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## The Colour of Time: Head Pots and Temporal Convergences

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## **The Colour of Time: Head Pots and Temporal Convergences**

Charles R. Cobb & Eric Drake

Colour symbolism permeated the world of indigenous North America. This symbolism was often tied to the cosmos where the earth was viewed as a quadrilateral disk and each of the four cardinal directions was linked with a colour array such as red, white, black, and blue (DeBoer 2005; Hudson 1976). We suggest that the recurring use of certain colours and colour contrasts comprised a suite of long-term historical practices that were essential for reproducing certain views about the world and about being in the world. Further, the rendering of colour had a plasticity that allowed it to enter a discourse about daily life that was intertwined with notions of the long-term. As a case study, we focus on well-known ceramic head effigies in the central Mississippi Valley to argue that their veneers of contrasting red and white were imbued with a notion of time immemorial that converged with other conceptions of temporality, most importantly, a pressing concern with regional violence, personal safety, and spiritual integrity.

### Notions of temporality and imagined histories

Archaeologists in the last two decades or so have highlighted history and the long-term from a wide range of approaches, ranging from Collingwood to Braudel (e.g. Bintliff 1991; Hodder 1987; Knapp 1992). Durkheim's thesis that collective representations stirred the rhythm of time, typically played out in repetitive actions such as rites and ceremonies (Durkheim 1995, 9–10, 441–2), seems to be particularly attractive to archaeologists even if not always explicitly cited. The layering of house floors (Boivin 2000), the construction of mounds (Knight 1989; Owoc 2002), and other practices evoke the rhythms to which Durkheim alluded. A primary critique of the Durkheimian model is that it is a necessary but not sufficient view of time. His focus on patterning and the totality elides the variation that may foster change through time, and it has an objectivist slant that de-emphasizes the importance of situating persons and groups in time (Gosden 1994, 101; Munn 1992). More recent discussions have focussed on the idea of the split between McTaggart's so-called 'A' time and 'B' time, which Thomas (1996) has characterized as a contrast between an Aristotelian notion of an objective, measurable time external to the subject, and Augustine's conception of time as intimate and experiential. Cultural anthropologists, too, have engaged similar questions. Most notable, perhaps, are the debates spurred by Geertz's (1973) contention that Balinese culture detemporalized experience through ritual. Bloch (1977) rephrased this into a model whereby the Balinese engaged in cyclical ritual time — as suggested by Geertz — as well as a linear time of everyday practice equally important as ritual time. Howe (1981), in turn, observed that such distinctions were arbitrary and ignored the subtlety of temporality, where subjects were capable of experiencing a cohesive time of both repetition and continuity, ritual and practice — a point we develop further in our case study.

The weight of the musings regarding time suggest that it is practiced, reproduced, and experienced as a multi-dimensional phenomenon. It may be non-discursive and mediated bodily through daily activities at the same time that it is explicitly marked and celebrated at intervals in the annual cycle. Importantly, various dimensions of time may also be subsumed in the world of objects, where things not only reflect time but assume an agency capable of constituting time (see Gell 1998). Certain objects simultaneously are a product of rhythms, they participate in and foster rhythms, and they are capable of arresting rhythms by objectifying multiple strands of time.

The concern of the papers in this section with 'deep time', however, underscores the difficulties with

