

ART and BURIALS in ANCIENT OHIO

A Tour of the Mound City Necropolis



No sign of habitation meets the eye;
Only some ancient furrows I discern
And verdant mounds, and from them sadly learn
That hereabout men used to live and die.

—*Wilton*

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Sketch based on woodcut in Squier and Davis' great work, Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley, the first volume issued by the Smithsonian Institution. It shows strata of a representative mound in this group. Skeleton near top is from one of many intrusive burials made here by a people who came long after the Hopewellians.

But it was the classical contribution of archeologists E. G. Squier and E. H. Davis that first awakened America to the true legacy left by the Mound Builders. Excavating here in 1846, they saw how the mounds were made. They uncovered the ashes and the artwork of the ancients.

Their findings made Mound City world famous and inspired succeeding generations to further inquiry. Among these later explorers was Dr. William C. Mills, Director of the Ohio State Museum.



*Squier
and
Davis*



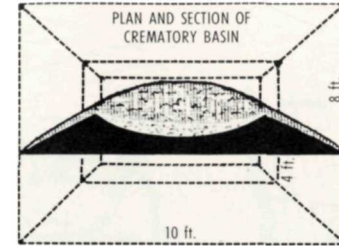
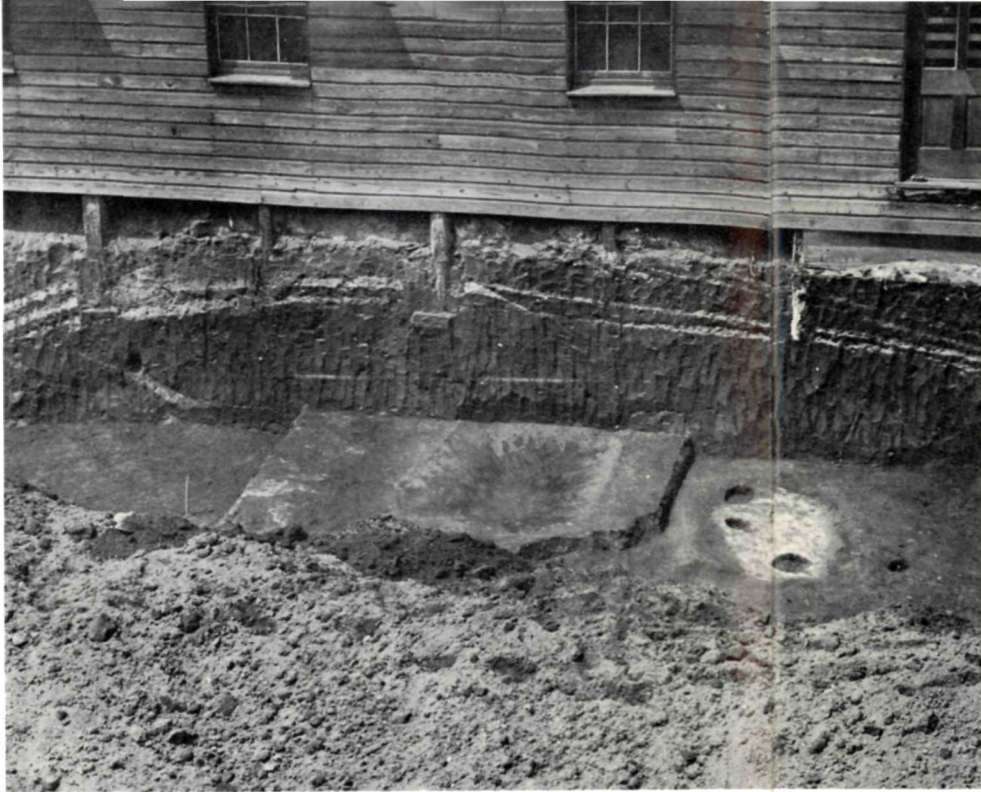


Shetrone (left) and Mills during the 1920-21 excavations. Camp Sherman barracks building in background.

