Public Architecture and Power in Pre-Columbian North America

Timothy A. Kohler
PUBLIC ARCHITECTURE AND POWER IN
PRE-COLUMBIAN NORTH AMERICA

For the International Symposium
“Power, Monuments, and Civilization”
Nara, Japan, December 1997

TIMOTHY A. KOHLER
Department of Anthropology
Washington State University
Pullman, WA  99164-4910 USA
tako@wsu.edu

Introduction

With state-level societies in mind, Bruce Trigger (1990) characterized monuments as a form of conspicuous consumption flaunting the ability of the elite to defy the principles of least-effort that are so important in structuring other aspects of social and economic organization. The prehistoric North American societies that I will be discussing, however, are not usually considered to have been “states”, a circumstance that allows us to dwell on processes operating at somewhat smaller scales than might be possible for, say, Egypt or Mesoamerica. This may require us to qualify Trigger’s characterization, at least for the earliest societies under consideration. Despite the absence of states in this area, anyone familiar with North American prehistory will recognize the difficulty of surveying the 5,000 years and thousands of miles spanned by expressions of indigenous monumental architecture.

For the North Americanist the title of this symposium is deliciously antiquarian in part, returning us as it does to the grand old days of Messrs. Squier and Davis (1848). Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley established or gave

P. 1
widespread usage to many terms (including “sacred enclosures” and “temple mounds”) still used on occasion to formally describe classes of monuments despite objections, beginning not long after (Thomas 1894), that these terms prejudged function on slim or no evidence. The addition of “power” to the title, however, brings us back forcefully to the complications of late twentieth century anthropological discourse, with its heterarchy of theoretical inclination, where disagreements seem so much more fundamental than the taxonomic and historical questions that detained the few Euroamerican men who began to examine the North American evidence not quite two centuries ago. Can a consensus account still be constructed, that acknowledges the insights of several interpretive possibilities? In the first part of this paper I present (very selectively) the basic data on monumental construction as viewed from the archaeological record, before, in the second part, suggesting some interpretations of this record.

Eastern North America

Much of Eastern North America is characterized today, as in the portions of prehistory considered here, by relatively high rainfall, mesic hardwood or mixed hardwood/coniferous forests, extremely productive river valleys, and, especially in southern marsh and estuarine locations, high constancy of resource availability coupled with very high gross primary productivity. Under early adaptational regimes these opportunities apparently led to more sedentism than characterized most other parts of North America, and more rapid population growth with the result that the most desirable portions of this region have hosted dense and relatively sedentary populations at least since the Late Archaic period (ca. 5/6000-3000 b.p.) during which the earliest ceramic containers appear and local starchy seeds (including Iva annua, Chenopodium berlandieri, and Polygonum spp.) come under cultivation.
Fourth and Third Millennia B.C.

Until recently the Poverty Point mound complex in northeastern Louisiana (Webb 1977), with its related cultures along the Mississippi Valley and the Gulf Coast that date from the mid-second millennium B.C. up into the earliest portions of the first millennium B.C., was considered to represent the first monumental construction in North America. It is now evident, however, that some mounds in Louisiana and Florida, at least, were being built 5000 years ago or more (Russo 1994a) in the terminal Middle and in the Late Archaic, as much as 1500 years before domestication of local weedy annual plants or the introduction of exotic food plants. These early mounds also, though more narrowly, pre-date the earliest ceramic containers of North America, the fiber-tempered basins and bowls found in shell middens along the South Atlantic coast and adjacent river valleys beginning about 4500 b.p. (Sassaman 1995), and are approximately contemporaneous with the earliest records for use of *Cucurbita* spp. (apparently as container; Petersen and Sidell [1996]).

The Watson Brake complex in northeastern Louisiana (Saunders et al. 1997), composed of 11 mounds between 1 m and 7.5 m in height connected by 1-m-high ridges to enclose an oval area about 280 m in diameter, appears to have been constructed between 5400 and 5000 b.p. It is the earliest known monumental construction in the New World (Saunders et al. 1997). The complex is constructed on a Pleistocene terrace adjacent to a now-abandoned channel of the Arkansas River with abundant swamp and backwater areas. Some of the mounds and ridges were constructed in multiple stages, some in a single stage; those constructed in multiple stages cover some habitation refuse that includes Middle and Late Archaic projectile points of local material, local gravels used for cooking stones, undecorated fired earthen objects, often squarish in shape, of unknown function,
animal bone dominated by river channel species such as freshwater drum and catfish, and charred seeds of weedy annuals, apparently undomesticated. The excavators argue for a seasonal use centered on spring and early summer. Limited testing revealed no burials in the mounds and little evidence for activity in the area between the mounds within the enclosure. If inter-group exchanges took place here and at similar sites, as I will suggest below, it is not evident from the distributions of lithic materials. Saunders (personal communication, 1998) however notes evidence for specialized production; in one 1 x 1.5 x .2-m level in one mound were found more than 120 microdrills, though without any of the beads that they are presumed to have been used to manufacture.

