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COMMENTARY

## Instilling the Earth: Explaining Mounds

JAY MILLER

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Nothing so well illustrates differences between Native and European views of the world as mounded up earth. Endlessly fascinating, mounds, mound building, and mound builders have been “weighty issues” at the core of the Americanist tradition of scholarship because they are simultaneously civil, cultural, ecological, and mythological statements of both skillful engineering and complex symbolism.<sup>1</sup> After reviewing familiar mound expressions and their explanations from the southeastern United States—and less known examples from the Northeast, California, Northwest, and Midwest—comparison of ethnologic, archaeologic, and linguistic evidence, especially as it relates to esoteric aspects of tribal knowledge, leads to the conclusion that, far from being lumps on a solid landscape, the thoroughly Native understanding of the world as characterized by flux and flow indicates that mounds are a haven of stability by virtue of their broad-based weight in a fraught and uncertain world of floods, earthquakes, attacks, and oppressive disdain, if not hostility. In large part, such misunderstanding of mounds is based in differences of language and perception. Since Native American languages rely on verbs and process, while English emphasizes nouns and product, this heavy solidity of mounds has yet to be sufficiently appreciated.

Such earthworks, large and small, dot much of the East, with strong clusterings in the Southeast. After the Archaic Period, conical mounds for the dead filled Ohio River tributaries as manifestations of what archaeologists have called the Adena, followed by varieties of Hopewell earthen expressions.

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In the Late Woodland Period, platform temple mounds occupied much of the drainage of the Mississippi River.<sup>2</sup>

By the late 1500s, Spanish and French adventurers actually saw mounds in use, but the English ignored their monumentality in favor of their own claims to “better” use of the land. Thomas Jefferson thought mounds both important and “American” enough to dig into one himself, presaging current intellectual problems and fads, such as the characterization of chiefdoms and the import of the urban hub at the megasite of Cahokia near modern Saint Louis at the heart of the continent.<sup>3</sup>

Most early naturalists like John and William Bartram, and protoarchaeologists like Cyrus Thomas, agreed to the continuous use of mounds to cover the dead, much like the tumuli across Europe that marked the graves of warrior heroes. John Lawson, writing of the Carolinas in 1708, noted that a mound was built as sepulchre for Santee River “kings,” piled higher or lower according to his “Dignity.”<sup>4</sup>

Citing a January 1796 flood that crested the Alabama River at forty-seven feet, Agent Benjamin Hawkins determined that any mound, called *o-cun-li-ge*, “literally, *earth placed*” in Muscogee Creek, was a “place of safety to the people, in the time of these floods.”<sup>5</sup> While his description of an eight-day Green Corn Busk mentions warriors cleaning the yard and sprinkling white sand, he was strangely oblivious to site preparations that included (and still includes) mound use.<sup>6</sup>

Yet Cyrus Thomas, after noting the overlap between ancient mounds and historic Overhill Cherokee towns, quoted James Mooney stating that such mounds were built during Green Corn ceremonies.<sup>7</sup> The irony is that Mooney was made aware of this connection by Postmaster Terrell of Webster, North Carolina, and only later confirmed it with elders such as Tsiskwaya. Even more intriguing, Thomas said Alice Fletcher saw mound building during a secret ritual of the Winnebago, now properly called Hochungara. Fletcher herself recalled hearing the song of a famous Omaha warrior while standing beside his “mounded grave” along the Missouri River.<sup>8</sup>

In his latest review of Florida archaeology, Jerald Milanich insists that “Mounds are tied to kinship” as corporate monuments of, for, and to clanship, while rituals cleanse and restore the world to balance, normality, and stability. *I will argue, however, that both mounds and rituals have this very same goal.*<sup>9</sup>

Platforms and other types of open earthworks, however, remained problematic. In his later assessment, written in 1788 but overly edited for publication in 1853, William Bartram reported that southeastern Natives believed a prior population intervened between modern tribes and the builders of the ancient mounds, perhaps “designed and appropriated by the people who constructed them, to some religious purpose, as great altars and temples similar to the high places and sacred groves anciently among the Canaanites and other nations of Palestine and Judea.” Later, noting mortuary customs in which basketry coffins woven of canes and splints were removed from a filled charnel house with their bearers “slowly proceeding on to the place of general interment, where they place the coffins in order, forming a pyramid; and lastly, cover all over with earth, which raises a conical hill or mount,” adding

the note that “Some ingenious men, whom I have conversed with, have given it as their opinion, that all those pyramidal artificial hills, usually called Indian mounds were raised on this occasion, and are generally sepulchres. However I am of a different opinion,” namely that “The mounds and cubical yards adjoining them, seemed to have been raised in part for ornament and recreation, and likewise to serve some other public purpose, since they are always so situated as to command the most extensive prospect over the town and country adjacent. The tetragon terraces, seem to be the foundation of a fortress, and perhaps the great pyramidal mounds, served the purpose of look out towers, and high places for sacrifice . . . as well as the exhibition of games, shews [shows], and dances.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, for Bartram, these mounds provided convenient masses for a variety of activities, though their very compactness seemed primary.

Most recently, testing at Watson Brake in northeastern Louisiana has almost doubled the dating of early mounds to 5500 B.C.E. The site itself is not a single mound, but rather eleven mounds with connecting ridges enclosing an oval with a diameter of 280 meters (916 feet). Gentry Mound, the tallest, is 7.5 meters (26 feet) high and the others are between 3 and 4.5 meters high. In reporting these new dates, *Science* noted:

Archaeologists once thought mound building was linked to agriculture, which created food surpluses and tended to lead to more permanent settlements and more complex societies. But because there is little evidence of agriculture at places like Poverty Point, many researchers thought that these mounds arose as a result of extensive trading networks, which fostered societies complex and prosperous enough to build them. Trade did not seem to be a factor at Watson Brake, however, as the artifacts found were all made of local materials.<sup>11</sup>

Lastly, Watson Brake seems to have been abandoned when the mounds were finished, since there is no further accumulation of debris such as ongoing use would have left behind. This walking away from a major construction project looms large in my own rationale for why mounds were built then and afterward.

