

Moundville's Economy, Version Two

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Abstract

Generalizing from the work of Timothy Earle as well as Christopher Peebles and Susan Kus, in 1977 Henry Wright published a model of the ways producers and consumers were distributed and connected within a chiefdom economy. My 1983 dissertation tested that and other published models against data from the Moundville polity in Alabama. Finding that none of the extant models was a perfect match with the data then available, I proposed a new model tailored to fit the Moundville data. Research in and around Moundville by subsequent generations of graduate students has done to me what I did to Wright: show that the model did not fit the reality. After reviewing this history of changing understanding of the articulation between producers and consumers in the Moundville polity, I assess the impact of Wright's intellectual legacy on this branch of archaeological research.

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I. Introduction

In the fall of 1982 as I was trying to figure out what to do for a dissertation project, I doodled a version of this drawing [Slide 1]. Students of Henry from the 70s and 80s will recognize this as his drawing of the movement of prestige goods in a complex chiefdom. Looking at the drawing, I recalled that the model came primarily from ethnohistorical work in Hawaii carried out by Timothy Earle and Susan Kus. It presents an economic organization very different from the classic redistribution model [Slide 2] proposed by Elman Service as the hallmark of chiefdoms. Although a number of archaeologists had begun to question the correctness of Service's model, neither it nor the Wright/Earle/Kus model had been explicitly tested against excavation data. It occurred to me that much of the necessary data already existed from the Mississippian chiefdom centered at Moundville [Slide 3] in Alabama, although we lacked excavation data from any second-tier site. In a flash of what I took to be brilliance, I realized that by excavating at one of these sites I could actually test this model pretty comprehensively, and so a dissertation was born. Months later I recalled that Henry had actually suggested this dissertation topic to me, some months prior to my flash of supposed brilliance.

II. The 1986 model

As soon as I began to analyze the data from my excavations, I found that things were not patterning the way Service had predicted. That was gratifying, but they also were not patterning the way [Slide 4] Wright's model predicted. First with the faunal remains, then with botanical remains, then with chipped stone tools—with each class of material I examined, I found a consistent pattern. There was evidence of goods moving up the site hierarchy, as Wright's model predicted, but little evidence of prestige goods coming back to the second-tier sites. This led to some concern: how would my dissertation advisor react to being told his model was wrong? I need not have worried, because Henry's comment on my analyses was “well, that seems clear.” I have always admired that response.

My dissertation was published in 1991 as *Moundville's Economy*. In it, I presented this model [Slide 5] of the way Moundville's economy was structured, which was not at all like Service's classic redistribution model. What I saw in the Moundville data is that tribute, primarily food and presumably mound-building labor, moved up the hierarchy to the paramount level, where it was used to subsidize production of crafts. Some of the crafts circulated within the chiefdom while others were used by the paramount for external exchange. In return, nonlocal goods, primarily prestige goods, came into the paramount center, but they mostly stayed in the paramount center. Contrary to Wright's model, nonlocal

goods were not distributed down the site hierarchy. One implication of this new model was that the paramount chief exerted very strong control over the production and distribution of prestige goods, allowing almost none of them to trickle down to lower social levels.

III. New data on production and consumption

After the book came out it was not long before some smart young graduate students did to me what I'd done to Henry: show that the model was incorrect in one way or another. There was one exhilarating Southeastern Archaeological Conference at which three different student presentations said Welch was wrong. Some of these papers introduced evidence from new excavations, especially from isolated farmsteads, the lowest tier of the settlement hierarchy. I had relied on surface collections from that kind of site, but the new excavation data contained things that my model had not anticipated. I didn't feel bad about being contradicted by previously unknown data, but in another instance my model was wrong because I had made a mistake.

My mistake was that I did not understand how a ground stone axe is manufactured. Without having done any investigation on the subject, I'd assumed that pecked-and-ground stone axes are manufactured by pecking and grinding the raw material to the finished shape. The byproducts of this would be minute chips

pecked off the surface, and rock flour from the grinding, neither of which would be retained on quarter-inch screens. Thus, I thought the very modest amounts of raw material in one precinct at Moundville indicated that a lot of axes had been made. But that's not the way ground stone axes are made; they are flaked to shape, and the pecking and grinding is only the final stage of the manufacturing process. Manufacture of even one axe would produce far more debitage than I'd seen in that one precinct at Moundville. Greg Wilson, who knew more about axe manufacture than I did, re-examined the evidence and correctly argued that axes were not being made from raw materials at Moundville. Instead, he argued that the evidence at Moundville only indicated that existing, broken axes—which had been made elsewhere—were refashioned into smaller tools. Although Greg was right and I had been wrong, this correction does not substantially change the overall picture of production and consumption in the Moundville chiefdom [Slide 6]. However, the new data from farmsteads had broader implications.