weaving together longer stretches of human experience with the immediacy of everyday life. Archaeologists in particular have been debating the notion of time perspectivism — whether there are different scales and rhythms of temporality, each with its own theoretical configuration and explanatory principles (cf. Bailey 1983; 2007; Harding 2005; Murray 1999). Without pursuing this in detail here, we believe some fruitful efforts have been made to address subjective notions of time that integrate longer conceptions of temporality with the currents of more immediate social time. Gosden & Lock (1998), noting that human activity is infused with many forms of temporality, have employed the notion of 'mythical history' as a form of deep time where groups follow practices that directly evoke a distant past — an approach that King and myself (Cobb & King 2005) believe usefully applies to certain Mississippian situations. Likewise, Joyce (1998) has borrowed Herzfeld's (1991) somewhat analogous idea of 'monumental time' to impart the idea of a distant past shared by those in a given present, a past that imbues ongoing social experience with collective predictability. Indeed, in deference to Anderson's (1983) well-known 'imagined community', we suggest that it is possible to conceive of an 'imagined history' that evokes the qualities of myth and monumentality suggested by these temporal references. Rather than a *longue durée* structured by climate or geography, an imagined history is constituted by a community through memories and citations to the distant past. It is animated and presented through the production of material culture and other means (e.g. oral history), and in turn the community is reproduced by these shared practices.

The advantage of ideas like imagined histories or mythical and monumental time is that they suggest a deep past composed of symbols and referents that play a structuring role in everyday life for many successive generations, thereby recognizing that 'multi-scalar' time — past and present — may be experienced simultaneously. At the same time, this cultural past is not passively received. The objects and symbols that comprise this imagining are actively modified by agents. This kind of past is best approached by a 'genealogy' focused on specific institutions, practices, and material culture, rather than as a wholesale history composed of epochs or cultural stages (Harding 2005). As we will contend, colour may be viewed as one constitutive element of a genealogy comprising a deep, imagined history in southeastern North America where events in the biographies of artefacts are '... seen to encompass a pattern of retentions from the past and protentions for the future' (Ingold 2000, 194).

### Colouring the Native American world

The use of colour to reference the natural rhythms of the earth is embedded in everyday metaphors of conversation, verse, and song. Evocative red and gold images of seasonality and death are conjured by the jazz standard 'The Autumn Leaves', and the waning of the day has been immortalized by Nat King Cole's 'Red Sails in the Sunset.' These kinds of direct temporal ties between colour and natural phenomena are commonplace. Yet colour may evoke time in a more fundamental sense, in that there is always a temporal character to being human that invokes memory and anticipation (Thomas 2006), and where the lived experience of a present derives from a montage of values, desires, and emotions anchored in the past (Whittle & Bayliss 2007, 24). Following from this, colour may affect ways of being in the world, conferring a sensual element grounded in subjective time. Moreover, colours are bound in social practice, assuming a relational quality whereby they may structure knowledge and the activities of those who create and perceive them (Gage 1999; Young 2006).

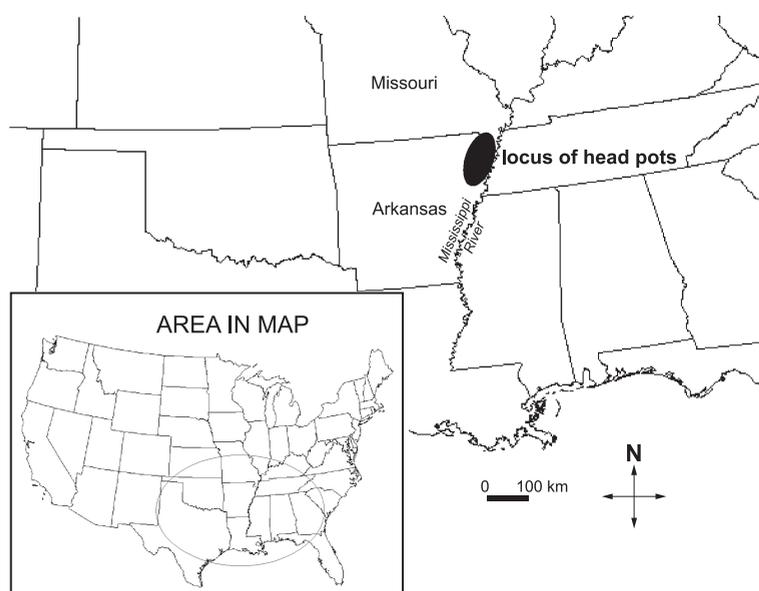
Colour symbolism appears to have a very ancient history among humans. This is certainly true in North America, where it is common to find directional colour systems that reference world quarters and were 'an integral part of cosmos-building' (DeBoer 2005, 67). Yet there were also many distinctive, regional traditions of colour symbolism. For instance, the ethnohistory of southeastern Native Americans shows that the contrast of red and white seems to have been insinuated into almost all aspects of life. Red frequently denoted life, blood, and warfare, while white was often associated with warmth, happiness, and peace (Hudson 1976; Knight 1986). While the specific meanings varied between tribes, the red: white dyad itself was a widespread structuring principle (Lankford 1993). Many groups, such as the Creek, were divided into Red and White organizations — the former related to warfare and external relations, the latter devoted to peace and municipal order (Dye 1995; Hudson 1976, 234–9). Towns themselves were often depicted as red or white. At a smaller scale, age grade organizations had colour affiliations, where junior grades were linked with red and senior grades with white (Dye 1995, 296).

