

Some Notes on Prehistoric Mortuary Sites From the American Illinois

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Up the steep slopes of "Cardiac" hill, south of Eldred, in west central Illinois, Biological anthropologist Jane Buikstra⁽¹⁾ began to excavate a mound. This was a mortuary site, having many graves, in one of which there lay a skeleton of a man (and not of a woman). Male brow ridges and jaw are larger and more rugged than in most women. More importantly, the shape of the pelvis differs significantly between men and women; the female pelvic outlet expands during the adolescent growth spurt to facilitate childbirth. That is our best means of estimating sex⁽²⁾.

On a tour of the site, one could see a burial mound built by Middle Woodland people, Circa 100 B.C. – A.D. 250.

We try to learn as much as we can about the group that built the mound from the way the dead were interred. As every society has different procedures for burying its dead, it is possible to develop

¹ Buikstra was presidentelect of the American Anthropological Association, and president of the Center for American Archeology, which has headquarters in Kampsville, Illinois. She is a biological anthropologist and an archeologist (in North America, archeology is a subdivision of anthropology). In recognition of her achievements, she was elected to the (American) National Academy of Sciences in 1987.

² The University of Chicago Magazine, volume 81, Number 3, Spring 1989, pp. 6 ff.; and Cf. Arthur Baessler, *Peruanische Mumien*, Berlin 1906; Marshall T. Newman, "Some Indian Skeletal Material from the Central Coast of Peru". Papers of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Vol. 28, No. 1, 1947.

theories about social custom from observing these procedures. This man, to whom the skeleton belonged, was buried in an extended position (lying flat on his back) in the center of this mound ; he was the tallest person by far in the mound. We found this pattern repeated in many of the Middle Woodland bluffcrest mounds which were excavated. A tall male would be placed in the center of the crypt, with several people around him. There were sometimes bundle burials⁽¹⁾ at the periphery of the mound⁽²⁾

Since the first Europeans stepped ashore on the east coast of the new world , people have speculated about the many earthworks they found lining the major river systems of eastern North America⁽³⁾.

Over the years, Euro-Americans conjured up many myths about the mounds. Partly because of the size of some of the mounds, (such as Monks Mound at Cahokia , Illinois , near present - day St. Louis, which is 100-foot high and originally covered 16 acres) . and because of the sheer quantity of earthworks, which numbered in the thousands, newly arrived European settlers concluded that it was beyond the ability of contemporary Indians and their immediate ancestors to marshal the

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- 1 A bundle burial is when the body is kept in a special place , sometimes on a specially built platform , until the flesh has deteriorated. The bones are then "bundled" together and buried at the very edge of the mound. Or the person may have been interred , and later , the bones removed and reinterred as a bundle burial, to make room for the interment of new bodies in an extended position.
 - 2 Cf. T. Dale Stewart, "Skeletal Remains with cultural Associations from the Chicama, Moche and Virú Valleys, Peru", Proceedings, U.S. National Museum, Vol. 93, Washington 1943, PP. 153 - 185 ; ID., "Skeletal Remains from paracas, Peru", American Journal of Physical Anthropology, N.S., Vol. I, Philadelphia 1943, PP. 47 - 61.
 - 3 Adolf Bastian, Die Kulturländer des alten America, 3 Vols., Berlin 1878 - 89.

labor necessary for mound construction . Some people speculated that the mounds had been built by Israelites or Tartars , or even by people from the "lost" continent of Atlantis. Others thought they had been built by Indians who had long since travelled south to find the highly visible civilizations of Mexico and South America⁽¹⁾

By digging the mounds that had been built in the lower Illinois River valley (dubbed Lowilva), Archeologists have found evidence that people occupied the valley for at least 10,000 years. The area is rich in archeological sites ; because it is largely rural , these sites have not been destroyed by urban sprawl .

Two major rivers – the Mississippi and the Illinois – meet at the base of the valley. Archeologists have long known that major populations of prehistoric people lived in the great river valleys of the Midwest, because such a habitat provided hunter – gatherers with an abundance of plant, animal , and aquatic resources⁽²⁾

There are hundreds of burial mounds in Lowilva . Much of the soil is basic (or nonacidic) , which means that soil conditions favor the preservation of human skeletal remains .

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- 1 Aleš Hrdlička, the Genesis of the American Indian (19 th International Congress of Americanists, 1915), Washington 1917, PP. 559 – 568 ; Thor Heyerdahl, American Indians in the Pacific, London 1952 ; Betty J. Meggers and Clifford Evans, "A transpacific Contact in 3000 B.C.", In : Scientific American, vol. 214, No. 1, 1966, PP. 28 – 35 ; Michael D. Coe, "Archaeological Linkages with North and South America at La Victoria, Guatemala", in : American Anthropologist, Vol. 62, 1960, PP. 363 – 393 ; Roland B. Dixon, "Contacts with America Across the southern Pacific", in Diamond Jenness, The American Aborigines ; Their Origin and Antiquity, Toronto 1933, pp. 313 – 353.
 - 2 Salvador Canals Frau, Prehistoria de América, Buenos Aires 1950.

