

# From Quarry to Cornfield

The Political Economy  
of Mississippian Hoe Production



Charles R. Cobb

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In memory of my grandmother, Mamie Seaton,  
who would have been the first archaeologist in the  
family, had she been born in another generation.

# Acknowledgments

The research represented in this book was carried out in two pulses. It began as my dissertation study, which was completed in 1988. After a hiatus of several years, I picked the thread up again in 1991 after I arrived at Binghamton University. I thus have had the good fortune to revisit an earlier body of research with additional fieldwork and analyses, which, not unexpectedly, altered many of the substantive conclusions in my original study. Further, my perspective on political economy has continued to evolve, resulting in theoretical changes in the original study as well. The somewhat lengthy time devoted to my study of the production and exchange of prehistoric hoes has resulted in a huge debt to numerous institutions and people who facilitated the logistical aspects of my work and who contributed to the ongoing gestation of my theoretical ideas.

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# 1 A Day in the Life

By the beginning of the second millennium A.D. human communities had been extracting metals and minerals from the earth's crust for thousands of years. Steady advances in quarrying and mining technologies had provided growing access to a broad range of raw materials widely valued as markers of wealth or as utilitarian resources. In turn, these substances—such as gold, copper, tin, and salt—were increasingly important in trade networks. In the Old World, demand for the earth's treasures was an important dimension of the global economy that was taking shape by the 1400s.

Several centuries before the development of the mercantile system that would create upheaval in the New World, a group of villagers was busy at work in the flinty hills northeast of the confluence of the mighty Ohio and Mississippi rivers in the present-day United States. Continuing a tradition that their ancestors had followed for generations, the villagers excavated into a hillside with stone spades in search of one of the most prized raw materials of their era. They pried brown, flat chert nodules from the earth and placed them in a growing pile. At the end of the day, the pile of stones was carried to the top of the hill, where a small village of 10 wattle-and-daub structures stood. Over the course of the next few days, several accomplished flintknappers from the village transformed the crude nodules into well-crafted hoes and spades. Holding a few aside for their own use, they placed the remaining two score or so into large, bark-woven bags.

The following morning a number of villagers gathered the bags and threw them over their backs. Setting off westward, they followed a well-worn path that snaked through the hills and avoided the steeper terrain. After the good part of a day, their path emerged from a break in the hills and entered the expansive floodplain of the Mississippi River. The flat relief was a sharp contrast to the hills where the men and women lived. As they continued on their now level trail, they began to approach a tight group of low prominences that interrupted the

even line of the horizon. The irregularities on the landscape slowly came into focus as a series of rounded and flat-topped earthen mounds. A stockade of tall posts punctuated by square bastions every 40 or 50 paces enclosed the tumuli. The porters passed through a small opening in the stockade wall and entered a vibrant village several times larger than their own. Smoke rising from roofs marked a busy residential area consisting of about 50 houses. In the center of the village was a large plaza surrounded by five large mounds. Two of the mounds had structures on top, but timber walls around them prevented the visitors from having a clear view of the activities of the secluded priestly leaders.

The weary travelers were led into the village and made welcome by relatives and old acquaintances. After an evening of feasting and storytelling, the following day was spent bartering over the contents of the bags. The visitors passed on the stone tools to their trading partners, and in turn refilled their bags with a variety of foods and crafts. Once again, they placed the bags on their backs, bid farewell to their friends and neighboring families, and retraced their steps home.

With some variation, the stone tools continued their journey. The new owners held some aside for their own use, then placed the remainder along with other regionally procured goods, such as galena cubes and fluorite beads, into a wooden canoe that lay beached alongside a large creek running by their village. Shoving into the water, they paddled downstream several miles until they entered the Mississippi River. The canoe was turned upstream and kept close to the shore to avoid the worst of the current. After a lengthy journey northward, the canoe was pulled ashore and the group hoisted their packs like their trading partners before them; then they continued inland on foot.

After passing a number of villages, the travelers approached yet another set of artificial hills on the flat landscape. Impressive as their own village was, these mounds dwarfed their own, even towering over the remaining patches of forest that broke up the large fields of maize. They recognized many of the features of their own village in this town, but as with the gargantuan mounds, everything in this huge settlement was many magnitudes larger. Hundreds of structures were visible, grouped into neighborhoods. Mounds also seemed to be grouped into clusters, usually arranged around plazas. By far the largest grouping occupied the center of the town, dominated by a tremendous platform mound that overshadowed the entire community. Artificial lakes dotted the area, where rainwater had filled in borrow pits gouged by the removal of clay to build all of the earthworks. Everywhere life teemed. Dogs barked, people played ball games in the plazas, the smells of cooking emanated from the various barrios, and several new mounds were in the process of being erected.