As often happens when information sticks between the covers of a book, it takes on an intellectual life of its own that all but eclipses any possibility that it can easily be corrected on the basis of some external human/cultural reality. Mound building is a particularly choice example of such academic blinders because while archaeologists and political theorists debate the reasons and roles of mound building in the abstract, they manage to ignore the dozens of mounds that are still added to every summer in Oklahoma, a tradition begun long before Andrew Jackson forced tribes descended from Mississippians to move there in the 1840s. After one-hundred-and-fifty years of relentless pressure, dozens of Creek and other “towns” still gather at their squares, or ceremonial grounds, where they celebrate the ripening of corn with all-night fasts and dances centering on a sacred fire, arbors, ball pole, and at least one earthen mound, slowly and surely increasing each year.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, these blinders are heavily conditioned by the English language itself, which tends to look at things, rather than processes. Thus, the role of mounds as a stillness on the landscape, a high refuge from quake and flood, requires the lens of Native languages where flux and flow are inherent in their grammars.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the very structure of Native languages, based in verbs, assumes that movement, change, and uncertainty are inherent in the universe. By contrast, English assumes the false sense of permanence and stability characterized by nouns.

### ALL HOLLOWES

A decade ago, Vernon Knight<sup>14</sup> summarized what the ethnographic literature says about the symbolism of Mississippian platform mounds, noting the obvious difference in scale between those of the past, which are dozens of feet high, throughout the East and those of the Oklahoma present, which are about five feet high. Still, he sees continuity between the two, although he does not take proper note of catastrophic historic population losses that reduced, oversimplified, or wiped out most of the ancient complexity, diversity, and variability. While summarizing his general findings, I will sometimes correct them based on my own participation at an annual Creek Green Corn.

Knight begins by citing that the early Muscogee term (*ekvn-like*) given to the large mounds means “earth placed, sitting, dwelling,” from *ekvuv* (earth, world), with compound extensions into “cave, mountain, hill, earthquake,” and *liketu* (dwelling, residence), with, in my assessment, the sense of “holding in place.”<sup>15</sup> The explicit conjoining of “earth” and “earthquake” says volumes about Native perceptions of “natural” stability.<sup>16</sup>

Knight,<sup>17</sup> unfortunately, relegates to his first footnote another term (*ekvn-holvuce*), translated as “hillock,” literally “little mountain,” because, “There is no evidence, however, that this term was applied to artificial constructions.” Yet a closer look at this same dictionary shows a meaning of “high earth.”<sup>18</sup> In Caddo,<sup>19</sup> an unrelated though neighboring language, a parallel word means mound, hill, church, because “You look up to pray.”<sup>20</sup> The latest Creek dictionary gives as words for mound, in technical spelling, *i:kan-leyki* (archaic), “mound of earth”; *lani*, “mound, mons veneris”; *tachi*, “ridge of sweepings encircling dance area”; and *tacho*, “area of the ceremonial grounds by the center fire.”<sup>21</sup>

Knight then considered Creek Muscogee mythology,<sup>22</sup> where both “mother towns” of Kasihta (white moiety) and Koweta (red moiety) mention mounds in their origin epics, both for burials and as prayerful offerings. For example, Kasihta warriors find survivors of an enemy town burying their dead in mounds, then later Kasihta members built large mounds to petition the immortals and provide a platform for taking the all-important Herb Water (*ussí, essí*), misknown in the literature as Black Drink.

Inside the mounds was a chamber used for fasting and praying, and, for Koweta, hiding to ambush Cherokee attackers. Such emergence, including notions of regeneration or resurrection, further provided these enclosures with womb-like associations.

Indeed, regard for focal mounds as “abodes” for the dead, and, especially, “holy homes” or “hollow hills” of resident immortals, recalls the central chamber built into such mounds as Craig at Spiro in eastern Oklahoma. Such indwelling life was also culturally evoked by references to ants and anthills, as at the famous Creek town of Tukabatchee,<sup>23</sup> and the more distant self-reference by the Pueblo of Zuni to itself as Halona, the anthill at the center (or earth navel) of the world as measured out by a mythic spider.

Thus, among Mississippian descendants, “Linguistic and traditional material from Muskogee, Yuchi, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Cherokee sources yields a reasonably coherent picture of mounds . . . possess[ing] symbolism associations with autochthony, the underworld, birth, fertility, death, burial, the placation of spirits, emergence, purification, and supernatural protection. They are metaphorical mountains, anthills, navels, or womblike ‘earth mother’ representations.”<sup>24</sup>

Knight concluded that modern mounds, four to six feet high, are known as *tadjo* and “appear to be made up partly of dirt from square ground sweepings and partly of fresh dirt dug up nearby. In each case the new mound covers the remnant of the mound built the previous year. . . . These mounds are distinct from other small mounds formed by successive ash piles from the annually renewed sacred fires.”<sup>25</sup> In addition, “The low ridge formed around the square ground from repeated sweepings is also called *tadjo* in Muskogee and Seminole contexts.”<sup>26</sup>

