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## New Perspectives in Mississippian Archaeology

John H. Blitz

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**Abstract** In recent years the pace of research on the late prehistoric Mississippian societies of eastern North America has accelerated. New data, methods, and theoretical goals are changing perspectives in Mississippian archaeology. Regional overviews and site syntheses provide unprecedented insights into the Mississippian phenomenon at local, regional, and continental scales. Traditional culture history, processualism, historical processualism, iconography, and neo-Darwinian archaeology are active theoretical orientations. Important research focuses on variability in Mississippian sociopolitical formations over time, organizational diversity among contemporaneous societies, and sources of political power. The new historicism and iconography place agency, identity, origins, factionalism, ideology, and meaning at the center of culture change, while many processualists continue to focus on developmental histories, economy, and control of material resources. Advances in physical and chemical analyses and the availability of remote sensing techniques are changing how Mississippian archaeology is conducted and expanding the kinds of data that are recovered. These diverse interests, methods, and goals have created considerable eclecticism in Mississippian archaeology.

**Keywords** Archaeology · North America · Prehistoric · Mississippian

### Introduction

New data, methods, and theoretical goals are reshaping interpretations of the precolumbian societies of the American Midwest and Southeast known as Mississippian. Although best known for research on chiefdoms, the variety of

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current interests and explanatory modes in Mississippian archaeology has much to offer all archaeologists seeking to understand those ancient societies that occupied the broad terrain between small kin-based communities and regional polities. Important themes of Mississippian archaeology, explored in this review, include (1) the fluidity of Mississippian sociopolitical formations over time, (2) organizational diversity among contemporaneous societies, (3) a shift in emphasis from hierarchical organization and vertical social differentiation to a greater interest in decentralized structures and horizontal social differentiation, and (4) awareness of the different settlement histories at sites and across regions. These themes are not new to Mississippian archaeology but have become mainstream interests. In recent years, a typological and staid culture history has been invigorated by new historical approaches concerned with issues of identity, origins, social memory, gender, factionalism, and interregional connections. On a parallel but different track, the established study of historic oral traditions for insights into ancient Mississippian symbols and beliefs has been combined with innovative techniques from art history to create a new wave of Mississippian iconographic studies. The new historicism and the new iconography place agency, ideology, and meaning at the center of culture change and favor particularistic and nuanced interpretations. These new perspectives are a challenge to the more generalizing and materialist approaches applied to Mississippian archaeology by many processualists, who continue to focus on economy, organizational diversity, control of resources, and the rise of political power. Advances in physical and chemical studies of material residues and the application of remote sensing techniques are recovering data on artifacts and sites formerly beyond reach. The diverse interests, methods, and goals of Mississippian archaeology have created an eclectic intellectual climate.

My purpose here is to assess the state of Mississippian archaeology through a synthesis of literature published from 2004 to mid-2008. By necessity I omit theses, dissertations, book reviews, conference papers, and CRM gray literature, venues that contain much of what is new but remain difficult to access (Snow et al. 2006). This is the first overview in the *Journal of Archaeological Research* concerned exclusively with Mississippian archaeology, although previous articles in the journal covered aspects of the topic (Brown 1994; Lindauer and Blitz 1997; Schroeder 2004). This review considers changes in Mississippian archaeology since those articles appeared. Perhaps the most important factor is the proliferation of high-quality data, but there are significant conceptual and methodological changes as well. More than a decade ago, Brown (1994, pp. 71–73) observed that southeastern archaeology (much of it concerned with Mississippian) was conservative in practice, a distinctively regional scholarly tradition focused mostly on culture history (cf. Dunnell 1990). This traditional mode of scholarship has been on the wane for some time, however, eclipsed by new perspectives that are changing how Mississippian archaeology is practiced and presented.

Since Brown's 1994 review, research interests have diversified. Mississippian archaeology has become more like archaeological practices elsewhere. There are more kinds of analyses and new perspectives on how research should be conducted and interpreted. This change is due to the interplay of new data and theory, the energetic promotion of new ideas and methods by influential individuals, and the

fact that the new perspectives have paid real interpretive dividends. Concurrently, the definition of Mississippian has become more problematic, reflecting a broader trend in American archaeology away from categorizing generalizations (Pauketat 2007, pp. 82–85; Yoffee 2006, p. 400). Definitions of Mississippian have changed along with the goals and methods of archaeology; it was first a pottery style (Holmes 1903), later a cultural tradition (Caldwell 1958) or distinctive set of artifact complexes (Griffin 1967), and still later an adaptive strategy (Smith 1978) or developmental stage subdivided by time periods (Bense 1994). Mississippian societies have been archaeological exemplars of the chiefdom concept for 30 years (Peebles and Kus 1977), but even applied as a heuristic, the chiefdom concept is falling from favor. Critics claim its typological approach obscures variation, lacks the specificity needed to model all Mississippian political organizations (Blitz and Lorenz 2006, pp. 4–6, 96–98; Boudreaux 2007, pp. 3–6; Cook 2008, pp. 150–154; Pauketat 2004, pp. 1–5, 163–171, 2007, pp. 133–154; Pollack 2006, pp. 316–321; Welch 2006, pp. 214–216; Wesler 2001, pp. 122–134), and bounds research to questionable social evolutionary (Pauketat 2007, pp. 16–26) and gender-role (Sullivan 2006, p. 268) assumptions. Mississippian is usually defined with a list of archaeological correlates shared by Native Americans in the American Midwest and Southeast A.D. 1000–1550, such as “maize horticulture, fortified communities with large earthen mounds, social ranking, and a set of rituals and symbols concerned with fertility, ancestors, and war” (Blitz and Lorenz 2006, pp. 3–4). Such all-inclusive definitions, though widely accepted, often come up short when applied to specific local and regional populations spread across different environments, who shared some but not all of these cultural practices. For example, ancient Caddo of the trans-Mississippi Southeast and Fort Ancient of the Ohio Valley are distinctive yet sufficiently linked to Mississippian in many ways (Cook 2008; Early 2004). For this reason, some Caddo and Fort Ancient references are included in this review. Different, yet linked, emerges as a theme in the recent literature of the precolumbian cultural development conveniently labeled Mississippian.

## Research trends

Current theoretical and methodological frameworks in Mississippian archaeology can be sorted into six groups. Culture history and processualism continue to have the most adherents, whereas art-historical iconographic studies, historical processualism, archaeometry (physical and chemical analyses), and selectionist evolutionism have fewer practitioners. A descriptive culture history in which theory is latent or unstated is most common because it forms a baseline narrative to many studies, dominates culture resource management (CRM) archaeology, and lingers in academic research. Processualism, with a strong problem focus, anthropological roots, social evolutionary assumptions, frequent use of ethnographic analogy, and a strong materialist orientation commands the most influence. The most potent sources of new perspectives in Mississippian archaeology, however, diverge from these established approaches. There is a surge of iconographic studies that boldly assert knowledge of ancient beliefs and meanings (King 2007a; Reilly and Garber 2007a). A new

historicism known as historical processualism forges together practice theory, agency, and ideological sources of change while disavowing some basic tenets of processualism and traditional culture history (Pauketat 2001). The expanding applications of archaeometry have increased the kinds of evidence that are recovered. Neo-Darwinian or selectionist evolutionary archaeology has had little influence on practice or interpretation beyond a small group of productive investigators. For the first time, Mississippian cultural development has been synthesized at multiple scales of analysis in ways unavailable before. The result is a growing realization that the organizational variation and different developmental histories revealed by recent research requires a thorough rethinking of some entrenched ideas about Mississippian societies.

The new perspectives are breaking down a longstanding theoretical divide in Mississippian archaeology. Nevertheless, this divide continues to shape research agendas. Although organizational diversity across sites, polities, and regions is widely acknowledged (Pauketat 2005; Scarry 1999), interpretive frameworks continue to diverge over the primary basis of power and the form of social, political, and economic organization in these societies (Cobb 2003; Milner 2006; Pauketat 2004, 2007; Smith 2007; Welch and Butler 2006), mirroring debates among those who study other early complex societies (e.g., Earle 2004; Iannone 2002; Wells 2006; Yoffee 2005). The theoretical division is a dichotomy that centers on a debate about centralized versus decentralized political organization, differing emphases on hierarchical or heterarchical social formations, and disagreements over the explanatory weight given to economic versus ideological sources of power, or even if these sources of power should be regarded as separate analytical categories.