Although it may be the earliest (so far at least) Watson Brake is far from the only mound complex recognized in the preceramic Archaic. In fact, the relatively high density of mounds of this period in northeastern and southeastern Louisiana suggest that a competitive process may be at work. One probable preceramic Archaic burial mound has been identified at Tick Island in Northeast Florida (Russo 1994b). In general, however, these earliest mounds seem to lack burials, as in the case of three of the four mounds at Horr’s Island in coastal Southwest Florida (Russo 1994b) or the nine mounds of the Tomoka complex in coastal Northeast Florida (Piatek 1994) which appear to be “ceremonial constructions” within or adjacent to substantial settlements of sedentary fishers/shellfishers.

However, we might also consider whether the many mounded shell middens of the mid-South Late Archaic (e.g., the famous Indian Knoll site [Webb 1946]) and the Late Archaic shell rings of coastal Georgia and northeast Florida, both of which contain burials, are also “intentional” constructions for interment (as argued by Claasen [1991]) rather than “incidental” constructions through casual shell and refuse deposition over very long periods, as traditionally interpreted. If so, then perhaps they too ought to be considered public architecture and monuments, in
which case such structures become fairly widespread across eastern North America between 5000 and 4000 b.p. By somewhat more conservative definition, however, notable characteristics of these earliest mounds include the facts that when in a residential area they appear to be associated with a sedentary occupation, as is apparently the case for the Florida examples; mounds are more likely to contain burials when they are within such a village, although overall burials are rare; and mounds appear to never cover or support mortuary or other structures, as is often the case with later mounds. In short, their function is not clearly understood and they are difficult to accommodate within the traditional taxonomy for mounds and earthworks in eastern North America.

Second Millenium B.C.: Poverty Point and related societies

Now increasingly viewed as the last manifestation of the Late Archaic in the lower Mississippi Valley, the Poverty Point “Phenomenon” is phenomenal because of the massive symmetric layout (first recognized by Ford [1954]) and monumental scale of construction at its best-known site, which at ca. 3200 b.p. is apparently the largest constructed landscape in the Americas. This northeastern Louisiana mound and village complex covers more than two square kilometers and features six concentric ridges partially defining a plaza area, all in front of the 21-m-high Mound A, with an east-facing ramp, and the 7-m-high Mound B. Neither these nor the more modest mounds identified at the two dozen or so most closely related sites in the region contains burials (though Mound B covered some charred human bones), covers structures, or supports structures. In a few cases mound construction covered basal hearths, possibly suggesting feasting activity immediately preceding construction. Known sites form a hierarchical size series ranging from this great regional center, to lesser regional centers, followed by hamlets, camps, and isolated households (Webb 1977:11). Gibson (1974) and
some others consider this the remains of a chiefdom-style organization, anticipating by almost 2000 years the chiefdoms of the Mississippian period. Several of the smaller centers have either six or eight mounds, often in conjunction with a semicircular village, most often on natural levees or terraces adjacent to rivers, marshes, or estuaries.

In contrast with earlier sites like Watson Brake, nonlocal materials are prominent in collections from Poverty Point sites, and particularly from Poverty Point itself. These include red jasper, red and green talc, banded slate, quartz, quartzites, galena, copper, and many other materials, apparently from sources throughout the south-central United States and as far north as the upper Midwest (Webb 1977:48-53, 60). These materials were worked into a variety of labor-intensive specialized goods rich in iconography that included beads, “bannerstones,” gorgets, tubes, tablets, pipes, pendants (often with bird motifs), and projectile points.

When the grandeur of the Poverty Point site was first realized, it was assumed that it was the product of an agricultural or at least a horticultural society. Recent work (e.g., Jackson 1991) has tended to discount the importance of squash, the only cultigen which has been identified. Instead, the subsistence economies were based on fish, pecan, acorn, and deer, which together seem to have been able to support relatively sedentary occupations. I suspect that the primacy of mound construction in the Lower Mississippi Valley during the Middle and Late Archaic establishes a pattern of emulation of this region by peripheral areas that may persist even into Mississippian times. Knight (1997:238), for example, notes the remarkable coincidence that “grog-tempered fineware vessels bearing Caddoan and lower Mississippi valley engraved motifs were especially prized at both Cahokia and Moundville, to the point that local potters in both places seem to have been moved to produce some rather good forgeries.”
First Millenium B.C. and First Millenium A.D.

All but the last 200 years or so of this period (which are called Emergent Mississippian in some areas) coincides with the Woodland period, which is traditionally subdivided into early, middle, and late portions and a huge number of local traditions, phases, ceramic complexes, and the like. These subdivisions will have to be ignored here in favor of many generalizations (virtually all of which have some local exceptions) supported by few examples. By the beginning of this period chenopod, sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*) and sumpweed (*Iva annua*) are both domesticated and seasonally important in the diet in places like Newt Kash and Hooton Hollow, rockshelters in Kentucky with excellent preservation (Gremillion 1996), and probably across much of the neighboring upper Southeast and lower Midwest. Maize first appears as a minor constituent in the food-producing economies of the Eastern Woodlands in about the second century A.D. but does not begin to take on much dietary importance until near A.D. 900 (Brown 1994:48-51). The scale of the mounds and landscapes constructed during this period does not surpass those already seen at Poverty Point, but the practice of mound building spreads throughout the East and most of these appear to have had motivations that were rare or absent in the preceding millennia.

