

ARCHAEOLOGY

# Maya-Like Relics Have Been Found in Oklahoma Mounds

## Archaeologists Puzzle Over Shells, Flints, Pipes That Show Far-Flung Trade Among Ancient Indians

See Front Cover

**D**ID THE Mayas, most civilized Indians this continent ever knew, have missionaries or traders or other traveling envoys who carried their culture to the "barbarians" of what is now the United States?

Or did the Indians of our great central valley region independently evolve culture patterns strongly suggestive of Southern Mexican cultures?

These questions are raised anew by astonishing discoveries made in excavating Indian mounds and village sites in Oklahoma. Weapons, utensils and ornaments found in the ruins and with the skeletons of long-buried chiefs suggest that here a culture resembling that of the famous Hopewell mounds in Ohio met with and was influenced by Maya culture patterns working up from the south.

Scientists are going to have a nice time working over this newest of American archaeological puzzles. The digging work and the preliminary examinations have just been finished. Detailed labor is to follow.

The digs were carried out as a joint enterprise of the Works Progress Administration, the University of Oklahoma, and the University of Tulsa, under the direction of Dr. Forrest E. Clem-

ents. The universities furnished the scientific brains and WPA provided the necessary pick-and-shovel brawn.

Scientific exploration of the ancient dwelling and burial sites came just in the nick of time, too. Commercial pot-hunters, seeking specimens to sell, had ripped into some of the most interesting of the mounds, and their vandalism had already ruined priceless records of America's prehistoric past. They were interested only in what they could market, and what they could not sell they thoughtlessly destroyed.

What information was left, however, has now been put into permanent record by the archaeologists, and the specimens are in public museums, where the people at large can see and admire, and where scholars can read as best they are able the story of the past.

One thing will doubtless surprise many who think of Indians, especially Western Indians, as always dwellers in skin tents or tipis, ready at any time to fold them up and steal away, like so many Occidental Arabs. These long-gone Oklahoma aborigines lived not in tents but in houses—really solidly constructed dwellings consisting of rows of posts set firmly in the ground, with roof-poles slanting up to center posts near the middle of the houses, and with clay hearths for the common fires.



**LIKE MEXICAN ART**

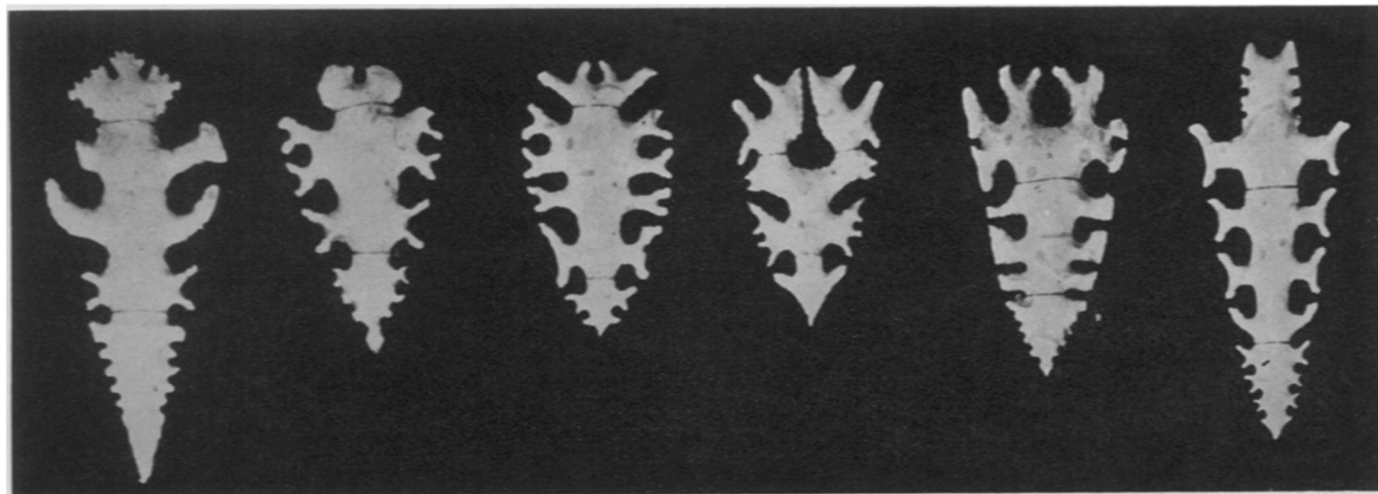
*The hand pictures engraved on this shell gorget, or throat ornament, from the Spiro Mound are strikingly Maya-like.*

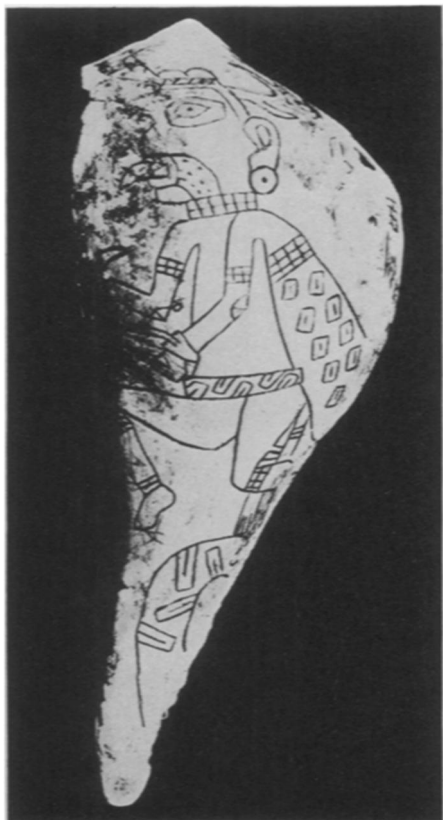
These houses or lodges, the excavations show, were large—from 20 to 35 feet square. Usually the outline was rectangular, but some were circular. It is probable that they were communal dwellings, occupied by several families. Dug into the earth floor were pits, where corn and other supplies were cached.

