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Illinois Council of Social Studies



## **Teaching The First American Civilization Recognizing The Moundbuilders as a Great Native-American Civilization**

**Jack Zevin  
Queens College/CUNY**

The Moundbuilders are a culture of mystery, little recognized by most Americans, yet they created farms, villages, towns, and cities covering as much as a third of the United States. Social studies teachers have yet to mine the resources left us over thousands of years by the native artisans and builders who preceded the nations European explorers came into contact with after 1492.

Perhaps the best reason for teachers to talk about the Moundbuilder peoples with students is that they provide North America with a distinctive large-scale Native American culture that matches in some ways those we recognize in the Middle East, i.e. river valley civilizations. They had a fully developed agriculture, architecture, and travel network, lacking mainly a writing system. Many objects and mounds are difficult to interpret without written records, but that makes for a much more alluring mystery.

We tend to teach American history as if it began with Columbus or, if more open minded, as if the Americas began with Maya, Aztecs, and Incas. But NO! We have our own predecessors to begin the American story with, predecessors that form a link to the distant past and to the 'tribes' that became famous after contact with Europeans.

While Egyptian pyramids are made of stone, Moundbuilders' pyramids are made of giant earthen heaps, much in the shape and function of Mayan pyramids for the living rather than the dead. Examination of Moundbuilder cultural objects provides teachers with great archeological mysteries to investigate in the classroom, and for Illinoisan peoples, visits are at most one long bus ride away. Once in Cahokia Park, teachers will discover a delightful headquarters building, small museum, exhibits of pottery, pipes, and sculptures, and a gift shop to visit before and after they wander the ruins, and if lucky, run into flocks of wild Turkeys (much prized by ancient Native Americans and still prized by modern interlopers). Maybe these are descendants of the originals?

Several of the Moundbuilder cities, nearly all located near rivers, grew to sizeable proportions and one in particular, Cahokia, Illinois, not far from East St. Louis became a kind of center for the many peoples inhabiting the surrounding tributaries of the Mississippi, Missouri and Ohio rivers. Some argue that Cahokia was the center of an empire or confederation of native peoples. Why? Because the artifacts, art, and everyday products of the Moundbuilder peoples follow fairly closely the styles discovered at Cahokia.

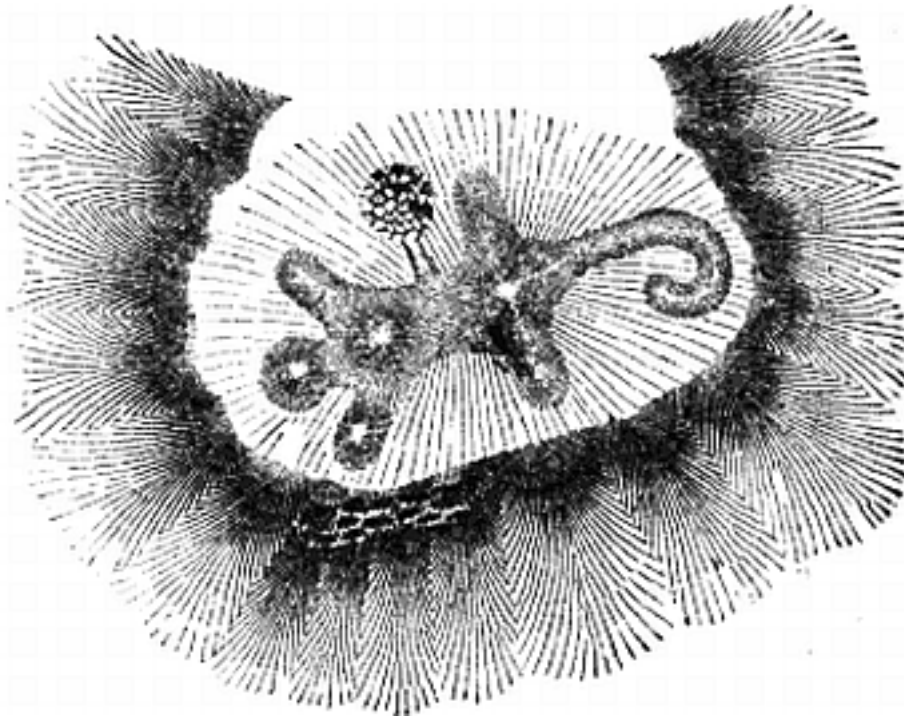


Figure 1: Drawing of Alligator Effigy Mound in Licking Country Ohio (The American Atiquarian Journal, 1891, Vol. XIII, p.316

