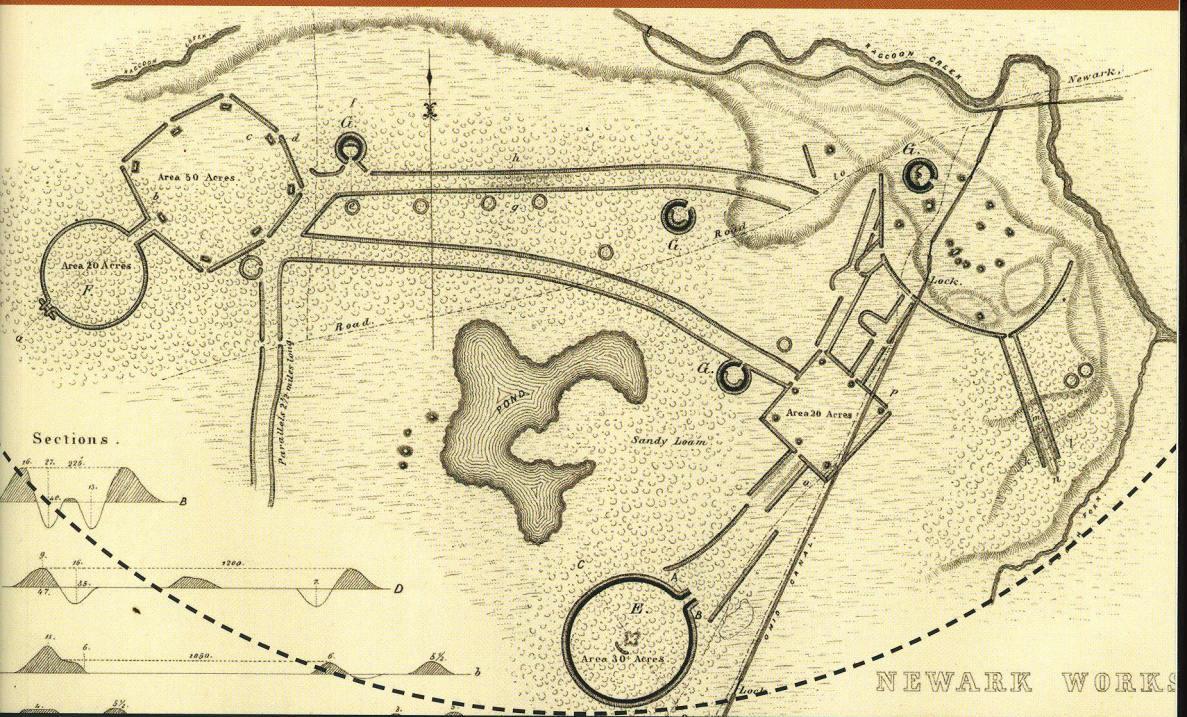




# THE NEWARK EARTHWORKS

ENDURING MONUMENTS, CONTESTED MEANINGS



EDITED BY LINDSAY JONES AND RICHARD D. SHIELS

# THE Newark Earthworks

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ENDURING MONUMENTS,  
CONTESTED MEANINGS

Edited by Lindsay Jones and Richard D. Shiels

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TIMOTHY DARVILL

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## Beyond Newark

### Prehistoric Ceremonial Centers and Their Cosmologies

CEREMONIES AND RITUAL observance connected to concerns about life, fecundity, well-being, and death are fundamental elements of the human condition and everyday experiences; they are axiomatic to what Martin Heidegger referred to as “dwelling” on the earth and fit within his four-fold concept of “oneness”: earth and sky, divinities and mortals.<sup>1</sup> Many aspects of these emotional attachments lie in the domain of intangible heritage—language, music, dance, sacred knowledge, beliefs, representations, cosmologies, and worldviews that peoples and societies hold dear and transmit through oral traditions, participation, pupilage, and performance. But such things also find formal expression in the tangible material world through what Colin Renfrew described as “technologies to cope with the unknown”: symbolic and projective—architecture, art, ceremonial monuments, holy objects, sacred places, and special spaces.<sup>2</sup> Embodied in such material culture are the practical realizations of big pictures that serve as mnemonics for beliefs, the means to structure ceremonies and rituals, and, in a very real sense, ways of representing in microcosm the world of particular social realities.

