

THE PALIMPSEST

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Land of the Mound Builders

The Geographical Setting

Effigy Mounds National Monument is an elongate tract of land sitting astride the boundary between Allamakee and Clayton counties in northeast Iowa. The area contains 1,204 acres of precipitous bluff-slopes and uplands covered with hardwood forest, open prairie expanses, and timbered bottomlands. It lies to the east of the Niagaran Escarpment, within the western fringe of the Driftless Area. Its scenic landscape is due to this geographic position, for in the Pleistocene, the last of the great glaciers by-passed the Driftless Area. In consequence, the terrain was not planed down as in surrounding localities. Along the east boundary of the area lies the great Mississippi River gorge, which is cut, at this spot, to a depth of 350 feet below the level of the surrounding land.

Effigy Mounds National Monument is bisected by the Yellow River, a small, swift stream which

falls rapidly from the western uplands to the Mississippi. The swamps and backwaters at the mouth of this stream support a population of mammals and birds, once most plentiful, which the Indians seem to have used for food and other economic needs. The swampy habitat also produced plants of importance to primitive economies. The stream contains edible fish, originally in great numbers. The native hardwood forest contains trees of economic importance today as well as in prehistoric and early historic times. The luxuriant forest undergrowth contains wild plants of use to the aboriginal population, and of interest to the modern botanist. Crops of corn are grown today on many of the terraces built up at the mouths of the small Mississippi tributaries, and on the bluff-tops. It is probable that Indians made similar use of some of these lands in prehistoric times.

The area contains ample tangible evidence of prehistoric occupation. This includes 87 Indian burial mounds and three rock shelters. The mounds are clustered in groups of varying numbers. One such group contains ten bear effigies, three bird-shaped mounds, and two which are of oblong, or linear, form. This is the Marching Bear Mound Group of the area's south unit.

The Prehistoric Indians

Toward the end of the last glaciation, Nature had created a hunter's paradise in northeast Iowa, amply stocked with big game. Into this abundant

landscape came the first men — hunters similar to other early people east of the Rocky Mountains, using tools and weapons like those excavated by archeologists in the High Plains. The life of the early hunters was simple. It is believed that small groups of men pursued and brought to earth the gigantic elephantine mammals and extinct forms of the bison of the latter part of the Pleistocene. Their weapons were darts, tipped with leaf-shaped, stone points, and hurled with the spear-thrower. They probably lived and hunted in groups of closely allied family units. If they built houses, archeologists do not know of it directly, but it is sometimes speculated that they used a very rudimentary shelter of brush or skin. Meager remains of their game kills and camps, dated by geological context, or by the radiocarbon method, indicate an age well in excess of 10,000 years for their appearance in North America. It is likely that they would have entered northeast Iowa shortly after this time, as the glaciers receded from the Upper Mississippi Valley.

No remains of these early Indians have been found on the land now within Effigy Mounds National Monument, but scattered evidence of their presence appears in the immediate vicinity in the form of dart points of types known to have been made by early peoples elsewhere. Several projectile points in collections of local people are of the Clovis Fluted type. An especially large number

of these has been found near Bluffton, Iowa, in Winneshiek County. Ellison Orr owned photographs of such a point from Allamakee County.

No doubt the Indians used the land now included in Effigy Mounds as a hunting ground. Their part in the history here set forth is minor, but it is noteworthy, for it represents the beginning of the human continuum of which we ourselves are a part.

The early hunter tradition can be traced through several thousand years, until changes in and additions to their way of living produced cultural assemblages sufficiently different to be apparent in modern archeological research. It is at this point in history that we recognize tools suited for intensive wood working activities. The axe, the adz and gouge all attest to changes in the adaptation of the Indian way of life from the plains to the forest. The result of these changes serves to differentiate the Archaic period, wherein the primitive hunting groups, with perhaps new population accretions from outside the region, placed increasing emphasis on other subsistence forms. Nuts, fruits, berries, and fresh water mussels, laboriously gathered, contributed a larger share to the food supply, and fishing also may have been more important. The produce of the hunt still played a goodly part in their economy, but the animals they hunted were the commonplace varieties of our own experience (*i. e.*, the

deer, bear, bison, and smaller species), for the great herds of elephants were gone forever.

In northeast Iowa, the Archaic people seem to have been culturally allied with Wisconsin groups, for scattered finds of tools like those excavated in Wisconsin sites have been made. The most striking characteristic of this Wisconsin Archaic culture is an array of copper tools, which led to the appellation for the industry — "Old Copper." Implements and weapons attributed to these people have been found along the Mississippi River. Some have come from the river banks along the east boundary of Effigy Mounds National Monument. These Indians may be pictured along the local streams, fishing, gathering mussels, stalking deer, and trapping beaver, muskrat, otter, and other small mammals. The women probably gathered roots, nuts, and berries in the woods. These additional food supplies, if coupled with relative ease of acquisition, could well have afforded more leisure time. Added leisure, for a part of the group at least, would have permitted time for thought, and a beginning may have been made toward elaboration of social life, and, certainly, religion.

