

Preliminary Report on the Excavation of the "Great Mound" at Mounds State Park in Madison County, Indiana

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Abstract

A summary of two season's excavations of the "Great Mound" at Mounds State Park is presented. Two major phases in the construction of the mound were apparent. The primary mound was a "platform" consisting of three superimposed burned clay floors, each covered with a layer of ash. Over this had been placed a capping of earth which covered a subfloor log tomb adjacent to the primary mound. Interpretations are given concerning the presence of two distinct post hole patterns related to the mound, and the results of a test trench in another mound are summarized. The "Great Mound" is compared with other excavated "sacred circles" and its chronological and cultural relationships are discussed.

Introduction

The earthwork complex at Mounds State Park near Anderson, Indiana, has long been recognized as one of the more unusual archaeological sites in the Ohio Valley. Within the park are found five circular enclosures; two panduriform or "fiddle-shaped" enclosures; one earthwork shaped like a figure-8 open at both ends; and one rectangular enclosure.

The largest and best preserved of these earthworks is a circular enclosure known as the "Great Mound." It consists of an embankment averaging 6 feet in height; an interior ditch; an entranceway to the south; and a small mound about 45 feet in diameter on the central platform.

During the first field season,¹ a contour map was made of the "Great Mound," and most of the mound on the central platform was excavated. The excavation of this mound was completed during the second season, after which a bulldozer was used to clear the topsoil from the surrounding central platform. This revealed a number of post holes in a roughly circular pattern. The final project of the season was the excavation of a test trench in a small mound on the western end of the larger of the two panduriform earthworks.

Mound Structure

Two major phases in the construction of the mound were apparent. The primary mound was a "platform" consisting of three superimposed burned clay floors, each covered with a layer of ash. Over this had been placed a capping of earth which covered a subfloor log tomb adjacent to the primary mound (4, C. F. White, *unpublished data*).

¹ The excavations at Mounds State Park were directed by Claude F. White in 1968 and by Kent D. Vickery in 1969. The project was financed by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources with the cooperation of the Glenn A. Black Laboratory of Archaeology, Indiana University.

The primary mound platform was oval and measured about 25 feet by 28 feet. It was underlain by a prepared floor of fine-grained silt, which was probably obtained from the nearby White River. A depression had been excavated into subsoil for the reception of this silt layer, but the fact that it was found at a higher elevation than the subsoil in the surrounding central platform suggests that the entire mound may have been built on a natural knoll.

The thickness of the platform and its underlying silt layer was about 2.25 feet. It was relatively flat, but terminated at the edges in a wedge-shape, thus indicating that each successive layer of burned clay and ash covered an area slightly less extensive than the one below it.

The ash covering the upper two burned clay layers was white and relatively "pure," a condition which could have been caused by total incineration of the material burned or the intentional removal of foreign matter such as charcoal and cremated bone fragments. The earth of which the upper two burned clay layers was composed was relatively soft in consistency and burned to a dull red color. The lower burned clay floor was generally level; of uniform thickness; and was baked very hard throughout. This suggests that intense fires had been built repeatedly over its surface. The lower ash layer was dry and compacted, a condition which could have been brought about by the deposition of earth on top of it, thus sealing it off and inhibiting the percolation of water down to it. The compaction of the ash may be explained by the overlying weight of two more layers of burned clay and ash, as well as the final mantle of earth constituting the mound capping.

Occasional bands of hard black burned material, mostly ash, were noted on the lower floor of the platform. This may indicate that burning took place in a reducing atmosphere, thereby resulting in incomplete combustion. The nature of the bottom burned clay layer, however, suggests sustained firing in the open and complete combustion. It is likely that fires were built on this floor for some period of time, and that the surface was scraped clean of ash and other debris periodically. During the final burning, earth was thrown over the platform, thereby causing the fire to smolder and turn the earth and ash black in spots. The dirt thus deposited then became the middle burned clay layer.

The original function of the platform is unknown, but Warren K. Moorehead speculated that it might have been a "dance floor" when an auger test made by Moorehead and Glenn A. Black in 1931 disclosed ". . . an 8 inch ash and burned earth bed . . . [with] a possible trace of calcined bone in the ash removed" (2). Nothing was noted in the structure of the platform that could either confirm or refute Moorehead's observation.