Knight found a direct link between Mississippian and modern procedures in the observations of John Howard Payne, who at the 1835 Tukabatchee Green Corn (while still in Alabama) observed that of two mounds, the larger was “used as a dance platform during the ‘gun dance,’ [and] had been given a new coat of earth scraped from the adjacent square ground . . . stunning testimony documenting Creek mound construction in the nineteenth century, involving the addition of an earth mantle (albeit a thin one) to a genuine Mississippian platform mound. The ritual context, moreover, is unambiguous. The symbolism is that of world renewal and purification within the framework of communal green corn ceremonialism.”<sup>27</sup>

Today in Oklahoma, despite all this past and highly public effort, actual mound building takes place as preparations for, rather than at, the actual Green Corn, at a time when almost everyone else is sleeping. In the days preceding the ceremony, new willows reroof the four arbors and new upright poles replace any weakened during the previous year. At dawn before the all-night dance, the square is scraped clean of weeds and the refuse raked toward an outer edge to make a ridge (*tadjo*) setting off the sacred enclosure that is the domain of fasting men and occasional women, by special invitation only. Once the area is clean, clear, and repacked down, attentions turn to the raised basin in the open center where the sacred fire of crossed logs will burn, after its former ashes are added to the biggest mound of all, by no means the “small” ash pile implied by Knight.

Throughout the Americas, the ashes of sacred fires have a specially charged status, as in a Delaware story in which twins are sent to get help from the Sun to kill an underwater monster. Instead of giving them his fire, which

was far too hot and dangerous, the Sun provided them with old ashes, which boiled up the lake where the monster lived. As a result of this cooking, the water monster died.

Reviewing Knight's own source, John Howard Payne reported that he first saw the 1835 Tukabatchee Green Corn while standing on a mound "just outside of one of the open corners of the sacred square." Payne "was afterwards told that this mound was composed of ashes which had been produced many preceding years by such fires as were now blazing in the center; and that ashes of the sort were never permitted to be scattered, but must thus be gathered up, and carefully and religiously preserved."<sup>28</sup>

Thus, one of the two mounds was composed of ashes, and the other was made of Knight's scraped-up earth. "In the center of this outer square was a very high circular mound . . . formed from the earth accumulated yearly by removing the surface of the sacred square thither. At every Green-Corn Festival, the sacred square is strewn with soil yet untrodden; the soil of the year preceding being taken away, but preserved as above explained. No stranger's foot is allowed to press the new earth of the sacred square until its consecration is complete."<sup>29</sup>

Every summer throughout Oklahoma, as occurred in previous centuries, at the central fireplace of my town *italwa*, the old ashes and upper layer of baked dirt are carried a shovelful at a time with great care by a brigade of men to the east and added as a topping to the six-foot mound that stands in the east-southeast. Another work group heads in a set direction and gathers special soil, often in a wheelbarrow, to add to the small bump in the east-northeast that later serves briefly as the place for a young man to place his feet when summoning the "Birds" before the series of Feather Dances begins. Indeed, these and other dances at the ground, all using the distinctively southeastern foot stepping called the *stomp*, offer another expression of the mounding impulse. In all, three mounds are made at this ground: one for the fireplace, a second for the Birds, and a third topping the decades-old mound of ashes.

This ongoing middle Oklahoma pattern, however, might be dismissed as a recent import, since prehistorically, except for Caddoans along rivers draining into the lower southwest Mississippi, mounds are not supposed to occur in the West, or so all have assumed. A close look at the ethnography, however, dispels that notion, particularly since mounds, albeit small ones, are still being made as part of world-renewal rituals in northern California along the Klamath River, where communities speaking languages of three distinct linguistic stocks participate in the same rituals exhibiting family treasures traced back to a time when immortals walked on the earth.

#### KARUK RENEWAL

During August and September, after the rising cremation smoke of the First Salmon signals the immortals, Karuk people upriver on the Klamath stage a series of three world-renewal rites, collectively called Fixing the Earth. They are held in sequence at Inaam (Clear Creek, Happy Camp), Panamniik (Orleans), and Katimiin (near Soames Bar).<sup>30</sup>

In traditional belief, after the beginning of the Karuk world, various immortal beings sank into the earth at special places. During the Fixing, which occurs over ten days, a priestly specialist visits each of these locales to light fires, pray, make offerings, sweep away refuse, and set aright slumped stones and other landmarks. Keeping his right hand empty, and his legs crooked, he seeks to attract luck, the coveted ability to gain wealth and well-being along the entire Klamath River. "The daily travels of the priest, accompanied by archers who shoot at targets [to steady the earth], lead up to the climactic night when the priest stands by the sacred sand pile (*yuxpit*)."<sup>31</sup>

At Orleans and Soames, he is helped by two women, called leader and follower, who reshape an eighteen-inch sand pile (*yuxpit*) into a miniature of Mt. Offield, known and seen by all Karuk as "God's Mountain." They pack firewood to the place and then gather river sand for the *yuxpit* at a spot upstream (at the boat landing beach).<sup>32</sup> "Each carries up two loads of sand in tightly woven burden baskets. They step slowly and carefully. There is no prayer. They dump the sand on the ground. The leader models the higher peak, and the follower the shorter one."<sup>33</sup> All night long, the priest stands at this mound and looks up at the twin paired summits.<sup>34</sup> The next day, the Deerskin Dance or a surrogate is performed," followed by an afternoon War Dance. "Then follows the retreat [seclusion] of the priest for a period of five or ten days."<sup>35</sup>

Overall, this Fixing is believed to prevent famine, disease, and cataclysm.<sup>36</sup> By reminding the local immortals, by showing respect for the landscape, and by setting landmarks on firm footings, like the focal mountain, the Karuk world is made steady and reliable in this earthquake-prone region.

