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Dolls, Demons, or Dice? An Inquiry of the Savage Site Figurines

Keywords

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Due to the lack of a convincing answer or a follow up from Murphy, this paper will attempt to advance Murphy's ideas concerning the Savage Site figurines. To successfully examine this problem, this paper will first describe the figurines, as well as the site and the people who occupied it. Anthropological and ethnographical sources will then be used to further develop the figurines possible treatment as children's dolls, mystic amulets, and game pieces. A critique of Murphy's vague and unconcluded argument will be included. This study will continue and possibly answer Murphy's twenty-year-old question: dolls, demons, or dice?

Figurines

The subject of this study is an assemblage of anthropomorphic ceramic figurines recovered from the Savage Site. These include both positively identified figurines and probable figurines. The identified figurines consist of one complete artifact, two heads, one torso, and six detached leg pieces, for a total of at least five distinct figurines (Murphy 1986: 38). However, Fraser (2001:51), who completed the only thorough published analysis of the Savage Site, disagreed and suggested that there were eight separate figurines, based on a total collection of twenty-four figurine appendages. Though the size of the fragmented figurines cannot be determined, they did not vary much from the complete piece, which stands 4.5cm tall. Murphy stated that the torso and legs of the figurines seem to be standardized, and that variances are evident in the heads of the figurines. It is important in this study to note that the figurines discussed display facial

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Introduction

Dolls, demons, or dice? This was the question asked in Carl R. Murphy's 1986 article discussing figurines found at the Savage Site in Southwestern Ontario. Though the article was identified as an introduction, Murphy never followed it with a published work further analyzing the site or the questionable artifacts. Entitled "Dolls, demons or dice: An introduction to the Savage Site figurines," Murphy's brief account outlined three possibilities for the figurines' purpose.

features, comprised of eyes, noses, and mouths. Wintemberg (1936) reported the only two other documented ceramic figurines found in prehistoric Iroquoian settlements in Ontario, which were found on the Roebuck Prehistoric Village Site. These artifacts and Wintemberg's analysis will be examined during this study. Murphy (1986:30) stated that "a definite style or type of figurine was being formed for a single, or perhaps a number, of related purposes." This analysis of the Savage Site figurines will attempt to assess this purpose.

The Savage Site

Background to the archaeological site and its occupants is essential to this study, as evidence from similar peoples and sites were used in Murphy's argument and will be implemented here. The Savage Site was given the alpha-numeric identification of AdHm-29. It is located in Howard Township, northeast of Chatham, Ontario. The small site lies just south of the Thames River, and contained one long house and one midden (Murphy 1986: 38) and dates to 1350 A.D. (Fraser 2001: 11). The site was home to late Middle Iroquoian people, and reflects influences from the Western Basin Tradition Wolf Phase. However, Fraser (2001:11) disputed this identification, and chronologically placed the site within the Springwell Phase. These conditions justify the Savage Site's comparison to ethnographical studies of later Iroquoians and archaeological studies of 14th or 15th century southern Great Lakes occupants.

Dolls?

Murphy proposed that the Savage Site figurines were children's toys and gave evidence to support and discredit this possibility. Both archaeological context and ethnographic evidence are applied

within his argument. Murphy (1986:38) suggested that the context in which the complete figurine was found is probably the most important clue for interpreting the function of the figurines. To elaborate, the complete figurine was found in direct association with a poorly made small ceramic pot. Murphy does not discuss the other contexts in which figurine pieces were found, besides saying that two figurine heads were excavated from the midden and did not lead to any further correlations. The pot and the figurine both displayed a thin granite temper and a yellow-brown tint. Traditionally, crudely shaped pots were thought of as children's toys that were made by juveniles as a way of becoming knowledgeable of the technologies of pottery making (Murphy 1986: 38-39). Though one might consider that this context was coincidental, Murphy (1986: 39) countered this argument by stating that the pot and figurine's "similarity between paste and temper does make such an assumption unlikely." This statement signifies a direct connection between the figurine and the pot. Murphy uses this relationship to suggest that the figurines may have been dolls, as they were discovered with other children's toys. The one piece of evidence that countered the possibility that the Savage Site figurines were dolls is the lack of comparable artifacts elsewhere (Murphy 1986: 39). Murphy's article does reasonably suggest a relationship between the Savage Site figurines and Savage Site children. However, he, as well as other documented evidence, reveals more clues for and against this function.

