12

Moundville as a Ceremonial Ground

C. MARGARET SCARRY AND VINCAS P. STEPONAITIS

When talking about sites and settlement patterns, archaeologists often use terms such as "community," "village," "farmstead," "capital," "ceremonial center," "settlement hierarchy," and so on. These generic categories work for many purposes, but we seldom examine how such units relate to ethnographic structures in specific cultural contexts. Our failure to look beyond conventional archaeological meanings may lead us to overlook social arrangements that shaped the settlement patterns we seek to understand. Moundville, which dominated the Black Warrior Valley of west central Alabama from ca. AD 1100 to 1500, is a case in point.

The Moundville polity had a large mound-and-plaza complex, several single-mound sites, and numerous small, rural settlements. We and our colleagues have commonly used the conventional terms to describe Moundville and its hinterland communities. For example, Moundville has been called a mound-and-plaza complex (Scarry 1998: 64), a palisaded town (Knight and Steponaitis 1998: 15), a ceremonial center (Knight 2010: 60; Peebles and Kus 1977: 435), a political and ceremonial center (Wilson 2008: 1), a paramount center (Welch 1991: 33; Welch and Scarry 1995: 399), and a regional center (Steponaitis 1983a: 168). These terms have their uses, but they tell us little about how Moundville society was organized. Here we take a different perspective. We look at Moundville from the standpoint of social units that come from the ethnography and ethnohistory of native peoples of the American South. Specifically we ask, "Was Moundville a town?" Not whether it was a town in the generic, archaeological sense, but rather in the local, ethnographic sense. In thinking about this question, we have come to realize that the conventional meanings of some terms we have used to describe Moundville do not fit comfortably with

ethnographic data. Examining these meanings more closely provides new insights about Moundville that root it more firmly in history and ethnography.

Although southern Indian societies spoke different languages and differed in their degree of political centralization, they were organized in broadly similar ways (Brightman and Wallace 2004; Galloway and Kidwell 2004; Hudson 1976: 184–257; Swanton 1946: 629–41, 654–61; Walker 2004). Notably, they shared two complementary structural elements with distinct social roles, namely towns and clans. The "town"—a social unit that was called *talwa* in Creek (Knight 1994: 375; Swanton 1946: 92) and *okla* in Choctaw (Galloway and Kidwell 2004: 500)—was the basic building block of Indian polities. It was generally seen, by Indians and Europeans alike, as a named corporate entity, marked by a defined area of settlement. At first glance, the answer to our question may seem obvious. Of course, Moundville was a town; what else could it have been? But when we look more closely, we find that the answer is not at all obvious.

To make our case, we address four issues. First, what were the characteristics of southern Indian towns and clans? To answer this question, we draw on descriptions from colonial-era tribes to discuss common structural elements. Where possible, we focus on records for Muskogean groups such as the Creek, Choctaw, and Chickasaw. Not coincidentally, these were the tribes that in colonial times surrounded the area where the Moundville polity was located. Second, does the archaeological evidence from the Black Warrior Valley suggest that Moundville exhibits the characteristics of a town? To anticipate our answer, we believe that Moundville was something fundamentally different. Third, if Moundville was not a town, then what was it? We argue that Moundville was not a town in the social sense, but rather bore more resemblance to ceremonial grounds where clan identities took precedence over town affiliations. Fourth, what are the implications of our view of Moundville not only for understanding Moundville but for the Mississippian world in general? We apply our ethnographic understandings of towns and clans to a consideration of how the people in the Black Warrior Valley reworked these basic structures to organize their communities and write their social arrangements on the landscape.

