

Toward a New Story of the Mound Builders

Famously, no one can agree about Indo-European prehistory, because there is no convergence of archeological, linguistic, cultural and genetic evidence. Sometimes, two of the four pathways converge, and anthropologists talk about the Yamnaya people or Kurgan culture being seminal to something called Proto-Indo-European or fulfilling the Shangri la of an Indo-European homeland, but *never* have all four criteria come together. The result is a radical divide between people in India and Europe about world history, amidst other confusions.

The same scholarly dispute and disagreement can be observed on the subject of eastern North American mounds. Barbara Alice Mann wrote a recent study that should have settled the matter (*Native Americans, Archaeologists, and the Mounds*, Peter Lang, 1999, 2010), but although it covers the poor science and racist conclusions of the 19th and 20th centuries, it jumps to its own conclusions about Iroquois, Cherokee and Lenape Indians being heirs to mound building culture and “thus” Moundbuilders, which none were, historically and archeologically speaking. It is fine to demolish the theories of past authors, but you’d better have an all-conquering new thesis of your own to substitute.

That’s the trouble with most writings about mounds. Although mound building was recognized by foreign observers and scientists early on as one of the distinguishing characteristics of indigenous American culture, in over two hundred years no consensus has emerged about who exactly built them, and when, and how, and what their meaning was.

Typical of this quandary is the seemingly important book, *Ohio Archaeology: An Illustrated Chronicle of Ohio’s Ancient American Indian Cultures*, edited by Bradley T. Lepper (Wilmington, Ohio: Orange Frazer, 2005). Its authors are timorous of the truth, afraid to say anything official or conclusive—which is what most audiences want to know from such experts. Of the glory period for mound building, the Middle Woodland, or Hopewell Period, we learn:

This is the archaeologist’s dilemma. We can stand amid the tombs of the Hopewell people. We can touch objects of breath-taking beauty shaped by Hopewellian hands. We can walk through the remains of monumental architecture of staggering proportions and unprecedented geometrical sophistication wrought by the exertions of their minds and bodies. But the richness of meaning behind this ritual panoply must be forever beyond our grasp. This is, of course, as true for our understanding of Paleoindian, Archaic, and Adena ceremonialism, but the frustration is more acutely felt for the Hopewell culture because, more so than in any previous period, their ritual expressions dominate the archaeological record (p. 113).

The panel of experts consistently skirts basic issues and admits collective ignorance. How is this better than the 19th century narrative of giants, Vikings, Hebrews, Egyptians, Celts, white wizards and survivors of Atlantis? One cannot define something by what it is not, unless you are a metaphysician instead of a scientist. At least the old arguments of Josiah Priest (1833), Caleb Atwater (1820), Ephraim George Squier and Edwin Hamilton Davis (1847) had variety, ingenuity

and first-hand observation to recommend them. A visit to the ancient wonder of the world called the Newark Earthworks, with its perfect circle covering 20 acres and octagon measuring 550 feet on each side, now sunk in a golf course, is likely to make us wonder in a different way today, even with a guidebook.

Maybe it's time to make a fresh start and reject both the Ancients and the Moderns in this Battle of the Books. Whoever they were, the builders of the mounds were just humans, with common needs, wants, desires and behaviors like everyone else. If we were to aim for a passable knowledge of the subject, it would include the following considerations:

- Who was responsible for burials and who got buried or who got neglected and passed over? Were families, the clan or the whole community involved?
- What was the cult of the dead like?
- Were beliefs and customs intended to keep the dead close and perpetuate their memory or distance the living from the dead and protect the living from vengeful and damaging actions of the dead?
- How was the corpse prepared (washing of the body, anointment, clothing and adornment)?
- How was the corpse displayed publicly before burial?
- Where was the grave?
- What goods or symbolic objects were buried with the individual?
- Was there visitation or tending of the grave site?
- When was cremation, bone picking, reburial or separation of the head or heart from the body practiced?
- What was the origin of these burial customs and beliefs?

Without making senseless generalizations and giving insensitive answers, we can productively address many of these questions. What everyone wants to know, of course, is what those left behind thought and felt about death—their religion. What kind of immaterial or spiritual culture did Ohio Indians have? This is an area of Cognitive Archaeology, one involving imagination and creativity. We do not have to throw our hands up and despair. Look what Marija Gimbutas did with a combination of archeology, mythology, folklore, linguistics, comparative religion and art to bring Old Europe's matriarchy alive.¹ We can at least begin.

