

Recent Excavations at the King Mounds, Wickliffe, Kentucky

Blanche Busey King

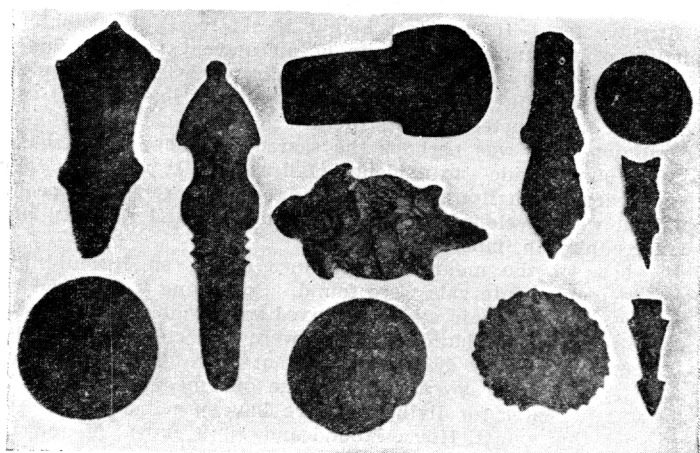
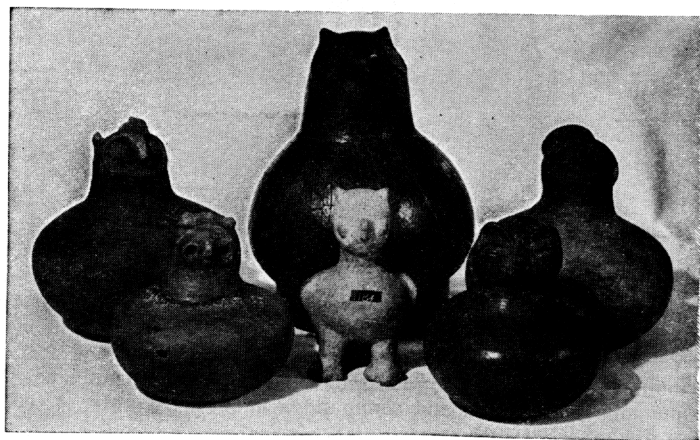
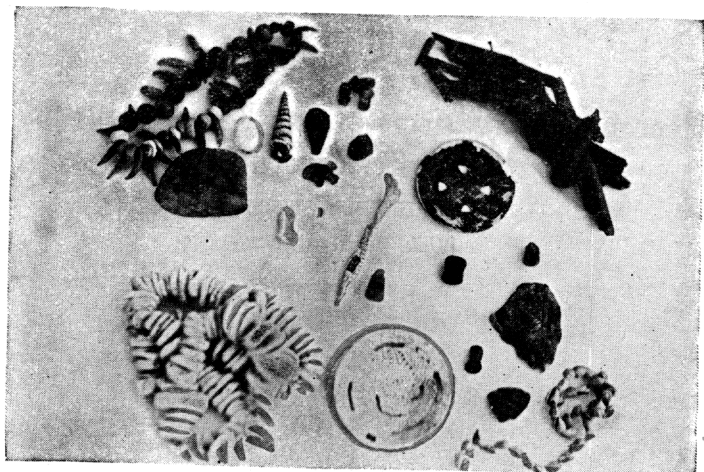
Wickliffe, Kentucky



Mound D, the fourth mound to be excavated of the nine mounds which comprise the group of the King Mounds, otherwise known as the "Ancient Buried City," Wickliffe, Kentucky, has been completed only a few weeks. These mounds are beautifully located high above the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, and command a magnificent view of the rivers for miles distant.

This mound is rectangular in shape and measures one hundred and five feet by fifty-five feet. Its greatest height is six feet. It presents a very vivid picture of the living conditions of an ancient people. The mound itself is built over many building sites, as indicated by different outlines all large and rectangular in shape, with the exception of one circular structure twenty-two feet in diameter. This structure no doubt had some significance in their religion—and was perhaps the sacred precinct of the shaman, as nothing was found inside—no evidence of fire, etc. It was purposely kept clean. One learns from literature pertaining to the prehistoric people that ceremonialism was developed to an unusual degree, and the medicine man or shaman occupies an important place.