In 1920-21 Mills and his assistant, H. C. Shetrone, followed up the work of Squier and Davis here. Though Mound City had been levelled during World War I to make way for Camp Sherman, Mills and Shetrone found the floors of many mounds intact. They thoroughly excavated the burials and crematories and caches of valuable objects which still remained. It was such work—here and at other mound sites—that made possible a vivid glimpse of the Hopewellian way of life.

We know that the local Hopewell people were settled though primitive farmers and that their culture lasted for about 1,000 years—from 500 B.C. to A.D. 500. Thus they had the means and the time to develop a religion rich in ceremony and art. That they were ancestors of the Indians met later by Europeans is proven by many cultural similarities.

They were accomplished traders, for burial offerings include objects of mica from the Appalachians, conch shells and shark teeth from the Gulf Coast, copper from Michigan, and obsidian from the Rocky Mountains.



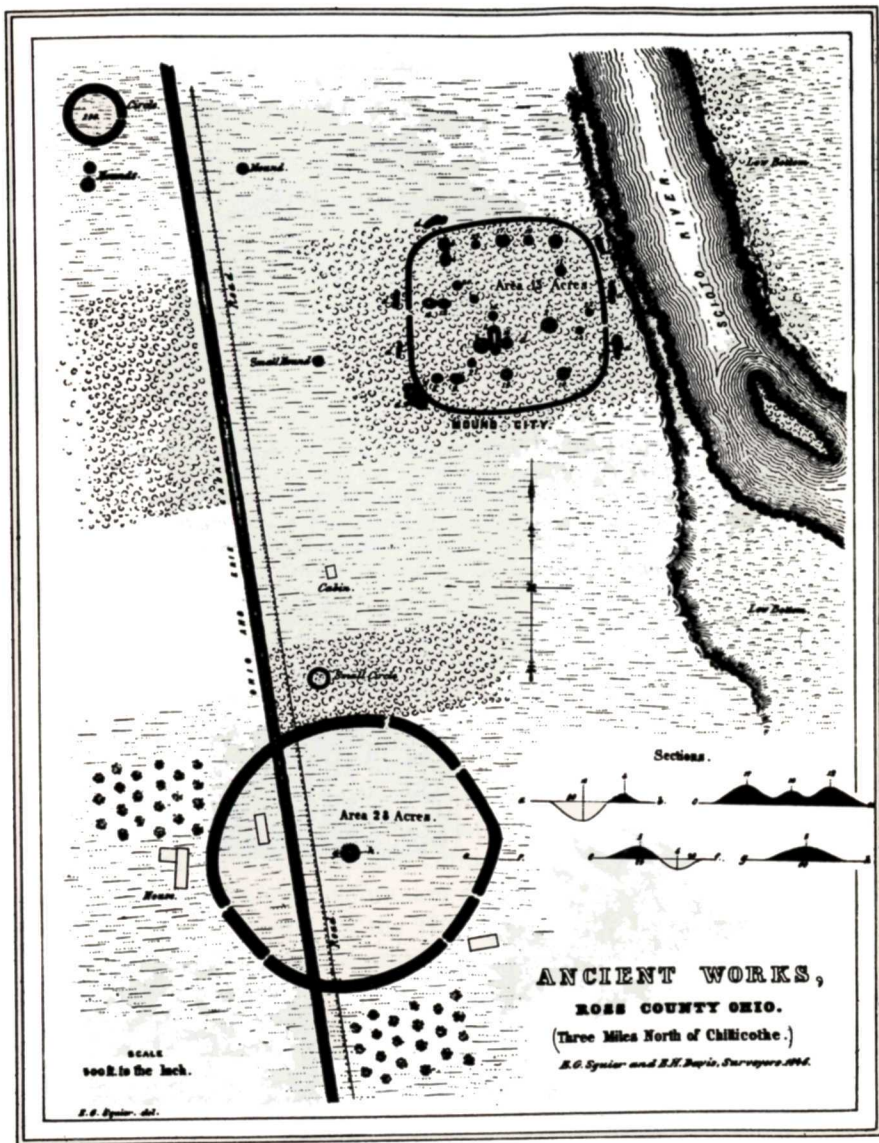
White lines in exposed section of this mound mark sand layers. A crematory basin, like the one just right of center on the raised platform, is sketched above. Hopewellian burials at Mound City were first cremated in such basins, which were made of clay. Though some flesh cremations occurred, usually disjointed bones gathered from charnal houses were burned.

