

## SOME ASPECTS OF MINNESOTA PREHISTORY <sup>1</sup>

It may be safely said that at one time Minnesota had as many as ten thousand Indian mounds. Damage to these monuments of prehistoric occupation through cultivation, weathering, and the building of roads, it is estimated, may have reduced the number by one-third, leaving perhaps not as many as sixty-five hundred mounds still visible. Added to this more or less inevitable destruction are the depredations of the relic hunter, who has often thoughtlessly removed or disturbed the evidences of customs and cultural contacts which might have been important in solving some of the problems connected with the prehistory of the Northwest.

The first extensive survey of the mound-builder antiquities of the upper Mississippi Valley, including Minnesota, resulted from the interest and initiative of two of St. Paul's early citizens. This project, conducted by Alfred J. Hill, its backer and originator, and Theodore H. Lewis, extended from 1881 to 1895. In that time there were surveyed and tabulated about thirteen thousand mounds in the Northwest, more than half of which were located in Minnesota. The 7,844 recorded in this state, great as the number seems, were not all that existed here at the time, for it was then impossible to explore thoroughly some of the less accessible places. And since that survey was made, other mound groups, then uncharted, have been reported.

An interesting feature of the Indian mound culture is the rather localized effigy mound area. Although mounds are distributed generally over the whole region drained by the

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Mississippi and its tributaries, the effigy mound is found almost solely in southern Wisconsin. A good many are to be found in Illinois and Iowa, but all are located near the Wisconsin boundaries. An offshoot of the effigy mound area which extends into southeastern Minnesota included at one time perhaps fifty effigies. These effigies are built to represent the form of some animal. A bird in flight is the form found most frequently in Minnesota; less often the snake, the bear, the buffalo, the frog, or the turtle is represented. Perhaps as many as half of these interesting mounds may no longer be seen. The fate that befell the interesting group of five bird effigies which once stood near Prior Lake in Scott County is typical of what overtook and is overtaking others. In the early eighties one of the five effigies extended into freshly broken land. Soon thereafter the advance of cultivation completely obliterated the entire group.

Almost everyone in and about the Twin Cities knows of the Indian mounds at Mounds Park, St. Paul. These are said to have been built by the Sioux as burial places. The chief purpose of all other similar Minnesota mounds apparently was that of burial. Although some mounds in the central part of the state seem to have had nothing in them, it is possible that the contents had almost completely decayed before the mounds were excavated. The practice of burial, of course, indicates a respect or consideration for the dead and an idea of life after death.

The typical mound burial for some parts of the state was the "bundle" or secondary burial. In such cases the dead, along with their possessions, were often first buried in shallow graves, or perhaps placed on scaffolds or platforms above the ground. On a stated date, after enough time had elapsed for the flesh to leave the bones, the skeletons of the recent dead were collected. Many of the small bones and often some of the possessions, such as pipes or

weapons, were left behind, but the long bones and the skulls were deposited, much in the fashion of cordwood, in mounds erected with ceremony over them, covering them all together. This was not the sole method of disposition of the dead, however; for there was no great uniformity of burial. Upon occasion the dead were cremated. At other times they were placed in mounds at full length horizontally or in a sitting position. Sometimes they were put in stone-lined graves or cysts, and again they were deposited in pits.

The purpose of the construction of the effigies apparently cannot be so simply explained. It has been supposed that the effigy type of mound was built for ceremonial or religious reasons. But in some instances the effigies contain burials located at some vital point in the mound, such as in the head, or where the heart should be.

It was rather commonly supposed not so long ago that the builders of the mounds were people of gigantic stature who possessed a civilization far superior to that of the Indians. Their origin was said to be mysterious. They acquired a great share of the North American continent, where their superior culture thrived for an indefinite length of time. Suddenly, it was supposed, the people and the civilization disappeared, leaving only the mounds behind. Before the significance of the mounds was known, and their study carefully undertaken, all sorts of queer speculations about them and their builders were advanced. The mound-builders were claimed to be anything from the "ten lost tribes" to the descendants of Welsh adventurers. Fanciful stories about these people grew, and no doubt the tales still flourish in out-of-the-way places. The skeleton of the giant mound-builder, upon being measured, modestly assumes the proportions of the modern Indian. There is ample evidence to show that the mound-builder is the ancestor of some of the present Indian groups. There also

are indications that his origin is Asiatic, dating back perhaps eight thousand years or more.