At the base of the mound the outlines of six small buildings with post molds at regular intervals were found. Split cane was woven between the posts like a wicker chair and clay mixed with water and grass forming a clay wattle plastered the building. They were subjected to fire, both inside and out, as the walls show evidence of violent heat. They may have been pottery kilns or used for sweat houses, like our modern Turkish baths—since this was a center for living. As we have previously excavated the Temple Mound, the Council House Mound and Adult Burial Mound, perhaps

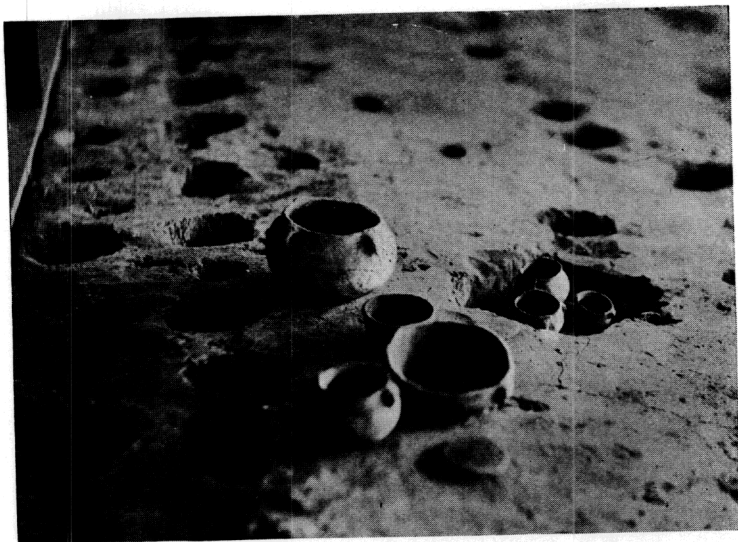


it was used as a spa, like Hot Springs or various watering places in this country and abroad.

In the middle of one of the structural outlines, three feet from the base of the mound, two adult extended burials were found completely covered with cypress and other wood bark. We also found a burial pit, the bottom covered by stones and six bundle burials.

One altar was found with a path of post molds on either side leading to it. No ashes were found, so it could have been a place where offerings of flowers were made; or again, it might have been a work table; all is conjecture until the entire story of prehistoric man is completed.

Five fire pits were found. One raised and concave, two feet in diameter, shows evidence of great heat, as it has a layer of fire-hardened clay baked almost to a brick. Near this fire pit is the remains of a feast; a charred

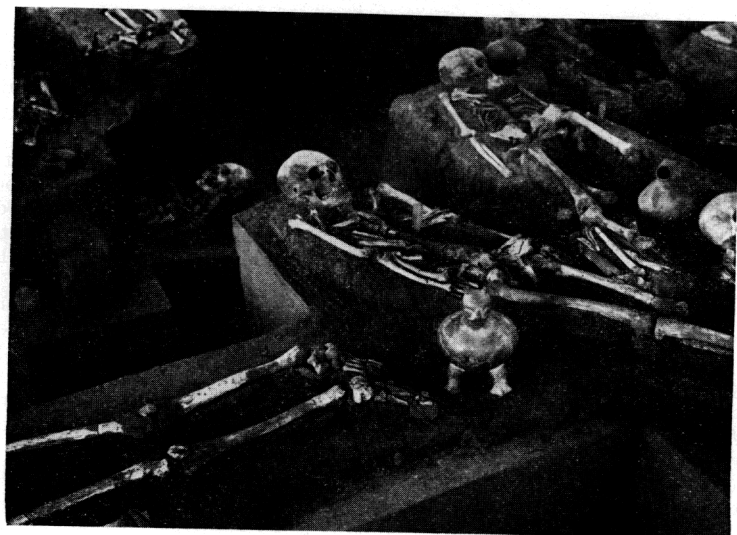


heap of chinkapin nuts, hickory nuts, pecans, beechnuts, pignuts, maize kernels, beans similar to lima beans, squash seeds, bones of turkey, squirrel, bear, deer, beaver, wolf, opossum, raccoon and other species of animals, fowl and fish, bearing concrete evidence of prehistoric dining.