A centralized political-economy model is the long established and still influential theoretical perspective in Mississippian archaeology (e.g., Anderson 1994; Knight and Steponaitis 2007a; Welch 1991). The roots of this perspective derive from the neoevolutionary concept of chiefdoms, cultural ecology, and southeastern ethno-historical accounts of leadership and social organization. Despite considerable interpretive latitude among researchers, there are common themes. In the centralized model, Mississippian societies are said to be organized as pyramidal political hierarchies dominated and administered by a paramount leader or lineage. Consequently, the research emphasis has been on elites at the largest sites. Political power is thought to be rooted in centralized control over or restricted access to valued resources such as food, labor, and craft production. Thus various forms of political-economy theory, in which elites participate in management, finance, debt, or exchange relationships to create and maintain institutional inequality, are at the core of this perspective. Social organization, at least at the largest mound centers, is viewed as a strongly ranked or emergent class society. Two-tiered and three-tiered settlement size hierarchies are viewed as decision-making levels in a tightly integrated administrative structure maintained to ensure the flow of coerced tribute (labor and staple goods) from producers to elite nonproducers (Emerson 1997; Steponaitis 1986; Welch 1996). Some degree of craft specialization or economic stratification is said to be present (e.g., Yerkes 1983). In some variations on the centralized perspective, production of ideology is identified as a critical source of elite power or central to the creation of a cultural hegemony that shapes social

realities and power relations (Pauketat 2007), but because the dominant ideology must be materialized to have political efficacy (i.e., DeMarris et al. 1996; Earle 1997), the labor, materials, and surpluses used to fund rituals and produce highly crafted symbols are said to be under centralized elite control (Emerson 1997, pp. 176–192; Pauketat 2004, pp. 100–110; Welch 1991, p. 178). Prestige goods models are favored by some investigators (Peregrine 1992; Welch 1996).

In reaction to the centralized perspective, others argue that Mississippian political organization and economy is best described as decentralized. The decentralized perspective gained influence with the absence of archaeological evidence for large-scale redistribution, full-time craft specialization, pervasive controls over access to material resources, or health distinctions between elites and nonelites, at least in some Mississippian polities both large and small (Blitz 1993; Byers 2006; Cobb 2000, 2003; Milner 2006; Muller 1997; Powell 2007; Saitta 1994). Critical readings of the ethnohistorical sources that influenced the centralized perspective, such as the early Spanish expeditions and French accounts of the Natchez, led to a revisionist argument that these accounts were marred by ethnocentrism, had been applied uncritically, did not depict class societies, and that chiefly power was less autocratic and more constrained by councils and factions than previously depicted (Blitz 1993, pp. 15–16; Galloway 1995, pp. 110–111; Lorenz 1997; Muller 1997, pp. 56–61). Improvements to chronological controls have revealed that some proposed three-tiered site size hierarchies were nonexistent, that modest distances placed constraints on efforts to expand polity boundaries, and that therefore many centers were autonomous polities engaged in loose alliance exchange and warfare relationships and were not integrated into centrally administered, regional-scale political territories (Blitz 1999, pp. 580–581; Blitz and Lorenz 2006, pp. 75–87; Hally 2006, pp. 40–42; Pollack 2006, pp. 318–322; Wesler 2006, pp. 144–145). Although it has become obvious that the centralized model does not fit some mound centers, and entire regions (e.g., parts of Arkansas, western Kentucky, the Carolina Piedmont, and much of southern Appalachia) have no preeminent sites akin to a Moundville or Etowah, it is far from clear whether all Mississippian societies were “decentralized.”

Emerging from the centralized versus decentralized dialog is a broadening of perspective, away from an emphasis on chiefs and elites to a greater concern for the segmentary or horizontal organization of corporate groups, usually said to be kin-based (clans, lineages) and/or nonkin associations (sodalities, cults) and how these social groups might be recognized in community plans and artifact distributions (Blitz and Livingood 2004; Blitz and Lorenz 2006; Boudreaux 2007; Byers 2006; Cook 2008; Knight 2007b; Wilson 2008). With evidence for elite monopolies or controls over access to basic resources inconclusive, weak, or lacking altogether at many Mississippian sites, there has been a shift in research focus away from economy to ideology as a source of political power. Consequently, Mississippian researchers who wish to examine the reciprocal negotiation of meanings, values, and power among the social segments of a Mississippian community or polity (Byers 2006; Kelly 2006; Welch 2006) are turning to decentralized models applied by archaeologists working elsewhere in which the economy is seen as embedded in a ritual mode of production (Mills 2004; Spielmann 2002; Wells 2006). Although

social rank and hierarchy may be replicated within the heterarchical arrangements of peer segments, in these models power, political controls, and sanctions within communities and polities remain decentralized, based on ideological power, not economic power. Agency of nonelites and analysis of small social units is drawing greater interest because it broadens the narrow focus on optimizing elites and considers how material goods are more than economic resources, commodities, or objects of wealth accumulation (Wilson 2008). Attention is directed to the social contexts of production as structured by kinship, nonkin associations, group identity, and efforts to produce and control ritual knowledge. From this perspective, it is unlikely that materialization of the ideological order was the exclusive prerogative of a noble class because corporate social segments, cults, sodalities, and other such entities created checks and balances on elite actions (Blitz and Lorenz 2006; Byers 2006; Cobb 2000, 2003; Saitta 1994; Wilson 2008). Thus the assignment of value and meaning to production and exchange was likely negotiated, contested, and fluid (Alt 2006). Nevertheless, at the largest Mississippian polities, such as Cahokia, the centralized-decentralized, hierarchy-heterarchy disagreements continue to be expressed from those who see hierarchical domination (Emerson and Pauketat 2002), or a collectivist ethos (Brown 2006), or developmental swings from communal corporate to individualistic network emphases (Trubitt 2000).

### Developmental histories and organizational variation

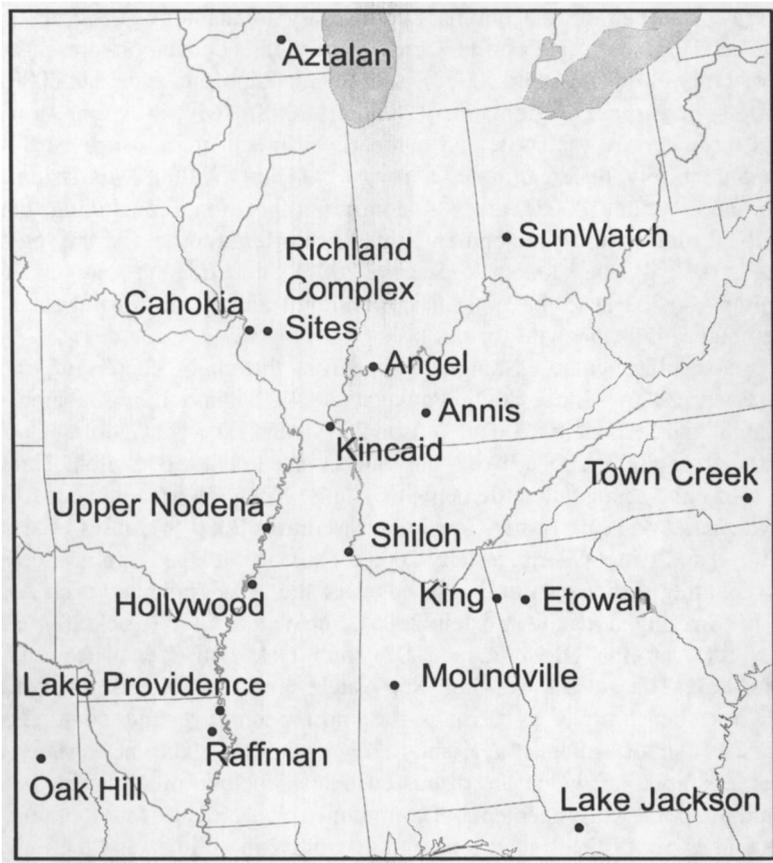
New regional overviews and new site syntheses provide unprecedented perspectives on the Mississippian phenomenon at local, regional, and continental scales. The new syntheses demonstrate that the centralized-decentralized theoretical divide in Mississippian archaeology has been drawn too tightly, that it was conceived in an overly dichotomous manner, and that it is insufficiently sensitive to different (yet sometimes linked) developmental histories and organizational variation. Another result of these syntheses is renewed concern with the movement of people, materials, and information between regions and across social boundaries. As previous generalizations about Mississippian are adjusted to the onrush of new data, attention is shifting away from the centralized-decentralized stalemate toward new concerns about identity, practice, cultural exchanges, pluralism, and the historical specificity of “culture making” (Pauketat 2005, pp. 205–208).

New regional syntheses abound. The long-awaited Southeast volume of the *Handbook of North American Indians* provides descriptive overviews of the eastern (Hally and Mainfort 2004), central (Rolingson 2004), western (Early 2004), and southern (I. Brown 2004; J. Brown 2004a; Kidder 2004a) Mississippian world. In contrast to the just-the-facts reportage in the *Handbook*, other regional syntheses are problem-oriented efforts, often based on original fieldwork, that challenge previous interpretations and provide new perspectives on the lower Ohio Valley (Pollack 2004), lower Chattahoochee Valley (Blitz and Lorenz 2006), northwest Florida (Marrinan and White 2007), and lower Mississippi Valley (Rafferty and Peacock 2008; Rees and Livingood 2007). The *Time's River* (Rafferty and Peacock 2008) overview is of special interest, as the editors and many (though not all) of the

authors are committed to a selectionist evolutionary archaeology, a still uncommon framework for regional-scale efforts. Consequently, the contributors present topical studies of chronology (Feathers 2008), settlement (Lipo and Dunnell 2008), and critiques of time-space systematics (Dunnell 2008), with a strong empirical emphasis on materials, methods, and comparison, much of it covering Mississippian. In an entirely different tone, a review of Fort Walton Mississippian by Marrinan and White (2007) takes a contrarian position, concluding that the sociopolitical models and developmental histories offered to date in the region are unfounded (i.e., Payne 2006; J. Scarry 2007), not due to any theoretical shortcomings but because the most basic temporal and spatial documentation of site assemblages is inadequate for the task.