It is unclear when the red: white contrast began to assume such prominence in the Southeast. By the Mississippian period, however, this dyad began to appear in the material record across the entire Southeast. It is most commonly seen on pottery, typically in the form of balanced geometric patterns. But colour equilibrium was even carried out at a massive scale,

such as the earthworks at the Shiloh site in Tennessee where excavations have demonstrated a spatial concatenation of mounds sheathed in mantles of either red or white clay (Purcell 2004).

It is possible that the red: white coupling may be related to the fact that many Southeastern groups placed emphatic importance on the harmony of opposition (Hudson 1976, 318–19). Much of the misfortune occurring in society was attributed to one side prevailing over another, whether the forces of the Upper World versus those of the Lower World or else men opposing women. Even if the known materialization of the red: white dyad is limited to the Mississippian and historic periods (i.e. after AD 1000), we may still assign it a span of several centuries. This is perhaps not a deep time as conceived by some, but it is impressively enduring nonetheless. In spite of this durability, we must emphasize that the ethnohistoric accounts indicate that the red: white contrast was not a simple cultural opposition. Individuals, social groups, and towns had an ability to change from one state and colour to another that was sometimes predictable (men moving from red to white age grades), but often puzzling to contemporary observers and later ethnographers (Lankford 1993). Southeastern groups apparently recognized an idealized contrast that was at once both eternal and mutable. For those who may still detect the unpleasant scent of an underlying structuralism to this dichotomy, it is hard to overlook the empirical record in North America that attests to a pervasiveness of two-way and four-way colour partitioning (DeBoer 2005).

The lack of hard evidence for widespread red: white contrasting prior to the Mississippian period in the Southeast could be a function of many things, not the least of which is variation through time in the media (and its differential preservation) displaying these colours. As DeBoer's (2005) overview of directional colour symbolism has shown, even the same society could be inconsistent about the uses and meanings of colours. Importantly, though, he does note one consistency: binary sets of colours among Native American cultures tend to oppose light and dark (DeBoer 2005, 85), and we are prompted to side with Gage's (1999, 111) hypothesis that many cultures of the Americas were marked by 'unstable' colour symbolism, and that value (light and shade) was equally as important as hue. As DeBoer (2005, 85) and others (e.g. Greber 2006) observe, Middle Woodland earthworks in North America frequently were constructed of alternating soils of distinctively different colours. Thus, from the view of the long-term we suggest that what art historians refer to as a contrasting 'tonal structure' may have had a particular



**Figure 1.** Region of high concentration of head pots in northeast Arkansas and southeast Missouri.

resiliency in the colour schemes of prehistoric eastern North America, regardless of colour. Red:white symbolism may have assumed particular importance as an expression of this tonal structure as late as the Mississippian period.

