

Thomas (C)

With compliments of  
Cyrus Thomas



Reprint from "The American Antiquarian," March, 1885.

## WHO WERE THE MOUND BUILDERS?

### SECOND PAPER.\*

In my previous article, I answered the question contained in the above title by saying that the Mound Builders were Indians. But that there may be no misunderstanding, I will define my position with a little more precision. Excluding such remains as are due to Europeans and are post-Columbian, I hold that *all* the ancient artificial works found in the Mississippi valley and Gulf States are to be attributed to the Indians found in this country at the time of its discovery and their ancestors. By this limitation of the term "Indian," I exclude the Toltecs, Aztecs and other civilized people of Mexico and Central America.

I presume it may be taken for granted that the following points, which necessarily arise in the discussion, are now generally conceded.

*First*, That we have no historical or other evidence, unless it be derived from the antiquities themselves, that any other race than the Indians occupied the region under consideration previous to discovery, at the close of the fifteenth century.

*Second*, That the Mound Builders did not belong to one great nation, but to several distinct tribes or peoples, differing as widely in their ethnic relations as the Indian tribes found inhabiting the country.

*Third*, That the Indians of this section, when first encountered by the whites, were, to some extent, a sedentary people,

---

\*The first article of the series is in the March number, 1884.

presented by  
Dr. Robt. Fletcher.

having fixed villages and depending largely for subsistence upon the products of the soil.<sup>1</sup>

*Fourth,* That the argument in support of the great antiquity of these works, drawn from the assumed fact that they are always found on the older or upper river terraces, has been abandoned, since it has been ascertained that the rule does not hold good even in a majority of cases. I may also add in this connection that, as it has been ascertained that the rings of growth in trees do not furnish a sure indication of age—one with eight hundred rings in the latitude of Ohio being more likely under than over four hundred years old—this test of antiquity must also be abandoned.<sup>2</sup>

*Fifth,* That the historical evidence that some of the southern tribes were in the habit of building mounds is conclusive.

As this country was inhabited at the time of its discovery by Indians, and we have no knowledge of any other people having occupied it previous thereto, every fact which indicates similarity between the Mound Builders and Indians, in arts, customs, religion and mode of life, is an argument in support of the theory that the Indians were the authors of these works. And the greater the number of striking resemblances, the greater the probability that the theory is correct, so long as we find nothing absolutely irreconcilable with it.

As a complete comparison would require more space than can be given to the subject in a single article, or even a series of articles, I must content myself with reference to such as appear most striking, and to somewhat general statements.

#### THE CUSTOM OF REMOVING THE FLESH FROM THE DEAD BEFORE DEPOSITING THEM IN THEIR LAST RESTING PLACES.

This custom appears to have been followed quite generally, both by the Indians and Mound Builders.

That it was followed, to a considerable extent, by the Mound Builders of various sections, is proven by the following acts:

The confused masses of human bones frequently found in mounds, show, by their relation to each other, that they must have been gathered together after the flesh had been removed, as this condition could not possibly have been assumed after burial in their natural state. Instances of this kind are so numerous and well known that it is scarcely necessary to present any evidence in support of the statement.

<sup>1</sup>Prof. Carr appears to have overlooked the mention by Lallemond—*Jesuit Relations* for 1640, p. 35—of twenty-nine tribes living south of the lakes, as sedentary and cultivators of the soil.

<sup>2</sup>The only true and satisfactory test of the theory is to cut down trees whose ages are known, and count the rings. The evidence so far obtained in this way is overwhelmingly against the theory.

The well known instance referred to by Jefferson in his "Notes on Virginia," is one in point. "The appearance," he tells us, "certainly indicates that it [the barrow] has derived both origin and growth from the customary collections of bones and deposition of them together."

Notices of similar deposits have been observed as follows: In Wisconsin, by Mr. Armstrong;<sup>1</sup> in Florida, by James Bell<sup>2</sup> and Mr. Walker;<sup>3</sup> in Cass County, Ill., by Mr. Snyder;<sup>4</sup> in Georgia, by C. C. Jones;<sup>5</sup> etc. Similar deposits have also been found by the assistants of the Bureau of Ethnology in Wisconsin, Illinois, Northern Missouri, North Carolina and Arkansas.