New site-specific syntheses range in size from the major centers of Cahokia, Illinois (Byers 2006; Milner 2006; Pauketat 2004), Moundville, Alabama (Blitz 2008; Knight and Steponaitis 2007a; Wilson 2008), and Etowah, Georgia (Cobb and King 2005; King 2003, 2004a, b), to the modest-sized center of Shiloh, Tennessee (Welch 2005) and the small settlements of Annis, Kentucky (Hammerstedt 2005), Upper Nodena, Arkansas (Fisher-Carroll and Mainfort 2000; Mainfort et al. 2007; Payne 2006), and King, Georgia (Hally 2008). There is wide geographical coverage as well, including settlements at the far edges of the Mississippian world: Aztalan, Wisconsin (Birmingham and Goldstein 2005), SunWatch, Ohio (Cook 2008), Town Creek, North Carolina (Boudreaux 2007), and Oak Hill, Texas (Pertulla and Rodgers 2007). The studies of King, SunWatch, and Town Creek, in particular, establish new benchmarks as perhaps the most perceptive and comprehensive treatments of small villages available. Key themes in the new site-specific syntheses, examples of which are discussed below, include relationships between spatial and temporal rearrangements in community plans, identification of corporate groups, degrees of political integration and instability in polities, and the impact of regional interaction on local developmental histories (Fig. 1).

Some of these themes are found in a “political history” of the Etowah site, which provides important insights into the rapid social and political transformations that shaped Mississippian polities (King 2003, 2004a, b). Etowah underwent three episodes of formation, abandonment, and reoccupation. Each episode was accompanied by new organizational changes and political forms that King interprets as shifts from corporate to network leadership strategies (i.e., Blanton et al. 1996), a model that has met a cool reception by some (Pauketat 2007, pp. 38–39) and been embraced by others (Payne 2006) in Mississippian studies. Etowah (A.D. 1000–1200) began as a small center, one of several such independent mound centers in the valley with group-oriented corporate structures. Following abandonment and reformation, Etowah (A.D. 1250–1375) grew into a multiple-mound capital of a “complex” chiefdom, with subordinate single-mound centers in the nearby hinterland. A network strategy is said to have prevailed as high-rank individuals received special treatment by burial in Mound C, accompanied by exotic copper and shell regalia with the striking Southeastern Ceremonial Complex iconographic imagery. Abandonment ensued at Etowah’s zenith of power and size, possibly the result of an attack, inferred from the burning of the palisade, the hasty burial of stone idols, and the disordered scattering of human bones and ritual paraphernalia at the Mound C mortuary temple (King 2003,



**Fig. 1** Location of archaeological sites mentioned in the text

pp. 80–81). Reoccupied once more around A.D. 1475, the earlier preeminent Mounds A and B were not refurbished, and political power resided at other centers until Etowah's third and final abandonment in the mid-1500s. In defining polity forms based on mound-center settlement patterns, King follows the well-established idea that a mound center is the seat of chiefly power and that site-size hierarchies are ways to detect levels of decision-making, i.e., the simple chiefdom-complex chiefdom model (Steponaitis 1986). Confronted with two nearby centers of equivalent size, however, he assumes one center must be dominant, identifies such polities as complex chiefdoms (King 2003, pp. 14–15), and dismisses the possibility of alternative polity forms such as dual organization or confederations (i.e., Blitz 1999; Blitz and Lorenz 2006; Pollack 2004).

Political instability and social reformation took place at other large centers as well, although in different ways. Moundville underwent substantial organizational changes. Instead of a series of total site abandonments and reoccupations as was the case at Etowah, occupation of Moundville was continuous throughout its long

history, from rapid foundation through a drawn-out period of depopulation and decline leading to a single, final abandonment (Knight and Steponaitis 2007b). Evidence of initial social hierarchy appeared with the foundation of two small platform mounds on a 1-km long, flood-free terrace with a high concentration of house sites that exhibit both local Woodland and foreign Mississippian material culture (Jenkins 2003; Knight and Steponaitis 2007b, pp. 12–13; C. Scarry 2007, pp. 73, 93). Within a few generations (A.D. 1200–1250), a planned arrangement of 29 or more mounds, dense concentrations of houses, and an extensive palisade were established. Pairs of large and small mounds around the plaza are interpreted as elite residences and other facilities maintained by ranked corporate kin segments (Knight 2007b). Knight (2007b, pp. 59–60) argues that the imposition of elite residences atop corporate-group mounds, especially at preeminent Mound B, signals a break from kin-based authority to establish paramount rank. Arrayed around the mounds are “residential groups,” clusters of 8–12 houses with associated middens and burials separated 50 m or more from adjacent groups (Wilson 2008). Wilson considers residential groups as fundamental social units, corporate-kin groups presumably associated with adjacent mound pairs. House form, house size (three size classes), and artifact assemblages in the residential groups are redundant, with little detectable differentiation between groups, although evidence for craft production and food processing was not systematically collected in the older excavations analyzed by Wilson. Residential groups expanded in size over multiple generations while maintaining the same community location.

Around A.D. 1300 many mounds and residential groups at Moundville were abandoned as the center was depopulated. The largest mounds, however, continued to be used (Knight and Steponaitis 2007b, pp. 17–21), and the abandoned residential groups were converted to cemeteries, apparently by those who asserted a claim to the ancestral space (Wilson 2008, pp. 133–134). The depopulation of Moundville and its conversion from a fortified town to ceremonial center is open to different explanations. In one interpretation, a paramount leader and other high-ranking members of society claimed exclusive rights to reside at Moundville; they consolidated their power by forcing lower-rank families to move out of a sacred place made over as the necropolis and elite administrative center of a complex chiefdom (Beck 2006, pp. 32–33; Knight and Steponaitis 2007b, pp. 18–19). Alternatively, the move out of Moundville may not be evidence of consolidation by an entrenched paramount but of a loss of political power by the resident leadership as rival factions left to establish their own mound centers nearby, consistent with a proliferation of single-mound centers elsewhere in the valley (Blitz 2008, pp. 67–68). If the depopulation was expulsion implemented as an elite “group-distancing strategy” to assert domination by “a fully entrenched apical hierarchy” (Beck 2006, p. 32), it is unlikely it was exercised without the consent of nonelite groups, who retained sufficient agency and influence to assert their own ancestral claim to Moundville by continuing to place the dead in former residential group spaces. Whatever the case, there was a fundamental resorting of sociopolitical relationships.

Influential centers of cultural production like Etowah and Moundville are placed in perspective when the edges of the Mississippian world are examined. At the Town Creek site, Boudreaux (2007) shows that something similar to the fortified

settlement-to-depopulated center sequence seen at Moundville could also occur at a small community. Town Creek began as a fortified circular arrangement of houses with a small precinct for public buildings. Later, a platform mound was constructed over a public building. The small houses were abandoned, replaced by larger corporate-group buildings, and burials were intruded into the places where the earlier domestic dwellings once stood. As was the case at Moundville, the dead were returned to the former residential areas, presumably by families asserting and commemorating proprietary claims to an ancestral place in the social order (cf. McAnnany 1995). A shift in the nature of leadership roles accompanied this community transformation, from an earlier emphasis on older adults with status tied to their family and household roles in pre-mound Town Creek to a later emphasis on young adults with status linked to community-wide ritual roles in post-mound Town Creek. Boudreaux (2007, pp. 106–115) observes that the single Town Creek mound lacked elite residences throughout its building sequence, and thus the radical shift from corporate kin-group authority to an exclusive association of mounds with a particular leader or family that Knight suggests for Moundville did not happen, despite the similar fortified settlement-to-depopulated center developmental history.