The term 'moundbuilders' has been used to describe at least two thousand of years of Native-American history characterized by the creation of earthworks in many shapes and sizes, geometric and animal, built by generation after generation of peoples. These earthworks, dating from prehistory to about the 16<sup>th</sup> century, demonstrate an evolving interconnected civilization that seems to have spread up the Mississippi River Valley throughout the center of North America into the Missouri and Ohio River basins. Surveyors of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century recorded and drew images of as many as 14,000 mounds from south to north and east to west in the heartland of America (Squier & Davis, 1847).

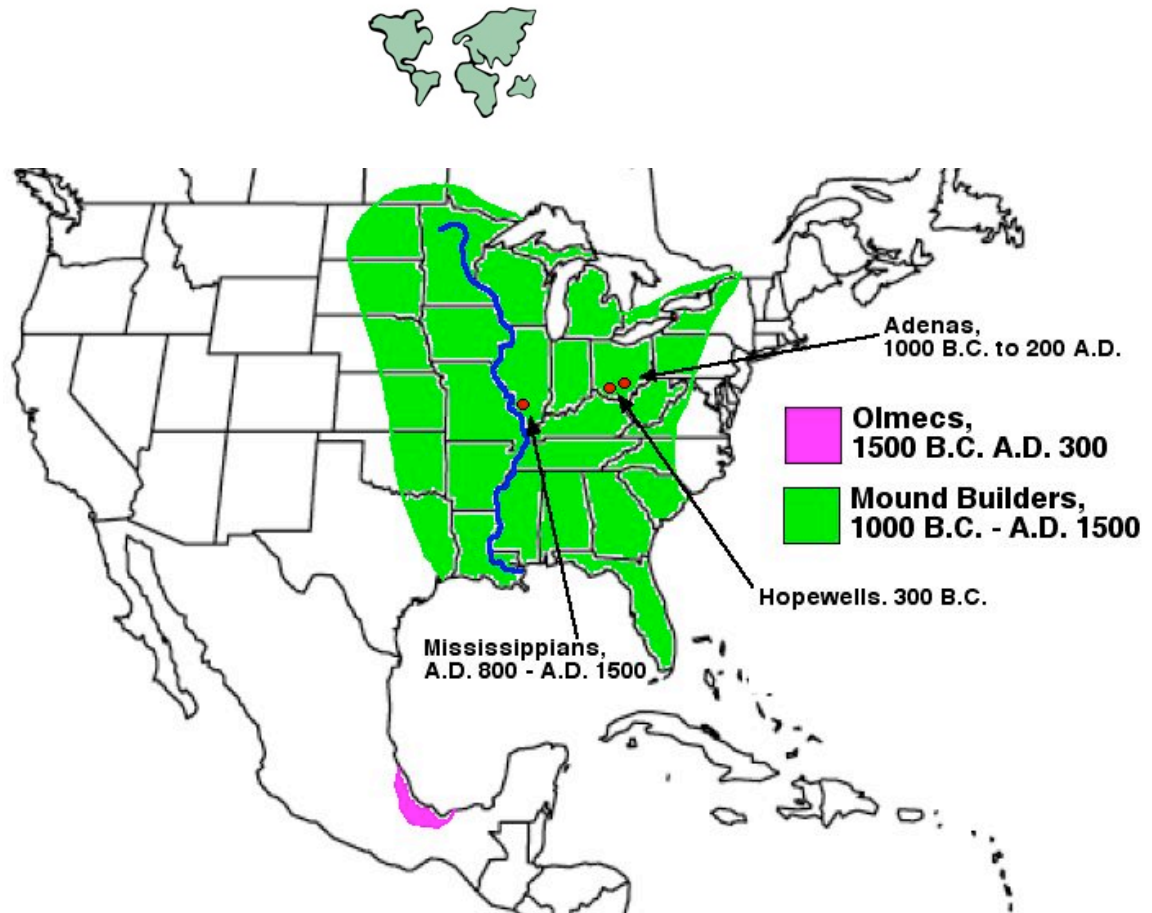


Figure 2: Wikipedia/attribution Herb Roe (creative commons attribution-share alike license)

