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The Mound Builders

Lafcadio Hearn

The Commercial

Cincinnati

April 24, 1876

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-Over the face of the country, throughout Ohio and the adjoining States, the extinct race of giant men who disputed their daily food with a race of monster animals, extinct like themselves, have written a mystic record of their existence in hieroglyphics perhaps uninterpretable, yet everlasting and indestructible save by some vast cataclysm. The mighty characters of this ancient record are not less imposing than the eternal hills themselves. A French theorist, who believed in the plurality of worlds and the possibility of holding communication with the inhabitants of other planets, once advocated the formation of enormous mounds, mathematically shaped, upon some sterile plain, to serve as a Universal Alphabet — for the language of mathematics must be the same in all spheres peopled by intelligent beings. The mountainous alphabet of the dead Nation whom we call Mound-builders offers a practical realization of the French author's idea, — excepting, perhaps, the fact of mathematical form. They wrote upon the face of the earth in such mighty bas-relief, that their hieroglyphics were once regarded as natural hills. Then it was gradually found that these hills possessed strangely unnatural forms. Some coiled in a serpentine circuit, curve within curve for miles, like ophidian monsters of the pre-Adamite age. Some presented the form of a huge tortoise fleeing from the open mouth of a pursuing serpent, whose writhing bulk shadowed the land at sundown for many thousand feet. Some were discovered to be grotesque imitations of the forms of birds or deer. Some represented nude prehistoric Man himself in monstrous effigy, and one has been found in colossal mimicry of a spider with vast legs extending over acres of ground. The serpent symbol was a favorite device, and in Adams County, Ohio, may be observed the hilly outline of a half-coiled serpent upwards of a thousand feet in length, which seems about to swallow an egg. But the greater number of mounds were found to be terraced or truncated, as though having once formed substructures for immense temples, which being built of some more perishable material than the Mexican teocallis, have disappeared without leaving a trace. Earthworks of the most extraordinary design are likewise visible throughout the State. At Miamisburg, Brownsville, Liberty, Cedarbank, Marietta, and several places in Pike and Adams Counties, Ohio, mounds have excited the curiosity of archaeologists in every civilized country. The great mound at Miamisburg is no less than sixty-eight feet high and eight hundred and fifty-two feet in circumference at the base.

-And this dead race of giants who fought with hairy mammoths and enormous cave bears, and perhaps that mastodon whose colossal bones to-day dwarf into comparative delicacy the elephant's rugged skeleton — this race, who bowed before the writhing form of the serpent, and perhaps beheld the megatherium, the plesiosaurus and the monstrous brood of the earth's first-born — who were they? It is at least generally recognized that they were not Indians. Their

monumental record little resembles that of the Aztec people; and indeed no other American Nation has left traces satisfactorily analogous to those left by the Mound-builders. But it is worthy of note that very similar remains have been left by the European Mound-builders. Both used similar weapons of defense; both were serpent-worshippers; both struggled with nature for a rude existence in the Stone Age — perhaps, according to the reckoning of one famous philologist, twenty thousand years ago. The arrowheads of the earliest European races are exact counterparts of those used by the earliest American people, and the serpentmounds of Ohio and Kentucky are strangely similar in design to the ophite temples of weird Karnac or rocky Stonehenge. Again, the Mound-builders of both hemispheres appear to have been sunworshippers, and carven disks representing the sun have been found in their graves. But it would appear that the Mound-builders who peopled the Mississippi Valley passed up north and west from the Gulf. Their rude stone implements are mostly wrought from rock which is not found in the region where they have left their mightiest traces. Obsidian, a volcanic product of adamantine density, from which many of their weapons and utensils have been manufactured, is found no nearer to the Mississippi Valley than the Mexican mountains of Cerro Gordo. The Ohio relics of stone are almost all made from material which can not be found in any part of the State. Many arrowheads from the Cincinnati district, for instance, are wrought out of a species of moss-agate almost peculiar to Colorado.

-A highly interesting theory of the origin of the Mound-builders, is connected with the most awful and most wonderful of all historic traditions — the ancient Legend of Atlantis, whereof Plato and other ancient writers spake weirdly and dreamfully. Even in their day, it was probably but the echo of a most remote tradition, handed down through the ages. Classic travelers said that toward the setting sun, far beyond the pillars of Hercules, lay a great, fair island, in the midst of the Unknown Sea, and beyond, yet another island; and still beyond, the foam-kissed shore of the unknown land which girdled the ocean. The first fair island was called Atlantis, and it contained four great kingdoms, with principalities and palaces innumerable. No such island, as geographically described by these writers, has any place in the world, although the researches of modern travelers confirm many long-doubted statements written in the classic ages. But the Aztecs and other ancient races had a dim tradition of such an island, and of a frightful cataclysm which destroyed it, even as the classic authors had written. And some modern theorists believe that there was an Atlantis, inhabited by mighty and wealthy nations.