Hopewellians were widespread—from Canada to Mississippi, and east to New York State. This dispersion produced variations within the broader cultural framework, giving to each major mound area a distinction of its own. What follows, then, describes the people of the Hopewell heartland in the Scioto Valley, but has general application to the larger Hopewellian story.

Now you step into antiquity to tread the sacred burial ground of a people who flourished, then faded from view a thousand years before the first European dreamed of their existence.




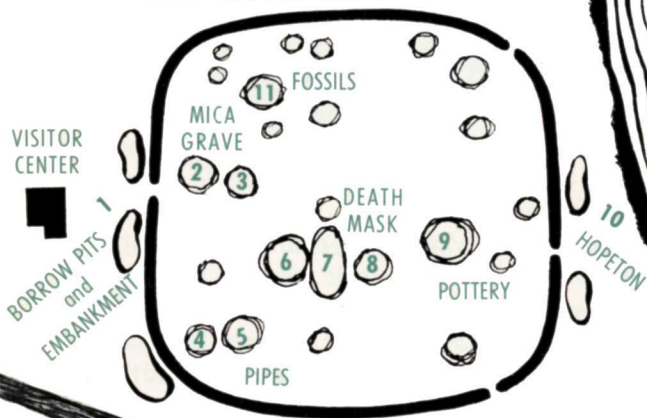
Copper ornaments found here show the progression from life forms to conventional design.



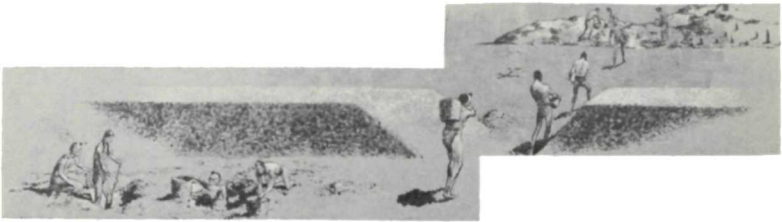


STOPS on YOUR TOUR

Numbers on this map are keyed to the text that follows.



Maps like one at left, reproduced from Ancient Monuments, made work of Squier and Davis an invaluable contribution to science. Many mound groups would have been lost without these beautiful drawings.



1. BORROW PITS AND EMBANKMENT. Earth to build the mounds came from “borrow pits” like these at the entrance to the enclosure. With digging sticks and hoes of shell or bone, the Indians loosened the dirt, then carried it in baskets to the sacred places within the enclosure where cremations and burials had taken place. There the dirt was dumped and tamped down: First in small sand-covered mounds over the individual graves and crematories, then in the larger mound which covered the entire ceremonial floor. To complete the mound, a protective cap of gravel and stones was placed over the packed earth. Reconstructions of these large mounds on the original sites are what you see today.

It took thousands of basketloads to build a mound. It took patience and organization—erection of the larger mounds may have stretched over many years.

Here is a clue to the cultural orientation of these people. Mere shelters of poles and matting protected them in life; the last traces of these flimsy structures have long since disappeared. But in their veneration for the dead and their concern for the hereafter, the Hopewellians found the motives for building these almost indestructible memorials.

The embankment enclosing the 24 mounds is a square with rounded corners. Three to 4 feet high and 3,000 feet around, this wall was itself a major construction effort.



2. MOUND OF THE MICA GRAVE, AND 3. CREMATORY SATELLITE. Here begins a pattern found throughout the enclosure: A mound with many burials, and a nearby satellite used mainly as a crematorium. A circle of posts once enclosed the place where the large mound now stands. Smaller structures within the circle protected shrine burials.

Mills and Shetrone found 20 burials and one crematory basin in this large mound. The grave pictured above contained four cremated burials and was covered with large sheets of mica. The care bestowed on this elaborate depository cannot be mistaken.

