

New Light on the Mound Builders

The Prehistoric Mound Builders are in the news again. Near the town of Bainbridge, in southern Ohio, excavators have discovered what is probably the most remarkable tomb of this vanished race that has ever come to light, writes Dr. E. E. Free, editor of The Scientific American, in the New York Times. In it lie, he tells us, the skeletons of four persons, evidently nobles or chieftains of distinction. Two of these skeletons wear helmets of hammered copper, among the most precious of all objects to the warriors of the Mound Builder days. Fragments



shell, as well as some composed of bears' teeth, a prehistoric forerunner of the familiar elk's tooth of today. Most remarkable of all, the Bainbridge graves contain a great profusion of pearls, some of them reported to be as much as a half-inch in diameter. Evidently the great men who were buried here so many centuries ago went to their graves surrounded by all the greatest gifts which their compatriots could provide. Even from the partial preliminary accounts of the burial which have been published so far, it is apparent that American historical science has been enriched by a discovery of high interest and importance. Dr. Free goes on:

"Racially the Mound Builders were

merely Indians. The majority of the pipes, pots, tools or weapons found in the Mound Builder graves might have come from any Indian workshop.

"But in some of their arts and customs the Mound Builders were very different from the Indians of Columbian days. These Indians built no mounds; they worked metals very crudely, if at all; they had no great liking either for gold or for pearls; they did not carve stone. The Mound Builders did, and liked all these things. Furthermore, there are facts which suggest that they had a religious ritual and a political organization quite different from that of the Columbian Indians. How are we to account for these traits and customs? Whence came the engineering skill and the constructive enterprise which led an Indian race to build all those thousands of mounds?

"It is probable that both the customs and the enterprise came into the country as the possession of a class of foreign rulers. These rulers were probably never very numerous. In the beginning they were not especially warlike. Yet they had much power over the native Indian population; enough power to command the labor of many men to erect the mounds and to gather the treasures which have been found in the tombs like that newly discovered one at Bainbridge.

"This power was won and held, we may believe, by what the Indians remembered at 'magic.' We would call it science or engineering. These mound-building rulers from outside the Indian country knew things—useful things—which their Indian subjects did not know. They knew, for example, how to predict the seasons; that is, they had a calendar which told the motions of the stars and of the sun. They knew of Indian corn and how to grow it best. They understood irrigation and the use of fertilizers. It is probable that they had knowledge of medicinal herbs and of a rude kind of surgery. No wider basis would be necessary for a reputation of possessing magic power. It is probably four of these ruler-scientist-magicians who lie buried amid their copper and their pearls in the grave at Bainbridge."

From what country did these rulers come? In all probability, thinks Dr. Free, they came from the great Empire of the Mayas, once a highly civilized and well-organized power in what is now southern Mexico and Guatemala. Why did they come? It is suspected, he says, that they came as adventurers, as mining engineers, as merchants. They were seeking gold and copper, turquoise and mica and pearls—always, and everywhere, the pearls. He continues:

"The presence of pearls in the Bainbridge graves and in other Mound Builder tombs is no accident. It was the reason, many scientists think, for the mound-building Mayan rulers being there at all.

"In the rivers and streams of the eastern two-thirds of the United States there lived, in prehistoric times, a vast profusion of the pearl-bearing mussel. Prof. W. J. Perry, the distinguished British anthropologist, is chiefly responsible for the suggestion that in these mussel beds of the streams of Eastern North America was one of the great pearl fisheries of the ancient American world, an industry quite comparable in magnitude with the present-day pearling of the South Seas.

"Directing these ancient fisheries, organizing the trade in pearls with the home cities of Maya land, equipping and conducting mining expeditions to the copper deposits of the Lake Superior country or to the mica mines of western Tennessee were scores of promoters, captains and engineers who came, Professor Perry believes, from the Mayan cities. These were the rulers whose traces we find, who trained and directed the Indian population, whose magic kept them safe from red-skin hostility, whose rituals of worship or of burial caused the erection of the famous mounds.

"Gradually the Indian country was made a colonial empire of the Mayas. Just as it became, between 1500 and 1700, a colonial empire of the European Powers. From the multitude of mounds that have been left to us we must imagine that it was a great empire and a busy one. Some of the mounds were erected, we know, as tombs. Doubtless most of the Mayan colonists and rulers were buried thus. Other mounds appear to have been ceremonial places or temples, similar to the stone pyramids which existed in every Maya city and many of which have been preserved. Still other mounds appear to have served as forts or protected places, in much the same way, no doubt, as did the later blockhouses of our own pioneers.

"If we are right in accepting Professor Perry's idea that the Mayas colonized Eastern North America for the sake of the pearl fisheries, these colonists must have retained, for a time at least, a certain degree of contact with home. Pearls gathered at the present site of Louisville or of Columbus would be shipped back to the Mayan cities. Copper ore, or even melted copper, would go along. In return would come halves of obsidian, objects of hammered copper like the two helmets of the Bainbridge graves, beads of turquoise, fine cloth from the Mexican looms, probably a hundred other articles so perishable that we have not yet found any trace of them. "It is even possible, indeed, that

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some Mayan Marco Polo may have made this trip and left an account of it. But, unfortunately for science, the Spanish priests who came into Mexico and Yucatan after the conquest—believed that the Bible was the only book necessary or desirable in promoting Christian missions. The Mayas then living in the country had books of their own, which they seemed to prize very highly. The Spanish priests could not read these books, but that did not deter them. They burned up every one that they could find.

"Thus perished, in the fires of intolerance, some of the most valuable historical records ever made and ever lost; among them, it is quite possible, documents which would have enabled us to verify from actual histories the deductions made from the contents and character of the North American mounds. We might have had, in the words of some Mound Builder captain himself, an account of how he had civilized the Indians of the pearl rivers and had offered sacrifices to his Mayan gods on top of some sacred mound which we now know quite well."

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