

# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LIBBEN SITE

by  
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The Libben Site was primarily a Late Woodland cemetery located on the north bank of the Portage River in Ottawa County, Ohio, approximately four and one-half miles upstream from the river's mouth at Port Clinton on Lake Erie. The lower reaches of the river are basically a long embayment of the lake and it is still half a mile wide in front of the site. The site was discovered late in the 1966 field season by Orrin C. Shane, III, then a doctoral candidate at Case Institute of Technology, who was doing field survey in the area at the behest of Dr. Olaf H. Prufer. Shane found human bones on the surface and, recognizing the potential of the site, notified Prufer, who immediately gathered a small field crew to conduct test excavations, during which several burials were uncovered. Prufer then organized and conducted a full summer field season of excavation with a crew of twenty-five from April to September of 1967, followed by a second full season in 1968 with a crew of sixty-four, supplemented at times by others. He sought financial backing for the dig but was unsuccessful in obtaining it, so Prufer paid for the excavations out of his own pocket; neither federal nor state government funds were involved.

While he didn't know it at the time of the excavations, Prufer reported that he later learned that his good friend, Arthur George "The Old Sarge" Smith (1891 - 1964), a well known and highly respected amateur archaeologist (Prufer delivered the eulogy at his funeral), had previously conducted excavations at the site. Sarge knew the site as the Montgomery Burial Site and reported that it was located in "a semi-abandoned peach orchard" on a "sand knoll" beside the Portage River. "One Sunday morning early in June, 1917," he and a companion conducted an expedition to the site on horseback from nearby Camp Perry, where they were serving in the U.S. Army with an artillery unit in training for World War I. They found bones on the surface and excavated seven graves. Artifacts, including projectile points, a crushed ceramic "cup", a complete clay elbow pipe and marine shell ornaments, accompanied three of the burials. Some of these artifacts are illustrated in Smith's report of the excavation published in the *Ohio Archaeologist* in 1964, shortly before his death.

Romain (1979) reported that the excavated area of Prufer's digs covered 30,000 square feet, breaking it down to 22,300 sq. ft., or 892 five-foot-square excavation units, manually excavated, with an additional 7,700 sq. ft. immediately to the north of the manual excavations examined after being scraped by a bulldozer. My understanding is that this resulted from the accidental discovery of postmolds during the backfilling process at

the end of the dig, which was then followed up to disclose an important and unforeseen discovery that would have otherwise been missed. No graves were revealed in this scraped area, but it did reveal long straight lines of postmolds to be discussed below. Prufer, who had undertaken the second season of excavation with the goal of 100% recovery, estimated that the excavated area encompassed 85% to 90% of the available site. Romain (1979), taking into account unexcavated areas, land lost to erosion by the river and a set-aside along the river's edge required by the landowner, Arthur Libben, to protect against future erosion, calculated the excavated area as being 66% of the original site, with 12% of the site having been washed away.

The skeletal remains of "about 1,300" (Meindl, Mensforth and Lovejoy, 2008) human beings, of both sexes and ranging in age from unborn fetuses to the elderly, were disinterred. Most of the graves were shallow and so highly concentrated over much of the site that many of them had been disturbed prehistorically by the intrusion of later burials into earlier ones. The first known historical disturbance to the site was from the peach orchard mentioned by Sarge Smith. The orchard was gone by the 1960's, but Prufer reported that the excavators encountered concentrations of peach pits and root molds where the trees had stood. Later the site was used to grow annual grain crops, which disturbed more of the burials.

The vast majority (93.6%) of the bodies for which the mode of burial could be determined had been laid out in an extended position, primarily on their backs. Other modes of interment are represented by 41 bundle burials (4.4%), fourteen flexed burials (1.6%), and four cremations (0.4%). Other than the cremations and bundle burials, only articulated remains, although they need not have been complete skeletons, were assigned numbers and tallied as part of the 1,300 burials. Nearly 22% of the numbered burials were described as disturbed and did not have a burial mode assigned to them. Whether from being thrown out prehistorically, plowed out historically, or disturbed by woodchuck or other burrowing, a large number of "stray" skeletal elements were recovered in the dig. Romain (1979) reported that these bones came from an additional 170 people, bringing the total number of bodies represented by the human remains excavated from the site closer to 1,500.