Other published sources can be consulted in order to address the question of whether or not the Savage Site figurines were dolls. First, Fraser (2001:51) thoroughly documented the Savage Site, but never confirmed or even suggested a function for the figurines. However, she did state that the complete figurine was found in association with juvenile vessel sherds. Fraser discussed both adult and juvenile vessels, but she failed to comment on the criteria by which the vessels and sherds were classified. Despite this lack in definition, Fraser's statement more fully concludes that the figurines were toys, as they were physically associated with children's possessions. In contrast, Speck's views were briefly consulted in Murphy's article. Speck noted that ethnographic examples of Iroquoian dolls were made of corn husks (Speck 1945). This was supported by Mogelon (1994:43) when he stated that "For centuries, Iroquois children have played with dolls made of corn husks." The reviewed ethnographic material did not point to ceramics as the material for children's dolls. More importantly, Mogelon (1994:43) revealed that these dolls were always faceless, which allowed the children to imagine the doll to have any face they may desire. Mogelon (1994:43) also hypothesized that dolls remain faceless because to put a face on a doll would be to give the doll a spirit or soul. Iroquoians believe that it is possible for a doll with a face to become a living being, who would feel hurt if treated unfairly by a child. Given that Iroquoians believed that to give a doll a face is to give it life, it is somewhat improbable that the faced figurines were dolls.

The analysis of figurines found at the Roebuck Site is important to consider. Wintenberg (1936:66) placed the two figurines found at this site in the section

Children's Toys and Amusements, stating the small earthenware figurines were probably toys. Although not found in association with juvenile pots, Wintenberg (1936:66) observed the existence of "small pottery vessels ... [that] were probably made by children in imitation of their elders and used as toys." The existence of similar objects at each site advances their classification of the figurines as toys. However, upon examination of the illustrations of the Roebuck Site figurines, it was evident that they had full faces (Wintenberg 1936:160-161). Clearly, the interpretation of the figurines with faces as dolls is not supported by the previously discussed belief that Iroquoian children did not play with faced dolls. Though Wintenberg identified the Roebuck Site figurines as dolls, this may not be correct. The examination of ethnographic and archaeological sources have revealed ideas to support Savage Site figurines as dolls, but other evidence more successfully suggests this function unlikely.

Demons?

In this study, as in Murphy's article, the term *demons* relates to the figurines having any supernatural function. While there is evidence from Iroquoian archaeological and ethnographic studies of bone and antler figurines having a supernatural purpose, the evidence for ceramic figurines having a supernatural purpose is less compelling. For example, Ritchie (1954) discovered a number of organic figurines that were found in the burials of children. They appeared to have been worn around the neck of the child. Similarly, Parker (1920) noted that the ancestors of

modern Seneca Iroquois used carved images of the human figure, which they named after a witch, as protection from evil actions of an illustrated entity. Carpenter (1942:111) suggested that the historical bone and antler figurines he examined "served as pendants on the necklaces of children, and that they formed a part of the religious worship of the Iroquois." Wintemberg (1936: 72-73) referred to the previous suggestion of the figurines as pendants (??) when he gave a second possible function of the ceramic figurines found at the Roebuck Site. He also listed them under *Objects of Superstition and Religion*, and suggested their possible involvement in witchcraft. The Iroquoian belief that faces placed on a figure may give it a spirit or soul is an important consideration in this argument (Mogelon 1994: 43). Since all of the figurines in question have faces, they all have the possibility of being viewed as a living being. Assigning human qualities to figurines with faces can be thought of as imbuing the figurines with a supernatural function.

The comparison of the ceramic figurines found at the Savage Site and the Roebuck Site, to the various studies discussed above may not be adequate. The sources that conclude that bone and antler figurines that were found in the burials of children of the later Iroquois seem to justify their consideration. However, the form, material, manufacture, and context of the Savage Site and Roebuck figurines vary greatly from these other figurines. When reviewing Ritchie's (1954) study, it is evident that the figurines he discussed are very dissimilar from the Savage Site figurines. However, they are very similar to the figurines Carpenter (1942: 106) discussed. Carpenter's figurines all have their arms across their bodies with their hands covering their sex organs and their

legs and feet together. Their heads are oval or circular, and meet a short neck. In contrast, the Savage Site figurines are bipedal (Murphy 1986: 40). Most importantly, Carpenter's (1942) and Ritchie's (1954) figurines were not found in association with children's burials, nor do they have the evident function of being worn as a pendant. Though the Savage Site figurines and the supernatural figurines do share some characteristics, the defining characteristics of the latter figurines, including their form, context, and manufacture, are not present in the Savage Site specimens.

