

There Is No Cherokee Syllabary at Red Bird River Shelter (15CY52): Reply to Tankersley and Weeks

Jan F. Simek, Beau Duke Carroll, Julie Reed, Alan Cressler, Tom Belt, Wayne Adams,
and Mary White

Despite new arguments by Tankersley and Weeks that we misinterpreted petroglyph engravings and ignored site formation processes at the Red Bird River Shelter in Kentucky (15CY52), we remain convinced that there is no evidence for Cherokee Syllabary writing at the site. The petroglyphs are clearly not symbols present in any version of the Cherokee Syllabary. There is no empirical evidence for any site formation processes that have altered the shelter or its petroglyphs in the ways they suggest. There is still no evidence that Sequoyah ever spent any time in the vicinity of Red Bird River Shelter.

Keywords: Cherokee Syllabary, Kentucky, Red Bird River Shelter

Pesar de los nuevos argumentos de Tankersley y Weeks de que malinterpretamos los grabados de petroglifos e ignoramos los procesos de formación del sitio en el Red Bird River Shelter en Kentucky (15CY52), seguimos convencidos de que no hay evidencia de la escritura del Syllabario Cherokee en el sitio. Los petroglifos claramente no son símbolos presentes en ninguna versión del Syllabario Cherokee. No hay evidencia empírica de ningún proceso de formación del sitio que haya alterado el refugio o sus petroglifos en las formas que sugieren. Todavía no hay evidencia de que Sequoyah haya pasado algún tiempo cerca de Red Bird River Shelter.

Palabras clave: Syllabario Cherokee, Kentucky, Red Bird River Shelter

Reconstructing the origins of the Cherokee Syllabary, invented by Sequoyah as a means for his people to express themselves in writing in the mid-nineteenth century (Perdue 1994), has over the past decade taken on an archaeological component with the discovery of syllabary inscriptions in several caves in Alabama and Georgia where the system was invented. Most of these cave inscriptions were made as or just after Sequoyah left the

“Chickamauga Settlements” in the South for “Old Settler” Cherokee communities in Arkansas to avoid white encroachment (Hoig 1995; McLoughlin 1995; Perdue and Green 2007). Very little is known historically about the process of invention, so the addition of archaeological evidence is important. In 2011, Weeks and Tankersley published an essay on the Red Bird River Shelter in Kentucky (15CY52), where, they argued, Sequoyah himself engraved prototypic

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inscriptions very early in the period of syllabary development. In a recent essay we dispute that argument based on our own observations at the site and on the historical evidence (Simek et al. 2019), making our case there and in our 2019 study of Manitou Cave (Carroll et al. 2019) as to why accurate historical narratives about Sequoyah were and are important to his Cherokee descendants. Tankersley and Weeks have responded to our essay in this issue of *American Antiquity*.

We find the response by Tankersley and Weeks to our essay on Red Bird River Shelter (Simek et al. 2019) unconvincing. This is because they abandon their original arguments and invoke entirely new issues and explanations never cited in their original study to try to sustain their argument that the Cherokee innovator Sequoyah himself wrote his syllabary on the walls of a sandstone rockshelter in Kentucky. Given our limited space, we focus here on two aspects of our original arguments. The first of these concerns historical documentation for Sequoyah visiting his white family in Kentucky in the early nineteenth century, originally cited by Tankersley and Weeks to place Sequoyah in the area with opportunity to engrave prototypic syllabary characters in Red Bird Shelter, which we categorically refuted. Thankfully, they have abandoned this unrealistic story that lacks any historical warrant. They replace it, however, by positing for Sequoyah matrilineal connections in the area based on oral genealogies of specific southern Kentucky families who cite Cherokee ancestry in their family histories, making the argument *ad hominem* instead of documentary. Family traditions comprising stories of Cherokee descent are common in Appalachia but notoriously difficult to verify (Adams 2016; Sturm 2011). Moreover, this specific case itself is hotly debated; arguments about Red Bird genealogies have arisen in the blogosphere, and the reader can search “Chief Red Bird Descendants” to get a sense of the contentious nature of these discussions. This uncertainty is why we explicitly avoid stories about Red Bird or about the cultural identity of postremoval residents of Kentucky (Simek et al. 2019:306). Both of these topics are problematic and clouded in historical uncertainty.