From these observations we proffer two points. First, colour appears to have assumed a doxic status imbued with a sense of mythic or imagined time widely subscribed to in the Southeast. In particular, colour opposition conveyed a permanence of balance from past, to present, to future. Second, the repetition of colour contrast was an ideological rendering of a stable symbolic history, while in practice the materialization of colour could be subject to manipulation by human agency. This second conclusion prompts us to move from generalities about colour and to specific ways in which Native Americans may have mobilized colour and time in historical settings.

### Ahead of time

Our case study is set in the Mississippian period of the southeastern United States (AD 1000–1500), an interval typically portrayed as a leap forward in social complexity as characterized by the birth of large towns, the adoption of agriculture, and the emergence of social hierarchies (Cobb 2003; Smith 1986; Steponaitis 1986). We focus on the region of northeast Arkansas and southeast Missouri, which is particularly well known for its high density of sizable towns (Fig. 1). One of the horizon markers for the late Mississippian period (c. AD 1350–1550) in the region is

a very unusual type of ceramic pot shaped as a human head (Fig. 2). Averaging around 15 cm in height, these effigies display a high degree of skill in their manufacture and almost appear to be renderings of actual people, with distinctive facial features, ornate tattoos and multiple ear piercings. More grimly, these appear to be renderings of dead people, with closed to semi-parted eyes and mouth drawn back to expose the teeth in a manner that suggests a partially desiccated trophy head. Interestingly, the production of these pots appears to have been fairly restricted geographically. With only a few exceptions, the known sample of just under 140 specimens has been recovered from sites concentrated along a few drainages in northeast Arkansas and southeast Missouri<sup>1</sup> (Cherry 2005).

Given the penchant for actual trophy-head taking, as well as the common iconography for this activity during the Mississippian period (Brown & Dye 2007; Jacobi 2007), it is difficult to escape the idea that these pots represent the heads of felled enemies. Nevertheless, Brown & Dye (2007, 293) make the case that depictions of heads in Mississippian art suggest ‘... not ordinary combat but an eternal struggle conducted in universal time’. The universalizing, bellicose associations of the head pots are further accented by their counterbalanced veneer of red and white or red and buff, suggesting the familiar themes of conflict and peace. Interestingly, ethnohistoric accounts describe the application of white clay to the faces of individuals who were elevated to the position of *miko*, or white chief (Lankford 1993, 58), and the head pots often display a white face with the remainder of the vessel in red. Rather than simply identifying these vessels as white chiefs, however, it could be argued that the red portion of the crown and rear of the head could easily be linked to scalping and warfare, while the face may impart the senses associated with white functions of diplomacy: speech, sight, and the ability to listen. Although this inference is based on direct historical analogy, we make the point to highlight the importance of viewing the duality of the colour symbolism.

Although there is some variation in these colour schemes (e.g. occasionally they may be reversed, or black substituted for white), the red:white pattern is so repetitive that it suggests a communal tradition intertwined with the production of an imagined history. Rather than merely asserting that the head pots simply contributed to the construction of a monumental time, however, we wish to move a step further by dissecting the pots to demonstrate that they constituted

a sophisticated culmination of temporal symbols and practices over many scales simultaneously. To close our discussion, we will then step back and review some of the history of the late Mississippian period in this particular region, to show why these unusual ceramic containers may have occurred when they did.

*Head pots: a chaîne opératoire*

The best way to appreciate the full complexity of the effigy pots is to move away from the idea that they were static containers and to trace their biographies, beginning with their production and following through to their depositional contexts. Various anthropologists have proposed that time comprises simultaneous dimensions of continuity and flux, or structure and process (Herzfeld 1991, 5–16; Hodder 1987; Munn 1992). Lucas (2005, 23) refers to this as a combination of succession and retention that mediates A time and B time. By integrating Ingold's (1993) and Gell's (1992) notions of flow (relations) and stoppages (the forms that things take), respectively, Gosden (2006) has attempted to transfer this duality into the realm of materiality. He suggests that object styles and types are stoppages that have both meaning and temporal implications, yet objects are never purely finished goods and they must be recognized as part of a larger processual flow. One could, we would argue, use the model of a *chaîne opératoire* to further disassemble types (i.e. Mississippian head pots), into a narrative of the flow comprising the biographical continuity in the life of a head pot, which in turn articulates a number of temporal inflection points that reference various forms of experiential, social, and imagined deep time. Although this approach recognizes the cognitive dimensions associated with the steps of a *chaîne opératoire* (e.g. Lemmonier 1986; Sellet 1993), it emphasizes the labour and relations integral to the processes of social production and reproduction (Castro *et al.* 1998).

