had a special appreciation for red-winged blackbirds. She had once even called them her “torem” bird and said with a smile that having one around always meant a good day.

He turned back to the bones and removed the scapula he had brushed off. It was yellowed but had weathered the last eleven hundred years well. Turning it over in his hands, he appreciated its smallness. It would fit into one of his palms. So different from a bison scapula. He noted its location and put it in a bag labeled, “Mound Test 2, Burial 3.”