

## Chapter 2

# Ethical and Political Ramifications of the Reporting/Non-Reporting of Native American Ritualized Violence

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**Abstract** Recent discoveries of mutilated skeletons in southern Indiana dating to 5,000 years B.P. have initiated significant scientific study of ritualized violence among aboriginal populations from the Ohio River Valley. Victims were usually young males, but females and children were also killed. The mutilation involved removing heads and/or forearms soon after death. The patterns of removal were consistent along the entire southern border of the state and lasted for over 1,000 years. The mutilations are significant scientifically because the process of “trophy taking” as well as the styles of burial for both the mutilation victims and those who were buried with harvested body parts demonstrate a level of cultural complexity that is not generally associated with foraging societies. However, there is risk in popularizing these findings because they may be used by the media to further stereotypes of “savage” Indians; the antithesis of what the findings indicate to the archaeological community. This forces researchers to strategically mete out publications in particular scientific outlets that are less likely to popularize the research. Unfortunately, the public at large ends up being circumvented. Attempts are currently underway to discuss the findings with Native groups so that they are aware of the intentions of the archaeologists and are not caught off guard if mutilation reports appear in popular media. Lastly, the benefits of establishing a meaningful and respectful dialog with descendant populations is put forth.

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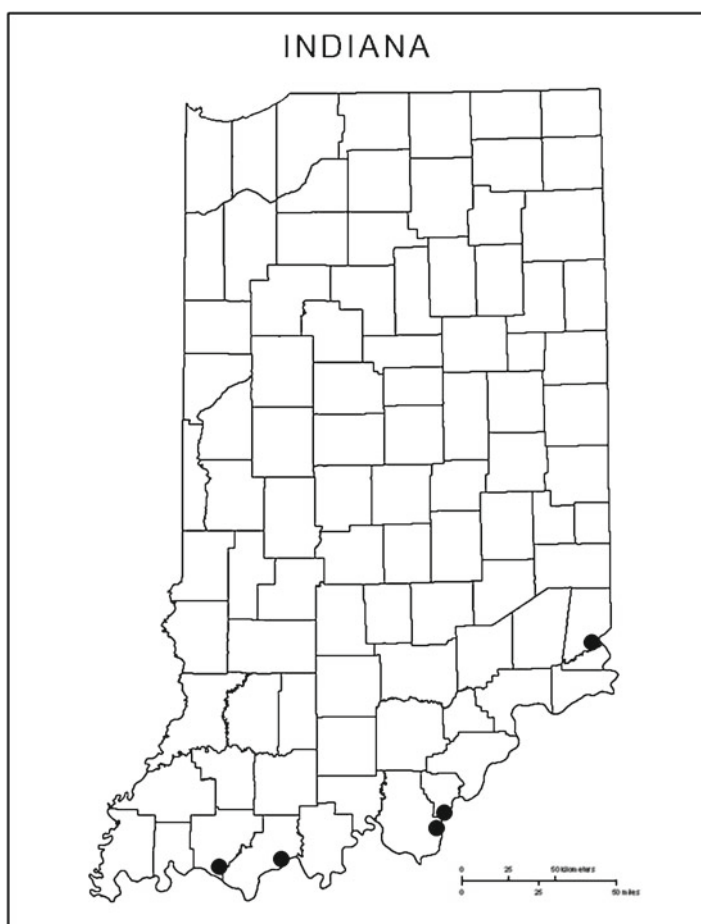
Although the global archaeological record is replete with evidence of violence, published reports from ancient North American sites have met with staunch opposition when they include descriptions of native practices that are considered repugnant by today's standards (e.g., Turner 1993). Specifically, in recent years Christie Turner has been accused of portraying Native Americans as "less than human" because he published evidence of Anasazi cannibalism. It was argued by some of Turner's opponents that his claims insulted native peoples because he was describing savage acts and almost animalistic qualities. Turner's response was to eschew the criticisms and to defend his scientific findings because to his satisfaction he had exhaustively studied the osteological and molecular evidence. The result, at least in terms of public perception, is a stalemate with both sides becoming increasingly entrenched. This case comes from the American Southwest but the tension between scientists and popular sensibilities is applicable to archaeology throughout North America.

In southern Indiana, five recently documented Middle to Late Archaic archaeological sites (dating from 3,500 to 5,000 years B.P.) from along the Ohio River exhibit evidence of violence and mutilation heretofore unknown from the state and include decapitation, limb and tongue removal (Fig. 2.1). Most of the sites were excavated from 2001 to 2005 but they have yet to be fully described in scientific journals and subsequently discussed in the media at large. One of the delays in publicizing the violence is the concern that native groups will take offense and seek to have the remains repatriated before comprehensive osteological studies are completed (i.e., studies of diet, pathology, body size, etc.). Scientifically, this would be very unfortunate because these particular instances of mutilation are unique and shed great insight into what must have been complex and meaningful behaviors (see Chacon and Dye 2007; Chacon and Mendoza 2007a, b). Eventually, once the studies are completed we will be faced with an ethical dilemma: should we publicize a scientific study that we suspect will upset living people who may fear being portrayed in a manner over which they have no control.