Relying on surface collections, I had concluded that nonlocal flint was abundant only at Moundville, and was nearly absent from farmsteads and second-tier sites. Furthermore, the evidence that I used indicated that pottery assemblages in rural sites contained far less serving ware than was present in high-status precincts at Moundville. New data from farmsteads were produced by graduate students at both North Carolina and Alabama. Mintcy Maxham, A UNC student,

reported one farmstead that had abundances of nonlocal flint that were as high as any of the excavated contexts at Moundville. The pottery assemblage at this farmstead also looked as “elite” as any of the excavated contexts at Moundville. As long as there was just one such “elite-looking” farmstead, I could perhaps pretend it was an aberration, but excavations of additional farmsteads by Alabama students through the 1990s and 2000s turned up other instances of “elite looking” things in places where my model said they should not occur [Slide 7]. There was more going on in the boondocks than I had thought, and the rural populace was not simply an undifferentiated mass of commoners.

We also learned that what was going on at Moundville was not what I’d thought, either. Jim Knight’s work on mounds at the site—detailed in his SAA award-winning book—showed that some of the mound summits were not the elite residences that had been assumed in all previous research. Instead, he found that on some mounds there was a wide variety of craft production involving nonlocal ground stone, local and nonlocal chipped stone, copper, feathers, shell, and probably other materials. Although the production was carried out on the mounds, it does not look like the artisans *lived* on the mounds. Instead, we have to envision multiple craft-workers coming to these mounds for relatively short stays.

Although it is conceivable that this was done under the administrative thumb of the paramount—as the Welch model envisioned—the evidence is also consistent with

sodality-focused production of ritual paraphernalia [Slide 8] which may have been used by ritual participants who were not chiefs.

IV. New perspective on the social contexts of production and consumption

Over the past decade a number of archaeologists have come to think that much of what we see at large Mississippian chiefdom centers has less to do with chiefs than with sodalities, and with social activities that are more religious than overtly political. This has been particularly apparent in the Cahokia region, most strikingly exemplified by Jim Brown's reinterpretation of the famous Mound 72 burial deposits not as the burials of important chiefs but as staged tableaux that use long-defleshed bones to depict important myths. And while there was surely political benefit to staging such tableaux, it is not clear that a chief had anything to do with it. At Moundville we have also seen old evidence reinterpreted, and new evidence uncovered, that points to social institutions other than the chief as being responsible for some of what I had modeled as production controlled by the chief.

One good example of this is the sandstone paint palettes [Slide 9], for which Moundville has long been known as a center for production. Hunter Johnson's excavations at the principal sandstone quarry, at the north end of the Moundville chiefdom, produced much evidence for manufacture of palette blanks, but less evidence for final manufacture at this spot. On the other hand, we also now have

evidence for final manufacture at a farmstead several kilometers from the quarry, as well as at Moundville. Moreover, the distribution of palettes in burials at Moundville is not restricted to the elite mound burials; instead, palettes are sometimes found in burials that otherwise would appear to be commoners. Steponaitis and Knight have addressed this evidence, and the distribution of Moundville-origin palettes across much of the Mississippian world. They argue that palettes were made and used by both local and foreign religious practitioners—“palette priests”—who came to Moundville to learn the lore associated with the ritual in which the palettes were used. In a related article about Etowah palettes, Steponaitis et al. (2010) note that the manufacture and distribution of such objects should not be read as indexes of political alliances or chiefly control over the distribution of prestige items (as I had done) [Slide 10]. When added to Jim Knight’s demonstration that some mound summits were loci for episodic production of a wide range of craft items, many involving nonlocal raw materials, the case for chiefly domination of prestige good production is gradually being whittled away.

V. Conclusion: The picture 27 years later

So what is left of the Welch model after 27 years of additional research? The first thing to note is that Service’s classic redistribution model is still wrong, and the newer research only reinforces that conclusion. Furthermore, as far as I

know, every other archaeological test of Service's model has also rejected it.

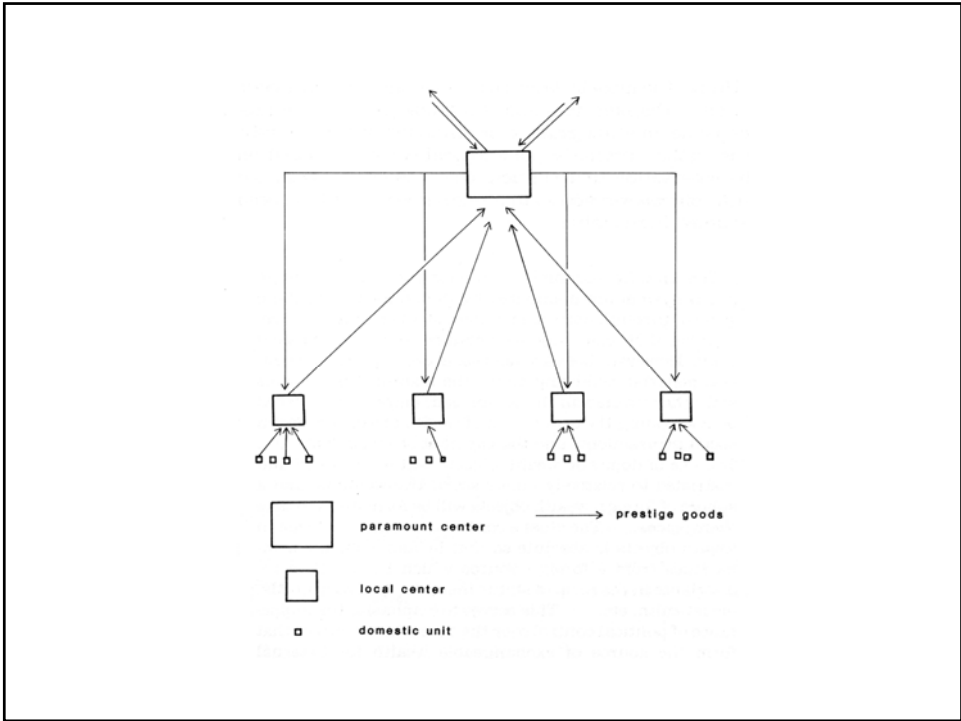
Societies that had the political structure of chiefdoms did not have the economic organization that Service said they did. Neither did they have the tightly centralized organization that my old model depicted.

