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Weiss and Custred: Burying the past vs. understanding the past

By Elizabeth Weiss and Glynn Custred

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Angel Mound State Historic site.

Jim Winnerman

By Elizabeth Weiss and Glynn Custred

In March, Indiana University, along with four Native American Organizations — the Quapaw Nation, the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, the Shawnee Tribe and the Eastern Shawnee Tribe — buried, with fanfare, the skeletal remains of 725 individuals, some more than a thousand years old. The burial took place at Angel Mounds on the Ohio River near Evansville, Indiana where the remains were found during the course of archeological excavations begun under the federal government’s Works Progress Administration project in 1939 and continued for decades.

The rationale for the transfer of those remains from a scholarly facility to the site where they were found is the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, a federal statute requiring that any skeletal remains, and associated cultural artifacts, be returned to people who can show lineal descent with the remains and artifacts in question, or that are shown to be culturally affiliated with living individuals or tribes.

Cultural affiliation is defined as “a relationship of shared group identity which can be traced historically or prehistorically between a present tribe or Native Hawaiian organization and an identifiable earlier group,” claims that are supported “by a preponderance of the evidence based upon geographical, kinship, biological, archeological, or other relevant information or expert opinion.” There is, however, no lineal descent between the remains that were reburied at Angel Mounds and the claimant tribes, nor is there cultural affiliation as defined in the law.

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The people who built these mounds, and who lived there from 800 AD to the middle of the 15th century, were part of the Mississippian Culture, a people whose way of life was marked by maize (corn) cultivation and hunting, as well as by compact settlements and a hierarchical-political organization, and by the distinctive mounds they constructed. The language they spoke was probably from the Muskogean linguistic family. It's not known why they disappeared. Some archeologists believe that environmental factors were the cause, perhaps an extended drought that reduced their maize supplies.

By around 1400, the site had been largely abandoned. Those who remained in the area were part of the Late Mississippian Culture known as the Caborn-Welborn phase, a people who lived a different way of life from that of their predecessors. They disappeared in the 17th century perhaps due to smallpox or measles, diseases brought to the continent from Europe, which greatly reduced and disrupted native populations.

The Algonquian-speaking Miami and Shawnee who migrated to the region beginning around 1700 were not lineal descendants of the original inhabitants of the Angel Mounds area, nor was there any cultural affinity between them, except for the fact that they weren't Europeans. The same can be said of the Quapaw nation which spoke a Dhegila Siouan language, a language different from the Algonquian spoken by the Miami and Shawnee and from the Muskogean which was perhaps spoken by the Mound Builders of the region.

The only exception for the Quapaw is that it is believed that their ancestors migrated from the Ohio Valley to the Mississippi, where they were first encountered by Europeans. Therefore, the only possibility of continuity between them and the people who had lived at Angel Mounds is geographical, which is a tenuous line of argument and does not amount to the "preponderance of evidence." If there is archeological or biological evidence of cultural affinity between the remains and the claimant tribes, it should be made public.

Nor were all the skeletal remains found at the site from people who resided there, for that period was marked by violent encounters, as evidenced by scalping, so that some may have been the remains of outsiders on enemy ground. A scavenged skeleton illustrates that treatment of deceased foes may not have included burial. Isotopic analyses, which use bone chemistry based on diet, reveal that some females had not been lifelong maize consumers, and may have been captured outsiders. To assume that all individuals who were buried in the location were native to the site is to misunderstand the past.

By burying skeletal remains, we are deprived of a way to best understand the lives of the people at Angel Mounds. Skeletal data can help reconstruct health, relatedness, social organization, and activity patterns. In 2013, ancient DNA revealed that a pair of skeletons thought to be conjoined twins — since their discovery 72 years earlier — did not even share a mother, thereby highlighting the importance of re-analyzing data to correct misinformation. Using ancient DNA could help determine whether those from the Caborn-Welborn phase did die of smallpox.

This collection reburied at Angel Mounds had so much more to tell us. Unfortunately, the remains have been reburied, and thus newer, more detailed, and more accurate information is out of reach and with it an avenue into a better understanding of the past and of our common human heritage.

Elizabeth Weiss is a professor of anthropology at San José State University and the coauthor (with James W. Springer) of “Repatriation and Erasing the Past.” **Glynn Custred**, who earned his Ph.D. in anthropology from Indiana University, is a professor emeritus of anthropology at California State University, East Bay.