Indian Community Structures in the American South

Southern Indian towns were more than places where people lived; they were social and political entities with which people identified (Brightman and Wallace 2004; Galloway and Kidwell 2004; Hudson 1976: 184–257; Swanton 1946: 629–41; Walker 2004). They ranged in population from a few dozen to several hundred people (Urban and Jackson 2004: 703). Whatever their size, most towns had a central precinct with square grounds, ball fields, and public buildings—council houses, earthlodges, or temples—sometimes on mounds, sometimes not (Brightman and Wallace 2004: 478; Urban and Jackson 2004: 703; Walker 2004: 377–78). Households from matrilocal extended families comprising mothers, daughters, and their families tended to live near one another, but otherwise there was no set pattern to household location (Galloway and Kidwell 2004: 504; Urban and Jackson 2004: 704; Walker 2004: 378). Towns were led by town chiefs and war chiefs who varied in influence and were generally advised by councils of elders (Brightman and Wallace 2004: 486; Swanton 1931b: 90–91, 1946: 629–41). Although their power varied over time and space, such chiefs oversaw their towns' governance and diplomatic relations with other towns.

People saw themselves as members of named towns that persisted over many generations (Brightman and Wallace 2004: 479; May 2004: 410; Walker 2004: 383). We emphasize that towns were social units not intrinsically tied to specific locations. Town affiliations were part of social identities in much the way that church membership is today. At any given time, towns had a presence on the landscape in the form of houses, gardens, and public buildings. But when circumstances warranted, towns could and did move while retaining their names and identities. The essence of a town was not its physical location, but rather the ties among people who considered themselves a community.

But what did a town look like? To answer this question, we draw on ethnohistoric descriptions. Some sixteenth-century towns, like those in the Central Mississippi Valley described in the De Soto narratives, were nucleated and fortified (Clayton et al. 1993: 1: 117, 2: 391). Other sixteenth-century towns (for example, among the Apalachee) and many eighteenth-century towns had households that were widely dispersed around central precincts (Clayton et al. 1993: 1: 71, 2: 197; Ewen and Hann 1998: 140; Foster 2007; Galloway and Kidwell 2004: 499; Swanton 1931b: 76, 1946:

629–41; Walker 2004: 383). Whether dispersed or nucleated, towns were spatially discrete units that often clustered with other such units to form polities. These polities were separated from each other by large buffer zones, a pattern well illustrated by the work of Hally and his colleagues in northern Georgia (Hally 1993; Hally, ed. 1994). It can also be seen in the distribution of Mississippian societies across the South, where clusters of sites are separated by apparently empty territory (see, for example, Scarry 1999: figures 5.1, 5.4, 5.5), as well as in the accounts of the De Soto entrada, which traveled through significant unpopulated areas between polities (Clayton et al. 1993). Sometimes, one town within a polity was the first among equals, a capital. But even when this capital was a paramount center—as in the case of Little Egypt or the King site in the Coosa polity (Hally 1994, 2008; Hudson et al. 1985) or Anhaica in Apalachee (Ewen and Hann 1998: 140)—it was still a town. It may have had a few more, or larger, public buildings or mounds, but the town itself was not fundamentally different from its neighbors in size or layout.

Of course, towns were not the only source of communal ties and social identities. By birth, people were members of exogamous, matrilineal clans, which formed networks connecting members of towns within a tribe or polity to one another (Knight 1990: 5–6; Swanton 1946: 654–65; Urban and Jackson 2004: 697). Clan membership was filiative; an individual belonged to his or her mother's clan, and there was no assumption that all clan members shared a common ancestress. Although local matriline segments often formed residential or landholding units—sometimes called corporate subclans or house groups (see Knight, this volume)—the clans themselves were neither residential nor corporate.[1] Rather, clan members were spread across multiple towns, and within any given town they lived intermingled with members of other clans (Knight 1990: 5–6; Swanton 1931b: 77). Clans defined acceptable marriage partners and codified relations among members, including obligations of hospitality and support in settling disputes (Knight 1990: 5–6; Spoehr 1941; Urban and Jackson 2004: 697). Clans were said to have characteristic personalities, lifeways, and demeanors (Knight 1990: 8). More importantly, clans had distinct but reciprocal roles in rituals and ceremonies. They were led by elders and priests, who held complementary sacred knowledge and, presumably, ritual gear. Within a clan, members were not ascriptively ranked, but the clans themselves were usually divided into two groups for ritual purposes. One division was generally held to be superior to the other,

and within a division the clans often formed graded ranks (Swanton 1946: 654–65).