Romain, in his 1979 masters thesis on the subject, also details an interesting number of post-mortem skeletal modifications on forty-five of the numbered burials as well as on an additional sixty-three "scattered skeletal fragments" representing a minimum

of six additional individuals. Some of these appear to be quite bizarre to our modern Western sensibilities. Dr. C. Owen Lovejoy of Kent State University and his associates have published a number of papers dealing with other aspects of the physiology, pathology and demography of the burial population, which Prufer claimed to be the largest discrete prehistoric population excavated in the United States.

A substantial amount of cultural material was also retrieved during the excavations. Prufer reported that he counted the potsherds recovered from the site in 1970-71, stopping when he reached 75,000 but estimating the total to be in the vicinity of 80,000. He commented that the extreme fragmentation of the ceramics gave them the appearance of having been "trampled." There are approximately thirty-five complete or nearly complete ceramic vessels extant from the excavations, most of which accompanied burials, as well as some 2,400 rimsherds that were primarily from non-burial or disturbed contexts. Only a very few shell-tempered potsherds were recovered; 99+% of the ceramics recovered from the site are from grit-tempered Late Woodland vessels.

I was only peripherally involved in the ceramic analysis and can only give my impressions, not a statistical analysis. There are at least eight thick, interior-exterior cord-marked Early Woodland rimsherds representing a minimum of two vessels. There are a few rimsherds, probably less than a hundred, whose only decoration is cord-marking over the entire exterior surface, that should date to the earliest part of the Late Woodland Period. There is also an interesting group of 46 small pieces of fired clay, all less than an inch and a quarter in maximum dimension, with most being less than an inch. A few pieces look as if they could have been daub, but most of them seem to have been symmetrically shaped, although it is hard to say to what end. Two appear to be rather elegant representations of the heads and necks of birds.

The vast majority of the pots that were left at the Libben Site, however, bear some form of decoration, the style of which is quite distinctive and impressive. The decorations are much more elaborate, even ornate, in comparison to the plain, utilitarian look typical of the Late Woodland ceramics from north-eastern Ohio with which I am more familiar. Not having seen such, to me, exotic pottery before and knowing that it came from a cemetery, I wondered upon first sight if it might be mortuary pottery made to be used for honoring the dead.

Switching from archaeology to art for a moment, most of the decoration on the ceramics is geometrical, and if the designs

have meaning, we are incapable of discerning what it is. There is one pot, however, whose decorations convey meaning to me. It spoke of death and despair, the emptiness that can wash over one in the immediate aftermath of a loved one's death. This nearly complete vessel (Fig. 1) was decorated with what I interpret to have been four stylized human faces, one of which has been lost. Fig. 2 illustrates the remaining three. They face outward on castellations opposite each other on the rim. The experience of art is subjective, but to me they are very evocative of death and mourning, while bearing a faint resemblance to the face in Edvard Munch's painting, *The Scream*. The word macabre comes to mind. This pot accompanied a 36-year-old man into his grave. A rimsherd from a different pot was recovered that has a similar motif (Fig. 3). This face is on a hemispherical protrusion just below the rim that probably served as a lug. It is listed as coming from a burial for which I have no information. The faces on both pots were very simply formed by pushing a few holes into damp clay. To my eye, that simplicity captures death and grief to powerful effect.

Analyzing the ceramics from the site was a daunting task that defeated more than one researcher over the years and was never successfully completed. They exhibit a great deal of variation in decoration that, per Prufer, defied conventional analytical schemes. There are repetitive patterns and designs in the decorations, but they are executed with a great deal of variation. When seeing groups of these rimsherds spread out on a table, one's first impression is that no two are exactly the same. Prufer said that when one sees a Hopewell pot, one knows that it is a Hopewell pot, and when one sees a Fort Ancient pot, one knows that it is a Fort Ancient pot – both cultures had decorative motifs that they “stuck with.” He ventured that the Libben potters lived in a more egalitarian society where there was no “Grand Snapdragon” to tell them, “This is the way we decorate our pots,” and so could experiment and express themselves more freely.