First, many of these mounds now covered structures of some sort, often mortuaries or “charnel houses” by which is meant a structure in which the dead are laid out and allowed to decompose before final deposition elsewhere (or, in a variation, charnel houses might store bones after the bodies decomposed elsewhere). Mark Seeman (1986) notes that in the Early Woodland period burial became “convoluted with ritual” and took on “the characteristics of a process rather than a simple event.” Further, Seeman asserts that the mortuary process “was probably the major vehicle for social integration at this time” (1986:573-574). In many cases this mortuary ritual seems to occur away from the residential
sites, which, typically, are relatively small and impermanent with lightly built structures. The high frequency of mounds across the landscape suggests smaller territories for the communities they represent, which are supplementing hunting and gathering with increasing use of starchy and oily cultigens.

The mortuary structures often covered by mounds were, in the Early Woodland Adena times, relatively simple circular structures, when they seem to have been used for a variety of activities (possibly including sun-watching) and were not always roofed. In the Middle Woodland Hopewell, however, such structures were more commonly multi-roomed facilities apparently specialized for an elaborate mortuary program with various subprograms (Clay 1986). Both sorts of structures were frequently surrounded by earthworks which echoed the plans of the submound structures (Clay 1986:585). The Adena structures were typically transformed into accretional burial mounds used over a period of time, beginning with the deposition of cremations on the floor of the structure, whereas the later, more elaborate and specialized Hopewell submound charnel structures in the same region more typically had large numbers of burials placed within them just prior to mound construction (Clay 1986:590-593).

There is of course a great deal of variability in the contents and original functions of Woodland period conical mounds, but the mortuary theme was usually dominant. In the North Florida Weeden Island Period McKeithen Site around A.D. 400, separate structures, built on low platforms, were apparently used for macerating bodies in shallow oblong pits (Mound A), and for storing the bones of at least 26 adults and 10 children recovered from this process (Mound C). Both were eventually burned and mounded over. A third mound (B), in an area of the village with unusually high ratios of ceramic to lithic materials, high proportions of finewares, and possible evidence for feasting, covered what may have been the residence, also on a low platform, of the high-status man who was found in an
extended burial on the east side of the structure, together with a ceramic turkey vulture head and other unusual items. At the death of this man this structure too was burned and mounded over, though the village continued to be inhabited for some 200 years (Milanich et al. 1984). The structure under Mound B, which at about 7 x 10 m in size was both much larger and more substantially built than any of the poorly preserved structures intercepted in the surrounding village, is connected with the mortuary process in the other two mounds by its date of construction, its orientation, and by the ceramic turkey vulture head, a motif represented on at least two vessels from Mound C. If as I suspect the individual buried in Mound B directed the mortuary activities in the other two mounds, the turkey vulture emblem seems almost too neat.

A second category of Woodland monumental construction first appears about halfway through this period, around 100 B.C. This is the platform mound, which has the shape of a truncated pyramid, once thought by most Eastern archaeologists to be particular to the later Mississippian period. Almost by definition such mounds are supposed to have structures on top (as was indeed often the case, as already seen at McKeithen) yet the earliest of these (at sites such as Pinson [Mainfort and Walling 1992] and Ingomar Mounds [Rafferty 1987]) have various features such as hearths, concentrations of nonlocal materials, postmolds for very large posts, and sometimes midden refuse, but no structures (Lindauer and Blitz 1997). At the Walling site in northern Alabama Knight encountered various pits containing native copper, marine shell, galena, exotic chert and ceramics, as well as hearths and postmolds in the three Woodland stages of platform mound construction. “It is tempting to suggest,” he says, that

   communal platform mound use at the Walling site was partly implicated in ...

   long-distance transactions.... One aspect of mound use was the manufacture of goods for ritual display and exchange. The evidence ... agrees with a broader
picture of gift-giving and gift-receiving in the context of feasting as a primary social mechanism in Hopewellian exchange (Knight 1990a: 160-161).

Numerous other kinds of constructions in several parts of the Eastern Woodlands generally date to the Woodland period (often late therein), including large enclosures such as the Old Stone Fort near Nashville, Tennessee (Faulkner 1968), the “stone forts” of the lower Ohio Valley which probably had no defensive function (Muller 1986:150-153), and the “effigy mounds” of southern Wisconsin and neighboring areas (Mallam 1976). Complexes with these features may include burials but these do not seem to have been the focus of activities in such places. Nor is habitation refuse generally evident. Often such complexes appear in prominent locations such as on the tops of bluffs.

≈A.D. 1000 – A.D. 1600: Mississippian Period

Beginning in various places between about A.D. 800 and 1050, a series of changes throughout the Eastern Woodlands culminated in many areas with a distinctive simple or complex chiefdom-style organization whose closing phases were witnessed by the Spanish invaders. These economies added intensive maize production supplemented by deer hunting and fishing, to the already-in-place production of starchy and oily seeds and achenes. Mississippian societies featured a strongly hierarchical system with hereditary chiefs and a nobility distinguished from commoners. Chiefs wore special dress and resided atop flat mounds in densely populated fortified towns in broad riverine bottomlands. The more powerful of these exacted tribute from the less powerful and warfare among neighboring polities was the common condition. Subsistence items including choice cuts of deer and shelled maize, and labor, flowed into the paramount centers to provision the elite, who in turn redistributed some locally crafted prestige goods to local centers (Anderson 1994; Blitz 1993; Lopinot 1997; Muller
Knight (1990b) argues that these societies were organized as ranked exogamous matrilineal clans with limited agnatic inheritance of nobility. We know a great deal about the operation and development of these polities in several areas. I will here briefly review the rise, operation and decline of the largest center—Cahokia in Illinois—and mention for comparison one of the next largest—Moundville in Alabama.