For example, one of the earliest mounds in horseshoe shape was discovered in a place known as Poverty Point, Louisiana, dated to about two thousand years ago. A much more recent mound of great size still stands near St. Louis at Cahokia, Illinois and is estimated to have been the center of a city of 50,000 or more people reaching its maximum in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. While being overlooked for decades and still failing to make it into most U.S. History books, it has finally dawned on scholars and teachers, like Abrams, and Pauteket, that the earliest mounds in Louisiana are stylistically related to temples and complexes in Mesoamerica! This would make the Mesoamerican early civilizations, Olmecs, Mayas, and Toltecs forerunners of North American styles and patterns of living, though there are differences between local cultures. Cahokia Monk's Mound viewed from the air has nearly the same shape as a Mayan Pyramid only it is made of clay or mud and not stone.

Noting the map below (figure 3) one can see that it is not very far from Oaxaca and Yucatan, jutting out of south Mexico, to the American South. It seems quite logical that ships would set up trade with the north once they got their paddles and sails in order.





The greatest of the Mound Building civilizations was the **Mississippians**. They lived along the **Mississippi River Valley**. They lived in hundreds of towns and a few large cities. The largest city was **Cahokia**.

Figure 3: Map of Moundbuilder peoples areas and Mesoamerican cultures

Thus we have a diffusion of peoples across the middle of North America along rivers with many customs and features in common, e.g., earthworks, corn cultivation, pottery and pipes, as well as artistic and religious expression. Some of the mounds are dated back 5,000 years while the most recent were built as recently as four or five hundred years ago. This is evidence of a continuing, interactive culture that followed rivers for trade and transport much as modern Americans do today, traveling great distances to share many products and ideas, about which a considerable amount is known but very little is taught in social studies.

Alas, we tend to avoid the prehistory of North America, forgetting that this continent has a long, varied, and often, a mysterious story, to tell our students. What makes the so-called Moundbuilder peoples so attractive for teachers is that their artifacts and ruins present so many potential opportunities for detective work. We need a Sherlock Holmes to pull together the diverse, lengthy, and complex evidence of the mounds, and their inhabitants, who many historians and social scientists regard as perhaps a great empire or confederation connected by a shared heritage of the arts, trade, and political power.



Figure 4: Black panther pipe: [www.coohio.com](http://www.coohio.com) (est. 12-14<sup>th</sup> Century)

Recently there have been fascinating discussions by Young and Fowler of potential or probable connections between the people who build mounds, particularly along the Mississippi, and the great native cultures of the Maya in Mesoamerica. For those who have flown or cruised from New Orleans to Cancun, the distance is not very great and it is easy to believe that Maya explorers in modest ships or great canoes visited the shores of Louisiana and Mississippi in the prehistoric millennia. Many of the artifacts in the mounds share a striking resemblance and iconography with Maya and Mesoamerican art, for example birdman (eagle?) warriors, gorgets (necklace pieces) made of large shells, and iconic pipes in the form of birds, mammals, and plants.



Figure 71: An example of a shell gorget displays the delicate carving skills of a Mississippian artist. The artifact was found at Etowah Mounds in Georgia.

Figure 5: Moundbuilder gorget (wikipedia)

Mound peoples allow us to interpret and extrapolate from a wide range of earthworks and artifacts to conjure up explanations of form and function that fit in with what we know about current cultures both in the United States and Mesoamerica. Of course, no one, expert or hobbyist, really understands with surety how to interpret the mounds because (as far as we know) no written records were given to us to enhance the physical clues left behind across a wide geographic area. Therefore the Mounds must be approached with a sense of mystery, drawing tentative conclusions, and by keeping alternative hypotheses open to reconsideration.



