The Adena Culture

Archaeologists identify the time period of man living in North America from about 1000 B.C. until about 700 A.D. as the Woodland Period. It is during this time that a new culture appeared and made important settlements in eastern and central North America. These people are known to us today by the general term of the Mound Builders. They were so named because they created earthen burial mounds and other earthworks. The Mound Builders lived over a wide area from the Atlantic Ocean, the Midwest and the Ohio River Valley to the Mississippi River Valley. The term "mound builders" refers to several cultures that span a period of about 20 centuries.

The first group to develop this way of life was the Adena culture. The Adena were an Early Woodland group located in central and southern Ohio and adjoining areas of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Indiana. Because they were a mobile society, moving from one seasonal camp to another, archaeologists have found only a few small Adena settlements. But the Adena did leave behind a record of their culture in the burial mounds, sacred circles, and geometric earthworks they built. These mounds ranged in size from 20 to 300 feet in diameter. They had well-organized societies since the construction of the mounds took a great deal of effort. Since the Adena had not yet developed more sophisticated means of construction, the labor of many people must have been required. The large amounts of earth had to be moved by the basket-load. Perhaps for this reason, the mounds were often used more than once. The Adena culture is named for the large Adena Mound on Governor Thomas Worthington's early 19th century estate called Adena in Chillicothe, Ohio.

The Adena were hunters, gatherers, and gardeners. They hunted deer, elk, bear, wild turkey, rabbits, squirrels, and other animals with stone-tipped spears to provide food and clothing. They hunted for birds, fished, and gathered fresh water mussels. They gathered nuts (acorns, hickory nuts, chestnuts, and walnuts), berries, fruits (like pawpaws and fox grapes), wild onions, and wild greens.
The Adena were beginning to live a more settled way of life based on growing plants such as sunflower, squash, gourd, and some weedy plants such as goosefoot and marsh elder. Since the people were more settled, making pottery containers from local clays became practical. These pots were important both for storage and cooking of food.

[Image - An early pot made by the Adena Culture (800 B.C. - A.D. 100)]

A typical Adena house was built in a circular form of about 15 to 45 feet in diameter. The walls were made of paired posts tilted outward, joined to other wood to form a conical-shaped roof. The roof was covered with bark and the walls may have been bark, wickerwork, or some combination of the two.

The Adena also occasionally constructed circular earthen enclosures several hundred feet in diameter. Often these enclosures have an opening or gateway on one side and a ditch following the interior edge of the earthen wall. These sites were probably built and used as public gathering areas, perhaps for ceremonies or other special events.

Although we do not know what the spiritual beliefs of the Adena people were, archaeologists assume that they believed in an afterlife.
because they took so much trouble to bury their dead. The largest mounds were not constructed all at once but over several generations, as each burial was covered with a layer of earth. Archaeologists found fragments of plain-surfaced cylindrical jars with round or flat bases mixed in with the soil that covered the graves. They believe they are the remains of vessels that the Adena probably used during ritual feasts held at the mound. These ceremonies brought people together from widely scattered settlements.

An Adena burial mound

People were buried in the mounds in shallow pits. Some were cremated. Men and women seem to have been buried with equal ceremony. Some individuals were placed in log tombs before being buried. People were often buried with special possessions like jewelry, stone smoking pipes, gorgets (a type of jewelry worn around the neck) carved from slate, or fragments of minerals like galena and barite. Sometimes they were buried with beautifully decorated pottery.
This carved pipe was found in the Adena mound in Chillicothe. It shows an Adena man wearing typical clothing and jewelry.

Grave Creek Mound in West Virginia is probably the most famous of the Adena burial mounds. It is certainly one of the most impressive. Not only is it the largest Adena mound, but it is the largest conical type of any of the mound builder structures. In 1838, road engineers measured the height of the mound at 69 feet and the diameter at the base as 295 feet. Originally, a moat of about 40 feet in width and five feet in depth with one causeway encircled the mound. Construction of the mound took place in successive stages from about 250-150 B.C., as suggested by the multiple burials at different levels within the structure. The building of the mound and moat must have been a huge undertaking, since the total effort required the movement of over 60,000 tons of earth.

The Adena took part in a long-distance trading network. We know this because many of the items found in their burial mounds were made from materials that are not found where the mounds were
located. For example, there are gorgets, rings, and bracelets made from copper found in the Lake Superior region; necklaces made from shell traded from the Gulf Coast; and mica from the Appalachian Mountains of Tennessee and North Carolina cut into crescents and worn as headdress ornaments.

Rarely the Adena buried hand-sized, rectangular tablets of clay or soft stone in the mound layers. These tablets are carved (or rarely etched) with designs that look like raptorial birds (hawks are a kind of raptorial bird) or human figures with bird features (tails, legs, wings, heads). We do not know what the designs mean, but we can make educated guesses. Archaeologists think they probably were important Adena religious symbols. Perhaps for the Adena people, as with other traditional farming societies, raptorial birds symbolized death and rebirth. By eating the flesh of the dead, these birds carried the spirit to a new life. As to how the tablets were used, the archaeologists’ best guess is that they were used to print designs on some kind of material, perhaps leather.

By about 500 B.C., the Adena culture began to slowly give way to a more sophisticated culture, the Hopewell. Like the tablets they buried, much about Adena culture is a mystery. However we can admire the beauty of the Adena pottery and ornaments and we can appreciate their technological skill in making stone tools and building burial mounds and earthworks.
Adapted from:
http://www.state.ky.us/agencies/khc/lesson%20plan_2_files/adena.pdf
http://www.oplin.lib.oh.us/point/people/erwdpeop.html
http://www.adena.com/adena/ad/ad01.htm

Standards Connections: Grade 6
Social Studies: Strand 1 Concept 2 PO 4
Reading: Strand 1 Concept 4, Strand 3 Concept 1