Cahokia

Located in the highly productive American Bottom near the confluence of the Missouri with the Mississippi River, Cahokia crystallized as a regional Mississippian capital in the mid-A.D. 1000s (Pauketat and Emerson 1997). This apparently sudden change followed, by some 200 years, a rapid increase in the ubiquity of maize in local assemblages in the mid-800s (Kelly 1991a). By the early to mid-900s in this area, local communities such as the Range site (Kelly 1991b:99) experienced for the first time an “amalgamation of a number of different kinship groups at a single location” and a reformatting of the community plan towards a strong focus on a central plaza featuring a large rectangular structure, possibly a chief’s residence, at one end. Finally, the dramatic consolidation of power in a complex chiefdom centered on Cahokia around A.D. 1050 was accompanied by marks of coercive force, including decapitations and other violent deaths not seen earlier in the local archaeological record. Once again there was large-scale reworking of community plans and introduction of new architectural practices (Pauketat 1997). For the century from A.D. 1000 to 1100, Pauketat and Lopinot (1997) reconstruct rapid population increase—from about 2000 to between 10,000 and 15,000—within a circular area 3.25 km in diameter immediately surrounding Cahokia itself.

The multi-mound center of Cahokia proper, however, is only the largest of what is now often called the Central Administrative Political Complex that
encompassed other mound clusters as distant as 12 km to the west, in the present city of St. Louis. “Within this complex lie some 200 earthen mounds and adjacent rectangular plazas, residential areas, and other elite or communal monuments or mortuaries” (Pauketat and Emerson 1997:8) including giant single posts, Post-Circle Monuments (or woodhenges) and palisades such as the one built (probably after 1150 A.D. as Cahokia began to decline in power) to enclose the “Central Precinct.” Clearly these monuments (which include Monks Mound, the largest prehistoric tumulus in North America) required very large amounts of communal labor. Moreover, the flat-topped mounds, their superimposed structures, the henges and huge posts, were all frequently modified, renewed, and rebuilt, so that large-scale mobilization of community labor was more regular than exceptional.

Most recent discussions emphasize that—

monument construction was probably a means to integrate an increasingly stratified Cahokian community while legitimating the sanctity of both the monument and its elite caretakers.... The act of monument construction as a regular event was probably as important, if not more so, than the actual monument itself (Pauketat 1997:43).

Similarly, Rinita Dalan (1997:99-100) notes that—

the communal construction and use of mounds, plazas, and other earthen features would have provided a means of creating and perpetuating social relations, and establishing and maintaining the labor force necessary for large-scale agricultural pursuits. The durability of this construction and its attendant message of group permanence would have assured [and signaled] a commitment to place .... An additional sense of community was obtained by tying these works to the power of the ancestors.... The power of the chief was manifested in a mound that stood above all others.
Early signs of the decline of Cahokia, which began by A.D. 1200 and was complete within a century, included (in addition to the palisading of the Central Precinct) less frequent and smaller additions to Monks Mound; an increase in the relative size of some other mounds; the return of some plaza space to residential use (Dalan 1997:101), and a population decline. This decline in residents apparently began even at the height of power of the site and tended, over time, to transform Cahokia into an empty necropolis and center revered through inertia, in the end populated only by vestiges of an elite, and then, by no one.

Moundville

The general similarities between this sequence and our other chosen example, Moundville, are striking (Knight 1997). Given the similarities, it is worth emphasizing that the sequence at Moundville is some 50 years later than that at Cahokia, and over 600 km distant; specific relationships between the two are extremely unlikely. In both sequences development of productive maize agriculture preceded by some 150 to 200 years the development of the paramountcies. Following within a century of this florescence of production and potential production, petty chiefdoms briefly appeared in both areas, for a century or less, in the context of increasing populations. In each case the political consolidation of the region occurred at the local population peak, and was accompanied by large-scale import of nonlocal materials including shell, copper, stone and pottery. At Moundville, the 26 (or so) mounds are arranged around a single grand quadrilateral plaza. This plan, and the initial construction of almost all the mounds, and the first palisades, dates to the period of initial consolidation, between A.D. 1200 and 1250 (Knight and Steponaitis 1998). Knight and Steponaitis (1998) suggest that these mounds on the periphery of the plaza, which alternate between larger mounds without burials and smaller mounds with burials,
were associated with particular kin groups and that their placement and relative size reflect status differences among these groups.

At both Moundville and Cahokia, as the long-distance imports began to decline (shortly after consolidation), they were increasingly monopolized for elite revaluation with symbols that Knight refers to a chiefly cult. In both cases, population at the center then too began to decline, and, shortly thereafter, the motifs once particular to chiefly goods and monopolized by the elites became popularized on everyday ceramic vessels and other media. Both centers progressed through waning phases in which they remained a center for subsidized elite occupation, and both faded away without evidence for large-scale violence, disease, or other catastrophe. In the end, both enjoyed regional preeminence for about two centuries (or perhaps 50 years longer at Moundville), although Knight and Steponaitis (1998) suggest that Moundville enjoyed a long twilight, perhaps extending to the period of the mid-1500s DeSoto incursion, by which time there may have been a resident hereditary paramount with only nominal power.