But it was in the dwellings of the dead, under the monumental mounds, that the diggers found the richest records of the lives of these vanished Indians. There is no paradox about this. For the Indian, the next world was simply a continuation of this one, so his sorrowing relatives placed with him in

### "ECCENTRIC FLINTS"

*These were found by hundreds in a cache, their tips all pointed in the same direction. They seem to have been votive offerings, for no possible utilitarian purpose can be imagined for them.*





#### FROM THE GULF OF MEXICO

*This conch shell which the ancient Oklahoma Indian artists engraved with the figure of a dancing priest had traveled far.*

the tomb the best equipment they were able to provide, for his future hunting and household needs.

The biggest mound included in the Oklahoma project was one on the Arkansas bottoms in Le Flore County. It is known as the Spiro Mound, or more pretentiously, as the Great Temple Mound of Oklahoma. It is really a compound structure, consisting of four connected mounds. In it the excavators found about 2,000 skeletons, and they estimate that several hundred more had been thrown away in fragments by pot-hunters who had previously partially vandalized the site.

This Spiro mound was not only the biggest, but it also yielded relics showing the most advanced civilization, and the most evidences for possible contact with the Maya culture.

The list of characteristic objects reads almost like a catalog of the Hopewell type artifacts from the famous mounds of far-away Ohio. It certainly shows that the builders of Spiro mound, like those of the Hopewell mounds, had trade contacts nearly as wide as the continent.

There is, for example, a great deal of copper, which most probably came from the Lake Superior region. This is worked up into ornaments, ax heads, richly wrought breast plates, sheathings over cedarwood ceremonial masks, spool-shaped ear-plugs resembling those found in Ohio.

There are also shells, including large conch shells, that could have come only from the Gulf of Mexico. Some of these are inscribed with patterns that look decidedly like those of Maya art, depicting men paddling a canoe, priests conducting a religious ceremony, etc. Shell was also used as inlay material in the wooden ceremonial masks.

#### Serpent Designs

Maya-like patterns appear again in the pottery, which these Indians made well and in great quantity. One shallow bowl, especially, has a design of extended hands that look astonishingly like those on the sculptures of the Central American temples and monuments. Serpent designs, characteristic of both Maya and Hopewell cultures, appear in the Spiro pictures.

The Spiro mound builders knew the art of weaving. Fragments of mats made of reeds and rushes were found, and even more striking in their workmanship, cloths made of buffalo hair, rabbit fur, and the fibers of milkweed and linden bark. One sepulchre buried under the mound, apparently the last residence of a great chief or high priest, consisted of a crib of cedar logs, hung within with patterned and dyed cloth of buffalo hair and rabbit wool. For its day and place, it was a veritable redskin Tut-ankh-Amen tomb.

Much of the burial furniture in the mounds was apparently made specially for funeral or votive purposes. The arrow heads frequently showed no signs of having been used at all. Many of the objects, also, were quite evidently intended for ceremonial use only: for example, one great flaked blade of chert, 28 inches long.

Among votive objects, perhaps the most puzzling, certainly the most disputed, are the so-called "eccentric flints." Most of these came from a single great cache, discovered some years ago by a halfbreed Indian named Mack Tus-singer, who made a very good thing, financially, out of selling them.

The "eccentric flints" are very skillfully flaked pieces with the general outline of arrow or dart points. But they could never have had any such practical use, or indeed any use at all, for their edges are incised and lobed in the most

intricate rococo shapes imaginable. They are almost snowflakes in stone. Similar patterns have been found in Central American flints, but nowhere else.

It has never been possible to authenticate these curious artifacts completely. Nevertheless, the report concludes, "they should not be casually dismissed as either fakes or freaks."

*Science News Letter, October 15, 1938*

#### AERONAUTICS

### Treasure Island Site To Become Great Air Base

**P**ARALLELING the development of the North Beach Airport at New York as a great combined land and sea air terminal, Treasure Island, in San Francisco Bay, site of the Golden Gate International Exposition of 1939, will probably become a terminal for domestic landlines as well as for Pan-American Airways' transpacific division, following the close of the World's Fair of the West.

Airline operators look with favorable interest upon the proposal to develop the man-made fair site into an airport because it will mean a single stop in the San Francisco Bay area in place of the two now made on most flights.

Domestic planes today stop both at Oakland, in the East Bay area, and at Mills Field, San Francisco. Cutting out one of the stops will mean 10 or 15 minutes less flying time.

In addition, the island is within a very few minutes of downtown San Francisco via the Bay Bridge. Mills Field is three-quarters of an hour from the Golden Gate city's hotel district.

The San Francisco Bay Bridge, which crosses the bay near one end of Treasure Island, is not a hazard in clear weather, in the operators' opinion, because of the fact that the prevailing wind parallels the bridge.

At times when instrument landings (which should be standard bad weather practice by the time the airport is ready) are required, the Oakland Airport will be used. This should be necessary at most 15 per cent. of the time, one airline official estimated.

Approval of such a move is, of course, up to the Civil Aeronautics Authority which, when the time comes, will have to pass upon the suitability of the port as a site. Unanimous support for the change is not expected, for sponsors of today's airports rarely welcome a change in location.

Pan-American Airways has already made arrangements to use Treasure