

THE "OLD PEOPLE" OF MIDDLE TENNESSEE

RICHMOND PEARSON BLACKMER

Franklin Limestone Co., Nashville

With Nashville as a center and extending northward well into Kentucky, westward to the Tennessee River, southward toward North Georgia, and eastward to the foothills of the Cumberland Mountains are to be found the remains of an ancient people, who, on account of the manner in which they buried their dead, are known to archaeologists as the "Stone Grave Race."

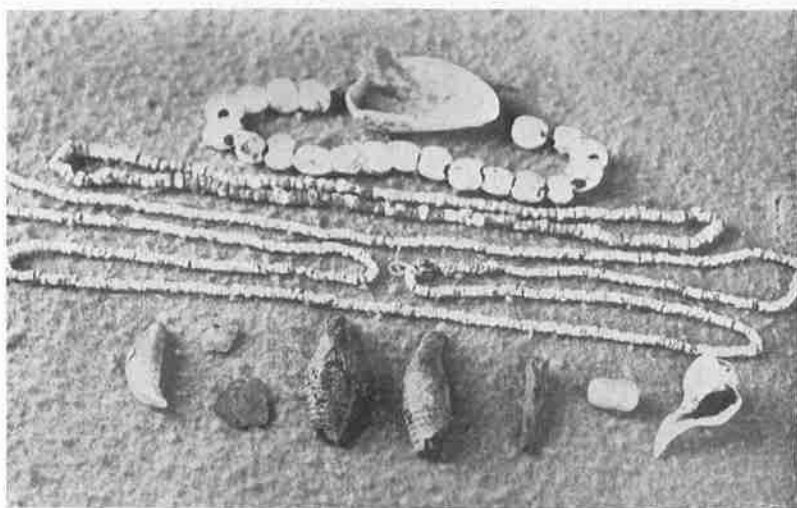


Photograph by Latimer J. Wilson

Fig. 1. Articles found in "Stone Grave Burials" near Nashville. In the center of the figure is an image of an infant strapped to a board. Just above this image is a mortuary vessel. To the left of the pot is a small shell gorget. To the left and below the image is a shell gorget engraved with conventional symbols, while just below the image is a small bone gorget in the form of a human hand. The beautiful gorget to the right is of shell and represents two birds facing in opposite directions.

The graves of this race were excavated to the approximate size and depth desired and then flat slabs of limestone or slate rock were used to line that part of the grave that was to contain the body, which was usually placed, in the vault thus formed, in a supine position with the hands at the sides. Then the top was constructed by placing layers of overlapping slabs of limestone on the vault and the earth was thrown back into the excavation. In placing the sidewalls and endwalls great care was taken to key in the rock slabs so that burrowing rodents could not gain easy access to the body. As a general rule earth was not placed in the vault with the body, but during the centuries since the

burials were made, earth has filtered in so that the interior of the grave is filled with earth of the same consistency as that on the outside of the vault. The writer has seen vaults without an infiltration of earth, but these are the exception rather than the rule and can be counted on the fingers of one hand. The graves are not arranged with any degree of order, but extend in every direction and are at varying depths, some showing at the surface of the ground and others as deep as four feet below the surface. The only thing common to the graves is their method of construction. It has not been the writer's experience over a term of years exploring these graves to find where the walls or ends of one grave served for a wall or end of another, even though the graves were parallel. It appears that their ritual required each grave to be a separate unit.



Photograph by Latimer J. Wilson

Fig. 2. Trinkets from "Stone Grave Burials" near Nashville. Above is a shell spoon. Just below the spoon are three strings of shell beads. The row below contains, from left to right, a bear's tooth, two small copper ornaments, two wooden ear ornaments overlaid with a veneer of native copper and containing small pebbles to make a rattle, a rolled piece of native copper, a quartz ear plug, and a small marine shell.