Twelve complete smoking pipes and 206 fragments of broken pipes are extant. All of the complete pipes were found with burials. Nine of them are grit-tempered ceramic elbow pipes, while three are made of stone. Several of them bear decorations, including one uniquely shaped stone pipe that has what appears to be a lizard engraved on its surface. The fragments of broken pipes, 120 stem fragments and 86 bowl fragments, were scattered across the site; eleven came from grave fill. They were all made of grit-tempered ceramics except for one stone bowl fragment and one shell-tempered stem fragment.

Chert items extant from the excavations include 101 Late Woodland projectile points, consisting of twelve Jack's Reef Corner Notched points, two Raccoon Notched points and 87 triangles. There are 155 presumably earlier projectile points extant. Among them are six Late

Palaeo lanceolates; a cache, likely the smallest cache on record, of four Turkey-tail fragments, each manufactured from a different piece of Wyandotte chert (Indiana hornstone); nineteen corner-notched points; eleven side-notched points; fifteen stemmed points; and 100 non-diagnostic projectile point fragments, consisting of 46 tip fragments, 32 mid-sections and 22 basal fragments. There are 113 bifaces; 94 splitting wedges (*piece esquillées*); 31 drills, one of which might be better described as an eccentric; 3 hafted scrapers; 17 unifacial endscrapers; 11 unifacial sidescrapers; 16 gravers; 260 utilized or retouched flakes (which Prufer preferred to refer to as “expedient tools”); and a bladelet or two. Michael Tallan reported in 1977 that there were 8,711 pieces of debitage recovered in the excavations.

In the ground and polished stone category, there are nine complete celts and/or adzes and eighteen fragments, one of which may have come from an axe. Additionally, there is one very thin slate “gorget” that is about 75% complete and covered on both sides with fine line geometrical engraving. Then there are two small, flat polished slate fragments without engraving; two small polished disks; three fascinating little fine-grained sandstone abrading stones, each having a unique shape; two slate knives; two iron pyrite fragments; two grinding stones; one stone bead; and a few unidentifiable fragments and items of unknown usage. Red ochre was also found in at least two, and yellow ochre in one, of the Early Late Woodland graves.

One copper awl, excavated by Prufer himself, and one copper bead were also recovered from the site.

Historic items extant in the collection are one coin, three buttons, four gunflints, ten brass shotgun shell casings, thirteen kaolin pipe fragments, 93 pieces of ceramic crockery, 133 fragments of various glass items (including one glass scraper), 164 pieces of various metal items and 284 ceramic china fragments. Prufer mentioned a memory of some “silver tinklers” from the site, but they could not be located.

Over 45,000 mammal bones (from which 23 species were identified), over 5,700 bird bones (from which 28 species were identified) and an estimated 250,000 fish bones (including ten identified genera), were recovered from the site (Harrison, 1978). Charred plant remains of corn, hickory, acorn, raspberry, smartweed, dock, hackberry, chenopod, grape and foxtail were also identified (Harrison, 1978).

The extant collection of artifacts recovered from the excavations contains over 450 pieces of bone, 79 pieces of antler and 2,711 items manufactured from marine shells, that are the subjects of the reports for which this introduction was written.

What has been written to date on the Libben Site reports the occupation of the site to have been that of a stockaded village. There is no evidence in the existing site records of

a stockade. What was being interpreted as a stockade consisted of long straight lines of postmolds. However, according to Prufer, the postmolds were only three inches or so in diameter and were spaced a foot or two apart. Revisiting the data in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Prufer's opinion was that their interpretation as a stockade “doesn't make sense.”

