

## An Archaeological Reconnaissance in Southern Kentucky

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During the first week of April, 1936, I had the opportunity of taking a trip into southern Kentucky with a party of three for the purpose of gathering archaeological materials of that region. Being in an unofficial capacity, we limited our work to the gathering of surface material; but naturally we ran on to much of interest in the line of burials and camp grounds. The area which we covered lies near Scotsville, Kentucky, about one hundred miles northeast of Nashville, Tennessee. Shetrone, in his work on the mound-builders,<sup>1</sup> designates this region as the Tennessee-Cumberland area. Culturally considered, the area shows close affinities with the Lower Mississippi division, merging with that area all along its western edge. The artistic accomplishments of the Tennessee-Cumberland division approximate those of the noted Hopewell Culture farther north except in geometrical earthworks. The Tennessee-Cumberland area can be divided into two geographical subareas that are also justified by the difference of cultural development. One area comprises the region of the lower Wabash, dividing the states of Illinois and Indiana and running southward across Kentucky into central Tennessee. The other area corresponds to eastern Tennessee and the nearby portions of Georgia and the Carolinas. Each of these areas possesses a definite nucleus of culture represented in the eastern region by the famous Etowah Group of Georgia and designated in the western subarea by the stone-grave mounds and cemeteries typically represented about Nashville.

The most prominent characteristic of the area in which we were exploring was the prevalence of the stone-box graves. On first thought one would believe that this type of burial designated a very definite culture, but Jones casts some doubts upon this by stating that "the mode of burial employed by the inhabitants of Tennessee was only practicable in a region of country abounding in flat rocks".<sup>2</sup> Whether or not this characteristic does denote a distinct culture, the fact remains that the stone-graves are the marking characteristic of the area. Jones also holds that this remarkable type of burial must have been received from the Europeans, and goes on in an attempt to prove this statement by presenting an array of apparently convincing evidence. I believe that today, however, little trust is placed in this belief.<sup>3</sup>

With the aid of the local people, we found a considerable number of the stone graves so typical of the area. They were found in large cemeteries, singly, and less often in small, conical tumuli. The locations in which the mounds were found were typically on bluffs along the rivers of the region.

The stone graves were seldom more than a foot below the surface. Apparently a shallow grave was excavated and the sides were lined with

<sup>1</sup> *The Mound-Builders*, pp. 409-412.

<sup>2</sup> *Explorations of the Aboriginal Remains of Tennessee. Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge*. Vol. 22, p. 15. 1880.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

thin plates of limestone. After the body was placed in the grave, flat rocks were laid across the top and the shallow hole filled in. Many of these graves have become apparent to the passer-by because the earth has sunk into the grave, exposing the upright edges of the sidewalls. Others, not so exposed, have to be located by probing with an iron rod. These graves were generally located singly along the high bluffs overlooking the rivers. However, on two occasions we found areas where large cemeteries must have existed. The fields had been under cultivation for a number of years and the great slabs of limestone literally covered the surface of the area. The only materials that could be found around these destroyed cemeteries were many imperfect arrowheads, scrapers, drills, and knives. In one such field that had been plowed only the year previous the slabs of limestone still lay scattered about the sunken area of a single grave and just a few feet away we found a large celt that had been tossed from the hollow by the plow.

Another type of burial which is less commonly found in the area is the conical tumulus built over a few stone graves. Whereas the other types of burials already described exhibited no raised area, these mounds stand up noticeably above the ground. We discovered one mound of this type which had been opened only recently and despoiled of its contents.

To one possessing mental curiosity it is naturally a matter of interest to consider the source of the people typified by the stone graves. Jones has worked at some length in an effort to discover the ancestry of the stone-grave race.<sup>4</sup> By a process of measuring a great series of crania from the stone-graves and a process of comparison he has determined that the people of this race very likely belonged to the Toltecan division of the American nations. The Tennessee-Kentucky race of primitive man which we studied is characterized along with the Toltecs of Mexico and the Inca Peruvians by skulls of a quadrangular shape that are remarkable for their want of symmetry. Jones concludes this hypothesis by stating that probably the stone-grave race is a northern offshoot of the Toltecan division.

The main emphasis which I wish this paper to give is the prevailing condition of archaeological remains in the section of Kentucky that we explored. Each year sees the cultivation of new tracts of hill land and each year the plowshare rips through the stone vault of some grave that heretofore had remained hidden in the underbrush. The bones quickly crumble to dust in the hot sun and the articles interred with the body are hopelessly scattered and shattered. These graves are so shallow as to make it impossible not to reach them with the plow. The mounds which show themselves by a raised area are probed into by curious natives, who disgustedly cast away the handful of crumbling bones and the few arrowheads or other relics that the grave may contain. Along with these deplorable conditions many commercial collectors from the larger cities tour the area, purchasing any materials that the farmers may have and paying the inhabitants for information to hitherto unexplored mounds and cemeteries. Such conditions are rapidly obliterating any story that the antiquities of the region have to tell to the inquiring archaeologist; and unless a systematic archaeological survey is soon made of the area, we may never learn the full story of the stone-grave race.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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<sup>4</sup>Jones, Joseph. *op. cit.*, pp. 146-147.