There are interesting parallels between the extensively excavated village sites of Town Creek, SunWatch, and King, even though they are located in different regions. (1) The settlements are circular in plan and fortified with palisades (Boudreaux 2007, pp. 15–17; Cook 2008, p. 12; Hally 2008, p. 2). (2) The houses are arranged around a plaza marked by a central pole (Boudreaux 2007, pp. 15–17; Cook 2008, pp. 26–30; Hally 2008, pp. 121–126). (3) Houses, pit features, and burials form discrete clusters interpreted as the residential zones of multiple-family households or corporate groups (Boudreaux 2007, p. 68; Cook 2008, pp. 69–105; Hally 2008, pp. 272–290). (4) Age, gender, and personal achievement were the primary determinants of individual status (Boudreaux 2007, pp. 93–94; Cook 2008, pp. 123–124; Hally 2008, pp. 497–505). (5) Adult males were more likely to have burial goods than adult females (Boudreaux 2007, pp. 84–87; Cook 2008, pp. 113, 125; Hally 2008, pp. 497–498). (6) Rare nonlocal or symbolic artifacts were associated with male burials (Boudreaux 2007, pp. 84–87; Cook 2008, p. 123; Hally 2008, p. 499). (7) Although higher-status adult males received marine-shell beads, beads also were found with some adult females and children (Boudreaux 2007, p. 73; Cook 2008, pp. 113–114; Hally 2008, p. 386). (8) Some houses were significantly larger and more substantially built than other houses (Boudreaux 2007, pp. 20–26; Cook 2008, pp. 108–109; Hally 2008, pp. 81–82, 96–100). (9) Household residential zones that have houses with the largest floor areas and/or special construction materials have the richest artifact associations (Boudreaux 2007, pp. 18–20; Cook 2008, pp. 118–120, 152–153; Hally 2008, p. 368). (10) The largest and/or special construction buildings were located closest to the central pole (Boudreaux 2007, p. 56; Cook 2008, pp. 106–108, 143; Hally 2008, pp. 122–123). In addition, there are some similarities in the developmental histories of Town Creek and SunWatch, which were occupied much longer than the short-duration King site. At Town Creek and SunWatch, there was a change in the nature of leadership through time. As noted above, village leadership was associated with older adults linked to the residential corporate groups early in Town Creek's

development; this was the case at early SunWatch as well. Later, leadership roles at both sites shifted to young males who were associated with pan-Mississippian symbols, nonlocal ornaments, and other exotica, including distinctive architecture (large wall-trench house at SunWatch, platform mound at Town Creek) (Boudreaux 2007, pp. 90–93; Cook 2008, pp. 123–124). At each of these three sites, the investigator interprets the settlement as representative of the lower end of the scale of Mississippian social complexity (Boudreaux 2007, p. 115; Cook 2008, p. 40; Hally 2008, p. 536).

Annis, Upper Nodena, and SunWatch are not the only sites in their respective regions without evidence of three-tiered settlement hierarchies or large-scale political integration. Aztalan and Town Creek are spatially removed from other mound centers and thus regionally unique in their frontier locales. They appear to be politically independent (but not isolated) places. If so, the social and political processes that created these settlements may be quite different from secondary centers or lower-tier settlements that are assumed to have ongoing social, political, and exchange links to nearby primary centers, such as in the Etowah, Moundville, and perhaps Shiloh polities. At the upper end of the social complexity scale is Cahokia, a primate center several orders of magnitude larger in extent than any other Mississippian site. Cahokia is unique in the Mississippian world in several ways: the scale of mound building is extraordinary; a four-tiered settlement hierarchy of the sort associated with archaic states may be present (there is uncertainty because some sites may not be contemporaneous); the population estimates are far greater than any other polity; and all of this occurred early in the Mississippian timeline (Pauketat 2004, pp. 67–75). The differences are qualitative as well; the organizational diversity of house sizes, forms, and spatial arrangements is incomparable, as is the variability of craft production evidence across mound contexts, neighborhoods, and rural settlements (Wilson et al. 2006). In all these characteristics Cahokia compares favorably with the primate centers of incipient states elsewhere (Pauketat 2007, pp. 163–199).

A Cahokia-centric model for the origin and spread of Mississippian traditions is championed by Pauketat (2004, 2005, 2007, 2008). Advocated in the frame of historical processualism (Pauketat 2001), he argues that Cahokia must be understood in its own terms as a unique historical phenomenon that shaped the subsequent cultural character of far-flung societies. The early timing, rapid rise, and unprecedented scale of Cahokia set into motion a “culture-making” centrifugal force that pulled in social groups with disparate origins to create a new social order, drew on distant resources, and then disseminated the material expressions of Mississippianism over a large portion of the Midwest and Southeast (Pauketat 2005, pp. 205–208). Wall-trench architecture, chunky stones, distinctive pottery, flintclay figures, and other items, all perfected in the unfolding Cahokia social experiment, are the archaeological signatures of a “*pax Cahokiana*” (Pauketat 2004, pp. 120–124, 2007, pp. 155–157). Widely distributed sites have been identified, especially in the upper Midwest, that appear to be outposts, resettlements, or otherwise directly impacted by Cahokia (Birmingham and Goldstein 2005; Boszhardt 2004; Emerson 2007; Stoltman et al. 2008). Pauketat makes the case that Cahokia’s most potent product was the ideological underpinnings for a new

way of living. Consequently, he interprets Cahokia as a city and regional polity at the center of an incipient North American civilization. According to Pauketat, processualists have failed to recognize Cahokia's true character because they impose abstract, typological categorizations such as chiefdom over diverse organizations best seen as specific historical episodes, thus artificially limiting interpretations of Cahokia to concepts predicated by social evolutionary models.

Coalescence, community fission, long-distance contact, site abandonment, and movement of social groups have become important components in models for the formation and spread of Mississippian settlements, organizations, and ideas (Alt 2006; Blitz and Lorenz 2002, 2006; Cobb and Butler 2006; Cook and Fargher 2007; Delaney-Rivera 2007; Kowalewski 2006; Pauketat 2007). Population movement, once dismissed as an unimportant nonexplanation by processualists favoring local adaptation as the prime mover in the rise of Mississippian, is now recognized as not merely another mechanism for the spread of Mississippian across regions but as a fundamental aspect of the sociopolitical dynamics that propelled the creation, rise, and dissolution of polities. Refinements in the dating of regional mound centers in several regions reveal patterns of rapid site foundation at places without immediate antecedent occupations or in depopulated buffer zones, short-duration mound building and reuse, and intervals of site abandonment followed by reoccupation with mound rebuilding, patterns that may extend over centuries without following the simple chiefdom-complex chiefdom-simple chiefdom cycle of regional-level political integration (e.g., Blitz 1999; Blitz and Lorenz 2006; Clay 2006; Hally 2006; Pollack 2004; Wesler 2001). Kopytoff's (1987) internal frontier model for the spread of African social formations has been cited as an analog for a Mississippian frontier and the creation of regional Mississippian variants (Blitz and Lorenz 2002, p. 120; Hally 2006, pp. 27–29; King 2003, pp. 118–119).

The Cahokia-centric interpretation of Mississippianization—the variable adoption of Mississippian lifeways in multiple regions—is a more detailed and multifarious reformulation of an earlier idea: a historically specific spread of materials, ideas, and people from a unique and powerful cultural phenomenon in the central Mississippi Valley. More Exodus than Genesis, it is a direct challenge to the long-standing efforts of processualist archaeologists to attribute Mississippian to local adaptation, conceived as “independent and isolated cultural responses to similar challenges” (Smith 1990, p. 2). In the original 1990 *Mississippian Emergence* volume, Smith and his contributors came down heavily in favor of analogy as the answer to the “analogy-homology dilemma” surrounding the origin and geographical extent of the Mississippian cultural phenomenon (Smith 1990, pp. 1–2). Over the last decade, however, strong evidence has been marshaled to show that the appearance of Mississippian mound centers and their widely similar material signatures display a time-transgressive and directional geographic spread from the central Mississippi Valley (e.g., Anderson 1999). In a new preface to the reprinted volume, Smith (2007, p. xxii) asks archaeologists to renew the challenge of investigating the “Mississippian emergence,” specifically “the initial emergence, prior to A.D. 1050, of primary chiefdoms from Late Woodland tribal societies across the eastern Woodlands of North America” [emphasis in original]. He provides a list of preconditions that may have led to the initial emergence of primary

chiefdoms: “(1) environmentally circumscribed resource-rich habitation zones, (2) population growth, (3) an increasing reliance on maize agriculture, (4) peer-polity packing linked with catchment-area constraints, and (5) increasing hostility associated with boundary maintenance” (Smith 2007, p. xxiv). The real problem for those wishing to take up Smith’s challenge may be conceptual; those promoting a more agent-centered perspective on Mississippianization relegate local adaptive preconditions to enabling but secondary factors compared to the sweeping nonlocal inputs of cultural emulation, cultural pluralism, material exchanges, population movements, and shared ideologies that gave Mississippian structure and content. The initial appearance of Mississippian in various locales, as well as the circumstances prior to A.D. 1050 leading up to the creation of Cahokia, may not be reducible to local adaptation scenarios.