-In fine, there is not wanting testimony to support the opinion that the present continent of America once extended into the Atlantic Ocean as far as the Madeira Islands; that these islands themselves are actually but the summits of a prehistoric mountain chain, which once shadowed Atlantis and its cities; that the ocean gradually divided this lost land into two or more islands, and that the condition of things spoken of by Plato really existed. Then came some calamity so overwhelming and frightful that we can form no adequate conception of it, when the islands and their cities were in one short night lost from the face of the earth. Tradition speaks of terrific earthquakes, of a raging sea eating up the land, of rivers of fire breaking forth from the entrails of

the rocks and devouring cities, with their peoples. Some few perhaps escaped to record the calamity in this fearful tradition, which has lived perhaps through ten thousand years.

-It is likewise supposed that it was from Northern Europe to Atlantis, and thence overland, or by short sea-journeys, to the continent beyond — that the Mound-builders came with their cattle.

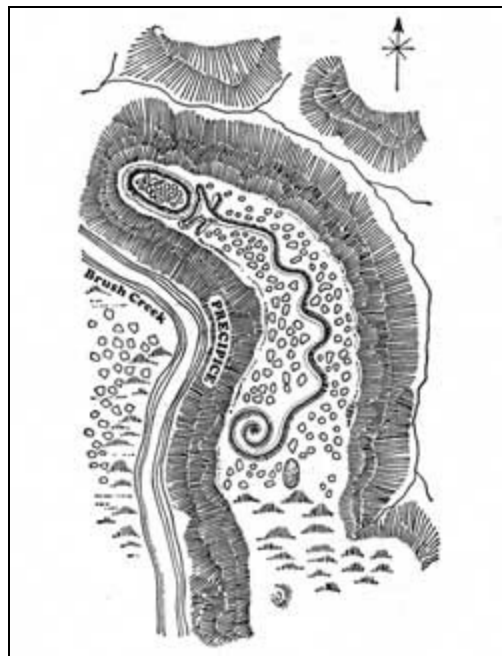
-[It is known that an animal very similar to the American bison once existed in Northern Europe.]

-When the Aztecs were questioned by Spanish discoverers as to their ancestry, they replied that they were the children of bearded strangers, with pale skins, who came from the remote East — from the rising sun. Perhaps those pale-skinned strangers were the emigrant Moundbuilders, and perhaps thousands upon thousands of years in this western climate permanently bronzed the skins and sharpened the features, and dwarfed the physique of their progeny. We do not hint at these theories because they have any great weight of probability, but simply because they are interesting. The birthplace of the human race might have been, not in the Far East, but in the Far West, or in some lost continent. And here it is worthy of note that in some of the Pacific islands are visible remains not altogether unlike the mounds of the Mound-builders. Perhaps there was also an Atlantis in the Pacific; for the language of Tahiti is recognizably similar to the tongue of Malay.

-We can hardly form any satisfactory opinion in regard to the physical characteristics of this primitive race, except that extraordinary strength, activity and endurance must have been necessary to human existence amid such rude conditions. Deep in the heart of their mystic mounds, skeletons have been found, but so completely decayed that the mere contact of the outer air destroyed even their form. It has yet been found impossible to obtain a correct outline of such a skeleton, much less of the entire body, which has been frequently done at Pompeii. Yet skeletons nearly two thousand years old have been unearthed in good preservation in various parts of Europe; and great indeed must be the lapse of time which reduced the skeletons found in our mounds to so evanescent a stage of decay. Fragments of bones have, however, been preserved sufficiently entire to take casts from, including several portions of skulls. These remains speak ill for the intelligence and physiognomical attributes of the race. Perhaps the best preserved skull yet found in an American mound was discovered at Kenton, Illinois. It is hideous, revolting. The frontal bones are strangely abnormal, the superciliary arches stand out in enormous ridges, the skull-face actually frowns. All the frontal bones are prodigiously thick and strong. A modern human being could hardly gaze into a living face similar to that which once clothed this skull without experiencing such a feeling of terror as the aspect of the most ferocious beast of prey could not produce. But it is not reasonable to suppose that this frightful skull, with

its inch-thick brows of frowning bone, is by any means a fair specimen of the Mound-builders' cranial development.

-The study of American archaeology is annually obtaining greater attention from scientists, and may yet result in the elucidation of some highly important ethnological problems. The antiquities of Mississippi, Missouri, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Kentucky and Ohio are perhaps being quite as earnestly discussed in Europe as they have yet been in this country, and the mounds of Miamisburg and Adams County are probably better known in London than they are in Cincinnati. In every county throughout this State plows daily turn up the wondrously hewn flints which formed the agricultural implements or battle weapons of this extinct people.



The Great Serpent Mound in Ohio