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Remarkable Shell Mounds in America

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“We have not now to deal with normal savages, wandering without shelter in the forests of the North and the pampas of the South; we are to make acquaintance with a numerous population living in social intercourse, and dwelling for long periods in a single locality.”—Nadaillac.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

REMARKABLE SHELL MOUNDS IN AMERICA

IN MANY places in America, both North and South, are found peculiar relics of a remote past, generally known as "shell heaps," or shell mounds; also called "kitchen middens," from the Danish word *kjökkenmøddinger*.

Shell Mounds are Abundant. Such heaps or mounds dot the American coasts, and may be seen in some places many miles from tide water. They are found in Eastern Canada, the New England states, Pennsylvania, Maryland, sections of Virginia, West Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Florida, in the middle and lower Mississippi valley, in the South Andean-Pacific area, on the Fuegian and Chilean coasts, in California, on the Aleutian islands, and elsewhere.¹ Some of them are the works of the waves and the wind and other natural agencies, but others are artificial, as proved by the presence in them of bones, shells showing marks of fire; charcoal, and various kinds of handicraft.

Vast Garbage Heaps. These mounds are really immense garbage piles, left on the sites of prehistoric human habitations. They consist chiefly of shells, some of which are of immense size, larger than any now found. The shell mound people, evidently, depended, very largely, on the sea for their food. But mixed with the shells are found bones of the elk,

¹See *Handbook of Aboriginal American Antiquities*, by Dr. Holmes, pp. 95-147.

the reindeer, the deer, the beaver, the seal, the mud turtle, the turkey, and some human remains; also stone mortars, hatchets, arrow heads, pottery fragments, scraps of quartz, cups of soap stone, and some sculptured objects. In one mound Mr. Edward Morse excavated the remains of an ancient fire place, with charcoal, bones, and pottery,² indicating that a human dwelling had stood there long ago. Small mounds, containing considerable quantities of ashes, charcoal, broken objects of flint, obsidian chips, potsherds, bones, shells, clay beads, etc., have been explored in the territory once occupied by the Mayas.³

Age of the Mounds. As to the age of the shell mounds, the only fact ascertained is that some of them are very old, while others are of comparatively recent origin. When mounds consisting of marine shells, chiefly, are found many miles from the present shore line, the inference is that the ocean has receded that far since they were abandoned, and that would indicate high antiquity. Then again, some of the mounds are so large that one cannot conceive of them being built up by animal remains collected by man in a short time, unless the mollusks were much more abundant than they are now. The gigantic oysters whose shells form the deposits of the mounds on the Damariscotta river, Maine, are now extinct—another certain indication of high antiquity of those mounds. Some of the mounds are adorned with majestic oaks, centuries old, and these trees are monuments of high age. On the other hand, in some

²John Fiske, *Discovery of America*, Vol. 1, p. 5.

³Thom. W. F. Gann, *The Maya Indians of Southern Yucatan*, Bureau of Am. Ethn., Smiths. Inst., Bulletin 64.

mounds objects, such as pieces of pottery and weapons have been exhumed, which indicate a more recent date. Nadaillac⁴ places their formation between the time of the disappearance of the last tertiary fauna and the first introduction of metals by Europeans—a date vague enough to be accurate. Mr. Fiske⁵ says: “Thus, at various points from Maine to California * * * we find records of the presence of man at a period undoubtedly prehistoric, but not necessarily many thousands of years old.” Southall⁶ says no antiquity is claimed for the mounds of the Northeast, since objects that must have belonged to modern Indians have been found in them. On the Gulf coast, however, they are, apparently, older. Foster,⁷ expresses a similar opinion. Those on the Gulf coast, he thinks, go back, possibly, to an era previous to that of the Mound builders. The mounds on the river banks are regarded as older than those on the sea shore, and those in the Andean-Pacific area are regarded as quite recent, because in them have been found implements and pottery with characteristics reminding archaeologists of the Inca period. Regarding the mounds on the Aleutian islands, Dr. Dall,⁸ after careful examination, concluded that the earliest are, probably, 3,000 years old. This may give us a clue to the approximate age of the mounds on the continents. It seems to be accepted as probable that the settlers who left the shell mounds on the Aleu-

⁴*Prehistoric America*, p. 65.