The new syntheses reviewed above suggest that Mississippian in its diverse forms was the product of intersecting local and external factors that defy isolation (Blitz and Lorenz 2002; Pauketat 2004, 2007). For example, Cahokia emerged in place out of indigenous Woodland social dynamics, but its demographic and cultural precocity was the product of a pluralism fed by an influx of groups with disparate histories (Alt 2006, pp. 294–300; Pauketat 2004, pp. 75–79, 2007, pp. 149–151). Moundville and Etowah arose from a convergence of local Woodland and foreign Mississippian material culture (Jenkins 2003; King 2003, p. 114; C. Scarry 2007, pp. 72–73; Wilson 2008, p. 50); the later appearance of elaborate Southeastern Ceremonial Complex symbolism is traceable to Cahokian prototypes (Kelly et al. 2007). Mississippian immigrants settled among indigenous Woodland folk at Aztalan and generated a new way of life; yet the material signatures of original and newcomer continued to be deposited in village remains for the next 150 years (Birmingham and Goldstein 2005). Town Creek and SunWatch, with indigenous house forms, community plans, and pottery traditions, originated through regional cultural continuity, not replacement. Nevertheless, external Mississippian cultural practices appear selectively, restricted to leadership and ritual contexts: platform-mound architecture and ceremonialism at Town Creek and a large wall-trench house with exotic Mississippian artifacts at SunWatch. In both circumstances, the Mississippian presence was the result of either a small foreign group, family, or even a single individual taking up residence, or perhaps an indigenous group or individual asserting a nonlocal identity by emulating foreign practices and exhibiting foreign items. Clearly, the explanatory frameworks required to understand Mississippian developmental histories will vary region to region and necessitate a careful weighing of local and external factors.

Developmental histories are contingent on where communities were situated in the vast temporal and spatial web of Mississippian interconnections. Locals were aware of distant others, and cultural production transcended regional boundaries. This increased interest in interconnections, exchanges, and large-scale perspectives has spurred renewed efforts to situate Mississippian within a larger American oikumene that includes Mesoamerica and the Desert Southwest. The tone of two exhaustive reviews for evidence of Mesoamerican connections in Mississippian times (White 2005a; White and Weinstein 2008) ranges from a cautious open-mindedness (White 2005b) to unbridled enthusiasm (Cabrera 2005). The more

secure examples, such as pre-Mississippian introductions of maize and other cultigens, similarly diffused ceramic form inspirations, scattered finds of Mexican-style filed teeth, and some very specific costume elements depicted in Mississippian iconography, have been known for some time (Cobb et al. 1999; Kehoe 2005). Currently, a piece of obsidian from Spiro is the only Mesoamerican imported artifact in undisputed precolumbian Mississippian context (Barker et al. 2002), although new sourcing of old obsidian finds promises to turn up more examples (White and Weinstein 2008, p. 236). Possible Southwestern links to Mississippian have been raised once more as well (Lekson and Peregrine 2004; Peregrine and Lekson 2006), but again physical evidence is lacking, with the exception of a few items of probable Puebloan origin such as fragments of cotton fabric and Pacific species shells at Spiro and related sites on the far edges of the Eastern Woodlands (White and Weinstein 2008, p. 254). Looking north, Mississippian ceramic-style inspirations reached Iroquoians in Canada (Michelaki 2007). Surprisingly, discussion of Southeast-Caribbean connections is moribund, perhaps because peninsular Florida was peripheral to the Mississippian world. All these pursuits stall out due to the lack of physical evidence, moving the question from the answerable “what has been found?” to the perhaps unanswerable “why isn’t it here?” The Mesoamerican-Southwestern-Caribbean linkage to Mississippian is best summed up as “discontinuities, common foundations, short-distance interactions, and sporadic long-distance connections” (White 2005b, p. 304).

### **Identity, factionalism, social memory, and landscape**

Greater attention to the nexus of local and distant factors is one reason why interests have turned to archaeological signatures of cultural identity, factionalism, social memory, and landscape. Organizational and material diversity has brought questions of identity construction to the forefront. Some investigators use practice theory as a frame for understanding how people constructed the material conditions of their lives at specific sites, such as Moundville, and how those practices might embody group values, traditions, and affiliations (Wilson 2008). When multiple groups with different origins come together, the possibilities for creating new practices and new identities are magnified. For example, the Richland Complex of small upland communities in Cahokia’s immediate hinterland, formed through the resettlement of groups with different social histories made manifest in subtle differences in material culture, technology, architecture, and settlement layout (Alt 2002; Pauketat 2003). Alt (2006, pp. 290–293), identifies this coming together of immigrant groups with separate identities as a situation that produced hybridity, a condition of changing social relations that required groups to adjust or alternate cultural practices to accommodate others. Hybridity results in an innovative “third space” where new practices and new identities can form (Bhabha 1990).

If we extend this social melding and its attendant accommodations, innovations, and dynamism over time, it is the very fact of cultural pluralism—linking and integrating different groups through contact, coalescence, and population movement—that constitutes Mississippian. Group construction projects such as platform

mounds provide a material correlate for affiliated social segments or factions; sites with multiple platform mounds imply the coalescence of multiple social groups (Blitz 1999). Because platform mounds were group constructions associated with chiefly authority (Steponaitis 1978, pp. 444–449), were built in stages initiated by disruptions in leadership or group status (Anderson 1994, pp. 126–129), and marked centers of political territories (Hally 1996, pp. 95–97), the building and abandoning of platform mounds expressed the factional politics that brought people together or pulled them apart (Blitz and Lorenz 2006, pp. 11–22). Archaeologists are parsing the spatial arrangements, size, and construction sequences of mounds at sites to identify factions and corporate groups and assess the possible social relationships they represented (Blitz and Livingood 2004; Knight 2007b). The fission of social factions from an old center was accomplished by population movement and emigration to found new centers, which contributed directly to the periodic mound-center foundation, abandonment, and reoccupation sequences so common to Mississippian societies. Mound building at places without antecedent occupations, often in depopulated frontiers or buffer zones distant from established settlements, was a common means for breakaway factions to establish independent polities, at least in some regions (Blitz and Lorenz 2006, pp. 75–87). Founding events and factional unifications also have been detected at small settlements without platform mounds. Detailed chronological sequences of houses identify the founding of households and subsequent immigrant households as corporate residential zones formed and changed at SunWatch (Cook 2008, pp. 148–151) and King (Hally 2008, pp. 314–329).

Mounds, plazas, and palisades were active productions of “social memory” (Van Dyke and Alcock 2003, p. 2) that helped create and essentialize the new identities and social relationships required to expand political and social integration (Beck et al. 2007; Pauketat 2007, pp. 41–42). Pauketat and Alt (2003) interpret Mississippian mound building as construction of social memory, a material component of ongoing negotiations between factions that could either assert or deny versions of a contested past. Building mounds, plazas, and palisades at Cahokia and other Mississippian sites restructured community plans by moving houses and filling or leveling to transform space (Dalan et al. 2003; Kidder 2004b). These projects occurred at rapid transition points in the social order. At Cahokia, the enormous efforts to build the Grand Plaza and Monk’s Mound were initiated at the same time; old houses and spaces were removed to establish a “disembedded” central place expressive of the new social order (Pauketat 2004, pp. 76–77, 2007, pp. 147–149). The construction of Moundville’s mound-plaza-palisade arrangement also occurred in a short time, a coordinated plan that excluded two preexisting platform mounds that were subsequently abandoned (Knight and Steponaitis 2007b, p. 13). One of these earlier mounds, Mound X, was terminated by running the new palisade line across it, perhaps an act intended to exclude the faction associated with Mound X and thus reconfigure social memory (Blitz 2008, p. 63). In a similar vein, it was common for long-abandoned platform mounds to be reoccupied by new groups who added new building stages, which may be understood as attempts to assert claims about the past through revitalization of a powerful but dormant symbol of legitimacy (Blitz and Lorenz 2006, pp. 91–96).

Natural landscape features, most notably caves, were the scenes of rituals removed from public gaze (Dye 2008).

Alt's (2006, p. 290) identification of hybridity as a catalyst for change and "a process that generates innovation" raises an important point. If "culture making" in Mississippian societies is to be a key subject of Mississippian archaeology (Pauketat 2005, pp. 205–208), then studies such as Alt's suggest that innovation, creativity, and their archaeological correlates should receive more attention. Practice theory in Mississippian archaeology tends to focus on the replication character of daily practice (e.g., Wilson 2008), placing more emphasis on a gradual pace of change than on the often rapid and innovative forms of agency that severed traditions. As some of the examples above suggest, innovation is the agent-driven hinge point that punctuates and alters incremental practice and overtly challenges structure. The rapid makeovers of landscape to remake memory or the fission of groups away from old centers to found new centers are best understood as goal-oriented, agent-driven projects rather than the passive continuation of practice.

