

## A "Partial Cremation" from the Angel Site, Vanderburgh County, Indiana

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### Introduction

The Angel Site (1), Vanderburgh County, Indiana, was an important regional center for the Angel-phase Mississippian culture which occupied the Ohio River valley of Indiana during the late prehistoric period (after A.D. 1000 and before the historic period). The 40 hectare site was enclosed by a bastioned stockade and contains several flat-topped pyramidal mounds and a plaza. It is now protected as a state memorial. Over twenty years of excavation at Angel, directed by Glenn A. Black, recovered abundant and varied material remains and demonstrated that portions of the site were intensely occupied. Because of the great complexity of the occupations at Angel, many aspects of the site are still poorly understood.

Excavations at Angel produced over 300 "burials" consisting of an unknown but greater number of individuals. Most of the burials at Angel were flesh inhumations in a variety of body positions and orientations, though secondary interments have also been recognized (1: 531-537). Of these 300 burials, only six show signs of burning. One of these, Burial 4 from subdivisions R12A and R11D, was described as unorthodox, aberrant, and inexplicable because this extended burial of a robust male aged 30 - 40 was thought to have been deliberately burned at the right maxillary, the right ilium, and the right foot, a pattern of "partial cremation" which is apparently unique at Angel (1: 337-385).

### Burial 4 R12A/R11D

The skull of Burial 4 R12A/R11D was first encountered near the end of the 1957 field school during test excavations of the "talus" slope on the east side of Mound A (Figure 1). Three blocks in subdivision R12A were excavated to determine if the slope was the result of historic period disturbances or was prehistoric in origin. The test showed that the area was the product of prehistoric activities and that it had not been disturbed except by plowing. The skull of Burial 4 R12A/R11D intruded into the northern edge of subdivision R12A and was remarkable because a pot was located at the left shoulder and the right side of the skull had apparently been burned in situ. Excavations were later extended into subdivision R11D to recover the rest of the burial (1: 337-385).

After the blocks containing the entire burial were cleared, it was apparent that a fully articulated individual had been placed within a grave dug into the floor of a semi-subterranean house. The grave was oriented parallel to one wall of the structure. The right side of the body had been charred on the right side of the face, the shoulder, the pelvic region, and the lower leg and foot. Charcoal and hard clay "around and amid the bones" was interpreted as an indication that the burial had been burned in the grave (1: 383).

Examination of the curated material from Burial 4 R12A/R11D shows that all the burned bone from this burial was "smoked" in patterns consistent with the burning of a fully articulated skeleton still connected together with ligaments. The bones of the lower right leg and foot are smoked on their ventral sides with very heavy smoking on the shin and tops of the tarsus and metatarsals. There is very light smoking or none at all on the articular surfaces of the joints of the ankle and foot. The phalanges of the right foot are unburned except for the superior surface of the first phalange of the big toe. A similar pattern of burning is also seen on the right lower arm, wrist, and hand. The most heav-

