

DISCUSSION OF MOUNDS IN CALIFORNIA*

Anonymous

Mr. McChesney called the attention of the Academy to a conspicuous Indian mound existing near Oakland, about two and a half miles from Broadway Station, and about 300 feet from the water's edge. It was circular in form, about 175 feet in diameter, with sides sloping from 45 to 50 degrees; it is, so far as he had examined it, composed of shells and other debris, and was now covered with shrubbery. The upper surface was somewhat hollowed.

Mr. Dameron referred to certain mounds that he had examined near Alameda Point, and which contained stone implements, shells and bones.

The President stated that this is the condition of nearly all these mounds; but in many, skeletons are found in a sitting posture.

Mr. D. J. Staples said that he did not deem the little information he had to offer of much importance, unless the fact of witnessing burials in the winter of 1849-50 may aid in the solution of the question "Whether the bones in these mounds are of prehistoric age?"

In the winter of 1849-50, on the Mokelumne River, fourteen miles north-east of Stockton, I witnessed the burial of several Indians, three of whom had died in one night from the effects of bad whiskey. These were placed in the ground near the tents or houses occupied by the tribe, and buried in sitting position, surrounded by their personal property, consisting principally of beads, trinkets, etc., the graves being made in the depression of the rancheria where formerly stood a sweat-house. The following year I saw the same ceremony performed, on one occasion, at the same rancheria, and another time at a place some miles farther up the river. In my opinion, the reason for the Indians burying their dead so near the habitations of the living, is found in their indolence and filthy habits, and in part, perhaps to the desire to often visit the graves of the departed. A number of mounds which I have examined on the Upper Sacramento and American Rivers, appeared to have been partially thrown up with the earth; and I am of the opinion that the Indians designed them to raise their brush huts above the encroachments of the spring floods. I feel quite confident that scientific men will not discover anything in the Indian mounds of California to connect them with a prehistoric age.

The President said, that up north the Indians seldom bury their dead near their homes. They sometimes put them in trees, sometimes in canoes, and sometimes in the ground. In Sitka, however, the graves are all very near the homes of the living.

Mr. Ellis called attention to a large mound in the southern part of the city. He said perhaps the Indians, being too indolent, had buried their dead where it was easiest to dig. As to the hollow in the center, they perhaps threw up dust around the edges to protect themselves from the wind.

Mr. Dameron said that in early days in the Sacramento Valley, they burned their dead. Perhaps the mounds were built to keep them from the floods.

* Proc. Calif. Acad. Sci. 5: 202-203, 1874.