Knight points out that one of the few obvious differences between Cahokia and Moundville is that the entire occupied area of Moundville was palisaded early in its history but that the palisades were abandoned at its height. This difference, however, can perhaps be explained by another, the greater power and population of Cahokia at its onset relative to any potential rival.

**Southwestern North America**

If we exclude the large timber longhouses of the Northwest Coast (as being obvious but not enduring), monumental architecture in western North America is primarily confined to California (for example the large Windmiller Phase burial mounds of the Central Valley) and to the Southwest. I assume that the California burial mounds are essentially similar to those in the Southeast and devote my
limited space to the rather different public architectural expressions of the Southwest. Here obviously monumental architecture appears much later than in the Southeast, and is restricted to societies with heavy commitments to agriculture, most likely because in the environments offered by the Southwest, relatively large and sedentary occupations only become possible with agriculture. By A.D. 500 or so, these societies become differentiated into several culture areas, most of which have expressions that might be considered monumental. In the Hohokam area of the Sonoran Desert these include platform mounds and ball courts (Fish and Fish 1994; Wilcox and Sternberg 1983) reminiscent of, though much smaller than, those of Mesoamerica to the south. The Mogollon area of the International Four Corners (where Arizona, New Mexico, Chihuahua, and Sonora come together), includes the important regional center of Paquimé (Minnis 1989) with its 18 mounds of various types, and ballcourts, and elsewhere, great kivas and limited canal systems. In both of these regions central residential sites contain various monumental or at least public architectural expressions that are being assessed by southwestern archaeologists for their roles in communal storage, food preparation for feasts, craft production, regional ceremonial observations, including calendric and astronomic observation, and elite residence (Fish and Fish 1994:25).

Because of personal experience, however, I will concentrate, albeit very briefly, on the Anasazi (ancestral Puebloan) great kivas, and on the Chacoan Great Houses and roads in the same ancestral Puebloan tradition. Maize agriculture arrived earlier to the Anasazi area, where it appears at about 1200 B.C., than to the Southeast, and quickly became an important part of the subsistence regime (Kohler 1993). Early agriculturists in this area typically resided for part, and later much of the year in pitstructures which contained both residential and some household-level ritual features such as sipapus. In the A.D. 600s and 700s much larger pitstructures, called great kivas, began to appear in the northern Anasazi
area. One such structure, from the late A.D. 700s on the Grass Mesa site of Southwest Colorado, was almost 23 m across and about 1.8 m deep, with a central platform and a bench running around the perimeter. It is unusually large, even for a great kiva, and its wooden roof, capped with earthen sediments, probably weighed in the vicinity of 270 tons (Lightfoot et al. 1988). The structure would have been more than large enough to house the entire population of Grass Mesa village, and probably served a community that extended beyond that resident in the village itself. These early great kivas are rather variable in size, construction, and floor features. Later great kivas, such as the one at Chaco Canyon called Casa Rinconada, contain a variety of more specialized floor features and are much more standardized in form.

Although great kivas apparently served to integrate communities distributed across several sites, after the mid-800s, until at least the mid-1200s, there were also special places in the Anasazi world that served to integrate much larger regions composed of many communities. The most famous of these was Chaco Canyon in the San Juan Basin of northeastern New Mexico (on which Sebastian [1992] and Stein and Fowler [1996] provide recent and often contrasting perspectives) which served as a regional center from the late A.D. 800s until the middle of the twelfth century. While it is clear that great kivas are both monuments and public architecture, it has only recently been recognized (and is in fact still a controversial view) that the large pueblo-like structures in Chaco Canyon probably did not serve primarily as residences but were really monuments on a large scale, probably serving large populations on occasion, but with only a small residential elite. The Chacoan great houses are now increasingly interpreted as central places in a very large ritual landscape linked by roads to communities dispersed on the peripheries of the San Juan Basin (Stein and Fowler 1996), each
of which contains somewhat smaller replicas of the Chacoan great houses in the canyon itself.