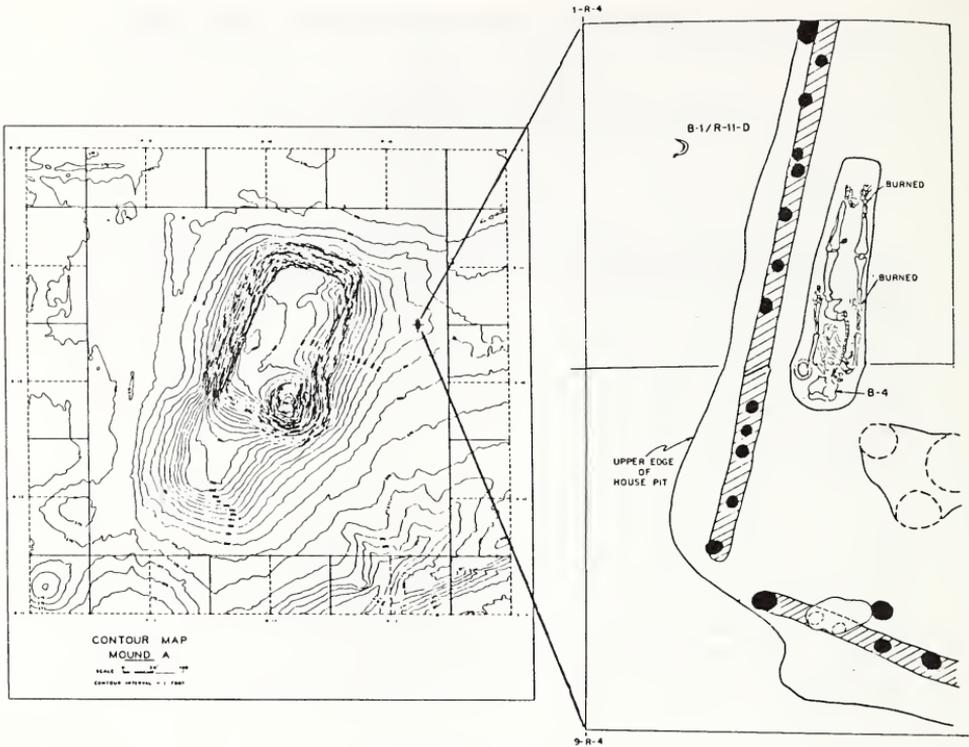


FIGURE 1. Location map of Burial 4 R12A/R11D. (Adapted from Black 1967: 37, 381, 382).

ily smoked portions of the lower right arm correspond well with the arm's placement adjacent to the right side of the pelvis.

The skull is heavily scorched in the facial region, especially on the most anterior portions of the maxilla and the mandible. The incisors, canines, and premolars of both the upper and lower dentition are badly fragmented and have broken off, leaving only the roots intact within their sockets. Both the upper and lower molars suffered less damage from heat. They are scorched but have been retained intact in their sockets. Fragments of what appears to be charred flesh were recovered from beneath the mandible, and the right gonial angle of the mandible is unsmoked with a relatively sharp demarcating line between the smoked and unsmoked portions of the mandible. The frontal bones are also smoked, with a gradual decrease in intensity toward the top of the vault. The scorched area extends onto the parietal on the right side but not on the left.

Though Black reported that parts of the post-cranial skeleton were partially calcined, the cataloged material from this burial stored in Packing Case 1103-2 does not include any calcined bone according to the definition of calcined bone used by Goldstein and Buikstra (4). However, portions of this skeleton are apparently missing from the collection, including the right ilium, the rib cage, right scapula, and the proximal ends of the right humerus and ulna. Photographs of the burial prior to removal show that all of these bones with the exception of the left side of the rib cage were in poor condition so they may have disintegrated on removal or subsequently. Smoked bones are apparent in the photographs but calcined bones are not.

### A possible interpretation of Burial 4 R12A/R11D

This burial shows few of the characteristics which make deliberate cremation a probable mortuary treatment. The low level of oxidation of the anterior surfaces of the skeleton is consistent with similar patterns on partially burned articulated extended burials from Mound 2 at the Yokem site, where a charnel house containing open graves was apparently burned (5). The restriction of the burned areas to the right side of the skeleton is probably a result of its placement in the structure with the left side adjacent to a wall and therefore partially protected.

The "partial cremation" of Burial 4 R12A/R11D may have been accidental if the structure containing the burial accidentally caught fire while the individual was interred and the grave was still open. Accidental burning has been used to explain incomplete "cremations" from Illinois Hopewell sites (2). Given that fleshed inhumations in house floors are common in the excavated village area at Angel, and that ethnographic accounts cited by Black (1: 273-281, 531-537) often describe the presence of fires within structures used for mortuary purposes, an accidental fire does not seem impossible. Alternately, the burning of Burial 4 may have been accidental in the sense that it was incidental to the deliberate burning of a charnel house as part of the mortuary ritual. Burned charnel houses located in or on small mounds have been identified at Mounds 2 and 3 at the Yokem Site (5) and at the early phases of the Kincaid Site (3) which is very similar to Angel. The location of the structure at Angel on an artificially raised area adjacent to Mound A may be significant.

### Conclusions

A reanalysis of Burial 4 R12A/R11D from Angel using more recent sources unavailable to Black suggests that the pattern of burning on this burial may not have been intentional and that it can best be explained by the burning of the structure housing the burial while the burial was in the grave but still exposed. Accidental or deliberate burning of a domestic structure temporarily used for mortuary functions or of a charnel house are possible interpretations which could only be evaluated by additional excavations to see if the simultaneous burning of multiple burials expected for a charnel house are present in the unexcavated portions of the structure.

### Literature Cited

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