

STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA

IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 76 | Number 2 (Spring 2017)

pps. 217-220

American Antiquities: Revisiting the Origins of American Archaeology

Marlin F. Hawley

Wisconsin Historical Society

ISSN 0003-4827

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Recommended Citation

Hawley, Marlin F. "American Antiquities: Revisiting the Origins of American Archaeology." *The Annals of Iowa* 76 (2017), 217-220.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12379>

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Book Reviews and Notices

American Antiquities: Revisiting the Origins of American Archaeology, by Terry A. Barnhart. Critical Studies in the History of Anthropology Series. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015. xviii, 572 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$75.00 hardcover.

Ancestral Mounds: Vitality and Volatility of Native America, by Jay Miller. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015. xxviii, 187 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$55.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Marlin F. Hawley is an archaeology curator with the Museum Archaeology Program at the Wisconsin Historical Society and also publishes as an independent researcher. The major focus of his recent research has been the history of archaeology in the Great Plains and Midwest, especially in the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century.

“Mounds weigh on the earth, as they do on the curious mind,” Jay Miller observes in *Ancestral Mounds*. Moreover, “Fascination with American Indian antiquities was intimately related to the emerging identity of a distinct American nation” (ix), suggest the series editors of Terry A. Barnhart’s *American Antiquities*. These two new books from the University of Nebraska Press delve into the subject of Native American mounds and earthworks. Barnhart explores the intellectual impact of the multicentury encounter of European societies with mounds and other earthworks, mostly in the trans-Appalachian West, especially the Ohio and Mississippi River valleys. Miller presents a historical ethnography of mound building, both as it evolved over millennia and in its historic and modern persistence.

American Antiquities is both an intellectual history of early perceptions of mounds, especially their authorship, and a meticulously rendered account of the early history and development of American archaeology, which he considers “as intellectual and cultural history writ large” (2). In seven lengthy chapters, Barnhart’s study spans from the early European exploration of the eastern United States to the coalescence of an archaeological and anthropological profession in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as he proceeds to dissect, compare, and sift the early archaeological literature. Barnhart does not shy away from the darker side of the early reportage on the mounds and attendant speculations, highlighting racism and the pernicious effects of colonialism. There are no heroes or villains, though. Despite

occasional excesses, there was a genuine mystery or, rather, mysteries to be solved; an understanding of the mounds was central to the formation of American archaeology.

The first accounts of mounds and other earthworks, some of which sites were of astonishing scale and organized with geometric precision, filtered out of the Ohio Valley in the 1750s. Over the next 150 years, scholars devoted considerable resources to unraveling the mystery of who was responsible for these and other mounds. For some the answer was obvious: American Indians. As early as the 1780s, however, speculations turned to non-indigenous progenitors of the mounds, including ancient Hebrews, the legendary Welsh Prince Madoc, Scandinavians, Mexicans, and so on. Such views were championed by some and just as often repudiated by others. Out of the debate arose the Mound Builder myth. The fact that de Soto and later Spanish conquistadors witnessed the production and use of mounds throughout the Deep South was often ignored, though some, including Benjamin Franklin, went so far as to posit that de Soto and his men had built the mounds! By the late nineteenth century, as an anthropological profession was crystalizing, archaeology finally settled on Native Americans as the authors of the mounds and earthworks—although the discredited Mound Builder mythos lingers in the pseudoscientific fringe.

The road from first observation to profession was hardly a straight one. Even as scholars strove constantly to improve their data, methods, standards of evidence, and reportage, they were hampered by standard terminology and a lack of chronology. Tree rings in old growth cut from mounds suggested ages of as much as a thousand years for some, but age was not always easily determined. Glimpsed, but poorly understood, were the disruptive effects of catastrophic population collapse on native societies, the result of disease, violence, enslavement, and environmental degradation in the wake of contact with Europeans. As Barnhart (among other scholars) notes, early speculations regarding more populous, more advanced societies were largely correct, though many missed the fact that those early more populous, more advanced societies were ancestors to contemporary Native Americans.

There are obvious areas of overlap, especially historical, between *American Antiquities* and *Ancestral Mounds*. In *Ancestral Mounds*, Miller thoughtfully summarizes the historical ground trod by Barnhart, but that is not his focus. His concern is not solely historical but also ethnographical. Early in *Ancestral Mounds*, he observes, “In academia centuries of scholarship (and an archaeology monopoly) have been devoted to basic questions of mound research . . . but as yet there has been no

serious investigation of a basic *Why?*" (xi). *Ancestral Mounds* considers the *why* of native mound building.

