Did The Moundbuilders Come From Mexico?

Archæology

By Frank Thone

WERE the Indians who built the mysterious mounds of the great interior valley of our country kinsmen to the Mayas of Yucatan and the other highly cultured peoples of the Mexican plateau?

Are the decidedly Maya- and Aztec-like sculptures taken from mounds in the Southeast really witnesses to an evolution from the same racial stock and an inheritance of the same art traditions, rather than just evidences of an ancient commerce with the countries across the Gulf of Mexico?

Dr. H. C. Shetrone, director of the Ohio State Museum at Columbus and one of the most active investigators of Indian mounds in America, thinks it not unlikely that the vanished people who built the great earthen monuments came as a great wave of migration from the south. They deployed over the Mississippi valley, overran the Gulf coastal plain southward to peninsular Florida, they penetrated to the Great Lakes region. They developed several different cultures, or types of civilization, as they spread abroad through the great land that was open to them, and the outer edges of the spreading wave became less and less like the original comers in their ways of living, while the group nearest the ancient homeland remained more like the stay-at-home descendants of their own forefathers.

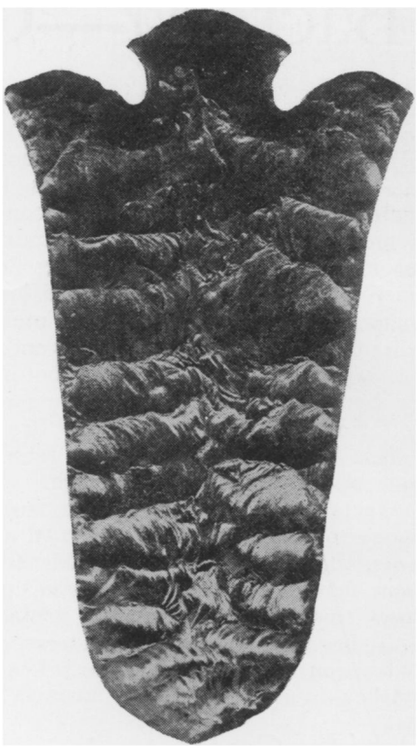
Scientific Modesty

This in brief is Dr. Shetrone's hypothesis. It is set forth (with due tentativeness and modesty, after the fashion of a scientist when he has something startling to say) along toward the end of a new book which he has written and which will be off the press in a short time.

That the moundbuilders in all probability had some sort of contact with the high civilizations to the south is believed now by practically all students of American antiquity. In several mounds, particularly in the southeastern states, elaborately worked figures in sheet copper, shell, and other materials have been found, in a workmanship that strongly suggests the conventions of Mayan and Aztec art. The favorite subject is a full-panoplied brave (or possibly a god) doing a war-dance. His regalia is decidedly like that of some of the figures in Mexican sculptures, and what is even more suggestive, he holds in one hand a severed human head, presumably the gory trophy of an enemy. And in addition to these lively figures of human beings, there are other conventional designs that also bear a notable resemblance to the great though grotesque art of the southern lands.

Another suggestion that the moundbuilders and the Mayas had a common inheritance is found in the occasional effigy of plumed rattlesnake discovered in the Southeast. The plumed serpent was a favorite religious emblem of the Mayas; it symbolized their great sun-deity. Its images in stone dominate the architectural decorations of the temples at Chichen Itza and the other great cities of the ancient Yucatecan civilization. And although the cult of the Serpent was not so highly developed among the Aztecs, some of their temples do show highly elaborated rattlesnake images. The snake dances among the Indians of our own Southwest may be a survival of the same cult, and an indication of how the gap between Yucatan and Alabama was bridged.

