

DEEP THOUGHTS OF SPOTTED PONY

Our trip to Etowah Mounds raised some questions for me. The park is an active archaeological site, with excavating ongoing. The burial mound has been completely analyzed & put back to its former condition, or as close as they can get. The information that was presented in the media at the park is based on these excavations.

We are told that this is a Mississippian Indian culture that lived here roughly 1000- 1550 AD. No other culture has been found in the area until the Cherokees came in the late 1700's. They stress that the people at Etowah were not Cherokee, as previously believed.

What happened then, to the Etowan culture?

I will start with my definition of culture. The word 'culture' is a noun. A culture represents people, & how they lived. The noun, 'culture,' then is a list of verbs that describe people.

I will use an example of another culture to illustrate my definition of the word 'culture', and to demonstrate what I think happened to the Etowan culture.

The Shewabbawabba culture existed along the Twingle River basin from 1010 AD until roughly 1510 AD. (With apologies to any Shewabbawabbans, I only use your culture as an example.)

The Shewabbawabba culture was characterized by 4 main behaviors. The people:

- 1) made only blue pottery
- 2) wore their hair in topknots
- 3) built all their houses with doors facing southwest
- 4) married only on 7 sacred days during the lunar year.

So we use the one noun, 'culture,' rather than the 4 behaviors (verbs) listed here, because it is shorter. The noun becomes a collection of verbs.

What archaeologists tell us that the Shewabbawabba culture ceased to exist about

500 years ago. However, recent studies have shown that Shewabbawabbans are still living in the area, only they no longer make blue pottery nor do they build houses with southwestern facing doors. They are rather distraught that scientists believe their culture died. As one of the elders said recently, 'we didn't go anywhere, we just stopped making that pottery because it did not sell well.'

Now, are the Shewabbawabbans in the area the same culture as before? Scientists (those who study such things) tell us no. Since they no longer make blue pottery nor southwestern facing houses, they have changed into a distinctly different culture. Recent articles in the archaeological journals have labeled the old Shewabbawabba culture as 'Archaic Shewabbawabban' while the Shewabbawabbans still in the area are part of the 'Modern Shewabbawabba' culture. What keeps the Shewabbawabba cultural name is the fact that the 'Moderns' still wear their hair in topknots & marry on only 7 sacred days during the lunar year.

So now I have to wonder, does all this labeling with nouns tell us anything about the Shewabbawabba people? I think not. If we want to learn about the people, we use verbs, we find out what they do. When we discover what they do, then we understand them.

How do we find out what they do? Obviously - we just ask them.

An anthropologist recently visited the area & did just that. He found the Shewabbawabbans quite friendly & very open about their lives. 'They are similar in many ways with the mainstream culture,' he wrote, 'they eat fast food, watch too much tv, enroll their kids in soccer camps, & drive SUV's. They are still quite proud of their heritage & insist on wearing their hair in topknots, & I was told if I wanted to marry a Shewabbawabba girl, I had to wait til the next sacred lunar day rolled around.'

So what I am concluding from my thought process here is that *a culture is declared dead (no longer existing) when the archaeologists cannot find anything to dig up after 500 years.* When the Shewabbawabbans stopped making that pottery & building their houses that way, archaeologists conclude that their culture died, because there is no more pottery or buildings to be dug up less than 500 years ago.

I conclude that we too often allow other people to make our determinations of culture for us. We can learn about other people for ourselves by communicating with them, or listening to what others say who have communicated with them. Grovionth, a Shewabbawabba elder, said it best. 'All this time, 500 years, they never asked us. What are we, chopped liver?'

I conclude also that labeling a culture 'dead' does not help us discover anything subsequent about the people of that culture. Labeling a culture dead tells us that this is the end of those people who were part of that culture, & that there is no more to learn about them.

I conclude that we need to stop using nouns & start using verbs to describe other people & their culture. Instead of declaring a culture dead, we need to note that the people changed, & how they changed. What do they do differently? Where did they move to, & why? Or did they all die, (as happened at Pompeii) which resulted in the death of their culture? Only by using verbs will we answer these questions. Then we will understand other people, whether they are alive today or lived 1000 years ago.

The science of archaeology (indeed any science) is characterized by the language of archaeologists. The interpretation of their work, & the language they use in that interpretation, is just as important as what they dig out of the ground.

I learned from other sources that Etowah means 'Mother Town' in Muscogean language group, which is spoken by the Creek nation. The Creeks living now in Oklahoma still consider the Etowah area sacred. I suspect that it was ancestral Creeks who lived at Etowah, who did not all move away, they just stopped building mounds & filling them with artifacts to be dug up after 1000 years. It's hard to believe that no one lived in this area after the town of Etowah ceased to exist. Yet that is what we are led to believe when we visit the park. Etowans left, they vanished, & nothing happened there til the Cherokees arrived in the late 1700's.

I told of the Shewabbawabbans to describe what I think happened there at Etowah. I think it most likely that the people stayed in the area, if not right at Etowah, & that their culture changed to the point of being unrecognizable as Etowan. They did not vanish. But we were not given this possibility during our visit to the park.

We left Etowah with good memories & good spirit but with insufficient data. The science involved in excavating the town was presented in a way that emphasized speculation while minimizing facts. It seems that the archaeologists who dug the place up could not wait to tell a story about the people of that place in their own way instead of waiting for the artifacts to tell the story.

Still, Etowah remains a great place to visit. Pick up the spirit of the place when you go. Describe the Etowans in verbs. Let them tell you their story.