Who Built the Mounds?

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Since the romantic postulate of a separate race of mound builders has been abandoned, archeologists are giving increasing consideration to the possibility of determining the tribal identities of the Indians responsible for the construction of the various types of earthworks found throughout the eastern woodlands and plains areas. The literature available shows scant interest in a related question, namely, whether the remains were built by men or by women, irrespective of tribal affiliation. Superficially, one may say that archeologists generally envisage men rather than women as having engaged in construction of the earthworks;[1] perhaps such a statement represents the archeologists' real viewpoint, and the matter is not critically discussed for lack of direct evidence. There is, however, a diversity of indirect evidence which bears on this question; this evidence, which is both of an ethnographical and archeological nature, I propose to discuss under three heads.

(1) **Division of Labor.**—Among practically all of the tribes of the eastern area, men engaged in the tasks appertaining to hunting, fishing, and warfare; women were occupied with cultivating food plants, gathering wild vegetable products, preparing and cooking food, transporting burdens, procuring firewood and water, and a variety of other occupations. Man's work consisted of more strenuous, but also more intermittent labor; women's work was less arduous, but of such a nature as to keep her more or less continually occupied. This division of labor on a sexual basis was generally and consistently adhered to; the fact is amply attested in the reports of early travelers and also receives attention in ethnographic literature of the present day.[2] The general pattern, it is true, varied slightly in some of its items from tribe to tribe,[3] but essentially it prevailed as outlined above, and there is little reason to doubt that, in point of time as well as in point of wide distribution, this pattern is an old and basic feature in the cultures of aboriginal eastern America. The marked differences which exist between the aboriginal Indian pattern and that of our own culture led many early writers to characterize Indian women as "drudges," "slaves to their husbands," "submissive," etc., although such observations as the following were also occasionally offered: "the women [Dakota] . . . seem to bear their laborious lot with cheerfulness and seem to consider that department as their appropriate sphere."[4] Indian men, likewise, take

[1] Shetrone, in a general discussion of mound construction, refers to "the primitive workman" as masculine in sex (**7**, pp. 42-43); in referring to the Hopewell group he observes, "Each individual of the community probably contributed to the task" (**7**, pp. 193-194). Hinsdale, in computing the time required for building earthworks, deals with "one man's" probable output and the number of men required for constructing an embankment of certain dimensions (**4**, pp. 34-35).

[2] For a few of the numerous references which might be cited, see **10**, p. 139; **8**, pp. 384-388; **5**, p. 107; **3**, pp. 968-973; **9**, pp. 228-229; **11**, pp. 243-244; **2**, pp. 301-303.

[3] Among various Southeastern tribes, for example, housebuilding was a male occupation (**8**, p. 385; **9**, p. 229; **10**, p. 139), while among tribes farther north it was done mainly by women.

[4] **5**, p. 107.

quite for granted the continuous round of tasks which customarily it is the duty of women to discharge. "My mother was a good woman; she was always busy working, from sun-up all day long," a Shawnee informant commented. When it was intimated that perhaps women had the long end of the bargain, my male informant patiently elaborated on what was to him so obvious a fact. "That was what woman was created for—to take care of the man and the house, all the time."[5]

Bearing the above facts relating to the sexual division of labor in mind, let us consider certain archeological findings relating to the construction of the tumuli of the eastern and central areas. Essentially these tumuli are accretions, great or small as the case may be, of individual loads of earth. Their construction is simple; primarily they represent none-too-arduous, but sustained labor. Individuals, equipped with burden baskets or perhaps using their leather skirts as receptacles, filled their containers with earth from areas where the ground had been loosened, near the site for the mound. Each individual then carried the load of earth to the mound site and dumped it there. A single load usually weighed, according to Shetrone's measurements, 20-25 pounds; other archeologists estimate 45 pounds per load. On the larger mounds construction often continued over a period of several years; the seasonal lines on cross sections indicate where work on the mound stopped temporarily, to be resumed again later.[6]

As we have already pointed out, among the historic tribes of eastern America, women were in the habit of keeping steadily occupied with repetitious tasks of a fairly arduous nature. Working the soil and carrying burdens were, notably, feminine occupations. According to the archeological record, these two activities were precisely the major ones involved in the construction of mounds and other earthworks. Since artifacts and burials found in the mounds show that the cultures of the various tribes responsible for the tumuli were similar in fundamental respects to the cultures of historic eastern groups, it seems reasonable to infer, therefore, that the division of labor among the tribes whose cultures are known to us only through archeology, was organized on much the same basis as it was among the historic tribes.