Clans were associations of people that came together for special purposes. Unlike towns, which were daily materialized in houses and public structures, clans normally had only ephemeral, situational physical presences—usually at ceremonial occasions or when people gathered from multiple communities. Thus, for example, many towns maintained square grounds or townhouses, where, during ceremonies, people sat together by clan (Brightman and Wallace 2004: 486; Swanton 1931a, 1931b: 77; Urban and Jackson 2004: 706; Walker 2004: 378, 382). Likewise at larger ceremonial grounds, when people from multiple towns gathered, they arrayed themselves by clan and clan rank around a central space (Knight 1998: 54–55; Speck 1907). The variations on this general pattern were numerous, and the relevant groups were not always clans—as among the Yuchi, where men's sodalities played a similar role (J. B. Jackson 2004: 417, 420). Even so, the dominant theme is clear: it was principally in ceremonial and multi-town gatherings that people arranged themselves according to larger, crosscutting social units, and among southern Indians these units were usually clans or their local manifestations—the corporate subclans or "house groups."

It should be noted that this pattern is not confined to the South but also occurred quite commonly in the Great Plains. There, priests and other celebrants typically arranged themselves in ceremonial lodges by clan (e.g., Bailey 1995: 55–60), and large tribal gatherings took the form of "camp circles" in which individual households positioned themselves according to their clan or band (e.g., Dorsey 1897; Fletcher and La Flesche 1911: 140–42; Nabokov 1989: 158–63)

Moundville's Settlement and Demographic History

We turn now to archaeological evidence to consider whether Moundville was a town in the ethnographic sense, and if not, what it was. The Moundville polity developed within a 40-km stretch of the Black Warrior Valley just south of present-day Tuscaloosa, Alabama (see figure 1.2). Over the last three decades, there has been considerable work at Moundville, as well as survey and testing at outlying sites (e.g., Astin 1996; Barrier 2007; Blitz 2007; Bozeman 1982; Gage 2000; Hammerstedt 2001; Hammerstedt and Myer 2001; Knight 2010; Lacquement 2009; Maxham 2004; Myer

2002a, 2002b; Ryba 1997; Scarry 1995; Steponaitis 1998; Thompson 2011; Wilson 2008). When combined, these sources make it possible to chart settlement and demographic changes over time.

In the West Jefferson phase, AD 1000 to 1120, people lived in small (0.2–0.5 ha) villages located on the fertile bottomland soils of the valley (Welch 1990: 211). There were no mounds, but clusters of sites were separated by vacant areas (Hammerstedt 2001; Hammerstedt and Myer 2001; Hammerstedt et al., this volume; Maxham 2004; Myer 2002a, 2002b). These clusters may have been early towns. There is little evidence for occupation at Moundville itself in this period. Sometime around AD 1100, two mounds and a presumably small but unknown number of widely dispersed houses were built at Moundville (Blitz 2007, this volume; Knight and Steponaitis 1998; Scarry 1995, 1998; Steponaitis 1992). This early settlement at Moundville also looks like a town in the ethnographic sense.

Around AD 1200 Moundville underwent a rapid spate of reorganization and building, from which it emerged as a densely populated monumental center. People decommissioned the existing mounds (Blitz, this volume). They then constructed an elaborate mound-and-plaza complex and surrounded it with a bastioned palisade (Knight and Steponaitis 1998; Scarry 1995, 1998; Steponaitis 1998). To achieve their desired layout, they dismantled at least one mound and leveled the terrace by filling in ravine heads before erecting new mounds (Blitz 2007, this volume; Lacquement 2009; Knight 2010). The end result was a clearly planned community of some 30 mounds around an open plaza (Knight 2010: 2). The arrangement is bilaterally symmetrical and composed of pairs of substructural and burial mounds, which get smaller as one moves from north to south around the plaza (Knight 1998; Peebles 1971, 1983). Clusters of closely spaced residential buildings are associated with the mound pairs (Wilson 2008, this volume). This new arrangement does *not* resemble a typical native town of the American South. While much of the valley's population resided in the dense neighborhoods at Moundville, some people remained in the countryside (Hammerstedt et al., this volume; Maxham 2004; Steponaitis 1998). There they lived in clusters of farmsteads on land that had been occupied by their ancestors (Bozeman 1982; Hammerstedt et al., this volume). Sometime during this period, people built single mounds at the Jones Ferry, Poellnitz, and Hog Pen sites, all of which are located within these hinterland clusters (Bozeman 1982; Welch 1998).