**Models of Social Evolution, Knowledge, and Power**

Accounting for so many kinds of phenomena across such a large area and long time forces a certain distance and makes it impossible to apply models that privilege local histories and circumstances. It is clear, however, that there are some trends visible in both the regions surveyed above. First of all, there is a tendency towards increased specialization in function of ritual structures, and in public architecture in general, through the sequences observed, that is paralleled by an increasing restriction in participation for some classes of monuments. For example, the open summits of early platform mounds in the Southeast provided a stage for an apparently variable suite of activities that could be observed, and even participated in, by all members of the community. On later platform mounds access or view was restricted, and buildings on the summit were designed to accommodate some subset of the community (often a chief) (Lindauer and Blitz 1997) even while the immense plazas could, and presumably did on occasion, accommodate throngs of people to more public ceremony. Adler and Wilshusen (1990) also observed the phenomenon of specialization in a cross-cultural sample of tribal communities, where they noted that increasing population size was correlated with increasing size and specialization of ritual function in community integrative structures. In the smallest of their communities, integrative structures tended to combine residential and ritual activities, much as did the early pitstructures of the Anasazi. Their ethnographic evidence, as well as the archaeological record, suggests that the great kivas of the ancestral Puebloan world were more specialized for ritual function.
Another trend—the one I want to dwell on—is for continuity in form combined with change in function. This change in function is of a particular type. Steponaitis (1986) has suggested that the Mississippian elite, by placing their residences on platform mounds, were appropriating a form and location that had previously, in Woodland times, symbolized communal mortuary functions. In fact, similar appropriations were conducted on a smaller scale by pre-Mississippian elites, as we saw from the McKeithen example, with its platform that became Mound B after the death of the ritual practitioner who apparently resided upon it. It seems to me that forms of appropriation, or co-optation, are fundamental to the historical trajectories of these regions, and extend even further back in time. As a kind of historical (as opposed to an explanatory) model, I offer the following interpretive generalization of the monumental histories we have just reviewed.

The earliest monumental architecture of which we are aware, at places like Watson Brake, was the product of increasingly sedentary and dense populations who, however, were still living under conditions of relatively low regional population density and relatively small community size. Cooperation within single communities at this time emerges “naturally” through a high degree of cultural homogeneity founded on real or perceived ties of kinship. Such communities can be structured through principles of economic and social reciprocity. A key problem for such communities, however, is the establishment of good relationships with neighbors (Tudge 1996: 262). Watson Brake, and similar sites, I think, need to be thought of as trial solutions to this problem, that provide a neutral locus for friendly exchange of raw materials, mates, information—even entertainment—that extended the principle of reciprocity to between-group relations. It is perhaps not too far-fetched to suggest that each of the mounds was constructed by a particular local group in a process of friendly competition that also involved display of prowess in activities that left some traces, such as bead
making (and possibly gambling, with the squarish fired earthen objects) and perhaps races or other contests that left no trace. These activities were presumably carried out under the cover of a ceremonial system that was generic enough to appeal to all parties, though judging by the absence of exotic raw materials, the catchments of the participating groups were fairly local. The spread of these early mounds within portions of the deep Southeast suggests that such cooperating groups were at a competitive advantage, in some fashion, relative to local groups in isolation. Perhaps the early great kivas of the Anasazi operated in a structurally similar manner.

Such “solutions” are open to appropriation in at least one direction, however. Poverty Point sites (often with their six or eight mounds possibly representing specific kin groups or communities) should perhaps be understood as a development of this system in which the most populous and successful communities have captured the previously neutral locus of inter-group cooperation and exchange, and under the banner of the old ways have relocated the center of the system to coincide with the center of their own community. The Poverty Point site itself would seem to be the grandest example of such a strategy. This site was also at the nexus of a two- or three-tiered system that concentrated nonlocal raw materials from a very large area, and almost certainly transformed some of these into easily portable social assets valued more for their beauty, prestige, and powerful symbolism than for their material utility. (In this way it carried on in more grandiose fashion the tradition of adding value to raw materials already seen at places like Watson Brake.) It is perhaps significant that Poverty Point itself has only two mounds, fewer than many of the smaller centers. Perhaps Mound A, in the form of a seated bird according to Ford, represents the power of the organized labor not just of the local residents themselves, but of all the participating communities; if so it seems more likely that in these societies power was still
communally based rather than vested in a single individual. Given the rich iconography of the “portable social assets” mentioned above, and the apparent importance of these manufactures at Poverty Point, it is possible that the craft specialists were also the shamans with important roles in healing and (as privileged through possession and contact with the spirit world) group criticism. (For an insightful discussion of the shaman in hunter-gatherer societies see Wilson [1988:44-45]). As such these individuals would have esteem, but little real power. However, these societies may well represent the extreme upper limit in size and complexity that can be successfully organized on this basis.

If there is any merit to these admittedly speculative views, then it may be useful to think of the end-point of this process as providing the inception and opportunity for another appropriation, which in turn provided the fundamental basis for the organization of Woodland period communities for the next two thousand years. The usual association of Woodland mounds (in contrast to Archaic mounds) with mortuary activities involving a lengthy liminal state for the dead between their death and their permanent placement in a mound implies that collections of previously loosely coordinative communities of the Archaic had accepted their identity and focused their communal attention not on their actual relationships with each other, but on their shared relationship with their common dead and the spirit world those dead inhabit and control. Undoubtedly the elaborate services performed for the dead anticipated a reciprocal gesture towards the living whose content can only be guessed; among the Orokaiva of Papua New Guinea, in possible general analogy, people could obtain pork for consumption and exchange only through intervention by the spirits of the dead (Barraud et al. 1994:25). The visible connection with local ancestors, of course, was entirely appropriate and advantageous for horticultural societies living in an increasingly
populous countryside, and in one sense those mounds constituted the society’s corporateness and their enduring claim on their territories.