⁵*Discovery of America*, Vol. 1, p. 5.

⁶*Recent Origin of Man*, p. 550.

⁷*Prehistoric Races of the United States*, p. 168.

⁸See Dr. Holmes, *Handbook of Aboriginal Antiquities* Vol. 1, p. 57.

tian islands came over from the American mainland. Dr. Holmes⁹ points out that the Commander islands, which form the western end of the island chain, have no traces of occupancy by man, as far as reported, while all the evidence of human presence in the dim past occur in the eastern islands which are nearer the American coast.¹⁰ But on that supposition, we may safely allow from five to ten centuries, for the necessarily slow progress of the shell mound people from their original homes on the main land to the far-off islands, and this would give us from 3,500 to 4,000 years ago as the date of the earliest shell mounds in America. The shell mounds in Brazil, Dr. Brinton thinks,¹¹ may have been the work of ancestors of the Tapuya Indians, "at once the most ancient and the most extensive (stock) now living on the soil of Brazil," and they may be 2,000 years old. Dr. Holmes also is of the opinion that they may be attributed to the immediate predecessors of now living Indians, and that their age is comparatively recent. But, as we have seen, many of the mounds in other parts of the American continents are older.

Immense Size of Some Mounds. Some of the shell mounds are of a very large size. There is one in Georgia which covers ten acres of ground, to a depth of from five to ten feet. One on the Amelia island is said to be a quarter of a mile long with a width of nearly five hundred feet. One, at Bear Point, covers sixty acres of ground, and another is

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁰See also Dr. Brinton, *The American Race*, p. 20.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 236-7.

mentioned as covering a hundred acres.¹² It is evident that settlements which left such immense garbage grounds must have been very large, even if measured by modern standards.

The Shell Heap People. What kind of people were they, who left on American soil those monuments of their existence?

In the first place, they were not savage nomads wandering about without shelter. They were living in established settlements, in social intercourse, with some sort of government. Everything indicates that they had attained some degree of culture. Even their crania, Dr. Foster claims,¹³ show a larger capacity than those of the Mound Builders, which, according to Dr. Foster, came here later. Their brain capacity, he places at 1,375 cubic centimeters, or nearly 84 cubic inches.

In the second place, from the fact that their garbage piles consist largely of the shells of oysters, clams, etc., it is inferred that their main food was shell fish. But the remains of fish bones, and bones of birds and mammals prove that they also engaged in fishing and hunting. Stone mortars are considered evidence that they had cereals and were agriculturists. They cooked their food in holes dug in the ground, as seems probable from the charcoal, ashes, and shells found in such primitive fire places.

Migratory. Further, it is thought that at least some of them migrated with the seasons, somewhat after the manner of Eskimos or Lapps. It is sup-

¹²See Nadaillac, *Prehistoric America*, chapter on Kitchen Middens; also Foster, *Prehistoric Races of the United States*, p. 159, et seq.

¹³*Ibid.*, 169-70.

posed that, at some seasons they hunted and fished, and then retired to some sheltered cove where they occupied themselves with the domestic arts, making pottery, weapons, clothes, etc., and subsisted, principally, on sea food.

Artistic Talent. Many of the objects found give evidence of artistic talent. According to de Quatrefages¹⁴ their needles and bodkins of bone, their mortars and implements of stone display remarkable workmanship, and representations of animals on bits of earthenware are often striking.

Religious Belief. From their burial mounds it is inferred that they believed in immortality; for they buried their dead with reverential care, and placed by the side of the bodies food and implements for use hereafter.¹⁵ But if they believed in a life after this, they must have had other tenets of faith and religious rites, with a priesthood to instruct them and administer to them.

Class Distinction. That class distinction, as between rulers and ruled, rich and poor, existed in this early age, is inferred from the difference in quality in artifacts otherwise belonging to the same class. Some of them are crude, as if intended for the poorer people; others are highly finished and, evidently, expensive. Objects intended for ornaments are very numerous. Red chalk or hematite was used for coloring.

War and Cannibalism. That the shell mound

¹⁴General History of the Human Race, p. 132.