(2) **Implements and Receptacles.**—The type of implements used in mound construction furnishes additional indirect evidence. Archeologists mention the digging stick, stone hoes, clamshells and shoulder blades of deer and elk as having been used to loosen the earth needed for the tumuli, and conical baskets as serving to carry the earth to the mound site.[7] In a source account for the Choctaw, mention is made of earth having been carried on the blade bones of the buffalo, as well as in cane baskets.[8] Parallel references for all these tools are to be found in the ethnographic literature. The digging stick, a straight three-foot shaft of wood pointed at one or both ends, the "grubbing hoe" or hack made of a forked branch with one fork cut off about five inches above the crotch, and more durable hoes consisting of a bone, shell, or stone

[5] Shawnee field notes of the author.

[6] **7**, pp. 42-44, 194 and fig. 116; **4**, pp. 34-35.

[7] **1**, pp. 269-270; **7**, p. 43, fig. 116.

[8] **10**, p. 20.

blade affixed to a straight stick handle—such were until very recently the implements used primarily by Indian women throughout the eastern and central areas for gathering wild roots and tubers or in cultivating the soil. Men used these tools rarely, if at all. In carrying burdens, women, not men, used the conical burden basket attached to a tump line which passed across the forehead or over the chest; the burden basket, it might also be pointed out, was not only used exclusively by women, but the manufacture of it, as well as of all other basketry articles, was entirely woman's concern.

Skin aprons are also mentioned as having been used to carry the earth wherewith mounds were built. Among some of the mound-building peoples wrap-around or double-apron skirts may have been worn by men as well as women; evidence from the burial of a male (?) in the Nowlin mound in Dearborn county, Indiana, suggests as much.[9] However, realistic terra cotta figurines from the Turner group in Hamilton county, Ohio, portray several male figures wearing a single garment consisting of a breechclout, whereas the only female figure shown is garbed in a wrap-around skirt.[10]

In regard to point (2) we find, then, that the implements and receptacles used in mound construction are those which, among historic tribes, women were accustomed to use in connection with their daily tasks. If the archeologists' assumption is correct that earth was also occasionally transported in a short apron-like skirt, then figures from at least one mound group show that the skirt was a woman's garment and was not, customarily, worn by the men of that particular group.

(3) **Traditions.**—In the traditions of the Choctaw, and also of the Cherokee, we have evidence which relates directly to our inquiry. To turn to the Choctaw material, in 1904 Dr. Gideon Lincecum, who, according to Swanton, "knew the Choctaw thoroughly,"[11] published a traditional account of the building, by the Choctaw, of two mounds at Nanih Waiya, in Winston county, Mississippi. In one of these mounds the Choctaw say they deposited the bones of their ancestors, which they had previous to that time packed with them for many generations. These bones, of themselves, made a large mound. Over the huge pile of bones they put cypress bark, which "was neatly placed on till the bone sacks were all closely covered in, as dry as a tent. While the tool carriers were working with the bark, women and children, and all the men, except the hunters, carried earth continually, until the bark was all covered from sight, constituting a mound half as high as the tallest fir tree."[12] At the time this mound was built, so the tradition asserts, the Choctaw were subsisting by hunting and gathering wild products; the hunters, therefore, presumably formed a goodly proportion of the male population. Bearing this point in mind, we have good reason to believe that the number of men engaged in building the mound was in

[9] **1**, p. 227-228.

