

7. An inquiry into “The Copper Artifact Master Database (CAMD)”

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Abstract:

Author and Historian Monette Bebow-Reinhard has been working with copper ancient rarities since 2000, when she started her work with the Oconto County (Wisconsin) Historical Society, home of the most established copper entombment site in the country. She has been incorporating a database of copper ancient rarities all through the country with an end goal to track an exchange system. She is also writing articles about what this database shows, and hopes to put out a series of resources manuals to make the data available and show its use. The Copper Artifact Master Database (CAMD) is a compilation of copper artifacts derived from more than 300 museums and collectors who shared their material with her. Monette gathers the data about their collections—where each piece was found, what the piece looks like, how many of each piece was found in that location, and who initially found it (See the sample at the end). “Donor information is important because it can keep her from recording duplicates, because artifacts change hands all the time,” she says.

Monette has a master’s in history, but started research on the Aztecs, Mayas and Incas as part of her undergrad work in anthropology. Monette retained this interest in trade networks and timelines and sees them very sharply coming into focus with this database. Distinction in the Major was called “Aztec Origins.” Since she is neither a private collector nor an excavator, her emphasis is on being an arbiter between collectors and archaeologists and in offering her compilation to researchers, students, archaeologists and museums—any interested in learning more about these ancient populations in the Americas. Monette addressed a couple of our inquiries concerning her work in copper examination:

Keywords: *Oconto County (Wisconsin), copper entombment, copper tooling, copper culture, copper artifacts, Copper Artifact Master Database, Aztec Origins, database.*

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Me: What is “Copper Culture” and why is it significant for the America?

Monette: *Quite simply, it's the oldest metal tooling industry in the world. It began here in the Great Lakes/Lake Superior region as much as 10,000 years ago. It is likely older than anything in Europe, but as we all know, people migrated over here from Europe as much as 20,000 years ago, when water levels were low and glaciers were high. When all the glaciers receded, water levels rose and pretty much cut off any travel between the continents. These people here then developed independently, probably about 6,000 years ago when water levels were highest migration must have stopped, and the people became all the various Indian tribes that Europeans encountered down in Mexico and South America in the early 1500s, and in the US after that. When the Spanish came up from Mexico looking for the Seven Cities of Gold, they could well have been put on the trail of copper.*

Ancient copper mines have been discovered in the Lake Superior region of Michigan, indicating the work of these early miners. But the copper industry began by using float copper—pieces of copper that the glaciers picked up from the Lake Superior region and dragged and left behind on the land as these ice sheets receded again. Annealing is the process of shaping copper into useable tools and ornaments. Wisconsin, the state where I live, has recorded more copper artifacts found than anywhere else in the world. And I've only uncovered a portion of what's probably out there.

I've been compiling this database since 2011 and it's now up to over 54,000 pieces. I also put out a monthly newsletter, now called “Copper Artifacts of the Americas.” It's free to anyone by email subscription, and relates some of this research, including photos.

Me: Historians and Archaeologists connect copper culture of United States with the Europeans invasion. What is your point of view in this context?

Monette: *I'm not at all sure what this means. The database is only interested in compiling artifact data from pre-contact times, before the Europeans arrived after Columbus. When the Europeans arrived, however, the various tribes of Indians were anxious to trade with them, as they had become used to trade, with copper and everything else at their disposal. Trade in this context was their downfall, you might say. Their copper industry finally ended for good. But in tracing the copper industry pre-contact, we can see they had a number of evolutions of civilization before the Europeans came.*

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Me: You are neither a private collector nor an archaeologist, but you have been working with copper artefacts since 2000. You have been compiling a database of copper artefacts throughout the nation in an effort to track a trade network. Why and how?

Monette: *A loaded question, Saurabh.*

Why? It's because no one else was doing it, and it occurred to me that the pre-contact copper industry in this country was suffering from neglect. I was hoping something like this would jumpstart that research again.

How? It all started when I was curator at the Oconto Archaic Copper museum, a job that didn't pay well but appealed greatly to my need to explore pre-contact trade networks in the country. I realized that the Hamilton Copper Collection in Madison, the largest known in the country at the time of over 2,000 pieces, was being displayed wrong, because they displayed them by what they looked like, rather than by where they were found. You can't trace a trade network unless you know where these artifacts were found. So I got their data and reassembled it into a different spreadsheet, by location. I just built on it from there.

Me: On many occasions, you have expressed your feeling that the first metal industry in this country has been ignored. How can you say that this issue was ignored by the American Archaeologists and Historians?

Monette: *I don't think I've done this "on many occasions." But when I gave tours at the museum I heard a lot of visitors express surprise at the vast complexity of the industry in the Americas, and once I began to really get into it, found a lot of things that many archaeologists and historians weren't expressing such as the idea that the Great Lakes copper toolers had a culture long before anything in Mexico or South America. I learned that South American peoples were the second to begin making copper tools and ornaments and the first to begin to smelt copper. And the Mexicans were actually the last, although their Mayans and Olmecs are considered the forerunners to civilization in the Americas. This is pretty tremendous stuff.*

But in my initial attempts at research, before I start compiling, I couldn't find much modern research to draw from—it was all "old stuff." And I couldn't convince anyone in Madison that the Hamilton collection was displayed wrong. Still haven't convinced them, but I'm working on it.

