Complicated Stamped Pottery

Circa A.D. 1, American Indians in the Southeast began stamping complex patterns into the surface of pottery, a design style which continued over the next 1500 years. The earliest complicated stamped design style is referred to by archaeologists as Swift Creek Complicated Stamped.

At least a thousand unique Swift Creek designs are known to exist, and at least as many more have likely not yet been identified. By identifying the same design on sherds found at different archaeological sites, we can map the interaction network of the people who made and used this pottery. Originally done using the naked eye, a computer application is currently under development that will match sherd designs with both known designs and with design patterns found on other sherds.

Known as SnowVision after complicated stamped design analysis pioneer Frankie Snow, this application is somewhat similar to fingerprint matching software, but is based on the topographic relief and curvature of the stamped design.

Approximately 70 Swift Creek complicated stamped sherds have been recovered from the Pinson Mounds site in western Tennessee, a large ceremonial center that was part of the extensive Hopewellian interaction network which spanned the Eastern Woodlands period circa A.D.1-600. Swift Creek pottery is found at sites across the lower Southeast (GA, FL, AL). However, it has also been found in limited amounts at locations outside of its traditional heartland, such as at Pinson Mounds, and further north at prominent sites in the Ohio Hopewell heartland. Because Pinson lies outside of the core area of Swift Creek pottery production, these sherds may represent the remains of vessels that were brought from the lower Southeast to Pinson, vessels created at the site, or some combination thereof.

In cooperation with the Tennessee Department of Archaeology, today the SnowVision team is scanning the complicated stamped pottery from Pinson. This data will be uploaded to the SnowVision application, where it will be digitally compared to designs in the database to identify connections to the other archaeological sites. The automation of the design matching process will greatly reduce the difficulty and expense of the travel required to visit the various curation facilities across the Southeast, and will make design matching much quicker and more "visually" rigorous than using the naked eye. We hope to partner with university and curation facilities to set up student-based data collection programs for assemblages with Swift Creek pottery.

Goals & Plans

Continue development and refinement of SnowVision database and application

Involve students in development & use of this new technology for archaeological analysis and research

Expand data collection efforts to the various curation facilities to acquire all Swift Creek assemblages

Collect data for Mississippian period complicated stamped pottery assemblages (although that will have to wait!).

Thanks & Acknowledgments

Daniel Brock (State Programs Archaeologist) and Mike Moore (State Archaeologist and Director) - Tennessee Department of Archaeology

Organizers of Tennessee Archaeology Day 2019!

Bells Bend Outdoor Center & YOU! for coming, and reading this far! Hope to see you next year!