Burial Ceremonies

Woodland Period

Introduction

Most of us have read about ancient cultures such as the Egyptians. We know that the Egyptians believed that after they died a new life began. When a person died, the Egyptians preserved or mummified the body.

Mummification was a long, complicated and expensive process. Burials became bigger and more elaborate. The pharaohs had magnificently built pyramids and artifacts they left behind.

We think of ancient Egypt as being far, far away and long ago which makes it interesting but perhaps difficult for us to relate to. Did you know that the Adena people, who lived in the Early Woodland Period, practiced interesting burial customs too?

Along the Ohio and Monongahela Rivers in Western Pennsylvania, lived the Adena. The Adena lived in small villages with several families in each village. Archaeologists have excavated several Adena burial mounds right here in Pennsylvania.

The Adena Culture

Early Woodland Period

What Archaeologists Believe

Although Adena burial mounds have been found in western Pennsylvania, most of what we know about the Adena comes from regions to the west of Pennsylvania. The Adena practiced burying their dead in large mounds of earth. Each mound was used to bury people, and as more and more people were buried there, the mound got larger and larger. Several different methods were used to prepare the dead for their burial. Some people were cremated, while others were left exposed to the weather so that their bodies would decompose naturally. Others were buried in stone or log tombs in the center of the burial mound. People from several small Adena villages buried their dead in the same mound.
Archaeologists also found goods such as well-made stone tools, carved stone smoking pipes in the form of animals and people and carved stone jewelry.

The Hopewell Culture

Middle Woodland Period

Adena Descendents Who Lived in the Middle Woodland Era

Hopewell burial mounds have been found in western Pennsylvania, but they are not as common as in Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio. In fact, much of what we know of the Hopewell comes from outside of Pennsylvania. Burial mounds continued to be built by the Hopewell that were even larger than the Adena. The Hopewell placed elaborate and valuable grave goods with their dead. Beautifully carved figurines made of mica and copper, stone tools made of obsidian, and jewelry of pearls, precious stones and even gold and silver were found in Hopewell graves. The materials these valuable objects were made from could only have come from areas outside of western Pennsylvania.

By the end of the Middle Woodland Period, the Hopewell culture declined and the people returned to a simpler way of life, without the large burial mounds and complex ceremonies.

Conclusion

The preceding information describes what archaeologists have discovered. Remember archaeology is a method of studying people by examining their artifacts and sites. From the information you just read about the Adena and Hopewell, develop some hypotheses that might help to answer the following inquiries:

1) Why did the Adena practice such complex burial ceremonies?
2) Who was buried in the stone or log tombs in the center of the burial mound?
3) How do archaeologists know that some people were cremated while other bodies decomposed naturally?
4) Why did the Adena and Hopewell place elaborate grave goods with their dead?
5) Why, at the end of the Middle Woodland Period, did the Hopewell culture decline and its people return to a simpler way of life, without complex burial ceremonies?