## Discoveries

### *Firehouse Site (12D563)*

The Firehouse site is located on a high bluff adjacent to the Ohio River in southeastern Indiana. It is a large Riverton site that likely dates to around 3,500 years ago. It produced five burials in addition to over 100 features and numerous artifacts including caches of hafted axes and bone tools such as combs, pins, and several atlatl fragments. The skeletons were located near the southern margin of the site although they were not clustered together. There were three males, one female, and one of undetermined sex. Burial 1 was a tightly flexed old adult male who had a broken right tibia and fibula that had healed with lateral displacement of the distal aspect. Burial 3 was a young adult male. He was buried in a loosely flexed position with his



**Fig. 2.1** Sites in southern Indiana where Middle and Late Archaic mutilation victims were found

back extended and his heels pulled up toward his sacrum. His right arm was missing below the humerus and his head was absent (Fig. 2.2).

Five Riverton or Riverton-like projectile points accompanied the skeleton, all of which were found around the thorax. They were not imbedded in bone but were under and between bones to indicate that they created perimortem injuries. A sixth point was found immediately adjacent to his second lumbar vertebrae. This point had passed through the spinous process and impacted the left transverse process. However, the damage was antemortem, having healed almost completely by the time of death. Thus, this individual suffered at least two significant violent events in his short life.

The skull was absent as were the first two cervical vertebrae. Deep cut marks were present on cervical vertebrae 3 through 5 clearly indicating that the skull was



**Fig. 2.2** Mutilation victim from the Firehouse site. Notice that the head and right forearm are missing (Photograph by Jeffrey Plunkett)

removed while soft tissues were present. The cut marks, which are percussive rather than incisive in nature, were located on the left side of the vertebrae. The distal right humerus had cut marks on the anterior, medial, and lateral surfaces with no marks on the posterior aspect. The cuts on the anterior surface suggest forceful slicing, while the lateral marks indicate chopping.

The skeleton had stab marks on several of the ribs located on the ventral and lateral portions of the bones. They penetrate just a few millimeters into the cortex and are a few millimeters in length. No cut or stab marks are found on the sternum. There are no other cut or stab marks on the skeleton and no other individual at the site bears such evidence of violence.

## ***12Hr6***

This site is located in Harrison County, Indiana, about 70 miles southeast of the Firehouse site. It is a heavily looted site with extremely fragmentary remains, the majority of which are cranial fragments. It is unclear how the bodies were initially interred prior to the looting, but the density of the remains suggests some type of cemetery. Artifacts from the site place it in the Late Archaic, making the human remains about 4,000 years old.

This commingled assemblage of bones has two bone fragments with evidence of trophy taking. One left temporal fragment has cut marks above the external auditory

meatus that are consistent with scalping. The other example is a likely male distal humerus fragment with cut marks that are very similar to those exhibited by Burial 3 from the Firehouse site. Because of the fragmentation it is not clear if these two bones are from the same person.

### ***Bluegrass Site (12W162)***

Bluegrass Site dates to the terminal Middle Archaic and is located in Warrick County in southwestern Indiana. It was excavated in the 1980s by Russell Stafford of Indiana State University and produced 82 burials; skeletons were found in flexed, tightly flexed, and extended positions (Mays 1997). Males and females were roughly equal in number and nearly 14% of the population was children under 1 year of age. Among the extended skeletons was a single young adult female who, like Burial 3 from Firehouse, was missing her skull, her first and second cervical vertebrae, and her forearm. Unlike the male from Firehouse, it was her left forearm that was taken where he had lost his right.

Also found at this site was a lone thorax; the head, arms, and legs were removed prior to burial. There are cut marks on the ribs near where the scapulae would have been positioned in life. There are cut marks on the pelvis as well. There are burials from Green River Archaic sites, such as Ward and Indian Knoll, which have similarly mutilated individuals, but they are usually accompanying another individual in a burial. At Bluegrass, the thorax was buried alone; it is, therefore, unclear if this body represents a trophy or someone who was harvested for trophies. Perhaps the latter is more likely in this instance since it was found by itself.

