



REVISITING THE MOUND-BUILDER CONTROVERSY

Thomas S. Garlinghouse discusses the slow acceptance of archaeological evidence for sophisticated civilisation in pre-Columbian North America.

THE GREAT EARTHEN mounds are silent now, remnants of a past, forgotten glory. Seemingly rooted to the earth like the acts of supernatural beings, immovable on the North American landscape, they are covered over with grass and scattered here and there with trees, weeds, and shrubs. Many have suffered from the vagaries of time, cut into by ploughs, looted by shovels and picks, scarred by centuries of livestock grazing and obliterated by modern development. Major highways and interstates cut through many of them and passing motorists rarely look up from the road to ponder the mounds' ancient significance.

These monuments occupy the Midwest, southeast, and parts of the east, and are heavily concentrated along major river systems, floodplains and minor tributaries. An estimated 10,000 mounds dot the landscape of the Ohio Valley, and nearly every major waterway in Illinois, Indiana, and Missouri is rimmed by clusters of mounds. There are nearly as many tumuli in the southeast, where huge platform mounds are often surrounded by concentric,

semi-circular ridges. Many are large and imposing, great earthworks like Cahokia, Illinois; Moundville, Alabama; or Poverty Point, Louisiana. Others are small, mere blips on the land, barely distinguishable from hills, that rarely go noticed by passersby. Still others play out in elaborate geometric designs that, when viewed from the air, form serpents, birds, panthers, or esoteric configurations that belie classification or seemingly rational understanding. Collectively, they are testaments to the creativity, ingenuity, architectural acumen and engineering prowess of ancient Native Americans, lost now to the hazy passage of time.

Once, however, the mounds were hubs of activity, the social and political nexus of complex tribal societies and chiefdoms, like the Adena, Hopewell, and Mississippian. At its height, around AD 1100-1200, for example, the great ceremonial centre of Cahokia had an estimated population of between 30,000 and 40,000 people distributed among rigid social classes that most likely included commoners and hereditary elites.



A copper sheet with an embossed face, possibly of a prominent warrior, showing decorations typical of the Southern Cult. Mississippian, c.AD 1000.

The largest earthwork at Cahokia, Monk's Mound, a series of four terraces that rise over 30 metres to form a large, flat-topped platform took 2,000 people nearly 200 days to complete, it is estimated. The smaller but no less impressive earthworks



at Moundville – twenty mounds built around a central plaza – show evidence of a high degree of centralised political power that was able to organise impressive engineering feats. Meanwhile, Poverty Point, situated on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi floodplain, near the confluence of six rivers, was calculated by one authority to have been built over a period of three years, taking 1,350 adults labouring for seventy days a year. That these types of structures were constructed without elaborate technology, beyond baskets, digging sticks and human hands suggest a sophisticated understanding of engineering and geometry.

Sadly, this fact was long in being recognised. Who constructed the mounds, and when they were built has long been a topic of controversy. For a long time, especially during the late eighteenth- and for much of the nineteenth centuries, the mounds were seen as the accomplishment of people separate from the Native Americans. This speculation, and the debate it generated, came to be known as the 'Mound-builder Controversy,' an imbroglio that would engulf American archaeology for nearly a hundred years.

Europeans first came into contact with the mounds as they pushed farther westward across the North American continent, moving beyond the Allegheny Mountains, settling lands that had formerly belonged to native peoples. As Europeans cleared the ground for farming and grazing, they were astonished to uncover a whole host of mounds and geometric earthworks that mystified the settlers. Who had built them? Were they the work of long-vanished civilisa-

Calhokia, the Mississippian site of c. AD 1000, close to present-day St Louis, Missouri, was once the home to more than 10,000 people within its five miles of walls.

tions, such as the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel? Or had the ancestors of the Native Americans built them?

These questions exercised the minds of many famous colonial thinkers, such as Benjamin Franklin, lexicographer Noah Webster, Reverend James Madison (the first Episcopal bishop of Virginia) and Governor Dewitt Clinton of New York. Chief among the galaxy of notables interested in Mound-builder origins was Thomas Jefferson, who excavated a mound on his property in Monticello. His aim was to probe the mound's contents and attempt to determine the origin of the builders. 'That they were repositories of the dead,' Jefferson wrote, 'has been obvious to all; but on what particular occasion constructed, was a matter of doubt.'