Or Dice?

In this part of Murphy's study, he refers to the possibility that the Savage Site figurines were a feature of the Iroquoian Bowl Game, which is similar to the game of "Dice" (Murphy 1986: 41). The game is a very old pastime, and is considered by the Iroquois to have been introduced by the Creator (Speck 1955: 82). It consists of shaking two-sided stones into a bowl, with players scoring points when all the stones, or all but one of the stones, end up showing the same coloured side. Counters are used to keep score, and one wins by collecting all of the counters used in the game (Blau 1967: 35). Variations of the game involve using different amounts of counters or stones, using different types of counters, or playing the game for different reasons (Blau 1967: 35- 49). It is important to note the different reasons for playing the Bowl Game. These include entertainment, religious rites, to cure the sick, as an activity during a wake, and as a form of witchcraft (Blau 1967: 35- 42). Historical accounts link

human figurines to some variations of the game; as such, the Savage Site figurines may have been involved in the Bowl Game.

Evidence of Bowl Game stones signify that the game was likely played in Ontario prior to contact with Europeans; this becomes significant in the discussion below (Murphy 1986: 42). Murphy (1986:41-42) suggested that the figurines may have been used as counters. However, Blau (1967) gave other possibilities for the figurines' purpose within the Bowl Game. First, other items such as sticks and beans are commonly counters; when the game is being performed as witchcraft, counters include short and long pegs, and small replicas of animals, female figures, male genitalia, and logs (Blau 1967: 37). Similarly, when the game is being played to cure the sick, sometimes special counters or figures are made. The counters may be used in the game, and both items may be broken or given to the invalid at the game's conclusion (Blau 1967: 37). Figurines may also be employed as sources of power during the Bowl Game, with the winner receiving the better figurine as a type of trophy (Blau 1967: 42). Ceramic figurines are suggested to play a role in the Iroquoian Bowl Game by taking on the function of both counter, sacrificial item, and trophy.

The association of Savage Site figurines with the Bowl Game is not conclusive. First, Murphy revealed a questionable morphological similarity between historic Bowl Game counters (Murphy 1986: 41) and the Savage Site and Roebuck Site ceramic figurines (Murphy 1986: 40- 41). The review of this material reveals that the figurines forms display only a weak similarity. Secondly, Culin (1907:111) completed an extensive study of the Bowl Game and does not mention any figurine association; instead,

he merely stated that beans were often used as counters. Speck's brief account of the game also noted that only beans were counters (Speck 1955: 82). Thirdly, it is necessary to accentuate Blau's analysis of the post-contact Bowl Game. In one form of the game, he mentions the figurines' function as being a source of power, which is given to the winner. However, it is important to note that another figurine is also given to the loser. In this variation, one figurine displays characteristics of a Native person, whereas the other figurine displays characteristics of a White man; the Native figurine goes to the winner (Blau 1967: 42). Though the Bowl Game is present in both pre-contact and post-contact Ontario, this evokes the idea that figurine involvement in the game may not have existed until the presence of Europeans. Given that the Savage Site figurines are dated to AD 1350, their use as figurines in the Iroquoian Bowl Game is questionable.

Conclusion

Murphy asked the question, "dolls, demons, or dice?" He answered it by stating that it was probable "that [the figurines] were intended to perform or participate in some type of ritual magic activity" (Murphy 1986: 42- 43). He also states that any of the historical figurine uses may apply to the Savage Site figurines (Murphy 1986: 42). Initially, the present study strived to finally answer the question. While this research might not be able to conclude the debate, after reviewing ethnographical and anthropological works concerning Iroquoian dolls and beliefs, it is evident that the use of the Savage Site figures as dolls is extremely improbable because they are

faced. Works concerning supernatural functions of Iroquoian anthropomorphic figurines do not reveal any direct comparisons to the Savage Site's figurine's characteristics. Iroquoian supernatural figurines do not share a form, material, manufacture, or founding context with the Savage Site figurines. Finally, human figurine involvement in the Iroquoian Bowl Game is not known until after Iroquoian contact with Europeans, which post-dates the Savage Site. Murphy raised a good question, and provided three possible answers. However, this study indicates the possibility that none of these answers are correct.

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