

A New Type of Burial Mound Near Quincy, Illinois

O. D. Thurber

Quincy Senior High School, Quincy, Illinois

There are dozens of early burial mounds in west central Illinois along the Mississippi River. In Quincy, one of the parks has six mounds, and an expedition from the University of Chicago spent the summer of 1928 excavating in and near another park. Mounds are scattered for at least 75 miles along the river north and south of Quincy.

Most of them are the typical mounds of western and southern Illinois, but the type of mound here described is entirely different. The site is eight miles down the river from Quincy in the bottomland immediately adjacent to what is known as the bottom road. The burials are on slightly sloping ground about 200 feet from the foot of the bluff and two miles from the river. The immediate place of burial is approximately 120 feet by 80 feet and roughly rectangular. It is only slightly raised above the surrounding ground.

The first crypt or vault was badly destroyed before its contents were fully discovered. Eight burial vaults were found in the west half of the mound, which is all that has been excavated to date. From five to thirty-five individuals were buried in each crypt. After the discovery of twenty-eight individuals in the second crypt, the University of Chicago was notified and Dr. Newmann arrived to take charge of the work.

The crypts varied in depth, the average being two feet. They were roughly circular and rectangular in shape with an average diameter of about six feet. All of the vaults were built of native limestone slabs laid up in a more or less regular brick masonry formation with the inside wall vertical. The tops of the walls were from two to three feet thick and the bases from four to six feet thick. Each crypt was covered with layers of flat rocks laid regularly to form a rock cover a foot or more thick. One vault near the middle along the west side of the group that was opened had a doorway that faced southwest. A six-foot stairway with laid-up walls led down to the crypt floor. The three steps were formed by flat rocks laid on the dirt.

The earth was removed from the outside of all these crypts before any of the rocks were removed, then the cover rocks were taken off and the material taken from the inside. The contents of these stone vaults are more difficult to describe exactly. Broken pieces of pottery were found everywhere, both inside and outside the crypts, almost all of which were shell-tempered and fire-blackened on the inside. Everything was badly jumbled, yet bones seemed to lie in layers. On the bottom was a layer four to eight inches thick of unburned bones, more or less in their proper relationship to each other, with the bones of several individuals piled together. In some instances a few small flat rocks seemed to separate this layer and the next one. The second layer consisted of charred bones and bone fragments. In only one instance were they completely matted with charcoal and ashes, yet single pieces of charcoal and bone fragments were found scattered

throughout every crypt in all the layers. The third layer was for the most part unburned bones and fragments. The top layer was a mixture of both burned and unburned bones. These are called layers for want of a better term, but they were not separate, distinct, layers, as each seemed to fuse into the next.

In one vault seven skulls were found, fairly free from breakage, piled in one corner. The number of individuals represented in these crypts could be computed only by counting the skulls. In the eight crypts so far uncovered we have found 152 skulls, only one of which, a woman's, was in perfect condition.



Fig. 1.—Vault graves near Quincy, Illinois.

Five pipes were found. One was an unfinished effigy stone pipe, two were shell-tempered pottery pipes, and the other two were stone, one of which was highly polished, of delicate construction, and showed much use. Only four small projectile points were found, four bone needles, three stone knives, one small scraper, and only two pots. One was an ordinary shell-tempered eight-inch pot and the other was a little two-inch pot about three-fourths full of what appeared to be face or body paint. Three beads made from the columella of sea shells were found.

Obviously these burials were a type of bundle burial, possibly extending over a period of many years. It is almost certain that most of the bones were devoid of flesh when they were interred. It is quite likely that part of the cremation was done in the vaults, but most of it was done elsewhere and the charred bone fragments carried in for burial. The bones of men, women, and children were jumbled together as if they had been tossed in from outside the pit.

The age of this site is problematical, yet all indications are that it is several hundred years old. Who were these people? We do not know and can draw definite conclusions only after other similar sites have been discovered and excavated. The writer knows of one other such site near Quincy and hopes to help get more exact information from it.