Jefferson cut a great trench through one of the smaller mounds that lay near the Rivanna river, observing layers of human bones at different depths, separated by sterile layers of soil. He recorded the internal structure of the mound, and estimated that more than a thousand skeletons had been deposited over the course of many hundreds of years. His excavation was unique for its time. Unlike many of his contemporaries, who tore into the monuments with no sense of method or scientific inquiry, Jefferson was not interested in collecting curios, but as a thinker influenced by Enlighten-

ment ideals, he was determined to gather facts that might shed light on the mystery of mound-builder origins. He conducted careful stratigraphic excavation, stripping back the mound, layer by layer. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he concluded that Native Americans were wholly capable of constructing these monuments and, in particular, the Rivanna mound served as a burial place for many generations, a place 'of considerable notoriety among the Indians'.

The majority of early archaeological investigation was far from scientific, however. Indeed, much of it was patently destructive. Many of the mounds were subsequently looted and found to reveal human burials accompanied by a brilliant array of grave goods such as obsidian, mica, soapstone, shell, meteoric iron and copper. These riches and the complexity of some of the mounds suggested to many early Americans a sophisticated, civilised race. Many came to believe that the 'savages' who were then residing in these areas could not have built the mounds. Instead, they were believed to have been the work of a civilised ancient people – a 'lost race' – that had been exterminated or had died out sometime during antiquity. This theory had many adherents, and soon a variety of different peoples were claimed to have built the mounds – Egyptians, Phoenicians, Canaanites, Hebrews, Toltecs, Hindus, Vikings, Celts, and Romans among them. Indeed, everyone seemed to have had a hand in mound construction except the Native Americans themselves.

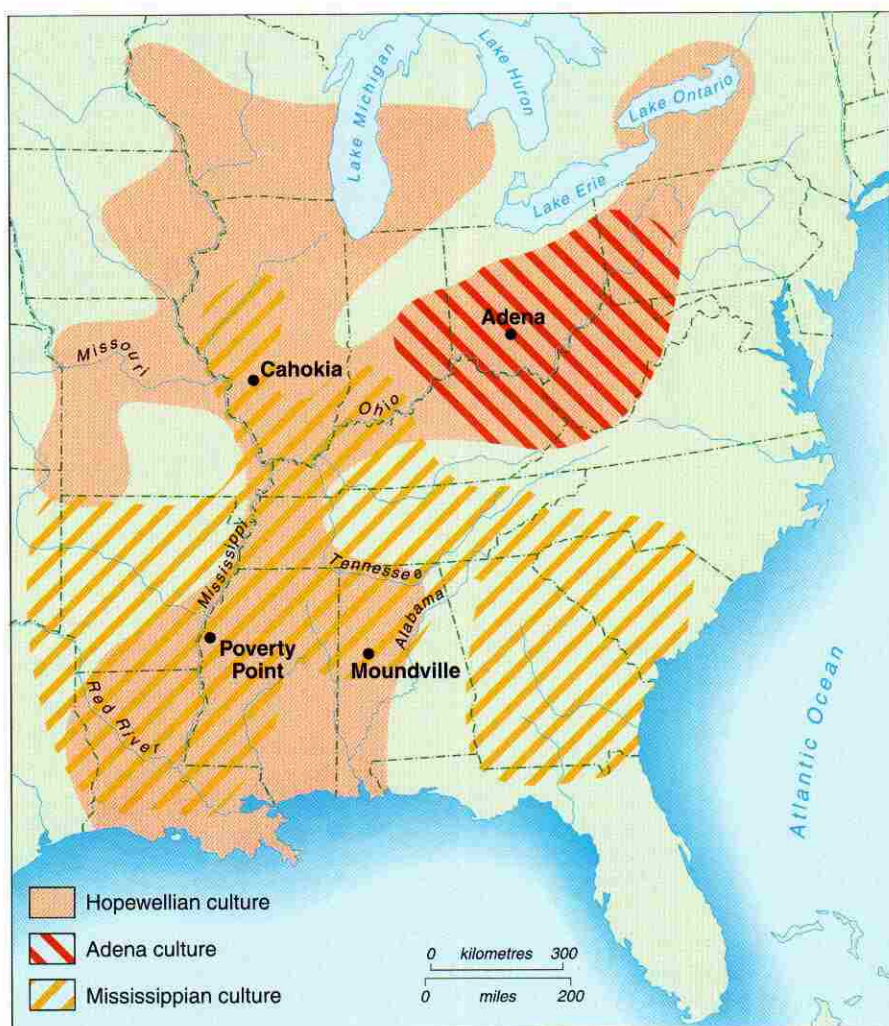
One of the earliest and most

The Mound-builder cultures flourished across much of modern eastern United States, from about 700 BC almost until the arrival of the Europeans.