¹⁵Many mounds in the Southern States are burial places. There is one on Stalling's island, on the Savanna river, 300 feet in diameter and 15 feet high.—Southall, *Recent Origin of Man*, pp. 189-90.

people sometimes were engaged in war seems probable from the evidences of cannibalism that have been exhumed in some places. Nadaillac¹⁶ tells us that human bones split for the purpose of extracting the marrow have been found in some mounds, and this is taken as evidence of cannibalism. But if this is correct, there must have been war, to procure victims. Cannibalism and war are, as history abundantly proves, twin children of barbarism, or, rather, savagery. When nations resort to cannibalism, either of necessity or of choice, they must necessarily be head hunters, too. I believe it has been proved that even civilized nations have, in times of warfare long protracted, had the most revolting cases of consumption of human flesh. The split bones furnish the key to the fate of the shell mound race. They indicate with sufficient clearness the causes that led to the scattering and extermination of the people. It should be kept in mind, however, that

“The vast extent of country—nearly all America—where these heaps are to be found affords abundant evidence of the spread of this nation; and the huge masses of accumulated shells and similar remains prove, like Monte Testaccio of the Romans, that they were in large numbers, sedentary in habits, and that they endured for many centuries.”¹⁷

The student of the Book of Mormon will find many striking points of resemblance between the shell mound people and the Jaredites. If they were not identically the same people, they were certainly

¹⁶*Prehistoric America*, pp. 58-60.

¹⁷P. de Roo, *History of America before Columbus*, Vol. 1, p. 51.

cotemporaneous. The Jaredites, too, were highly cultured at one time, but through strife and degradation they fell from a high estate, and their "bones," the remains of their meals as well as their skeletons, became "as heaps of earth upon the face of the land."¹⁸

In a Cave. In the Book of Ether it is noted that the prophet of that name and the Jaredite dispensation, towards the end of his life, took refuge in a cave, where he finished his records, while in the daytime he watched the progress of the devastating battle that raged in the vicinity. (Ether 13:13, 14, 18, 22.)

Caves in America. In this country, caves were frequently used for burial places in the early days of history. Caves have been found in Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, California, Durango and in Chihuahua, Mexico, and in Peru and many other places, from which mummies, or human bones have been removed. The walls of some caves in California are covered with drawings of men and strange animals. In other caves stone arrow-points, and vases resembling Egyptian pottery have been found. It may have been such a burial cave that served the Prophet Ether for a refuge.

Other caves were inhabited. In Pulaski county, Mo., such a dwelling has been discovered. It contained several human skeletons, surrounded by bones of deer, bears, mud-turtles and wild turkeys.

Shelter cave, near Elyria, Loraine Co., Ohio, is another such remarkable habitation. Human bones,

¹⁸Ether 11:6.

mixed with those of the bear, wolf, elk, rabbit, and squirrel, have been found here. It is supposed the occupants perished by the fall of part of the roof.

In Pennsylvania, about 80 miles from Philadelphia, on the face of a cliff by the Susquehanna river, a cave has been found, containing human remains and arrow-points of various shapes and stages of manufacture; also so-called tomahawks, knives, turtle bones, shells, fragments of pottery, a pipe, and pestle and some pigments.

Other caves have been explored in Kentucky, in New York, near Saratoga, and many other places.

The cave dwellers were hunters and agriculturists. They buried their dead with reverent care, they made clothes and sandals and pottery, and some were probably cannibals, whether of choice or of necessity as in times of war and famine. One skeleton was found in a cave, seated against the wall, and it was covered with pieces of bark, as a protection against cinders. A packet of seeds had been placed near the deceased, and this was covered with a layer of grass and ferns, and then with some coarse tissue, showing, in all probability, that these cave dwellers believed in existence after death.

Very little is known concerning these people, but it is quite possible that the Jaredites, or some of them, during the long period of war and anarchy that preceded the final struggle, resorted to caves as shelter against enemies, just as the Prophet Ether did. The country was also, later, filled with lawless bands, who, in all probability used caves as hiding places and convenient bases of operation. Some

of them, it is thought, were inhabited about 2,000 years ago. Others date much further back.¹⁹

¹⁹Nadaiillac, *Prehistoric America*, p. 69-79.