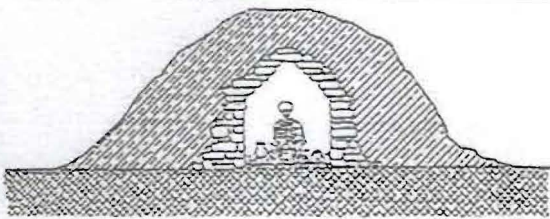


Forgotten Cherokee Migrations

by Donald N. Yates

	
McCulloch's digital copy of photocopy of Seth Eastman drawing of Grave Creek Stone from Henry R. Schoolcraft Indian Tribes of the United States, 1850, by way of Barnhart (1986). The original stone measured 1.875 inches wide and 1.5 inches high. Its whereabouts today are unknown.	Drawing of burial in Adena Culture. The elite individual is placed in stone-and-timber constructed tomb in a seated position surrounded by riches. The Grave Creek Stone was recovered in 1838 from the dismantled fascia stones of the archway leading to the principal tomb in the mound, according to the best contemporary eyewitness accounts.

The origins and migrations of the Cherokee have long been debated, and there are some widely conflicting views. Some say they came from the east, some from the northeast, some from the west, and some from a flying island. Leaving aside the theory of a mother ship from another star system, we can firmly reject all these directions of origin and assert they came from the northwest.

According to a little known, but impeccable work of scholarship by the Smithsonian archeologist Cyrus Thomas published in 1890, it is a fact "now nearly forgotten" that the Cherokee migrated to their present-day homeland in East Tennessee and Western Carolina from the upper Ohio Valley "in the latter part of the thirteenth century." His book is *The Cherokees in Pre-Columbian Times* (New York: Hodges, 1890). I stumbled upon it recently in a gargantuan compilation on DVD titled *The Native American Indian Collection*. I got my disc from England after spotting it on Etsy.

According to the publisher, "'Rare-book-collections' was created in 2014 and our aim is to provide the world access to collections of specialist rare, antique and out-of-print books, manuscripts and documents as well as vintage images, in modern formats, allowing them to be read or viewed anytime, anywhere at as low a cost as possible."

Also on offer are DVDs titled *Vikings and Norse Mythology* (293 books), *Scottish History and Genealogy* (500 books) and *Fairy Tales, Folklore & Mythology* (400 books), all reasonable priced around ten dollars a disc.

Among the 178 rare books on the Native American Indian disc are: *American Indian Fairy Tales* (1907); *An Historical and Geographical Memoir of the North-American Continent, Its Nations and Tribes*, by James Bentley Gordon (Dublin, 1820); *Constitution and Laws of the Cherokee*

Nation (1875); *Handbook of Indians of Canada* (Ottawa, 1913); *Literature of the Cherokees*, by George E. Foster (Ithaca, 1889); *New Voyages to North-America*, by Baron Lahontan (London, 1735); and *Truth of a Hopi*, by Edmund Nequatewa (1936). This is by no means a comprehensive or systematic or curated selection. It's a grab bag of the hard-to-find, ranging from the absurd to the august.

Certainly, Cyrus Thomas (1825-1910) must be classed among the august. He was one of the founders of American archeology and physical anthropology (originally called ethnology) at the Smithsonian. He had the added advantage of having been born in Kingsport, Tennessee, the Cherokee heartland. It is hard to understand why his findings about their migrations are not better known. In his own day the migrations were accounted "now nearly forgotten." Today, more than a hundred years later, it is safe to say they *are* forgotten. Even the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma is ignorant of its roots in pre-Columbian times. There is nothing about a migration from the northwest in handbooks or standard accounts.