vociferous proponents of the 'lost race' theory was the antiquarian and author Benjamin Smith Barton. He wrote a travelogue in 1797 in which he proposed that the mounds were built by Danes who then migrated to Mexico and became the Toltecs. Caleb Atwater, the postmaster of Circleville, Ohio, reached a similar conclusion in 1820. A careful researcher who made many detailed and accurate descriptions of the mounds, Atwater nonetheless fell prey to the prevailing theory, speculating that Hindus from India had built the mounds before moving on to Mexico.

Possibly the most influential populariser of the 'lost race' theory was Josiah Priest, whose *American Antiquities and Discoveries in the West* was a bestseller in the 1830s, which sold over 20,000 copies. Priest envisioned the Mound-builders as a white, warrior race who had mysteriously burst upon the American continent and then just as mysteriously died out, possibly at the hands of treacherous savages. His lyrical prose and fantastic accounts of ancient battles – between 'white' warriors and 'red' savages – held the general public in thrall. He wrote:

A Hopewell period (200 BC – AD 500) claw of a bird of prey, made of mica.



Revolutions like those known in the old world may have taken place here, and armies, equal to those of Cyrus, of Alexander the Great, or of Tamerlane the powerful, might have flourished their trumpets, and marched to battle, over these extensive plains.

Descriptions like these proved ample fodder for nineteenth-century novelists and poets. The novelist Cornelius Mathews' *Behemoth: A Legend of the Mound-builders*, which appeared in 1839, was largely based on Priest's theories. Joseph Smith's *Book of Mormon*, with its account of Israelite migration to North America also seems to reflect familiarity with this literature. And the New England poet William Cullen Bryant was so taken with Priest's book that he sat down and penned 'The Prairies' – a paean to the lost race of white warriors:

Let the mighty mounds
That overlook the river, or that rise

In the dim forest crowded with old
oaks,
Answer: A race, that long has passed
away,
Built them – a disciplined and
populous race ...

Like Priest, Bryant concluded that the demise of the Mound-builders was brought about by the villainous depredations of the red race:

The red man came –
The roaming hunter tribes, warlike
and fierce,
And the mound-builders vanished
the earth.

At the same time, however, a few individuals began to question the lost race theory. They put forward the novel idea that the ancestors of the Native Americans themselves, rather than some now-vanished race, had constructed the giant earthworks. A prominent, early proponent of this view was Dr James H. McCulloh, an armchair antiquarian who denied the existence of a separate Mound-builder culture. He pored over several reports and put forward the controversial thesis in 1829 that the Mound-builders and the Indians were one and the same race. Moreover, he concluded, the American Indians were quite capable of erecting the mounds. Nonetheless, his findings were largely ignored and the general public continued to believe in the notion of a separate Mound-builder race.

The implications of this broadly-held view were significant. Implicit was the racist belief that the Native Americans had neither the intellectual capacity, nor the technological know-how to erect monumental structures. This in turn was a justification for the continued repressive policies toward the Indians. It was much easier to advocate a policy of genocide if the Indians could be viewed as savages incapable of significant cultural achievement. More pointedly, many people asked: If the Native Americans had somehow participated in the extermination of this lost race, then what right did they have to the land? While questions of this sort were played out in political and philosophical circles, some serious scientifically-inclined investigators began to probe the mounds in search of the truth, or at least empir-

ically verifiable fact.