Indeed, Stephen Powers, a much-traveled 1870s journalist, faithfully called it "the great Dance of Propitiation, at which all the tribe are present, together with deputations from the Yurok, the Hupa, and others . . . which signifies, literally 'working the earth' . . . to propitiate the spirits of the earth and the forest, in order to prevent disastrous landslides, forest fires, earthquakes, drought, and other calamities."<sup>37</sup>

#### PUGET IRONY

Even further north along the Pacific Coast, intimate knowledge, conscious deliberation, and ultimately personal chagrin have been necessary to make any kind of a mound connection. For example, in the Pacific Northwest, piles of dirt have been built as fort emplacements or flood protection, but they do not have the sacred or spiritual aura of mounds elsewhere. Despite authoring three relevant books, I first denied any evidence of Puget-Sound mounds until I happened to reexamine illustrations, drawn with my own hand, in *Shamanic Odyssey*.<sup>38</sup> I suddenly realized that at the base of each one of the protecting planks sheltering a shaman there is a black dome that is explicitly said to be the earthen mound home of a being called a Little Earth, one of a group said to "own" the earth.<sup>39</sup> Thus, here in the original, not in the academic derivative and artificial, was evidence for a mound as a holy home for a powerful earth spirit. If I had not personally drawn that mound at the base of each plank diagram, I would have been even slower to see the link. Moreover,



it now turns out that mounds are more than mythological for other tribes in this area besides the Lushootseed, since archaeologists have indeed found local burial mounds to the north and south.<sup>40</sup>

The need for such massiveness is supported linguistically, since the Lushootseed word for earth is *swatix<sup>w</sup>təd*, also modified to mean forest and earth-owning spirit immortals, indicating expansive motion.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the earth, like life, can be inherently unstable; to gain stability, to assure permanence, the earth, or a portion of it, must be held safely in place in a way that stands out and up from the shiftable landscape.

### HURON GRAVES

Another aspect of mound lore in the Northeast serves as a reminder of the complexities lost after epidemics and disruptions. It occurs in the Jesuit Relations from New France, particularly for the Huron (Wendat) before their dispersal by the Iroquois in 1649. In their ancient homeland on Georgian Bay off Lake Huron, burial depended on conditions at death.<sup>42</sup> Babies were placed under paths in hopes that they would be reborn into a passing woman. Mutilated captives, criminals, and witches had their bones dumped into the village middens. Those who drowned or froze to death somehow offended powerful spirits of water and sky, so their bodies were given double disposal in the village cemetery where their flesh and innards were cremated and their bones buried.

Every decade, when a village moved, all its honored dead were exhumed and, after a night of singing celebration known as the Feast of the Dead, reburied together in a common ossuary called "the kettle." Any members who had died violently, however, were regarded as unquiet and were thus left in their separate graves under a mound with a hut set on top. This was their final abode. Similarly, those who died very old and very young were too weak to journey to the afterworld and so stayed near the abandoned village, living on the ghost crops of the fallow fields.

All this variety stresses the role of the mound in holding down the restless dead, adding weight to my growing argument that mounds provide stability in a very uncertain world.

### CAYUGA IROQUOIS

Within the League of the Iroquois, Cayuga are known as "those of the great pipe," but,

Cayuga represent themselves as a tribe by the symbol of a "mound," literally "earth" made into a "lump." This symbolic elevation of ground, representing a powerful people, attracted other tribes or nations who desired asylum with the Cayuga, and they came freely, "trampling the brush down" as they pressed onward to reach it.

Since the main Iroquois towns ("castles") were usually situated on natural hilltops offering excellent means of fortification and protection, serving also as observation points, the significance of this metaphor must be left to our imagination. Whether it referred to an artificial or natural elevation is not implied in the use of the term given.<sup>43</sup>

By extension, Frank Speck implies in the above passage that the size and effort put into a mound lump directly indicates the strength, integrity, and available resources of these builders, both for themselves and for those who come to them for refuge.

### ISLAND WEIGHTS

One of the most compelling accounts of the need to weight down the earth, or part of it, so that life can proceed, comes from the esoteric epic of the Ho-Chunk (Hochungara, Winnebago) Medicine Rite, their priesthood analogous to the Midewiwin (Grand Lodge, Shaman's Academy) of the Ojibwa and other Great Lakes nations reconstituted about 1700 in the aftermath of severe depopulation and an end to Feasts of the Dead. In earlier centuries, Effigy Mounds<sup>44</sup> across the driftless region of southern Wisconsin were probably built by their ancestors among the Chiwere Siouians, before some stayed behind as Hochungara and others moved west to split into Oto, Ioway, and Missouriia.<sup>45</sup>

Because the Native American Church was making great inroads among the Ho-Chunk during Paul Radin's 1908–1913 fieldwork in Nebraska, new converts like Jasper Blowsnake were urged to provide the esoteric beliefs and metaphors of the Medicine Rite as a way of publicly rejecting them. Radin was there at the right moment and wrote down text in long hand, though these words did not have their ordinary meanings. Several years passed before fate allowed him and Blowsnake to translate these many esoteric and poetic usages.

According to this epic, after Ma'una (Earthmaker) placed the land, he could not get it to be still.<sup>46</sup> Its constant spinning kept things from rooting and growing, so it remained entirely bare. Some say that anything that tried to settle down flew off into space. Only spider webs floated above its surface.<sup>47</sup> After Ma'una got grass to grow, he sent down trees, but everything still moved. At last he had four island earth weights, brother water serpents, implant themselves tail first at the corners of the four directions, all facing the east and the sun, to stretch, steady, and hold the earth. But still the earth trembled, so he scattered rocks (regarded as females) and these finally made it quiet. The name used for these snake stabilizers in ordinary usage derives from *sewe*, "to be quiet, to reduce to silence, to press, to press down."<sup>48</sup>

Thanks to Copernicus and others, we all have come to know that the earth does indeed continue to spin. Thanks to Earthmaker and all his efforts to slow and quiet it down, this rotation is usually imperceptible.