There are further resemblances between the culture of the moundbuilders and that of the Mexican area. Another noted American archaeologist, Prof. Warren K. Moorehead, of Phillips Academy, has made a list of them. He mentions especially the building of flat-topped pyramids or temple mounds. For many of the earthen mounds in this country, especially in the South, have flat tops, and once had religious structures, probably of wood, built on them. It is worth noting that the so-called pyramids of the Mayas, Aztecs and other Mexican nations were not solid stone pyramids like those of the Egyptians, but were built of earth and covered with stone. They were really stone-plated mounds, rather than true pyramids.



This ceremonial blade, seventeen inches long, was made from a block of obsidian carried from the Yellowstone region to Ohio. It was found beneath one of the Hopewell mounds.

Another thing which the moundbuilders and the Mexican peoples held in common was the wearing of large spool-shaped ear ornaments of copper. In several different types of mounds, presumably built by different tribes and possibly at widely different times, these somewhat ponderous pieces of jewelry have been found. In Dr. Shetrone's own particular pet mounds in Ohio, of the type known as Hopewell, these ear-spools have been turned up by thousands. Apparently everybody wore them. And ear-spools of almost identical pattern adorn the heads in Mexican sculptures and appear on the carved figures found in Alabama mounds.

There is considerable similarity also in two types of the ceremonial

objects which probably played a large part in the religious ritual of the mound peoples and certainly did in the rituals of the Mexican nations. These are one-piece axes made of stone, handle and all, and tremendously large chipped stone blades. Neither of these two types of implement could have been of any practical use, for the knives are much too large for either tools or weapons, and a stone ax is much more serviceable if it is tied on a wooden handle.

Volcanic Glass From Afar

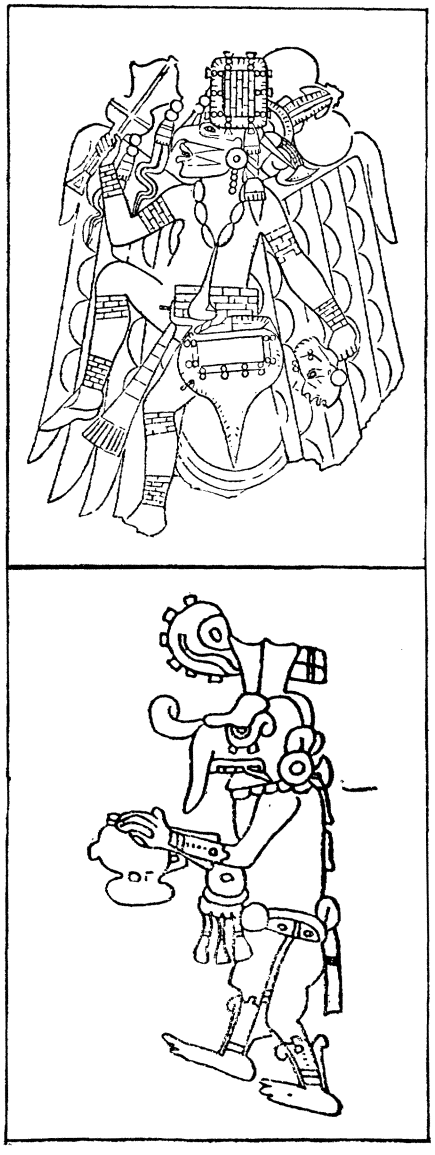
The trouble to which the Hopewell moundbuilders went to get obsidian, or volcanic glass, for their big ceremonial blades is possibly an outstanding example of this religious conservatism. Hundreds of these beautifully chipped blades have been taken from mounds in Ohio, and bushels upon bushels of flakes knocked off in their manufacture.

All the hundreds of pounds of obsidian for making these had to be carried on human backs for long distances. The nearest source of this shining black volcanic glass is Obsidian Cliff in Yellowstone National Park. There is no doubt that much of the Hopewell obsidian came from this place—perhaps most of it—although some of the pieces are chemically and physically more like obsidian found at a still greater distance, in the Southwest.

