

MULTIPLE MODES OF MONUMENTALITY

CASE STUDIES FROM THE AMERICAN SOUTH

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The practice of building earthen mounds has tremendous time depth in the American South, and the variation in these mounds across time and space continues to spark debates regarding their functions and social significance. That said, it is commonly argued that a shift from construction of conical burial mounds to large platform mounds marks a parallel shift from an egalitarian social structure to a hierarchical one dominated by chiefly lineages (e.g., Hudson 1976; Kidder 2004; Steponaitis 1986). This interpretation is based on sixteenth- and eighteenth-century European accounts that connect chiefly status with platform mounds by describing powerful leaders presiding over their subjects from mound-top residences. Some authors have highlighted the complexities and inherent biases underlying these interpretations (e.g., Lindauer and Blitz 1997; Pauketat 2007), but many have applied them uncritically and they continue to color our notions about prehistoric American Indian groups. We suggest that while this ethnographically derived model is an appropriate explanatory tool in some instances, it cannot be relied upon without an evaluation of its applicability to the given case, particularly with increased temporal distance from the ethnographic example. While platform mounds were undoubtedly powerful and explicit symbols of collective action, we argue that the ideas these symbols communicated were not static or universal.

We use the notions of time perspectives and palimpsests of meaning as discussed by Bailey (2007) to explore why certain understandings of platform mounds have been perpetuated in the literature while others have been largely omitted. We then focus on case studies from our own research to provide possible new directions for conceptualizing mounds as locations of communal identity construction, commemoration, and political contestation.

Bailey draws attention to the challenge of working with great time depth by focusing on the idea that archaeology is riddled with palimpsests—things that bear visible traces of ear-

lier forms despite reuse or alteration (Figure 1). Archaeologists typically view palimpsests as a handicap when taphonomic processes distort or compromise the clarity of archaeological deposits, and Bailey (2007:203) outlines two approaches for dealing with them: (1) archaeologists may attempt “to reconstitute the individual episodes of activity” or (2) they may “focus on the best preserved and most highly resolved exemplars.”

We contend that ethnographic case studies have had an overwhelming effect on our understanding of prehistoric mound building because archaeologists have relied heavily on the latter strategy to obtain thick descriptions not commonly afforded by archaeological data. In particular, we recognize two distinct ways in which the nature of mounds as palimpsests has undermined our current interpretations. The first way concerns the long history of platform mound building in the Southeast. Though mound uses and meanings undoubtedly changed through time, the most recent and best-understood uses—derived from ethnographic analogies—dominate our interpretations. The second way concerns the use of a given site over a relatively short period of time. In this case, the palimpsest nature of the record obscures the recognition that any given place may have been used and interpreted differently by the various groups and individuals who interacted with it. We suggest that refocusing the scale of our investigations to look for evidence of individual actions and events—Bailey’s first strategy—will allow us to address such palimpsests and significantly improve our understanding of platform mounds in the American South.

Long-Term Palimpsests

We begin our analysis of the first type of palimpsest with an example from the central Mississippi Valley. Carson Mounds (22Co505) is a Mississippi period site located in a region now dominated by intensive agricultural production. Interesting-

