

EDITED BY JON L. GIBSON AND PHILIP J. CARR

SIGNS OF



POWER

THE RISE OF CULTURAL COMPLEXITY IN THE SOUTHEAST

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The Rise of Cultural Complexity in the Southeast

Edited by
JON L. GIBSON and PHILIP J. CARR

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This book was born on a mustard-smeared napkin in a foyer of a New Orleans hotel. It all started innocently enough—Joe Saunders, Bob Connolly, Phil Carr, and Jon Gibson brainstorming about a symposium we wanted to offer to the 1999 Southeastern Archaeological Conference in Pensacola. Well, maybe it was not so innocent: scribbling covered both sides of the napkin. Mainly because Gibson wound up with the napkin and Carr had the pen, they, by default, became the organizers for the symposium that was called “Big Mound Power” but actually turned out to be a rather freewheeling discourse on Archaic hunter-gatherer power and complexity. Thanks to strong performances by the original cast—David Anderson, Sam Brookes, Phil Carr and Lee Stewart, Cheryl Claassen, John Clark, Bob Connolly, Robert Dunnell and Carl Lipo, Jon Gibson, Jose Iriarte, Dick Jefferies, George Milner, Mike Russo, Ken Sassaman, Joe Saunders, Vin Steponaitis, Prentice Thomas and Jan Campbell, Corbett Torrance, Nancy White, and Dolf Widmer—there were few unfilled seats during the session. By sunset, the organizers had been approached about turning the papers into a book, and by nightfall, a poll of the participants found that most were willing to take the next step, and they agreed to a follow-up meeting that would help everybody decide what everybody else was talking about.

That second gathering took place at Poverty Point during the autumnal equinox in 2000. It was a four-day, no-holds-barred, delightful jousting of the minds on major issues of organization and empowerment in simple and intermediate social formations in southern North America. Making the Poverty Point pilgrimage were original participants David Anderson, Sam Brookes, Phil Carr, John Clark, Bob Connolly, Jon Gibson, Mike Russo, Joe Saunders, Lee Stewart, Nancy White, and Dolf Widmer, as well as new invitees George Crothers, Tom Eubanks, and Becky Saunders. What better place to talk about hunter-gatherer complexity than on Poverty Point’s ancient grounds? Whether it was carrying

on discussions atop the bird mound in the bright sunlight or atop Mound B at night when even the owls fell silent, listening, Poverty Point recharged everyone with enthusiasm for this undertaking.

Now, four years after a scribbled-on napkin started us on our way, the University of Alabama Press has turned our thoughts into a book and a mighty fine-looking one at that. We are much obliged to many fine people who lent a helping hand along the way. John Kelly and Jay Johnson, our reviewers, caught threadbare sections in the manuscript before they reached public eye. Elizabeth Benchley, program chair for the fifty-sixth Southeastern Archaeological Conference, made room for the day-long symposium in Pensacola. Commentary by John Clark, George Milner, and Vin Steponaitis, our symposium discussants, helped stew and simmer conference papers into book-worthy servings and earned Mesoamericanist Clark an honorary membership in the sodality of Southeastern archaeologists. Dwight Landreneaux, Director of the Louisiana Office of State Parks, gave the okay for the Poverty Point gathering and for videotaping the event. Dennis LaBatt, Manager of the Poverty Point State Historic Site, was our sponsor and host. He provided meeting places, gave us our daily bread and beds, and led the way through the mounds and rings one bright afternoon. His staff shared the giving spirit too. Linda York brought our breakfast fixings every morning; Robert Pickering fried Opelousa catfish caught that very day in the bayou that runs by the rings, proving beyond a shadow of a doubt what really fueled Poverty Point's phenomenal growth. Betty Miller and Gloria Lemon cooked our supper, and David Griffing did the little things that lightened our burden. Joe Saunders and Recca Jones took us to see Lower Jackson and Watson Brake. Michelle Cossey, Louis Courville, Kisha Holmes, and Josetta LeBouef, University of Louisiana, Lafayette, anthropology students past and present, did everything short of reading palms and making short-term loans to keep the meeting running smoothly. Michelle arranged for Geoff Douville to videotape the gathering, and we owe Geoff a shiny doubloon for donating his time, camera, and tapes.