Another proof of this custom was observed by Mr. Middleton and Col. Norris, in Wisconsin, Northeastern Missouri and Illinois. In numerous mounds the skeletons were found packed closely, side by side, immediately beneath a layer of hard mortar-like substance. The fact that this mortar had completely filled the interstices and, in many cases, the skulls also, showed that it had been placed over them while in a plastic state, and as it must soon have hardened and assumed the condition in which it was found, it is evident the skeletons had been buried after the flesh was removed.

As another evidence we may mention the fact, that the bones of adult individuals are sometimes found in stone graves (in mounds) which are so small that the body of a full grown person could not, by any possible means, be pressed into them. Instances of this kind have occurred in Tennessee, Missouri and Southern Illinois.

From personal examination, I conclude that most of the folded skeletons found in mounds were buried after the flesh had been removed, as the folding, to the extent noticed, could not possibly have been done with the flesh on, and the positions, in most cases, were such that they could not have been assumed in consequence of the decay of the flesh and settlement of the mound.

The partial calcining of the bones in vaults and under layers of clay, where the evidence shows that the fire was applied to the outside of the vault or above the clay layer, can be accounted for only on the supposition that the flesh had been removed before burial.

Other proofs that this custom prevailed among the Mound Builders, in various sections of the country, might be adduced, but this is unnecessary, as it will doubtless be admitted.

That it was the custom of a number of Indian tribes, when first encountered by the whites, and even down to a comparatively modern date, to remove the flesh before final burial, by

<sup>1</sup> Smithsonian Rept., 1879, p. 337.

<sup>2</sup> Smithsonian Rept., 1881, p. 636.

<sup>3</sup> Smithsonian Rept., 1879, p. 398.

<sup>4</sup> Smithsonian Rept., 1881, p. 573.

<sup>5</sup> Antiq. So. Indians, p. 193.

suspending on scaffolds, depositing in charnel houses or otherwise, is well known to all students of Indian habits and customs.

Heckwelder says, "The Nanticokes had the singular custom of removing the bones of the deceased from the old burial place, to a place of deposit in the country they now dwell in."<sup>1</sup>

The account of the communal burial among the Hurons, by Brebœuf, is well known.<sup>2</sup> The same custom is alluded to by Lafitau.<sup>3</sup> Bartram observed it among the Choctaws.<sup>4</sup> It is also mentioned by Bossu,<sup>5</sup> by Adair,<sup>6</sup> by Barnard Romans,<sup>7</sup> and others.

#### BURIAL BENEATH OR IN DWELLINGS.

The evidence brought to light by the agents of the Bureau of Ethnology, of a custom among the Mound Builders of Arkansas and Mississippi, of burying in or under their dwellings, has been given, in part, in an article published in the Magazine of American History.<sup>8</sup> That such was also the custom of the southern Indian tribes is a well attested historical fact. Bartram affirms it to have been in vogue among the Muscogulgees or Creeks,<sup>9</sup> and Barnard Romans says it was also practiced by the Chickasaws.<sup>10</sup> C. C. Jones says that the Indians of Georgia "often interred beneath the floor of the cabin, and then burnt the hut of the deceased over his head,"<sup>11</sup> which furnishes a complete explanation of the fact observed by the Bureau explorers mentioned in the article before alluded to.

#### BURIAL IN A SITTING OR SQUATTING POSTURE.

It was a very common practice among the Mound Builders to bury some of their dead in a sitting or squatting posture. The examples of this kind are too numerous and too well known to justify me in burdening my pages with the proof. I may add that the yet unpublished reports of the Bureau, and other explorers, show that this custom prevailed, to a certain extent, in Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, North Carolina, Missouri, Ohio and West Virginia. Instances have also been observed elsewhere. That the same custom was followed by several of the Indian tribes is attested by the following authorities: La Hontan,<sup>12</sup> Bossu,<sup>13</sup> Lawson,<sup>14</sup> Bartram,<sup>15</sup> Adair,<sup>16</sup> etc.