### ***Meyer Site (12Sp1082)***

Meyer is a Middle Archaic cemetery found not far from Bluegrass in Spencer County, Indiana, that dates to 5,000 years B.P. (Bader 2011). Its excavation was led by Anne Bader and produced over 20 individuals including adult males, females, and children. Most of the burials were in a tightly flexed position and buried on their sides. A burial of a 12–15-year-old possible male deviated from the rest in that it was loosely flexed and bore significant evidence of mutilation. His right arm was extended and in his right hand was his skull (which included his first and second cervical vertebrae). Chopping marks were on the cervical vertebrae 3 through 6.

The mutilation of this individual was not limited to the removal of his head. There is compelling evidence that the tongue was removed. The mandible itself was still articulated with the cranium, but it had cut marks on the ramus and body. On the inner aspect of the right corpus were two subparallel lines placed at the origin of the mylohyoid muscle. The mandibular cuts were not intended to remove the

mandible, nor were they caused by the chopping of the neck (Schmidt et al. 2010). The most parsimonious explanation of the mandibular cut marks is glossectomy (Lockhart et al. 2009). Additional traumata on this skeleton include a possible blunt force wound on the occiput and punctures to some ribs.

## ***12Fl73***

This site is located in Floyd County, Indiana, not far from 12Hr6. It sits on the Ohio River and is part of an enormous site, or collection of contemporaneous sites, that stretch for over half a mile. The cemetery has not been fully excavated but in 2001 nine burials eroded out of the river bank. From the few burials that were complete enough to discern burial position, it was determined that the bodies were buried on their right sides in a flexed position. Grave goods were uncommon, although one burial was accompanied by 20 forearm bones representing both the left and right forearms from five adult males. A few articulated metacarpals indicated that at least one forearm was still fleshed at burial and included a hand, yet some of the radii and ulnae were clearly disarticulated suggesting they were heavily decayed before they were placed in the grave. None of the bones have cut marks on them.

## **Archaeological Perspective**

The instances described here of mutilation among ancient Native Americans are exciting from a scientific viewpoint because they expand our knowledge of these still poorly understood people. They provide information specific to the individuals affected as well as give insight into culture-wide phenomena (Lockhart Sharkey 2010). In general, they are helping to overturn outdated ideas regarding the simplicity of Archaic life. The mutilation events from Indiana are similar to mutilations documented in Kentucky and Tennessee (e.g., Snow 1948; Smith 1993, 1995, 1997; Mensforth 2001, 2007) indicating that they are part of a regional phenomenon; yet they are idiosyncratic because they include practices like glossectomy and forearm caching that to date have not been documented elsewhere in the Eastern Woodlands. There is little doubt that detailed publications regarding these sites would garner significant scientific attention.

## **Opposing View**

However, the scientific excitement of such findings is not always shared outside of the scientific community. Certain native groups, who may not be thrilled by excavation and osteology in the first place, may not care for the depiction of their ancestors

as people who killed and mutilated young men, who removed a head and a tongue from an adolescent, who decapitated a woman, and who collected and curated human limbs. It may be seen that scientists are feeding a stereotype that American Indians were brutal and “savage.” Such a depiction may further isolate Indians in American culture and undermine their overall social status. It has been a decades-long tradition to have Indians portrayed in various media as either villainous or as spirits rather than typical humans, or used as symbols of nature, like animals, in commercial ads and as team mascots. Are scientists promoting this stereotype of subhuman behavior if they continue to state that American Indians were engaging in behaviors that today are viewed as reprehensible?

### **“Mystical” Indian**

One stereotype that is often challenged by scientists is the “mystical Indian” even though in popular media, such a depiction continues to get more attention than the type of Indian described by archaeologists and bioarchaeologists. Rather than portraying early Native Americans as people who suffered and succeeded in manners whereby living people can extend a certain empathy, they are depicted as ghost-like figures that move about in mysterious ways. Historic period Indians are not portrayed showing the emotions and intellectual curiosities that tend to be found in living people and certainly do not seem to emulate the behaviors of early Indians. They are not engaged in significant engineering projects like long-distance irrigation canals, yet we know several native peoples did just this. They are not shown building large earthen mounds that include strategically placed layers of sediment that allow for stability and water drainage. Nor are they cast as agricultural scientists developing domesticated plants, although they did this to such a significant extent that much of the world today is fed on foods that were first domesticated by Native Americans. Instead, early and contemporary mystical Indians act like spirits, creatures that are part human and part animal.