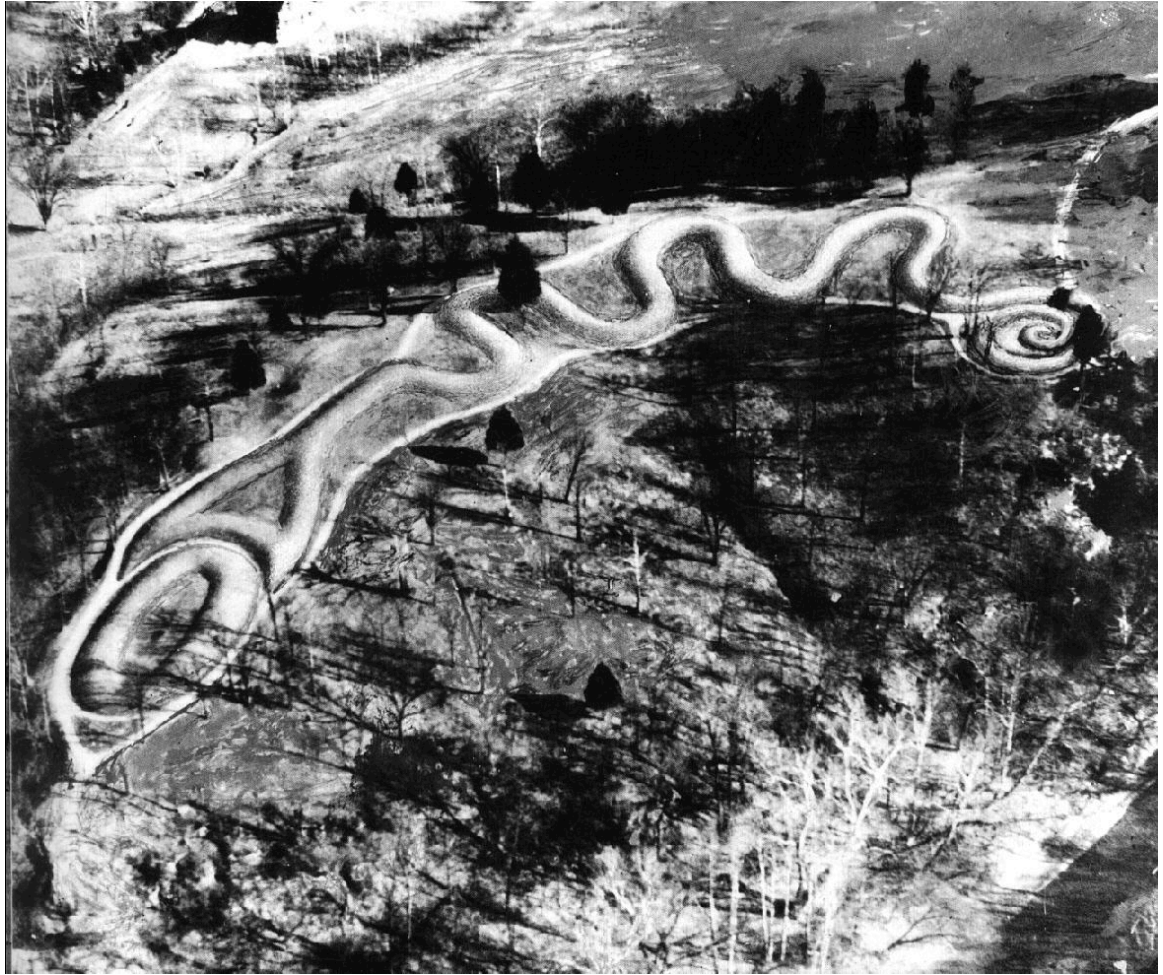


Figure 6: Great Serpent Mound, Chillicothe, Ohio (still there for a visit)

Rather than simply accepting many interpretations as 'true' or 'false' we should share a sample of pictures and artifacts with our students to give them a new appreciation of American prehistory, with rich and varied examples of adaptation to the resources of one of the world's largest river ecosystems. While we honor the foundation of civilization in the Near East/Southwest Asia, for example the Nile and the Tigris Euphrates basins as 'The fertile crescent', we don't apply the same theories of geography to the environment presented by North America's heartland with its rich interlocking river system running from the Appalachians and Great Lakes as far north as Minnesota down the Mississippi and its branches to the delta that opens out into the Gulf of Mexico.