Although the book centers on mound building in the southeastern United States, Miller argues that the impact of contact with European societies was so profound, so violent, as to require a pan-cultural effort to compare the scattered, multiple lines of historic, ethnographic, and linguistic evidence to construct a meaningful native understanding of mound building. Miller takes a few swipes at the archaeological profession, but throughout the book he generously and respectfully treats anthropological and archaeological considerations of native cultures and mounds. He makes a cogent argument that the mounds are much more than static piles of earth, noting that Native American languages emphasize "process over products" (xxi) such that mounds "are secure weights set upon the earth and are necessarily composed of labor, song, dance, and prayers . . . to be safe havens in a volatile world ever vengeful of grievous human faults" (xxi). Although mound construction was integral to world renewal ceremonies, such as the Green Corn or Busk Ceremony Mounds, not all mounds were fashioned in the course of such rituals. Nonetheless, all are vital "honored earth, blessed bubble, holy ballast, and secured bank deposit" (121). Moreover, despite cultural disjunctions, mound building among southeastern natives continues to the present day among some tribes. The Creek, for instance, carried earth and ash from their villages to Oklahoma reservations which then formed the kernel of new mounds that are still maintained.

It is obvious, yet easy to forget, that the societies native to the Americas developed in isolation from Eurasia for some 12,000 or more years. Native American mounds fitted organically into an indigenous cosmology, with its own internal logic, lore, and rituals. It is no less than the undergirding native logic of mound construction and use that Miller seeks to reveal. As an archaeologist, I suspect that some of his argument will fall on deaf ears (as he acknowledges), but *Ancestral Mounds* deserves a close reading. It may well be one of the most important studies of mound building ever written.

While both books are products of the same publisher, the editing varies greatly between the two books. Miller's book is cleanly edited with few noticeable errors. Barnhart's book, however, is plagued with missing words (mostly articles). While most of these elisions are of little consequence, they do occasionally bring the reader to a pause. There are a few misspelled names (John Wesley Powell as Powers [394] and biologist and science historian Ralph W. Dexter's given name rendered as Ralf [407]). In a volume premised on a close reading of

sources, these editorial lapses stand out. The extensive bibliography (almost 100 pages) reveals additional concerns. For instance, William H. Stiebing Jr. is credited as author of a number of papers, most if not all of which were in fact written by the late historian of anthropology George W. Stocking. Stocking's name is absent, although it appears in the endnotes. In other words, the bibliography (which may be mainly of interest to scholars) has to be approached with due caution.

Both of these books are richly detailed, readable, thought-provoking volumes well worth the attention of anyone with even a passing interest in the intellectual history of early American archaeology, mounds (common to the Midwest), and, in the case of *Ancestral Mounds*, their meaning among Native American cultures, past and present.

Land Too Good for Indians: Northern Indian Removal, by John P. Bowes. *New Directions in Native American Studies* 13. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016. xiv, 328 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$29.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Libby Tronnes is a history instructor at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. She is working on a Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Wisconsin-Madison tentatively titled "'We Know We Will Suffer': Removals and Returns of the Rock River Ho-Chunk in the Early Nineteenth-Century Western Great Lakes."

Too often the narrative of Indian removal is told through the Cherokee Trail of Tears. John Bowes's latest book, *Land Too Good for Indians*, broadens how scholars think and talk about that history. Bowes rejects simplifying northern removal histories by linking them to a federal policy or regional events relative to removal events. His methodology relies on "adaptive resistance" rather than the more conventional form of Native agency. "Indians who accepted the presence of, or worked closely with, traders and/or missionaries to maneuver around local, state, or federal policies used the means at their disposal to do what they thought best for themselves, their family, and their community" (13).

Bowes begins with an overview of shifting relationships among Great Lakes Indians, Euro-Americans, and British amid the wars and other violence in the first 50 years of the American republic. In chapter two he contrasts Cherokee removal debates, which centered on constitutional authority and the meaning of sovereignty, with rhetoric surrounding northern removal, in which missionaries and Indian agents emphasized the policy's benevolence and politicians "praised the wisdom of Indian communities" (51) who took it upon themselves to save their people from white vices and relocate west of the Mississippi.