EFFIGY MOUNDS AT BELOIT COLLEGE
Scattered about the Beloit College campus are twenty-three conical, linear and animal effigy mounds built between about A.D. 700 and 1200. One, in the form of a turtle, has inspired the symbol of the College. These mounds and others like them are found in Southern Wisconsin and adjacent portions of surrounding states. They were built by Native Americans identified by archaeologists as Effigy Mound peoples. Current research by Beloit College archaeologists is proving that these people were the ancestors of the modern Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) Nation.

The mounds are not high (no more than five feet) and usually small, although a newly-discovered bird effigy has a wingspan of 1310 feet. They were usually built along bluff tops adjacent to rivers, and the Beloit College group illustrates this pattern. Mounds also usually occur in groups of from two to more than two hundred. Based on maps made by early explorers, it is estimated that more than 20,000 such mounds existed prior to the arrival of the pioneers. Today, fewer than 3000 remain, the others having been destroyed by farming and urban expansions.

There is no conclusive data regarding their use. While human remains have been found in many, some contain no skeletons. It is likely that they were built as family unity projects, where everyone in an extended family lent their hands to the work as a way of reinforcing their identity. The mounds also served as final resting places for recently deceased members of the family. The mounds also served to define territories of such families and the shapes may represent clan totems. Religious ceremonies must have accompanied the building of the mounds.

We are beginning to learn more about the Effigy Mound peoples. They were hunters and gatherers and fishermen and they moved around a great deal. After about A.D. 1000, they added corn agriculture to their economy. They used the bow and arrow and made other tools from stone, bone, shell and wood. Their pottery vessels were extraordinarily thin-walled, made with exceptional skill and decorated with complex geometric designs. Their activities responded to seasonal cycles: in the winter they lived in family groups scattered over the landscape and hunted large numbers of deer; in the spring they gathered in large, but temporary, villages to catch up on news, exchange gifts, perform ceremonies and build mounds; fall was a time to gather nuts, fruits and other wild foods and to get ready for the long winter months. Analyses of their skeletons indicate that they were a well-nourished and healthy people.
Around A.D. 1000, at least two new groups moved into the area. Archaeologists refer to these as “Oneota” and “Mississippian” peoples. The Oneota were hunters and gatherers like the local residents, but the Oneota grew corn in large quantities and led a more settled life. Mississippian peoples, immigrating from the Cahokia site in Central Illinois, built temples on top of pyramidal-shaped mounds and surrounded their permanent villages with massive protective stockades. There are few details about how these three peoples got along with each other, but evidence implies that warfare was common. By A.D. 1300, Mississippian towns were abandoned. We think that Effigy Mound peoples joined up with the Oneota, since only the latter group lived in the area when the first explorers arrived.

All of the mounds on the Beloit College campus have been excavated. Materials found in them, such as scattered fragments of pottery vessels and small pieces of broken stone tools, are in the permanent collection of the College’s Logan Museum of Anthropology.

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