Back at UL Lafayette, archaeology lab assistants Michelle Cossey, Karen Chuter, Melissa Collins, and Kellie Thomassee transcribed audiotapes, compared them with videotapes in order to get speakers properly blamed, and typed the full transcript. Michelle went back through the transcript and replaced preliminary identifications—big cowboy, big fast-talker, blondie, witty guy, pretty dark-haired lady, and good-looking fellow—with given names. Transcribers knew other participants and recognized their voices but sometimes even that did not stop their vivid identifications. The editors had to eliminate some IDs in order to keep our PG-13 rating. At one time, we contemplated including an edited version of the sessions, but after seeing how much work would have been involved, we decided against it.

This book bears scars from rampant worms and viruses, as well as a faulty power source. But all the cyber problems in the world cannot suppress the word, especially when Piper Smith and Lark Goodwin, Gibson's two favorite nieces, recreated lost files from hard copy. Further cleanup of the text and figures for the final draft was aided by Harriet Richardson Seacat and Sarah Mattics, staff members of the University of South Alabama Center for Archaeological Studies.

We editors have been told how self-appreciating it sounds to thank contributors for writing their own book, but neither of us has ever paid much attention to such advice. Our mammas taught us both to say thanks when folks did you a favor. We didn't convert oral presentations into book chapters with wave of wand or cast of spell. Authors did that bit of magic themselves with Logitech keyboard and hard-won data. Salient points ripened under each others' gazes and were served up for a second round of feasting at the Poverty Point miniconference. *Signs of Power* chapters have been tempered with grog from both Pensacola and Poverty Point forerunners. For staying with the effort in the years between Pensacola and Tuscaloosa through conflicting class schedules, contract meetings, fieldwork, grocery shopping, and short periods of sleep, *Signs of Power* authors have the editors' deepest gratitude and hand in friendship. To Dave, Sam, Jan, John, Wildcat George, Gator Mike, Dick, Nittany Lion George, Jim, Bluewater Mike, Ken, Joe, Lee, Prentice, Nancy, and Dolf, Phil and Jon doff their hats and raise their mugs to each of you. Salute, y'all.

Phil thanks Amy and Jon thanks Mary Beth for approving their own sabbaticals from housework, yardwork, and normal life and for sticking by them during their leaves, with love.

Jon L. Gibson
Lake Claiborne, Louisiana

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Big Mounds, Big Rings, Big Power

Jon L. Gibson and Philip J. Carr

The ancient monuments . . . consist . . . of elevations and embankments of earth and stone, erected with great labor and manifest design.

Ephraim Squier and Edwin Davis,
Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley (1848)

Mounds have quickened the pulse of American antiquarians and archaeologists for generations. They still do. Who among you could stay calm after hacking a trail through a bottomland-hardwood jungle and suddenly realizing that the incline you're struggling to climb is no natural levee but a lost Indian mound? Or stand atop a mound on a starlit night with a handful of fellow archaeologists and keep from getting caught up in what the wind is whispering or help wondering whether the owl hooting deep in the woods is bird or shilombish?¹ No use pretending, mounds are as magical today as ever. The contributors to this book are come before you to explain some of that magic.

ANCIENT MOUNDS AND THEIR BUILDERS

Mound builders always have been considered culturally more sophisticated and evolutionarily more advanced than groups who did not build mounds. But were they really? What about builders of the very first Archaic mounds? Were they more socially and politically adept than their hunter-gatherer forefathers and neighbors or just different? Archaeologists labored long under sway of hunter-gatherers as short-lived brutes spending every waking moment filling their bellies (Hobbes 1968 [1651]) or as lay ecologists basking in the leisure afforded by an almost serendipitous affluence (Sahlins 1968a, 1972). Ethnographically known hunter-gatherers did not engage in public construction, and only in rare prehistoric instances, such as Poverty Point in the Lower Mississippi Valley and shell rings on the southern Atlantic coast, were Archaic hunter-gatherers accorded mound-building motives and skills. Still, such primal cases were considered atypical, ahistorical—as cases lying outside mainstream cultural developments and forming exceptions to widely accepted generalizations of Archaic lifeways in the southeastern United States. Archaeologists were taken with the generalized

foraging model of egalitarian hunter-gatherers going about their business in an efficient, no-nonsense way—so much so, in fact, that they skipped over the fact that the model was based on historically marginalized foragers, not on pristine foragers living in bountiful environments.

