

## The Mound-Builders and the Emergence of Archaeology in America

### Introduction:

Understanding the past has been an interest of human civilizations for thousands of years, since the very first myths and religions explained how the world came to be. And while the written word granted us a kind of record to be passed through time, interpreting prehistoric or physical remnants of our past was dominated by what each culture could imagine for many centuries. Today, archaeology, with its rigorous methodology and rational interpretations, has formed a narrative of logic to combat the narratives of faith, though its emergence and development was not a clean break. In the early days of archaeological practice, the mainstream consisted of a curious mixture of scientific method and superstition that today is quickly classified as pseudoarchaeology, and it took time for archaeologists to form conclusions based entirely on the remains they discovered instead of searching to justify the implausible. There is perhaps no better way to trace this process of development than by studying 19th century America's attempts at explaining the many earthen mounds discovered across the country. Beginning with the basic, racist premise that the Native Americans were too primitive to have constructed them, early archaeologists theorized that a lost race of men must have once walked North America, their identities ranging from the predecessors of the Aztecs<sup>1</sup> to Vikings<sup>2</sup> to God himself<sup>3</sup>, and while each origin story had its own context, they all emerged from the same racism, American nationalism and ignorance.

### The Myth:

In its most basic form, the Mound-Builders theory stated that the mounds were built by a "vanished"<sup>4</sup>, "sedentary"<sup>5</sup> race of human beings that had mysteriously "disappeared from the face of North America"<sup>6</sup> sometime before the arrival of Columbus<sup>7</sup>. From this blueprint, many different academics and artists alike added details and embellishments that came to be

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Silverberg, *The Mound Builders*, abr. ed. (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1986), Location 375, digital file.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth L. Feder, "The Myth of the Moundbuilders," in *Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries: Science and Pseudoscience in Archaeology*, 6th ed. (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 168.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 122.

<sup>5</sup> O. T. Mason, "The Relation of the Mound Builders to the Historic Indians," *Science* 3, no. 69 (May 30, 1884): 659, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/1759684>.

<sup>6</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 122.

<sup>7</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 164.

characteristic of many Mound-Builder narratives, whether drawn from archaeological evidence or not. It was commonly accepted that the Mound-Builders were a vast population<sup>8</sup>, with Caleb Atwater even estimating their numbers to have been in the “millions”<sup>9</sup>, and they were often thought to have been “agriculturists”<sup>10</sup>. They were also considered adept at both art<sup>11</sup> and technology<sup>12</sup>, possessing knowledge of a metallurgical technique unknown by the Native Americans at the time<sup>13</sup>. When explaining their disappearance, it was common for Mound-Builder narratives to describe their military defeat and genocide, either directly at the hands of Native Americans or by “floods of barbarians from the North of Asia”<sup>14</sup>, where the ancestors of Native Americans were believed to have originated<sup>15</sup>, though this extinction story was not universally accepted<sup>16</sup>. The chronology of the Mound-Builders tended to vary greatly from source to source. A French writer in 1801 estimated a mound at around 600 years old<sup>17</sup>, while Jacob Bailey believed the Mound-Builders to have been defeated “between 795 and 995 AD”<sup>18</sup>. One writer, Josiah Priest, believed the Mound-Builder civilization predated the Old World, on account of America being the country of Noah<sup>19</sup>.

While the basic elements of the myth were maintained in each iteration, where the Mound-Builders originally came from was left completely up to interpretation, much to the joy of many academics and fiction writers alike. One of the earliest claims was that Vikings had voyaged to the New World and settled<sup>20</sup>, only to migrate south and become the Toltecs<sup>21</sup> of Aztec lore, and both of these two groups would be separately championed in other theories<sup>22</sup>. A race of giants was also considered<sup>23</sup>, supposedly evidenced by bones found inside certain

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<sup>8</sup> Curtis Dahl, "Mound-Builders, Mormons and William Cullen Bryant," *The New England Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (June 1961): 180, DOI:10.2307/362525.

<sup>9</sup> Caleb Atwater, "Western Antiquities," in *Writings of Caleb Atwater* (Columbus, OH: Caleb Atwater, 1833), 126, digital file.

<sup>10</sup> Dahl, "Mound-Builders, Mormons," 182.

<sup>11</sup> Mason, "The Relation," 659.

<sup>12</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 637.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* and Feder, "The Myth," 167.

<sup>14</sup> Dahl, "Mound-Builders, Mormons," 183.

<sup>15</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 169.

<sup>16</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 375.

<sup>17</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 166.

<sup>18</sup> Dahl, "Mound-Builders, Mormons," 182.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 168.

<sup>21</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 375.

<sup>22</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 489 and Location 536.