The number of individuals buried in one grave varies. Usually a grave contains only one, though some have been found that contained two or more. When two bodies are in a single grave, the heads are generally in opposite ends. When an adult and an infant are buried together, the infant usually is in the crook of the adults left arm. Several instances have been reported where an extra decapitated skull has been found between the feet of an extended skeleton, with its face looking to the footwall. In some regularly constructed graves the bones have been disarticulated and bundled up in one end of the

grave, while an entire skeleton occupies the length of the grave. In other graves the bones are in great disorder and seem to have been dumped in. Broken pieces of pottery are sometimes used as a floor lining for the graves instead of stone. The shape of the vault is very similar to the old style coffin, being wider at the shoulders than at the head and narrow at the feet. Some burials have been found within square stone vaults, with the skeleton on its side and the elbows and knees flexed and touching. Pottery is usually found in such burials. Superimposed graves have been found, although such cases are rare.

Some idea of the magnitude of undertaking the construction of a grave is given when it is considered that the stone slabs in one grave weigh over five hundred pounds, that the only tools for excavating the grave, procuring and transporting the rocks were those of wood, stone, shell, or bone, and that there were no beasts of burden. Man or woman power did the work. Such stones as they needed were pried up from the beds of small streams or were procured from ledges in the hills. In one graveyard near Nashville over four thousand graves have been opened.



Fig. 3. Various types of clay pottery from Tennessee "Stone Graves."

The graveyards are found near camp or village sites, which are usually located in the most fertile land and near a large spring or springs and in the bend of some stream. Take these three factors, the rich land, the spring, and the bend or junction of two streams, and in eighty per cent of the sites meeting these conditions in Middle Tennessee remains of these ancient people will be found. In searching for village sites the best surface indications are fragments of pottery, weathered shells, a discoloration of the soil by fire, periwinkle shells, and refuse banks.

The villages were usually enclosed by a rampart of earth and contained a mound or a group of mounds, with the graves being in the smaller mounds or a short distance away within the enclosure. The mounds of earth were built up basket-load by basket-load, with ceremonies, of a religious nature no doubt, at different levels, until the desired height and size was reached. This is shown by the inspection

of such mounds as have been opened by a trench through their diameter. Strata of charcoal and ashes are found at the different levels and earth of various colors or character appear throughout the mound.

Within the enclosure were also the lodges or houses. These were made by placing the butts of small trees in holes dug in a circle representing the circumference of the structure, the tops were then pulled together and bound by thongs or withes and vines or split reeds woven between the trees. Then the surface on the outside was plastered over with clay. A hole was left in the top of the structure for ventilation and a place for a door in the walls. In excavating a house site the post holes are found full of charcoal and a plan of the structure can be seen, showing where the door stood, there being two extra posts at this point, both within the circumference of the lodge. The writer has in his collection of the relics of these people a part of the wall of one of these wattled houses, with split reeds imbedded firmly in the clay.

These people had a high degree of culture as is indicated by the artistry shown in the manufacture of their pottery and ornaments. The pottery runs from a strictly unornamented utilitarian vessel to that of a highly complex representation of the human form or that of a bird, a fish or beast, and at times to a combination of any two of these. The pottery is made from clay into which has been worked finely fractured fragments of shell to serve as a binder. Some pieces of pottery are most fragile and delicate while others were made strictly for service and rough usage. Fragments of large vessels measuring from three to four feet in diameter and from six to eight inches in depth have been found near Nashville. These are thought to have been used for evaporating salt or sulphur water for the purpose of recovering the salt. There are two distinct types of these salt pans, one showing the imprint of a woven fabric on the exterior and the other being of a plain surface. It is thought that the type with the fabric imprint is the older of the two.

The working of shell ornaments and utensils is no less interesting. Ornaments made from marine shells from the Gulf of Mexico and abalone shells from the Pacific Coast are sometimes found with burials in the stone graves, showing that these people carried on a commerce with those parts. Many of the shell gorgets or breast ornaments found near Nashville have a conventional design or symbol that is thought to have some "time" significance. These gorgets are made from the concave surface of the *Busycon perversum*, a marine shell. They have in the center a point enclosed within a circle, on the circumference of which are three equidistant pits or perforations, from which points, involute lines radiate upwards making about half a revolution and extending to a second circle, above which is another circle with no engraving between the two circumferences. Beyond this is a third and larger circle containing several small concentric circles spaced equidistantly and with points in their centers. The surfaces between these small circles are pitted. This brings us to the

outer rim of the gorget which consists of a series of elliptical bosses or scallops at the base of one of which are two perforations through which a thong or fibre could be run and the ornament suspended from the neck.

