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Pyroepistemology along the Northern Shores of Lake Ontario:

Reinterpreting the Hopewell Tradition and Mound-Builders Theory through Anishinaabeg Perspectives

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Authors' Note: As is custom within Anishinaabeg ethics, we would like to personally say miigwech *to the ones who have led the way for our own learning to take place within our own understanding of Anishinaabeg history, customs, and traditions.*[1] *The authors' authority to write about these sites is rooted in both lived experience and ceremonial responsibility. One author is a recognized ceremonial leader who continues to conduct funerals and related rites on this territory, following practices that have been maintained since time immemorial. These responsibilities are not symbolic—they are enacted, lived, and grounded in relationships with the land, the ancestors, and the knowledge systems that guide Anishinaabeg life. Both authors are Anishinaabeg, born and raised in this region, and have longstanding ties to the specific communities connected to the Serpent and Hastings mounds. Through direct teachings from elders, years of community-based engagement, and continued ceremonial involvement, the authors hold both cultural and ethical responsibility to speak to these histories. Our academic roles at Trent University are extensions of that responsibility—not substitutes for it—and we have followed proper protocols and permissions in the preparation of this work. This article is therefore not an external interpretation but a continuation of a living knowledge system shared with the intention of protecting and honoring these sites. We particularly would like to acknowledge the contributions of Anishinaabeg elders and knowledge-holders from whom we have learned either directly or through their works.* Miigwechiwenimaa *Bawdwaywidun-ban (Edward Benton-Banai), Asinii-Kwe (Edna Manitowabi), Onaabinise (Jim Dumont), Obizaan-iban (Lee Staples), Anishinaabe-Nini-ban (Merritt Taylor), Minwaajmod-ban (Winston Taylor), Mishkogaabowe (Paul Bourgeois), Maajiijiwan (Charles Petahtegoose), Wewebijoon (Eric*

Assiniwei) owii-miizhiiyaang Anishinaabe aadizookaanag, dibaajimowinan ge gikendaasowin. G'zaagin Memegwaan, Niigaanii-Taamgad, Miigwaan, Bagone-Giizhig, ge ndinwemaaganadok. Ni kaanaa'gonaa![2]

Anishinaabeg Creation and Migration Knowledge

To provide context for the Anishinaabeg migration from the East Coast, Anishinaabeg knowledge of the seven fires of creation must be briefly discussed to provide a holistic overview of the migration and their arrival and ongoing presence along the north shore of Lake Ontario. These stories are essential to providing a new way to view archaeological evidence by establishing this oral history as the contextual background for mound building in this region.

Gaa-Maajiishkiyaawin (The Seven Fires of Creation)

Mew zhaa (a long time ago), there were seven fires of creation known to the Anishinaabeg.[3] The traditional knowledge of *gaa-maajiishkiyaawin* (how everything started) is conveyed as the Seven Fires of Creation, with each fire representing an era. The exact duration of these eras remains unknown, but they are perceived as eons: from a time before time, characterized by silence, emptiness, darkness, and cold, to the time when Earth was finally created and life emerged.

Creation unfolded in seven stages. Initially, it is said that the vast unknown was filled only with darkness, emptiness, silence, and cold, boundless and eternal. Amid this void, a distant rumble was heard, akin to thunder. This sound recurred intermittently, growing nearer each time until, after an unimaginable silence, a blinding flash of light and a deafening thunderclap broke the stillness. This event marked the first spark of creation, an explosion of creative energy.

Following this, a shimmering and shaking sound, reminiscent of seeds in a gourd, resonated throughout the darkness. This sound, interpreted as the *first thought*, preceded all others. It emanated from the center of the darkness and spread infinitely, creating the need for a "place" for these thoughts to reach. Accompanying this thought was a rhythm, the heartbeat of creation, which permeated the void. As thoughts touched the darkness, stars were born, leading to the creation of the universe by the *first thought* and *first heartbeat*, known as the first fire of creation.[4]

In the second fire of creation, a light was formed: the Creator's fire, the Sun, illuminating a space in the darkness. Around this fire, a great circle was traced, defining the four directions.

The third fire of creation, another light, the Moon—known as Grandmother, the Grand Woman of the sky world—was then created, establishing the twin-ness essential for life's evolution. This twin-ness, manifest in sunrise and sunset, day and night, and within each being, represents the third fire of creation. The fourth stage of creation saw the establishment of the universe's movement according to the four directions, known as the fourth fire: the *first movement*.[5] With the completion of the universe's structure, movement became possible. In the fifth fire of creation, all elements were encapsulated into a form, embodying the potential to be. This form, *the*

seed, contained the essence of life. The Creator shaped seeds of life essence, reflecting creation's every possibility.[6]

In the sixth fire, Earth was created as a home for these seeds. After four attempts, Earth was perfected, with flowing waters as its lifeblood. Birds then spread the seeds across the land, completing the creation of Earth, the First Woman, and the Mother Earth. This stage embodies the Creator's love and desire to manifest his dream in the most beautiful expression. The seventh fire of creation involved the creation of a being in the Creator's image. Formed from the Earth and imbued with the Creator's thoughts and heartbeat, *the first human*, Anishinaabe, was created. This being, composed of Earth and Sky, desired to be part of the great harmony and balance of creation. Anishinaabe's descent to Earth was gentle, embodying a desire to coexist with and respect all forms of life.[7]

These seven stages of creation, from the *first thought* to the emergence of the *first human being*, reflect the continuous evolution of creative activity. This process is evident in all aspects of life, from the conception of ideas to their realization, mirroring the original blueprint of creation. By understanding their creation story, the Anishinaabeg can comprehend the movement and genesis of life, seeing the seven stages reflected in all creative endeavors.[8]

Anishinaabeg Chi-Bimoodewin (Anishinaabeg Migration)