#### THE USE OF FIRE IN THE BURIAL CEREMONIES.

Another respect in which the burial customs of the Mound Builders corresponded with those of the Indians, was the use of fire in the funeral ceremonies. The evidences of this cus-

<sup>1</sup> The Indian Tribes of North America, p. 75. <sup>2</sup> Jesuit Relations for 1636. <sup>3</sup> Mœurs des Sauvages, Vol. II, 420-435. <sup>4</sup> Travels, p. 516. <sup>5</sup> Travels through Louisiana, p. 298. <sup>6</sup> Hist. Am. Indians, p. 183. <sup>7</sup> Nat. Hist. Florida, p. 90. <sup>8</sup> February, 1884. <sup>9</sup> Travels, p. 505. <sup>10</sup> Natural Hist. Florida, p. 71. <sup>11</sup> Antiq. So. Indians, p. 203. Georgia and Florida, Jones' Antiq. So. Indians, pp. 183-5. <sup>12</sup> La Hontan. <sup>13</sup> Travels, I, p. 251. <sup>14</sup> Hist. Carolina, p. 182. <sup>15</sup> Travels, p. 515. <sup>16</sup> Hist. Amer. Ind., p. 182.

tom are so common in mounds as to lead to the supposition that the Mound Builders were in the habit of offering human sacrifices to their deities. Although charred and even almost wholly consumed human bones are often found, showing that bodies or skeletons are sometimes burned, it does not necessarily follow that they were offered as sacrifices. Moreover, judging from all the data in our possession, I think the weight of evidence is decidedly against such conclusion. But the discussion of this question is not involved in the present argument, hence I omit it.

Among the Indians, fire appears to have been connected with the mortuary ceremonies in several ways. One use was to burn the flesh and softer portions of the body, when it was removed from the bones.<sup>1</sup> Brebœuf also mentions its use in connection with the communal burial of the Hurons.<sup>2</sup> According to M. B. Kent,<sup>3</sup> it was the ancient custom of the Sacs and Foxes to burn a portion of the food of the burial feast, to furnish subsistence for the spirit on its journey.

Picket says<sup>4</sup> the Choctaws were in the habit of killing and cutting up their prisoners of war, after which the parts were burned. He adds further, in reference to their burial ceremonies,<sup>5</sup> "From all we have heard and read of the Choctaws, we are satisfied that it was their custom to take from the bone house the skeletons, with which they repaired, in funeral procession, to the suburbs of the town, where they placed them on the ground in one heap, together with the property of the dead, such as pots, bows, arrows, ornaments, curious shaped stones for dressing deerskins, and a variety of other things. Over this heap they first threw charcoal and ashes, probably to preserve the bones, and the next operation was to cover all with earth. This left a mound several feet high." This furnishes a complete explanation of the fact that uncharred human bones are frequently found in southern mounds, imbedded in charcoal and ashes.

Cremation was practiced to some extent among the tribes of the Pacific slope, and is supposed by some to have been practiced, to a limited extent, by the Indians of the Mississippi Valley and Gulf States, and also to have been a common custom among the Mound Builders.<sup>6</sup> If we accept this opinion as correct, it furnishes an additional argument in favor of the view here advanced, still I am inclined to doubt its correctness as applied to either the Mound Builders or Indians, but will not stop to give my reasons for this opinion at this time.

Several other points might be mentioned in which the burial

<sup>1</sup> Barnard Romans, *Nat. Hist. Florida*, p. 90. <sup>2</sup> *Jesuit Relations for 1636*, p. 135.

<sup>3</sup> Yarrow's *Mortuary Customs N. A. Ind.*, 1st Am. Rep. Bur. Ethn., p. 95.

<sup>4</sup> *Hist. Alabama*, 3d Edn., I, p. 140. <sup>5</sup> I, p. 142.

<sup>6</sup> Dorman, *Origin of Primitive Superstitions*, p. 171. Wilson, *Prehistoric Man*, II, p. 211.

customs of the Indians and Mound Builders resembled each other, but we will have occasion to allude to most of these in another connection.

#### SIMILARITY OF THEIR STONE IMPLEMENTS AND ORNAMENTS.

In addition to the special points of resemblance between the works of the two peoples, of which a few only have been mentioned, we are warranted in asserting that in all respects, so far as we can trace them correctly, there are to be found strong resemblances between the habits, customs and arts of the Mound Builders and the Indians, previous to change by contact with Europeans. Both made use of stone implements, and so precisely similar are the articles of this class made by the one people, to those made by the other, that it is impossible to distinguish one class from the other. So true is this, that our best and most experienced archæologists make no attempt to separate them, except where the conditions under which they are found furnish evidence to guide them. We find even Dr. Rau, whose long and careful study of articles of this class, both of Europe and America, would certainly enable him, if any one, to decide in this case, thus frankly stating his opinions: "In North America, chipped, as well as ground, stone implements are abundant; yet they occur promiscuously, and thus far cannot be referred to certain epochs in the development of the aborigines of the country."<sup>1</sup>

The European classification into *Paleolithic* and *Neolithic* is wholly out of place and confusing, when applied to the stone articles of America, and the term "stone age" has no chronological signification here.