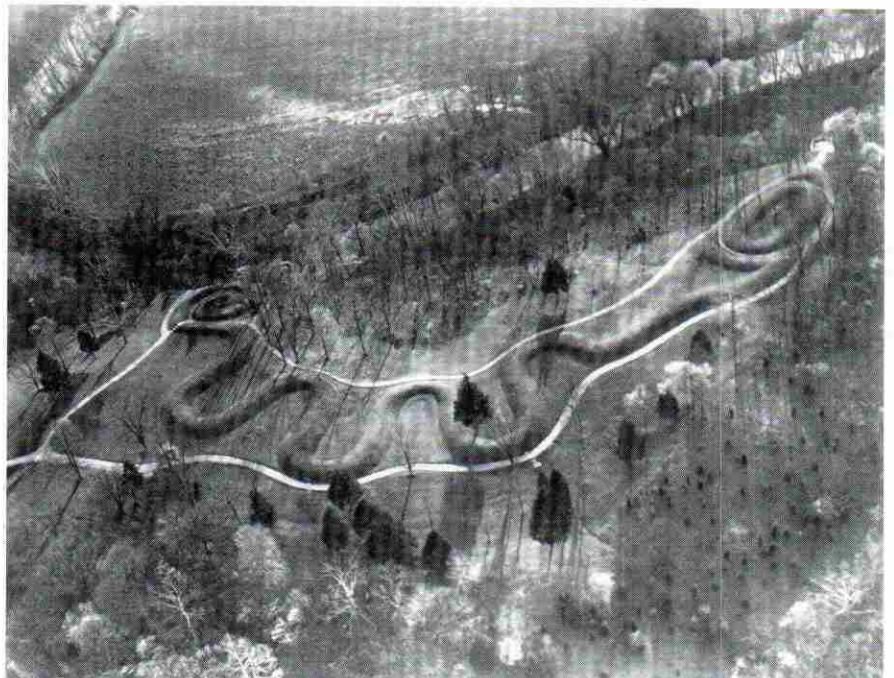
In 1848, two such, Ephraim Squier and Edwin Davis, published a book, *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley*, in which they described, mapped, and surveyed many of the mounds in Ohio. This treatise was well-researched and different from the many armchair speculations and rampant theorising that had long characterised the debate. Ultimately, however, the 'lost race' theory proved too tempting even for such careful researchers as Squier and Davis and they, like many before them, concluded that the Native Americans were incapable of erecting the mounds.

Squier and Davis were followed by Samuel F. Haven, a librarian at the American Antiquarian Society, and a man of great erudition and intelligence. Haven was intrigued by the mounds and became convinced that the 'ancient lost mound-builder race' hypothesis was untenable. From his comfortable Massachusetts study, he sifted through the available archaeological data – a monumental undertaking – and attempted to evaluate the work done on American prehistory up to that time. His subsequent report, *Archaeology of the United States*, published in 1856 by the Smithsonian Institution, offered a balanced treatment of the archaeological writings that had then accumulated in the US. Among other things, the monograph argued forcefully against the lost Mound-builder

theory. Haven condemned those previous authors who, he believed, had been seduced by the romantic notion that foreign cultures had built the mounds. He proposed that the Native Americans and the Mound-builders were one and the same.

In spite of Haven's reasoned argument, the Mound-builder controversy continued to rage throughout the nineteenth century. Indeed, it seemed to be taking even more bizarre twists. Ignatius Donnelly, a newspaper publisher, politician, and popular author of Minnesota, put forward the romantically sounding but wholly implausible theory that the mounds were the work of Atlanteans. His 1882 book, *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World*, argued that survivors from the famous sunken continent had travelled to both the Old and New Worlds in mass migrations. The Mound-builders, according to Donnelly, were offshoots of Atlantean colonies in Mexico. He speculated that adventurous Atlantean navigators eventually moved north where they discovered the mouth of the Mississippi River. From there, they pushed up the river, establishing colonies and erecting earthworks that superficially resembled those they had built on

The Adena Great Serpent Mound in Adams County, Ohio (700 BC – AD 200), photographed in the late 1880s.





A 16th-century engraving by Theodore de Bry of a Timucuan town in Florida encountered by de Soto in the 1540s. This was a remnant of the ancient Mississippian cultures.

vanished Atlantis. Donnelly's book was so influential that it went through nearly fifty printings and, in fact, persuaded the British prime minister William Gladstone to ask Parliament for funds to search for Atlantis.

It was not until 1894 that the careful work of Cyrus Thomas, a scientist in the employ of the Bureau of Ethnology – a Government agency headed by John Wesley Powell – that the Mound-builder myth was at last overturned, at least among the academic community. Powell, the famous American explorer who had been the first man to descend the rapids of the Grand Canyon, believed that the 'lost race' theory was bankrupt. He was firmly convinced that the forebears of the North American Indians had indeed constructed the monuments. In one of his annual reports for the Bureau, Powell wrote,

...[there] is no reason for us to search for an extralimital

origin through lost tribes for the arts discovered in the mounds of North America.