Another theory is that the primary mound platform served as the central crematorium for the entire earthwork complex, in which case one would expect to find redeposited cremations in the other mounds in the complex, but without evidence that they were burned *in situ*. It is always possible that the primary mound platform served both of these purposes or other, as yet unknown, purposes.

Post Hole Patterns

A number of post holes were found at the edges of the primary mound platform (Fig. 1). Five of these were large, and were located near the eastern edge. Three smaller ones were found in back of them. This pattern was nearly duplicated at the other end of the platform, where six large post holes were found—four at the edge and two more in back of them. The large post holes were filled with loose black soil containing an abundance of charcoal. They were about 1 foot in diameter and from 1-2 feet deep, with the exception of 2 shallow post holes, 1 at each edge of the platform and in identical positions with relation to the other post holes in alignment with them. Several others were also noted at the northern edge of the mound, but they were generally small, shallow, and were not placed in any noticeable arrangement. The size and placement of the larger post holes suggests that they may have held the vertical support posts for some type of roofed structure over the primary mound platform.

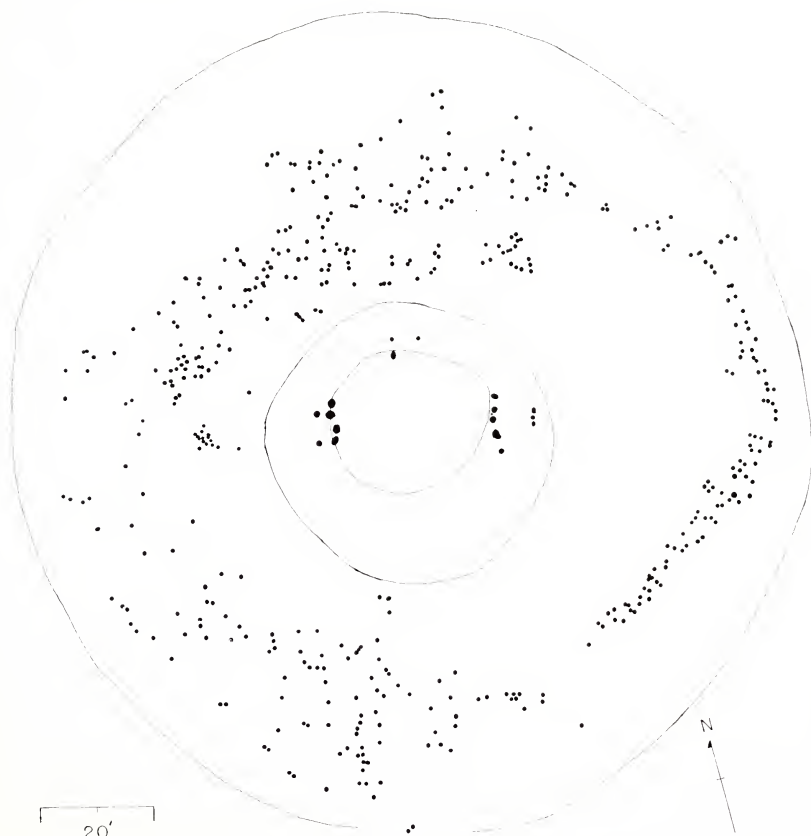


FIGURE 1. Central platform of "Great Mound" showing primary mound, mound capping, post holes, entranceway, and inside edge of ditch.

Approximately 450 small post holes were revealed on the central platform in a roughly circular pattern surrounding the mound. In the eastern portion of the platform, they were confined to a narrow zone which tended to follow in a straight line near the inside edge of the ditch. They were scattered elsewhere on the platform, perhaps suggesting periodic reconstruction of the fence, but the generally circular arrangement was apparent all around the periphery of the mound. With the exception of one place where a test trench had previously obliterated some of the post holes, there was no obvious break in the pattern. The post holes were very shallow and small, averaging about 0.2 foot in diameter. They were filled with light brown earth which was difficult to distinguish from subsoil. Most of them were pointed at the bottom, in contrast with the larger post holes at the edge of the primary mound platform, which were rounded or flat at the base.