Instead of burdening these pages with proofs of these statements, by reference to particular finds and authorities, I call attention to the work of Dr. C. C. Abbott, on the handiwork in stone, bone and clay, of the native races of the Northern Atlantic seaboard of America, entitled "Primitive Industry." As the area embraced in this work, as remarked by the author, "does not include any territory known to have been permanently occupied by the so-called Mound Builders," the articles found here must be ascribed to the Indians, unless, as suggested by the author, some of a more primitive type, found in the Trenton gravel, are to be attributed to a preceding and ruder people. Examining those of the first class, which are ascribed to the Indians, and to which much the larger proportion of the work is devoted, we observe almost every type of stone articles found in the mounds and mound area.

Not only the rudely chipped scrapers, hoes, celts, knives, spear and arrow heads, but also the polished or ground celts, axes, hammers, chisels and gouges. Here we also find drills,

<sup>1</sup> Smithsonian Arch. Col., p. 7.

awls and perforators; slick-stones and dressers; mortars, pestles, and pitted stones; pipes of various forms and finish; discoidal stones and net sinkers; butterfly-stones and other supposed ceremonial objects; masks or face figures and bird-shaped stones; gorgets, totems, pendants, trinkets, etc. Nor does the resemblance stop with types, but is carried down to specific forms and finish, leaving absolutely no possible line of demarkation between them and the similar articles attributed to the Mound Builders. So persistently true is this, that had we stone articles alone to judge by, it is probable we would be forced to the conclusion, as held by some writers, that the former inhabitants of that portion of the United States east of the Rocky Mountains pertained to one nation, unless, possibly, the prevalence of certain types in particular sections should afford some data for tribal districting.

This strong similarity of the stone articles of the Atlantic coast to those of the mound area was noticed as early as 1820, by Caleb Atwater, who knowing that the former were Indian manufactures, attributed the latter also to the same people, although he held that the mounds were the work of the ancestors of the civilized nations of Mexico and Central America.<sup>1</sup>

#### MOUND AND INDIAN POTTERIES.

The pottery of the Mound Builders has often been referred to as a proof of a higher culture status, and of an advance in art beyond that reached by the Indians. I am inclined to believe that some writers have been led to this conclusion by an examination of the figures and drawings, without a personal inspection of the articles. That all mound pottery is comparatively rude and primitive in type, manufacture and material, must be admitted. It is true that specimens are frequently found which indicate considerable skill and advance in art, as compared with that of other barbarous people, but there is nothing to remind us of the better ware of Peru, Mexico and Central America; and so far as my examination extends, I have not seen a single piece that is equal in the character of the ware to some of the old Pueblo pottery. The finest quality of mound ware I have seen is a broken specimen, [evidently aboriginal], pertaining to an intrusive burial, in a Wisconsin mound, and, strange to say, the ornamentation, which is rather unusual, is almost exactly like that on some pottery found in mounds of Early County, Georgia.

The vase with a bird figure, found by Squier and Davis, in an Ohio mound, is presented in most works on American archaeology as an evidence of the advanced stage of ceramic art among the Mound Builders, but Dr. Rau, who examined the collection of these authors, says, "Having seen the best speci-

<sup>1</sup> American Antiquarian Soc., Vol. I, p. 3.

mens of mound pottery obtained during the survey of Messrs. Squier and Davis, I do not hesitate to assert that the clay vessels fabricated at the Cahokia Creek were in every respect equal to those exhumed from the mounds of the Mississippi valley, and Dr. Davis himself, who examined my specimens from the first named locality, expressed the same opinion."<sup>1</sup> The Cahokia pottery which he found along the creek of that name, (Madison County, Ill.), he ascribes to Indians, and believes it to be of comparatively modern origin.

Most of the mound pottery, as the reader is probably aware, is mixed with pulverized shells, which is also true of most Indian pottery.<sup>2</sup> Du Pratz says, "The Natchez Indians make pots of an extraordinary size, cruses with a medium sized opening, jars, bottles with long necks, holding two pints, and pots or cruses for holding bear's oil;"<sup>3</sup> also, that they colored them a beautiful red by using ochre, which becomes red after burning.

