

## Table of Contents

List of Illustrations   vii

Preface   xiii

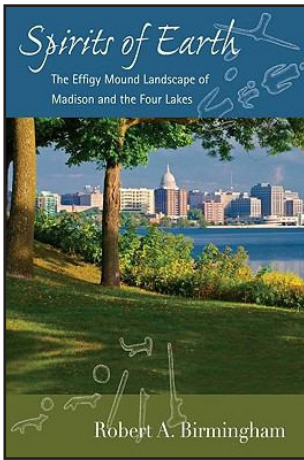
1	Spirits of Earth: An Introduction to Effigy Mound Landscapes	3
2	The Ancient Mound Builders	42
3	The Effigy Mound Landscape of Madison and the Four Lakes	92
4	Yahara Inlet and Mendota, Lake of Spirits	115
5	Wingra: Lake of Sacred Springs	147
6	Lake Monona	161
7	Waubesa: Lake of Ancient Serpents	176
8	End to Beginning: Lake Kegonsa and the Mouth of the Yahara River	188
9	Landscapes of the Past, Questions and Issues for the Future	201

Appendix: Selected Mound Sites Open to the Public   207

Notes   215

Bibliography   229

Index   247



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

Robert A. Birmingham. 2010. The University of Wisconsin Press, 274 pp., 126 figures, 2 tables, 1 appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 (paper), \$14.95 (eBook).

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The ideas of cultural and sacred landscapes are not new. As a follow-up to *Indian Mounds of Wisconsin* (co-authored with Leslie Eisenberg), Robert Birmingham uses a holistic framework to examine the cultural and sacred meaning of effigy mound landscapes. Earthen mounds in the shape of animal effigies built by Late Woodland peoples occurred from A.D. 700–1100 in a relatively restricted area of the Upper Mississippi region of the Midwest—southern Wisconsin and adjacent areas of southeast Minnesota, northeast Iowa, and northwest Illinois—a resource rich area with highly-dissected topography and numerous water sources. Birmingham uses his landscape approach to examine the “why”—why effigy-shaped mounds and why only in a relatively small restricted area.

He uses the effigy mounds found in the Madison, Wisconsin, Four Lakes geographical area as his research sample and also provides a visitors’ guide to those effigy mounds located on public lands. The Four Lakes area includes the Yahara River from its headwaters (including spring-fed Lake Wingra) through Madison and on to its juncture with the Rock River. Along the way, four primary “lakes” or widenings of the Yahara River—Mendota, Monona, Waubesa, and Kegonsa—are key locations of effigy mounds.

In the Preface and Chapter 1, Birmingham presents an ideological landscape approach (using a framework of the worldview and beliefs of the ancient people involved) to interpret the effigy mound building phenomena, drawing upon ideas earlier proposed by Clark Mallam and Robert Hall. Birmingham sees effigy mounds as “monumental, symbolic constructions” (p. xv) built to maintain balance and harmony of the natural world. Therefore, one needs to look at the entire landscape in which these mounds were built—the “place” being what landforms were used and the distribution of the mounds on those landforms and the “space” being the mound types and the arrangement of the various mounds and mound types within

groups. The mound shapes and their patterning within the effigy mound landscape is meant to reflect the natural dualism between the opposing yet complementary upper (sky) and lower (earth, water) divisions, also commonly expressed in social dualisms such as moieties. The most common forms of effigy mounds are birds, bears, and long-tailed “water spirits”—forms recognizable as reflecting the sky, earth, and water divisions.

p. 141

Birmingham feels that specific areas were chosen for effigy mound construction because of “certain spiritual or supernatural characteristics attributed to natural territory” and that the arrangement of the mounds within groups reflects “the structure of the builder’s religious and related social world and have the potential to tell us much about the ideological realm” (p.xx). The resulting “ideological landscape” or pattern reflects the builders’ beliefs and worldview, intertwining the ideological, ritual, and social aspects of a culture.