This insistence of the moundbuilders in Ohio and the upper Mississippi valley on just this one kind of stone, obsidian, even though they had to make long and toilsome journeys to get it, is well worth noting. For obsidian was the material favored for ceremonial blades by the Aztecs and their forerunners on the Mexican plateau. In that volcanic region it is relatively easy to get, and therefore a natural thing to use. If it is only a coincidence that a people in the remote middle valley of the continent would be willing to go to such trouble to get this same material for the same purpose, the coincidence is most remarkable, to say the least.

These parallels in the cultures of eastern North America and the Mexican area by no means exhaust the list, but they are sufficient to indicate at least that the moundbuilders and the Mexicans were not strangers to each other.

Dr. Shetrone strongly disclaims any theory that the moundbuilders started from Mexico with their culture already fully developed, and merely transplanted themselves and their mode of living into the northern land, as the Europeans did centuries later. On the contrary, his hypothesis supposes a people at a relatively early stage of development, who left the parent stock in the homeland and journeyed northward and then toward the east, bringing with them the germs of the culture which they later evolved and diversified in their own ways as they spread out into the great land they found before them, while their kinspeople at home also evolved and diverged in a different direction. This would account for the great differences to be found among the moundbuilders themselves, and between them and the historic Mexican nations, while allowing for the striking similarities that persisted.



The figure above is from a copper plate found at Etowah, Georgia; the lower one is from the Mayan Codex. Each bears a severed human head in one hand, wears elaborate headdress, beak-like nose-mask, ear-spools. Is this genetic relationship or chance resemblance?

But let Dr. Shetrone tell the story in his own words.

"Although several theories have been advanced as to the route of entry into America of the Asiatic migrants, all others, including the Polynesian Islands, the mythical Atlantis, and the Aleutian Islands, have been abandoned in favor of the only logical and easy point of access—Bering Strait," he says. "At its narrowest the Strait is but sixty miles in width, with the Diomede Islands, midway of the channel, visible under favorable conditions from either shore. Human curiosity, it is pointed out, would of itself be sufficient incentive to provoke a crossing, and the migratory instinct would hardly recognize in the undertaking any serious obstacle. Moreover, it is conceivable that the Strait at that remote time may have been wholly or partly frozen over, thus affording an ice bridge. This significant migration from the Old World to the New, however, is believed not to have been an enterprise begun and completed within a comparatively short time. Continuous bands of migrants, under venturesome leaders, presumably continued to cross the Strait throughout centuries of time, as the great continents to the southward received and absorbed their first human inhabitants. . . . .

The Moundbuilders' Ancestors

"Of the subsequent dispersals and migrations of these primitive immigrants only sufficient need be recounted to indicate their connection with those interesting peoples who, centuries later and after generations of wandering, were to become the so-called Mound-builders. Dispersal from the first appears to have been both to the east and to the south. Although the rugged mountain ranges paralleling the Pacific Coast imposed a barrier to the eastward, certain bands were able to find their way across in favorable localities. From these hardy adventurers it seems plausible to trace the historic Indian stocks and (*Turn to page* 62)

Moundbuilders—*Continued*

nations of the Plains and the northern portions of the present United States and Canada. With these, the purpose of this volume is not much concerned, for they seem to have had but superficial connection with the mound-building peoples.

"Whether or not the southerly trend of migration was numerically more important than that to the eastward, certain it is that in eventual development it was more significant. Hemmed in by mountain barriers on the left flank and enticed by the salubrious climate and never-failing food supplies of the Pacific Coast, the streams of immigrants from across Bering Strait came after a while into Mexico and Middle America. Here, in a semi-tropical setting unfavorable to the more advanced planes of human civilization but eminently encouraging to the development from primitive to higher culture stages, they prospered. From wandering nomads they became sedentary agricultural peoples, able for the first time to face the future with adequate stores of food supplies against famine and pestilence; able to exist in compact populous communities and thus to develop community enterprise and specilization of labor. The magic key which unlocked the door to progress was nothing more nor less than maize or Indian corn. . . .

