



REGIONAL DESCRIPTION OF COLLECTIONS

Southeastern United States

Etowah

Leah Rosenmeier, *Research and Interpretation Specialist at the Mi'kmawey Debert Cultural Center; former Outreach and Repatriation Coordinator at the Robert S. Peabody Museum of Archaeology*

The Etowah Site is recognized as one of the largest Mississippian sites in the Southeastern United States. It was occupied from 880 AD to at least 1550 AD, if not later. Six earthen mounds, several plazas, a bastioned palisade and an encircling moat define the 52-acre site. Today the site is the Etowah Indian Mounds State Park, and claims the highest yearly attendance of any Georgia State Park.

The Etowah collections at the Robert S. Peabody Museum represent material from the excavations of Warren King Moorehead between 1925 and 1928. Moorehead published the findings of this excavation in the *Etowah Papers*, (Union City, GA: Charley G. Drake, 1979). The Moorehead collection derives from two Mississippian period archaeological cultures: the Wilbanks Phase of the Savannah Period (ca. 1250-ca. 1375 AD), and the Brewster Phase of the Lamar Period (ca. 1450-ca. 1550 AD).



Excavation of Mound C, Etowah c. 1926

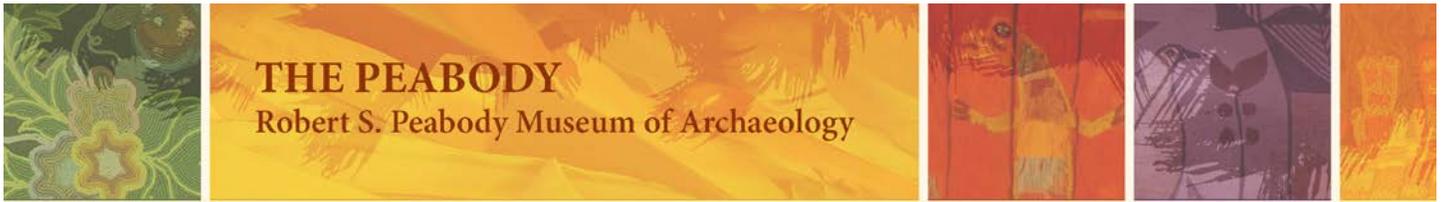


Stone figure from Mound C

During the Wilbanks Phase, Etowah emerged as a core area with extensive regional influence and is considered to be the major Mississippian center in North America during this time. Etowah and the local distribution of smaller sites indicate the structure of a polity with an elite social hierarchy. Mound C served as a burial ground for the most important members of the community. The center plaza was clearly reserved for ceremonial and/or other community utilization during this time.

The Wilbanks occupation exhibits the most intensive and complex use of the site, as well as the most elaborate artifacts. These artifacts are the clearest indication of the community's ability to secure great quantities of exotic (non-local) materials and suggest a high degree of local and regional political influence. The organic material is largely comprised of artifacts made of thick *Busycon* whelk shell, including cups and several types of beads: barrel, flattened ovoid, hourglass, spherical, thick disc, thin disc, and tubular; as well as freshwater pearl and *Olivella* or *Columella* shell beads. Engraved and excised shell gorgets (round pendants

Regional Description of Collections – Southeastern United States



carved from *Busycon*, often with double suspension holes): in birdman, cross in circle, spider, and paired birds (including pileated woodpecker and turkey) motifs. Feathered costume elements are present that Moorehead impregnated with paraffin in an attempt to preserve them. Textile mantle fragments, cane matting, wooden forelock beads and ear ornaments complete the organic inventory.

Metals are cold hammered copper sheets from probable local native sources. Copper artifacts include axes, celts, discs, and repoussé plates depicting birdmen, elongated tubular forms with crosses, opposed birds, human profiles, and wheels. There are also copper-covered shell forelock beads, shell hairpins, shell discs, and an elaborate wooden topknot.

After a period of abandonment, the site was reoccupied during the Brewster Phase (ca. 1450-1550). The population was smaller and the site was used differently. People lived on the plaza and appeared to have little regard for areas previously used for ceremonial purposes. Both archaeologically and ethnohistorically, Etowah appears to be part of "the Cartersville polity" located along the Etowah River, and may have been subject to a large paramount chiefdom centered at the town of Coosa to the north. The ethnohistoric record suggests that Etowah may be the town of Itaba, the administrative center of the Cartersville polity that served the chiefdom located at Coosa. According to de Soto (1540) the paramount chiefdom of Coosa consisted of 5 provinces, all under the control of the town of Coosa. As Etowah declined in importance, it appears that Coosa simultaneously emerged as the central area of influence.



Etowah shell gorgets in collection storage

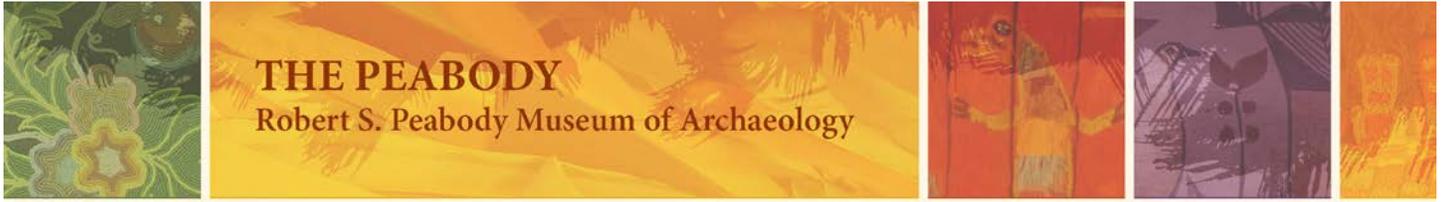
Brewster Phase artifacts from Etowah are fewer and include both *Olivella* and *Columella* shell beads in barrel, flattened ovoid, hourglass, spherical, thick and thin disc shapes; tubular *Busycon* beads, engraved and excised gorgets in Citico rattlesnake styles, and *Columella* discs perforated pendants, and spatulate ear ornaments. The non-organic objects consist of pottery, mica, small sheet copper fragments and iron from a European source, possibly a sword fragment connected with the visit of de Soto to the region.

Importance of the Etowah Collection

Lewis H. Larson, *Former Georgia State Archaeologist and Etowah Site Excavator*

Determining real importance is a risky business; usually illustrated by citing the impossibility of determining the favorite, i.e. the most important, among one's own offspring. We may easily ask; do the archaeological materials comprising the Robert S. Peabody Museum collection from the Etowah site have any importance? After all, prehistorians have known the site for almost 200 years, and, indeed, it has been explored archaeologically for well over 100 years. The ready and simple answer is also easy - yes.

The positive answer would be one that was virtually unanimous among those archaeologists with a research orientation in the Eastern United States. The vast public, those who have no professional involvement with the site, nevertheless have a great interest in Etowah, now managed by the State of Georgia. Thousands visit the site annually. The archaeological collections from the site, held not only by Robert S. Peabody Museum, but also by several other major institutions and agencies in the United States, including the Smithsonian Natural Regional Description of Collections – Southeastern United States



History Museum, are constantly in the process of professional study, in whole or in part. As archaeology asks new questions of the corpus of data from the Etowah site and as new methodologies and archaeological techniques are developed for dealing with the archaeological materials, the value of the Etowah archaeological collections as well as their responsible stewardship, is apparent and critical. This is no less true of the Robert S. Peabody Museum collections than it is of collections from the site held by the Smithsonian Institution.