Me: Please tell us about CAMD and how can it contribute to the researches on Copper culture and ancient copper trade in the United States?

Monette: *The database is a compilation of more than 300 museums and collectors who shared their material with me. I gathered information about their collections - where each piece was found, what the piece looks like - also how many pieces of a certain kind - and who initially found it. Donor information is important because it can keep me from recording duplicates. Artifacts change hands all the time. Sometimes some of this information is missing and I then attempt to fill the gaps. Where I can I add a clear typology to the piece, and I've also found that museums will often use the wrong names for things, because they have volunteers recording their pieces. So I also address developing a common nomenclature, which Wittry did back in 1955 in his typology that I still use as well. For privacy reasons, I don't share donor names or site information. What I do is contact every museum I can to see if they have any copper artifacts accessioned. I've gone to collector shows and talked to collectors, and get them to share their data. I put all this data into the appropriate spreadsheets, by location. If I don't have a description, I ask for a photo. It's best if I can handle it myself to see the artifact's many angles and pound marks. I get these all logged in into separate spreadsheets for each state. In the case of Wisconsin, they have so many that I've had to break it out into four spreadsheets. I also have them by province and by country, in the case of Canada, Mexico, and South America, as well as Central America.*

The value is pretty self-explanatory. Without a database like this, we have no idea of how many artifacts were found in a single location, because collectors from 150 years ago have deposited their collections all over the place. There's no other way to track where anything is or went or ended up than having one single spreadsheet showing where all the different artifacts are accessioned. Otherwise, trying to study this metal industry can be pretty frustrating.

If we want to trace where certain copper artifacts can be found, a database like this gives us a lot more information to use, all in one place. This database will save a lot of people a lot of legwork.

Me: How do you deal with missing information and links?

Monette: *It's sometimes a matter of guesswork. If a museum has one piece by a collector recorded by location, and that same collector has other pieces without the location recorded, it's a simple matter of using logic to say, then all these he found must be from there. Sometimes you'll see? By the location, which means it's a logical guess. It's better than putting it into my "unknown location" spreadsheet, which has over 1,200 pieces. Sometimes it means I go online and do a search, or hit one of the many books I use. If possible, I try to add what age it's considered to be and what cultural group it can be assigned to, such as Hopewell, or Mississippian or Red Ocher, all different manifestations of civilizations over time.*

Me: What are the various challenges that you have been facing while compiling this database?

Monette: *The biggest challenge is getting museums to respond, or to understand that I don't plan to share confidential material. The main reason is that I'm doing this alone. I don't have the backing of any institution. That leads some to not trust me. Then there are many others that think this is such a fantastic idea and they're glad to help. I think as I get this out there, more and more will become cooperative, and start coming to me. But it's extremely time-consuming to be making all the contacts and entering all the data; they haven't starting coming to me yet.*

Me: What is your objective in following curios in North America and South America?

Monette: *I need to see scientists and students of history and others ready to get to this information to answer a wide range of waiting inquiries. I need to see individuals who believe that the local American Indians who lived here were savages come to understand how savvy and socialized they truly were. I need individuals to quit saying that Europeans probably come over and made the copper business much sooner than Columbus, on the grounds that "those individuals weren't able." You might say that was one of the main drivers of my research—hearing people today still relate a theory from the 1800s, that other people came over and built civilizations and created the copper industry and were killed off by the Indians. That is just plain wrong.*

Me: Please let us know, how can copper culture and copper trade network researchers get in touch with you?

Monette: Researchers and scholars can contact me through e-mail. They can also visit my website which happens to be “Home to the original CAMD Copper Database”.

My E-Mail address is: Monette Bebow-Reinhard moberein@yahoo.com and my web-address is: <http://www.grimmsetc.com>

Me: Thank you for your time, Monette. This database is one of its kind and we appreciate this effort.

Monette: *You are welcome Saurabh; it is an honor to get interviewed by the Socrates Journal. I hope your readers enjoy hearing about this research.*

Sample of the Copper Artifact Master Database (CAMD)

Location	Artifact	description/type	#	Source	ID/p hoto
Vilas County	Celt-shaped chisel or adze	Wittry VI-B, Considered Hopewell, 3-5/8"	1	private collector	IMG 0230
Vilas County	float copper; effigy axe	Looks like Wittry VI-C	1	Chicago Field Museum	2796 19
Vilas County	fragment and awl		2	Logan Museum of Anthropology-Beloit	2138 7.07. 001-02
Vilas County	awls or punches	uses such as bead formation, punching holes in clothes, etc.	8	Marathon Co Historical Museum, Wausau	IMG 4309
Vilas County, Lac du Flambeau	spear point		1	Illinois Museum, Springfield	X802 796
Vilas County, Lac du Flambeau	point	Wittry I-A2	1	Wisconsin Historical Society/ Hamilton	1919 .851

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