They were much more likely to have been the walls of what were, perhaps, one or more charnel houses. They are very reminiscent of the long “enclosures” revealed by excavations at the Younge Site, a partially excavated Late Woodland cemetery in Michigan reported by Emerson Greenman in 1937. The Younge Site and the Libben Site share many similar, indeed identical, cultural traits. The Younge Site excavations revealed postmolds outlining two of these structures, both about 25 to 30 feet wide, with one being 585 feet long and the other 252 feet long (Greenman, 1937). Greenman cited early historical reports by Cadillac, Lalemont, and Charlevoix of the Hurons, Iroquois and Nipissing erecting such large buildings. They used them to temporarily house the bodies of the dead and host ceremonies honoring them before their mass burial in a large pit, dug for the purpose, during periodic gatherings or festivals known as Feasts of the Dead, which were held every eight to twelve years. Jesuit missionaries living among the native peoples of the Great Lakes in the 17<sup>th</sup> century reported that they held their dead in great regard, keeping their bodies with them near their homes until it was time to take them to the Feast of the Dead. Mound burial demonstrates that Early and Middle Woodland peoples of the Great Lakes area also had great regard for their dead. The Libben Site cemetery lies halfway along the time line between the two. Mortuary practices changed over time, but it isn't too hard to imagine that some thread of belief and continuity of ritual practices concerning life and death traveled through time with the people. The postmolds don't fit the known models for a defensive stockade or for a domicile. In our culture, the building standing next to the graveyard is usually a church. We don't know what it was at the Libben and Younge Sites, but it was something that wasn't typically found in a village.

There is scant direct or conclusive evidence for a village at the Libben Site. Some postmolds were recorded, but beyond the walls just discussed and what was apparently some type of shelter built over one grave containing multiple individuals, they did not reveal individual structures but were, according to Prufer, “random.” There were so many burials in such close, indeed overlapping, proximity to each other that it was assumed by those interpreting the excavation in the 1960's that the graveyard had continued to expand until it ultimately covered and obliterated the evidence of the village. Perhaps, but negative evidence is poor proof. Some 115 features, primarily pits, but also a few hearths and small sheet middens, were recorded for the excavations. Some of

these may well have been created as part of a village occupation, one or more of which could have occurred at the site over time.

Alternatively, some of the features may have resulted from repeated occupations of the site for periodic hunting and/or fishing expeditions by people whose permanent residences were elsewhere. The site fronted on the Portage River and produced direct evidence of the bounty of its fisheries. Lovejoy recalled “a lot of fish pits” at the site, while Prufer reported that there were “millions” of still slimy and smelly fish scales in the pits, way too numerous, not to mention disgusting, to save; only a handful, now having the appearance of dry curled fingernails, seem to have been curated. On the back side of the site, away from the river, was an area that was still swampy when the excavations were conducted in the 1960’s and was likely much more so before the Great Black Swamp, which is what this area of northwestern Ohio was known as in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, was drained. It covered an extensive area and carried a rich and diverse biota that would have been available for human exploitation, which is also amply demonstrated by the faunal remains recovered from the site. While the site produced a large amount of ceramic and faunal remains, the balance of the artifact inventory shows sparse evidence of either activity, village life or hunting and fishing.

What is unquestioned is that Libben was the site of a cemetery. Prufer mused that it could have served as a regional cemetery for several nearby villages. Father Jean Brebeuf, a Jesuit missionary, attended a Huron Feast of the Dead in 1636. He reported that hundreds of people from several related tribal villages gathered at a location chosen strictly for the purpose. People set up camp and the festivities lasted for ten days. We’re not dealing with exactly the same circumstances at the Libben Site, but the overabundance of ceramic vessels and smoking pipes at Libben in comparison to the dearth of hunting, fishing and other domestic artifacts would seem to indicate something other than a standard village occupation. We don’t know that similar gatherings to honor the dead took place at the Libben Site, but a congregation of hundreds or even dozens of participants involved in feasting, ceremonies, games, contests and other social activities, particularly if lasting for several days and repeated periodically over time, could have produced the volume of cultural remains recovered from the Libben Site quite as easily as a village occupation would have.