The great accumulation of kitchen midden proves convincingly that this mound was built in a slow and gradual manner and that a large number of people lived here at one time. In the kitchen debris literally thousands of broken sherds, discarded bone implements and other miscellaneous material have been found. So much kitchen midden caused the soil to be very black from decomposition.

Among the bones we found discarded mortars and pestles which we know played an important part in their domestic life. Some of the pestles are highly polished on the ends from grinding and pounding, so they must have pounded the nuts, meat and corn and had hoe cake or bread of some kind. Some of the long pestles are like our modern rolling pins; however, they were quite heavy and made of stone. We also found many pipes, so they probably were inveterate smokers, or used them in ceremonials.

Many hundreds of spoons carved out of the iridescent mussel shells are quite lovely, and not long ago I noticed in a magazine that it is quite "de rigueur" to serve caviar in mother-of-pearl dishes, so we are imitating the prehistoric people even today.



Some of the miscellaneous pieces found in flint are drills, knives, scrapers, spear, bird and war points, etc. In bone, fish hooks of various sizes, ornaments, awls, a bone dagger eleven inches long, two beautifully polished hair pins ten inches in length, celts and needles; ear bobs and rings of cannel coal, plumb bobs of sandstone, galena, beaten copper ornaments, gorgets made from the carapace of turtles, ornaments from the canine teeth of bear, wolf and beaver, shell beads, spoons, gorgets and pendants made from flat discs cut from mussel shells. A turkey bone caller with an antler tip was found. Perhaps this was a musical instrument, as all races have had music of some kind. A number of pottery trowels were also excavated.

Two unusual and large pendants were found, one of white fluorspar, rectangular in shape, with rounded corners showing evidence of having been surrounded by copper. Because of the fragility of this material, the artist showed great skill in his carving. The other pendant is a hand with fingers



extended, carved out of shell, on the palm of which is carved a Maltese cross surrounded by two circles. This pendant must have been very beautiful when first made, as it still shows the lovely iridescent colors of the shell. A cache of bone implements of various sizes, all beautifully polished, was uncovered in a burial—the favorite implements, no doubt, of an artisan of some type—perhaps he was the leather worker.

Three ceremonial fire pits were found with only the ceremonial ashes remaining. Another small ceremonial fire pit, surrounded by five skulls, is placed near a group of adult burials.

We also found a skull which had eighteen teeth, instead of sixteen, two premolars or bicuspid in the mandible inside the regular line of teeth. In the right maxilla of another skull was a large bone growth near the molars which were almost twice their usual size.

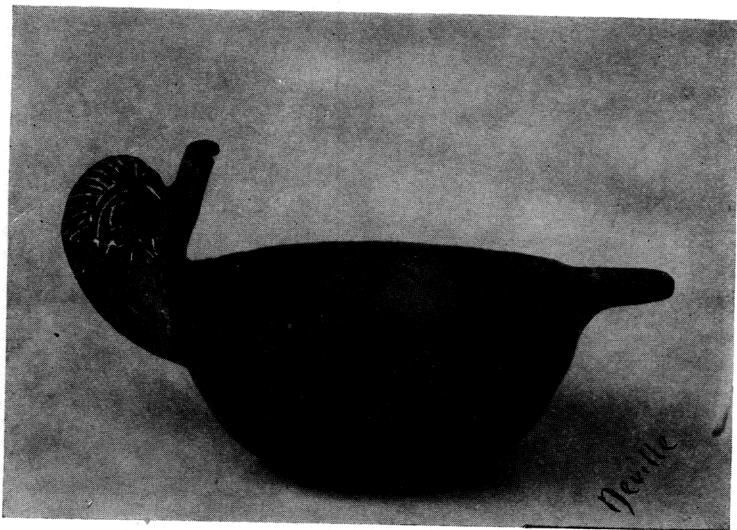
Dozens of antler tips and other pieces made from deer antlers and used perhaps as "sizers" or mesh gauges in their fishing nets were found.