Social memory, landscape, and factionalism are all aspects of identity construction. As Mississippian archaeologists track material expressions of identity, it may prove useful to examine the evidence at different spatial scales, as suggested for the ancient Maya by Schortman et al. (2001). At a multiregional scale, identity is expressed in a high culture or "international style" (Blanton et al. 1996); a Mississippian example is the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex regalia that was exchanged and displayed to signal an individual's identity as part of an interregional elite (Cobb and King 2005). At a regional scale is the identity associated with specific centers, the product of that center's more particular history and values; a Mississippian example would be the distinctive fine ware pottery known as Moundville Engraved, with motifs in the Hemphill style (Knight 2007a). An apparent third scale is at the community level, where variations on utilitarian artifact styles, house architecture, or other subtle distinctions and practices express local identities of the sort detected by Alt at the Richland complex sites.

Mortuary analysis is the most direct way to recognize identity affiliations at the individual level. At the King site, a short-duration occupation and careful contextual analysis illuminated the range of social identities that were open or closed to a person in that small Mississippian village. According to Hally (2008, pp. 497–505), age and gender were the two most important dimensions of mortuary variability, followed by ranked social status and household affiliation. Through the linkage of these dimensions to artifact forms and the application of cluster analysis and ethnohistoric analogy, a rich picture of the social identities of individual men and women emerges. Adult men had the most diverse artifact associations, whereas the majority of adult women had no artifact associations, a pattern Hally attributes to the greater public role of men. Adult males had overlapping or composite social identities that included three grades of warrior, ritual specialist, and craft specialist, with specific items of war honor, war trophy, chunky game, flintknapping, pipe use, woodworking, and other roles, all variously linked to specific households (Hally 2008, p. 530). Adult female identities, more subtle due to fewer artifact associations, included a biological female buried with male-associated artifacts, interpreted as a female warrior (Hally 2008, p. 369).

## Social status, craft production, wealth, and control of resources

The uses of materials and labor to modify landscapes, manipulate social memory, divide or unite factions, and forge new identities raise issues about status, craft production, wealth, and differential access to the resources needed to affect such changes. Because a significant body of literature on the origins and development of complex society links political hierarchy to the centralized control of valued resources (e.g., Earle 1997), this remains a topic of concern in Mississippian studies. Although ascriptive and achieved statuses have often been identified, the precise basis for individual and group status in Mississippian societies is often difficult to ascertain; status may be rooted in kin-based ranking or ideological claims that have little direct connection to economic controls. Leaving aside for now the well-known examples from the largest centers such as Etowah, where ranges of wealth and rank are sometimes dramatically apparent (King 2004b), the most detailed picture of Mississippian status is at the small community level, as revealed in new site-specific syntheses.

For example, at the King site, an ascriptive status of town chief was attributed to an adult man buried in the founding household zone with a “gravy boat” ceramic vessel, a rare form that probably functioned to carry sacred fire from an old community to a new one at its founding, a role that ethnohistoric sources state was performed by town chiefs (Hally 2008, p. 517). Also at the King site, Hally (2008, p. 466) identified the social status of an adult man with copper arrow symbol badges as an achieved highest-level warrior grade. Another achieved status category was marked by burial of several adult men with war-related items beneath a public building at King (Hally 2008, pp. 521–525). Contrast this group of males at King to a possible ascriptive status present in the early Town Creek community, where a group of adult females was interred beneath a public building, perhaps members of a ranking matrilineage (Boudreaux 2007, pp. 81–83). Older adult women are underrepresented in mound burial and prestige-good association at most Mississippian sites but are sometimes overrepresented in domestic house burials, as might be expected if their realm of community status was based on lineage and maintenance of property rights (Sullivan 2006, p. 280). For these women, it was the house and compound itself that was symbolically charged and indicative of their status, as opposed to the exotic artifacts found in adult male burials (Sullivan 2006, pp. 279–280). Consequently, Mississippian mortuary studies incorporate spatial dimensions to identify gender-based roles (Sullivan 2001). The idea that status may be expressed primarily through use of space, architecture, and landscape rather than artifact burial associations has been linked to the corporate aspect of the corporate-network social dynamic (King 2006, pp. 86–87; Payne 2006, pp. 104–106). Recent studies of small communities break through the preoccupation with “chiefs” to highlight the varied leadership positions that may have had little to do with increased hierarchical power. Mortuary objects formerly associated with high rank are interpreted as elements in rituals performed to meet the goals of the social group (Brown 2006).

Although differential allocations of labor (Blitz and Livingood 2004) and food (Jackson and Scott 2003; Yerkes 2005) continue to be examined, crafted goods have

received the most attention. Distribution studies across domestic and ritual contexts have greatly expanded, revealing considerable diversity in the location and social context of craft production, the possible forms of exchange, and the implied degree of controls over production. Nowhere is this diversity more evident than at Cahokia, where caches of whole axe heads and hoes have been found; areas of concentrated production evidence for marine-shell beads, microliths, groundstone axe heads, debitage for exotic cherts have been documented; and frequency distribution curves for this production debris fall sharply with distance from Cahokia to hinterland sites, a pattern interpreted as centralized redistribution (Pauketat 2004, pp. 100–106). Hoes of Mill Creek chert entered the American Bottom in finished form from small communities of “part-time specialists” at the source in southern Illinois (Cobb 2000, p. 191). Most hoe blades and hoe chips are found at rural sites, with the implication “that low-status farmers using hoe blades were producing a surplus of crops ultimately to provision Cahokia” (Pauketat 2004, p. 103). Scattered rural households around Cahokia sometimes produced marine-shell beads, so the center did not have a production monopoly (Wilson et al. 2006, p. 62). Some degree of community-level specialization apparently took place at the small villages of the Richland Complex in Cahokia’s hinterland, such as surplus yarn and textile production, measured by unusually high frequencies of spindle whorls (perforated sherd disks) (Alt 1999).

Currently, the distribution of production evidence at Cahokia has a quality of equifinality that leads to sharply divergent conclusions. Cahokia could have a centralized redistributive economy with an administrative apparatus that coordinated activities at dispersed and diversified production locales (Pauketat 2004, pp. 106–110). Emerson (1997, pp. 185–192) has identified larger houses with concentrations of exotic goods, sweat bath facilities, and other amenities not found at the majority of rural houses as “nodal households” that directed local production activities to ensure asymmetrical flows of resources from household, community, and neighborhood to the Cahokia center. Others consider production and exchange of shell beads, stone tools, utilitarian pottery, and other widely accessible goods at and near Cahokia to be the product of dispersed, part-time domestic production without strong centralized controls (Milner 2006). Massive dumps of production debris are said to be absent at Cahokia, taken as evidence that the intensive crafting by residential groups seen in some complex societies did not occur, and therefore claims that Cahokia was an “urban” city with economic stratification are overblown (Welch 2004). There are heterarchical models of a decentralized communal or ritual mode of production at Cahokia in which valued resources moved along reciprocal channels between and among corporate groups that retained economic control over the products of their own labor (e.g., Byers 2006; Kelly 2006; Saitta 1994; cf. Spielmann 2002). In this view, the economy is embedded in communal ritual. Drawing on historic Osage analogy and the observation that materials from different stages in the shell bead-making process have distinct and separate distributions at Cahokia, Kelly (2006) proposes that clan-based corporate groups manufactured distinct parts of the total marine-shell bead production process in separate locations and then combined these materials as part of the reciprocal obligations required to perform socially integrative

ceremonies. In this Durkheimian scenario, production would be distinctive, segmented, and complementary, partitioned at the scale of the corporate group. Welch (2006, pp. 227–231) proposes that Emerson’s nodal households represent the mature portion of a common household cycle when domestic wealth peaked and occupants had ceremonial duties of the sort identified in the Osage analogy; nodal houses need not represent Cahokia-imposed administrative control points (cf. Mehrer 1995, 2000). A question arises as to whether the Osage analogy is appropriately scaled to Cahokia, which had a population many times greater than any historic Osage village.

Elsewhere, even well-studied sites have craft production data that are difficult to interpret. Knight (2004) compared assemblages recovered in Moundville’s Mound G, a large mound without burials, to materials from Mound Q, a smaller mound with burials. Both mounds had many similar characteristics: remains of summit buildings; food remains consisting mostly of corn, deer, and turkey; broken pottery vessels; stone chisels, axes, drills, saws, and other evidence of craft-making; paint pigments; and copper, shell, feather, and other ornaments. These materials indicate that costumes, paints, stone palettes, and other ritual materials were made and used at the mounds. Knight interpreted the mounds as elite residences where the elites themselves were making crafts. Although differences between the two mound assemblages varied primarily in the relative frequency of crafting activities, ornaments, or ritual materials and the presence or absence of burials, Knight (2004) argued that these differences reflect specific emphases in elite craft production.