Based on demographic analysis, Meindl, Mensforth and Lovejoy (2008) propose a continuous village occupation at the Libben Site lasting for 250 years. Thirty-nine of the Late Woodland flint projectile points

recovered from the site were found with the bodies in the graves, leaving sixty-two, assuming that they weren’t from disturbed graves, to potentially represent the non-mortuary-related occupation of the site. If all of the 115 features excavated at the site were part of this village, wouldn’t a village of people who, for the whole village over the course of 250 years, dug on average one pit or created one firehearth every two years and lost or discarded on average one projectile point every four years make for a poor village? Not to mention the lack, or dearth, of such domestic tools as hammerstones, pitted stones and grinding stones in the extant inventory.

Of course, it is entirely possible that the site served all of the suggested functions, and more, over time. Very little in the archaeological record is self-evident; nearly everything is subject to interpretation. The data from the Libben Site excavations is very much open to interpretation, and “the truth” is hard to find. When trying to read the evidence unveiled by archaeology, what may appear to be the obvious truth may, in truth, be a direct lie. The truth is, that beyond the sure knowledge that a lot of people were buried there and disinterred centuries later, we really don’t know much at all about what took place at the Libben Site.

Five charcoal samples from the site were submitted for radiocarbon dating. The results were A.D. 720 ± 105, A.D. 865 ± 120, A.D. 955 ± 110, A.D. 1280 ± 85, and A.D. 1310 ± 104. It is not entirely clear what these dates tell us about the occupation of the site. Prufer pointed out that they do not date *the site*, but only five discrete occasions when someone had a fire burning there. It was not clear from the records I saw what, if any, artifacts were associated with the radiocarbon dates. Prufer had arranged for additional radiocarbon dating directly from the bones of individuals selected for their accompanying grave goods or other criteria that should be more enlightening. He was also having some of the organic material recovered by water screening or flotation from a couple of the larger pits at the site analyzed. The project ended before the results of either of those efforts became available.

Much more obviously could be, and has been, written about the site. Approximately thirty works – academic papers, journal or magazine articles and one newspaper article – have been written over the years on different aspects of discoveries from the Libben Site excavations. From the beginning, Prufer had envisioned a final report covering all aspects of the site. He saw getting a handle on the voluminous amount of material to be reported as the main obstacle to publication. He attempted to do that by supervising several master’s theses on different aspects

of the site at Kent State University. These covered smoking pipes (Morgan, 1971), ceramics (Fossett, 1975), flint (Tallan, 1977), floral and faunal remains (Harrison, 1978), and skeletal modifications (Romain, 1979). However, as time marched on bearing life’s vicissitudes with it, the vision of a final report faded and fell by the way.

In March of 2007, feeling the heavy hand of mortality pressing on him and having the Libben Site as his only unpublished excavation, Olaf started to gather the material together to write the final report. He envisioned it being published in book form and invited me to create the illustrations for the book. I imaged most of the diagnostic prehistoric artifacts from the site (skipping the “75,000” ceramic body sherds) and became heavily involved in other aspects of the project as well. Olaf eventually asked me to write two chapters for the book, covering items from the site that hadn’t previously been analyzed and reported: first the bone and antler tools and weapons from the site, and then items fashioned from marine shells. These chapters were written during the winter of 2007-2008. I was then asked to write a third chapter on the flint artifacts from the site and was well into that when work on the book came to an abrupt halt with Olaf’s death on July 27, 2008.

