

THE PALIMPSEST

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Who Were the Mound Builders?

In the latter part of the Eighteenth Century and the early Nineteenth Century travelers and settlers moving westward across the eastern part of the United States noted the mounds and earthworks which they found along the river valleys. Because the living Indians knew nothing about these monuments of the past, a myth became well established in the Nineteenth Century that the earthworks were built by *Mound Builders* — a mysterious race which was often regarded as descended from the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel or refugees from the Lost Continent of Atlantis. The Mound Builders were believed to be far superior to the Indians. It was thought that they disappeared before the Indians, first encountered by the early explorers and colonists, arrived in this hemisphere.

A number of the mounds and earthworks were destroyed in the Nineteenth Century as cities began to grow and agricultural activities expanded across the continent. Fortunately, some of the men

who found the mounds were very careful observers who mapped and recorded their findings in great detail.

In the latter half of the Nineteenth Century the interest in the past history of North America increased. More and more of the mounds were discovered, recorded, and in many cases destroyed. The Smithsonian Institution, founded in 1846, began an active program of collecting and publishing records of these earthworks. Information was sent to Washington by people in many parts of the country. Sections of several of the early volumes of the Smithsonian Annual Reports were devoted to their accounts.

The myth of the Mound Builders gradually came to be disproved as studies of the writings of early explorers revealed that Indians had been building mounds in the Sixteenth and early Seventeenth centuries. Excavation and studies by archaeologists and physical anthropologists showed that the Indians and their predecessors were physically similar.

But it was not until the early part of the Twentieth Century, when there was an intensified interest in controlled and scientific archaeology, that we really began to know something about the Indians who built the mounds. By then it was established that there were different types of mounds. Some were constructed as monuments to the dead, with skeletons placed in them; others

were platforms for ceremonial structures, and still others were effigies of animals and serpents. The real break-through in the understanding came about in the 1940's and 1950's when, with the development of Carbon-14 dating, some accurate information on the age of the mounds was at last available. It then became apparent that mound building had been practiced for over 2,500 years on the continent by many groups of prehistoric Indians whose only records are the remains left behind buried in the ground. Generally speaking the burial mound builders were earlier and the temple mound builders, those who built mounds as platforms, and effigy mound builders were later in Midwestern prehistory. In time the term "Mound Builders" almost disappeared from scientific writing as it had no real meaning in terms of the prehistory of the country.