

CULTURAL

Iti Fabussa

Ancestors of the Choctaws and the spiritual history of the mounds

It is in human nature to marvel at the great feats achieved by people of the past. The Egyptian pyramids, Stonehenge, and the castles of Europe are household words in the United States, even though they are located on the other side of the globe. By omission, American history classes often tend to make it seem as though the ancient people who lived in the Americas did nothing equivalent to these great achievements. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth.

Before European contact, Native American communities had, as a whole and through thousands of years, made world-first advances in agriculture, nutrition, medicine, ecology, political structure, philosophy, architecture, technology, and the arts. When these innovations were spread around the globe through European contact, they changed the course of world history. Our Choctaw ancestors were a part of all of this.

This month, Iti Fabvssa focuses on one of the achievements of the Choctaw ancestors before European contact, Moundville.

For thousands of years, Choctaw ancestors had lived in the homeland developing societies that grew and changed through the centuries. Around AD 1000, these communities were obtaining their food through a combination of wild and domesticated native plants, hunting, and fishing. However, around AD 1050, they reshaped their diet and their society around corn agriculture. As a result, populations relocated to the broad river valleys around the Choctaw homeland, and reorganized their settlement system to make the best use of fertile soil for corn agriculture.

One of these burgeoning settlements was located on a high terrace along the Black Warrior River, in present-day Tuscaloosa County, Alabama. Today, it is known as Moundville. We do not know for sure what the people who lived in this community called it, but it may have been named “Zubusta” (Elvas 1993:105 [1544]; Hudson 1994:88).

Moundville was the center of a large farming community that stretched for 20 miles along the Black Warrior River (Welch 1991:23). At its height, Moundville was the



Photo Provided

A view of three of the earthmounds at Moundville, surrounding a pond that was carved out when the mounds were created.

second largest settlement north of the Valley of Mexico. It was a multi-ethnic community, and among its inhabitants were the ancestors of today’s Choctaw people and several other closely related modern-day tribes. Construction of the 200-acre settlement began around AD 1050, and a defensive wall was erected around the town. At the center of town was a flat plaza. This was likely the site of spiritual events, a market place, and ballgames. Twenty-nine earthmounds were constructed around the plaza in a symmetrical pattern. Made one basket load of soil at a time, these giant mounds are monumental architecture and spiritually significant symbols of the community. Their arrangement probably served as a physical representation of the different families within the Moundville settlement (Knight 1998). One of these mounds stood as high as a 6-story building. Outside of the earthmounds, houses for 1,000 people were constructed (Steponaitis 1998:39).

Moundville was a seat of secular and spiritual authority for the regional population. Anthropologists believe that the settle-

ment had three different levels of leadership (Welch and Scarry 1995:400). The leaders carried symbols of their power in the form of pieces of artwork that combined high levels of skill, exotic raw materials, and esoteric references. People living in the surrounding communities supplied the leaders with deer meat and other items of food (Welch and Scarry 1995:395).

By AD 1250, Moundville was an established regional center for the arts. Certain areas of the settlement were home to artisans who specialized in particular types of work (Enser 1991:35) such as shell-engraving, copper work, beadwork, wood carving, textiles, basketry, stone work, and hide work. Some of the finest pottery ever produced in North America was made by

artisans living within Moundville’s walls. A few of these artisans came from several hundred miles away, and married into the Moundville community.

Moundville was also a center of trade (Blitz 1993:175). Some of the fine artwork produced at Moundville was exchanged across portions of the South and Midwest. People living at Moundville had access to shell from the Gulf Coast of Florida, copper from the Great Lakes, bison products from the Great Plains, and stone from perhaps as far away as Central America (Hammerstedt and Glascock 2008).

In the 1600s, after roughly 30 generations of people had lived within the town’s walls, Moundville and the adjacent section of the Black Warrior River Valley were abandoned, probably as a result of European contact (Brain and Phillips 1996:354). Today, the legacy of Moundville lives on in the Choctaw people, the Chickasaw, the Alabama, the Coushatta, and perhaps other tribes. Designs created by Moundville artists are still used by tribal artists today. Some of the languages spoken at Moundville are still spoken by tribal communities today. Many of the corn-based food dishes that these communities are known for today were developed at Moundville and other period sites. In a way, Moundville is still a part of our deep identity.

The Moundville Archaeological Park is today recognized as a World Heritage site, managed by the University of Alabama. Each fall the University sponsors the “Native American Heritage Festival” bringing in Native American artists from all over the Southeast. Visitors to the park are welcome year-round. Touring the earth mounds, the plaza, the river, and the new museum can help a Choctaw person connect with a profound and living heritage, one that is unique but equivalent to the heritage built by the ancient peoples of the eastern hemisphere.

Three views of a restored clay bottle made by Moundville artisans (AD 1300 – 1450).