“This is like Christmas!” Linda Spurlock, who was to be co-author of the book, said as we opened box after box of Libben Site artifacts to gaze upon what lay within for the first time. I put that here to illustrate that it was a treat just to have the opportunity to see and work with these exotic items. However, my real motivation and pleasure in this project came from working with Olaf, not from the project itself. I miss our camaraderie. As it turned out, he waited too long to start and so didn’t live long enough to finish the Libben Site book. But from my perspective, publication of this article and the two that follow, added to the five master’s theses on different aspects of the site that he supervised, fulfills what Olaf considered to be one of the primary obligations of his profession – if you dig it up, publish it. To quote him directly concerning the Libben Site, “The important part now,” he said, “Is just to get the information out there so it can be used.” While it may not be as widely distributed as he would have liked, he did, after all, bring into existence a substantial record of the Libben Site, his last unpublished excavation, before departing this life himself.

There you have a brief overview of the Libben Site, one of Ohio’s most productive and interesting, but least well known, archaeological excavations, written to provide context for the reports that follow on the bone, antler and shell artifacts recovered from the site.

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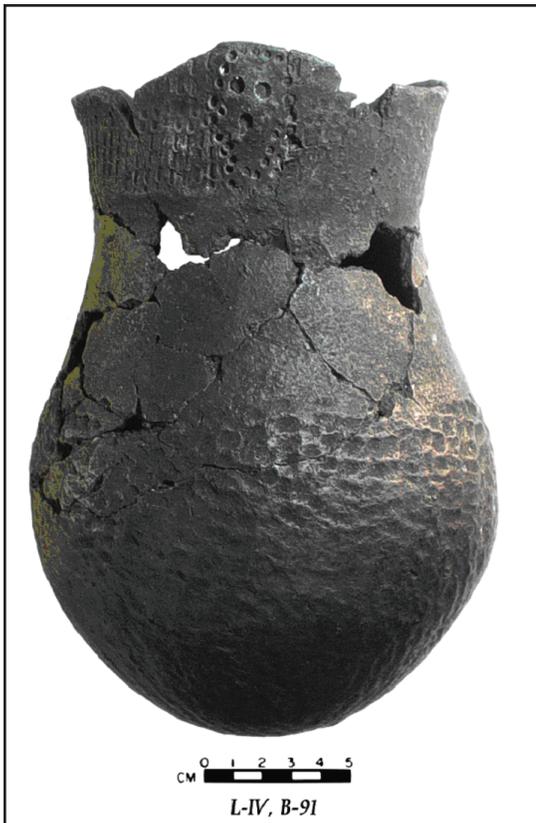


Figure 1 (Pigott) Grit-tempered ceramic vessel from the Libben Site, bearing stylized human face adorns, reported to have been recovered from the grave of a 36-year-old man.

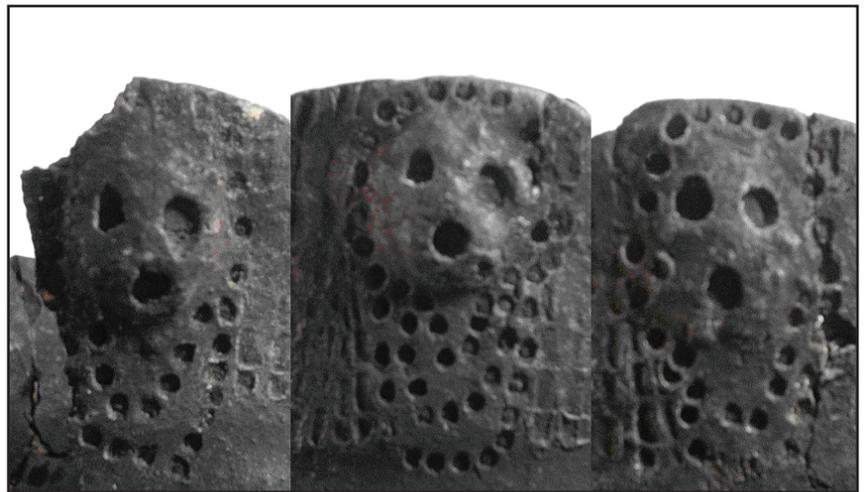


Figure 2 (Pigott) Images of all three of the remaining human face adorns on the vessel.



Figure 3 (Pigott) Three views of a stylized human face adorno or lug from another ceramic vessel recovered at the Libben Site.