Instead, the picture we have now [Slide 11] is that the communities within the polity are self-sufficient in basic goods such as food, housing, and clothing, with some food and labor moving up the social hierarchy as tribute. People throughout the polity are involved to varying degrees with what I will call "sodality economies" [Slide 12] though sodalities are not necessarily the only social groupings that are involved in production and consumption. The old notion of prestige goods (or display goods) comprises items made for and displayed by chiefs, but it is increasingly evident that many of these items were made for and used in rituals in which chiefs are not involved. These may be rituals of corporate kin groups, rituals conducted by medicine societies whose membership cuts across kin lines, or rituals conducted by priests or shamans or prophets. Jon Marcoux has pointed out that in the Moundville chiefdom the *production* of paraphernalia for such activities is not centralized, but the *consumption or use* of the items is very much restricted to this singular ceremonial center. I had previously interpreted that centralization of use and consumption as evidence of chiefly domination of exchange. Now [Slide 13], I argue that the evidence only tells us that all the most

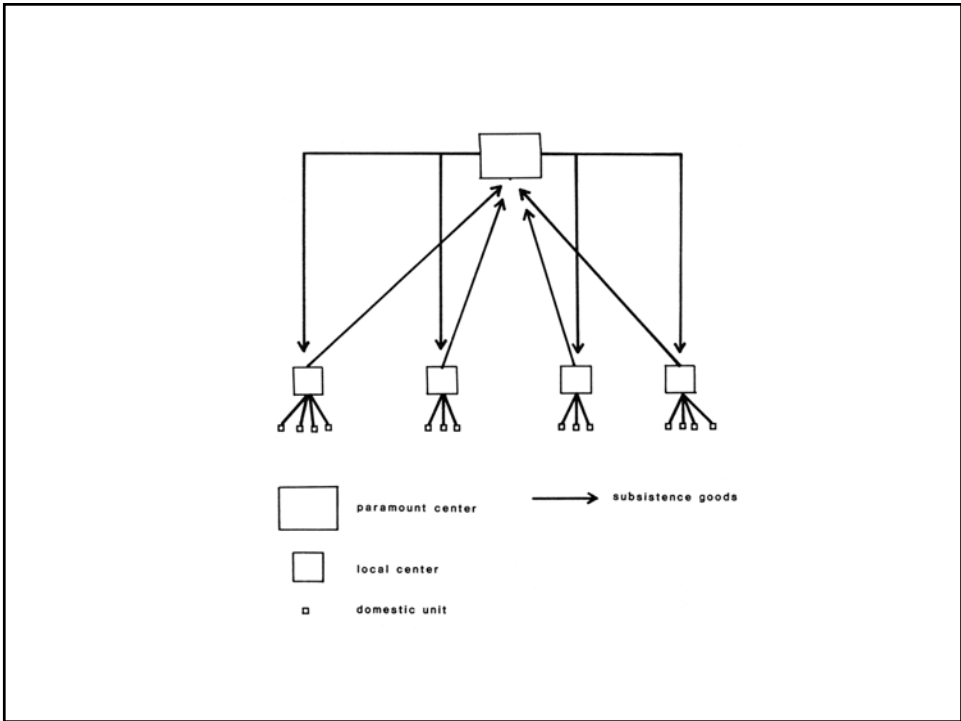
important rituals were held at Moundville, and that a substantial portion of those rituals were not focused on or controlled by the chiefs. Instead, much of the production and export of “display goods” takes place under the auspices of sodalities or other non-chiefly social institutions and roles.

I would go further and add that Service was not only wrong about the economic organization of chiefdoms, but that he was also wrong about their political organization. Although he mentioned in passing that sodalities did not disappear from chiefdoms or states, he downplayed their roles in both the political and economic aspects of social life. Just as the new evidence points toward important economic activities by sodalities, so too there is new evidence pointing to a political organization in which chiefs are not the only, or even dominant, institution. A very recent magnetometry survey at Moundville, reported last fall by Jeremy Davis and John Blitz, reveals a half dozen very large circular and rectangular buildings scattered throughout the plaza and atop Mound A. More than 15 m on a side, these are most likely public buildings. Based on the variety of shapes and locations, they are probably several different kinds of public buildings. It will take years of further research to clarify what these buildings are and what they tell us about the exercise of power in the Moundville chiefdom. I think it is safe to say, however, that political power at Moundville may have been more heterarchical than envisioned in the old “one chief to rule them all” model.