<sup>23</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 548.

mounds, as reported by the New York Times<sup>24</sup>. It was even more common to believe the Mound-Builders were descended from the Israelites<sup>25</sup>, citing the comparison between mounds and biblical “high places”<sup>26</sup>, and The Book of Mormon is said to be an example of this kind of narrative<sup>27</sup>. Other cultures considered included “Hindoos”<sup>28</sup>, Egyptians, Greeks, Chinese, Polynesians, Welsh, Belgians, Phoenicians, Tartars, Saxons, Africans, Mexicans, and even Atlanteans<sup>29</sup>. The many possibilities was part of what attracted so many to write on the subject<sup>30</sup>, and they were grateful to be granted a “grand and romantic”<sup>31</sup> American past.

### **The Context:**

When placed in its context, it becomes clear that the Mound-Builders theory is an integral and principal component of the development of archaeology in the United States. An excavation by Thomas Jefferson of a mound on his property<sup>32</sup> in 1784 was “almost certainly the first archaeological excavation in North America”<sup>33</sup>, and a map of the earthworks at Marietta was “the first such archaeological map ever made in the United States”<sup>34</sup>. Many organizations sought to explain the mounds, including the American Philosophical Society<sup>35</sup> and a young Smithsonian Institution<sup>36</sup>, as well as many curious and notable individuals. The first Northern mounds noticed were in Ohio in 1772<sup>37</sup>, and it was later remarked that “one cannot help but pay more than a passing notice”<sup>38</sup> to them. Early mentions in writing described them as “advanced”<sup>39</sup>, but speculation of a lost race only began as migration to Ohio caused interest in them to rise<sup>40</sup>, and

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<sup>24</sup> "Monster Skulls and Bones," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), April 5, 1886, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1886/04/05/103958620.html?pageNumber=1> and "Wisconsin Mound Opened," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), December 20, 1897, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1897/12/20/105959977.html?pageNumber=1>.

<sup>25</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 512.

<sup>26</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 524.

<sup>27</sup> Dahl, "Mound-Builders, Mormons," 187.

<sup>28</sup> Atwater, "Western Antiquities," 119.

<sup>29</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 168.

<sup>30</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 167.

<sup>31</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 111.

<sup>32</sup> James Madison, "A Letter on the Supposed Fortifications of the Western Country, from Bishop Madison of Virginia to Dr. Barton," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 6 (1809): 137, DOI:10.2307/1004782.

<sup>33</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 167.

<sup>34</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 353

<sup>35</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 167.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 335.

<sup>38</sup> John Patterson MacLean, *The Mound Builders*, kindle ed. (Waxkeep, 1879), Location 14, digital file.

<sup>39</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 344.

<sup>40</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 364.

this created a split between two factions that came to be symbolized by two specific papers<sup>41</sup>. The first faction was the skeptics, gathered behind Reverend James Madison and his dismissal of the lost race theories as “lifeless”<sup>42</sup>. The second faction, the lost race theorists, grouped behind Reverend Thaddeus M. Harris and his conclusion that the mounds “were too elaborate an engineering feat to have been the work of mere savage Indians”<sup>43</sup>. The skeptics were not necessarily the only practitioners of quality excavation, however; Caleb Atwater’s survey of the mounds in Ohio<sup>44</sup> was “a landmark... serious and detailed”<sup>45</sup>, and with reputed names such as William Henry Harrison<sup>46</sup> (later elected President of the United States) and Albert Gallatin<sup>47</sup> (Secretary of the Treasury under Thomas Jefferson) joining the lost race faction, the view that the Native American ancestors constructed the mounds grew less popular<sup>48</sup>. Many writers on the subject were more interested in capturing public fancy than doing quality archaeology<sup>49</sup>, and the supposed history of the Mound-Builders was either greatly embellished in official works<sup>50</sup> or made the subject of fiction, both prose<sup>51</sup> and poetry<sup>52</sup> alike. Fascination with the Mound-Builder narratives would even lead to the creation of a new religion, the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints<sup>53</sup>. It wouldn’t be until Cyrus Thomas, working for the Bureau of American Ethnology<sup>54</sup>, conducted “the most extensive and intensive study yet”<sup>55</sup> and published a long report that signaled the myth was “put... to rest”<sup>56</sup>.

While each theory presented for the origins of the Mound-Builders had its own motivations, the entire concept was based on a single assumption that the Native Americans could not have built the mounds, and five key arguments were presented as evidence throughout the 19th century<sup>57</sup>. All of these five were either at their core racially motivated, or

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<sup>41</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 478.

<sup>42</sup> Madison, "A Letter," 133.

<sup>43</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 489.

<sup>44</sup> Atwater, "Western Antiquities,".

<sup>45</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 594.

<sup>46</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 720.

<sup>47</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 755.

<sup>48</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 536.

<sup>49</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 766.

<sup>50</sup> Dahl, "Mound-Builders, Mormons," 180.