Commenting on this symbol Dr. Joseph Jones wrote in 1876:

... the shell ornament discovered on the breast of the skeleton in the burial mound opposite Nashville and which was carved from a large flat sea shell resembling the "Pecten Mortonii," appears to have been sacred, ornamental, and symbolic.

Similar ornamental patterns have been found in various portions of Middle and West Tennessee, in the aboriginal mounds and stone graves. The construction of the ornaments from large sea shell; the reproduction of the same figures; the position in which they were worn, namely, upon the breast, their comparative rarity, not more than two having been found in any one burial mound; and their final deposit in carefully constructed graves near the center of the burial and sacrificial mounds, apparently with distinguished personages, sustain the view which we have advanced, that these ornaments were of a sacred and symbolic character.

The singular division of the circle into three portions has a slight and perhaps fanciful resemblance to the representations of the "TAE-HEIH" of the Chinese. Chinese philosophers speak of the origin of all things, under the name of "TAE HEIH." This is represented in their books by a figure formed thus: on the semi-diameter of a given circle describe a semicircle, and on the remaining semi-diameter, but on the other side, describe another semicircle. In the figure given below we have a comparative view of the representation of the Chinese "TAE-HEIH" and the symbolic divisions of the circle by the ancient stone grave and mound-building race of Tennessee.

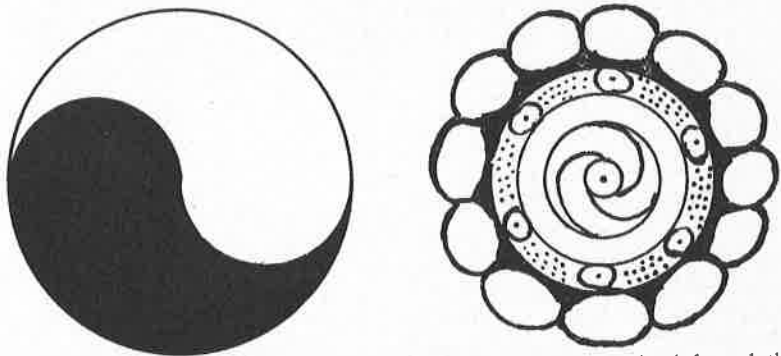


Fig. 4. The similarity between the Chinese "Tae-Heih" on the left and the central design of the "Stone Burial" gorget on the right.

These ornaments were worn high upon the chest, as is determined by the position in which they are found in the graves, as is determined by the position in which they are found in the graves. When the body has decayed sufficiently for the lower jaw to fall away from the skull, and the individual happens to be wearing such a gorget, the jaw will fall so that just a small portion of the lower end of the gorget will project beyond the point of the fallen jaw. Great care is taken in

removing the intrusive earth from this part of the skeleton, so that in case a gorget should be found it might be recovered without damage.

Other ornaments of wood overlaid with native copper, broken out from its matrix and hammered into thin sheets; pieces of mica from workings that are still evident in the Western part of North Carolina; implements of bone and hematite and weapons of stone are also to be found with the burials.

About ninety per cent of the graves opened do not contain any relics, so there is much tedious labor that is a dead loss. But when a grave is found that yields a nice unbroken clay pot or shell spoon or gorget, the recollection of the useless work on other graves is quickly forgotten.

It is not the writer's intention to go into the matter of the origin of these ancient people. Many books have been written on the subject and much speculation indulged in to attempt to prove them to be the descendants of the Lost Tribes of Judea, wanderers from the lost continent of Atlantis, or Mu, or immigrants from Asia coming to America by way of Behring Strait. We do know that the ancient remains of these people have been here for centuries and that their origin was unknown to the natives here when the pioneers first settled Middle Tennessee. When asked about these mounds, the natives said that their ancestors had always told them that the stone graves and mounds were the work of the "Old People" and that they had been there always.

Received September 26, 1935.