About AD 1300 there was another demographic shift. Moundville itself

became home to a few high elite, who we presume were ritual special-ists (Knight 2004, 2010: 348–66; Steponaitis, this volume). The residen-tial neighborhoods were vacated, however, and the bustling community was transformed to a necropolis where people from throughout the val-ley buried their dead (Steponaitis 1998). Most people dispersed back to hinterland communities, where population rebounded in long-occupied areas, and activities continued at outlying mound centers (Hammerstedt et al., this volume; Maxham 2004; Steponaitis 1998). It is worth noting, however, that when the population "returned" to the countryside, several new single-mound sites were built—often across the river from earlier single-mound sites that were no longer used (Bozeman 1982; Welch 1998). In all, there were seven active single-mound sites during this period (Boz-eman 1982; Welch 1998).

In the fifteenth century, Moundville was gradually abandoned as a ritual center. In contrast, all seven hinterland centers continued to thrive, and an eighth was built. The single-mound centers not only persisted but also took on new functions as people ceased carrying their dead to Moundville and created new local cemeteries (Steponaitis 1998; Welch 1998).

Moundville as a Ceremonial Ground

For our argument there are two important things to note about the settle-ment and demographic sequence in the Black Warrior Valley. First, the hinterland hamlet clusters have remarkable stability from West Jefferson times onward. Specific household and field locations undoubtedly shifted, but people built mounds near where they had always lived, and com-munities endured for over 500 years. While they were unusually spatially stable, these mound-hamlet clusters look very much like the dispersed towns described in ethnohistoric sources (figure 12.1; also see figure 8.6). Second, the thirteenth-century transformation of Moundville adds a new type of settlement to the landscape of towns scattered up and down the valley. Moundville has the appearance of a ceremonial ground, albeit a permanent one, that brought together people from many towns. So, in this sense, it was not a town but an entirely different kind of community.