Contrary to the Bering Strait and coastal migration hypotheses, the Anishinaabeg migration focuses on the seven fires prophecy, which guided the Anishinaabeg on their westward migration from the Atlantic coast to the Great Lakes region.[9] This narrative underscores significant cultural, spiritual, and historical aspects of the Anishinaabe journey, highlighting the importance of cultural heritage, spiritual guidance, and adaptation while preserving traditional values. For the purposes of this publication, the first three stopping points of the migration will be specifically explored. The migration began when seven prophets emerged from the Atlantic and approached the Anishinaabeg, who were then living in prosperity along the eastern shores of North America. Oral traditions describe the nation as vast and populous, with settlements extending beyond the visible horizon. Despite their abundance of resources, the Anishinaabeg heeded the prophecies, which warned of destruction if they did not move westward. One group, the Waabanong-kiig (Daybreak People), remained in the east to maintain the eastern fire.[10] These people were later referred to as the Abenaki by the French. The prophet of the first fire warned them that if they did not move, they would be destroyed. The Midewiwin (Grand Medicine Society) people remembered this prophecy, which included seven stopping places during their westward migration. The first stop was a turtle-shaped island in the St. Lawrence River, where a significant portion of the Anishinaabeg settled, while the majority continued westward.

As the migration progressed, the Anishinaabeg were cautioned about encountering hostile nations, and were instructed to defend themselves without initiating conflict. One notable adversary was the Naadweg (Haudenosaunee Confederacy). The second stopping place was at Animkii'wabaa (Niagara Falls), where the *megis* (cowrie) shell

emerged from the water to greet them. The third stopping place was at the Detroit River, where the megis shell appeared once more. Here, some Anishinaabeg established permanent settlements to maintain the third fire, known as the *Boodwe'aatomi* (Potawatomi, or fire people). During this period, two other prominent groups emerged: the Odaawag (Ottawa, or trader people), responsible for providing food and supplies, and the Anishinaabeg (Ojibwe), who served as the faith keepers.[11] The Anishinaabeg were entrusted with the *wiigwaasabakoon* (birch bark scrolls) and the water drum of the Midewiwin. These three groups collectively formed the Three Fires Confederacy, uniting the nation in their shared responsibilities and cultural preservation.

It is crucial to contextualize Anishinaabeg creation and migration knowledge as a form of pyroepistemology. Defined by Paulette Steeves as "a ceremony that cleanses the academic landscape of discussions that misinform worldviews and fuel racism. Such literary renewal clears the way for healthy growth in academic fields of thought and centers of knowledge production."[12] This study deviates from the conventional institutionalized Bering Strait theory or the "clovis first" theory and instead immerses the reader in the Anishinaabeg ontological frameworks of creation and migration.[13] This account of the Anishinaabeg migration from the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Lakes offers additional oral evidence suggesting that the Anishinaabeg were present in the regions along the northern shore of Lake Ontario during the periods associated with the sites of the Serpent and Hastings mounds. These sites physically embody the narrative of migration, serving as tangible markers connecting past and present Anishinaabeg communities. In addition, this creation story is the foundation upon which our entire culture exists, including the practice of creating burial mounds along the route these prophecies predicted. Starting with this perspective of the Anishinaabeg is crucial in understanding where and why we created burial mounds along the north shore of Lake Ontario. While this article references older archaeological sources throughout, they do not represent current scholarship; they illustrate how colonial narratives have historically shaped public and institutional understandings of mound sites. We also acknowledge and incorporate more inclusive contemporary research to reflect ongoing shifts in the field.

Anishinaabeg Eschatological Knowledge

This section examines Anishinaabeg eschatological knowledge, or burial practices, primarily transmitted through oral tradition. It is crucial to approach the dissemination of traditional knowledge with caution, as certain ceremonial details must remain within the oral tradition. The purpose of sharing this information is to provide context for Anishinaabeg burial practices and beliefs regarding the spirit's journey at the time of death. To preface this discussion, Anishinaabeg believe in *gaa-gege aadiziwin* (eternal or forever life). The eschatological concepts of reincarnation and rebirth are essential within Anishinaabeg belief systems and thereby the understanding of our burial practices. As articulated in the Seven Fires of Creation, the continuity of life is fundamental to understanding Anishinaabeg ontological frameworks.

In addition, Anishinaabeg eschatological practices and beliefs regarding life after death are explicitly linked to burial mound sites. Central to this is the *jiibai miikan* (ghost road), where the spirit embarks on a profound journey through different realms, guided by ceremonial rituals performed by the living community. Burial mounds such as the Serpent and Hastings mounds reflect this spiritual cosmology through their intentional orientation and proximity to water, symbolizing the spirit's journey across significant thresholds and cosmic waters. These sites align physically and symbolically with the stages described in eschatological traditions, including the encounter with *mishi-ginebig* (the great serpent), marking the final transition to *gaa-gege miniwaanigozi-wing* (the place of eternal happiness).

Aanji-kiing (Changing of Worlds and Lands)

When the *wiiyo* (body) of the Anishinaabeg was shaped and molded by *Gzhemanidoo* (the Creator), the *o'jijaak* (spirit) was breathed into the vessel using the *megis* shell. This transfer of spirit and life into the physical vessel also included the impartation of the Creator's thoughts, considered the highest and purest form of thought.[14]

The Anishinaabeg's understanding and conceptualization of *jiibai miikan* (ghost road) is profound due to the continuity of the spirit. Upon death, the spirit travels for four days within the earthly realm. During this period, a fire is lit by the clans responsible for the ceremony, providing a center for the spirit to return to. The spirit visits family, relations, friends, and every place where the person's hair has touched the earth, highlighting the cultural importance of caring for one's hair. On the third night after passing, *manidoo-naaknigewin* (spirit instructions) are given to the spirit in Anishinaabemowin, the original language provided by the Creator. The spirit begins to hear the *shkwiichigan* (eagle whistle) and its name called at the western door of life. At this door, the spirit encounters two bundles of clothes—one set dirty and drab, the other shiny and beautiful. The spirit is instructed to wear the dirty clothes, which transform into beautiful regalia for the journey home.[15]