We must start by pointing out that if all Indians came from Siberia and East Asia they did not bring an Asiatic way of death with them. There are no artificial mounds in Siberia or China (or at least not many). In the state of Ohio, on the contrary, there are thousands of mounds large and small, burial mounds as well as those made for other purposes. *The Archaeological Atlas of Ohio*, by William C. Mills, published in 1914, shows how mounds and earthworks were thickly clustered along creeks, streambeds and rivers, more in the south than the north.²

Although we like to pretend that mound building started with the so-called Adena Period and continued with the Hopewell and Mississippian, there was never a time when the Americas

lacked large ceremonial mounds as far back as we glance. The Natchez Indians were in the midst of constructing one in the eighteenth century, when they were warred upon to extinction by the French. Scandinavian voyagers found age-old unoccupied mound sites at the mouth of the Savannah River before they passed up the waterway and founded the first "Euchee" settlements. Today, there are notable ancient mounds at the mouth of the Amazon River, which Heide Goettner-Abendroth draws attention to.

James A. Neely of the University of Texas announced in 2014 that a survey of the Tehuacán Valley in Puebla discovered an ancient effigy mound in the form of a scorpion. It measured 207 feet long and 36 feet wide.³ Tehuacán has pyramidal temples and artificially shaped mountains whose remote age no one knows.

Although burial mounds, earthen effigies and 'geoglyphs' are worldwide phenomena, we have to conclude that they were especially popular in the Americas, the land of the Earth Mother Goddess. They had functions largely connected with matriarchal societies. In our book *Cherokee DNA Studies*, we suggested it was not unreasonable to think that ceremonial mounds and matriarchal culture, as well as the diversity of mitochondrial DNA types in eastern North America, can be largely traced to the Sea Peoples and their mixed origins in Old Europe, the Aegean and Atlantic-facing lands like Ireland and Spain. At the same time, American mounds are *not* typical steppes pastoral kurgans honoring a single elite male and containing an accumulation of individual weapons, burial goods and riches.

If we try to understand American burial mounds in terms of the conflicting strategies of "keep the dead close" and "distance the dead from the living." It is obvious that the dead were laid to rest near communities, in necropolises and bone houses, and that, in general, native peoples did not fear the "living dead." Many times, the relatives were buried in the floor of domiciles, so the living could continue to be near clan members and visit with them spiritually in dreams and visions. It was always the hope that a relative who died would be reborn as a child in the same clan. In contrast, Old World cemeteries are often placed outside town, tending of burial sites is often restricted to one day of the week (Sundays), and today in most European countries, cemetery space is only temporary. A grave is resold after a number of years.

Apparently, the clan mothers were in charge of funeral rites and burial practices. It has even been argued that boneyards and what appear to be massacres are not the consequences of battles to extinction and brutal invasions but the result of reburials by the clans, a common practice in matriarchal societies.

The survival of roadways, geometrical groups and sight-lines shows that the mounds were religious or ceremonial sites honored by more than one group. Evidently, there were pilgrimages made. A paucity of walls and fortifications suggests societies of peace, doubtlessly matriarchal ones.

In early Neolithic Anatolian villages, only women were considered important enough to be given special burial and remembrance by the community. Men's corpses were disposed of in

peremptory fashion. The male was not the source of life or sacred. This is probably the reason why the bodies of warriors were simply "dumped" in a ravine or abandoned to the ravages of birds and beasts, according to some observers in colonial times in the Americas. Henry Timberlake, an adventurer among the Cherokees in the middle 1700s, reported, "They seldom bury their dead but throw them into the river," an observation the modern editors of his memoirs are at pains to dismiss.⁴

It is not known how many of the skeletons in Ohio valley burials were male and how many were female, nor how children were buried, statistically. In fact, the great majority of bones recovered or still in museums have never been analyzed, measured, inventoried or catalogued. Barbara Mann writes:

Pre-NAGPRA [Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990], only 30% of the bones held in institutions had ever been "studied." As of 1995, of the 20,947 skeletons inventoried as taken from the lower Mississippi Valley, archaeologists had not even bothered to determine the sex of 64%, while in Missouri, 83.6% of the catalogued skeletons had never been studied in any way. These statistics are common place across the United States, with the complete failure to follow through once bones are unearthed putting the lie to the claim that pure science spurs the digging.⁵

Many contemporary Indians take the position, as Russell Means used to say in his lectures, "The ancient ones have already been mourned." For many, it seems that there are more important issues in Indian country today than repatriation.