Seek New Homes

"Equipped with the rudiments of agriculture and with the confidence engendered thereby, and carrying the germ of culture generated during their sojourn in the parental area in Mexico, the American aborigines again succumbed to the instinctive urge to seek new homes and to explore unknown lands. Once more groups and bands followed venturesome leaders across the visible horizon, some of them retracing, in a way, the old migration trails of the northward. To afford the reader an appreciation of the manner in which numerous highly diversified tribes and peoples, under equally diversified phases of environment, developed from a common source or stock, and to lead him, without further delay, to the objective of our inquiry, the Moundbuilder area, a somewhat hypothetical but highly probable series of movements may be assumed. From the nuclear area in southern Mexico the line of migration may be followed northward, finding its first materialization in the arid region of the Southwest. Here, influenced definitely by environment, may be envisioned the development of the Pueblo culture. Taking advantage of natural shelters in the cliffs and utilizing the native clays for making sun-dried brick for the construction of communal dwellings, the Pueblo peoples develop in due time a culture complex, distinctive and outstanding. This, it may be assumed, represents the first step outward from Mexican influence, and, as would be expected, it contains more elements of the parent nucleus than any other outlying region. The second stage of migration is found, not to the northward, as might be expected, but eastward in what is termed the Southeastern Woodland area, corresponding to the southern half of the general mound area. This second stage of removal from the Mexican cultural center brings us definitely into the country of the Mound-builders, and completes the hypothetical connection between the Asiatic migrants at Bering Strait and the peoples with which this volume is concerned. From this Southeastern region migration may be assumed to have extended, by still another step or stage, to the northern half of the mound area; and, ascending the Mississippi, it appears to have influenced to some slight extent the Plains area adjacent to the Southeastern Woodland, west of the Mississippi."

Cultures Differed

It must not be thought that after the great dispersal which Dr. Shetrone envisages the moundbuilders maintained any kind of uniformity. Though never so numerous as the peoples of Europe, they were spread over a territory nearly as large as everything west of Russia, and they achieved a diversity of culture as great as that of western Europe. Their most elaborate civilization was that of the so-called Hopewell people in Ohio and westward to the Mississippi. Their towns were the Paris and Vienna of the mound-builder world, and their ceremonial enclosures doubtless its Rome and its Canterbury. But there were at least two other distinct mound-builder peoples in Ohio alone, and when all the different types of burial, religious, and dwelling-site mounds have been counted up and correlated with the artifacts found in and around them, there are easily a score of different moundbuilder "nations" recognizable.

In spite of all that has been said and written about the moundbuilders, the real scientific investigation of their story is only beginning. There are thousands of mounds that have never been explored, including even the largest of all, the great mound of Kahokia, Illinois, opposite St. Louis, which is bigger than the pyramid of Cheops.

Some of these have been set aside as state parks or otherwise protected.

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Bacteria—*Continued*

different chemicals that cause a change of color when it is present. So by this indirect method it is possible to determine whether or not there is sufficient calcium in a given piece of land.

Increasing Nitrates

SOIL nitrates, one of the most important classes of plant nutrients, are materially increased by the addition of other fertilizers in proper amunts. This is the central idea of a paper presented by Prof. A. B. Beaumont of Massachusetts Agricultural College.

The American scientist added graded amounts of various types of fertilizer to different kinds of soils, and tested for increase or decrease in nitrates. Lime, he found, increased the nitrate concentration, in amounts up to six tons of lime to the acre. Beyond that amount lime was not beneficial; in some cases large amounts depressed nitrification. Green crops plowed under checked nitrification for three or four weeks, but after that time nitrates again accumulated rapidly.

The addition of nitrate fertilizers naturally increased the amount of soil nitrates; but in some instances it was found that the natural reactions and biological activities in the soil increased the soil nitrates over the figure allowed for even in adding the nitrogen fertilizers. Only one non-nitrogenous fertilizer element, phosphorous, had a consistent tendency to decrease soil nitrification.

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