### **“Archaeological” Indian**

Presumably, bioarchaeologists excavate and analyze ancient human remains because of their concern for an objective portrayal of early peoples. Their studies address the link between biological and cultural phenomena that ultimately affect the condition and disposition of human remains. Typical studies deal with issues of diet, disease, mortuary practices, and violence. Through rigorous analysis and hypothesis testing they produce interpretations that are meant to provide accurate (if not particularly precise) insights into ancient lifeways. In the process, they often elucidate many qualities that are frequently overlooked in popular descriptions of Indians. For example, archaeologists have demonstrated that early people, including those of the



Eastern Woodlands of the US, often struggled with natural resources management, much like people of today. Moreover, archaeologists have demonstrated many early Indian achievements. Some of these were cultural, for example, the independent development of agriculture, while others were biological, such as an almost continuously increasing population despite a plethora of pathological conditions – ranging from dental caries and arthritis to tuberculosis and syphilis (e.g., Larsen 1997; Jermain 1999; Roberts and Buikstra 2003; Powell and Cook 2005). These findings underscore the complexity and antiquity of Native American accomplishments, many of which date to several thousand years ago. However, the detailed studies that have produced evidence of great achievement also have uncovered certain facts that may be deemed today as unsavory, in particular the examples of violence mentioned herein.

The scientific justification for reporting all findings is that archaeologists are not to act as filters, teasing out discoveries that may be uncomfortable to some. Yet, this has led to archaeologists being accused of casting Native Americans as “less-than-human” for insinuating violent ways of life. In fact, the stance taken by the authors of the current study is that reporting early violence does not, in fact, reduce the humanity of Native Americans, it increases it. It bolsters their human qualities because it shows the ways in which certain people at certain times dealt with the challenges of life. Living people can relate to the struggles and strife early people must have faced and triumphed over. Are we just as likely to understand the concerns of a mystical spirit who moves like the wind and is apparently impervious to the vagaries of life? To us, reporting on violence shows how similar groups are around the globe; it would be odd indeed to find a population that did not engage in some type of significant warfare and it could easily be argued that Native American violence is no more rampant or disturbing than elsewhere. There are numerous examples from Europe and Asia of humans being extraordinarily brutal in their treatment of others, from drawing-and-quartering to torture, that by comparison make the Native American violence not particularly extraordinary.

It seems, therefore, that from an archaeological perspective the “mystical Indian” portrays native peoples as more “less than human” than the “archaeological Indian.” So why is it such a popular image, conveyed not just by media outlets but often by native peoples themselves? This confounding point may be at the very heart of the tension between archaeologists and Native Americans; the “archaeological Indian” is externally applied or even imposed while the “mystical Indian” has at least some direct investment and contribution from Native Americans. But, the mystical Indian is just one depiction that serves here as a protagonist to underline the discord between scientists and native peoples. It is not the only point of divergence between these two groups. Thus, our efforts to “overcome” Indian stereotypes must focus more on making archaeology relevant and meaningful to Native Americans. Until archaeology becomes internalized by American Indians, even well-intended archaeological work will likely continue to be seen as an outsider’s view of an exploited people.



## Resolution?

Although duty bound to conserve and study human remains, bioarchaeologists need more effort to improve Native American investment into archaeology so that they are an empowered member of the community that contributes to decisions regarding the excavation and analysis of Indian remains. Indians should know and feel that archaeologists work in the interest of the public, which includes all people, including American Indians. As long as archaeologists are perceived as another external force that is taking rather than giving to American Indians, their input is going to be challenged. The authors are currently building a dialog with the Miami Nation of Indians of the State of Indiana and the Pokagon Band of the Potawatomi to improve our relationships with them.

This process will not be easy and we must be prepared to hear comments and criticisms that will make us uncomfortable at first. Claims for immediate repatriation are likely to precede cooperative plans regarding future studies. To show respect for native views on archaeological evidence of violence, a plan is currently being developed to notify the Miami before the final reports about the sites mentioned earlier are publicized. In this way, it is hoped that the Miami feel included in the dissemination process and are able to digest the ramifications of the publications prior to the inevitable media attention that will follow. Perhaps, both archaeologists and the Miami will be able to steer the media reporting away from the sensationalism both groups likely abhor. In sum, the hope is that through direct communication between archaeologists and Indians and by developing some measure of control for Indians, archaeological studies can become viewed as appropriately objective and native peoples will not feel victimized by our work.

Finally, realizing that scientific findings can adversely affect some people reminds us that we do not work in a vacuum. How we report our findings is important. Just as physicians tend not to blurt out “you have cancer, you are going to die” and today work with patients and their families to develop coping strategies for such bad news, we in bioarchaeology need to find a cooperative approach to sharing our findings so that the value of our work is not lost to antagonism. Such an approach should not be confused with “political correctness” or compromising good science; and it does not mean that we should withhold our findings. It simply means that our dissemination should be done thoughtfully, considering both the intra-cultural and cross-cultural ramifications of what we say. This is nothing more than what we ask of our students when we urge them to think like anthropologists and we see nothing wrong in asking the same of ourselves.

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