Size is important for ceremonial monuments in a social context. Almost every society provides opportunities for people and their gods to meet together, be it in natural sanctuaries in the landscape, domestic shrines within the house, transportable tabernacles, or towering temples. Most serve local communities and are of commensurate scale. Occasionally, however, much larger ceremonial centers serve extended communities and act as regional foci within sacred landscapes by representing symbols of cosmic, social, and moral order. In prehistoric times such centers typically appear at one of three key moments in the development of social complexity: the emergence of stable agricultural communities, the formation of hierarchical or chiefdom

societies, or the coalescence of political units into simple state systems immediately preceding the appearance of urban centers. The Newark Earthworks (fig. 1) represent the physical remains of one such substantial ceremonial center spread over more than 83 ha beside the Licking River in central Ohio.<sup>3</sup> The sheer scale and diversity of Newark's numerous components represented by enclosures, mounds, avenues, platforms, and burial grounds set it apart as one of a handful of important and significant Hopewell ceremonial centers. Much is already known through studies dating back to the mid-nineteenth century,<sup>4</sup> but many questions remain to be answered about how it developed, how it worked, and what the various components meant to those who used it. Some of these can only be answered through new research at the site itself, but comparative perspectives are also potentially useful. Accordingly, this essay looks beyond the Newark Earthworks and the Ohio valley into the wider world of ceremonial centers across time and space in order to provide a broad context through cross-cultural comparisons and mapping possibilities. Working on a wide canvas, I shall explore four themes represented at selected ceremonial centers across Eurasia, Africa, and the Americas: sacred geography, seasonal communal meetings, cosmological structuring, and links between life and death—all of which bear on what can be seen in the archaeological record at Newark and related Hopewell centers.

### Sacred Geographies

Ceremonial centers generally both represent and create a sacred geography through a social use of space that is intimately and recognizably linked to beliefs and understandings of sacred and profane worlds. As Paul Wheatley pointed out some years ago, operationally, ceremonial centers were instruments for the creation of political, social, and economic order, but structurally they were symbols of cosmic, spiritual, religious, and moral order.<sup>5</sup> Positioning in the landscape was therefore important, and often gave special meanings to the ceremonial centers of particular communities. A connection with water, especially rivers or lakes, is common. This may have the practical advantage of facilitating communications and access to a site, but water also has many attributes that find expression in beliefs (healing, purification, a liminal zone between worlds, a boundary that restricts the movements of people and spirits). It can also be seen metaphorically as representing the journey of life from source to sea. James Mooney notes that among Cherokee

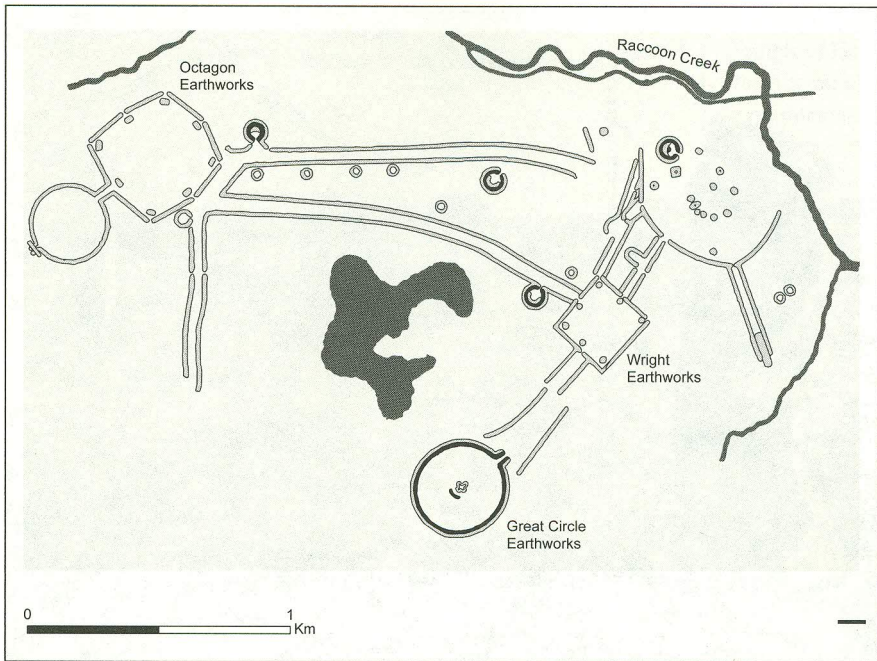


FIGURE 1. Plan of the main component monuments of the Newark Ceremonial Center. (After Squier and Davis, *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley* [1848], plate 25; drawing by Vanessa Constant)

people every important ceremony contains a prayer to the “Long Person,” the formulistic name for the river.<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes the linear form of rivers can perhaps be glimpsed in the elongated enclosures and defined pathways found at nearby ceremonial centers. It has been suggested that at Newark movements between the various enclosures were structured by embanked avenues that link them together and connect the whole complex to the South Fork of the Licking River via the Cherry Valley Ellipse with its burial mounds and enclosures.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in the quite different cultures of southern Britain in the fourth and third millennia BCE, cursus monuments often run parallel or at right angles to rivers, while avenues link rivers to henges and henge enclosures.<sup>8</sup> At Stonehenge the earthwork avenue linking the stone circle with the River Avon is 2.5 km long with a stone circle at start and finish.<sup>9</sup> Avebury is much the same, with the stone-lined West Kennet Avenue (fig. 2) starting at a stone circle on Overton

