

PIECING A CULTURE TOGETHER

Anthropologists at OU's Stovall Museum are working to solve a puzzling mystery, the Case of the Caddo Indians, with the aid of clues found in the tribe's burial grounds

IN LEFLORE COUNTY of eastern Oklahoma lies the site of what was once an archaeological goldmine. Known historically as the Spiro Mound, this great burial ground of the Caddo Indians has been the subject of widespread attention since the early 1930's.

For several years, the mound was tunneled, churned, mined and gutted of everything it had to offer. Many of its burial goods were looted by commercial pot hunters in 1934-35, but the University of Oklahoma, in cooperation with other institutions, followed right on their heels to salvage the remnants—thousands of valuable artifacts of prehistoric significance. The latter excavations were conducted by OU's anthropology department as part of a Works Progress Administration project.

Today, that department, backed by a \$30,000 two-year grant from the National Science Foundation, is culminating its research talents in an attempt to put Spiro Mound's bits and pieces together. Head researcher is Dr. James A. Brown, who recently received his doctor of philosophy degree in anthropology from the University of Chicago. Project director is Dr. Robert E. Bell, OU professor of anthropology and curator of the Stovall Museum.

Dr. Brown's laboratory is filled with a myriad of artifacts—a conglomeration of pottery fragments, arrowheads, engraved conch shells, human effigy pipes, pigments, ceremonial blades, monolithic axes, copper plates and textiles—all set before him in a massive labyrinth. His job is not only to solve this jigsaw puzzle, but to analyze and interpret it as well. And because of the indiscriminate and careless commercial mining of Spiro Mound, the task won't be an easy one.

Many of the pot hunters had little or no awareness of the historical or artistic value of the articles they found, so much of the mound area was gutted before any concrete observations could be made. "The regrettable fact is that the looters took objects that were laid out in an orderly arrangement," Dr. Brown says. "In the OU collection, relationships between

Despite previous tamperings of commercial diggers, this 1937 WPA crew uncovered and salvaged much of Spiro Mound's treasure.



the articles are complex and not very discernible."

Although the famous mound had been badly damaged by hasty commercial diggers, anthropologists still believed that much could be learned from systematic work on the site. So, with the financial assistance of the Oklahoma State Historical Society and the University of Tulsa and private donors such as Frank Phillips, Bartlesville; Clark Field, Tulsa, and Alfred Reed, Grove, OU and WPA men began doing their own digging.

Dr. Brown believes that of all the archaeological sites in Oklahoma, Spiro elicits the most excitement. The story it has to tell, he says, is of a value of great magnitude. And once he has his laboratory home in order, Dr. Brown hopes to write a complete history of the Indians who occupied this ceremonial center from about 900 to 1450 A.D.

"This research is not of just academic interest. The Spiro Mounds are famous for the elaborate materials represented by ceremonial equipment of various kinds. Many of the objects that probably were status symbols . . . have high artistic merit."

In a history of the Spiro Mound, written by Forrest E. Clements, former head of OU's anthropology department, the author speaks of the pottery found in the area:

" . . . Spiro pottery is extremely varied both in vessel shape and decorative motifs. Hardness of the vessels ranges between 2.5 and 4 with a hardness of 3 being typical. In large utilitarian vessels the temper is usually coarse shell but the more finely made types appear to be tempered with bone, grit, crushed sherds or fine shell, grit and bone being the most common . . . The decoration is applied by incising, trailing, engraving, punctating and modeling. Design elements include hachures, chevrons, concentric circles, cross-hatching and scrolls. Common shapes are water bottles either with or without effigy heads, bowls, beakers, amphorae, wide-mouthed ollas and jars. Decorative motifs on the pottery are entirely different from those on the engraved shells or from the repousse designs on copper plates."

Many of the artifacts, among them

effigy pipes, shells and breast ornaments, are decorated with human forms. The variety of clothing and mannerisms of persons depicted on these objects show that at least during a few generations there is a wide diversity in the manner in which the Caddoan tribes lived.