Although the mounds are probably better known than any other feature of prehistory, it must be remembered that there are others which are equally important, and in some respects more important than the mounds. One such feature is the old habitation or village site, where the successive generations of prehistoric tribes carried on the business of living. There they erected their dwellings. There in the regular daily routine they made, used, and lost or discarded their implements of stone, bone, shell, or wood. There they made and accidentally broke their pottery. There they left the broken bones of the animals which had served as food. And on or near the site they occasionally buried their dead. Such a site may have been occupied so long, and under such conditions, that three or four or more feet of refuse had accumulated.

For the story told by such a site, consider the only rock shelter or shallow cave habitation site that has been carefully excavated in Minnesota. It is situated on the St. Croix River. The occupants of this shelter lived there long enough for as much as four feet of *débris* to collect on the floor. They may have occupied it chiefly from eight hundred or a thousand to two hundred years ago. Of the first years of their occupancy there are not many remains. But the top half of the deposit, which is the later refuse, is rich in remains. In this *débris* have been found prehistoric implements, such as arrowheads, bits of spearheads, short stone knives, stone scrapers of several types, and other less common pieces. Many of these implements must have been produced on this very location, for there are present hundreds of stone chips which are the waste products of such a stone industry.

As the inhabitants of the shelter sat about their camp fires, which are now indicated only by black bands of char-

coal and burned rock some distance below the present ground surface, they prepared hides for clothing and other uses, made implements, and did many other routine tasks. These facts are documented almost as clearly as if the record were written in longhand, for here are sharp bone awls and needles, the bone flesher or grainer used in working the skins, and the bones of deer and other animals in some numbers. Here are also other implements. Some, of bone, were used perhaps in the preparation of vegetable food. There are sharp bone fishhooks used—apparently with notable success—for angling in the pond below the shelter. Bone beads and a pottery tobacco pipe, which happens to be of a type found in mounds and which has a bowl well blackened as if from use, also were found in the shelter.

The food which the people who occupied the shelter used was that which was obtainable in the neighborhood of their camp. Some of the animals that simmered in their stew pots have been identified from bone fragments. They include deer, beaver, muskrat, rabbit, raccoon, red squirrel, and probably dog, which continued to serve the Indians as food in historic times. Remains of a number of animals no longer found in this region, like the deer, the elk, and the bear, also were found. At least five kinds of fish—pike, catfish, sturgeon, buffalo fish, and sheephead—have been identified. The turtle was frequently caught, as were several kinds of birds, including the duck. At least three different types of pottery have been found in the shelter débris. There is a northern Minnesota type, another known chiefly to the immediate south and eastward, and a Wisconsin type. Their presence may indicate that this cave or shelter was used at various times by different groups of people.

When a prehistoric site such as this is exhaustively and scientifically studied, the objects obtained in excavation may

be compared to pieces from a jig-saw puzzle. Each piece has certain definite characteristics, but its full significance is not apparent until it is interlocked with the others.

The question of the age of habitation sites and mound groups is one which will probably never be answered as definitely as one would wish. A very few Minnesota mounds are known, by historical record, to have been built at, or shortly before, the time of the first white contact. And some of the habitation or village sites are known by historic records to have been occupied at a given time. Thus, the date of the most recent village site remains may be set with some certainty, but the dates of the earlier occupations may be judged only by the relationship of the layers of village refuse. The mounds and habitation sites often produce implements and pottery which are identical. The dating of the mounds and sites can be fairly exact chronologically, although the year or even the century may not be assigned. If there existed for the Northwest a system comparable to the Douglass tree-ring system of dating used in the Southwest, the problem would be greatly simplified. By this method the age of the remains of some species of southwestern trees is determined on the basis of the pattern formed by characteristic variations of series of growth rings; and the pattern has been now worked out for almost a two-thousand year sequence, ending with the present. Thus, it is sometimes possible to date village or habitation sites in the Southwest simply by examining the better preserved pieces of charcoal found in the fire hearth, although the fire may have been out and covered with dirt for fifteen hundred years. But such a key is almost too much to hope for in the Northwest, which is far outside of the effective range of this system. At present it may be sufficient to say that most of the prehistoric remains in the state are from three to twelve hundred years old.