The funeral for the body is typically held on the fourth day, with preparations made to return the body to *Eshkaakimig-Kwe* (Mother Earth). Items such as plugs of tobacco, flint and striker, food (sometimes four kernels of corn), birch bark, and a small copper kettle are placed with the body before burial. The body is wrapped in a blanket by the *kwewag* (women) and returned to the earth in the manner of our entrance into this world—wrapped by a woman at birth. The fire, having burned for four days, is allowed to extinguish naturally. The body is often positioned facing west, though some practices vary according to specific community teachings.[16]

The spirit's journey takes a year to complete, during which the *manidoo-nooswin* (spirit name) is not spoken aloud to avoid distracting the spirit from its journey. As the spirit begins its travel, it follows a sandy trail marked with the moccasin footprints of ancestors. At a fork in the road, the spirit offers tobacco, illuminating the correct path. Upon encountering the first fruit, *ode'min* (strawberry), the spirit eats and rests. Elders recount that before exposure to Western embalming practices, the spirit sometimes returned to the body, with moccasin tracks on the spirit road going both ways.

This traditional knowledge demonstrates the depth of Anishinaabeg spiritual beliefs and practices surrounding death and the afterlife.[17]

In the second phase of the spirit's journey back home, it enters the realm of the clans. The Anishinaabeg recognize the Seven Fires of Creation, the Seven Prophets, the Seven Stopping Places, and the Seven Chief Clans. These principal clans include the *a'jijaak* (crane), *maang* (loon), *migizi* (eagle), *makwa* (bear), *mikinaak* (turtle), *miziweganzhii* (hoof), and *waabizheshii* (marten). Originally, there were five chieftainship clans, but this has expanded to seven, each with seven subclans. Upon entering the land of the clans, the spirit offers tobacco and calls out its clan. The responsible clan then steps forward to guide the spirit to the second set of fruit, *miinan* (blueberries), where the spirit rests and uses the bundle prepared by the family for the journey home. [18]

The third phase, often referred to as the water realm, involves crossing a significant body of water, *gchi-ziibi* (big river), characterized by mist. The spirit is advised to remain steadfast to find its way to the river. If lost in the mist, the spirit offers tobacco to summon the *manidoo-shkaabewisag* (spirit helpers) for guidance. Upon reaching the river, the spirit encounters the third set of fruit, *mskomin* (raspberries), and rests. In the fourth phase, the spirit approaches a mighty entity resembling a log, known as *mishi-ginebig* (great snake). The spirit offers tobacco and requests safe passage across the river, which marks the point of no return. Upon crossing, the spirit finds the fourth fruit, *bagesaan* (plum), and rests.[19]

Upon awakening, the spirit encounters other spirits, accompanied by the rattles of creation. These spirits lead the new arrival to a lodge that is oriented south to north. Inside the lodge, *manidookewin* (spirit ceremony) transforms the spirit from *jibaii* (ghost) to *manidoo* (spirit). The spirit is then directed to follow *giiwednang* (the northern star), symbolizing the path to eternal happiness, or *gaa-gege miniwaanigoziwing* (place of eternal happiness).[20] This journey leads the spirit to a vast plain, *gchi-mishkode* (great plains), at the center of which stands the *ogimaatik* (chief tree). Here, ancestors gather to greet the spirit. When the spirit is ready, it looks through *bagone-giizhig* (the hole in the sky—the Pleiades constellation) to see the lodge of life. The Creator then sends the spirit back to deliver a new message to humankind, embodying the Anishinaabeg concept of reincarnation.[21] All of these aspects have been considered when examining the burial mounds that are found within Anishinaabeg territory. This knowledge, which is usually only passed down through oral history, has been completely lacking from any archaeological examinations of both the Serpent and Hastings mounds and need to be considered in order for more accurate representations of our history. These detailed linkages between creation, migration, and eschatological knowledge not only clarify the significance of the Serpent and Hastings mounds but also critically reinforce the necessity of integrating Anishinaabeg traditional knowledge into archaeological practices. By explicitly framing these connections early and consistently throughout the analysis, this research advocates for a more respectful and holistic approach to archaeological interpretation.

The Hopewell Tradition and the Mound-Builders Theory

The Hopewell tradition has been extensively studied and documented in the archaeological literature, notably by Warren K. Moorehead, who, in the early 1890s, coined the term "Hopewell" to describe this cultural affiliation. The Hopewell network is vast, and this publication focuses specifically on the Laurel, Point Peninsula, and Saugeen complexes. After conducting an analysis of the historical literature on these complexes, the paper provides a detailed overview of the proposed "lost race" of mound-builders. This discussion highlights the colonial underpinnings of traditional archaeological interpretations and emphasizes the necessity of adopting a pyroepistemological perspective when reviewing historical sources. This methodology is grounded in the Indigenous practice of "burning away dense undergrowth and allowing the sunlight to bring new life to earth."[22] Indigenous people across Turtle Island used different types of burning to increase biological diversity and provide room for new plants to thrive that were buried by more dominant species of trees or brush. For the Anishinaabeg, particularly in the area we are writing about along the shores of Rice Lake, this practice has been ongoing since we arrived. Across the lake from the Serpent and Hastings mounds is perhaps one of the most significant examples of this practice on Turtle Island. The black oak savanna, located within Alderville First Nation, continue to be successfully managed through the practice of controlled burning. This endangered ecosystem supports both tallgrass prairie and oak savanna (or *mishkode* in Anishinaabemowin) and are "the largest intact tract of native grassland habitat left on the Rice Lake Plains."[23] The fires would clear the land for both hunting and agriculture as "wildlife was attracted to the new green growth of the grasses that came after a spring burn. It was this practice that helped provide conditions necessary for the preservation of savanna and tallgrass prairie habitats."[24] The Anishinaabeg who settled in this region called this area *Pemadashkotayang* (Lake of the Burning Plains) to denote the annual process of using fire to regenerate this diverse ecosystem. This example shows how the Anishinaabeg in this region have also practiced forms of pyroepistemology and provide a template to how we should approach this type of method within archaeology. Moreover, the plains habitat found within the traditional forested areas along the north shore of Lake Ontario is directly connected to our oral histories, specifically to one of the final stages of the spirit's journey after death, when it arrives at *gchi-mishkode* (the great plains), where the *ogimaatik* (chief tree) stands at the center. We believe that these two significant mound sites were placed across the lake from *Pemadashkotayang* as a method to help spirits come back home to our traditional lands. As Paulette Steeves reminds us, "Indigenous archaeologies seek to restore the knowledge of the Indigenous past, a place that has been historically distorted, erased, and denied in anthropoidal knowledge production."[25] We believe early archaeological work at these sites has erased our cultural traditions of the burial mounds, distorting our understandings of ourselves and the people who created the Serpent and Hastings mounds. Recent studies have shifted away from the earlier mound-builder theories once applied to this region, yet they still stop short of explicitly recognizing Anishinaabeg ancestors. Instead, the mounds are categorized into two

