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REMAINS OF PREHISTORIC MAN IN THE DAKOTAS

BY

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MOUNDS IN NORTH DAKOTA

a. View of field in Walsh county, showing four mounds in the distance.  b. Burial pit after the removal of the mound and with the contents of the pit undisturbed.
REMAINS OF PREHISTORIC MAN IN THE DAKOTAS

By HENRY MONTGOMERY

The work of exploration of the remains of prehistoric man in Dakota Territory was begun by me in the summer of 1883, and since then I have completed the exploration of 40 of the ancient artificial mounds in that region, have inspected the exterior of very many others, and have examined numerous specimens obtained from the latter. Twenty-four of the mounds explored were in Ramsey county, 8 were in Benson county, 6 in Walsh county, and 2 in Grand Forks county. Others studied to some extent were in these and other counties of what is now North Dakota, and still others were on the Fort Sisseton reservation and elsewhere in South Dakota.

These mounds may be classified as follows:

1. Burial mounds.
2. Ceremonial or feast mounds.
3. Beacon mounds.

There were 37 burial mounds, 2 probably ceremonial, and only 1 beacon mound.

1. Burial Mounds: their Structure, Situation, and Contents. — Of the burial mounds, or mounds of sepulture, there are two or more kinds, namely:

(a) The ordinary burial mound of most frequent occurrence, of which external views are shown in plate xxx, a. This consists of a circular, rounded, or conical heap of earth, mostly rich black soil from the prairie, clothed with grass and rising generally to a height of several feet above the surrounding land. The height ranges from a few inches to more than 12 feet, and the diameter from 30 to 90 feet. Doubtless these mounds were originally much higher, the winds and rains having reduced their height very considerably. There is good reason to believe that a large number of them have

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1 Read before the Anthropological Society of Washington, March 13, 1906.

640
been worn down to the surrounding level, and therefore are not likely ever to be discovered. All burial mounds of class a examined bore evidence of having been blown or washed toward the southeast, as might be expected where the prevailing winds are from the north-west. In each such mound one or more burial pits occur, in which human skeletons and various implements, ornaments, and other articles are found. If but one burial pit occurs, it is nearly always centrally situated. If two or more pits occur in one mound they are all excentric in situation, and from a few inches to several feet distant one from another. The pit or burial chamber is circular. In only one case have I seen it vary from the cylindrical form, and in this instance it was merely a little irregular. I have never found one to be rectangular or square. It is a well-like excavation in the ground, having a calcareous bottom and wall, and sometimes also a calcareous covering consisting of a whitish-yellow layer an inch or two in thickness. The lining as well as the covering is a mixture of lime and clay. The bottom of the chamber was overspread with bark of some tree, often the elm; and upon this bark rested almost a foot of finely pulverized yellow clay, which in turn was surmounted by rich, black soil similar to that constituting the general soil of the region. The pit ranged from 3 feet to 7 feet 5 inches in diameter, the average being about 3½ or 4 feet. Its depth ranged from 2 to 4 feet, while its bottom was often 6 or 8 feet or more below the summit of the tumulus. In my work of excavation I proceeded to dig the sod and earth from the surface of the mound to a depth of about one foot, over an area 15 feet in diameter, with the center of the mound for its center. Then another thickness of similar size was removed, and thus the depth of the excavation was increased foot by foot, always keeping a level floor in order that the situation of the burial chamber or chambers might be more readily determined. Wood was found from a foot to three feet down. This consisted of poles, the trunks of young trees, principally elm and oak, varying in diameter from 3 to 10 inches, charred at their ends and over their entire surfaces. When the yellow subsoil was reached it was carefully scraped off to the depth of two or three inches, when the pit or grave was at once perceived as a circular area of soft black soil surrounded by yellowish-white clay. This is shown in plate xxx, 4,
POTTERY FROM NORTH DAKOTA

a. Urn of pottery, height, 1 ft. 6 in.; greatest width, 1 ft.; taken from burial pit in Ramsey county, July 18th, 1874.