We suggest that the thirteenth-century reconfiguration of Moundville was conceived not as a town, but as a "tribal" ceremonial ground that brought together people from many towns. In some respects our inter-
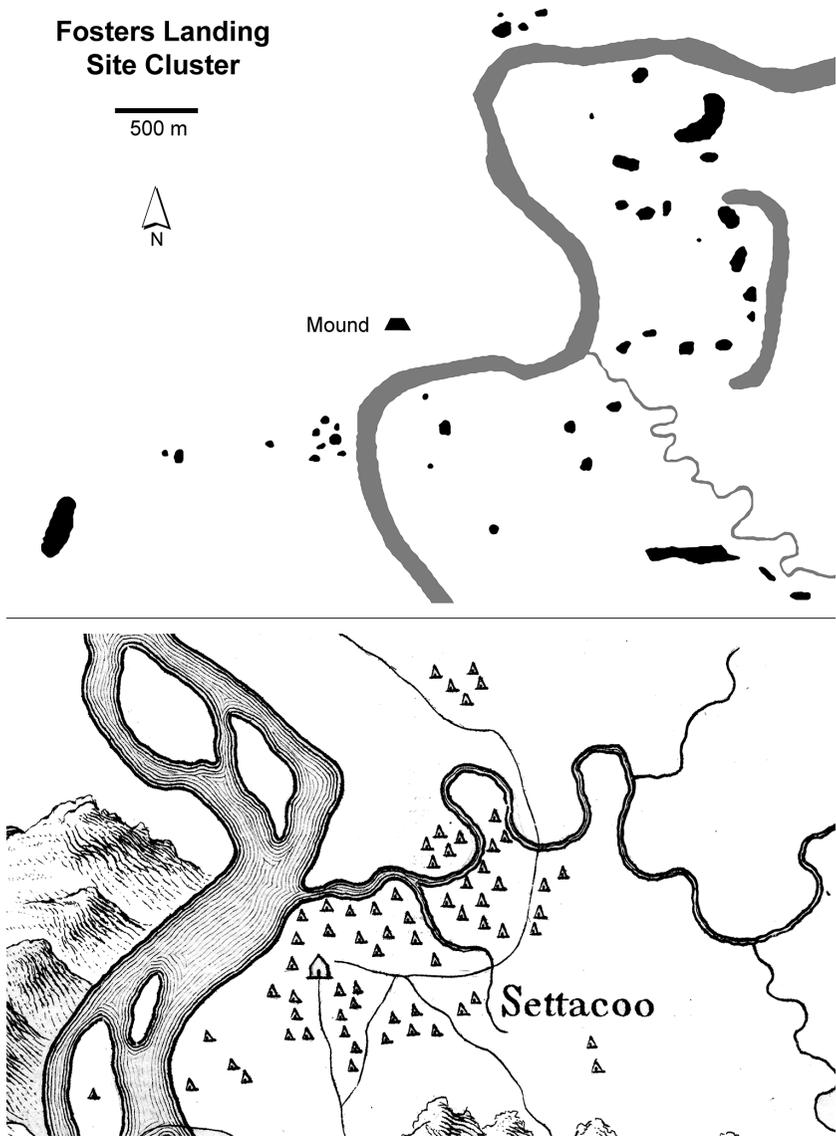
Figure 12.1. Comparison of a Mississippian site cluster in the Black Warrior Valley with an eighteenth-century Indian town: (*top*) the Fosters Landing site cluster on the Black Warrior River north of Moundville, with sites shown in black; (*bottom*) the Overhill Cherokee town of Citico on the Little Tennessee River, as mapped by Henry Timberlake in 1762. Both views are shown at approximately the same scale. The same settlement pattern, hamlets loosely dispersed around a town center, is seen in both. (The map on top is redrawn from Myer 2002a: Figure 33; on the bottom is a detail from "A draught of the Cherokee Country on the west side of the Twenty Four Mountains, commonly called Over the Hills" [Timberlake 1765: frontispiece].)

pretation is not new. More than a decade ago, Knight (1998), building on earlier observations by Peebles (1971, 1983), pointed out that Moundville was laid out much like a "camp square." Knight called attention to Speck's (1907: 53) map of a nineteenth-century Chickasaw camp square in which "subclans were arranged by rank around a rectilinear space, divided bilaterally according to the well-known dual organization and centered on a council fire" (Knight 1998: 54). Knight used this map to make an elegant analogy arguing that the mound pairs at Moundville were associated with ranked corporate groups and that the monumental construction wrote the social position and presumably power relations in "tangible, inviolable, immovable, [and] sacred" form (Knight 1998: 54).

In making this argument, Knight emphasized that Moundville was a "diagrammatic ceremonial center," a settlement in which "the layout of public architecture or monuments calls deliberate attention to key social and cosmological distinctions, in a maplike manner" (Knight 1998: 45). We fully agree with his conclusion and regard it as a key insight in our current understanding of Moundville. But here we are taking his analogy one step further: Moundville was like the Chickasaw camp square not only in its layout, but also in its basic purpose as a place where people from many towns gathered for political and religious activities. In such a setting it is not surprising that clans—which crosscut towns—were the dominant organizational theme. We argue that Moundville was fundamentally the same as a ceremonial camp square, except larger and more permanent.