So, here is “Moundville’s Economy, version 2”. It is a direct descendant of Henry’s old complex chiefdom economy model, although it no longer looks much like the original. I also have to point out that these revisions are all the result of thesis and dissertation research by a dozen graduate students, including Robyn Astin, Casey Barrier, Jeremy Davis, Scott Hammerstedt, Hunter Johnson, Jon Marcoux, Mintcy Maxham, Lauren Michals, Jennifer Myer, Kristi Taft, Claire Thompson, Beth Ryba, and Greg Wilson,. The quantity of this work testifies to the fertility of Henry’s ideas **[Slide 14]**. I have been very fortunate to follow in Henry’s footsteps. And while I seem to have I repaid that favor by kicking dust at his back, at least he has the satisfaction of seeing other students do the same to me.



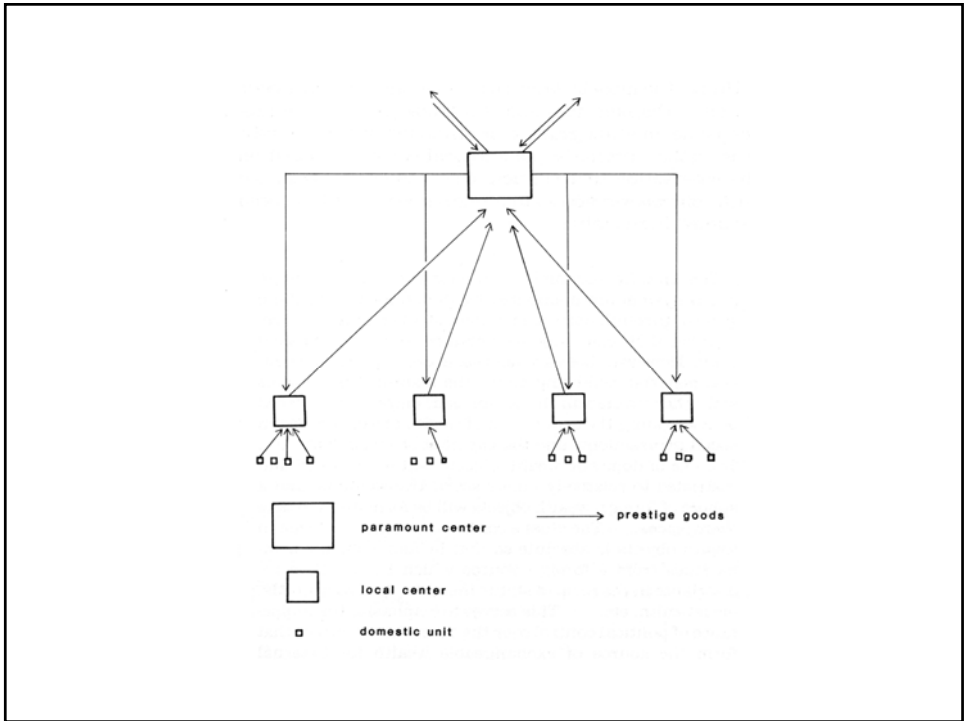
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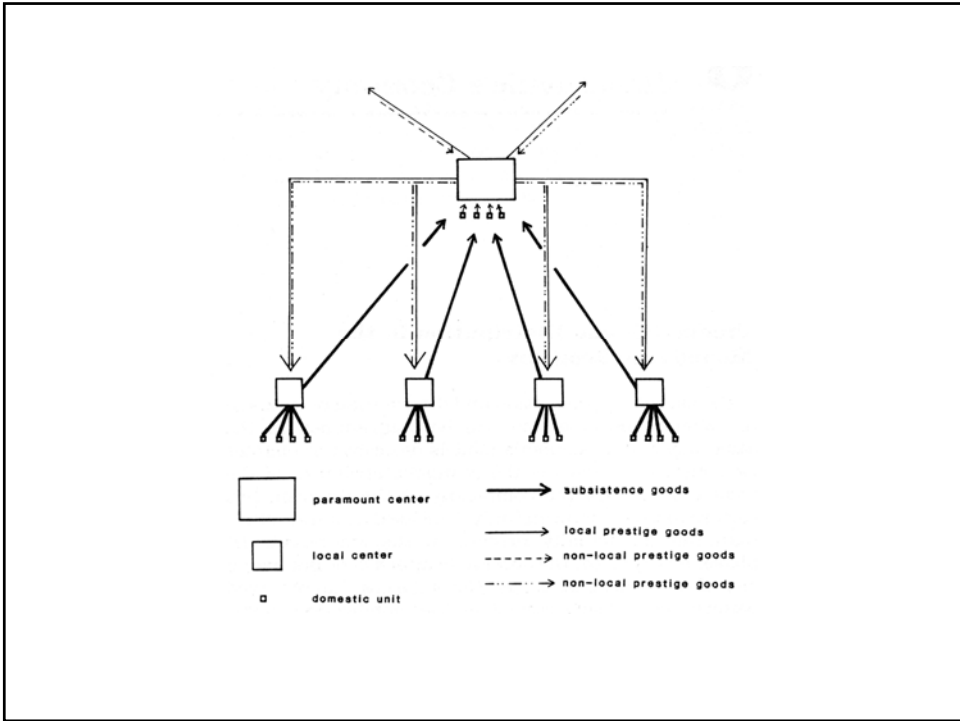
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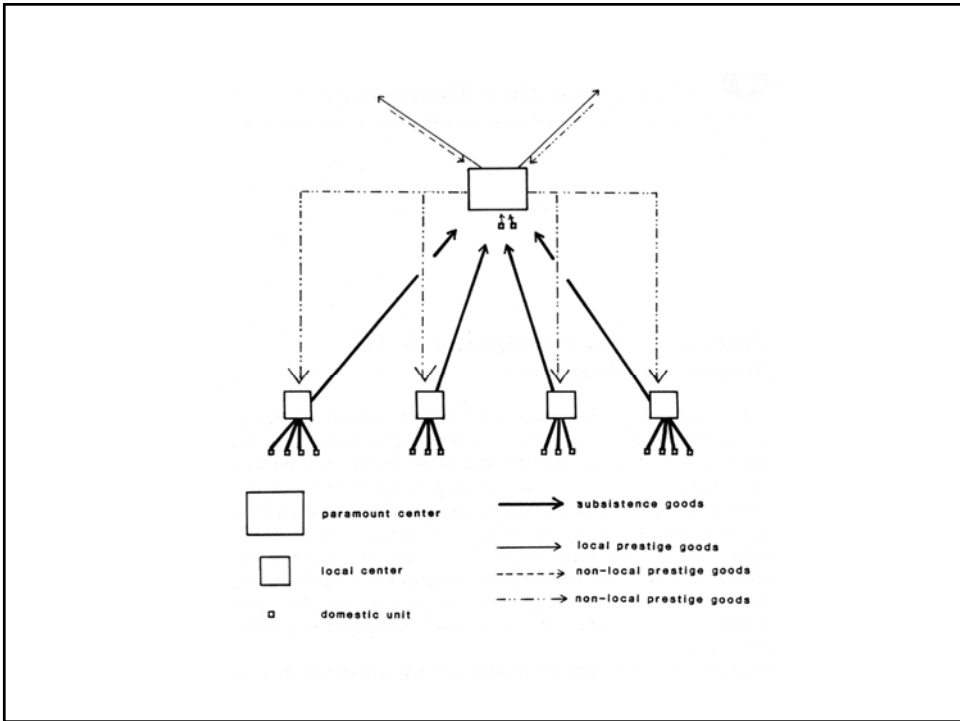
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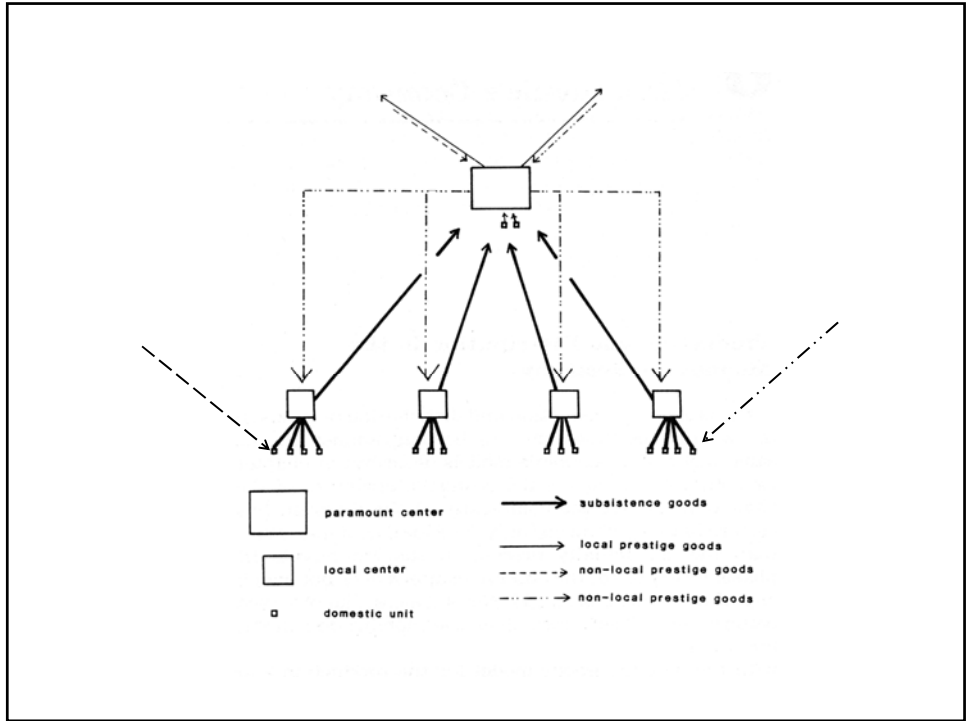