The potsherds tell an impressive story of prehistoric textiles, pieces of which must have been pressed into the clay while soft, leaving indentures of many different designs. Mussel shells were ground and mixed with the clay as a tempering agent, and red and yellow ochre used to color it. The potsherds also help to define this Indian culture—every sherd, bead, burial-outline helps towards completing the entire story.

Many effigy pieces were found among the sherds. The most unique are the heads of a dog and an owl which rattle when shaken.

The existence in the mounds of so many articles foreign to the region is proof of some established trade route, and we know extensive intertribal traffic in articles existed from remote ages. Mica from the Carolinas used for mirrors and jewelry, cannel coal, copper from the borders of Lake Superior, sea shells from the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic coast, hematite and quartz from distant mines were found. Extensive trading operations brought these people in contact with Mexico and its distant races, as some of the pottery and copper ornaments are distinctly Mexican in design. A handsome plumed eagle bowl shows Central America influence.¹ It is difficult to realize the extent of their commerce.

The burials and pottery are distinctly of the Middle Mississippi culture, with the exception of the plumed eagle and the human effigy caricature of a crouching woman. This effigy type is seen so often that one is led to



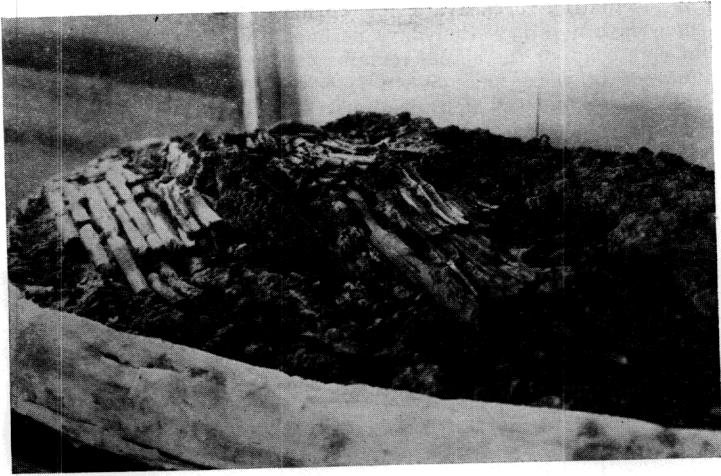
believe she represents some malevolent goddess whose rage had to be averted in every household. These show distinctly Central American influence. From the several burned buildings one wonders if the old Mexican custom of the fifty-two-year cycle was used by these people.

They were an ingenious people. They utilized the human figure in many attitudes, and every kind of bird and beast in the prehistoric forest is represented in their zoomorphic effigy pottery, pipes, bird stones and ceremonials.

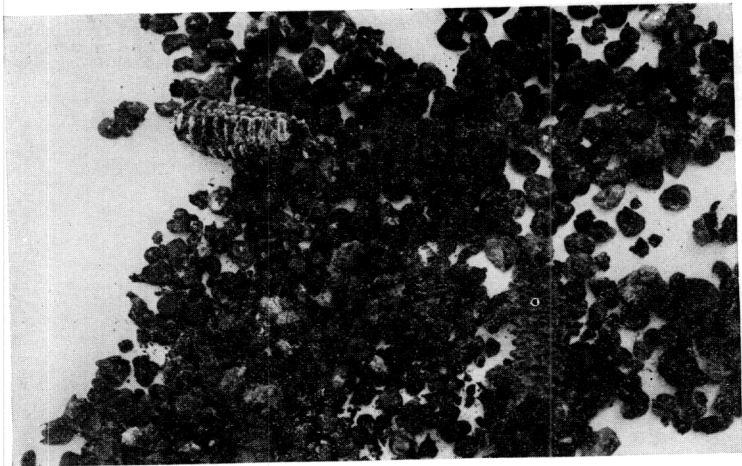
Some of the artifacts are very crude and their use problematical, others are admirably wrought and polished and the magnificently chipped flints show beautiful workmanship.