By the Archaic period, the local environment was thoroughly familiar, and natural resources were known to the fullest extent permitted by the primitive technological level. In addition to the copper tools mentioned earlier, new stone projec-

tile point styles appeared, and there was wider variation and greater numbers of nearly every tool type. The more numerous tools and weapons suggest larger populations and a relatively prosperous life. Religion would have been magical in character. Shamans, who would have aimed at bending the forces of nature to man's will, probably were the religious leaders. These men no doubt conducted magical ceremonies connected with the chase — to bring success in hunting, and to increase the number of game animals. Also, they would have worked to prevent harm to the group through natural disasters, and would have driven away sickness.

Thus, it was during the Archaic Period we have the beginnings of the Woodland Indian way of life which successfully assimilated new ideas into the basic pattern up until historic times in the forests of northeastern North America.

In northeast Iowa the Archaic may have flourished from around 6,000 or 7,000 years ago until about 3,000 years ago. Some time around the latter date, more or less, Indians in this region added certain material elements sufficiently distinctive to enable the archeologist to define a new period in their cultural development. This is called the Early Woodland period, and it is dated, depending on the locality within the eastern United States, from around 3,000 years to about the beginning of the Christian Era. In this period the

economic requisites to greater social and religious elaboration may have been added. The greatest need was a dependable food supply. The earlier peoples, with their hunting and food collecting economies, depending on Nature's caprice in regard to wild animal and plant populations, controlled their food supply but little. Until this could be brought under partial control, at least, little economic security could develop, and consequently there would have been a lack of freedom to engage in more "intellectual" occupations.

While there is no direct evidence of horticultural activity on the part of the Early Woodland population, some investigators infer it on the basis of other developments. It is reasonable to assume that agriculture, coming into the eastern United States, helped produce the Early Woodland, but direct evidence for it is scanty. In the immediate locality of Effigy Mounds National Monument, the gathering of wild rice may have, at least partially, obviated the need for agriculture since large quantities are known to have been gathered and stored by such historically known tribes as the Menominee.

The large and elaborate burial mounds may furnish indirect evidence in support of this, as they would require the work of many individuals, and a considerable number of hours away from the purely economic activities. People building mounds must be fed during the time they are occu-

pied producing the monument. While it is possible that another part of the population might be able to hunt enough and gather enough to feed those engaged in mound construction, it seems more likely that a supply of food on which the community could depend was readily at hand. The fruits of gardening or wild rice seem the best candidates. In addition to this, it should be remembered that those who dug and carried the earth of which the mound was built probably did not do so from sheer spontaneous impulse. More than likely their occupation would have been suggested to them by others who were more exalted, socially, politically, or religiously, with the power to compel the builders to their task. Again, gardening and wild rice seem the most likely forms of controlled food supply which would release the supervisors to pursue their particular culturally-accepted forms of idleness.

With the exception of the additions of mound-building and pottery-making, and the possible appearance of gardening supplementary to hunting and gathering, the material content of Early Woodland changed but little from that of Archaic times. The spear-thrower was still the chief weapon, and the projectile points continue in the same styles as their Archaic antecedents. Among the innovations, pottery is a most important item. The first pottery was crude, thick, and heavily tempered with coarse pieces of crushed rock. The

exterior was covered with impressions of rather coarse cord, and some cord-impressions also were placed on the interior. Toward the end of the period, pottery became thinner and was decorated with wide, indifferently-applied, incised lines. Pottery of the latter type has been found in Effigy Mounds National Monument.

Burial mounds probably dating from this Early Woodland period have been excavated in nearby areas to the south of Effigy Mounds National Monument. Grave offerings included with the interments have included large flint blades, some of which were made from an exceptionally fine grade of flint called hornstone. This hornstone is known to have come from a series of quarries along the Ohio River. Red ocher paint, made by grinding hematite, was scattered through the fill of the burial pits, over the grave goods and burials.

Between Early Woodland and the next major time and cultural division there is no clear demarcation. The Indians seem to have elaborated their material possessions and intellectual life gradually, following a trend apparent throughout the Middlewest. This trend, in Illinois and Ohio, at least, produced complex and distinctive social and religious forms. The remains dating from this period are called Hopewell among archeologists of the Middlewestern area. More generalized remains known to stem from this time are included under the classification of "Middle Woodland."

In northeast Iowa, pottery collected in and near Effigy Mounds National Monument shows relationship to certain Hopewellian types. Projectile points of Hopewellian type are also found. Several burial mound types seem to be characteristic of the period. While certain of these show clear Hopewellian resemblances, others seem to reflect influences from non-Hopewell sources. Three mounds containing Hopewellian grave-goods have been excavated in Effigy Mounds National Monument. One contained a rectangular, sub-floor, burial pit filled with bundle burials, one of which was accompanied by a copper gorget (breastplate). Another contained a sub-floor burial pit, but with a rock wall surrounding the pit on the original ground surface. One burial in this mound was accompanied by a copper gorget, while another had copper beads associated with it. The third mound contained remains of cremated bodies, with grave offerings of perforated bear teeth, and large chalcedony spear points or knives.