Just as importantly, however, those mounds demonstrate the ability of religious specialists to extrapolate the reciprocal relations of the living to encompass a reciprocal relation with the dead. (See Charles Spencer [1997:239] for an account of extrapolation—“an extension or projection of an internal model of authority from one social unit to others on the same level of the scalar hierarchy”—as a basic mechanism by which a control hierarchy can emerge from a heterarchy). Since the spirit world is a wholly social construction, these specialists may construct it as they please, within the constraints provided by the traditions they inherit. One source of their power is their perceived success in influencing that other world. Another source may well be that they are the permanent residents in a center which others only visit; they are thus the perpetual hosts as well as, by extension, the “hosts” of the mortuary process. Peter Wilson (1988:94) has shown how the perpetuation (i.e., extension in time) of the host:guest status may lead, eventually, to a hierarchical differentiation between chief (the perpetual host or donor) and follower (the perpetual guest or recipient). Finally, these mortuary specialists receive some legitimacy by virtue of the fact that they recognizably perpetuate (at the same time as they extend) the role of the shaman/craft specialist of late Archaic societies, who transformed materials from plain to powerful.

Constrained by a different set of traditions than the emerging spiritual elite of the southeastern woodlands, the Chacoan religious elite did not develop an ideology based on elaborate mortuary ritual, but seem to have encouraged a sort of nested metaphor for social relations within the pueblo world, in which the participating communities were “like” the households in a pueblo, and were symbolically accommodated in greatly oversized pueblos at Chaco Canyon. This
too, then, was a process of extrapolation. On more local levels, distinct but neighboring communities in the participating region were accommodated within a local great house, like single households in a pueblo. The pueblo, too, was like a household (and this provides an alternative interpretation of early great kivas as the pithouse of the pueblo). In a process of increasing generality, then, the local great house was like a pueblo, and the regional great house was like a local great house. Significantly, the visitors to the Chacoan great houses were by this model temporary guests and in a position of structural inferiority to their donor/hosts. Nevertheless, a specific household in the larger Chacoan world could conceptualize its relationships with very distant households in the same world as being “like” its relationship with other households in its local pueblo. The religious elites of Chaco, then, were “like” the respected elders of the pueblo, but with larger scope; the riches with which these perpetual hosts were interred suggests that they were not above exploiting the analogy.

By this logic, at least in theory these nested relationships were (I suspect) governed by principles of balanced reciprocity. Elsewhere, Van West and I (Kohler and Van West 1996) have argued that microeconomic considerations should promote activity in such sharing networks during periods of high agricultural yields. Van West and I have noted that in Southwest Colorado, population aggregates tend to break up during periods of low yields. In like fashion, it is no coincidence that Chaco Canyon loses its position as the great house of great houses during a period of sustained low productivity in the mid-A.D. 1100s. It would be interesting to know the role that local resentment of the increasingly institutionalized elites at Chaco may also have played in this reorientation of focus.

Finally, in closing, we still have to consider the Mississippian Southeast. In Woodland-style societies a common (though not the only) pattern was lightly
inhabited central places with caretakers specializing in maintaining mortuaries and handling relations with the dead, which also had a reciprocal character, and coordinating rituals of renewal and purification that united an often dispersed populace that recognized some kinship. These societies were transformed through the addition of a highly productive maize agriculture with ensuing population growth and competition for productive locations. Due to their larger social and spatial scales these societies could no longer rely solely on reciprocity (or even the myth of reciprocity) to achieve cooperation, and had to layer payment and receipt of tribute, and threats of sanctions, onto the earlier mechanisms to achieve political integration of increasingly unrelated populations. Quite a bit of work in the field of multi-agent simulation points to the usefulness of “norms-enforcers” in maintaining cooperation in large societies (e.g., Axelrod 1986) and, of course, a chief is a sort of norm-enforcer.

Given the frequency with which sacred authority seems to have been used in both the Southeast and the Southwest as a device for extending the secular power of a nascent elite, the most plausible general scenario is that Mississippian chiefly authority is an extrapolation of the power entrusted to the caretakers of the dead in Woodland societies. The initial rise to power of some individuals in this category appears often to have involved large-scale import and broad redistribution of exotic goods and materials; this is one aspect of deep tradition that is drawn on by both petty chiefs and later paramounts to legitimize their rule. Clearly the successful early paramounts were “good hosts” and part of the increase in their power, compared to their Woodland predecessors, lay in the much greater agricultural production, larger populations, and greater labor capacity of their “guests.” This contributed both the to military effectiveness of chiefs, and to their ability to subsidize the adding of value to raw materials. The continuation of the specific symbolism of the platform mounds, possibly involving communal rites of
renewal (Knight 1989) was another source of continuing power. Eventually, however, following lines of argument suggested by Pauketat and Knight, the amount of imported materials falls off, and is concentrated in the hands of the elite, who for whatever reason are no longer able to consistently be generous hosts. In the declining phase of power, these symbols become popular property and it is a measure of the decline in power of the elite that this is allowed to happen. The general problem as to what causes the decline of specific places and polities is almost certainly linked, in the Southeast as in the Southwest, to material considerations of declines in production or depletion of resources in conjunction with the costs and burdens of maintaining superordinate structures.