Not only was Moundville built to a plan that materialized clan relationships, but also there are other clues that the difference between Moundville and other communities in the Black Warrior Valley was fundamental and qualitative. The scale of its monumental architecture—in both the size and the number of its mounds—was an order of magnitude larger than that of any town. The concentration of burials at Moundville, together with the absence of cemeteries in the countryside until after Moundville's decline, suggests that for centuries Moundville was a place of burial for *all* the towns in the Black Warrior Valley. As the chapters in this volume by Davis, Jackson et al., Hammerstedt et al., and J. Scarry et al. show, people at hinterland communities participated in rituals, engaged in feasting and crafting, and had varying access to sumptuary goods made from local and nonlocal materials. But the scale and diversity of crafting and ritual at Moundville dwarfs that seen elsewhere in the valley. Notably, pipes,

palettes, pigments, and other items that we believe were ritual gear associated with priestly activities are prominent and widespread at Moundville (Knight 2004, 2010: 348–66; Phillips, this volume; Steponaitis, this volume). This is exactly what we would expect at a ceremonial ground. Finally, as Knight (2010) has demonstrated, the so-called temple or structural mounds at Moundville all show evidence of residential activities, crafting, elite meals, and ritual dining. But the buildings atop the mounds and the crafting activities that took place within these buildings varied remarkably from mound to mound. This pattern is consistent with the complementary ritual roles of clans.

In sum, Moundville was not simply a "first among equals" town, as were historic-era polity capitals. Rather, it was a ceremonial ground that incorporated and integrated people from many towns. Its monumental landscape emphasized clan organization and priestly activities—quite possibly those of clan priests and elders.

Turning outward from the Black Warrior Valley, Williams (2007) presents a similar archaeological case from the Oconee Valley of Georgia, where he argues that the Joe Bell site was used only for periodic gatherings to celebrate the busk. Nor was this pattern confined to the South. Much farther afield, we find a parallel example in DeBoer and Blitz's (1991) discussion of Chachi ceremonial centers in Ecuador, which were used periodically for public events in which people from multiple communities gathered and arranged themselves by social group. These sites differ from Moundville mainly in that they had episodic, rather than permanent, occupations.[2]

Implications and Speculations

We close with some thoughts about the implications of seeing Moundville as a ceremonial ground for understanding the region's history. Recall that colonial-era Indian communities of the American South had both secular and ritual leaders. While their specific duties varied, town chiefs and war chiefs were responsible for the smooth running of the town and for diplomacy with other towns. Clan priests and elders oversaw relations among clan members, who were spread across multiple towns. Clan priests also were responsible for the protection of sacred paraphernalia and for the perpetuation and performance of the clan's ritual responsibilities. We believe these offices have very deep roots in southern Indian

communities but that the relative power of town chiefs and clan priests varied over time and space, depending on historical circumstances. In our view, the reconfiguration of Moundville represented a shift in the balance of power between secular town officials and clan ritual specialists. That is, clan priests may have succeeded in making permanent the "ceremonial ground" in which they played dominant ritual and political roles, thereby enhancing their power in relation to the town chiefs.

Here we find Gearing's (1962: 13–29) discussion of "structural poses" among the eighteenth-century Cherokee informative. Gearing (1962: 15) defined a structural pose as "the way a simple human society sees itself to be appropriately organized at a particular moment for a particular purpose." He argued that the Cherokee had multiple ways of organizing themselves, including affiliation by household, clan, village council, and war grade. Individuals held multiple roles such that their varied positions and identities came into play depending on the social arrangements appropriate for the context and activity in which they were engaged. These structural poses were situational and fluid, and they shifted power, leadership, and affiliation among individuals and groups. Gearing further claimed that, in the late eighteenth century, war chiefs gained ascendency in a specific colonial context that enabled them to "fix" the structural pose for war and created a path to permanent power within the community.

Returning to the Black Warrior Valley, we see Moundville arising from a social base that had at least two (and probably more) structural poses: towns and ceremonial gatherings. The West Jefferson and early Moundville I settlements, including the initial two-mound community at Moundville, were towns. We presume either that town chiefs dominated the political scene, or that the power of town chiefs and clan priests was more or less balanced. During the Moundville I phase, something—we leave consideration of the catalyst for a future paper—created a situation that led large numbers of people from the valley's towns to relocate to the terrace at Moundville. The unprecedented size and nucleation of population required mechanisms to integrate people, many of whom were strangers to one another. Byers (2013: 649–700) has suggested that many Mississippian mound centers, including Moundville, were heterarchical and that mounds were maintained by nonresident, religious sodalities; but Knight (this volume) has presented a compelling argument that this model does not work for Moundville. Rather, we suggest that the structural pose of a ceremonial gathering provided a model for organizing

people from disparate towns into a residential community at Moundville. Perhaps inadvertently, it also created a situation that gave clan priests a path to fix and expand their power at the expense of town chiefs.