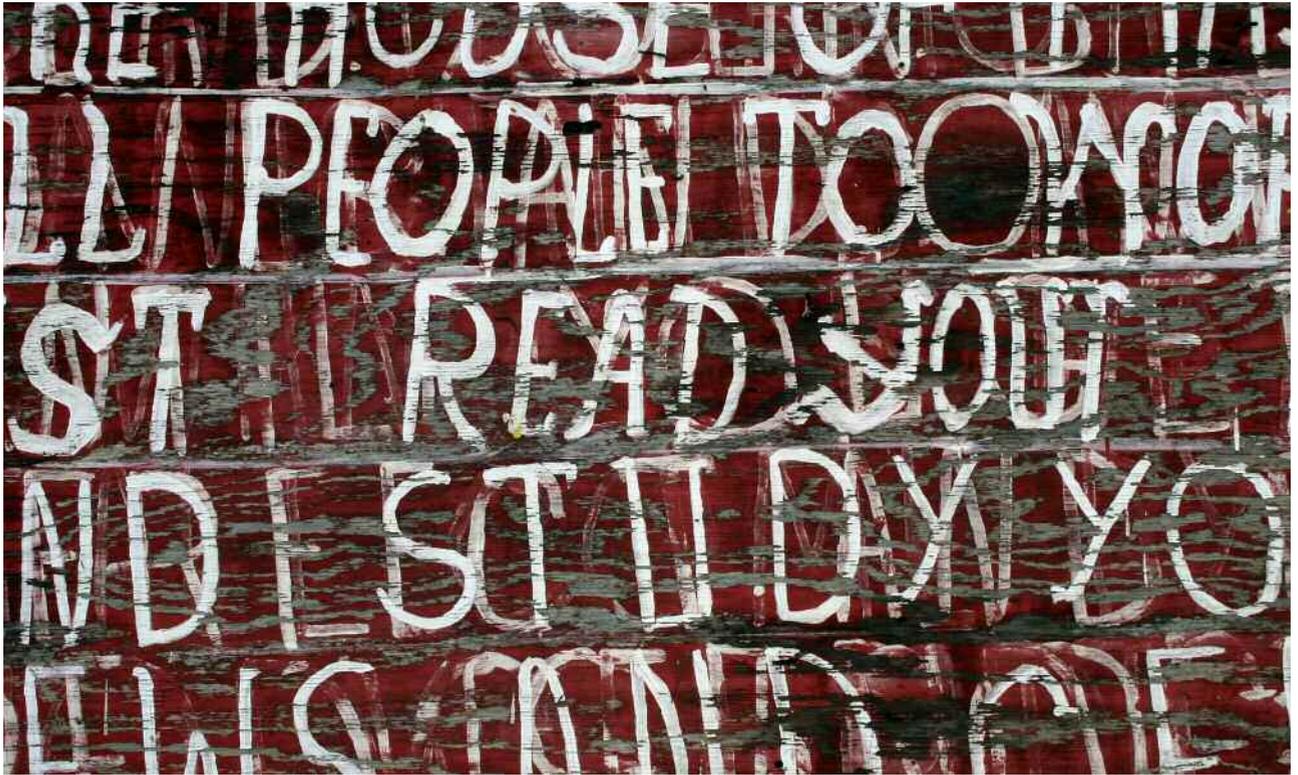


Figure 1. Example of a modern palimpsest.

ly, the prehistoric site has been claimed and repurposed by its current landowners, who have superimposed a “traditional” southern plantation landscape onto a “traditional” Mississippian mound-and-plaza landscape. A pecan grove now resides in the plaza, while a grand staircase leads from the plaza up to the “big house” on top of Mound A (Figure 2). While we can generalize about the power dynamics asserted by each arrangement, it would be absurd to interpret Mississippian ideas about mound building based on our understanding of the southern planter landscape. Is it not then equally absurd to project our ethnographic understanding of the Mississippian case into the past to interpret the functions and meanings of mounds for earlier people?

Such a projection has often been applied to Coles Creek landscapes in the Lower Mississippi Valley. Because of its position immediately before the transition to Mississippian societies, the Coles Creek period (A.D. 750-1200) is thought to contain the incipient stages of Mississippian social organization (see chapters in Barker and Pauketat 1992; Kidder 2002, 2004; Steponaitis 1986). For example, the early presence of large platform mounds at locations such as the Fel-

tus site (22Je500) has led some to claim that the earliest indications of profound sociopolitical change can be recognized in the Coles Creek tradition. However, these Coles Creek mound sites lack other characteristics commonly used to support arguments for institutionalized hierarchy, such as burial practices indicating differences in status (Kassabum 2011).

