

SPIRO MOUNDS

Prior to the arrival of Europeans in what is now Oklahoma, the eastern part of the state was home to a Native American society discussed within a political complex known by archeologists as the Mississippian Period (A.D. 1000-1540). During this time, ancestors to either the modern day Wichita and/or Caddo tribes developed a society with a well-developed chiefdom, defined by a ranked social hierarchy. The high status of the leaders is epitomized by elaborate grave offerings buried with these individuals at the Spiro Mounds site in LeFlore County, Oklahoma.



Craig Mound

Spiro Mounds in eastern Oklahoma is a unique location in terms of not only the variety, but also the special nature of materials recovered from this location. Thousands of artifacts typical of the Southern Cult and representative of religious symbolism are reflected, including specialty items such as ground stone spuds, chipped stone projectile points manufactured from exotic cherts, engraved marine conch shell vessels, copper covered wooden and stone ear spools, copper tablets and other elaborate offerings. Some of the offerings were manufactured from raw materials originating from such distant places as the Great Lakes region, Tennessee valley, and California and Gulf coasts, documenting advanced trade networks in place by this time. Many of these artifacts are inscribed with iconographic symbols emphasizing the special status of the offerings.

The Spiro Mounds site was occupied by the priestly elites and their attendants rather than by the total range of people. Villages spread out along the terraces bordering the Arkansas River bottoms, were where the more common folk resided. These inhabitants not only raised the crops that fed the elites, but supplied labor to construct the mounds.

It was during the later Spiro Phase (A.D. 1350-1450) that this culture reached its height in regards to mound building for the area. Towards the end of this period, Craig Mound experienced a “closure” event after which the site was minimally used. The Spiro culture collapsed due to what many believe was a loss in belief in the leadership, probably brought on by a major drought that had its beginning during this period. Crop failures resulted not only in major changes in use of the site, but overall reduction in population for the area and a move towards hunting Plains bison.

During the 1500 years the site was occupied, no less than eleven mounds were constructed, with the Brown Mound being the largest. Although still somewhat uncertain, this temple mound along with the near by Copple Mound, was probably reserved for special ceremonial functions associated with the Craig Mound where most of the leaders were buried. The remaining mounds mostly mark the locations of charnel houses where the dead remained for an unknown length of time prior to burial. Following removal of the remains, the charnel houses were burned, then “entombed” themselves by construction of low earthen mounds. Only recently it has been determined that certain aspects of the larger mounds are aligned with the solstice and other more distance mounds in northeastern Oklahoma.

Suggested links:

<http://www.okhistory.org/Museums/SpiroMounds.html>

<http://www.ou.edu/cas/archsur/counties/leflore.htm>