## ESOTERIC LANGUAGE

This popularization of knowledge, especially cosmology, starkly contrasts with the valued significance of esoteric lore in defining elite membership throughout the Americas. The metaphoric, poetic, and obscure usages given to ordinary Hochungara words in the epic of the Medicine Rite should serve as a reminder and a check on misguided research. As one example, Marion Mochon<sup>49</sup> tried to assemble words for Mississippian farming, commerce, society, polity, and worldview from dictionaries of five languages of the Muskogean (Choctaw, Creek) and Siouian (Osage, Ofo, Biloxi) stocks. Of note, she found many more Muskogean than Siouian examples, and accordingly argued for heavy Muskogean participation in the Mississippian Period.

Conversely, a decade later, James Springer and Stanley Witkowski<sup>50</sup> argued from the internal branching of the Siouian linguistic stock, especially Central Siouian, to connect them with the archaeological complex known as Oneota, which had a mound-building aspect. In all, to be reliable, such information should be extremely difficult to come by because it was specialized and privileged.

## OSAGE RITES

Recently, Garrick Bailey<sup>51</sup> began the Herculean task of synthesizing the cosmology of the Osage, one of the last and most populous Siouian nations to sustain priesthoods directly out of the core Mississippian area, if not from the urban center of Cahokia itself. This cosmology was articulated in elaborate rituals of initiation into Osage priesthoods, as recorded by Francis La Flesche, a tribal member and native speaker of Omaha, son of a high chief, non-practicing lawyer, and an ethnographer, both on his own and in collaboration with Alice Fletcher, his adoptive mother. His research was marked by tragedy since Black Dog, former high chief and source for comparative materials, died a month after Francis began interviews in 1910, and Saucy Calf, the Buffalo Clan priest whose dictation to Francis filled 140 pages, burned to death in his cabin in 1912 under suspicious circumstances. Within a decade, many other Osages were brutally murdered by their white spouses in order to inherit "head rights" to huge fortunes from oil pumped out of their unique underground reservation.

Throughout the Americas, knowledge, especially esoteric information, was synonymous with a healthy long life, but to be valued it had to be contested and protected. Indeed, the very transmission of linchpin information was supposed to be given only with the last gasp of a mentor. Among Omaha, this meant that the transmission of vital knowledge involved a final degree of what has been termed *patricide*.

The Osage population of 4,000, largely spared devastation from epidemics until the 1880s, was governed by priesthoods based in clans, pipes, and the entire tribe as halves of a whole. Concentrating on clan and tribal initiations, which both prayed for blessings from the Creator (Wakonda) and explained the universe in progressively more detailed stages, La Flesche totaled 170 such rites.

Clan priest initiations generally lasted four days, most of the time spent alerting the entire universe for the finale. After pledging to be inducted and submitting to penalty verses, a candidate had seven years to gather necessary gifts and food. Both tribal priesthood inductions (per moiety), however, occurred much more rapidly, lasting only one day because the unseen universe hung in the balance until both great bundles were owned (secured) by priests of the earth and sky. All other 168 initiations concerned the visible world, inducting into a clan priesthood, where each of the twenty-four clans had seven degrees culminating in the ultimate grade called Sayings of the Ancients.

Osages equated rituals with books since they preserved and transmitted knowledge through a complex interaction of words, actions, and objects intended to puzzle the serious, intrigue the curious, and impress the literal minded. Each ritual combined songs (*wathon*), actions (*we'gaxe*), and recitations (*wi'gie*), repeating many of the same poetic verses, except that the main image varied according to that specific clan and its degree. A vital identifying phrase specified "I am a person who has made of an X his body" to indicate the clan's life symbol through which they approach the Creator. Examples of X vary from the immensities of the sun, water, and stars to animals, plants, objects, weather conditions, colors, and abstractions.

The embodiment of each clan and priesthood was a sacred bundle. That of a clan, called a "hawk," variously held a hawk skin, woven-mat bag, deerskin bag, buffalo-hair bag, buffalo-hide rope, eagle leg, scalp, and buffalo-hide hanging strap. All such objects (life symbols) of the clans were called *waxo'be* (sacred).

Moreover, the two clans referred to as Men of Mystery and Buffalo Bulls were the symbolic keepers of all the clan bundles, while, for the entire tribe, that of the great bundle keeper was Gentle Ponka and that of the great medicine bundle was Gentle Sky. The Elder Water clan was the symbolic keeper of the peace pipes of tribal unity, with their own great bundle priests (*wawathon*). Among secondary sacra were war standards, rattles, war clubs, sacred bows and arrows, charcoal, and more. In addition, known only to adepts, unconsecrated symbols, called "those carried to excite enthusiasm" (*wazhawa athin-bikshe*), and therefore not real, might be used.<sup>52</sup>

Each initiation involved a set of officials who served formal or functional roles.<sup>53</sup> Typically, these were a candidate and his wife, a sponsor, an assisting sponsor, priests of all twenty-four clans, a holy warrior holding all thirteen possible military honors, a messenger, widows of former priests, and singers. The candidate and sponsor had formal claims to a clan and degree, while the assisting sponsor actually and thoroughly knew the involved ritual in all its intricacy and precision. The songs were particularly important to bring the universe to life with special verses extolling their human ancestor's ability to think, search with the mind, and thereby learn (*wathi'gethon*) "to bring things to pass." Songs and recitations were context sensitive, describing a body from head to feet to indicate birth and new beginnings, or from feet to head for growth and maturity.