Very few weapons were found with the burials which would indicate that here was a peaceful people. The sun and serpent must have been symbols in their mythology, as they were used so extensively on their artifacts. Without doubt they have some special significance in their religion. One wonders if they were sun worshippers.

¹ Eagle bowl here shown was photographed by Russell Trall Neville, Kewanee, Illinois.



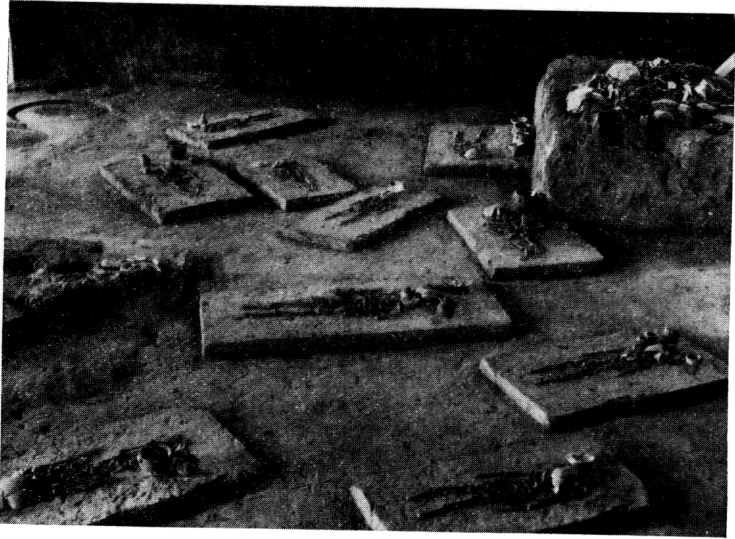
Obviously, this last mound is the children's mound, for at the base of the mound sixty-three infants were found. They are left in situ. There was no set method in their burials, as some are on their backs, others on their sides, with their feet crossed. Some face each other, perhaps in a twin burial, and others have their little knees to their chins in a flexed or prenatal burial. One infant had a string of shell beads around its neck and near the hand of another lay a beautifully carved white bone doll, three inches in length; another had a miniature clay doll, another a tiny clay bear; others were surrounded by petite three-legged bowls—one with a snake head for a handle, the other in the shape of a small hand; and others in the shape of fish and animals; all telling a simple, poignant story of paternal love and devotion. So that is one thing apparently that has never changed all through the ages—a parent's love. The Infant Mound, or Mound D, is a miniature of the adult burial mound, for the children lie surrounded by their chosen possessions.



It is fascinating to excavate, for we never know what we are going to find—some days nothing, other days perhaps a cache of bone implements or fine flint or a bead, or the actual remains of a people who lived in a thriving city hundreds of years ago. When I look at these people I am reminded of a line in a couplet which inspired the famous sculptor, Lorado Taft, in one of his celebrated works:

"Time goes, you say?—ah, no!

"Alas, Time stays—we go."



NOTE: Since giving the paper at the Rockford meeting in May, 1937, we have found, in Mound E, two caches of prehistoric maize—twenty-eight thousand, one hundred and sixty-two kernels, cobs and other botanical material. Due to the charcoal of the burned building, which neutralized the acids of the earth, part of the split cane container is preserved.

On March 5, 1938, an unusual *fabric* container was excavated from a new portion of Mound D. Due to carbonization, the type of weave and material can be determined. The bag or container was filled with charred prehistoric corn and cobs.