- The life of a head pot begins with the gathering of clay and the addition of burnt, crushed shell temper. Ethnohistoric accounts describe this process, as well as the manufacture of pots, as a communal activity (Swanton 1946, 549–55). These steps conjoined the temporal praxis of individual bodily performance with communal social activity.
- The shaping of the clay into a human head was a powerful transformation, which invoked memory and/or commemoration. If the head represented a known individual, perhaps a relative fallen in a recent violent encounter, it clearly had a strong emotional and temporal connection. If it signified a mythical character, as some argue, the head implicated a genealogical time where it charted a



**Figure 2.** Mississippian head effigy vessel. The face of this specimen is a buff colour, with red comprising the dark zone behind the face and the top spout. (Photograph © 1997 The Detroit Institute of Arts.)

path to a distant ancestor or hero (see Brown & Dye 2007; Mills 1968; Phillips *et al.* 2003, for discussion on head portrayals).

- The painting of the head requires a return to the earth, where the primary substances used to create red and white were ochre and kaolin or white clay, respectively. Both of these raw materials have strong ritual connotations in eastern North America, dating back millennia (e.g. Brown 1997, 473; Hall 1997, 19, 46). Again, temporality plays out on many levels, as the bodily tempo involved in the extraction of these substances migrated into their transubstantiation into sacred colours.
- It is unclear how the vessels were used on a daily basis. Intact specimens show signs of wear implying that they were handled and used for a period of time. Without knowing their exact uses, we can at least speculate that they may have been used for storage or the drinking of ritual beverages.
- A great number of the head pots were looted from sites in the nineteenth century, so their contexts are not all securely known. However, the cumulative evidence suggests that they are found primarily as funerary objects (Mills 1968). So while we cannot say much about their above-ground biography after they were manufactured, at the conclusion of their life they were consigned to

the world of ritual and the cosmos. One specimen that was recovered by professional archaeologists, however, does urge caution with unexamined correlations between males, conflict, and head pots. A woman from the Campbell site in southeast Missouri was buried alongside a child and an infant, while a cluster of funerary items buried near her head included a head pot (Chapman & Anderson 1955, 64–6). One can only surmise as to whether the vessel represented a missing father or brother, lost to violence, or else evoked even more complex symbolism.

#### *Head pots and temporal convergences*

Conceptualizing head pots as the culmination and continuation of a *chaîne opératoire* suggests that they were objects where numerous conceptions of time — experiential, social, and mythic — converged. A final step toward contextualizing the head pots involves inserting them into their larger milieu over half a millennium ago. The state of affairs in northeast Arkansas commencing in the mid AD 1300s was apparently turbulent.

Suddenly ... large portions of the Central [Mississippi] Valley became uninhabited ... The areas not abandoned experienced significant population increases (and) at about the same time, an extraordinary population nucleation. During the process of chiefdom consolidation a critical point must have been reached that resulted in a severe demographic adjustment (Morse & Morse 1983, 271).

The process of nucleation was accompanied by the widespread construction of fortifications around the growing towns (Morse & Morse 1983, 283). These trends coincide with what appears to be a general rise in inter-group violence during the Mississippian period throughout the Southeast (Anderson 1994, 136–7; Milner 1999), but the degree of aggregation and the pervasive efforts to defend communities were particularly acute in northeast Arkansas and southeast Missouri.