What then, in closing, of Trigger’s characterization of monuments as a form of conspicuous consumption flaunting the ability of the elite to defy the principles of least-effort? By the logic presented here this concept is, I suggest, inapplicable to Archaic monumentality, where we search in vain for an elite. We might expect that the communities (such as Poverty Point) that “captured” the neutral loci for inter-group activities (as carried out as places like Watson Brake) derived some power from their status as host, but I would suggest that this power was still generalized within the community (though the craftsmen/shamans, if this role in fact existed, would have been due some special regard). In Woodland societies, however, the development of a complicated mortuary system, centralized and shared by collaborating peripheral communities, provided a role for its managers that could become the basis for real, if somewhat temporary, power as the products of the labor it commanded were magnified by the development of a highly productive agricultural system. Here only, in Mississippian times, do we find monuments that approach the spirit of Trigger’s definition, and even here, when these societies were operating most effectively, the perception of the
participants may have been more commonly one of willing participation in a communal endeavor than of coerced labor in service of a socially distant elite.

In reflecting on the record reviewed here (or at least, on this interpretation of it) it is remarkable how rarely truly novel social or political structures appear, and how much more common it has been for emergent structures and roles to extend an earlier scope to operate on a broader social or spatial scale. Archaic societies in Eastern North America appear to have forged alliances with their neighbors by exchange of raw materials and mates at neutral inter-group loci, extending the ancient principles of within-group reciprocity to operate between groups. The role of the chief in Mississippian societies seems to have extended that of the Woodland mortuary practitioner, which in turn perhaps extended that of a putative shaman/craftsman in Late Archaic societies. Apprenticeship, imitation, borrowing, and metaphor-making are the common tools with which we humans weave both social continuity and social change.

Acknowledgments

I thank Jim Knight, Jerry Milanich, and Joe Saunders for providing many of the slides used in the oral presentation of this paper, and Knight, Saunders, and Bill Lipe for helpful comments on the oral version. Jim Knight also called my attention to Warren DeBoer’s recent (1997) article on monumentality. I could not at that point revise this to take DeBoer’s arguments into account; interested readers will find some useful parallels in our approaches, even though his perspective is fundamentally structural and mine processual. Finally, I thank the organizers for their generous invitation to participate in this symposium; Sarah Moore for drafting Figure 1; and the Santa Fe Institute whose various stimulating programs have influenced some of the ideas herein.
Bibliography

Adler, Michael, and Richard H. Wilshusen

Anderson, David G.

Axelrod, Robert

Barraud, Cécile, Daniel de Coppet, André Iteanu, and Raymond Janous

Bird, Kathleen M., editor

Blitz, John H.
Brown, Ian W.
1994  Recent Trends in the Archaeology of the Southeastern United States.  
Journal of Archaeological Research 2:45-111.

Claasen, Cheryl P.

Clay, R. Berle

Dalan, Rinita

DeBoer, Warren R.

Faulkner, Charles H.
Fish, Paul R., and Suzanne K. Fish  
1994  Southwest and Northwest: Recent Research at the Juncture of the United States and Mexico. *Journal of Archaeological Research* 2:3-44.

Ford, James A.  
1954  Additional notes on the Poverty Point site in northern Louisiana.  

Gibson, Jon L.  

Gremillion, Kristen J.  

Jackson, W. Edwin  

Kelly, John E.
1991a The Emergence of Mississippian Culture in the American Bottom Region. In *The Mississippian Emergence*, edited by Bruce Smith, pp. 113-152. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C.


Knight, V. J., Jr.


1990a *Excavation at the Truncated Mound at the Walling Site: Middle Woodland Culture and Copena in the Tennessee Valley*. Reports of Investigations 56. Division of Archaeology, Alabama State Museum of Natural History, University of Alabama.


Knight, V. J., Jr., and V. P. Steponaitis

Kohler, Timothy A.


Kohler, Timothy A., and Carla Van West


Lightfoot, Ricky R., Alice M. Emerson, and Eric Blinman


Lindauer, Own, and John H. Blitz


Lopinot, Neal H.

Mallam, R. Clark  
1976 *The Iowa Effigy Mound Manifestation: An Interpretive Model*. Report 9, Office of the State Archaeologist, University of Iowa, Iowa City.

Mainfort, R. C., Jr., and R. Walling  

Milanich, Jerald T., Ann S. Cordell, Vernon J. Knight, Jr., Timothy A. Kohler, and Brenda J. Sigler-Lavelle  

Minnis, Paul  

Muller, Jon  

Pauketat, Timothy  

Pauketat, Timothy, and Thomas Emerson


Petersen, James B., and Nancy Asch Sidell


Piatek, B. J.


Rafferty, J.


Russo, Michael


P. 32
Sassaman, Kenneth E.


Saunders, Joe W., et al.


Sebastian, Lynne


Seeman, Mark F.


Spencer, Charles S.


Stein, John R., and Andrew P. Fowler

Steponaitis, V. P.

Squier, Ephraim G., and Edwin H. Davis
1848  *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley*. Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge 1, Washington, D.C.

Thomas, Cyrus

Trigger, Bruce

Tudge, Calvin

Webb, Clarence H.
1977 *The Poverty Point Culture*. Geoscience and Man XVII. School of Geoscience, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge.

Webb, William S.
1946 *Indian Knoll Site, OH2, Ohio County, Kentucky*. *University of Kentucky Reports in Anthropology and Archaeology* 4(3) Part I:113-165.

Welch, Paul D.

Wilcox, David R., and Charles Sternberg

Wilson, Peter

**Figure Caption**

Figure 1. Map of selected sites and regions mentioned in the text.