Members of the US Congress, like much of the nation, had long been interested in the mound-builder con-

trovery and had set aside funds for the bureau of ethnology to study the mounds in an effort to end the controversy once and for all. \$5,000 was transferred to the bureau in 1882 and Powell picked Thomas to head a Division of Mound Exploration. Thomas was born in Cairo, Illinois, where, as a boy, he had roamed over many mounds near his home. He had spent his early career as an entomologist and later a botanist for the newly organised Geological Survey. By the time Powell chose him, Thomas's interests extended into many fields and he had acquired the title 'professor'. At first, Thomas was sceptical of a Native American origin for the mounds, believing in the separate race theory. It was a position, however, he soon abandoned.

Through careful and detailed fieldwork, Thomas established that the ancestors of the Native Americans had indeed built the mounds.

Through careful and detailed fieldwork, Thomas established, beyond all doubt, that the ancestors of the Native Americans had indeed built the mounds. Together with eight assistants, he spent seven years investigating over 2,000 mounds, especially ones in the Mississippi Valley. It was exhausting and monotonous work. The team surveyed, mapped, and excavated the mounds as well as catalogued the treasure-trove of recovered artefacts and burials. They

hoped to demonstrate that there had been continuous mound-building activity from the time of white settlement back into remote, prehistoric times.

Finally, in 1894, Thomas produced his monumental, 730-page treatise *Report on the Mound Explorations of the Bureau of Ethnology*. In it, he concluded definitively that the Mound-builders were the immediate ancestors of historic Indian tribes. 'The links directly connecting the Indians and the mound-builders are so numerous and well-established,' he wrote, 'that archaeologists are justified in accepting the theory that they are one and the same people.' It was the final nail in the coffin of the Mound-builder myth.

Ironically, this conclusion could have been reached a lot earlier had researchers paid close attention to some of the ethnographic writings of earlier travellers and explorers. Hernando de Soto, the particularly ruthless conquistador who traversed the southeast in 1540-42, encountered many different Mound-builder peoples, perhaps the descendants of the great Mississippian culture. Indeed, the Mound-building tradition was very much alive in the southeast during the mid-sixteenth century. De Soto observed Creek Indians, for example, living in fortified towns with lofty mounds and plazas and surmised that many of the mounds served as foundations for priestly temples. Near present-day Augusta in Georgia, de Soto encountered a Mound-building group ruled over by a queen who told the conquistador that the mounds within her territory served as the burial places for Indian nobles.

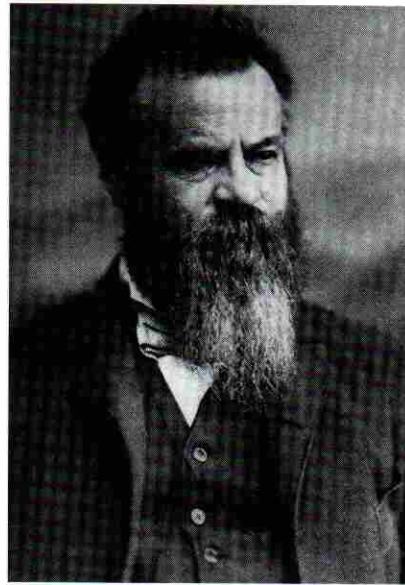
The artist Jacques Le Moyne, who had accompanied French settlers to northeastern Florida in the 1560s, likewise noted many Native American groups using existing mounds and constructing others. He produced a series of watercolours vividly depicting scenes of native life. Although most of his paintings have been lost, some engravings were copied from the originals and

published in 1591 by a Flemish company. Among these is a depiction of the burial of an aboriginal Floridian tribal chief, an occasion of great mourning and ceremony. The original caption reads:

sometimes the deceased king of this province is buried with great solemnity, and his great cup from which he was accustomed to drink is placed on a tumulus with many arrows set about it.