Tankersley and Weeks also raise concerns over our interpretations of the petroglyphic inscriptions found in the shelter. In our original essay, we argue that all of the engraved writings on the walls of the Red Bird River Shelter are either precontact period linear rock art or historical Euro-American graffiti comprising initials and signatures. Our conclusion is that there is no Cherokee Syllabary on the shelter walls. The response does not change this finding. We present new photographs of the key inscriptions in our Supplemental Figure 1, and we invite readers to compare our illustrations with Tankersley and Weeks’s 2020 Supplemental Table 5 and with their original Figures 6 and 7 (Weeks and Tankersley 2011:985).

In their response, Tankersley and Weeks argue that we misinterpret specific marks on the walls. They focus particularly on two lines of writing shown in our supplemental illustration. They argue that there is no clear *N* at the beginning of the lower line. While we see remnants of a letter inside the hollowed-out hole, we admit that this is very hard to discern. But even so, the next letter, which they do not consider, is clearly a dotted lowercase *i*, with *no horizontal base*, a symbol that does not exist in any version of the syllabary (Bender 2002:4; Carroll et al. 2019:522; Cushman 2011:43). They argue that the next letter resembles an *a*, but our figure shows that it is clearly a lowercase *c* without serifs or embellishment. Neither a lowercase *a* nor a small *c* without embellishments exists in any version of the syllabary. They also argue (1) that the *o* in “Ronter” is “more complex” than we show, but we show it with a serif as it exists; (2) that the *e* in “Ronter” is a θ , though it clearly does not close at the right center; and (3) that the *u* on the lower line is a *v*, although the base is clearly curved, not pointed, and so on. In fact, they argue for different interpretations in their comment and supplemental material. In the syllabary, precision in execution was central to Sequoyah’s design, with serifs, bases, and embellishments used to distinguish the different symbols (Cushman 2011:71–88). Critically, the lack of embellishments on most letters here (the *i*, *c*, and *k*) indicates that these are not Sequoyan elements. And if these letters are not from the syllabary, there are no Sequoyan

inscriptions on the walls of Red Bird River Shelter.

Another new aspect of Tankersley and Weeks's reply to our essay has to do with newly proposed "site formation processes" that we neglected to recognize. They argue that

more than a century ago . . . the Cherokee inscriptions inside 15CY52 were at eye level. Since that time, deforestation and erosion have reduced the rockshelter to a mere crawlway, and the rockshelter walls have been covered in graffiti.

There is absolutely no empirical evidence for such significant geomorphological alteration over the past 200 years. The slope below the shelter is clear of the rock talus that would be present if the outcrop had eroded over the past two centuries (Supplemental Figure 2). The grooves that constitute precontact petroglyphs at the site are still intact, including some on an exterior wall near the entrance. There are several dates inside the shelter that are more than a century old. Finally, the photographs they use in their own analyses, all taken by Dr. Fred Coy in the 1960s, show little or no change between 60-year-old photographs (Coy 1997:35–37) and our own (Simek et al. 2019:308)s, especially in the area they interpret as related to the syllabary. Indeed, Tankersley and Weeks point to inscriptions on the outside wall of the shelter, marks that still exist today, attributing them to Red Bird himself. Thus, the wall cannot have eroded. After 30 years of work on the Cumberland Plateau, we are quite familiar with how the landscape evolves; the Red Bird River Shelter presents today as it did during the mid-nineteenth century.

Finally, we respond to Tankersley and Weeks's statements at the end of their reply concerning collaboration and the involvement of descendant communities. We believe that our research team exemplifies such an approach, involving the full collaboration and engagement of indigenous scholars from the outset. Three of us are enrolled members of federally recognized Cherokee descendant communities: Carroll (Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians), Reed (Cherokee Nation), and Belt (United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians). These colleagues are scholars of Cherokee archaeology, history, and

language (respectively), so they provide both academic and cultural perspectives on these matters. This is the kind of collaborative descendant involvement advocated by the scholars cited by Tankersley and Weeks (Echo-Hawk 2000; Whitley 2002).

Data Availability Statement. No original data were presented in this article.

Supplemental Materials. For supplementary material accompanying this essay, visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/aaq.2020.5>.

Supplemental Figure 1. Two petroglyphic lines from Red Bird River Shelter purported to be Cherokee Syllabary writing as photographed by Cressler in December 2019. Compare this photograph with Coy's 60-year-old photograph (shown as Figure 6 in Weeks and Tankersley 2011:985). There is no evident change between the two images.

Supplemental Figure 2. View facing east from the top of Red Bird River Shelter down a 61.25% slope to the Red Bird River below. The river flows northeast (left) in this view.

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