Impressed as they were by these sights, the newcomers had seen them before. Replaying a scene from their own village several days earlier, they were greeted by old friends, fed, and put up for the night in preparation for a new round of trading for the goods they carried. Two days later they returned home carrying items not easily obtained in their own village: an embossed copper plate, a shell gorget, and several quartz crystals.

In the large town to the north, the stone tools entered the final stage of their journey. The collection was broken up into smaller lots and distributed among households. The tools were hafted onto short wooden handles and became workable spades and hoes, particularly useful for cultivating fields that provided the maize, beans, and squash that were the mainstays of the diet. And in an interesting twist, the tools that were crafted by the hands of men saw much of their use in the hands of women, who tended the fields and did most of the harvesting. The women considered the hoes an essential part of their daily toolkit. The edges of the tools were resharpened as they became dull or damaged to prolong their usefulness. During the seasons when the tools were not being used, special care was taken to cache them in storage pits in the floors of their houses. Sometimes the houses had to be unexpectedly abandoned due to accidental fires and the caches would be forgotten. There they would remain for centuries until they were discovered by archaeologists and put into use again; not as implements for cultivating plants, but as tools for recreating and understanding a lifeway that had long since disappeared.

This study explores the manufacture and exchange of the stone hoes that made their way into households throughout a large region of North America. They were produced in the hilly region of southern Illinois (Figure 1.1) where our story began during a dynamic time known as the Mississippian period (ca. A.D. 1000–1500), when many societies in the American Southeast and Midwest were transforming into chiefdom-style polities characterized by complex social, political, and economic relations. In undertaking this study, I argue that a political-economic framework can greatly illuminate those processes guiding the production, exchange, and consumption of stone hoes. Because the Mississippian period predates the mercantile and capitalist eras, my interpretive framework will differ in many respects from that used to understand the emergence of the world system, industrial capitalism, and related issues in political economy. Although I believe that there are qualitative differences between the way political economies are organized in small-scale versus modern societies, there are still similarities in the important questions to be asked of each: How was labor organized? What were the mutual effects between production and

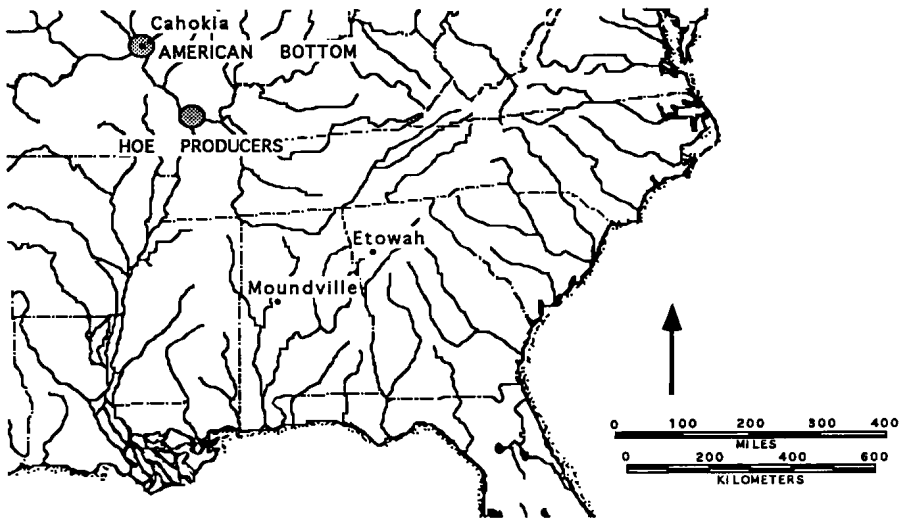


Figure 1.1. Location of sites and regions referred to in the text.

exchange? What was the interaction between production for exchange, social organization, social hierarchy, and gender relations?

In confronting these and related issues, two themes will be continually visited throughout this work—history and scale. The events occurring in the research region could be seen to have parallels elsewhere. As already noted, quarrying and mining enjoy a lengthy history worldwide. One also might be able to identify grossly similar forms of social organization between Mississippian groups and other chiefdom-style societies in Polynesia, Africa, and elsewhere. Yet, the genesis of the Mississippian period and the particular form that it took in the Central Mississippi Valley was a unique process—one that demands an appreciation from a historical perspective not only for explanatory reasons, but also for the purpose of appreciating Native American cultures from the standpoint of their everyday life, rather than reducing their features to variables on a flow chart. Consequently, how people worked and lived are just as important as the theoretical models that inform us about such activities.