Among hundreds of offerings uncovered here was a copper headdress in the form of a bear. Its hinged ears flopped in time to the motions of the dancer who wore it.

Four crematory basins in the smaller mound were accompanied by only three simple burials. Crematories were deeply burned and often repaired. Probably they were used over and over again until the adjoining burial area was finally covered by the large mound.

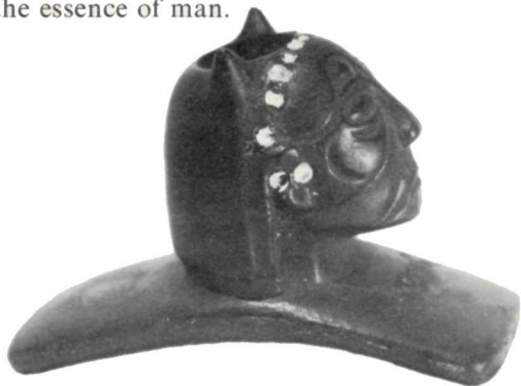


*Above: Copper breastplate of double-headed bird of prey.
Right: Mica eagle claw. This type of ornament adorned
the robes of the shamans.*



4. MOUND OF THE PIPES, AND 5. CREMATORY SATELLITE. Near the central basin of the far mound, Squier and Davis found a remarkable deposit of stone pipes. They reported: "The bowls of most of the pipes are carved in miniature figures of animals, birds, reptiles, etc. All of them are executed with strict fidelity to nature, and with exquisite skill. . . . [M]ost interesting . . . are a number of sculptured human heads, no doubt faithfully representing the predominant physical features of the ancient people by whom they were made."

Most of the pipes had been broken. This custom of "killing" burial offerings was widespread. Aside from destroying the intrinsic value of the object—thus forestalling thievery—it may have symbolized the release of the object's essence, just as death released the essence of man.



6. DEATH MASK MOUND, AND 7. AND 8. SATELLITES.

This central mound, with its two auxiliaries, was the nucleus at Mound City. Its location, the design of its sacred enclosure, and its size proclaim that here the ancient Indians achieved their greatest ceremonial splendor.

The sketch below is based on an exhibit in the Chicago Natural History Museum. A composite, it illustrates customs at many Hopewell sites. Richly attired shamans or priests are conducting cremation and burial ceremonies in the sacred enclosure, which will later be mounded over. Grave platforms appear at the right; the central log tomb is reserved for remains of the most illustrious; while to the left, cremations are in progress.





Mills and Shetrone found a unique structural feature in the central mound: A “basement” under the hard-packed sand and clay of the main floor. This sunken room contained a crematory, and its floor was made of puddled clay, which also covered the upward slanting walls of the depression.

Thirteen cremated burials were found on the main floor or deposited on low platforms of clay; three were very elaborate. In one of these were burned fragments from a human skull. Thirty years after Mills discovered them, Dr. Raymond Baby of the Ohio State Museum pieced the fragments together and found that they formed a mask designed to slip over a shaman's face. Holes drilled in the margin of the mask suggest ornamental attachments.

Dr. Baby conjectures that the shaman wearing this mask may have personified death. How he must have looked is pictured above.



A brilliant display of mica covered the great central burial of this mound. Within a log vault was a platform covered with more mica. And in the midst of cremated remains was a copper-covered wooden effigy of the death-cup toadstool. Some 13½ inches long, this object, shown at the left, probably served as a shaman's wand.

Among the many offerings in the last major burial of this mound was a striking human effigy headdress of copper. You can see how its conventional form is curved to fit the crown of the wearer's head.





*Death Mask Burial where Mills found skull fragments.
Grave is depressed within boundary of large shells.*

Other ceremonial paraphernalia found here included ear-ring spools of copper; plates with finely executed hawk designs in relief; wood, bone, shell, and pearl bead necklaces; and many objects of worked stone, one of them an obsidian spear point flaked to almost transparent thinness.

