

# THE BIOARCHAEOLOGY OF VIRGINIA BURIAL MOUNDS



DEBRA L. GOLD

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# The Bioarchaeology of Virginia Burial Mounds

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To work with human remains is a  
privilege unlike any other in archaeology.  
This work is dedicated to the people  
whose skeletons I studied.

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# Introduction

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Though its starting point is death, the real focus of this study is the life of late prehistoric Native American peoples of interior Virginia. This region was at the crossroads of some of the most fascinating cultural developments of late prehistoric North America. To the west and south were the centers of the Mississippian chiefdoms, with large earthen mounds, hierarchical settlement patterns, and plentiful, often exotic, material goods. The people of interior Virginia did not participate in the Mississippian phenomenon, at least not directly, but they were not far removed from it either. To the east, along Virginia's Coastal Plain, lived the various societies that by the late sixteenth century comprised the Powhatan chiefdom. Understanding the lifeways of the late prehistoric native peoples of interior Virginia is an integral part of understanding eastern North America in the centuries before European contact.

For a variety of reasons, European explorers and settlers largely ignored the mid-Atlantic coast in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. By 1607, when the English established the first tenuous settlement at what became known as Jamestown, the native peoples of coastal Virginia were loosely allied under the paramount chief Powhatan. Ethnohistoric documents chronicle many aspects of Powhatan life at the time of Jamestown, but we know little about the development of the Powhatan chiefdom, a subject of much debate (e.g., Barker 1992; Fausz 1986; Feest 1978; Potter 1993; Rountree 1989).

Although Chief Powhatan's power on the coast of Virginia was far from absolute, it was substantial. Like many leaders in the protohistoric Eastern Woodlands, Powhatan obtained and maintained his power through a combination of physical conquest, intimidation, and ongoing political negotiations.

The Powhatans strongly discouraged the English colonists from traveling to Virginia's interior, the territory of the Monacan peoples. The Pow-

hatans referred to the Monacans as their enemies, and the English had very little contact with these native peoples of Virginia's interior regions until well into the seventeenth century. Until recently, much of what we thought we knew about the Monacans was shaped by the biases of the Powhatans and the ignorance of the English. Seen through Powhatan eyes, Monacan territory was the hinterlands and the territory of enemies. We now know that this was not the reality of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century society. The Monacans are not just a "forgotten people" whose cultural history should be reconstructed for the sake of accuracy and completeness. Understanding them and their changing interactions with the world around them over hundreds of years is essential to understanding the larger context of late prehistoric societies in eastern North America.

The Late Woodland period was a time of interesting and important changes throughout eastern North America, including Virginia. Prior to this time, native peoples of Virginia were primarily hunter-gatherers living in small, seasonally mobile populations with great similarities in lifeways throughout the region. By about A.D. 550 there is evidence for seasonal semipermanent settlements and increasing exchange of goods throughout the Middle Atlantic Region. After A.D. 900, there is evidence for loosely allied permanent settlements of small villages located alongside crop fields on the floodplains. Site patterning and artifact analysis suggest the emergence of both spatial and cultural boundaries between the peoples of coastal Virginia and those living to the west in interior Virginia. Archaeological evidence suggests that a cultural boundary between what became the Powhatan and Monacan areas first developed sometime around or slightly before A.D. 900 and was maintained into the seventeenth century, spanning the entire Late Woodland period. These Late Woodland peoples were sedentary farmers, dispersed over a fairly large area but with a unified identity expressed through material goods, settlement patterns, and mortuary ritual. Recent research has substantially increased our understanding of Monacan history, but many critical issues have remained unresolved, especially those relating to human demography, subsistence economy, health, and *political organization that changed through the Late Woodland period.*

Accretional burial mounds are a defining characteristic of Late Woodland interior Virginia. By late prehistory at least 13 of these sites were scattered through the Piedmont and Ridge-and-Valley provinces of central Virginia. The mounds were a substantial physical presence on the landscape. They were constructed of earth and stone, with diameters of 40 to 80 feet and heights of 12 to 15 feet. Their impressiveness was probably enhanced by the fact that they were built on the broad, flat floodplains of Virginia's major rivers and tributaries. Most of the burial mound sites seem to have

been associated with contemporaneous village sites, although we still need more detailed archaeological study in order to understand this relationship fully. These mounds are the clearest surviving physical evidence of the development and maintenance of an ancestral Monacan Indian identity. Without a complete understanding of these burial sites, it is impossible to understand who the Monacans were and are or to grasp the importance of Monacan history in the larger realm of late prehistoric and protohistoric interactions in Virginia.

This study developed from my interest in the bioarchaeology of small-scale, sedentary, or mostly sedentary, village societies. Bioarchaeology has been underutilized in the examination of “middle range” societies, and one of the goals of this study is to develop a general understanding of the patterns of demography, subsistence, and health in small-scale sedentary societies that is applicable beyond the study area. Bioarchaeology looks at the interrelationships among biological, cultural, and environmental variables and allows the study of social questions using biological data. Contemporary bioarchaeologists look at the ways in which biological variables like age, sex, diet, and health intersect with such cultural variables as gender, status, power, and subsistence.