Those Native American groups engaged in the extraction of chert and its manufacture into hoes may have constituted unique cultures, but they were not closed societies. Starting from the location of the quarries and moving outward, the stoneworking communities were enmeshed in an ever-widening ripple of relations that had different manifestations and impacts at varying scales. At the local level, people probably married into neighboring villages and traded foodstuffs and

valuables back and forth; at a much greater scope the hoes they produced were one of the most intensively and extensively traded items during the Mississippian period and are found over a substantial portion of the American Midwest and Southeast. A major objective of this study is to explicate the nature of relations at either end of the scale, as well as points in between.

At a more basic level, I aim to provide an understanding of how the manufacture of hoes was embedded in the social relations of everyday life. In other words, how can the organization of production be viewed as a social as well as technological phenomenon? In following this pursuit, I am interested in how archaeologists bridge from the archaeological record to make statements about the social constitution of production and the mobilization of surplus. Finally, I am concerned with how the manufacture of stone digging implements can be framed as a particular manifestation of the labor process during the Mississippian period, and with what that tells us about the political economy of late prehistoric Native American societies. I am particularly interested in exploring how power relations governing the labor of stone hoe production, exchange, and consumption varied greatly depending upon which part of the economic cycle was involved. As I will argue, production appears to have involved little social asymmetry, interregional exchange shows some evidence of influence by elites, and consumption was likely impacted by gendered notions of labor. In short, the reproduction of the system of hoe manufacture entailed a multifaceted web of power and labor relations that extended far beyond the technical act of extracting chert and making stone tools.

#### POLITICAL ECONOMY, ANTHROPOLOGY, AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Anthropologists have been interested in political-economic studies for several decades, although interest in the topic has exploded since the 1970s (see overviews by Marcus and Fischer 1986; Ortner 1984; Roseberry 1989). In a broad sense, the term *political economy* denotes a study of power relations and how they mediate access to wealth and basic resources. Several political economy studies, such as *Europe and the People Without History* (Wolf 1982) and *Sweetness and Power* (Mintz 1985), have become classics in the field, solidifying the importance of political economy in anthropological research.

My broad definition of political economy in fact glosses over what has developed into a wide range of approaches and objectives. To list just a few of these directions, we have ambitious studies concerned with the development of the modern world system and capitalism (Wallerstein 1974; Wolf 1982); with how the production and exchange of



certain commodities impacted specific cultures (Mintz 1985; Nash 1979); with relations of power from a gendered perspective (Harris and Young 1981; Sacks 1974; Silverblatt 1991; Stoler 1985); and with the role of symbols and ideology in the reproduction of relations of inequality (Helms 1988; Keesing 1987; Sahlins 1990).

There are several important common threads that unite these and related works, despite the diversity of approaches, and my research on Mississippian societies embodies these emphases. The first thread goes back to the definition of political economy offered above: underlying all of the studies is a strong concern with the nature of power relations and how they may be related to material aspects of society. Second, the studies are sensitive to historical processes and contexts. Reacting against the idea of a timeless, ethnographic present, political-economic anthropologists have strongly advocated the importance of a historical approach that lays great emphasis on how groups came to be what they are (or were). This perspective sees human communities as constantly changing and only understandable as dynamic recipients and modifiers of cultural practices. Finally, political-economic research in anthropology is usually concerned with notions of scale and scalar processes. Although individuals and communities may represent key loci in the reproduction of cultural practices, they do not exist in a vacuum. Local traditions and practices are subject to the influences of neighboring communities, encompassing nation-states, and large-scale or global economic systems that may regularly insinuate their way into everyday life, sometimes abruptly and jarringly, at other times gradually and barely noticed.

Two modifiers must be added to the general attributes of political economy as practiced within anthropology. These relate to (1) differing notions of history in anthropology and (2) various ways in which the idea of scalar relations is put into practice in case studies. Many anthropologists embracing a historical perspective primarily use it in an operational sense. Here, history involves a documentation of the long-term, that is, looking at the changing sequence of cultural practices through time rather than framing studies in terms of limited, synchronic observations. In this sense, ethnographies may attempt to “finesse” history by limiting themselves to descriptive chronicles (Marcus and Fischer 1986:95). Yet history also can imply certain theoretical and epistemological stances toward explaining or interpreting the reproduction or transformation of practices through time. With the exception of some cultural anthropologists and archaeologists (e.g., Hodder 1987; Knapp 1992; Roseberry 1988; Sahlins 1985; Trigger 1989; Wolf 1990), however, the theoretical articulation of history with political-economic topics is rarely broached.