Cobb & Giles (2008) have argued that Mississippian conflict was enmeshed in a host of contradictory values. One of these centred on the embodiment of valour. From one perspective, the Mississippian conception of the perfect warrior is often portrayed through valuable regalia such as copper plates and shell gorgets. While the human figure may reference a mythical hero, we also argue that it represents an ideal state to be attained by males whose success in everyday life was often predicated by success on the battlefield. On a more sombre note, those who were captured or killed were frequently subjected to mutilation, especially decapitation and scalping. Ethnohistoric accounts describe this anti-funeral as a

source of extreme dread to warriors, to whom bodily defilement was thought to disrupt the soul as well as the body (Hudson 1976). It is no accident, we believe, that these opposed beliefs fostered an anxiety that was often represented by offsetting ideal and defiled warriors within the same tableaux, such as individuals depicted with a weapon in one hand and a severed head in another.

It is within this light that we see the head pots: from one perspective they are possibly honorific and they may also allude to cosmological forces, but from another angle they are a reminder of the ill-starred venture into battle. And it is likely no accident that their popularity coincides with the upsurge of nucleated, fortified towns that characterized the late prehistoric era in Arkansas and Missouri. The state of chronic conflict was attested to by chroniclers of the de Soto expedition that entered the region in 1541, where chiefs vied with one another to gain the Spaniards as allies in their attempts to subdue one another (Clayton *et al.* 2003).

Even more, we would suggest the head pots constituted a temporal convergence. They embodied several vectors of time simultaneously through their decorative elements and through their manufacture and use-life: to an individual a severed head potentially represented an existential dread even as it evoked the activities and rites of passage surrounding warfare. During its use-life the pot was a manifestation of many repetitive eddies and flows within society, ranging from the procurement of clays to its final deposition in funeral ceremonies. Overlaying these shorter cycles of lived and symbolic time was the distinctive hemispherical colouring of the overall pot in red and white, placing it in a longer continuum of social balance symbolized by a contrastive tonal structure. It is this final decorative touch, we believe, that embedded all of these activities into a deep and naturalized imagined history — a time that had no real past, present, or future but just was. The opposition of red and white in some respects was a reminder that the pains, joys, and conflict caught up in both the intimate and the social experiences of time, were, after all, part of the received order.

We emphasize, though, that the long-term as mediated through colour was not an inert structure — to make this assumption is to merely reify structure (Hodder 1987, 5). Instead, the production of deep, imagined histories was integrated with personal activities and social processes that comprised shorter cycles of time. In this sense, colour was subject to manipulation. As Borić (2002) suggests, colours and decorative art may represent ways to overcome dangerous and liminal experiences (see also Taçon 1999), and in our case it can be suggested that the manufacture of red and white heads may have sus-

pended anxiety over warfare by inscribing conflict into monumental time.

## Conclusion

The Mississippian head pots of the central Mississippi River Valley constituted a convergence of temporal flows and stoppages. This nexus was comprised of both symbolic representations of genealogical and cosmological time in addition to objectifications of lived time. The stark, chiaroscuro effect of red and white situated the vessels in an imagined history of uneasy balance that often broke out in physical conflicts threatening personal safety and social harmony. The head itself was multi-valent, referencing deep time seated in cosmology, while concurrently evoking the ebb and flow of warfare and the dangers posed to both physical and spiritual well-being. Finally, the physical biographies of head pots were punctuated by a series of social and ritual events, commencing with the gathering of clay and closing with burial interments. As this case study suggests, our attempts to develop theoretical approaches toward the materialization of time must consider how objects enact time as well as reflect time, and how objects situate people in time.

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## Note

1. There are a variety of depictions of heads on pottery over a larger geographic area. Here we refer to a very distinctive globular vessel with a three-dimensional rendering of the human head, largely found in northeast Arkansas and southeast Missouri.

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