Our model fits with Knight's (2004, 2010) documentation of diverse, but presumably complementary, activities and rituals on mound summits at Moundville. It is also consistent with Wilson's interpretation that each clan-based residential unit at Moundville "included multiple subclan residential groups" (Wilson, this volume). Our view also helps make sense of the decommissioning of Mound X and the apparent deliberate acts of forgetting that preceded the layout of the mound-and-plaza complex (Blitz, this volume). The demolition of Mound X erased the social arrangements for which it stood, replacing a town's local claim to the ground on which Moundville was built with an assertion of a regional ceremonial ground where clan priests held sway. The ritual and political hold of the clans and priests lasted for several generations, but eventually conditions changed, people moved away from Moundville, and the balance of power shifted with a resurgence of town authorities.

If Moundville took form through the ascendency of clan priests over town chiefs, this requires a broader reconsideration of the settlement pattern and political organization within the Black Warrior Valley. Following a neo-evolutionary model of chiefly societies, we and others have previously interpreted Moundville as a "paramount center," which was home to a hereditary chief and other elites. The single-mound sites were depicted as subsidiary centers whose lesser chiefs, drawn from cadet lineages, answered to the paramount chief while simultaneously ruling over people within their districts (Peebles 1978; Steponaitis 1978; Welch 1991; Welch and Scarry 1995). Here, we offer an alternative scheme that fits better with the ethnography of Indian communities in the South. In our view, the single-mound centers were continuations of towns that had their roots in earlier Woodland communities. During the ascendency of the clan priests at Moundville, towns in the countryside dwindled in population, and town chiefs' political power waned but did not altogether disappear. The shifting locations of mound centers within a town's district through time may have resulted from a change in the lineage from which the town chief was drawn (Bozeman 1982; Welch 1998; cf. Hally 1996). Alternatively, the construction of new mounds at the towns may have been an early sign of the resurgence of town chiefs' authority and the weakening of the clan

priests' sway. In sum, rather than the settlement pattern reflecting a hierarchy with nested levels of decision making and power, our model gives a heterarchical spin (although different from that of Byers [2013]) with dual competing but complementary forms of leadership at play in the emergence, entrenchment, and disintegration of the Moundville polity.

Our interpretation of Moundville as a ceremonial ground also has implications for the broader Mississippian world. Polities with single mounds are often interpreted as simple chiefdoms, while those with two tiers of mound centers are considered paramount chiefdoms. We suggest the situation is even more complex. There may well be two kinds of Mississippian mound centers, some based in towns, such as Little Egypt (Hally 1994) in the Coosa polity, and others constructed as multi-town ceremonial grounds, such as Moundville and perhaps Cahokia, the St. Louis Mound Group (Fowler 1989; Pauketat 1994), Winterville (Brain 1989; Moore 1908), and Town Creek (Boudreaux 2007). If so, then the ways in which polities were organized and by which leadership was deployed and legitimated may have been profoundly different.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. Knight correctly points out that the "clans" found among southern Indians do not fit a classic definition of such units in the anthropological literature, because they are neither corporate nor based on descent from a common ancestor (Knight 1990, this volume). We accept his point but still prefer to use the term. The word "clan" in so ingrained in southern Indian ethnography, and among Indians themselves, that substituting another in this context would create confusion, more so than deviating from the textbook definition. Or, to put the matter differently, we see no harm in following local precedent, so long as the differences between the varying usages of the term are understood.

2. Chachi oral traditions hold that at least one of their ceremonial centers, Pueblo Viejo, was a permanent settlement during the early colonial period (DeBoer and Blitz 1991: 55–57). Thus, in this period it may well have been more like Moundville.