<sup>51</sup> Curtis Dahl, "Moby Dick's Cousin Behemoth," *American Literature* 31, no. 1 (March 1959): DOI:10.2307/2922649.

<sup>52</sup> Dahl, "Mound-Builders, Mormons," 185.

<sup>53</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 819 and Dahl, "Mound-Builders, Mormons," 187.

<sup>54</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 179.

<sup>55</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 173.

<sup>56</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 179.

<sup>57</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 173.

based in bad archaeological practice, exposed by Cyrus Thomas' report<sup>58</sup>. These arguments were<sup>59</sup>:

1. Indians were too primitive to have built the mounds and produced the works in stone, metal and clay attributed to the Mound-Builder culture.
2. The mounds and associated artifacts were very much more ancient than even the earliest remnants of Indian culture.
3. Stone tablets were found in the mounds that bore inscriptions in European, Asian or African alphabets.
4. American Indians were not building mounds when first contacted by European explorers and settlers. When queries were made of the local Indians concerning mound construction or use, they invariably professed complete ignorance.
5. Metal artifacts made of iron, silver, ore-derived copper and various alloys have been found in the mounds.

The desire to further ideas of the racial superiority of the European colonizers over the Native Americans is most definitely a factor in the emergence of the Mound-Builders theory, and it has been argued that this kind of thinking was designed to make it easier for early Americans to view their Westward expansion and slaughtering Native Americans as "reclaiming territory"<sup>60</sup>. There are also elements of American nationalism at the foundation of the idea, as they wished to view the country as more of a historical wonder, as the great cities discovered there proved Mexico and South America to be<sup>61</sup>. Many of the individual theories had additional nationalistic and religious goals, such as the Viking theories being proponents of Nordic superiority, and the Israelite theories promoting a biblical worldview. Important here, though, is to note that there was not a desire nor appeal to go against established academia or undermine 'so-called authorities', as the writers in question were the established academia of the time. Instead, a more factual, grounded mindset and approach to interpreting archaeological remains had to develop over time, culminating in Cyrus Thomas refuting the lost race theories based on evidence alone, despite having believed one of the theories was likely to be true going into the project<sup>62</sup>.

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<sup>58</sup> Bennie C. Keel, "Cyrus Thomas and the Mound Builders," *Southern Indian Studies* XXII (October 1970): 11, PDF.

<sup>59</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 173. (All direct quotes)

<sup>60</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 182.

<sup>61</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 111.

<sup>62</sup> Keel, "Cyrus Thomas," 9.

### **The problems:**

Identifying the problems with a theory like the many proposed Mound-Builders civilizations can be difficult, as they are plentiful, and cover a wide range of logical, methodological and archaeological sins. There are the macro-problems, or problems that are general and pervasive, and there are micro-problems, specific instances or techniques that present as flaws in certain theories. In the case of the Mound-Builders, it is easiest to explore the problems by going through the five general arguments presented to explain why the Native Americans could not have built them, and explore the serious flaws each one possesses.

#### 1. Indians too primitive

This first argument is most definitely in the macro-problems category. The basic assumption that the Native Americans were too primitive to have been the Mound-Builders was a racist categorization<sup>63</sup> of what many then believed to be a culture of savages<sup>64</sup>. Naturally, there was little factual information to anchor these claims, though it was common to make the distinction between the Native Americans' nomadic tendencies and the supposed sedentary and agricultural Mound-Builders. This ignored existing evidence of some Indian societies being sedentary and agricultural, including reports from Hernando de Soto's chronicler in the sixteenth century<sup>65</sup> and accounts of William Bartram's journeys in 1773<sup>66</sup> through the American Southeast. This would indicate that Native American populations very well could have the sophistication to construct the mounds, undermining the one potential attempt at supporting this argument with reason.

#### 2. Mound culture was older than Indian culture

This argument was the most difficult to accurately counter at the time, given the unbelievably wide variance of possible dates for the Mound-Builder civilization's existence, as well as the many techniques used for estimating these dates. Caleb Atwater made note of how Native American artifacts were always buried close to the surface, while Mound-Builder artifacts were much deeper<sup>67</sup>, indicating their greater age, all before stratigraphy was an established

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<sup>63</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 173.

<sup>64</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 102.

<sup>65</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 174.

<sup>66</sup> William Bartram, *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida, the Cherokee Country, the Extensive Territories of the Muscogulges*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, PA: James and Johnson, 1791), 91, digital file.