The issue of social complexity drives authors' searches here just as it did two centuries ago when antiquarians were trying to explain the enigma of the mounds and their builders. But there is a difference. Our searches are guided by history, not presumptions about complexity as a monolithic sociopolitical condition or cultural developmental stage. To a person, authors herein subscribe to complexity as "that which is composed of many interrelated parts" (Price and Brown 1985:7), as opposed to simplicity, which we construe as sociality having fewer parts. Conceptually, "hunter-gatherer" covers a potentially vast range of variability between traditional views of simple, egalitarian hunter-gatherers and advanced, ranked chiefdoms. Hunter-gatherer complexity has come under fire for making "simple" hunter-gatherers less social, apolitical, and unorganized, perceptions that have dominated traditional views of Archaic foragers. But the discovery of Archaic mounds prompts us to characterize their builders as complex, a wonderfully vague description that highlights that variability while sending us searching for its sources.

Interest in mounds has deepened since it was discovered how old some Louisiana and Florida mounds really are. Today, people do not roll their eyes at claims of 6,000-year-old mounds, but this was not the case a few short years ago. For a half-century, Poverty Point earthworks claimed title as the oldest in the continental United States (Ford and Webb 1956), and they dated to sometime between 1730 and 1350 cal B.C. Claims of even older Archaic mounds were dismissed out of hand for contravening conventional wisdom and, worse, for being seditious. Like the Missouri mule, the archaeological establishment had to be shown the truth and lots of it. Radiocarbon dating and elegance of argument were the capstones, but it was widespread realization that some Archaic fisher-hunter-gatherer groups manifested social formations and practices once accorded only to farming groups that softened skepticism about the early age of mounds. The quiet acceptance of Archaic origin brings us to the point where we can now ask after the sources of power and sociality behind primordial mound building, an impossibility a few years ago. Yet, as is often the case when data run ahead of theorizing, tough questions abound and open new avenues of research regarding relationships and interactions between regions where Archaic mounds were built and those where they were not. But the primary concern is time-honored—just how socially complex Archaic mound builders really were.

While neither complete in coverage nor unified by similar datasets or approaches, the body of research presented in the following pages represents our attempts to get a handle on Southeast Archaic lifeways, some embodying public

construction and elaborate stone and bone artifacts and some lacking them (Figure 1.1). We recognize that general characterizations on the scale of regions and periods are as likely to be wrong for specific places and times as they are correct. Syntheses that portray Archaic hunter-gatherers as mobile, egalitarian populations roaming over a sparsely populated land do not always fit the data, as this book bears witness.

ARCHAIC SOCIALITY: TECHNOLOGY AND ARCHITECTURE

The rise of chiefdoms and hereditary social inequality has claimed center stage in contemporary research into Native American cultural complexity. It has not been that long since archaeologists assumed stilled mobility and horticultural economy were essential for chiefdom organization. Mounds and craft specialists were part of the mix as well. We have since learned that structural linkages between these variables are neither simple nor, more important, causal (e.g., Arnold, ed. 1996; Feinman 1995). John Clark and associates have, for example, proposed that some ancient Mesoamerican communities, such as Paso de la Amada, turned to farming sooner than others, because corn was used to make not tortillas but beer for competitive feasting (Clark and Blake 1994). To other researchers, hereditary inequality and foraging were structurally and organizationally incompatible, although the Calusa fisher folk of Florida's Gulf Coast and some salmon-fishing peoples of the northwestern Pacific Coast were long recognized as exceptions. But these were well-documented historic groups. What about Archaic foragers and collectors—the first groups on the North American mainland to deal with matters besides raising a family and finding supper and to leave earth and shell monuments and stone and bone masterpieces to show for it?

Archaic mound and ring building is only the flash point for a broader inquiry on Archaic organization and power. Contributors to this book examine other Archaic technologies and practices regarded as being out of sync with traditional perceptions of hunter-gatherer organization. Their unitary goal is to collect data and infer aspects of hunter-gatherer organization instead of relying on traditional models and perceptions.

Before Poverty Point, some Southeast groups wielded polished-stone and chipped-stone technologies that excelled in craftsmanship and beauty of line and finish. Arlatl weights, particularly bannerstones, were crown jewels of Middle Archaic sites on the Tennessee and Green Rivers during the third and fourth millennia B.C. (Moore 1916). A few unfinished and broken weights came from domestic contexts, but whole objects came from graves or deposits suggesting that their social importance outweighed practical importance in the end (Sassaman 1996). In familiar social groupings, the practical and the social were in-