Although he admits the archaeological limitations to understanding ideological aspects of past cultures, Birmingham feels that the use of ethnography, ethnohistory, and general belief structures of historic native peoples expressed in iconography, stories, myths, and oral history can provide insights to understanding ancient native ideology and symbolism. He looks at the worldviews, beliefs, and social systems of possible descendant Indian tribes (especially the Ho-Chunk), and what he sees as continuity between the past and the present, in his attempt to decode the patterning and symbolism of the effigy mound landscape.

Chapter 2 is a general discussion of 13,000 years of Native American history in the area providing the temporal and cultural context for the time period when effigy mounds were built. Birmingham provides a general discussion of broad climatic and environmental changes as well as cultural changes in subsistence, technology, and social organization. Throughout, he provides examples from Wisconsin archaeological sites. Given this is a book on mounds, the expanded discussion on the Woodland Period is warranted. Conical-shaped burial mounds were built across the Midwest throughout the Woodland Period. Birmingham argues that even the earliest mound building and related ceremonies probably incorporated concepts of creation and renewal with elaborations of that theme culminating in the effigy mounds. He describes Late Woodland as a time of rapid change—increasing incorporation of corn into the existing hunting and gathering subsistence economy, increasing population, increasing influences from outside the region. Late Woodland groups in the effigy mound region are believed to have lived in small dispersed groups late fall through early spring, congregating in large groups in late spring through early fall. It’s this annual congregating into large groups that may have spurred the need for social and ritual

p. 142



integrative activities such as mound building. Birmingham's discussion of culture history extends into the historic period and includes speculation of possible descendant groups of the effigy mound builders, repeatedly coming back to discussions of the Ho-Chunk.

Chapter 3 provides an introduction to the documentation and preservation efforts in the Four Lakes area of several individuals —Increase Lapham, T. H. Lewis, A. B. Stout, and Charles E. Brown—with considerable discussion focusing on Brown's efforts during his long tenure as museum director at Wisconsin Historical Society (1908–1944). Birmingham also describes the landscape of the Four Lakes area and provides a breakdown of the types and numbers of mound forms and distribution of those mound forms across the landscape. He continues his argument about the importance of a landscape perspective, and he feels that the separation of mounds into individual groups or sites is an artificial construct.

Chapters 4–8 are what Birmingham describes as a tour guide of the Four Lakes "effigy mound ceremonial landscape" (p. 114). He provides detailed discussions of the types of effigy mound forms and their distribution on the landscape, from the headwaters of the Yahara River (north of Madison) continuing south to its confluence with the Rock River. The numerous photographs and maps of the various mound groups are useful, both for readers and potential visitors to the mound groups. These chapters also provide information on the history of the area, Ho-Chunk legends, early documentation and preservation efforts, and the current conditions of the mounds and the surrounding landscape. Individuals interested in visiting effigy mound groups will find the Appendix valuable with its listing of selected properties open to the public with a brief description of each.

Birmingham uses the final chapter to summarize concepts he presented in the earlier chapters, as well as posing questions and needs for future research. He sees a need for a better understanding of effigy mound society itself. Additional and more accurate radiocarbon dates for this period are also needed. Birmingham would like to see continued research using a landscape approach. But important to that is addressing the continuing threats to the landscape itself due to expanding development throughout the area. Mounds in Wisconsin are protected by law, but the surrounding landscape is not. Birmingham sees the need for new laws protecting mound landscapes, acquisition of property around mound groups, and strong conservation programs.

Early in the book Birmingham acknowledges there are critics of an ideological approach and his landscape model. The construction of effigy mound complexes serving a social integrative purpose, as territorial markers,

or both is fairly widely accepted. However, Birmingham also sees construction of effigy mounds as ceremonial in nature related to world renewal rituals and ideas that likely permeated all aspects of their culture. In *Spirits of the Earth*, he presents an interesting and detailed examination in his attempt to explain the "why effigy mounds" and "why only here." This book should be of interest to professional archaeologists in considering the possible cultural and sacred meanings of effigy mound landscapes as well as the general public who can gain a better understanding of these interesting earthen constructions as they visit effigy mound groups in the Madison, Wisconsin, area and elsewhere in the Upper Mississippi region.