Native Americans traditionally had no "heroic" burials. We know of no grandiose grave sites or monuments to male leaders such the Mausoleum of Augustus in Rome or the marble tomb of Abraham Lincoln in Oak Ridge Cemetery in Springfield, Illinois with its obelisk, monumental bronze head and four flights of balustraded stairs. Typically, native burials are anonymous and egalitarian with few grave goods and no conspicuous markers beyond the mound itself, which often grew generationally like a layer cake. Among the Shawnee, the survivors place only a pinch of tobacco in the grave, according to C. C. Trowbridge, and once the rites are over, "they seldom visit the graves of deceased persons."⁶

As a rule, native funerals were rather plain, collective affairs, with celebratory feasts, giveaways of goods and rather brief mourning periods. Sometimes the body was dusted with vermillion or wrapped in a white shroud. Rarely did mummification take place. Such customs emphasized the eternal cycles of Earth. Death was part of life. The symbolism of shells placed in the grave meant something similar— tokens of the Mother Goddess, who cherishes and protects all, transforms and rebirths.

The meaning of "singing someone to the other side" can be illustrated with the rite performed by the Tihanama Indians of the Southeast, who were known as a Big Medicine (Tihe) tribe, and who were often asked to conduct funerals for other tribes, especially in and around present-day Nashville, with its numerous mounds, which boasted the large sites of [Mound Bottom](#) and

the Pack Site, together known as the Great Mound Group, both now forbidden to visitors and excavators, and which eight different nations called The City of the Dead.⁷



View of [Mound Bottom](#) site on the Harpeth River outside Nashville from bluff. No one can enter the property without an archeologist, and there have been no publications about tests or excavations. One can see a platform mound in the background. Wikipedia.

To Sing Someone to the Other Side

Was apo ta sha
Was apo ta sha
Was apo ta sha-ah
Was apo ta sha

Blanket (him, her) with spirit
Blanket (him, her) with spirit
Blanket (him, her) with spirit
Blanket (him, her) with spirit

Shaidi ha monn shaida
Shaidi ha monn shaida
Shaidi ha monn shaida

Raise (him, her) to the highest heaven
Raise (him, her) to the highest heaven
Raise (him, her) to the highest heaven

Chi-su iieya shalo.

May (he, she) need no thing anymore, forever.

Chi-su iieha shalo.

The song has a simple, dirge-like melody and is sung to the accompaniment not of a drum or rattle but ordinary wooden sticks such as you would pick up from the ground beaten together rhythmically. The spirit of the dead goes away from the music to the spirit land until the mourners can no longer be heard. The song can continue for several hours, until it is felt that the spirit has reached his or her destination. The last verse is pronounced without much intonation and said only once, at the end.

The native idea of death was diametrically opposed to modern-day "western" notions. Matriarchal societies were comfortable with a person's death just as they felt a solace and surety living in the embrace of the Mother Goddess. Death was not something to be greatly feared. It was just a transition or doorway.

¹ Joan Marler, ed., *From the Realm of the Ancestors: An Anthology in Honor of Marija Gimbutas* (Manchester, Conn.: Knowledge, Ideas & Trends, 1997).

² See Bradley T. Lepper, *Ohio Archaeology: An Illustrated Chronicle of Ohio's Ancient American Indian Cultures* (Wilmington, Ohio: Orange Frazer, 2005), p. 93.

³ James Neely, "A Prehistoric Effigy Mound in South-Central Mexico??" SAA Current Research 176, http://www.saa.org/CurrentResearch/pdf/saa_cro_176_A_Prehistoric_Effigy_Moun.pdf. 10.13140/ResearchGate.2.1.2622.8647.

⁴ Duane H. King, *The Memoirs of Lt. Henry Timberlake: The Story of a Soldier, Adventurer, and Emissary to the Cherokees, 1756-1765* (Cherokee: Museum of the Cherokee Indian P, 2007), p. 35.

⁵ Barbara Alice Mann, *Native Americans, Archaeologists, and the Mounds* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 268.

⁶ Vernon Kinietz and Erminie W. Voegelin, *Shawnee Traditions: C. C. Trowbridge's Account* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1939), p. 25.

⁷ See Donald N. Panther-Yates, *The Eighth Arrow: Wisdom and Storytelling from Tennessee's Tihanama People* (Longmont, Colo.: Panther's Lodge, 2018). *Echo the Heart: The Tihanama Language, Word-List, English Glossary and Specimens* (Phoenix: Panther's Lodge, 2012), pp. 32-33.

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