The post holes on the central platform probably represent small stakes or saplings, sharpened to a point at one end and placed in such a way that branches could have been woven between them in wattle-like fashion. The resulting brush fence or screen would have isolated the primary mound platform and prevented outsiders from observing any activities which might have taken place within. There was no clear evidence of an opening through the fence, but suggestions of one or possibly two pathways were noted to the north and south, where post holes in both locations led from the ditch to the edge of the mound capping in relatively straight lines. Since no large gap in the pattern was observed, however, the possibility of a baffled entranceway cannot be dismissed.

Features

A rectangular subfloor log tomb was found adjacent to and south of the primary mound, and was apparently the central feature of the later mound capping. The tomb was about 5 feet wide and 7 feet long, and was constructed of logs which had been placed in a "lean-to" fashion; burned; and then covered with earth while the structure was still burning. Two burials had been placed on the floor of the tomb, and associated with them were some fragments of mica and a platform pipe. The burials consisted of a redeposited cremation and a secondary or "bundle" burial, the latter of which was an adult male. A total of 13 deer bone awls placed upright around the edge of the tomb suggests that they may have been used to tack down a covering of cloth or animal skin. This trait has also been noted at the Seip mound in Ohio (7).

A roughly circular feature about 5 feet in diameter and a rectangular basin about 3 feet by 3.5 feet were found within the primary mound. Evidence of burning on the interior and the presence of a baked clay ridge surrounding each of these features suggests the possibility that they once served as crematory basins, but no concentrations of bone fragments or artifacts were found in them.

Burials

A total of six burials were excavated in the "Great Mound." With the exception of the two burials in the log tomb, however, all of them were apparently intrusive. Two of these burials, one adult male and one adult female, were flexed inhumations which were found near the surface of the mound. There was clear evidence that one of these was buried in an intrusive pit. A concentration of burned human bone fragments representing a redeposited cremation was found in disturbed earth near the center of the primary mound, and another re-deposited cremation of a single individual was present in a pit which had been intruded through all three floors of the platform. Although there were no artifacts found in association with any of these burials, the practice of intruding burials into mounds is typically a Late Woodland trait, and has been documented for several Late Woodland cultures in the Ohio Valley.

Artifacts

With the exception of the mica, bone awls, and platform pipe associated with the log tomb, most of the artifacts recovered from the "Great Mound" were found in disturbed fill dirt.

All of the deer bone awls which had been placed around the tomb were made from split metatarsals, some of which had been burned.

The platform pipe was made from material resembling limestone. It was approximately 4½ inches long and 1½ inches high. The base was slightly curved, and the bowl was constricted near the out-flaring rim. A ridge was present around the middle of the bowl, which expanded slightly from this point downward to its juncture with the base. The pipe was not keeled.

Ten of the 13 sherds recovered from the "Great Mound" were plain. Three sherds show portions of the "nested-diamond" design characteristic of New Castle Incised (3).

Eleven fragmentary bone artifacts were also found, most of which had been burned and polished. All but two were drilled completely through from both sides. Objects of this type frequently have two holes drilled through them, and evidence for this was noted on the nearly complete specimens. Three of the artifacts were in the shape of split bear canine teeth. Tentative identification of the material from which several of the bone artifacts were made revealed one of deer; one of snapping turtle; and three of bear, including two of the bone imitations of bear canines. Several are polished on one side only, as if they had originally been attached to a garment rather than worn around the neck as gorgets or pendants. Effigies in bone of split bear canine teeth have been noted in several Ohio and Illinois Hopewell sites, including Mound 25 of the Hopewell group (6).

Other artifacts from the "Great Mound" include one rectangular gorget fragment of slate and several ground stone and chipped flint artifacts, including hammerstones, scrapers, knives, and projectile points.

Some of the projectile points are corner-notched; others came from the subsoil underlying the mound and from the central platform. One has the bifurcated base typical of Archaic points.