Although bioarchaeology is a still emerging subdiscipline of physical anthropology and anthropological archaeology, the Eastern Woodlands of North America have an especially distinguished history of bioarchaeological study. Many of the pioneering bioarchaeological studies were completed in this region. These studies have generally focused on two topics: first, changes in population health with the adoption of agriculture and, second, the relationship among status, diet, and health in Mississippian chiefdoms. I am interested in a related issue, namely, how subsistence and health are involved in the workings of small-scale, sedentary societies and their relationship to incipient or emergent inequality. This part of the study goes beyond the Monacans—even beyond eastern North America—to look at the role of subsistence and health, everyday things, in middle range societies.

My goal is to examine aspects of and changes in social and political life through the Late Woodland period in interior Virginia. I am interested in the daily life of the native peoples of Virginia, especially in the wider context of the late prehistoric Eastern Woodlands. The study presents new information on the demography, diet, health, and mortuary activity of the populations that interred their dead in the interior Virginia burial mounds. I find that the variation in skeletal markers of mortuary processing, demography, subsistence, and health shows a pattern of broad similarity across interior Virginia, but with local variation in dietary and health patterns consistent with localized resource exploitation and subsis-

tence preferences. The overall pattern is one of sufficient and varied dietary resources and good health, interspersed with what appear to be intermittent periods of violence.

These patterns encompass hundreds of years, indicating the stability of these small-scale, sedentary, horticultural societies from at least A.D. 900 through the fifteenth or sixteenth century. There are, however, important changes through time, including emphasis on collective secondary burial, a trend toward improvement in health, and, perhaps, an increase in hostility in late prehistory. I do not think it is coincidental that these changes occur concurrently with the emergence of increasingly formalized sociopolitical inequality toward the later part of the Late Woodland period. I argue that the skeletal data presented here are consistent with the presence of kin-based sedentary village societies dominated by one or more of the type of leaders we label “headmen,” “bigmen,” or “aggrandizers.” I suggest that several different recent archaeological models—peer polity interaction (Renfrew and Cherry 1986), heterarchy (Crumley 1987, 1995), network interaction (Blanton et al. 1996), and sequential hierarchy (Johnson 1982)—present similar approaches to the examination of small-scale sedentary societies within a regional framework. I argue that these models, especially the concept of sequential hierarchy (Johnson 1982), are applicable to interior Virginia in the seven centuries prior to European contact and can help us to explain this dynamic and poorly understood period.

I begin this study with an exploration of the ethnohistory and archaeology of late prehistoric and protohistoric Virginia (Chapter 1). The ethnohistory is almost entirely restricted to descriptions of the Powhatans by the English, but the archaeology of the region now includes a great deal of information on the Monacans as well. In Chapter 2, I describe the variety of mortuary sites constructed and used in late prehistoric Virginia. I describe the burial mounds, and especially the sites in this study, in detail and provide new data and interpretation of the chronology of these sites.

In Chapter 3, I provide the anthropological background and justification for the approach I am using here. I focus on anthropologically informed archaeology of middle range societies and sequential hierarchies as well as the ways in which bioarchaeology may contribute to our understanding of these small-scale, sedentary societies. Following this discussion, I enumerate specific expectations for the bioarchaeology of middle range societies. In Chapter 4, I use bioarchaeological data to test the hypotheses presented in Chapter 3. I infer from these data an overall pattern of stability and local autonomy among the Late Woodland village societies of interior Virginia. The subsistence pattern of a mixture of maize farming and the utilization of wild terrestrial and riverine plant and animal foods held strong for over 600 years. During this time, population health was

generally good, and there is evidence that it improved over time. At the same time, the skeletal evidence suggests that there was an increase in violent interactions during the later Late Woodland period.

In the concluding chapter, I summarize my findings and place them into the wider context of late prehistoric eastern North America.



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# From Jefferson to Jamestown

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## Monacan History through English Eyes

### 1

Virginia mound archaeology has a well-known starting point: Thomas Jefferson's late-eighteenth-century excavation of a burial mound near his home at Monticello (Jefferson 1954). Unlike many who came after him, Jefferson recognized the connection of contemporary Native Americans to the mound he excavated. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, written in the late eighteenth century, he describes an event he apparently viewed years earlier:

[O]n whatever occasion they [the burial mounds] may have been made, they are of considerable notoriety among the Indians: for a party passing, about thirty years ago, through the part of the country where this barrow is, went through the woods directly to it, without any instructions or inquiry, and having staid about it some time, with expressions of sorrow, they returned to the high road, which they had left about half a dozen miles to pay this visit, and pursued their journey. (Jefferson 1954:100)

Jefferson believed that the mounds were constructed and used by the immediate ancestors of the Indians living in eighteenth-century Virginia, although Hantman's examination of Jefferson's writing and its historical context strongly suggests that Jefferson did not view his work as addressing the mound builder myth (Hantman 1998; Hantman and Dunham 1993). Scholarly concern with the mound builders was still nearly a century away, and most of the Virginia archaeologists who succeeded Jefferson were even less clear about the link between Virginia's contemporary Native Americans and the burial mounds that dotted the landscape of central Virginia. More recent research has been hindered by the lack of ethno-historic descriptions of interior Virginia. The Jamestown colonists barely