The pottery that is found so commonly in parts of Min-

nesota is one of the most important aids in matters of dating and distribution. The predominant type found in the northern two-thirds of the state is a large wide-bodied vessel made of fired clay mixed with a sand or grit temper to prevent cracking in manufacture, often elaborately decorated on neck and rim with fabric and cord impressions. The capacity is often from three to five gallons. In spite of the size, the clay of the body wall is rarely much more than one-eighth of an inch thick, and often less. It is not surprising that such pots did not last a great while when used and that they are almost never found in a complete state. The usual southern Minnesota type is a vessel of about the same capacity as that used in the north, but it is made of clay with a crushed shell temper. The rims are less elaborate than those on northern pottery, and the design is incised by drawing a stick or other implement over the surface of the bowl while the clay is fresh. Oddly enough, it appears that the Siouan people were responsible for making both types, one in the south and the other, over a wide area, in the north. They may have learned at one time to make the northern type from some neighboring tribe, perhaps an Algonquian group. The distribution of these and other types of pottery within the state of Minnesota, their origin, and their age are important problems in Minnesota prehistory.

Copper was rather widely used in prehistoric times in Minnesota, although it was not very abundant. The metal was not smelted or cast, but was beaten and sharpened in the cold state. There are in the Lake Superior region aboriginal mines that doubtless were worked by the Sioux and perhaps by other early Minnesota peoples. In addition to copper that had been mined, occasional copper nuggets found in or on the glacial drift were used. Spearheads and knives are two of the most common prehistoric copper implements found in Minnesota, and beads are the

most common ornaments. Many other artifacts of stone or bone were reproduced to some extent in copper by the prehistoric inhabitants of the region.

There are other marks of prehistoric occupation which may not be so well known as the mounds and village sites. Portages between lakes, sugar orchards where the trees still retain the marks of tappings, pictographs or rock drawings, pits which were used for storage or cooking, old trails, and arrowheads, hammers, and other implements may be found in many parts of the state.

Cannibalism has long been known in the New World, for the first Spanish explorers reported it in Central America. Knowledge of the extent of this practice in the western hemisphere in prehistoric times has gradually been expanding. Last summer an expedition from the University of Minnesota found, while excavating a mound on the Rainy River, unmistakable evidence of this custom as practiced prehistorically in what is now northern Minnesota. A large percentage of the long bones of the remains of more than a hundred individuals showed signs of cannibalistic treatment, which allowed the removal of the marrow fat upon heating. Parts of the skulls had also been broken out to facilitate the removal of the brain. The nature of the remains and the condition under which they were found suggest that this cannibalism was ceremonial rather than necessary. The extent of the custom in the state has not yet been determined, but its presence has been substantiated. Evidences of prehistoric cannibalism are found quite generally in the eastern parts of the United States. Several well authenticated cases of cannibalism in Minnesota in the last one hundred and fifty years are recorded; this cannibalism was practiced as a result of famine.

Most of the features of prehistory so far mentioned are common to all the northwest states, but there is one prehistoric site which is peculiar to Minnesota. It is the pipe-

stone quarry in the southwestern part of the state. Its product is unique, although in the rough state or worked, for example, into pipes, the soft red stone is known to have been transported long distances. The early French explorers mentioned the red stone, and other reports of it were made later. The best known of these was made by Catlin after his trip to the quarry in 1836, since which time pipestone has often been called catlinite. Tribes ordinarily hostile could meet at this spot in safety while they quarried enough pipestone to meet their needs. The quarry was a place of truce, and it came to be considered sacred. It is appropriate that this historic, and prehistoric, site, which cannot be duplicated elsewhere, should be created a national park. Such plans are under way.

The present status of Minnesota, archeologically, is an interesting one. There is the "Minnesota man"—the skeleton of a girl of about sixteen, some parts of which are in a good state of preservation. It was found in 1931 in an undisturbed deposit of silt which had been the bottom of a lake that preceded glacial Lake Agassiz. There is evidence that the skeleton is about twenty thousand years old, and since it shows some peculiar characteristics which may prove to be important in the story of man in America, its discovery—reported by Dr. Albert E. Jenks of the University of Minnesota—has already attracted widespread attention.

Among Minnesota's archeological resources are the results of the early surveys, the interesting disclosures of more recent field expeditions, the unique pipestone quarry. All the rest of the field of Minnesota prehistory is as yet scarcely more than probed by scientific exploration. There is a growing interest in the story of man. The future of archeology in Minnesota should merit attention.

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