Test Trench

A 5-foot by 10-foot test trench was excavated to a depth of 8 inches in a small mound on the larger of the two panduriform earthworks. The trench yielded a great quantity of rocks, flint chips, deer bone, chunks of burned clay, pottery and other debris. All of the material appeared to be characteristic of a village midden deposit. Approximately 200 sherds were recovered, at least 25 of which have incised designs. Cremated human bone fragments were scattered throughout the fill. Two secondarily deposited lenses of ash were noted, but there was no indication of *in situ* burning. This evidence tends to support the theory that the primary mound platform of the "Great Mound" may have served as a central crematorium.

Conclusions

The excavation of the "Great Mound" was undertaken because the excavations of other "sacred circles" have failed to provide a clear definition of the structural features or cultural affiliations involved. The first "sacred circle" to be excavated was the Mt. Horeb site in Kentucky, where Webb (10) found a very regular arrangement of paired post holes in a circular pattern measuring 97 feet in diameter. No break in the post hole pattern was noted, however, nor was there any evidence of a structure inside the fence. The "sacred circle" at Mt. Horeb did not have a mound on the central platform.

The next circular enclosure to be excavated was the Dominion Land Company site in Ohio, where Baby and Goslin (1) found the remains of a house outlined by a circular pattern of outsloping post holes underneath one of two mounds on the central platform. This house measured 40 feet in diameter, and additional post holes suggesting roof supports were located inside the pattern. No post holes were found encircling the mounds, however.

The Bertsch site in Wayne County, Indiana, was recently excavated by J. M. Heilman (*unpublished data*), who found a centrally located burial pit, a portion of a wall trench, and what appeared to be three parallel lines of post holes flanking these features, all within a circular burned structure about 30 feet in diameter on the central platform of a "sacred circle." Since plowing had defaced the surface of the central platform, it was undetermined whether or not the "sacred circle" originally enclosed a mound.

The "Great Mound" has some features in common with each of these sites, but also has some characteristics which appear to be unique. On the basis of pottery, geographical proximity, and occurrence within an earthwork complex, the closest affinities of the "Great Mound" seem to be with the New Castle site in Henry County, Indiana, from which radio-

carbon dates of A.D. 10 and A.D. 40 were obtained (9). As far as structural features are concerned, however, its ties are with the Ginther Mound in Ohio, which was an isolated mound adjacent to a "sacred circle." In his excavation of the Ginther Mound, Shetrone (5) noted a "highly specialized floor" of burned clay, as well as post holes around the edge. The fact that no burials were found which could be attributed to the people responsible for constructing the mound led Shetrone (5) to the conclusion that ". . . the impressive tumulus was erected to mark the spot where some event or occurrence of great moment and significance to its builders transpired—rather than as monument to the dead."

As far as cultural relationships are concerned, the "Great Mound" has traits considered typical of both Adena and Hopewell. Circular enclosures and incised pottery with the "nested-diamond" design have traditionally been considered characteristic of Adena, but the occurrence of a platform pipe and bone artifacts in the shape of bear canine teeth suggests Hopewellian influence. The Mt. Horeb and Dominion Land Company sites are considered to be Adena by Webb (10) and by Baby and Goslin (1). Shetrone (5) regards the Ginther Mound as basically Hopewell, but recognizes some anomalous traits. Swartz (8) and J. M. Heilman (*unpublished data*) are noncommittal about the cultural affiliation of the New Castle and Bertsch sites, but both tend to emphasize the Hopewellian aspects of each.

It is possible that the "Great Mound" represents a marginal persistence of Late Adena at a time when Hopewell was fully developed elsewhere in the Ohio Valley. The presence of several characteristically Hopewell traits, however, is clearly in evidence. In the final analysis, it is artificial to assign either the Adena or the Hopewell label exclusively to the situation at Mounds State Park. It appears, rather, that the blending of several cultural expressions produced a distinctive regional tradition during the Middle Woodland period which may be restricted to the upper Whitewater and White River drainages. The excavation of the "Great Mound" has contributed to our knowledge of this little-known cultural complex, and to our general understanding of Ohio Valley prehistory as well.

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