Equally insightful were the writings of Maturin Le Petit, a Jesuit priest (1619), and Le Page du Pratz (1758), a French explorer, both of whom observed the Natchez in what was later Mississippi. Boasting a population of some 4,000 people, the Natchez were devout worshippers of the sun, occupying at least nine villages and presided over by a paramount chief – known as the Great Sun – who wielded absolute power. Both observers were particularly impressed by the high temple mounds the Natchez had built so that the Great Sun could commune with God, the sun. His large cabin was built atop the highest mound, from which, every morning, he greeted the rising sun, invoking thanks and blowing tobacco smoke to the four cardinal directions.

These accounts were evidence of late Mound-builder cultures, societies that flourished at the time of initial contact with Europeans, but went on to be decimated by the



John Wesley Powell (1834-1900), Civil War hero, explorer and conservationist, who promoted the view that the mound-builders were indigenous North Americans

onslaught of superior European technology – guns, steel swords and cavalry. The Natchez, for example, were crushed by the French in a series of wars, and the survivors sold into slavery. Many more were killed off by smallpox and other exotic diseases to which the Native Americans had no immunity.

Today, there is little argument about the origin of the mounds. Few believe a vanished race or mythical beings erected them. Archaeological

evidence gathered since 1894 has firmly established their connection with the Native North Americans and, moreover, has distinguished three major Mound-building cultures. The earliest of these, the Adena, flourished primarily in the Ohio River Valley between 700 BC and AD 200. An apparently kin-based, 'egalitarian' society, they relied on hunting and gathering as well as the cultivation of squash and other local plants. The Adena built large burial mounds as well as extensive earthworks that followed the natural contours of hills. Burial mounds housed dozens of bodies smeared with red ochre or graphite and accompanied by ceremonial soapstone pipes. One notable non-funerary earthwork of the Adena is the famous Serpent Mound in Ohio. It is an impressive structure, its long undulating body measuring 383 metres from head to tail and averaging some 6.7 metres across. Although theories as to its significance abound, a current interpretation holds that the serpent mound is a symbolic representation of an important lineage or clan.

The successor to the Adena was the Hopewell, a mound-building culture centred in Ohio and Illinois, which first appeared around 200 BC. They acquired the name Hopewell after Captain M.C. Hopewell, the

Detail of 'Monumental Grandeur of the Mississippi Valley' (1850) by John Egan, showing excavations beneath a mound.





The 13th-14th-century AD Moundville site, Alabama, was excavated from 1906 by Clarence B. Moore.

owner of the farm near Chillicothe, Ohio, where an extensive mound complex was excavated in the 1890s. The Hopewell was more widespread than the Adena, extending as far afield as Wisconsin, Louisiana, Florida and New York. Renowned for producing exotic artefacts and engaging in long distance trade, Hopewell artisans fashioned elaborate pipe bowls, incised bone and shell, thin copper sheets formed into all manner of designs, and delicately flaked obsidian blades. Unlike the Adena, Hopewell society was apparently a ranked society, made up of elites, or 'big men', who exercised political power over commoners. Similarly, Hopewell burial mounds are much more elaborate than their Adena predecessors. They built spectacular burial mounds, effigy mounds in the form of animals, and complex ceremonial centres.

By AD 700, however, a new mound-building group, the so-called Mississippian, was beginning to eclipse the

Hopewell tradition. They represent the zenith of cultural development in aboriginal North America, with communities exhibiting complex social stratification, high population density, intricate religious iconography and elaborate ceremonialism. This culture first appeared along the lower Mississippi River, then spread north along the major floodplains formed by its tributaries. They grew a variety of crops – maize, squash, beans – in the highly fertile lowland soils and harvested seasonal crops of nuts, seeds, berries and fruits. The most prolific of the Mound-builders, the Mississippian built large ceremonial centres fortified with defensive palisades and dominated by plazas and truncated temple mounds. Although little is known about the particulars of Mississippian society, it was apparently much more stratified than the Adena and Hopewell. Powerful chieftains ruled over separate valleys and vied with each other for supremacy. A few archaeologists have

A soapstone pipe from Spiro Mound, Oklahoma (13th-century AD), showing a warrior beheading his victim.

speculated that the Creek and Natchez Indians were the direct descendants of the Mississippian peoples.

Despite much that has been learned about these bygone cultures, many questions remain. For example, why were the mounds built? Who, exactly, were the mound-building peoples – the Adena, Hopewell, and Mississippian? What were their societies like? How did they live? What did they believe in? A new generation of archaeologists has set themselves the task of answering these intriguing questions.

FOR FURTHER READING

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