To minimize the distorting effects of this long-term palimpsest, we focus on mound building and related practices at Felts. At its abandonment, the site consisted of four mounds surrounding a plaza, an arrangement that resembles later Mississippian site plans. However, excavations from 2006 to 2010 showed that the heaviest use of the site took place *before* mound building began. Excavations uncovered a substantial pre-mound midden containing large amounts of pottery and food remains that we interpret as communal feasting debris. This preliminary interpretation is based on the “everyday” nature of faunal and botanical samples as well as the exceptional size of ceramic vessels.¹ These characteristics, combined with a paucity of evidence for competition such as rare or exotic materials, elaborate



Figure 2. Example of a long-term palimpsest: 1939 photograph showing a historic house on top of Mound A at Carson. LMS Archives Online. (Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 993-23-10/100524.1.28.3.1).

burials, and other prestige goods, suggest that these feasting events were not competitive, and therefore do not suggest chiefly sponsorship. Further, the feasting debris was capped almost immediately by the first construction stage of Mound A, and there is little accumulation of debris on or off the mounds after their construction. We interpret the above characteristics as indicating that the Feltus mounds' underlying purpose may have been to promote group solidarity while marking and commemorating these important communal feasting events.

This interpretation suggests that earlier mound-building cultures may provide more useful analogs for Feltus than those from later periods. Though much of it remains unpublished, recent research on other Woodland platform mound building traditions such as Marksville, Troyville, Swift Creek, Plum Bayou, and Weeden Island also favor interpretations focusing on the integrative functions of platform mound sites (e.g., Boudreaux 2010; Downs and Blitz 2011; Thompson and Pluckhahn 2010). These traditions have striking similarities with Coles Creek, yet communal interpretations are being more readily accepted in these cases. This may in part be because many of these traditions do not immediately precede a Mississippian culture, thus illustrating one of the ways time perspective clouds our interpretation of platform mound building practices.

Short-Term Palimpsests

As Bailey (2007) mentions, it is not only our uncritical application of the best-understood cases to less-well-understood

ones that can skew our perspective of the past; rather, material objects, even those on monumental scales, can be manipulated and altered throughout their use-lives, potentially transforming their form, function, and meaning. Though we acknowledge that tools are often repurposed (Figure 3), we rarely recognize the changing function of mounds even though mound building is an accretional process, allowing early stages of construction to be both preserved and directly observable. Detailed stratigraphic analysis of mound deposits at Parchman Place (22Co511), our next case study, illustrate the utility of focusing on fine-grained chronological scales for understanding the multiple meanings and uses of Late Mississippian (A.D. 1350–1600) mounds.

Excavations at Parchman from 2003 to 2006 revealed a repeated sequence of building, using, cleaning, burning, burying, and rebuilding structures associated with mound surfaces. Although aspects of this sequence seem to indicate that mound construction progressed in a highly uniform manner, other features suggest that, in fact, mound building proceeded according to different rules and goals at different times in Parchman's history. The first is a series of thin, rapidly repeated mound surface deposits of pure white clay that may represent a community renewal or purification ritual (Stevens 2006). This interpretation is based on the increased periodicity of the surface's construction and use as well as ethnographic evidence of the color white's symbolic association with purification and renewal for many historic Southern Indian groups² (Hudson 1976:226; Knight 1986:678; Pursell 2004:147). Secondly, the stratigraphic sequence shows that one of the smaller mounds was truncated in a single destructive event, after which mound building resumed. Sometime after this destructive event, the small mound was incorporated into the construction of the largest mound. Johnson (2005) has suggested that the small

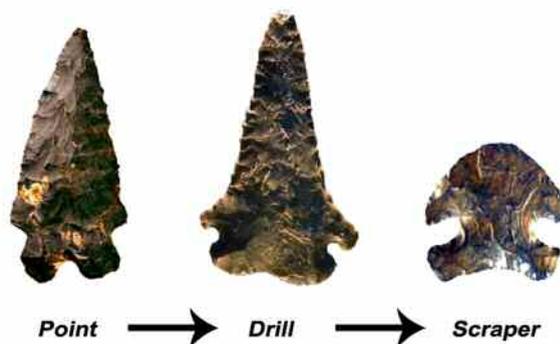


Figure 3. Example of a short-term palimpsest: stone tool modification for reuse.

