

Ancient connection: New evidence points to Shawnee lookout as oldest continuously occupied site

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The discoveries continue to surprise for a team of UC students digging in Shawnee Lookout Park, with a major new mound being located and a rare kiln used to fire pottery excavated in recent weeks, along with even more evidence emerging to support the theory that the site could be the largest continuously occupied hilltop Native American site in the United States.

But perhaps most importantly from this year's work, evidence was also found to bolster the theory that Shawnee Lookout was the largest continuously occupied hilltop settlement established by any Native American group. The dating of recent evidence found argues for cultural continuity at the site, meaning the Hopewell who lived at Shawnee Lookout up to 2,000 years ago are showing direct links to the Shawnee people who were living on the site less than 300 years ago.

Work this summer was conducted by a group of more than 20 students working in the Hamilton County Park District property in southwestern Ohio as part of UC's Ohio Valley Archaeology Field School. Much of the summer was devoted to excavating the remains of structures, dwellings about the size of a modern-day ranch house, says UC Assistant Professor of [Anthropology](#) Ken Tankersley, who oversaw work at the site this summer.

"The site we were working at had been previously looked at back in the

1960s and was considered a small village site," Tankersley says. "This summer we did an extensive survey of the site, and it is so densely vegetated, you can understand how there were features that were missed. We found a number of mounds at other sites around the park. While it had always been thought that there were about 40 archaeological sites in Shawnee Lookout, it now looks like there are many, many more."

The extent to which they may be present further supports the case for Shawnee Lookout being the largest continuously occupied hilltop settlement established by Native Americans. Fort Ancient, about 40 miles to the northeast, is comparable, but it presently lacks evidence of the cultural continuity found at Shawnee Lookout. Work from last summer showed that Shawnee Lookout has evidence of earthworks on its perimeter that stretch up to six kilometers in length with numerous villages and mounds.

One of the goals of the UC team is to continue to fill in the blanks as to the overall physical scope of sites at Shawnee Lookout.

Another is to continue to uncover the answers to questions of how the site was used by different Native American bands and tribes. It had already been established that the Hopewell and Fort Ancient were at the site in ancient times - and historically they were the society given credit for constructing the earthworks at Shawnee Lookout. It was also obviously known that the Shawnee and others were at the site more recently.

Tankersley says an argument for cultural continuity between the two societies was strengthened by this year's work.

"The assumption has always been that the Shawnees were fairly recent arrivals in the area," Tankersley says. "So we had this question of just how long they had been there?"

Evidence is being developed via two methods: physical evidence that is being excavated at Shawnee Lookout and genetic comparisons.

Physical evidence is being uncovered in ancient discarded material in a way that would be expected, with items from Shawnee culture on top and, beneath it, older material from the Hopewell. But some earthworks building materials themselves have been successfully carbon-dated back to about 300 years ago, meaning the Shawnee were engaged in the same kind of earthen construction that had previously been attributed to just the Hopewell.

This, Tankersley believes, begins to build the case that cultural knowledge was handed down from ancient times through modern times by Native Americans living at the site.

As a second path to supporting the theory, DNA examinations are being conducted comparing known Hopewell material to current Shawnee populations. Tankersley has an article coming out in the next edition of the journal "North American Archaeologist" discussing these studies.

"We're using a technique called the direct historical approach, which takes a slice of known historical documentation and then works backwards into pre-history," he says. "The Shawnee are an Algonquin-speaking people, and they were thought to have broken off from the Delaware and Miami prior to European contact. But we're finding cultural continuity archaeologically, indicating that splitting off may not be the case. Shawnee Lookout was an important spot that we're seeing was used across 2,000 years and perhaps beyond that."

The implication is that the Shawnee could be directly descended culturally from the Hopewell. If documentation continues to be successfully added, this would mark a major change in the historical narrative of Native Americans in this region.

Source: University of Cincinnati ([news](#) : [web](#))

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