Of eight mounds in the Spiro complex, located in an area of 80 acres near a large bend of the Arkansas River, one has yielded the greatest amount of material. "The mounds," says Dr. Brown, "consisted of four conjoined mound units that were built separately. Under the largest of these were the remains of a very large mortuary from which came the great bulk of well preserved and elaborate artifacts, including reburied human bodies beside and in cedar pole liters."

It's been about 20 years since OU's artifacts have been out of storage, but with some history to go by and rows of objects before him, Dr. Brown feels that he has a "unique opportunity" to rediscover the Caddoan cultural tradition.

"As far as telling the complete story

is concerned, we have several gaps in our knowledge that were caused by the depredations of the commercial looters," he says, adding that he still should be able to arrive at important results. And Dr. Brown has some pretty definite ideas of just what more can be learned from Spiro:

"First, here lies an excellent opportunity to elucidate the position of a ceremonial center with respect to the surrounding settlements. Spiro occupied an important position in the region and we may expect that it exercised an important focal point for social integration of the surrounding population during that period.

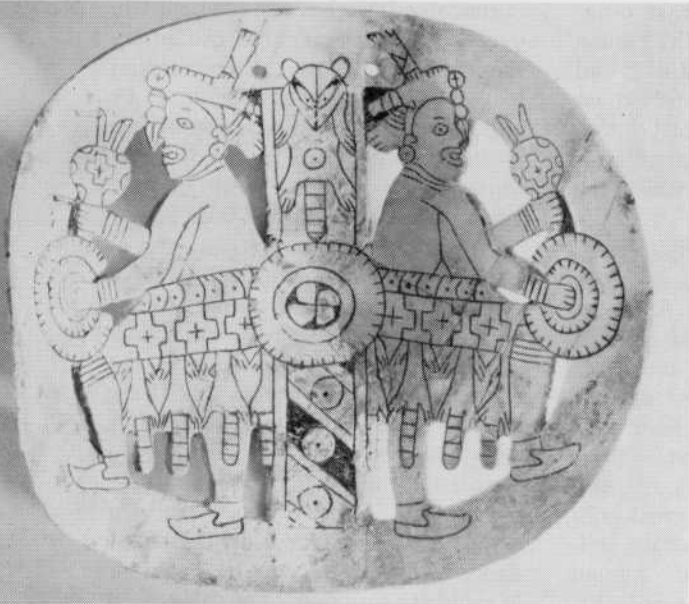
"Second, Spiro is an example of a ceremonial center for which an abundance of material occurs in a number of replicate situations. For this reason we have at our command a body of data from which we can understand the behavior of particular classes of items with each other.

"Third, Spiro provides an important basis for understanding the regional interaction of prehistoric policies in the southeastern United States."

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Anthropologist Dr. James A. Brown daily surveys the thousands of artifacts that share his office at OU's Stovall Museum.



It may have been in fashion for Caddoans to wear gorgets to cover the neck and breast.



This charming fellow is affectionately called "Lucifer" by anthropologists studying him.

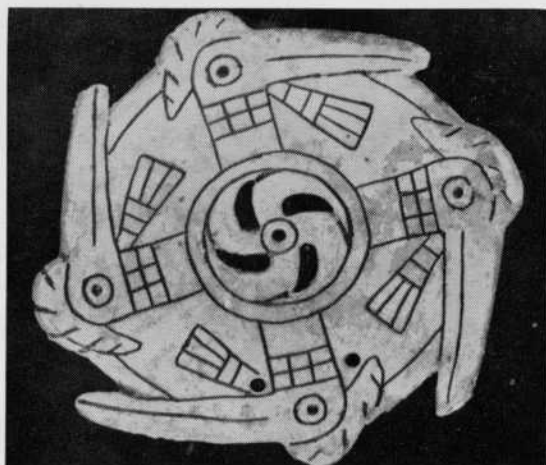
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This human effigy pipe depicts a kneeling man who is probably smoking through a reed stem.



Many Spiro artifacts show the dress of ancient inhabitants, this one smoking an elbow pipe.



Another breast ornament portrays some prehistoric bird known to the Caddo tribe.