mounds were affiliated with particular clans or groups. At some point, one of these factions was able to gain political advantage over the others, and as a symbol of that new power, reduced the height of the rival group's mound, then built another, much bigger mound to symbolize their elevated status. Taken together, this evidence suggests that mound building traditions at Parchman were malleable and that individuals or groups were able to manipulate or adapt their construction practices to suit their changing social goals (Stevens 2006). In this case, understanding the early stages of mound use is essential to understanding changing social relationships within the community because merely considering the mounds in their final form suggests a hierarchical social organization that almost certainly did not exist at an earlier period.

The northern Caddoan area provides yet another example of the dynamic potential that existed within platform mound-building cultures. The regional Mississippian variant (A.D. 1000–1450) centered on the Arkansas River of eastern Oklahoma is best known for the unique array of ceremonial and funerary objects unearthed at Spiro. This anomalous site has overshadowed other Caddoan platform mound sites in the area. Interpretations of the principal mounds at Norman (34Wg2) and Harlan (34Ck6), two large, closely spaced, and contemporaneous mound sites, suggest that these monuments were used differently from many Mississippian mounds (Cranford 2007). While the remains of superimposed submound structures were found at both sites, little to no evidence exists for mound-top buildings. What is evident from excavations is that mounds from both sites show complex depositional histories that include multiple construction stages, repair and capping episodes, interior berms and pits, and contrasting mound fills (Bauxar 1950; Bell 1972; Vogel et al. 2005). When considered within the context of recent research from mortuary facilities at both Norman and Harlan, it appears that social divisions within these communities, probably clans or kin groups, played an active role in the use and management of these monuments (Cranford 2009). Platform mound architecture in this case was neither a location for elite residences nor ceremonial temples, but rather a stage where factional competition or cooperation could be performed.

Conclusion

Earthen mounds have long represented a dynamic medium through which a variety of social relations could be negotiated, manipulated, and enacted. Platform mound architecture in particular varies widely across time and space, suggesting that the motives and meanings behind these structures were

similarly varied. Unfortunately, we feel that much of this variation has been unrecognized or overlooked in favor of explanations that focus on mounds as tools to legitimize chiefly status.

As paradigms within archaeological theory have waxed and waned, so too have the ways that mounds have been envisioned by archaeologists. We are not the first to emphasize community-building rituals associated with platform mounds (e.g., Knight 1986). However, this point of view was generally overshadowed as archaeological thought first emphasized a processual approach focused on chiefdoms, and then an agency-based one that favors the actions of individuals over large groups. We believe that this preoccupation with chiefs and chiefdoms has significantly limited our interpretations. While categories such as “hierarchical,” “egalitarian,” and “chiefdom” can be useful heuristic devices, they also have the potential to become “obstacles to understanding what really happened in the ancient world” (Pauketat 2007:3). By looking at the evidence provided by each archaeological case rather than trying to fit it into predefined and potentially inappropriate categories, we contend that one will be struck by the variety of functions mounds have had, many of which are strikingly deemphasized in the current literature.

If, as we have argued here, some platform mounds provided locations for communal ritual activities such as feasts, acts of commemoration, and the performance of social roles, perhaps their purpose was also to stimulate group cohesion and a sense of identity and equality with participating community members. With this paper, we emphasize that it is critically important to use the material record to *determine if*, rather than *assume that*, monumental landscapes were the products of elite strategies. The case studies presented here show that platform mounds were locations of community identity construction, commemoration, and political contestation.

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Notes

1. Numerous pots have rim diameters greater than 40 cm.
2. In this case, we believe the ethnographic analogy is appropriate because of the late date of mound building and corroborating archaeological evidence.