As with all life, the original Osage came from the sky (Father) to the earth (Mother), where they met one clan that had always been there and so became known as the Isolated Earth. Between the sky and the underworld was and is

the “snare of life,” linked with a sacred spider<sup>54</sup> along the surface of the earth, holding everything together between birth and death. On this snare, the clans divide between Sky and Earth moieties, also called halves, sides, or divisions. Earth further separated into Land and Water segments. Symbolic oppositions between these moieties included Sky with left, six, morning star, male, and father; Earth with right, seven, evening star, female, and mother. Other associations include East with sun, birth, life, red, and male, West with moon, death, destruction, black, and female.

### CONCLUSION

In sum, mounds apply weight to hold, stabilize, calm, and still a very active earth. Much more a place for physicists reeling through chaos than for archaeologists sifting through what is for them piecemeal and inert, this world of flux and flow had to have zones of safety so people, place, and power could safely link up. Mounds were primarily to instill, with their size and effort proportional to their guarantee of safe refuge. The biggest mound was most likely to be the best haven, as among Cayuga, regardless of the forces directed at it.

This is a world with spin, speed, spread, motion, shake, rumble, and roll. Mounds are its weights, covering the restless dead, sheltering immortals in holy homes, and holding up temples and icons for nearby human and other residents. Indeed, this very need to (in)still such motion was represented in the aptly named Stomp Dances, using a step Lawson<sup>55</sup> described as “nothing but a sort of stamping Motion, much like the treading upon Founders Bellows.”

Twenty years ago, Robert Hall<sup>56</sup> noted that mound rituals probably recreated aspects of the earth-diver epic in which the first land was formed from a speck brought up from the bottom of the primordial sea by an aquatic hero, using colored marsh muds in Wisconsin and staked hides over Illinois Hopewell graves. Once this earth grew outward and stabilized, it supported a varied population of living, thinking denizens, who well knew its origins and took none of its features for granted.

In confirmation of such insecurity, the most solid of shapes were believed to be hollow, caverns inside mountains, chambers inside mounds, and a chasm inside the earth. In Celtic folklore, best known from Ireland, similar hallowed hills, called *Shidhe*, remain the dwelling places of fairies, a prior godly race called the *Tuatha De Danann*.<sup>57</sup> If a human got inside, he or she became thoroughly enchanted and lost all track of ordinary time. Those few who emerged characterized the insides as ornate palaces, a description appropriate to their culture. Like American mounds, the *Shidhe* were the focus of periodic rituals, particularly during the four times each year when the magic mounds were open because the barrier between mortals and immortals was thin. On Samain (November 1, which became All Souls for Christians, the day after Halloween), all parts of the world renewed their connections and, long ago, the Irish high king at Tara symbolically married the earth goddess to assure the prosperity of the nation. On Beltine (May 1, May Day), cattle were driven between two fires to ward off disease. On Imbolc (February 1, St. Bridget’s Day), ewe’s milk marked an ancient spring festival. On Lughnasad (August 1, harvest), games

and festivals were held in honor of the deity called Lug of the Long Arm. After conversion by Saint Patrick, the Irish Catholic Church redirected these events to saints and built churches and shrines atop these holy places, unobtrusively keeping them hallowed and hollow to this day.

For Ireland, as for Native America, this constant pressure applied by mounds as bulky weight explains why Watson Brake was built and then left to hold an oval space; why the Karuk mound made of soil from a boat landing assured security; why the Lushootseed expanding universe was dotted with mounds occupied by Little Earths; why Cayuga were known for a giant refuge mound; why Huron once anchored their unquiet dead; why Hochungara Earthmaker pierced the spinning earth with huge serpents; and why Osage rush through great bundle tribal priest initiations to make sure the halves of the universe remain secure.

The Karuk remind us that mounds may not be so much built and added to as they are sculpted and shaped to conform to particular models, such as the local high mountain or, in the case of the hundreds of mounds at Cahokia, uses ranging from boundary markers to burials, temples, or solar observations.<sup>58</sup>

Indeed, the use of mounds as obvious high ground,<sup>59</sup> with all that implies, may be pan-human since the famous Dobu believe “at death one attains a permanent haven in the village mound where one is at last free from untrustworthy outsiders.”<sup>60</sup> Everywhere, it seems, mounds were more than landmarks; they were steady weights in a sea of uncertainty and an occasionally treacherous landscape. Out of this same concern, Catholic monks take vows of stability, Mississippians kept up mounds, and the rest of us buy disaster insurance.

Overall, the process of creating mounds is akin to communion in Christianity. Elementals (bread, water, earth) are transformed or transubstantiated by human efforts, prayers, blessings, and divine intervention to become something else—safer, more nourishing, and more inspiring.<sup>61</sup>

## NOTES

1. Jon Gibson, “Earth Sitting: Architectural Masses at Poverty Point, Northeastern Louisiana,” *Louisiana Archaeology* 13 (1986): 201–238; Robert Hall, “In Search of the Ideology of the Adena-Hopewell Climax,” in *Hopewell Archaeology: The Chillicothe Conference*, eds. David Brose and N’omi Greber (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1979); Robert Hall, *An Archaeology of the Soul: North American Indian Belief and Ritual* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); James Howard, *The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex and Its Interpretation* (Columbia, MO: Missouri Archaeological Society, Memoir 6, 1968); Roger Kennedy, *Hidden Cities: The Discovery and Loss of Ancient North American Civilization* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); Vernon Knight Jr., “The Institutional Organization of Mississippian Religion,” *American Antiquity* 51, no. 4 (1986): 675–687; William Morgan, *Precolumbian Architecture in Eastern North America* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999); John O’Shea, “Social Configurations and the Archaeological Study of Mortuary Practices: A Case Study,” in *The Archaeology of Death*, eds. Robert Chapman, Ian Kinnes, and Klavs Randsborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 39–52; Lynda Norene

Shaffer, *Native Americans Before 1492: The Moundbuilding Centers of the Eastern Woodlands*, Sources and Studies in World History Series (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1992).