neutral groups—Ancestor I and Ancestor II—based on differences in style, size, and mortuary features.[26] The early excavations, theories, and interpretations of the site are still important: they are the ash from which our new ideas about the sites will emerge, grounded in Anishinaabe worldviews rather than Eurocentric perspectives. We will provide an overview of these earlier interpretations before turning back toward the regeneration that is already occurring on our lands.

Laurel Complex

One of the Eurocentric theories that have been applied to this region is the Laurel complex, which encompassed a substantial portion of present-day Canada, extending from parts of southern Quebec through the Trent-Severn Waterway in south central Ontario to Boweting (Sault Ste. Marie), and reaching the northern extensions of Lake Winnipeg.[27] Historically, the Laurel complex is recognized for its extensive trade network, with no singular culture or group definitively representing the entire complex. Like other Hopewellian traditions, the Laurel complex is distinguished by the construction of earthworks. Among these, Kay-Nah-Chi-Wah-Nung (Genwaajiwanaang), dating from approximately 5000 BCE to 360 BCE, is notable for being Canada's largest concentration of earthwork burial mounds.[28]

Of particular interest within the Laurel complex is the emergence of what is now referred to as the Blackduck tradition.[29] Dawson describes the Blackduck tradition carriers as a distinct yet related southern population that rapidly spread across northwestern Ontario between 700 CE and 900 CE, coinciding with climatic amelioration. These groups are identified as Algonkian speakers, historically known as Northern Ojibwa. This identification is significant, as it positions the Anishinaabeg as descendants of this tradition, despite the Blackduck tradition being considered a "new, but related" ancestral group to the Laurel complex, primarily due to similarities observed in pottery styles.

Point Peninsula Complex

The Point Peninsula complex, which flourished during the Middle Woodland period from approximately 600 BCE to 700 CE, presents an intriguing case within the broader context of Hopewellian culture. Archaeologists often cautiously associate this complex with a potential cultural group. Distinctive features of the Point Peninsula complex include thicker pottery styles, characterized by dentate and symmetrical designs, with occasional cord-wrapped ceramics, similar to the diagnostic traits of the Laurel complex.

The Point Peninsula complex is linked to several notable mound sites, including Miller, Serpent, East Sugar Island, Cameron's Point, Hastings (Preston), Le Vesconte, Bay of Quinte (Massassaga), and See mounds.[30] These sites are all situated within the Trent-Severn Waterway system along the north shore of Lake Ontario and within the traditional territory of the Anishinaabeg and modern Three Fires Confederacy. Integrating the oral histories of the Anishinaabeg, as previously discussed, suggests that the ancestors of the Anishinaabeg were well established in this region during

the period when these mounds were constructed. Further analysis of the mortuary assemblages from the Serpent and Hastings mounds will be undertaken to elucidate connections with Anishinaabeg eschatological frameworks and practices.

Saugeen Complex

In contrast to the Point Peninsula culture, there is a tentative cultural affiliation ascribed to the Saugeen complex. The Ontario Archaeological Society suggests that the Saugeen complex may have evolved into the Odawa (Ottawa) Nation, stating, "There is some evidence that the Saugeen complex in the Bruce Peninsula may have evolved into the Adawa or Ottawa, as they were later called. The main distinction between the Saugeen complex and the Point Peninsula complex appears to be that Saugeen pots were relatively cruder, both in construction and decoration."[31]

However, Neal Ferris and Michael Spence have argued against a definitive cultural affiliation or distinct separation between the Princess Point and Saugeen complexes. They recommend that the term "Saugeen complex" be used for specific geographic locality purposes rather than implying cultural affiliation.[32] The Pelee and Yellow Point mounds are attributed to the Saugeen complex based on their spatial and temporal dynamics.

