

Newark among the Wonders of the Ancient World
Earthworks Day 2008

We are pleased to announce that among the many offerings of this year's Newark Earthworks Day, our keynote event is a ceremonial dance of the Aztec tradition to be held at 6:30 p.m. at the Great Circle.

Why Aztec Dance at the Great Circle?

Many scholars and Native oral traditions suggest that the sophisticated complex of geometric mounds comprising the Newark Earthworks was a ceremonial site that drew large numbers of peoples who traveled great distances to participate in these rituals. Archeological evidence of materials not found locally, such as: Obsidian from present-day Wyoming, galena from present-day Oklahoma, copper from present-day Wisconsin and shells from the Gulf of Mexico point to long distance travel by the indigenous people of North America 2,000 years ago. Because local materials (such as Flint Ridge flint) have not been found in similar quantities at these distant sites, some scholars argue that this "Hopewell Interaction Sphere" suggests that these items were a form of tribute or gifts that possibly helped to solidify alliances. Contemporary Native practices include the offering of materials held important to participants when visiting sacred sites. Archeologist, Brad Lepper's work on what he calls "The Great Hopewell Road" also suggests that the Newark Earthworks was a pilgrimage site—one that likely drew indigenous peoples from long distances.

In an early ethnographic account, French explorer, Jacques Carter describes how he was approached at the mouth of the St. Lawrence River by a group of Indian in a canoe who were singing and dancing. This event in 1534, which may be the first account, was in actuality only the beginning of numerous ethnographic descriptions (from this early period through the present) that are laden with descriptions and interpretations of "Indian" song and dance. Dance was practiced so frequently by so many tribes that in some descriptions, to be "Indian" and to dance were one in the same. Artist George Catlin, noted for his paintings of Native peoples, activities, and landscape, observed a wide variety of dances such as the medicine dance, beggar's dance, buffalo dance, bear dance, eagle dance, woman warrior dance, discovery dance, and even a snowshoe dance. The abundance of dances among the Native peoples of North America was so extensive that Catlin wrote, "Dancing is one of the principal and most frequent amusements of all the tribes of Indians in America" (Laubin 42). Although it is certain that Native peoples would not describe dance as "amusement," it is clear that dance was and is central to Native practice and way of life.

When we consider the centrality of dance for indigenous life-ways and the Newark Earthworks as a pilgrimage site, it is easy to imagine dancing as part of the ceremonial activities that may have taken place at the earthworks and that dancers may well have included visitors who had traveled long distances in order to pay tribute to the site. During the last two Newark Earthworks Days, we incorporated dancing by local Native

people as part of our program. This year we expand the spirit of this tradition by inviting Aztec dancers (also known as concheros) from Mexico to be a part of our program.

The theme of this year's Newark Earthworks Day is "Newark among the Wonders of the Ancient World." The program focuses on two sacred sites that have achieved World Heritage Status—Stonehenge in England and Teotihuacán in Mexico—to consider why the Newark Earthworks deserves similar recognition and attention. A comparison of these three sites frames our discussions throughout the day. By doing so, our imagination is set to envision what sorts of cultural practices may have occurred at the earthworks by looking to the models and knowledge generated by and about the other two sites. The Aztec dance troupe from Mexico frequently dances at one of the sites, Teotihuacán. We hope that this becomes a tradition whereby each year we will invite an indigenous dance group to be featured during Newark Earthworks Day.

About Aztec Dance

In contemporary central Mexico, Aztec dance is a common and publicly visible activity. Dancers in full attire with headdresses of long pheasant and peacock feathers swirl to the rhythmic beat of the drum with the rigorous turns, dips, and steps of the dance. These ritual dances occur at ancient Aztec sites throughout the valley of Mexico and tens of thousands of people participate. Each step, each dance, and each song tells a story that has been transmitted through this cultural practice for millennia as this tradition traces its dance lineage to pre-contact times.

A central practice of this tradition is the pilgrimage. Since pre-Columbian times, dancers have taken pilgrimages to sacred sites in order to dance at these sites. For the participants, these dances are not performances or exhibitions; they are ceremonial activities that pay tribute to the spiritual forces and ancestors believed to reside at sacred sites. For this reason, no explanation of the activities will be given during the dance at the Great Circle.

Witnesses to this ceremony who are familiar with the practices of Native North Americans will observe many similarities. A processional into the sacred site, which incorporates smudging (the burning of sacred herbs, whereby the resulting fumes are meant to purify the space) begins the ritual. A small altar incorporating popular offerings such as flowers, fruit, and breads is built as a center space for the dance as dancers gather in a circle. Blessings are offered to the four cardinal directions in order to orient the dance in relation to the cosmos. Then a series of dances that give thanks, honor the ancestors, and tell stories are conducted. At the conclusion of the dance, the altar is deconstructed and the dancers form as a processional in order to exit the sacred site.

Our Guests

We have extended an invitation to the Aztec Dance group *Palabra del niño Dios Teopiltzintecuhtli* (Word of the Holy Child Teopiltzintecuhtli) under the direction of Captain Margarita Xochiyaocihuatl Zárate García to take part in Newark Earthworks Day. Captain Zárate García has been a dancer for over twenty years and is well known in

Mexico. She is one of the first women dancers to achieve the rank of Captain in the dance ranks within two major dance troupes. This distinction allows her to teach the dance and form her own dance troupes. She travels extensively throughout Mexico and has visited the U.S. (from Texas to Pennsylvania) in order to share her knowledge about the dance. Captain Zárate García is a particularly appropriate person to bring to this year's Newark Earthworks Day as she has been intimately involved with the dance at one of our featured sites, Teotihuacán. Over a decade ago she began dancing at the site with a large group of women dancers in conjunction with important astronomical occurrences. The purpose of these dances is to bring feminine energy into an often a male dominated world so that the masculine and feminine will be balanced. Teotihuacán is an important site for this purpose as the pyramid of the sun and moon represent this balance of energies.

The Aztec Dance group *Palabra del niño Dios Teopiltzintecuhtli* is comprised of young adults, many of whom are university students. They represent what the Captain describes as some of the best young people who have chosen to live the way of life of an Aztec dancer, which takes a tremendous amount of dedication and commitment to the practice. For these dancers, the dance is more than a performance; it is a spiritual practice and way of life.

Reading Recommendations:

Laubin, Reginald. *Indian Dances of North America their importance to Indian life*. Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1977.

Lepper, Bradley T., *Ohio Archaeology: An Illustrated Chronicle of Ohio's Ancient American Indian Cultures*. Wilmington, OH: Orange Frazer Press, 2005.

Searching for the Great Hopewell Road: A landmark journey into the mysteries of the ancient Hopewell People. Pangea Productions Ltd., 1998

Stone, Martha. *At the Sign of Midnight: The Concheros [Aztec] Dance Cult of Mexico*. Tuscon: The University of Arizona Press, 1975.