If we think about 'river valley civilizations' one might well ask why the Mississippi didn't develop a great civilization like those in The Middle East, Asia, or Europe? Yet, upon trying to answer this question, if we take a good, close look at the evidence left behind by Moundbuilders, we find that indeed there are towns and villages, mounds and ruins, farms and stockades, trails and paths, all along the Mississippi, Ohio, and some branches of the Missouri and related rivers that make perfect sense in terms of human location. Cahokia, for example, perhaps the largest town/mound discovered is near the

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junction of the Ohio, Illinois and Mississippi rivers. It is also rich farmland even today growing just what the natives grew in abundance as their main crop, maize, what we commonly call corn. Teachers can stress the value of contact during the Columbian exchange when the range of food on both sides of the Atlantic increased many times over, and reinforce the debt owed by the world to the agricultural skills of Moundbuilder and other native peoples.

Agriculture was well developed a long, long time ago by natives who appreciated the rich river bottoms fed by silt as ideal for growing large amounts of corn plants accompanied by other crops like squash, beans, and wild rice. Here is another great opportunity to demonstrate the rich agricultural potential of North America as part of the NCSS standard for People, Places, and Environment. Corn, beans, and squash was grown across the entire flood plain and over the Appalachians and on into the deserts of the Southwest, a highly developed agriculture much celebrated and depicted in national and 'tribal' art and mythology. Bad weather or drought affected them as much and as perversely as any modern day farmer for whom we feel sorry when her or his crop is destroyed. Where would 'Tex-Mex' be without Native contributions?

For teachers, the Moundbuilders could serve as an entry point for U.S. History by providing a case study for a river valley civilization that influenced Native peoples across the heartland, and touched the European explorers who came upon impressive mounds, many drawn in detail by both Squier and Davis, and a bit later Cyrus Thomas, on their travels in pre- and post- Civil War 19<sup>th</sup> Century America. A sampling of these drawings could serve as an interesting springboard for discussion since mounds appear in animal shapes and as pyramids, or rectangles, with different functions not fully understood to this day.

Excellent Museums such as the Moundville Archeological Park in Alabama, or the Cahokia Mounds State Historic site in Illinois, or the Spiro Mounds Historical site in Oklahoma have websites and artifact collections encouraging teachers to develop their own 'arrays' of 'finds' for students to examine and analyze as junior archeologists and social scientists in social studies and science. Gerwin and Zevin devote a chapter to the Moundbuilders as mystery, with artifacts for teachers to apply to classroom inquiry investigations.

While we are working restoring the ancient Moundbuilder peoples to their rightful place in American history and in the social studies curriculum, let us also consider a bit of relabeling, for example, calling them and other native people 'nations' or confederacies rather than 'tribes'. Teachers need to rethink the place of native peoples in the presentation of U.S. and North American history, giving them a more prominent place as the foundation of current nations, as well as catalysts for new foods distributed worldwide.

Let us think of them as traders and travelers, as explorers and scientists, as politicians and priests mining the resources of the great river systems of North America, contacting other nations like the Olmecs, Mayas, and Toltecs of Mexico and Central America, developing and imitating art styles in new environments, and building great towns and farms across a huge swath of territory, most of what is still the heartland of



American agriculture and transport between the Great Lakes, the South and the East, creating a network of cultural communication and an interconnected economy of trade.

Let us take a new look at the prehistory of America as teachers and students, one that celebrates origins, accomplishments, and consequences for the wider worlds, while delving into the delicious mysteries of a treasure trove of artifacts and earthworks (many destroyed or nearly destroyed by development). And let us offer clues to an American past richer and more extensive than we might expect from our current viewpoint.

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