Mound-Builders Theory

The mound-builders theory was not only used to justify the displacement of First Nation peoples but also served as an explanation for the elaborate and complex mortuary practices found within the earthwork mounds of Canada and the United States. At the time, First Nation peoples were erroneously viewed as too primitive and savage to have constructed such sophisticated structures. This sentiment is reflected in an 1832 poem by William Cullen Bryant, which suggested that a lost, advanced race was responsible for these mounds:

> And burn with passion? Let the mighty mounds
> That overlook the rivers, or that rise
> In the dim forest crowded with old oaks,
> Answer. A race, that long has passed away,
> Built them;—a disciplined and populous race
> Heaped, with long toil, the earth, while yet the Greek
> Was hewing the Pentelicus to forms
> Of symmetry, and rearing on its rock
> The glittering Parthenon. These ample fields
> Nourished their harvest, here their herds were fed,
> When haply by their stalls the bison lowed,
> And bowed his maned shoulder to the yoke.
> All day this desert murmured with their toils,
> Till twilight blushed, and lovers walked, and wooed
> In a forgotten language, and old tunes,

From instruments of unremembered form,
Gave the soft winds a voice. The red man came—
The roaming hunter tribes, warlike and fierce,
And the mound-builders vanished from the earth.[33]

From an Indigenous perspective, this poem is problematic for several reasons. It suggests a simplistic narrative in which a "race" of mound builders has long vanished, replaced by "roaming hunter tribes," which ignores the continuous presence and resilience of Indigenous peoples. This perspective erases the rich, complex histories of Indigenous communities who have lived on these lands for millennia and reduces their cultures to an exoticized past. The poem romanticizes and mystifies Indigenous history without acknowledging the vibrant, living cultures that maintain deep connections to these lands and their historical sites. Moreover, it implies a binary narrative of displacement and conquest, overlooking the multifaceted interactions and relationships among Indigenous groups. By failing to recognize the agency and ongoing significance of these sites to Indigenous peoples, the poem marginalizes their lived experiences and cultural heritage.

The racist foundations of physical anthropology were reinforced by Carl Linnaeus, the father of the modern taxonomy system. Linnaeus categorized humanity into four distinct races: *Europaeus albus* (White Europeans), *Americanus rubescens* (Red Americans), *Asiaticus fuscus* (Brown Asians), and *Africanus niger* (Black Africans). Although this taxonomical classification is now considered outdated and unsupported, it was widely accepted during the period when the mound-builders theory was popular. Linnaeus's classification also included assigned traits for these racial categories. For instance, *Americanus rubescens* was described as having "straight, black, and thick hair; gaping nostrils; a beardless chin; and unyielding and free behavior."[34] This pseudoscientific taxonomy contributed to the erroneous belief that First Nation peoples were incapable of complex cultural achievements, such as those evidenced by the earthwork mounds, and perpetuated stereotypes that justified their exclusion from narratives of advanced civilization building.

Recent scholarship has already started the process of regeneration of the mound-building myth by outlining the colonial assumptions that underpinned earlier archaeological theories. Nicholas Timmerman has demonstrated how conservative talk show host Glenn Beck falsely claimed "that a lost tribe of Israel constructed the ancient mounds of North America."[35] These ideas were founded on false narratives created by early settlers who contended that the "American Indian lacked the capacity to construct large and intricate mounds."[36] Thomas Jefferson, a founding father of the United States, actively contributed to the perpetuation of this myth during the rise of American nationalism, as the nation sought to establish its own creation story in competition with European history. As Timmerman explained, "The myths of the mound-builders gave America an ancient past on a par with Europe's."[37]

Within the Canadian context, Lily Hart's recent master's thesis explored the implications of the theory and highlights the denialism of advanced knowledge among First Nation peoples. Hart wrote,

> Minister Thomas Wentworth Higginson claimed in the Ontario Reader series that the mound-builder "must have been of an advanced civilization," and "our Indian tribes show nothing of the skill and industry required for constructing great works." The Ontario Readers were authorised and promoted by the then chief superintendent of education, Egerton Ryerson—the same Ryerson whose reports laid the groundwork for Canada's residential school system and saw "agriculture, kitchen-gardening," and "industry" as central skills to be taught in them. In school-books, skill, industry and agriculture belonged to the mound-builders, and also to the settlers. The "skill and industry" of mound-builders did not fit settlers' notions of what an authentic Indian was, but did fit their ideas of who a white settler was and the correct mold to assimilate to.[38]

From an Anishinaabeg perspective, this quote highlights how colonial narratives were used to undermine our deep knowledge and capabilities of the land. The claim that mound-builders were of an "advanced civilization" and distinct from any Indigenous person served to justify the assimilation policies promoted by figures like Egerton Ryerson, whose educational reforms laid the foundation for the harmful residential school system, aiming to impose settler values and erase Indigenous cultures. Sadly, one of the first residential schools in Canada was the Alderville Manual Labour School, established in 1838 under the influence of Ryerson's educational model.[39] Hart concluded in her thesis "the mound-builder myth is just one of the ways settlers used anthropology to advance settler colonial goals, and the myth is demonstrative of a broader pattern of thinking among the settler population."[40]

Revisiting the Burial Mounds of the Northern Shore of Lake Ontario

Having thoroughly reviewed the Anishinaabeg cosmological, eschatological, and ontological frameworks, we now explicitly connect these traditions to archaeological evidence from two distinct earthwork mounds located along the northern shore of Lake Ontario within the Trent-Severn Waterway region. By employing pyroepistemology, this paper integrates Anishinaabeg knowledge systems and archaeological findings from David Boyle's excavations at the end of the nineteenth century.[41] This methodological approach provides a coherent connection, specifically addressing spatial, temporal, and spiritual alignments of these sites with Anishinaabeg creation, migration, and eschatological narratives. Despite several archaeological studies over the last several decades concerning different aspects of the culture who built the mounds, no study has examined these sites exclusively through the perspective of the original and treaty inhabitants of the area.[42]

The Serpent and Hastings mounds exhibit significant spatial and spiritual alignments consistent with Anishinaabeg eschatological teachings. Burial mounds in southern Ontario, including these, are intentionally situated near water and elevated terrain, aligning with cosmological beliefs about *jiibai miikan* (the spirit road) and the transitional phases the spirit undertakes during its journey. This can also be found within the placement of the two mounds and their close connection to the

gchi-mishkode (the great plains), which are situated directly across the lake from these sites. In addition, the orientation of these mounds often aligns with celestial markers crucial to Anishinaabeg cosmology, explicitly integrating creation and migration stories into their construction and spatial symbolism.