<sup>67</sup> Atwater, "Western Antiquities," 22.

archaeological practice<sup>68</sup>. Reverend Manasseh Cutler was reported to have estimated the age of a mound by counting the rings in a tree-stump, and, noticing new trees growing from decayed stumps<sup>69</sup>, expected the mound was built in the 14th century<sup>70</sup>, inaccurate due to his not knowing a tree can grow more than one ring in a year<sup>71</sup>. Others even relied on timelines that fit their origin story, even dating the Moundbuilders back thousands of years<sup>72</sup> without relying on any kind of scientific method. Others, including non-missing race proponents Benjamin Franklin<sup>73</sup> and the myth-slayer Cyrus Thomas himself<sup>74</sup>, speculated incorrectly that the mounds were built after Europeans had reached the New World. In this area, 19th century archaeologists were severely limited by the technology and techniques available at the time, though today's understandings of the peopling of the Americas makes this discussion irrelevant. Given that we currently understand the Native American ancestors to have crossed into the New World "more than 13,000 years ago"<sup>75</sup>, their presence stretched much further back than was believed in the 19th century, and all of the predicted dates would not have been older than their culture.

### 3. There were alphabetically inscribed tablets in the mounds

One of the arguments in favor of the lost race theory was that tablets had been discovered with inscriptions in Old World alphabets, and here we encounter many micro-problems that bled into the mainstream understandings of the mounds. Throughout the 19th century, several different hoaxes were attempted to support certain theories, many of which were exposed in their time as well as confirmed by modern archaeologists. One example is the Walam Olum, a 1836 hoax by Constantine Samuel Rafinesque to give weight to the popular extinction through warfare narrative. He claimed to have discovered an ancient Lenape tablet detailing a story called the Walam Olum, chronicling the Native Americans' journey from Asia and conquering of the Mound-Builders. The Lenape people refuted this story, and a modern researcher has shown the writing to be a mix of Egyptian, Chinese and Mayan<sup>76</sup>. The Newark Holy Stones, a series of inscribed artifacts found in mounds in Newark, Ohio<sup>77</sup>, were attempts at

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<sup>68</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 165.

<sup>69</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 364.

<sup>70</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 166.

<sup>71</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 364.

<sup>72</sup> Dahl, "Mound-Builders, Mormons," 182.

<sup>73</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 344.

<sup>74</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 174.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 169.

<sup>77</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 176.

proof that the Mound-Builders descended from the Lost Tribes of Israel. The first find, called the Keystone<sup>78</sup>, was criticized for its modern hebrew and witness-less discovery<sup>79</sup>. When a journal then claimed the alleged discoverer was searching for a tablet with the Ten Commandments<sup>80</sup>, such a find was made, with the errors of the previous instance fixed, with older hebrew used and a witness to corroborate the story, though there were still anachronisms in the text<sup>81</sup>. These hoaxes were exposed in their time and often discounted<sup>82</sup>, but that did not prevent the idea of them from remaining part of the legend.

#### 4. Indians were never witnessed building mounds and had no knowledge of who built them

This argument is a blatant falsehood, ignoring multiple written accounts of Native Americans making use of mounds. Hernando de Soto's chronicler, the Gentleman of Elvas, mentions mounds when describing the Indian town of Ucita<sup>83</sup>, while another chronicler on the same expedition does the same of Indians in Florida<sup>84</sup>. French travellers in the 18th century described a mound in a town near the Mississippi River<sup>85</sup>, and William Clark made similar remarks when exploring the American West<sup>86</sup>. In his report, Thomas gathered many of these accounts and concluded this argument to be wholly based in ignorance.<sup>87</sup>

#### 5. Metal objects found in the mounds were beyond the metallurgical skills of the Indians

This conclusion must have been a result of poor archaeological practice, as Thomas personally examined the artifacts in question and found no reason to believe any complex metallurgy was involved in their creation<sup>88</sup>. Frederic W. Putnam, curator of Harvard's Peabody Museum, went through the original reports and refuted individual points, such as traces of iron

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<sup>78</sup> J. Hutson McCulloch, "An Annotated Transcription of the Ohio Decalogue Stone," *Epigraphic Society Occasional Papers* 21 (1992): 56, PDF.

<sup>79</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 176.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 177.

<sup>82</sup> Mason, "The Relation," 659.

<sup>83</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 180.

<sup>84</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 235.

<sup>85</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 180.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Feder, "The Myth," 181.



rust actually being copper rust<sup>89</sup> and describing how a specific artifact was created “simply by hammering”<sup>90</sup>. The false identification and description of artifacts, likely coupled with a lack of metallurgical expertise, caused this to be part of the Mound-Builder narrative, while closer examination revealed it to be unfounded.

**Conclusion:**

The Mound-Builders theories are important, both within the history of American archaeology and as examples of pseudoarchaeology. The intense interest and curiosity generated by the mounds spurred archaeology forward, and many firsts for the discipline in the new world were done to further this pursuit. They also serve as reminders of the importance of rational scientific practice, living examples of ignorance and imagination can corrupt the past.

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<sup>89</sup> Silverberg, *The Mound*, Location 1792.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

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