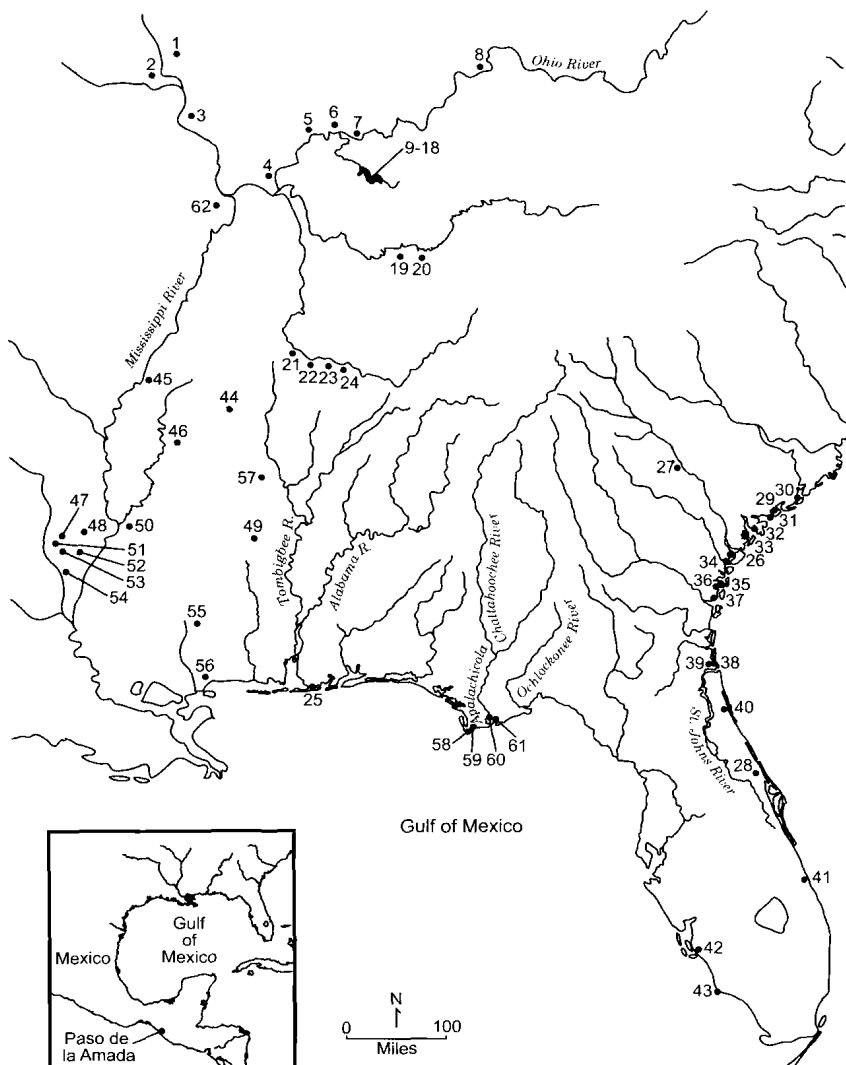


Figure 1.1. Location of key sites discussed in this volume. 1, Koster; 2, Arnold Research Cave; 3, Modoc Rock Shelter; 4, Black Earth; 5, Bluegrass; 6, McCain; 7, Crib Mound; 8, KYANG; 9, Kirkland; 10, Jackson Bluff; 11, Baker; 12, Jintown Hill; 13, Carlston Annis; 14, Read; 15, Barrett; 16, Butterfield; 17, Ward; 18, Indian Knoll; 19, Anderson; 20, Unnamed; 21, Long Branch; 22, Mulberry Creek; 23, Perry; 24, Little Bear Creek; 25, Van Horn; 26, Bilbo; 27, Stallings Island; 28, Tick Island; 29, Lighthouse Point; 30, Sewee; 31, Fig Island; 32, Coosaw; 33, Sea Pines; 34, Skidaway; 35, Busch Krick; 36, Sapelo; 37, Cannon's Point; 38, Rollins; 39, Oxeye; 40, Guana; 41, Joseph Reed; 42, Bonita Bay; 43, Horr's Island; 44, Humber; 45, Oak; 46, Denton; 47, Frenchman's Bend; 48, Poverty Point; 49, Nanih Waiya; 50, Jaketown; 51, Plum Creek; 52, Insley; 53, Watson Brake; 54, Caney; 55, Keenan Bead Cache; 56, Cedarland/Claiborne; 57, Vaughan; 58, Clark Creek shell midden; 59, Pickalene Midden; 60, Van Horn Creek shell mound; 61, Sam's Cutoff shell mound; 62, Burkett.