Serpent Mounds

The cultural affiliation of the Serpent mounds has been a topic of contention, as the Anishinaabeg have encountered repeated resistance from archaeologists in their efforts to protect the site and use it for ceremonial purposes. Although the Serpent mounds are currently owned and protected by Hiawatha First Nation, there remains a struggle to "prove" cultural affiliation. David Boyle stated that "the construction of the mounds cannot be attributed to any people with whom Europeans have come into contact. It is not recorded that the Huron-Iroquois were mound-builders, and we must therefore regard the earthworks in question as the product of a people who preceded them."[43] Immediately, the Anishinaabeg are not considered as the original creators of this site despite two First Nation reserves surrounding the area.

An examination of the Anishinaabeg eschatological frameworks reveals significant connections. One of the last *manidoog* (spirits) an individual encounters when crossing to the other side is a serpent known as *mishi-ginebig*. The mound itself is constructed in a serpentine shape, with five oval mounds in close proximity. These five oval mounds are symbolic of the four stops the spirit makes along *jibaii miikan* (the spirit road) and the final resting place, *gaa-gege miniwaanigoziwining* (place of eternal happiness), on its journey back home.

Examining the writings of Walter A. Kenyon (1986), it becomes evident that the alignment of the Serpent mounds is deliberate: "The major axes of these five mounds, all parallel, ran east and west, as did the center line of the long, sinuous embankment itself. . . . Their orientation, that is to say, was not random."[44] This observation underscores the intentionality behind the mound construction and demonstrates how the Anishinaabeg created the site in connection with the cosmos.

Jackson Pind further explored this alignment, finding that the serpentine earthwork aligns perfectly with *gichi-mishomisinaan giizis* (our grandfather sun) during the summer solstice.[45] This alignment is not merely an architectural coincidence but fits within the Anishinaabeg ontological framework of *aadiziwin miikan* (the road of life). According to this understanding, the road of life extends from the eastern door of the lodge of life, where the spirit enters the physical vessel, or *wiiyo* (body), and exits through the western door when the spirit is called back home by *Gzhemanidoo* (the Creator). Our oral histories are crucial to understanding this alignment, as they carry the teachings that link celestial movements to the spiritual journey of the Anishinaabeg, offering insight that cannot be derived from archaeological evidence alone.

Further evidence is provided by Kenyon, who describes the following: "At various levels he unearthed a human skull, some dog or wolf teeth . . . and below this, at the base of the mound, was a crude circle of stones about three feet (0.9 meters) in diameter. Many of the stones, but not all of them, had been subjected to intense heat,

although there was no evidence of fire in the area."[46] Examining these findings through our spiritual teachings, we find more context about how this site may have been used. In the Midewiwin tradition, a *wiigwaasabak* (birch bark scroll) details the process of guiding a spirit along the spirit trail.[47] This process includes a *madoodooswaan* (sweat lodge), where the *madoodoo manidoo* (sweat spirit) is invoked to assist the individual on their journey. The *wiigwaasabakoon* (birch bark scrolls) often depict a wolf at the western door, symbolizing a guardian or guide for the spirit.

By employing a pyroepistemological approach that integrates traditional Anishinaabeg cosmological, eschatological, and ontological frameworks, multiple lines of evidence point to the Serpent mounds being of Anishinaabeg origin. The serpent figure not only represents the final *manidoog* (spirit) the spirit encounters but is also situated by a significant body of water, now known as Rice Lake, which was historically affected by the flooding due to the Trent-Severn Waterway.[48] This revised analysis outlines the significance of integrating First Nation traditional knowledge systems into archaeological interpretations, providing a richer, more culturally aligned understanding of the Serpent mounds. Such an approach emphasizes the necessity of respecting and acknowledging the Anishinaabeg's cultural heritage and spiritual beliefs in the study of the earthwork structures located along the northern shore of Lake Ontario.

Hastings Mound

The Hastings mound, also known as the Preston mound (named after the settler landowner), is not as extensively documented as the Serpent mound. According to the writings of David Boyle and Walter Kenyon, the Hastings mound features another serpentine earthwork:

> The largest structure was a linear mound eighty feet (24.4 meters) long, twenty-two feet (6.7 meters) wide, and three-and-a-half feet (1.1 meters) high. Its major axis was parallel to the river, which runs east and west at that point. Sixty-five feet (19.8 meters) west of the linear mound was an oval mound with a major axis of nineteen feet (5.8 meters), a minor axis of fifteen feet (4.6 meters), and a maximum height of two feet (0.6 meters). Its major axis, like that of the linear mound, was parallel to the river. The remaining mound was the smallest of the three, but Boyle failed to report its dimensions. He tells us only that it was located eighty feet (24.4 meters) east of the linear mound.[49]

The exact location of this site has been lost due to a number of new housing developments around the area, but was found one mile downstream of the town of Hastings and alongside the north side of the Trent River. As result, we must rely solely on the interpretations of previous archaeologists, as we can no longer visit the site as Anishinaabeg. This demonstrates just one of the issues we have with applying pyroepistemology to these sites. However, this description suggests a structure almost mirroring the Serpent mounds on a smaller scale. The Anishinaabeg belief in *mishiginebig* (the great serpent), the proximity to a river, the presence of oval mounds, and

the east-west orientation all align with Anishinaabeg cosmological, eschatological, and ontological frameworks.

One intriguing piece of evidence from Kenyon's observations of Boyle's findings is particularly notable: "Below the crematorium, in turn, was a layer of extremely hard clay from four to six inches (ten to fifteen centimeters) thick, which apparently covered the entire structure at that level. When the clay was removed, the bodies of seventeen people were exposed. 'Some of them,' he tells us, 'were underlying others to a depth of four feet, or two feet below the outside level.'"[50] This description evokes a vivid image of paddling along the Trent River and observing a serpentine earthwork encased in clay. The hardening of the clay would create a distinct, shiny contrast to the surrounding landscape, resonating with Anishinaabeg stories that depict *mishi-ginebig* as having shiny scales that could be used for medicinal purposes if one could get close enough.