As is well known, the bottle shaped vase with a long neck, is the typical form of clay vessels found in the mounds of Arkansas and southeastern Missouri, and is also common in the mounds and stone graves of Middle Tennessee. Those colored or ornamented with red are also often found in the mounds of the former sections. It is also worthy of notice in this connection that the two localities—near St. Genevieve, Missouri, and near Shawneetown, Illinois—where so many fragments of large clay vessels used in making salt have been found, were occupied for a considerable length of time by the Shawnee Indians. As will hereafter be shown, there are reasons for believing this pottery was made by the Shawnees. I will only add here, that by the treaty of Ft. Wayne, (June 17, 1803), the United States agreed, in consideration of the cession by the Indians of the "Great Salt Springs, on the Saline Creek, near the mouth of the Wabash," to deliver to the tribes who were parties to it, "one hundred and fifty bushels of salt annually." From this I infer that the Indians were in the habit of procuring salt at this locality.

The statement so often made, that the mound pottery, especially that of Ohio, so far excels anything made by the Indians, is a mistake, and is not justified by the facts. We find Wilson, carried away with this supposed superiority of the Ohio mound pottery, going so far in his comparisons as to ascribe the ornamented ware found in the mounds of Mississippi to the "red Indian," yet asserting in the same paragraph that it "suggests no analogy to the finer ware of the Ohio

<sup>1</sup> Smithsonian Rep. 1866, p. 349.

<sup>2</sup> Dumont, Mem. Hist. La., II, p. 271, 1753; Adair, Hist. Am. Indians, p. 424; Loskiel, Gesch. der Miss., p. 70, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Hist. La., p. 179



mounds."<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Nadaillac affirms that the pottery of Missouri, that found in the southeastern part of the State, "is superior to that of Ohio."<sup>2</sup> So far as I can ascertain, the supposed superiority of the Ohio mound pottery, maintained by so many writers, is based wholly on the description of *two vessels* by Squier and Davis.

BOTH CULTIVATED MAIZE AND USED IT AS FOOD.

A resemblance between the customs of the Mound Builders and Indians is to be found in the fact that both cultivated and relied, to a certain extent, upon maize or Indian corn for subsistence. That this was true of the Indians when first encountered by Europeans, has been shown by Prof. Lucien Carr, in the work referred to in our previous article, and will doubtless be admitted by all. That the Mound Builders must have relied, to a large extent, upon agricultural products is conceded, and that maize was their chief food plant is generally admitted; but this is not left to conjecture, as we have proof of it from the mounds and ancient works. Not only do we find the prints of cobs on many clay vessels, but lumps of clay which have been pressed around the ear of corn, and then burned, have recently been found by the agents of the Bureau of Ethnology in some of the Arkansas mounds. From these, we judge the variety to have been what is known in the south as "Gourd seed corn." Charred ears, cobs and grains have been found in mounds and in pits or caches, which appear to be the work of the so-called "Veritable Mound Builders."

We may also mention in this connection another fact which, though negative in character, appears to form an argument in behalf of the view we are attempting to maintain. Although *metates* are and, from time immemorial, have been in common use among the Central Americans, Mexicans and Pueblo Indians, not one has been found in connection with the ancient works east of the plains, and so far as I can learn, only two or three have been found in this entire area. These were dug or plowed up in Missouri, not far from the Missouri River.

The Mound Builders used stone mortars for grinding paint and for other purposes, but few, if any, of those found appear to have been adapted to grinding maize, at any rate they bear no resemblance to the *metate*. It is, therefore, more than probable that they made use of the wooden hominy mortar, just as the Indians were accustomed to do.

I am fully aware that some of the customs alluded to are common to barbarous or uncivilized nations, and that it is probable any other people in the same stage of civilization, had they occupied the region under consideration, would have

<sup>1</sup> Preh. Man, II, p. 23, Edu. 18.

<sup>2</sup> L'Amerique, Prehistorique, p. 171.

adopted similar customs, but the fact that the Indians are the only aborigines known to have inhabited this region must be constantly kept in mind. Hence, as heretofore stated, every resemblance in customs, habits, arts, etc., is an argument in favor of the theory advanced. But, what is more conclusive, the particular types of these customs indicated, as will be apparent to the close observer, tend more and more to exclude from consideration the Mexican and Central American nations.

CYRUS THOMAS.



