

Pilgrimage, Multiculturalism and Stewardship at the Earthworks of Newark, Ohio: Ancient Models and Future Prospects

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Introduction

This presentation focuses on the 2000-year-old Earthworks of Newark, Ohio, enormous ancient architectural constructions that—despite being designated “one of the 70 Wonders of the Ancient World” and presently under consideration for UNESCO World Heritage Status—remain very little known, even to the present-day residents of Ohio. My remarks will capitalize on ideas from a forthcoming interdisciplinary collection of essays tentatively entitled *The Earthworks of Newark, Ohio: Ancient Monuments, Enduring Significances*, edited by Lindsay Jones and Richard D. Shiels, which is currently in process at the University of Virginia Press.

All fifteen of the essays in that volume, which emerges from a 2011 symposium at The Ohio State University on “The Newark Earthworks and World Heritage: One Site, Many Contexts,” concur that these Hopewell-era monuments are both truly fabulous and distressingly unappreciated. Of particular anxiety is the fact that a site that many Native (and non-Native) groups continue to revere as “sacred” is presently occupied by a private golf course(!), and thus afforded only highly restricted access. But, aside from comingled appreciation and distress, the widely diverse collection of authors agrees about little else. Indeed, among the most fascinating aspects of this ancient earthen architecture—especially for one like myself interested in “the hermeneutics of sacred architecture”—is the remarkable and impassioned *dis*agreement concerning both the original significance of these constructions and the most suitable future management of the site.

Below I summarize, in a staccato list, fifteen quite different ways of assessing the specialness of the Newark Earthworks, each of which has ramifications for how the site ought to be managed in the future. For the purposes of an ASC6 meeting devoted to “The Architecture of Spirituality in a Multicultural Setting,” I will accentuate especially option number 13 by Duane Champagne, a Native sociologist and scholar of American Indian Studies, and Carole Goldberg, a lawyer who has litigated many Native American land claims. They argue that the Newark Earthworks were, in the Hopewell era (200 BCE to 500 CE), not a site of ordinary habitation but rather a major pilgrimage destination, which exemplified a Native land ethic of “stewardship” wherein many indigenous groups felt both special investments and special responsibilities in connection to this place, but none claimed exclusive “ownership.” That is to say, in their view, the Newark Earthworks were not only a “sacred space,” but also **a context of multicultural sharing** wherein otherwise contentious Native groups periodically came to adjudicate disputes and celebrate common interests. Champagne and Goldberg argue, moreover, that this ancient model of non-hegemonic and cooperative sharing could—and should—inform the future management of the site, especially if it is allowed to become a World Heritage Site.

What Is So Special About The Newark Earthworks? Fifteen Viable Replies¹

- 1. Richard Shiels (historian of American religion):** The 2000-year old Newark Earthworks, despite a convoluted history of neglect and repurposing during the past 200 years, provide (among other things) a uniquely evocative educational resource with which to reconceptualize the history of Ohio and America, which has roots far deeper than Euro-American occupation...
- 2. Bradley Lepper (archaeologist, Hopewell specialist):** The Newark Earthworks were, during the Hopewell era, a pilgrimage destination with enormous drawing power, a vast ritual context, “ceremonial machine” or “monumental engine of world renewal” in which to orchestrate highly choreographed Hopewellian mortuary rituals, the goal of which “may have been nothing less than the regeneration of the Earth”...
- 3. Ray Hively (astro-physicist) & Robert Horn (philosopher):** The Newark Earthworks provide a uniquely elaborate instance of archaeo-astronomical planning wherein enormous and stunningly sophisticated geometrical configurations track the movements of celestial bodies, most notably a 18.6-year lunar cycle, as well as integrating the built features with the local topography of streams, valleys and “hilltop observing stations”...
- 4. Helaine Silverman (archaeologist, Andean specialist):** The Newark Earthworks, like the Nazca Lines in Peru, were, during the Hopewell era, a highly venerated pilgrimage destination, a “heterotopic sacred site,” designed in ways that reflective decidedly religious priorities; a place that would have impressed ancient visitors as exceptional in the extreme, an awe-inspiring contrast to the broader landscapes within which they lived their ordinary lives...
- 5. Stephen Lekson (archaeologist, Southwest specialist):** The Newark Earthworks, like Chaco Canyon, is a site much-revered for its supposed conception as a “sacred place” and a center for “rituality,” which may, however (again like Chaco), actually owe its impressive scale and configuration less to ostensibly “spiritual” priorities than to more to prosaic political and economic factors; i.e., the exceptional religiosity of both sites may have been much overestimated...
- 6. Timothy Darvill (British archaeologist):** The Newark Earthworks is an underappreciated site that deserves credit as a top-tier ceremonial center insofar as it provides outstanding exemplification of all of the “common themes” such as geometrical precision, linkages of the living with the dead, and “cosmological structuring” that one observes at much more high-profile ancient centers such as Stonehenge, China’s Temple of Heaven and Çatalhöyük in Turkey...
- 7. John E. Hancock (architect and architectural historian):** The Newark Earthworks persist as “continuously meaningful works of architecture” (rather than simply “archaeological sites that hold knowledge about distant cultures”), which contemporary audiences can best appreciate via the sorts of digital technologies and “augmented reality” utilized on the dynamic web-based guide to the earthworks known as the “Ancient Ohio Trail”...
- 8. Thomas Barrie (architect and architectural historian):** The Newark Earthworks was—and remains—a “liminal space” or “place of mediation” at which contemporary visitors,