Not only were Thomas' facts and argumentation beyond reproach but his sources were excellent. An important one was the fellow Tennessean John Haywood (1762-1826), who published [*The Natural and Aboriginal History of Tennessee: Up to the First Settlements Therein by the White People, in the Year 1768*](#) in 1823. On the basis of interviews with Cherokee informants around 1800, Haywood reported, and Thomas reiterated:

"The Cherokees had an oration in which was contained the history of their migrations, which was lengthy." This related "that they came from the upper part of the Ohio, where they erected the mounds on Grave Creek, and that they removed hither [East Tennessee] from the country where Monticello is situated." This tradition of their migrations was, it seems, preserved and handed down by their official orators, who repeated it annually in public at the national festival of the green-corn dance (p. 7).

The Grave Creek mounds claimed by historical Cherokee witnesses as their own are located in Moundsville, West Virginia on the Ohio River (now part of the Wheeling metropolitan area). The principal mound has an unusual conical shape and was once 69 feet high. It is the largest of the Adena Culture burial mounds, believed to have been constructed between 250 and 150 BCE.

The Adena or early Moundbuilder culture began perhaps around 1700 BCE and continued until 100 CE, being followed by the Hopewell, Fort Ancient and Mississippian periods. The name allegedly comes from a Hebrew word "given to places for the delightfulness of their situation." Significantly, the Grave Creek complex and wider Kanawha River Valley region had the highest number and greatest concentration of burial mounds in North America, according to a recent book, [*Woodland Mounds in West Virginia*](#) by Darla Spencer (Charleston, S.C.: History Press, 2019).

James Adair identified the Kanawha or Conoy Indians with Phoenicians or Canaanites according to the etymology of the name. Constantine Rafinesque surveyed many of these mounds, noting

that their typically round shape suggested North African origins. In 1838 local amateur diggers probed burials in the Grave Creek Mound and unwittingly discovered what has become known as the Grave Creek Stone. Although generally dismissed today as a fraud, on very slight grounds, this inscribed stone was photographed and a good cast made of it before it was lost. In 1843, Henry Rowe Schoolcraft recognized its importance and thought its characters were Celtiberian. Barry Fell thought it was similar to many ancient Iberian inscriptions instanced in both Europe and North America, and read it as Phoenician from the first millennium BCE. He translated its writing as: *The mound raised on high for Tasach this tile the Queen caused to be made.*¹

If we pursue this thread, it is notable that this ancient settlement, no matter what its tribe or ethnicity might have been, had a queen. The society was probably, then, a matriarchal one, as, to some extent, the Cherokee, Hopi and Iroquois are today. Such scholars as Heide Goettner-Abendroth and Barbara Mann have convincingly demonstrated the ancient matriarchal basis of American Indian societies.²

Cyrus Thomas himself studied the Grave Creek Mound firsthand in 1880. The upper grave, he said, contained "a single skeleton, decorated with a profusion of shell beads, copper bracelets, and plates of mica." In his report [*Burial Mounds of the Northern Sections of the U.S.*](#) (2022, originally published 1887), Thomas emphasized that these burial mounds were Cherokee. Most of them in the Kanawha region were interments of single prominent individuals accompanied by rich grave goods (including iron and copper objects). In this sense they were not dissimilar to the kurgan chieftain burials of Indo-Europeans.

Later, in 1890, Thomas put it all together in his book *The Cherokees in Pre-Columbian Times*. After that, he was almost completely ignored.

¹ Barry Fell, *America B.C.: Ancient Settlers in the New World* (New York: Demeter Press, 1977), pp. 20-23. A recent review of the Grave Creek Stone's controversial standing is J. Huston McCulloch, [The Grave Creek Stone: A New Drawing](#) (website from around 2008 accessed Feb. 22, 2022). For the opposite view, see Bradley T. Lepper, "[Great Find in West Virginia Nothing More Than a Fraud](#)," *The Columbus Dispatch*, Nov. 11, 2008.

² See most recently, Heide Goettner-Abendroth, *Matriarchale Gesellschaft der Gegenwart*, vol. II: *Amerika, Indien, Afrika* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2022).

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