The alignment and features of the Hastings mound in conjunction with the Anishinaabeg oral traditional knowledge further reinforce the connection to Anishinaabeg heritage and highlight the importance of integrating First Nation knowledge into the interpretation of these archaeological sites. Such an approach not only respects but also enriches our understanding of the cultural implications of these notable earthworks. There were numerous remains found within the mound, but the location of these ancestors is also not clear, damaging our current understandings of the burial practices that may have been used.

Conclusion

This study has identified significant issues within current archaeological paradigms that often marginalize or negate cultural affiliations of the Laurel, Point Peninsula, and Saugeen complexes of the Middle Woodland period with the Anishinaabeg Nation. Contrary to prevailing archaeological narratives, this paper specifically claims cultural heritage affiliations of the Serpent and Hastings mounds based explicitly on Anishinaabeg epistemological frameworks, oral histories, and territorial continuity. We intentionally choose not to rigidly align Anishinaabeg oral traditions with Western archaeological dating methods, employing instead a parallel framework that underscores Indigenous epistemological autonomy. This deliberate methodological choice highlights the validity and integrity of Indigenous knowledge systems on their own terms, not as subordinate to Western scientific methodologies.

There is a critical need to address and reform colonial legacies entrenched in archaeological practices by meaningfully integrating Indigenous traditional knowledge into stages of archaeological inquiry. This inclusive methodology, termed "Biskaabiiyaang archaeology" or "Returning to Ourselves archaeology," advocates for comprehensive First Nation involvement from research to excavation to analysis and curation.[51] Historically, Anishinaabeg perspectives have frequently been treated as obstacles rather than essential insights, leading to problematic situations like those involving the Serpent mounds, with hundreds of ancestral remains and artifacts remain contested at institutions such as the Royal Ontario Museum.[52] Negotiations

to return this material to Hiawatha First Nation have stalled due to conflicting claims from the Huron-Wendat Nation. Despite approval for the return of items from the mounds, the Royal Ontario Museum's policy prevents repatriation in contested cases, leaving the process unresolved.[53]

Similarly, the 2011 disturbance of the Hastings mound site highlights ongoing issues surrounding Indigenous cultural heritage management, further emphasizing the urgency for policy reform and respect for First Nation heritage stewardship. In 2011, parts of the Hastings mound site were disturbed after a landowner was renovating his basement and unearthed a human skull in the area. This accidental find led to the recovery of more than 2,000 bone elements from ten to twelve ancestors/specimens, along with artifacts such as projectile points, lithics, and ceramics.[54] The unearthed site, believed to be a burial mound dating back 2,000 years, drew immediate attention and concern from First Nations communities, who called for its protection and proper recognition. Eventually two dump trucks of material were sent to Hiawatha First Nation, whereby archeologists began sifting through the material to find any cultural artifacts or remains. One of the authors of this article was part of that effort to try and recover what remains they could from the site, however no further updates about what has happened to those remains has been provided. These recent intrusions into some of our most ancient burial grounds demonstrate how difficult it can be to conduct archaeological research through an Anishinaabeg framework.

This study clearly advocates for a decolonial archaeological framework that respects and integrates local Indigenous perspectives, providing richer, more culturally accurate interpretations of specific mound sites. The research explicitly outlines broader implications for archaeological and heritage studies, urging methodological reforms that prioritize Indigenous epistemological autonomy. In addition, the paper recommends concrete educational reforms in Ontario to include Indigenous knowledge systems, and calls on the Government of Canada to establish federal legislation similar to the United States' Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA, 1990). Such policies would protect and facilitate the repatriation of Indigenous cultural heritage from private, academic, and institutional collections.

In conclusion, by employing pyroepistemology to critically reevaluate the mound-builders theory and the Hopewell tradition along the northern shores of Lake Ontario, this research provides a significant step toward decolonizing archaeological narratives. The specific claims to cultural heritage affiliation made here, particularly regarding the Serpent and Hastings mounds, clarify the importance of precise historical continuity and First Nation epistemological integrity. Ultimately, this study highlights the broader importance of recognizing and respecting Indigenous perspectives within archaeological practice, highlighting the necessity for inclusive educational curricula and comprehensive federal heritage protection and repatriation policies.

Notes

1. Kathleen E. Absolon, *Kaandossiwin: How We Come to Know: Indigenous re-Search Methodologies* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2022).

2. 3 We have used Anishinaabemowin words throughout this article that can't be directly translated into English without losing some of their meaning. The spelling and dialect are based on the version of Anishinaabemowin spoken in Curve Lake First Nation.

3. Edward Benton-Banai, *The Mishomis Book: The Voice of the Ojibway* (Saint Paul: Indian Country Press, 1988); personal Anishinaabeg oral history.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Cary Miller, "Every Dream Is a Prophecy: Rethinking Revitalization—Dreams, Prophets, and Routinized Cultural Evolution," in *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies: Understanding the World through Stories*, ed. Jill Doerfler, Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, and Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2013), 124.

10. Benton-Banai, *The Mishomis Book*.

11. Ibid.

12. Paulette F. Steeves, *The Indigenous Paleolithic of the Western Hemisphere* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021), 20.

13. We acknowledge that this theory is being well critiqued by other scholars including Jen Rose Smith, "'Exceeding Beringia': Upending Universal Human Events and Wayward Transits in Arctic Spaces," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 39, no. 1 (2021): 158–75; Steeves, *The Indigenous Paleolithic of the Western Hemisphere*.

14. Bob Goulais, "Spirit and Creation" (Onaubinisay at the 2018 Parliament of the World's Religions), YouTube video, 49:20, posted November 26, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQB3rHfNex0.