2. Robert Silverberg, *The Mound Builders* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1986). William Romain's *Mysteries of the Hopewell: Astronomers, Geometers, and Magicians of the Eastern Woodlands* (Akron, OH: University of Akron Press, 2000), in particular, explores the proximity of Ohio earthen monuments to natural resources, water courses, and astronomical alignments, though its quest for meaning truncates Creek ethnography by ignoring the encircling camps of families around the square of men's arbors. Except to block gateways, he gives mounds little attention in favor of the enormous Hopewell banked avenues and enclosures, though these indeed serve to stabilize or anchor their inner spaces to provide large gathering and ceremonial areas. Blue Clark kindly supplied me with Romain's book to make this article as current as possible.

3. Biloine Whiting Young and Melvin Fowler, *Cahokia: The Great American Metropolis* (Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

4. John Lawson, *A New Voyage to Carolina*, ed. Hugh Talmage Lefler (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 28.

5. Benjamin Hawkins, *A Sketch of the Creek Country in 1798 and 1799*, Collections of the Georgia Historical Society, Volume III, Part I (Savannah: Georgia Historical Society, 1848), 1–88, 38–39; *Letters of Benjamin Hawkins, 1796–1806*, Collections of the Georgia Historical Society IX (Savannah: Georgia Historical Society, 1916), 42–43.

6. Hawkins, *Sketch of the Creek Country*, 75–78.

7. Cyrus Thomas, *The Cherokees in Pre-Columbian Times*, Fact and Theory Papers 4 (New York: N. D. C. Hodges, 1890), 32, 43.

8. Alice Fletcher, *A Study of Omaha Indian Music*, Harvard University, Archaeological and Ethnological Papers of the Peabody Museum 1(5), 1893 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 31.

9. Jerald Milanich, *Florida's Indians from Ancient Times to the Present* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1998).

10. Gregory Waselkov and Kathryn E Holland Braund, eds., *William Bartram on the Southeastern Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 84, 129, 131.

11. *Science* 277 (19 September 1997), 1761 (quote), 1762, 1796–1799.

12. Many of their relatives, however, gather at local Indian Baptist and Methodist churches, where the architectural setup is much the same, though the relative positions of the plaza and the mound are occupied by the church and steeple. See Jack Schultz, *The Seminole Baptist Churches of Oklahoma: Maintaining a Traditional Community* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

13. Standing atop Turtle Mound overlooking the Atlantic Ocean and Mosquito Lagoon in flat central Florida, it is easy to imagine how mounds helped the elite to see and be seen by people sometimes desperate for news that could save their lives.

14. Vernon Knight, "Symbolism of Mississippian Mounds," *Powhatan's Mantle: Indians in the Colonial Southeast*, eds. Peter Wood, Gregory Waselkov, and M. Thomas Hatley (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 279–291.

15. Knight, "Symbolism of Mississippian Mounds," 280.

16. Jack Martin and Margaret McKane Mauldin, *A Dictionary of Creek/Muskogee, with notes on the Florida and Oklahoma Seminole dialects of Creek* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 71, 105, 124, 274 n.71 for *ikana* (noun). 1. ground, land, earth, 2. world + *leyk-ita* (verb). 1. to sit, be situated, exist (of a person, God, land, a town,

money in the bank, or something about evenly tall, wide, and long . . . 2. to settle, live (in a house, a place), reside (of one), [with ka:k-ita the dual number (of two)].

17. Knight, "Symbolism of Mississippian Mounds," 289 n.1.

18. According to Reverend R. M. Loughridge and David Hodge, *English and Muskokee Dictionary* (Okmulgee: Baptist Home Mission Board, 1890), "high" is *homahlu*, *hv'lw'e* (p. 38), while their actual listing for "mound" is *Ekvn-hv'lwuce*, *Rv'ne* (p. 51), with *rvn'e* alone listed beside "mount, mound" (p. 181).

19. Jay Miller, "Changing Moons: A History of Caddo Religion," *Plains Anthropologist* 41, no. 157 (1996): 243–259.

20. While Caddo ancestors built impressive mounds, their Pawnee linguistic relatives revered a constellation of earth-lodge-like hills on the Central Plains. See Douglas Parks and Waldo Wedel, "Pawnee Geography, Historical and Sacred," *Great Plains Quarterly* 5 (Summer 1985): 143–176.

21. Martin and Mauldin, *A Dictionary of Creek/Muskogee*, 23, 105, 124, 274.

22. Knight, "Symbolism of Mississippian Mounds," 282.

23. *Ibid.*, 281.

24. *Ibid.*, 283.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, 284.

27. *Ibid.*, 285.

28. John Swanton, "Green Corn Dance," *Chronicles of Oklahoma* X, no. 11 (1932): 170–195, 179; John Swanton, *The Interpretation of Aboriginal Mounds by Means of Creek Indian Customs*, Smithsonian Institution Annual Report, 1927 (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1928), 495–506, 7 plates.