¹ Based on a volume tentatively entitled *The Earthworks of Newark, Ohio: Ancient Monuments, Enduring Significances*, edited by Lindsay Jones and Richard D. Shiels (in process at the University of Virginia Press).

not unlike their ancient Hopewellian counterparts, are afforded a special opportunity to reflect upon such profound matters as “the ontological significance of home,” the on-going precariousities of the natural environment and the inescapable “mystery of death”...

- 9. Margaret Pearce (geographer, indigenous cartography specialist):** The Newark Earthworks exemplify characteristically indigenous mapping practices, which (unlike Western cartography) are “process-oriented,” “dispersed” and “embodied” so that visitors—either in the ancient past or in the future—are themselves “mapmakers” who may contribute to a “continually regenerative mapping process,” which was begun by earlier generations of Hopewell surveyors...
- 10. Thomas Bremer (American religionist, specialist in tourism and travel):** The Newark Earthworks endure as both a site “modern religiosity” and a “tourist attraction” insofar as this remains an appealing travel destination to which highly reverent visitors (i.e., anti-tourists of sorts) undertake “meaning-making journeys,” which nonetheless include the characteristically touristic practices of “aestheticizing,” “commodifying” and “ritualizing”...
- 11. Marti Chaatsmith (sociologist & Indian scholar):** The Newark Earthworks enable a fortuitous sort of two-way exchange: On the one hand, increasing appreciation of the Ohio mounds serves as a resource for contemporary native peoples, especially those with some historical connection to this region, to retrieve a sense of their own history; and, on the other hand, Indian stakeholders increasingly emerge as resources for the preservation and thoughtful management of the Ohio mounds...
- 12. Mary MacDonald (historian of religions, Australian specialist):** The Newark Earthworks—the contested status of which reflects the broader and on-going processes of colonialism—not only “belong in a special way” to all American Indians, an affiliation that ought to be recognized and respected, but, moreover, to the indigenous peoples of the entire world; and thus management of the site ought to be informed also by the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*...
- 13. Duane Champagne (sociologist & American Indian Studies) & Carole Goldberg (lawyer & scholar of law):** The Newark Earthworks were, in the Hopewell era, a major pilgrimage destination, which exemplified a native land ethic of “stewardship” wherein many groups felt both special investments and special responsibilities in connection to this place, but none claimed exclusive ownership, a non-hegemonic and cooperative model that should inform the future management of the site...
- 14. Greg Johnson (religionist, North America & Hawaii specialist):** The Newark Earthworks presently stand as “a depressed cultural site” insofar as the mounds occasion admiration, celebration and even adulation, but most of all “concern,” that is, a sense of distress, which evokes a corrective sensibility like that which Native Hawaiians call *malama* (care), which entails both legal and extra-legal strategies of site reclamation and management...
- 15. Winnifred Sullivan (historian of religions and law):** The Newark Earthworks provide a context in which to reconsider our often-romanticized imaginings of native peoples by giving serious consideration to the possibility that this place was designed less to facilitate ritual engagements with the divine or perhaps the honored dead than as a forum in which to undertake a distinctive sort of “law-stuff,” i.e., “a space for regularizing human relations, resolving disputes, and performing justice”...

References

Note that for additional images and information relevant to the Newark Earthworks and other related sites, by far the best place to begin is the Ancient Ohio Trail website (www.ancientohiotrail.org).



Figure 1: Schematic recreation of the Newark Earthworks, the largest geometric earthwork in the world.