15. Lee Obizaan Staples and Chato Ombishkebines Gonzalez, *Aanjikiing/Changing Worlds: An Anishinaabe Traditional Funeral* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2023), 18. Throughout this section, we also rely on oral history teachings provided to one of the authors. One of the authors conducts traditional Anishinaabeg burials for their community, which is also where this information is drawn from.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Steeves, *The Indigenous Paleolithic of the Western Hemisphere*, 20.

23. Todd Farrell, Mark Rupke, and Mark Stabb, "Project Prairie and Tallgrass Education on the Rice Lake Plains: A Journey from 1870 to Today and Beyond," *Prairie Naturalist* 21 (2014): 92, https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tpn/21.

24. Ibid.

25. Steeves, *The Indigenous Paleolithic of the Western Hemisphere*, 21.

26. Thomas W. Dudgeon, Daniel J. Rafuse, Gary Burness, and James Conolly, "Faunal Analysis of the Middle Woodland Rice Lake Serpent Mounds (BbGm-2) Midden Assemblage, Ontario,"

Ontario Archaeology 98 (2018): 84–99; Kenneth E. Sassaman, "Structure and Practice in the Southeast," in *Contemporary Archaeological Theory: The New Pragmatism*, ed. Robert W. Preucel and Stephen A. Mrozowski (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 170–90.

27. C. S. Reid and Grace Rajnovich, "Laurel: A Reevaluation of the Spatial, Social and Temporal Paradigms," *Canadian Journal of Archaeology* 15 (1991): 193–234, https://canadianarchaeology.com/caa/publications/canadian-journal-archaeologyjournal-canadien-darcheologie/15/laurel-re-evaluation.

28. Kayleigh Speirs and Tasha Hodgson, "Bii-azhe Gìiwé iná daanig (Let's Bring Them Home): Lessons in Humility, Relationships, and Changing Perspectives," in *Working with and for Ancestors: Collaboration in the Care and Studies*, ed. Chelsea H. Meloche and Laura Sparke (Routledge, 2020), 68–75.

29. Kenneth C. Dawson, "The Wabinosh River Site and the Laurel Tradition in Northwestern Ontario," *Ontario Archaeology* 36 (1981): 3–46, https://ontarioarchaeology.org/wp-content/uploads/oa036-01_dawson.pdf.

30. Walter Kenyon, *Mounds of Sacred Earth: Burial Mounds of Ontario* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum), 1986.

31. Ontario Archaeological Society, "The Archaeology of Ontario: Middle Woodland Period," https://web.archive.org/web/20090715213157/http://www.ontarioarchaeology.on.ca/summary/middlew.htm.

32. Neal Ferris and Michael W. Spence, "The Woodland Traditions in Southern Ontario," *Revista de Arqueologia Americana* (1995): 83–138, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27768356.

33. William Cullen Bryant, "The Prairies," Poetry Foundation, 1832, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/55341/the-prairies.

34. Carl Linnaeus, *Systema Naturae* (Tenth Edition) (Holmiae: Laurentii Salvii, 1758).

35. Nicholas A. Timmerman, "Contested Indigenous Landscapes: Indian Mounds and the Political Creation of the Mythical 'Mound Builder' Race," *Ethnohistory* 67, no. 1 (2020): 75, https://doi.org/10.1215/00141801-7888741.

36. Ibid, 76.

37. Ibid, 80.

38. Lily Isabelle Hart, "'The Mound Long Antedates the Present Tribes': The Mound-Builder Myth in Canada, 1855–1963" (MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 2022), 45–46.

39. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Canada's Residential Schools: The History, Part 1—Origins to 1939* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 146.

40. Hart, "'The Mound Long Antedates the Present Tribes,'"76.

41. David Boyle, "Mounds," *Annual Archaeological Report, Ontario* (1897): 14–57.

42. Please see Samantha Walker, "The Persistence of Place: Hunter-Gatherer Mortuary Practices and Land-Use in the Trent Valley, Ontario," *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 54 (2019): 133–48, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaa.2019.03.002; Sarah Robinson and James Conolly, "Compositional Variability in Middle and Early Late Woodland Pottery Fabrics from the Trent River Valley," *Ontario Archaeology* 167 (2020): 19–33, https://ontarioarchaeology.org/wp-content/uploads/OA_web_100.pdf#page=25.

43. Boyle, "Mounds," 60.

44. Kenyon, *Mounds of Sacred Earth*, 10.

45. Jackson Pind, "History Education at the Anishinaabeg Serpent Mounds," *Ancient and Indigenous Wisdom Traditions in the Americas: Toward More Balanced and Inclusive Curricular Representations and Classroom Practices*, eds. Ehaab Abdou and Theodore Zervas (2024).

46. Kenyon, *Mounds of Sacred Earth*, 11.

47. Walter James Hoffman, "The Midewiwin, or 'Grand Medicine Society,' of the Ojibwa," in *Smithsonian Institution, US Bureau of Ethnology Report*, vol. 7, 149–299 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1891); Selwyn H. Dewdney, *The Sacred Scrolls of the Southern Ojibway* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1975).

48. Madeline Whetung, "(En)gendering Shoreline Law: Nishnaabeg Relational Politics along the Trent Severn Waterway," *Global Environmental Politics* 19, no. 3 (2019): 16–32, https://doi.org/10.1162/glep_a_00513.

49. Kenyon, *Mounds of Sacred Earth*, 15.

50. Ibid.

51. Patty Krawec, *Becoming Kin: An Indigenous Call to Unforgetting the Past and Reimagining Our Future* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2022).

52. J. Deer and R. Johnson, "When Multiple First Nations Lay Claim to Ancient Indigenous Remains, How Does Repatriation Get Sorted," *CBC News*, (March 7, 2020), www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/indigenous-remains-repatriation-consensus-1.5488750.

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54. Lance Anderson, "The Big Dig," *The Peterborough Examiner* (July 19, 2013), https://www.thepeterboroughexaminer.com/news/friday-focus-the-big-dig/article_86f9c7b7-4e47-5b3b-988a-e8b2e391efba.html.