Marcoux (2007; also Wilson et al. 2006) drew on older excavation data to examine the distribution of highly crafted, nonutilitarian goods of copper, stone, and shell at Moundville and hinterland sites dating to A.D. 1300–1450. Most finished artifacts were found in mound and off-mound burials. Production debris for some status/ritual-related artifacts (stone palettes, oblong stone pendants, mica, pigments) occurs primarily (but not exclusively) in mound-top contexts. Marcoux concluded that these “display goods” were rare and were produced in far lower quantities than expected if the items were used in strategies of wealth accumulation or for regular payments of social debts, as found in prestige-goods economies (*contra* Welch 1991, 1996). If each corporate group manufactured different display goods in separate locations of Moundville and then combined these materials as part of the complementary reciprocal obligations in performing ceremonies, as suggested in Kelly’s (2006) variation on the ritual-economy model, then craft production residues of a limited subset of items would be spatially distinctive. Evidence of mound-top crafting published thus far for Moundville, however, shows mostly redundant quantitative distinctions rather than sharp qualitative differences in the items produced. This pattern is contrary to Kelly’s Osage-inspired Cahokia model of separate, distinct, and complementary production locales. Moreover, it remains uncertain if mound assemblages are the product of elite residences, corporate-group facilities, or some combination of these functions. The degree to which craft production may be restricted to mounds at Moundville is not known because there have been no systematic comparisons of on-mound and off-mound assemblages. Nor are the data robust enough to understand variation in craft production and exchange at smaller sites in Moundville’s hinterland.

Given the organizational diversity across the Mississippian world, broad generalizations concerning status, wealth, and control of resources are suspect. Although sometimes weakly expressed or not always detectable, the examples above indicate that some degree of rank, achieved status, and ascribed status were usually present, even in small communities away from centers. There were wealth differentials as well. House sizes, house materials, and house energy investments range along modest gradients at King, SunWatch, and Town Creek (Boudreaux 2007, pp. 17–26; Cook 2008, pp. 108–109; Hally 2008, pp. 96–100), whereas at the other end of the complexity scale there are sharp breaks in house size distributions and other substantial architectural differences that separate entire “neighborhoods” at Cahokia (Pauketat 2004, pp. 78–80; Wilson et al. 2006, pp. 53–55). Production of utilitarian artifacts of local materials is usually found to be the result of part-time domestic production and commonly distributed in variable frequencies that suggest open access based on ability and reciprocal ties. Production evidence for nonutilitarian items of exotic materials is less common and more spatially restricted; the finished objects are distributed in ways that suggest that identity, status, and wealth intersected to create exclusivity, rarity, and value. Highly crafted artifacts of copper and shell such as the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex “international styles” had limited production and circulation, suggesting elite production controls and exclusive elite-to-elite exchange in projects of identity construction, alliance, and status validation. As we have seen, some of these items, the copper arrow symbol badge for example, even found their way to small settlements such as King (Hally 2008, p. 466). In all communities large and small, marine-shell beads are distributed in ways consistent with open access based on ability and reciprocal ties. At Cahokia, Trubitt (2000, 2005) found that through time shell bead production was associated with larger households, part of increasing wealth concentration that served networking and individual aggrandizing goals.

A clearer understanding of production, exchange, and consumption is plagued by equifinality problems in the interpretation of artifact distributions. Solutions to the problem require awareness that production, exchange, and consumption patterns for distinct artifact classes may differ temporally and spatially. Mississippian researchers should consider applying methods developed by their colleagues in Mesoamerica, which have been successful in identifying the artifact distributions indicative of reciprocal, redistributive, and market exchange (e.g., Feinman and Nicholas 2004; Hirth 1993, 1998). Cahokia’s more diversified and spatially variable craft production stands out as markedly different when compared to other Mississippian polities such as Moundville (Wilson et al. 2006, p. 63). Although this is perhaps an unsurprising observation given Cahokia’s other unique and prodigious characteristics, it is reason to consider whether its economy was organized in ways fundamentally different from other Mississippian polities. The exceptional scale of Cahokia suggests that some forms of clustered, neighborhood, and community-specific production were governed by a mechanism of centralized exchange that permitted regular face-to-face transactions with nonkin apart from ritual obligation. Alternatives to classic redistribution should be considered. While Pauketat’s *pax Cahokiana* was accomplished through the ascendancy of a dominant ideology, it may have been underwritten by a radical new innovation in exchange

such that disparate peoples with separate histories could have a stake in the new social order. Although the idea of market exchange at Cahokia has long been dismissed (tainted by claims of Mesoamerican diffusion), perhaps an innovation at Cahokia's inception that established a means for contractual exchanges among people who did not know each other took place on a large scale in the "disembedded" neutral space where order was secured. Such an alternative model might take as an analogy an expanded variant of trade fairs or protomarket arrangements such as the Plains-Pueblo exchanges (Spielmann 1991). In addition to new models evaluated by distribution studies, greater attention must be paid to how value was created in Mississippian societies, not just by scarcity and labor investment (Hally 2008, p. 500) but by how artifacts served as powerful metaphors that rationalized social distinctions (Lesure 1999). Inquiries into how values and meanings were materialized raise questions about Mississippian symbolism and interpretations of iconography.

### Iconography

One of the most exciting developments in Mississippian studies is a new wave of scholarship focused on the interpretation of the highly stylized representational and abstract images rendered on copper, ceramic, stone, and shell artifacts long referred to as the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (SECC) (King 2007a; Reilly and Garber 2007a; Townsend 2004). Although Mississippian iconography always has been a major topic of research, the new wave has reconfigured and transformed the whole enterprise by introducing a new methodology of formal analysis borrowed from art history while retaining the older dependency on direct historic analogy (King 2007b). Also new is the broader range of analogies, with Siouan sources gaining importance in addition to Muskogean oral tradition. The new wave emanates from an annual workshop, the Texas State University Mississippian Iconography Conference, modeled after those used in the study of Maya epigraphy. Conference participants bring their expertise in archaeology, Native American beliefs, art history, and folklore together to identify motifs. Sources from ethnohistory and oral traditions are searched for characters, themes, and symbols thought to correspond to the ancient imagery. The results have been an outpouring of bold and detailed interpretations of Mississippian beliefs and meanings that have taken different directions, some synthetic and some decidedly esoteric. Many interpretations are a highly particularistic parsing of specific motifs, with new interpretations of well-known symbols such as the bellows-shaped apron (J. Brown 2007), petaloid motif (Reilly 2007), and hand-and-eye (Lankford 2007). Others have reconstructed a broad outline of the Mississippian cosmos (Lankford 2004; Reilly 2004a) or isolated subsets of symbols and beliefs tied to preeminent Mississippian concerns such as war (Dye 2004). Another body of work, building on decades of earlier efforts, identifies major style groupings and traces their chronological development and geographical distribution (J. Brown 2004b; Kelly et al. 2007). Given the disparate interests and goals, the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex has experienced lumpen redefinition (Reilly and Garber 2007b, p. 3),

splitter partitioning (Knight et al. 2001), and a telling critique that it is not Southeastern, not ceremonial, and not a complex (Knight 2006).

In a programmatic statement that charts the direction of the new iconographic studies, Knight et al. (2001) claim that there is an underlying thematic unity to the SECC centered on the depiction of supernaturals in the celestial realm; therefore, these scenes and beings are not real-life events or costumed humans. They argue that this thematic unity implies that the SECC can be best studied by identifying the core themes in the regional variants and following the developmental links that unite them; the core themes are found on copper plates, shell gorgets, and shell cups. It has become widely accepted that the regional expressions and style groups of SECC are ultimately derived from the “Greater Braden style,” the mother style with origins in the American Bottom (J. Brown 2004b). Shell, pottery, and stone artifacts depicting the winged anthropomorphic being known as “birdman” and other motifs of the Greater Braden style are found at Cahokia and as nearby rock art at an earlier time than the regional expressions farther east (J. Brown 2004b, 2007; Diaz-Granados and Duncan 2004; Kelly et al. 2007). Moreover, the “birdman” is interpreted as a supernatural being with associations analogous to the culture hero known as Morning Star or Red Horn in the historic-period beliefs of the upper Midwest (J. Brown 2007). These insights have produced a historical scenario that posits the rise of a cult centered on the birdman and related imagery at Cahokia and its subsequent dissemination to eastern and southern Mississippian centers such as Etowah, Lake Jackson, and elsewhere, where the cult provided a mythic charter to legitimize the rise of chiefly elites (J. Brown 2004b, 2007).