Archeologists who had focused upon the excavation of village sites in Lowilva had already documented a population increase during recent prehistory. During Late Woodland times (A.D.250 – A.D. 1000), people in Lowilva began to cultivate maize (corn). By Mississippian times (A.D. 1000 – A.D. 1300), they had become dependent on maize ⁽¹⁾. This marked the beginning of a very important change , the shift from a hunter – gatherer way of life to that of agriculturists ⁽²⁾ .

In Lowilva , the mound-building tradition began approximately 6000 years ago. That was roughly 1000 years after the earliest evidence we have for the development of settled communities. Actually , the only burials we have found so far from Early Archaic time (8000 B.C. – 6000 B.C.) were in village middens⁽³⁾. The first formally structured areas reserved exclusively for disposal of the dead were built during the Middle Archaic Helton Phase (6000 B.C. – 2500 B.C.)

Based on ethnographic accounts, we think that these formally bounded cemeteries may have been created by people to define a territory . These first cemeteries may have been established , along with burial rituals , as an expression of solidarity with the ancestors.

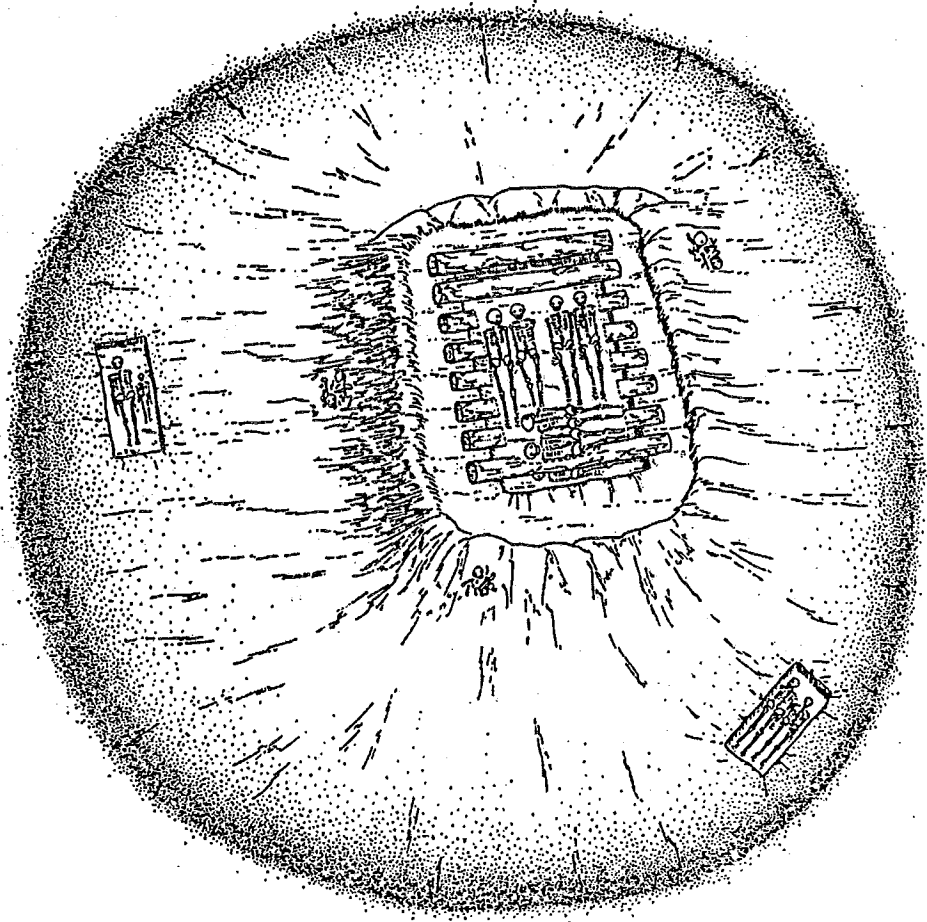
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- 1 Paul C. Mangelsdorf, "New Evidence on the Origin and Ancestry of Maize", in : *American Antiquity*, 19,4, 1954, PP. 409 f. ; ID. and R.G. Reeves, the Origin of Indian Corn and its relatives. Texas Agricultural experimental Station, Bulletin No. 574, 1939 ; Hugh c. Cutler, "Races of Maize in South America", Botanical Museum Leaflets, Vol. 12, No. 8, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. 1946, PP. 257 – 291.
 - 2 Junius B. Bird, "America's oldest Farmers", in: *Natural History*, 57,7, New York, 1948, PP. 296 – 303 and 334 – 335 ; and Cf. J. Alden Mason, *The ancient Civilizations of Peru*, A pelican-book A395, London and High Wycombe, 1968, PP. 14 – 37.
 - 3 A midden is the layer of refuse found at a prehistoric residential site.

We found that the Middle Archaic mounds on the bluffcrests were relatively simple compared to those built by later cultures . Mostly they consisted of shallow pits covered by about three inches of earth.