29. Swanton, "Green Corn Dance," 177.

30. Julian Lang, ed., *Ararapikva: Creation Stories of the People, Traditional Karuk Indian Literature from Northwestern California* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1994), 25, 27; John P. Harrington, *Tobacco among the Karuk Indians of California*, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 94 (Washington, DC: Bureau of American Ethnology, 1932).

31. Alfred L. Kroeber and E. W. Gifford, *World Renewal: A Cull System of Native Northwest California*, Anthropological Records 13, no. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), 1–156, 19.

32. *Ibid.*, 29.

33. *Ibid.*, 27.

34. *Ibid.*, 21.

35. *Ibid.*, 19.

36. *Ibid.*, 105.

37. Stephen Powers, *Tribes of California*, ed. Robert Heizer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 28.

38. Jay Miller, *Shamanic Odyssey: The Lushootseed Salish Journey to the Land of the Dead* (Menlo Park, CA: Ballena Press, 1988).

39. Jay Miller, *Lushootseed Culture and the Shamanic Odyssey: An Anchored Radiance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

40. Kenneth Ames and Herbert Maschner, *Peoples of the Northwest Coast: Their Archaeology and Prehistory* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 190–191.

41. The latest dictionary (Bates, Dawn, Thom Hess, and Vi Hilbert, *Lushootseed Dictionary* [Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994]) provides *-ti-* "spreading"



and -təd “implement,” with the implication that the earth is constantly expanding, or getting away (p. 245). For Vi Hilbert, a fluent Lushootseed teacher, the purifying aspects of brushing off with cedar boughs combines with the image of a mother bird protectively “spreading” her wings over her brood to better translate -ti- as “take care of, hope for, indicate regard or concern” (See Jay Miller and Vi Hilbert, “Caring for Control: A Pivot of Salishan Language and Culture,” *American Indian Linguistics and Ethnography in Honor of Laurence C. Thompson*, eds. Anthony Mattina and Timothy Montler [Missoula: University of Montana, Occasional Papers in Linguistics 10, 1993], 237–239, 238.) These morphemes can be traced on pages xvii for s-, 240 for *tix<sup>w</sup>* “brush, shake off,” 226 for *tix<sup>w</sup>* “bail out a boat,” -ti- “spread,” 220 for implement suffix, and 246 for -*waw*- “take full advantage of.” In all, the best translation of this word for earth is “something that fully takes care of spreading everything around.”

42. Bruce Trigger, *Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1976), 30, 52.

43. Frank G Speck, *Midwinter Rites of the Cayuga Longhouse* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, Bison Books, 1995), 16, native terms omitted.

44. William Hurley, *An Analysis of Effigy Mound Complexes in Wisconsin*, University of Michigan Anthropological Papers 59 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Museum of Anthropology, 1975).

45. Martha Royce Blaine, *The Ioway Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979); William Whitman, *The Oto*, Columbia University Contributions to Anthropology 28 (New York: Columbia University, 1937).

46. Paul Radin, *The Winnebago Tribe* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 302; David Lee Smith, *Folklore of the Winnebago Tribe* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 19.

47. Nancy Lurie stunned me when we discussed this epic by noting that there is indeed an early-morning phenomenon called Mary’s Veil (usually in German) when glistening spider webs carpet the ground.

48. These snake stabilizers are named *widjirasewe*, island-weights; *widjirawasewe*, weights, island-weights (in ritual), See *cewe*, *xewe*, *witc* island in Paul Radin, *The Origin Myth of the Medicine Rite: Three Versions*, Indiana University Publications in Anthropology and Linguistics, Memoir 3 (University of Indiana, 1950), 1, 9 line 23, 19 line 37, 63, 64 line 16; and Mary Carolyn Marino, *A Dictionary of Winnebago: An Analysis and Reference Grammar of the Radin Lexical File* (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1968), 388, 422.

49. Marion Johnson Mochon, “Language, History, and Prehistory: Mississippian Lexico-Reconstruction,” *American Antiquity* 37, no. 4 (1972), 478–503.

50. James Springer and Stanley Witkowski, “Siouian Historical Linguistics and Oneota Archaeology,” in *Oneota Studies*, ed. Guy Gibbon, University of Minnesota Publications in Anthropology 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982), 69–83, ch. 5.

51. Garrick A Bailey, ed., *The Osage and the Invisible World: From the Works of Francis La Flesche* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995).

52. *Ibid.*, 47.

53. *Ibid.*, 76.

54. *Ibid.*, 241 line 13.

55. Lawson, *A New Voyage to Carolina*, 45.

56. Hall, *In Search of the Ideology of the Adena-Hopewell Climax*, 260.

57. Alwyn Rees and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978); Katharine Scherman, *The Flowering of Ireland, Saints, Scholars, and Kings* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1981).

58. Melvin Fowler, *The Cahokia Atlas: A Historical Atlas of Cahokia Archaeology*, Studies in Illinois Archaeology 6 (Springfield: Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, 1989), 189–197.

59. In her remarkable *A Sacred Path: The Way of the Muscogee Creeks* (Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 2001), Jean Hill Chaudhuri provides a systematic overview of Mississippian theology, referring to mounds as platforms to the cosmos and astronomical observatories. Even more to the point of this commentary, she notes that all major events in Creek ethnohistory were accompanied by a “trembling of the earth” that conceptualized mounds, all the more from an insider perspective, as havens of security in a very unstable world.

60. Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Perry, *Death and the Regeneration of Life* (Cambridge: University Press, 1982), 29

61. Because I will probably never be as precise again, I should record that the basic idea of mounds as weights to hold a portion of the earth still came to me at 9:30 P.M. on October 9, 1998, while exiled to Madison, Wisconsin, and surrounded by effigy mounds.