b. Urn of pottery, having holes in the rim; found in pit in Mound 7, Section 16, R. 137.

c. Urn of pottery, with four holes in its rim.

d. Side and bottom views of urn of pottery showing a continuous spiral groove; found in burial pit in Ramsey county, July, 1874.

e. Under surface of urn of pottery from pit in Mound 7 on Section 16, R. 137.
which represents a mound on section 12, range 65, township 153, on the west side of Creel's bay, Devils lake, Ramsey county. This view was taken immediately after the location of the pit and before any of its contents had been disturbed. I then proceeded to remove the loose black earth, and soon came to the yellow clay, a human skeleton, an earthenware urn, a shell scoop or spoon, a birch-bark basket, a turtle-shell, and several shells of large Unios. The skeleton was generally found in a crouching posture, with the back against the wall and the face toward the center, the ossa innominata upon the tarsal bones, and the shoulders, head, and hands upon the knees. It occasionally happened that the weight of the overlying wood and earth had forced the skull and upper parts of the body forward or to one side, but the position in which the pelvic and leg bones and the lumbar and sacral vertebrae were found, in all cases determined the original position of the whole body. The utensils, ornaments, and trinkets were usually found beneath the skull and the chest. Occasionally, however, an urn was found in the upper part of the burial pit, and in one instance an urn containing decomposed twigs and leaves was found immediately above the pit.

The preservative properties of the yellow clay are more effectual than those of the black soil, and this perhaps may be a reason for the use of the former in the manner stated.

(b) The second kind of burial mound in several respects resembles the one just described, but differs in having no burial chambers and no wood, in the skeletons being greatly broken and defective, and in the bones being much scattered throughout the mound.

(c) There is perhaps a third variety of burial mound in this district. The principal characteristic by which it is distinguished from the second class (b) is the possession of a layer of yellow clay two or three inches thick, which extends through the greater part of the tumulus and seems to overlie human bones. This may correspond in some measure to the covering of the pit or to the pit itself, described in the first class (A). In this last class (c), however, there is no real chamber or excavation, and the layer of yellow clay is found two or three feet above the original surface of the ground.
All the burial mounds contain near the surface numerous bones
of bison, deer, and other animals, which have been broken as if in
the process of making use of the flesh as food.

2. Ceremonial or Feast Mounds. — These had no burial pits, but
contained pieces of partially burnt bones of men and beasts.

3. Beacon Mounds. — One mound in Benson county consists
largely of burnt clay.

The location, dimensions, and contents of a few of the mounds
are here given:

**Mounds in Ramsey County**

These were situated on high ground on the north side of Devils
lake, the surface of which is about 1,430 feet above the level of
the sea.

**Mounds on Section 13, Range 65, Township 153**

**Mound 1.** — This mound was circular in form, 60 feet in diam-
eter and 5 feet in height, but as it had been cultivated for a garden and
a green-house its height and internal structure could not be ascer-
tained with accuracy. The burial pits were only partially made out.
Considerable quantities of wood and charcoal were unearthed,
the wood consisting of poles charred on their surfaces and at their
extremities. Besides these poles the following were taken from
this mound:

(a) Fifteen human skeletons. Of these only a few were in good
enough condition to admit of being removed. The antero-posterior
diameter of one of the skulls found here measures 7.75 inches,
and its transverse diameter 5.875 inches; hence the cranial index
is 75.8 and the skull is mesocephalic.

(b) One urn or vase of pottery, in a perfect state of preservation.
It is 3 1/4 inches high; its greatest width is 4 1/2 inches, while the
diameter of its flaring-rimmed mouth is 3 1/4 inches. The mouth is
circular and the external surface is ornamented by a continuous,
winding groove extending ten times around the vessel from the rim
to the center of the bottom, where it terminates in a cross. The
material of which the urn is made appears to be fine-grained. This
specimen was found close to a woman’s skull. Indeed every