[10] 7, figs. 64-65 and p. 124. Cf. also fig. 67, showing a human effigy pipe of a male figure wearing a loin cloth, which was taken from the Adena mound in Ross co., Ohio.

[11] **10**, p. 12.

[12] *Ibid*, p. 12.

all probability much less than the number of women engaged in the same task.

Relative to the second mound at Nanih Waiya, the mound upon which was placed the sacred pole which had guided the Choctaw in their migrations, we find that this mound was erected entirely by men, but that they displayed a singular ineptitude for the task. The guardian of the sacred pole suggested that certain men, "the good, lazy Ishtahullos, yushpakamini, dreamers, spirit talkers and medicine men [who] had not found it convenient to assist . . . in the contruction of the great monument for the dead" be assigned to build the mound for the pole. Accordingly, "the whole of the conjurers and sorcerers [were summoned] to commence the work. They came, but they were so extremely awkward and lazy that the work progressed quite slowly. The Ishtahullo, who was superintendent of the work, exerted his whole power to encourage them to facilitate the building of the mound. It was all to no effect. They grumbled from morning till night and moved so slowly at their work, that a child could have done as much work as they accomplished in a day. The superintendent shortened their daily supply of food. They did less work and grumbled more. He made their daily food still less. They, with but few exceptions, ran off into the woods, and scattering themselves among the camps of the hunters, sponged upon them until the hunters, becoming tired of them, drove them from their camps like dogs. They returned to Nanih Waiya,"[13] but not to labor. A council was called, at which only 30 conjurers, those known to be industrious men, appeared. The great majority of the dreamers and spirit talkers, it was soon learned, had again run off, taking some 200 women as companions, mostly young wives of men who were away hunting. Searching parties could find no trace of these "lazy, heartless" men nor of the women, and, after diligent search, reported that "the conjurers must have gone off on the wind." [14] The few industrious medicine men who had attended the council labored faithfully on the mound, however, and in due course it was completed in good style and the sacred pole set therein.

Besides the two mounds at Nanih Waiya, there is also an earthen embankment surrounding the tumuli; Choctaw tradition, as recorded by Lincecum, is somewhat indefinite as to who constructed the embankment. Over 1000 of the warriors are said to have been absent at the time it was hurriedly built; the task of laying off and superintending the work was, we are told, assigned to men, the earth for the wall itself was thrown up "by the people, old and young." [15] But if this statement is rather vague, another concerning individual burial tumuli is remarkably definite. "There are," reports Lincecum, "occasionally found among the great number of tumuli scattered over the land, mounds of larger dimensions than ordinary ones. These mounds were constructed by females. Upon the death in camp of a man who had an affectionate wife, his mourning teckchi (wife), regardless of the customary time to cry, would throw down her hair and with all her strength and that of her children would

[13] *Ibid*, p. 22-24.
[14] *Ibid*, p. 23.
[15] *Ibid*, p. 26.

carry earth, and build upon the mound as long as they could find food of any kind that would sustain life. They would then return to camp, worn out skeletons." [16]

This concludes our evidence from the Choctaw; turning now to the Cherokee, we also find among this tribe certain definite statements as to the methods of mound construction. Mooney was told that "When they were ready to build a mound they began by laying a circle of stones on the surface of the ground. Next they made fire in the center of the circle and put near it the body of some prominent chief or priest who had lately died—some say seven chief men from the different clans—together with an Ulûñsu'ti stone, an uktena scale or horn, a feather from the right wing of an eagle or great tla'nuwa . . . and beads of seven colors . . . The mound was then built up with earth, which the women brought in baskets, and as they piled it above the stones, the bodies of their great men, and their sacred things, they left an open place at the fire in the center . . ." [17]

Both the Choctaw and the Cherokee material, taken by itself, would be evidence for nothing further than the methods of mound construction for these two tribes. Taken in conjunction with the previous evidence relating to division of labor and the type of implements used, however, the traditions quoted above suggest that these were typical, rather than isolated instances.

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[16] *Ibid*, p. 21.

[17] **6**, p. 396.