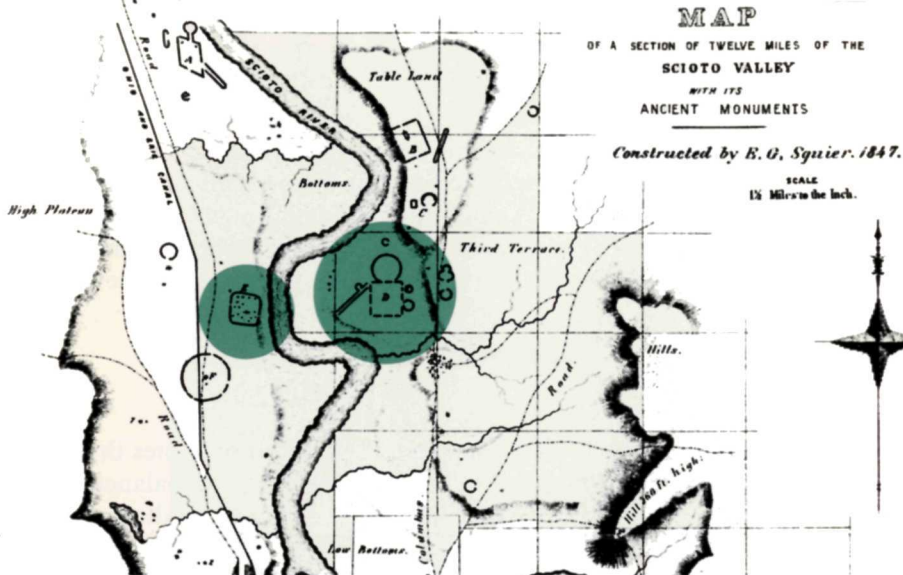
Completing the central mound group are the oval mound and its small circular companion. Lacking any major burials, but possessing large and much used crematory basins, these two enclosures were no doubt adjuncts of the sacred ground now covered by the central mound.



Hopewell Indian wearing antler headdress and spool earrings of copper. Necklace is of shells, fresh-water pearls, and copper pendants. Black ornament between pendants is obsidian.

9. **MOUND OF THE POTTERY.** Ceramic art was highly developed by the Hopewell people. Though their utility pottery was meant for heavy duty, they also made beautiful ceremonial vessels. The contrast between the two styles is easily noted below. Supporting legs and incised designs—in this case a shoveler duck or a roseate spoon-bill—are distinctive marks of Hopewell pottery. Mills and Shetrone found this ceremonial vessel in the mound before you.





10. HOPETON SITE. From here, the Hopeton Works are directly across the river. Except for the Squier and Davis survey, which produced the above map, these monumental works have never been scientifically explored. Use of the term monumental is warranted here: These works are one of the great creations of the Hopewell people.

The rectangle marked D on the map measures 950 by 900 feet. Squier and Davis described the walls as a clayey loam 12 feet high and 50 feet wide at the base.

The great circle intersecting the rectangle is 1,050 feet across. When surveyed in 1846, its eroded and plowed walls still averaged 5 feet high.

Parallel walls nearly half a mile long form a causeway leading to what was then the river shore. It is this feature which indicates a close relationship between the Hopeton Works and the Mound City Group—E on the map—directly across the river.

11. **MOUND OF THE FOSSILS.** This mound was more than half destroyed by grading when Camp Sherman was built. In what was left Mills and Shetrone found a large crematory basin and six cremated burials. Among the grave offerings were fragments of mastadon or mammoth tusks. The Indians found these in fossil deposits, revering them for reasons we can only guess.

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In his book, *The Mound Builders*, H. C. Shetrone notes that the artistic development of the Hopewell people over-balanced other aspects of their culture. Their many art forms indicate a high plane of specialization. And their artistic skill has been pronounced equal to that of any other Stone Age peoples. “Nevertheless,” Shetrone concludes, “it must be admitted that in more material things the achievements of the Mound-builders did not equal their aesthetic development.”



PHOTO CREDITS:

p. 14. American Antiquity.

pp. 16, 17, 18, 20. Chicago Natural History Museum.

Cover, pp. 1, 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15, 16, 18.

Ohio State Museum.