Whatever their burial customs, these people probably differed but little from their Early Woodland antecedents in terms of economic and everyday life. In the Upper Mississippi Valley, Hopewellian mounds are not complex, with the exception of a few cases. An assumption of more efficient agricultural practices such as have been proposed in Illinois is not warranted. Hunting and gathering seem to have furnished a consider-

able part of the food supply, and the socio-political groups producing the mounds need not have been large.

Although the degree of control of leadership need not have been great, some form of political or religious head must have existed. There may have been social classes of a sort, for the people buried in the mounds probably are not ordinary citizens. Among the Hopewellian peoples, trade relationships of a fairly extensive order are indicated by the mica, copper, brown chalcedony and obsidian blades buried with the dead. No large villages are known, and it seems likely that the people who built the mounds may have spent much of each year in seasonal hunting camps, occupying a tribal village during the crop-growing season.

Archeological research, both within and outside Effigy Mounds National Monument, has not advanced sufficiently to permit detailed assertions as to the nature of the cultural changes following the construction of the Hopewellian mound types in northeast Iowa. It appears that there was a gradual shift to a mound of less complex nature. An interpretation which appears valid at the present stage of research is one which proposes the appearance of most of the Iowa effigies as a part of the cultural shifts taking place late in the Middle Woodland period, with effigy construction, along with building of very simple conicals, filling

the gap between such phenomena as Hopewell and the advent of Upper Mississippi cultures.

Little difference may be seen between the structure and content of the effigies and the simple conicals. No great elaborate set of ideas or social practices need be involved in the effigy culture. The elaborate mound shape is the only striking feature. In everyday life, Indians of this period probably differed little from the previous groups. The camp sites attributable to them are small, and are found on the bluff-tops, often near mound groups, and in the numerous rock shelters. Occupational debris stemming from this period is found in most of the major village sites on the large Mississippi River terraces. In the area immediately surrounding Effigy Mounds National Monument, the most common village remains found are those which seem to have belonged to the effigy mound-building Indians.

Although many campsites and villages are known, few have been excavated. It may be guessed that they lived as a tribal unit during the summer months on the large terraces along the river, where indications of fairly large populations are found. The smaller camps and the rock shelter camps may represent seasonal occupation sites such as winter quarters for small, local hunting groups. These people may have had corn gardens, and they used the bow and arrow for hunting and as a weapon of war. They used bone

tools, some copper for tools and ornaments, chipped stone scrapers, arrowpoints, and drills, ground stone axes, pearl beads, shell ornaments, and pottery. The numerous small sites suggest that the land may have been supporting a moderate, but dispersed population.

It has been demonstrated in the State of Wisconsin that Hopewellian culture precedes that of the Effigy Mound Builders. Since the mounds of northeastern Iowa fall into the same cultural groups as those of Wisconsin, a similar sequence may be assumed to exist west of the Mississippi. Radio-carbon dates place Hopewell culture within the first centuries of the Christian era while dates for Effigy Mound culture suggest a range from the eighth to twelfth centuries. Simple mounds, similar to the effigies in content, may have been built until around 1300 or 1400 A. D.

The Woodland way of life was a tradition in which hunting and gathering played a strong role. The Effigy Mound and related peoples represented this way of life. Some time around the last dates mentioned above, they seem to have been supplanted in the region by Indians whose culture included a stronger emphasis on agriculture, and on life in larger villages. These are the people called Oneota. Their pottery, economic orientation, and certain facets of their religion indicate a more southerly cultural ancestry. Their villages, in northeast Iowa, have been fairly identified with

a historic tribe — the Ioway Indians, from whom the state takes its name. Although these people did not bury their dead in earth mounds, large cemeteries belonging to them are known. They remained in the region until early historic times. Certain French explorers may have encountered them. For the most part, their villages lie to the north of Effigy Mounds National Monument. Scattered finds, consisting of pottery fragments, indicate that they made at least temporary use of the National Monument confines. They probably hunted in the area, and they seem to have had transient camps in some of the area's rock shelters.

With the coming of the whites, the Oneota way of life was modified. Later it was changed radically in respect to material items, and finally they moved farther west, giving way before other Indian groups from the east, and the white trappers and traders. With the fur trade era, the Indian occupation of the locality comes to an end as a continuous cultural stream. The trading center which developed at the mouth of the Wisconsin, called Prairie du Chien, attracted Indians, but the area of Effigy Mounds National Monument was not a permanent home for them. Sioux of several tribal divisions hunted in the area, and they disputed the right to do so with the Sauk and Fox, and even with the Winnebago. Indigenous claimants of the land, by this time, had moved on and are no longer a part of this history.