Not only does the new iconography reinforce the idea of a precocious Cahokia as the font of Mississippianism, but it complements the current shift in Mississippian studies from an emphasis on the control of economic resources to a control of ideology as the basis of power and authority. Some investigators are redoubling efforts to understand the social context of the iconography, especially as charter myths that positioned elites as the arbiters of powerful cosmological forces (J. Brown 2007; Cobb and King 2005; Dye 2004; Pauketat 2005). One example illustrates the interpretive dilemmas in these attempts. As mentioned above, some investigators insist that SECC depictions of elaborately costumed beings are mythological scenes and not meant to convey the reenactment of myth by costumed humans (Knight et al. 2001). While not doubting that “god-impersonation took place in the Mississippian world,” which seems reasonable because the imagery often shows regalia and other items of display and performance that turn up as archaeological finds, the authors enumerate various human-animal composite images to reinforce their argument (Knight et al. 2001, pp. 133–136). The problem is that others also may select imagery and items to make the opposite case, such as the Rogan No. 1 embossed plate of a “birdman” (Knight et al. 2001, Fig. 1), in which the bird beak element is embossed to raise it above the recessed human face and mouth (complete with teeth and lips) as if to show that it is indeed a mask, a detail not seen in “flat” media. If the more important observation is that cult participants embodied these supernatural forces in the real material world of community and society, then several questions demand attention. Why did the various cult genres of the SECC appear when and where they did? What does the

overlapping shift in emphasis from the earth-fertility thesis of the flintclay figures associated with prototypical Green Corn ceremonialism (Emerson 1997, pp. 237–248) to its antithesis seen in the celestial-war themes of birdmen, weapons, and trophies (Knight et al. 2001) tell us about changing and contested social values? Did the celestial-war cult provide the means for disenfranchised juniors to sever the senior-dominated bonds of kinship, claim separate origins in the celestial realm, and through their efforts of seeking personal power transform rank into class?

## Archaeometry

Archaeometry, analytical techniques from the natural sciences applied to archaeological problems, is revealing aspects of Mississippian societies previously beyond retrieval. Zooarchaeology (Kelly and Kelly 2007), paleobotany (Bush 2004; Simon and Parker 2006), and osteology (Hedman 2006; Hogue and Melsheimer 2008; Powell et al. 2005) are well-established research directions in Mississippian archaeology, and studies that integrate these approaches are particularly insightful (Emerson et al. 2005; Scarry and Reitz 2005). Geoarchaeological and environmental analyses that examine human impacts on environments (Olson et al. 2005; Peacock et al. 2005) should attract more interest but are underutilized. Alternative chronometric techniques, such as luminescence dating of ceramics, are in use (Lipo et al. 2005), but radiocarbon remains the standard. Instead, it is the physical and chemical characterization and sourcing of materials as well as the increasingly common use of geophysical subsurface surveys that are having the greatest impact.

The chemical and physical sourcing of stone, bone, shell, and pottery adds a parallel line of evidence for tracing the physical movement of products and people between regions that complements the traditional focus on artifact style. For example, the Cahokia-centric interpretation of Mississippianization as an ideologically driven phenomenon gains support through the sourcing of Missouri flintclay figures disseminated from the American Bottom c. A.D. 1050–1150 (Emerson and Girard 2004; Emerson et al. 2003). Analysis of strontium isotopes from human teeth and bones at Aztalan, long thought to represent a settlement established by foreign Mississippians, identified some people of nonlocal origin with isotopic signals that matched Cahokia values (Price et al. 2007). Petrographic analysis identified pottery from the American Bottom at Wisconsin sites dating to the time just prior to the rise of Cahokia, perhaps brought to the region by groups “who had lost out, or were otherwise disenfranchised or disenfranchised” by the establishment of the Cahokia polity (Stoltman et al. 2008, p. 334). Shell temper may be sourced as well (Peacock et al. 2007). Although ceramic provenience studies based on neutron activation analysis hold considerable promise (Neff 2008), the results have been imprecise for prehistoric ceramics in the Southeast because the identity of provenience has remained at a rather gross level, apparently due to the relative homogeneity of geological conditions across regions (Descantes et al. 2004). For example, petrographic analyses identified an American Bottom origin for Powell Plain pottery at the Lake Providence site in Louisiana, whereas results of neutron

activation analysis of the same samples were ambiguous (Wells and Weinstein 2007, pp. 56–58).

Stable isotopic analysis of Mississippian pottery residues provides new evidence about food consumption practices that is independent of interpretations based on vessel form (Beehr and Ambrose 2007). The presence of maize in pottery residues can now be identified (Reber et al. 2004). Residue analysis of 134 pottery samples from the Mississippi Valley revealed a surprising lack of meat consumption in Late Woodland and Mississippian times (Reber and Evershed 2006). The expanding interest in Mississippian material studies may be the reason for a surge in experimental archaeology as well. Most are replication studies of ancient architecture and features (Blanton and Gresham 2007; Bonghage-Freund 2005; Lacquement 2005; Litchford and Glienke 2006). In one study, measures of the physical properties of the ceramic fabric are made to argue for evolutionary explanations for changes in the distribution and frequency of the shell-tempered pottery so often associated with Mississippian sites (Feathers 2006).

Remote-sensing methods, especially the geophysical technologies of ground-penetrating radar and magnetometer, are incorporated into archaeological investigations with ever-increasing frequency (Johnson 2006). Subsurface surveys using these methods are creating large-scale maps of buried houses and features at large and small Mississippian sites. Many of these mapping projects are still ongoing or have not been published; as viewed at recent conference presentations, sites such as Angel, Etowah, Kincaid, Hollywood, and Shiloh have been mapped in astounding detail. The methods reveal community spatial organization without site disturbance and provide an informed guide for placement of excavation units. Entire site portraits can be obtained in sufficient detail to differentiate among types of structures and features (Perttula et al. 2008). Increased excavation costs, preservation goals, and the greater availability and resolution of geophysical techniques have converged to offer new research opportunities. Use of remote sensing for site investigations may be standard procedure in the near future.

## Conclusions

Archaeologists investigating Mississippian sites, like their counterparts elsewhere, face a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, the more nuanced and multifaceted explanatory frameworks taking shape require extensive exposures of site features and distributional studies across multiple sites. A few test pits will not provide the answers we seek (Brown 2008, pp. 393–394; Wesler 2006, pp. 153–154). Unfortunately, funds for large-scale excavation outside of CRM, such as that from the National Science Foundation, are inadequate to meet demands as competition for these limited resources is increasing and grant application success rates are decreasing (Brainard 2007). As a reflection of this situation, most of the new site syntheses reviewed here are reexaminations of older excavation data, sometimes combined with modest levels of new fieldwork (the active Cahokia research scene is a major exception). This trend is likely to continue. On the other hand, the ability to extract more information of certain kinds from smaller-scale or low-impact efforts

has increased. The continuing advances in archaeometry hold the promise to generate remarkable insights into Mississippian societies from remote-sensing surveys, small samples, or even single artifacts from underutilized collections.

Archaeology continues to enjoy a high level of public interest, and discoveries about the Mississippian past are reaching a wider audience than ever before through public archaeology, museums, film, the World Wide Web, and popular writing. The views of contemporary Southeastern and Midwestern native peoples also are being heard, and despite differences in perceptions, values, and goals (Mason 2006), archaeologists and Indians have identified common interests and concerns (Reilly 2004b, c). Peregrine and Lekson (2006, p. 361) argue that, “relevance today is measured in scale and explanatory breadth, and for archaeology relevance can be equated with public interest.” Mississippian studies, however, neglect certain issues. Climate change (Benson et al. 2007) and societal collapse (Tainter 2006) hold considerable public interest, but Mississippian research that addresses these topics is infrequent and only rarely reaches the general reader (Diamond 2005; Mann 2005). In fact, ecology, demographics, subsistence, and other infrastructural variables are no longer central concerns in Mississippian studies. Perhaps this is attributable to the ascendancy of agency and ideology as explanatory frameworks in American archaeology, a paradigm shift in which the biological and ecological conditions of life are considered unimportant to an understanding of ancient societies (e.g., Brumfiel 1992). Furthermore, archaeologists’ explanatory frameworks increasingly embrace nuance, historical specifics, and concerns with the local and particular. Many archaeologists seem to be following their cultural anthropologist colleagues, whose reluctance to generalize or compare has led to an infatuation with difference to the neglect of similarity (Bunzi 2008). The current trend in Mississippian archaeology is toward discarding generalizing social evolutionary models for more nuanced historical ones. Critics attack social evolutionism as a unilinear typology that masks cultural diversity (e.g., Pauketat 2007, pp. 20–26). Social evolutionists counter that this charge is a misconception that would cut archaeologists off from making systematic comparisons or gaining an understanding of the commonalities found in long-term cultural change (Marcus 2008). This raises a question about the future of Mississippian archaeology: Will comparative studies and the generalizing efforts of anthropological archaeology be discarded in favor of a narrow historical particularism? The answer, for now, appears to be “no.” The acceptance of explanatory complexity and the recognition that there are too many voices and constituencies to bind archaeology to a single perspective means that theoretical and methodological eclecticism will continue to find accommodation in Mississippian studies. Some of the most exciting work in the historical processualist (Pauketat 2007) and iconographic (King 2007a) mode embraces synthesis and comparison at multiple scales of analysis. The new site-specific syntheses reviewed here strive to place local cultural practices and contingent histories into a larger comparative context. Culture history and social evolution, specific event and general process, will continue to contribute to new perspectives in Mississippian archaeology. The best interpretations tack between the unique and the comparable: Specific, general, gradual, and punctuated phenomena all have a place in efforts to generate more realistic understandings of Mississippian societies. As is the case when playing

music, archaeology works best by moving along the scale and not continuously repeating one note.

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