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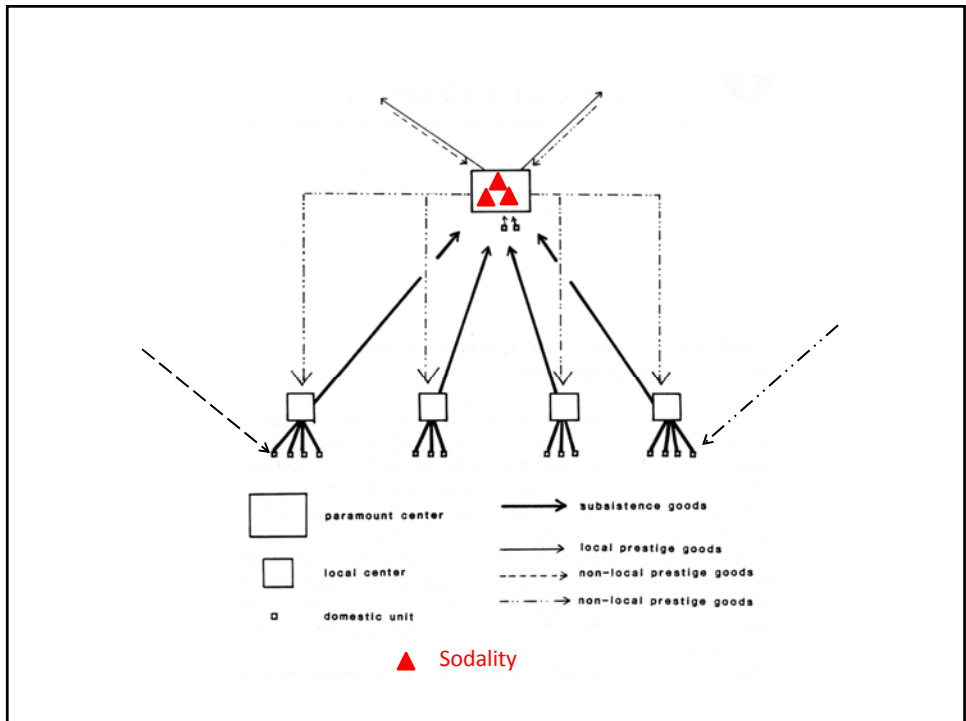
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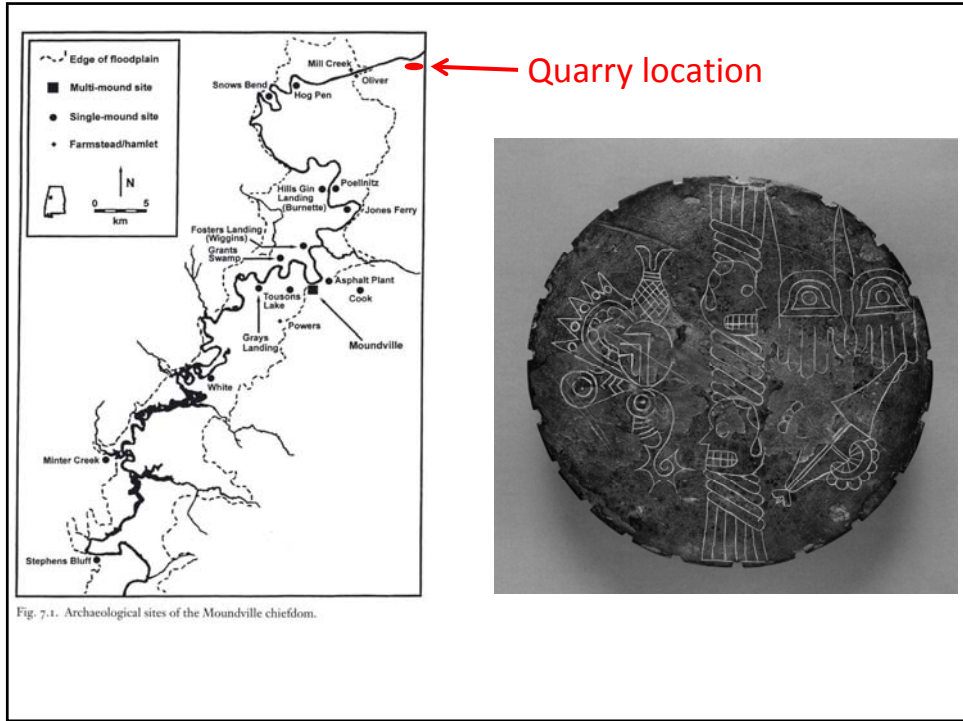
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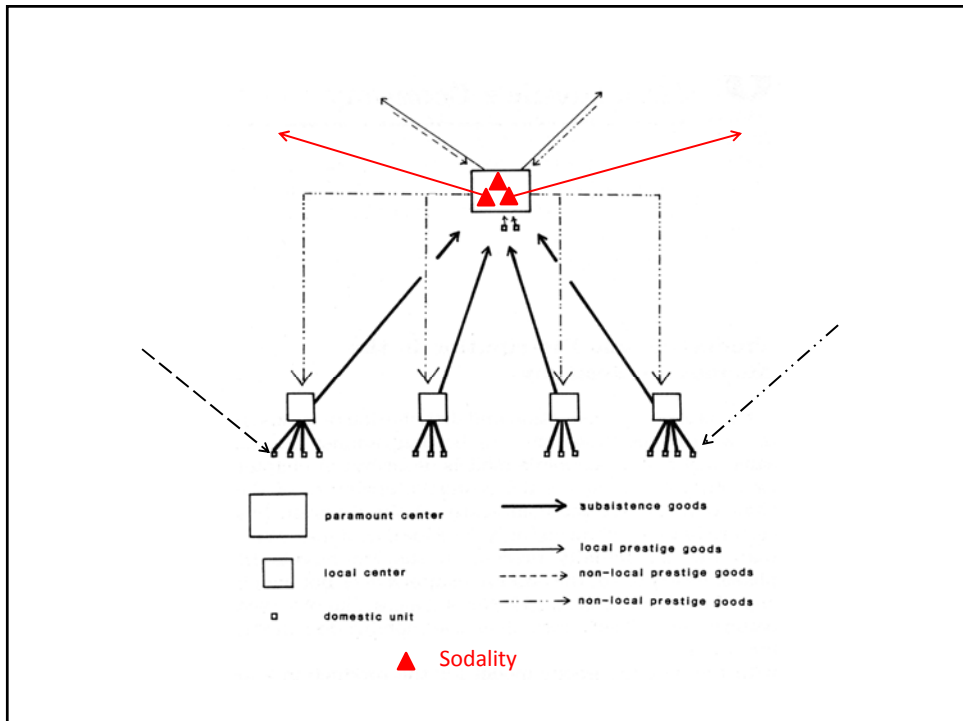
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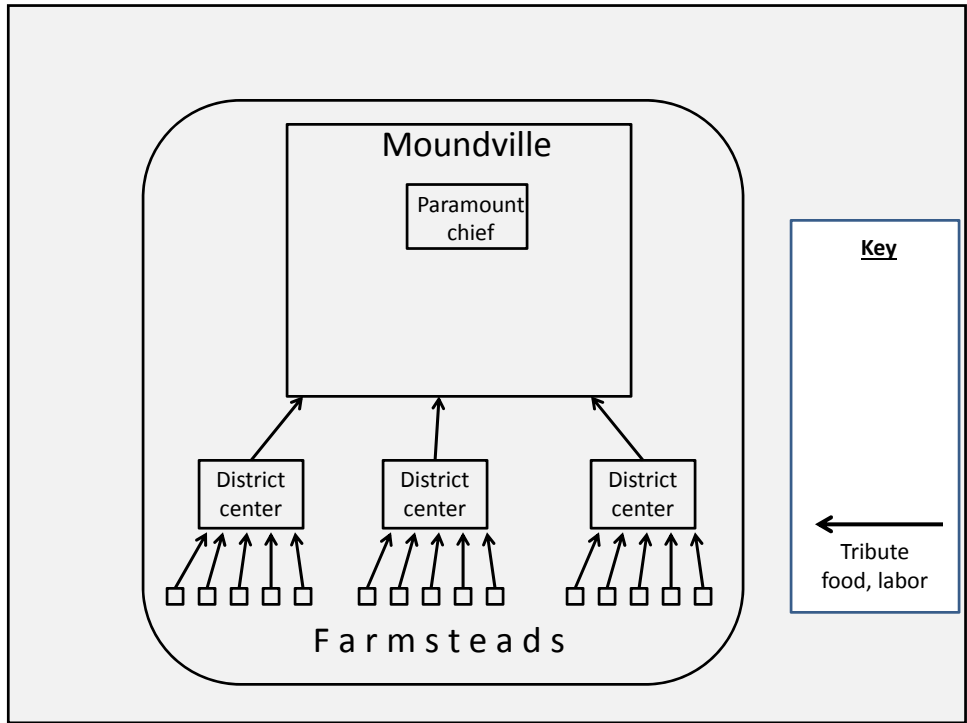
