

Hopewell: Burial Mound Builders

The best known of the prehistoric burial mound building Indian cultures in the eastern United States is the Hopewellian culture which occurred during what archaeologists in the Midwest call the Middle Woodland period (about 200 B.C.—400 A.D.). Archaeological sites in which Hopewellian artifacts are found occur as far east as New York State, as far west as Kansas City, and from Florida on the south to New York and Wisconsin on the north. The Hopewellian culture was named originally for the Hopewell farm in Ross County near Chillicothe, Ohio. For many years the best and most detailed information on the Hopewellian culture came from Ohio, for a number of sites were excavated there in the late 1800's and first quarter of this century. Most of the work, however, was conducted in the mounds and earthworks, a number of which have been preserved and can be seen even today in parks and National Monuments in the vicinity of Chillicothe and at Newark. Almost nothing was known of the domestic life of these people.

During this same time many smaller and less impressive mounds were excavated in Illinois and Iowa. Fortunately some were studied by careful

observers and there are records of the Davenport Academy of Natural Sciences excavations now on file at the Davenport Public Museum. Many other sites were simply destroyed by untrained curiosity-seekers.

In the 1920's and 1930's Dr. Fay-Cooper Cole of the Department of Anthropology of the University of Chicago began a systematic survey of the archaeological sites in Illinois and under his direction students dug a number of Hopewellian village sites. As a result of this work, and that of his associates, archaeologists came to know more about the domestic life of the Hopewellian Indians in Illinois than elsewhere in the country. It began to appear that while the most elaborate development of burial practices was achieved in Ohio, the longest development and the earliest village sites were found in Illinois. Fortunately, in the last fifteen years much more research in mounds and village sites has been conducted in eastern United States and more information is available on all aspects of the Hopewellian complex.

The archaeological evidence of the Hopewellian culture, which was spread across the eastern United States during the Middle Woodland period from, perhaps, 200 B.C. to 400 A.D., indicates that it was in many ways more of a *cult* than a *culture*. The details of the local indigenous village complexes, which reflect the daily life and customs of the local Indian groups, vary from area

to area, but there is a general similarity in ceremonial paraphernalia and to some extent burial practices. It might be compared to the spread of Christianity in the New World in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries when much of the local Indian way of life did not change radically although the Indians adopted the new religion, often built churches, and acquired many of the religious symbols that went with it.

The origin of the Hopewellian cult is far from being fully understood by archaeologists. Some of the ideas incorporated in it may very well have come from south of our border in Meso-America. Others may have come from Asia and others were probably the result of the blending of the new and the older indigenous cultures in the area. It is easy to show that the cultivation of maize, the use of mounds for burials, figurines, rocker-stamped designs on ceramics and parallel-sided knife blades occur earlier in Meso-America than in the eastern United States. But it is impossible, at this stage in archaeological research, to plot the route or routes of movement of such traits through the area. Some appear to occur earlier in Illinois while others are earlier in the Southeast. Furthermore rocker-stamping and parallel-sided blades also occur at an earlier date in Asia.

If the origin of the Hopewellian cult is imperfectly understood, what happened to it is also. We know that it died out, that the burial cult and

the ceremonial paraphernalia eventually no longer were found in the eastern United States, and subsequently other cultures took its place. James B. Griffin (1960) has suggested that a minor variation in climate, producing cooler weather and a shorter growing season, was responsible for the decline in agricultural productivity and, as a result, of the Middle Woodland culture.

Olaf Prufer (1964) believes that this may explain the more gradual decline in the northern Mississippi Valley and perhaps in Illinois, but he feels that in Ohio the end was more abrupt. He suggests that the latest sites are those located on fortified hilltops and that the Hopewellians were forced to move into the fortified locations for as yet unidentified reasons and then, following an upheaval, were dispersed.

It is also possible that, as Griffin suggested earlier (1952), the burden of supporting the elaborate ceremonial activities became too great for the population and the cult and the communities broke up as a result of "cultural fatigue."

These two big questions of how Hopewell came about and what happened to it and many other questions of inter- and intra-village and area relationships will be answered only when more controlled research is done in archaeological sites throughout the eastern United States. Until the work can be done we can only hope that the sites can be protected and preserved.