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Spirits of Earth: The Effigy Mound Landscape of Madison and the Four Lakes

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Book Reviews and Notices

Spirits of Earth: The Effigy Mound Landscape of Madison and the Four Lakes, by Robert A. Birmingham. Wisconsin Land and Life Series. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010. xxiv, 274 pp. Illustrations, maps, graphs, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 paper.

Reviewer James M. Collins is an archaeologist at the Office of the State Archaeologist, University of Iowa.

Earthen mounds in the shapes of animals and other supernatural creatures were constructed roughly A.D. 700–1100 by prehistoric inhabitants of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, and Illinois. *Spirits of Earth* is an excellent synthesis of the latest research on the phenomenon. The author argues that the mounds, mound-building ceremonialism, and sacred landscape created by such activities reflect the cosmology of the builders. Representations of birds, bears, and water-related animals suggest a cosmology that included a three-part division of the universe into sky, earth, and water realms. Patterns within thousands of mounds thus rendered a ceremonial landscape in which world renewal was a major theme.

The effigy mound builders were most likely ancestors of late prehistoric Oneota and, by historical extension, the Chiwere Siouan tribes (Ioway, Oto, Missouri, and Winnebago or Ho Chunk) that occupied the four-state region at the time of European contact. It is probably more than coincidence that many of the animals commonly represented in the ancient earthworks mirror clan totems associated with those tribes. The first several chapters of this book deal with socioreligious concepts, their cultural context throughout the last millennium, and the study of the mounds from the late nineteenth-century “antiquarian” movement through the present. The author then uses the Four Lakes region near Madison, Wisconsin, to illustrate the particulars of the native belief system and the relationship of the mounds to the physical landscape. This serious and carefully researched yet jargon-free book should find a place in all regional libraries.

The Missouri Mormon Experience, edited by Thomas M. Spencer. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010. vi, 187 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$34.95 cloth.