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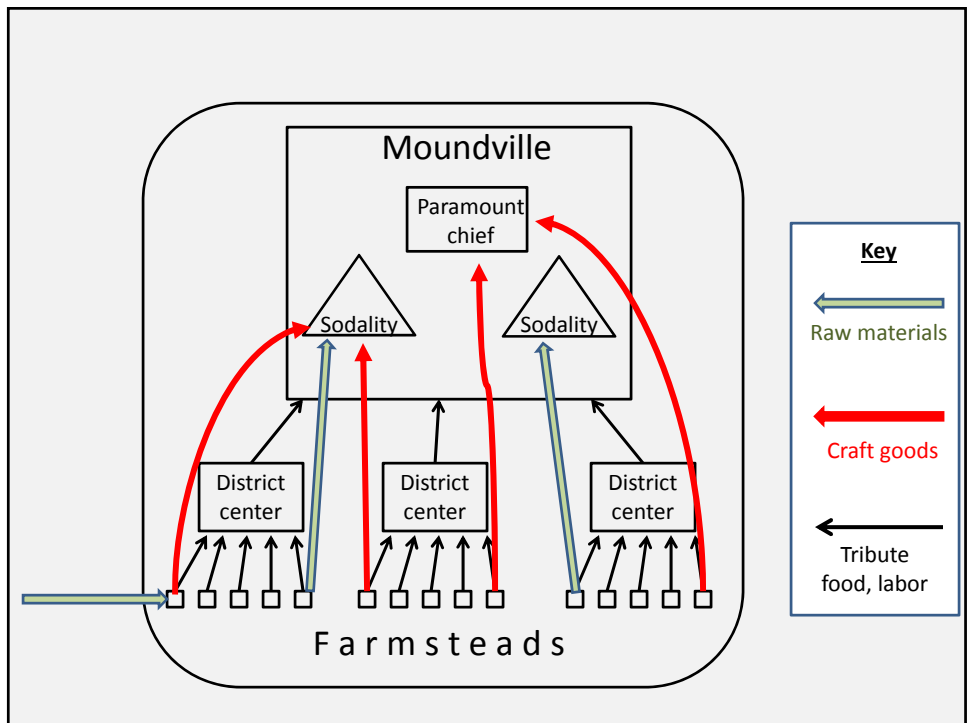
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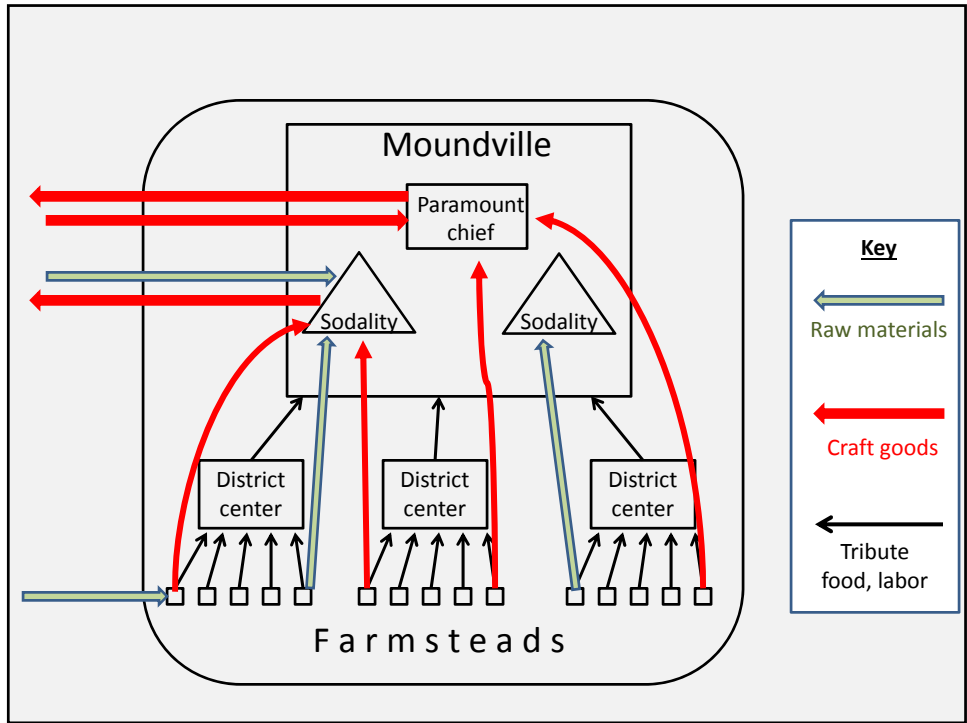
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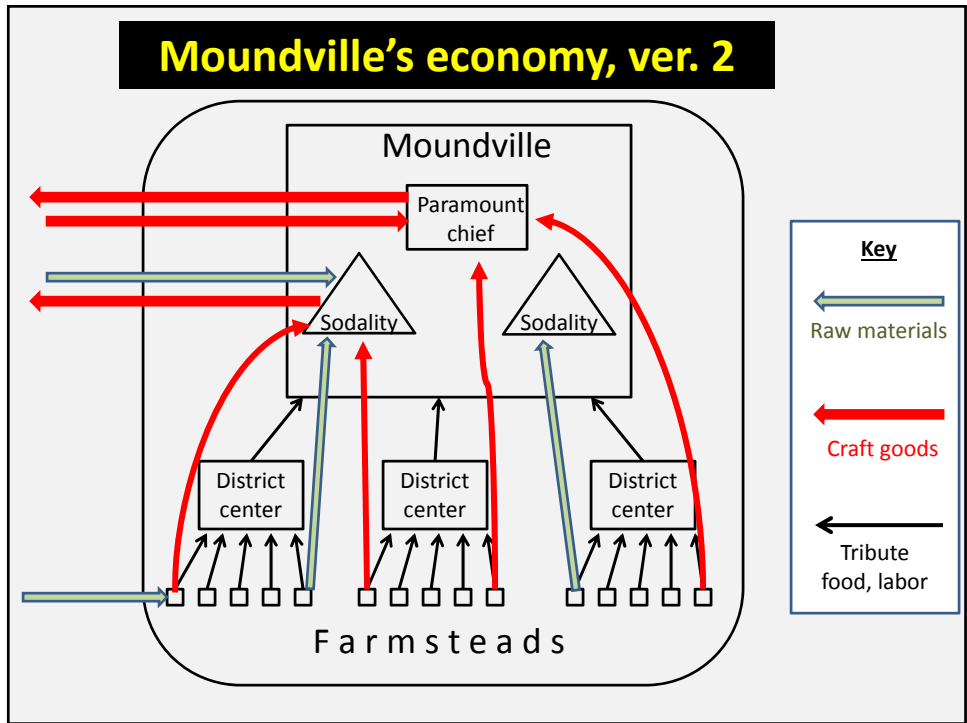
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