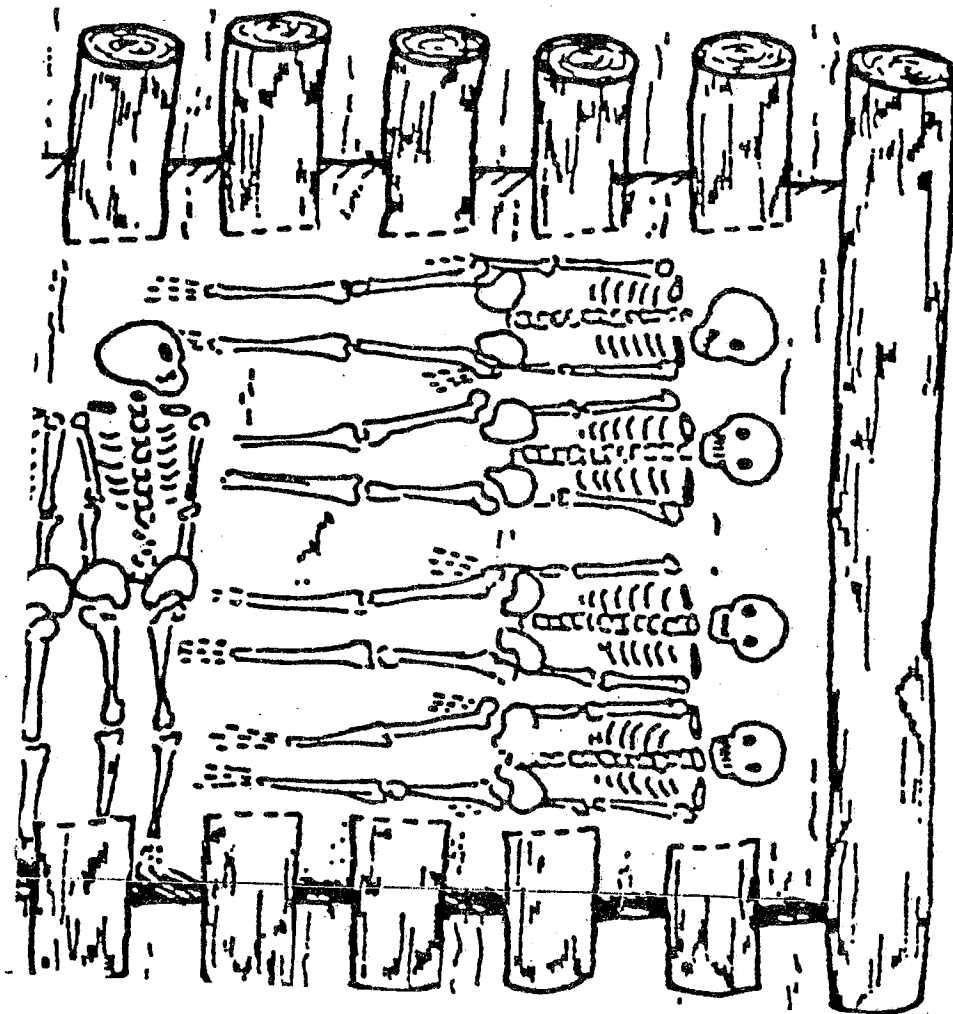
In a Middle Archaic mound at the Elizabeth site (circa 5000 – 2500 B.C.), which consisted of a series of 14 mounds above a village site, there were four young adult males, each with two to three projectile points within the chest cavity, implying that they may have been killed in battle. The disarticulated remains of at least 12 other persons had been placed with the fill above and beside this tomb.

Middle Archaic people had at least two different strategies for burying the dead. In one place they buried those people with severe infirmities or chronic diseases, individuals who were not capable of operating fully as hunter – gatherers . In another they buried those who had been healthy, active adults, we still have not found many remains of infants or children from the Middle Archaic, So one can assume they had yet another procedure for them ⁽¹⁾.

1 For more information about Ancient Man in America : Jesse D. Jennings and Edward Norbeck (Editors), Prehistoric Man in the New World, William March Rice University, Houston 1964, PP. 23 – 81, by Alex D. Kreiger ; E.H. Sellards, Early Man in America, Austin, Texas, 1952 ; Kenneth Macgowan, Early Man in the new World, New York, 1950 ; H.M. Wormington, Ancient Man in North America, popular Series. The Denver Museum of Natural History, Denver, 1949.



A DRAWING OF
A MIDDLE WOODLAND BURIAL MOUND



DETAIL, DESCRIPTION ON PAGE



THE HEAD OF A MUMMY, NEARLY 1000 YEARS OLD, FOUND IN
A GHIRABAYA SITE IN PERU. NOTE THE PRESERVATION OF THE
FEATHER HEADDRESS



AT THE ESTEQUINA SITE IN PERU (1000-1300 AD) A STONE CRYPT WITH A SUBSURFACE TOMB IN THE FOREGROUND