

Abstract

Through the crafting of materials a building postures its relationship to land and place. This essay considers this relationship in the context of the architecture built by ancient inhabitants of the Ohio Valley; Native Americans, called the Adena-Hopewell (ca. 500 B.C. - 500 A. D.). Adena-Hopewell attitudes are contrasted to Western attitudes regarding place, land and building. Typical of traditional Native American cultures, Adena-Hopewell meaning knowledge and education was rooted in their place or tribal geography. Western approaches to meaning, on the other hand, dwell principally in the universal internal structure of things. While the Western approach is positive, constructive and historical it disallows a beholding of animate connections between humanity, building, place and land.

Like the historic Native Americans of the forested Midwest the Adena-Hopewell built dwellings from saplings and bark, and their relationship to nature was one of reciprocation. Unlike these Indians the Adena-Hopewell practiced complex mortuary rites listened to the land, and evinced their approach to the world through a monumental architecture built principally of earth. The Adena-Hopewell considered their world to be cyclical and their architecture valorized, made clear and even “acted out” that cycle of life through the extraction, transportation and transformation of elements occurring in their land. Those elements very probably had a symbolic dimension; they included water, the *primordial chaos*; soil, the *primordial media*; sky, the *heavens* framed and made apparent by the enclosure and wood, the *world-life* that rises and descends through water, earth and sky.

The remains of this architecture is rendered through the experience and gait of the writer. Questions and observations occur that could only have been inspired by the experience of these places. The writer describes the Great Circle and Circle and Octagon at Newark, Seip Mound and Fort Ancient.

With their monumental architecture the Adena-Hopewell were able to listen intently to their land and their myths and meanings were bound to it. In this lies a lesson for the architects of today. For in the urban and suburban regions where most of us live, the natural appearances of these places are now so foreign that they have acquired something of an unreal and even irritating cast. While the Adena-Hopewell provide examples of awe inspiring monuments, the real lesson of the Adena-Hopewell lie in how, through their mytho-cultic attitudes, they listened intently to the appearances of nature in their land.