Review article
In search of mound-builder histories

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TERRY A. BARNHART. *American antiquities: revisiting the origins of American archaeology*. 2015. xviii+574 pages, 28 b&w illustrations. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press; 978-0-8032-6842-5 hardback £54.

JAY MILLER. *Ancestral mounds: vitality and volatility of Native America*. 2015. xxviii+187 pages, 3 b&w illustrations. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press; 978-0-8032-7866-0 hardback $55.

C. MARGARET SCARRY & VINCAS P. STEPONAITIS (ed.). *Rethinking Moundville and its hinterland*. 2016. xx+321 pages, numerous b&w illustrations, tables. Gainesville: University Press of Florida; 978-0-8130-6166-5 hardback £64.95.

There are insights to be gained from comparing three very different books on the mounds, mound-builders and moundvilles of later pre-Columbian and early historic-period eastern North America. These insights stem from the range of perspectives embodied by the trio of hardbacks here, written by authors with diverse backgrounds using very different kinds of case material. In one book, historian Terry Barnhart gives us a rich reading of the historical relationship of American archaeology to 'The Mound Builders', identified by many Euro-Americans in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as an actual lost race or civilisation that pre-dated the American Indian occupation of the continent. In another book, writer Jay Miller seeks a cosmological explanation of all eastern North American mounds, in some ways reaffirming the centrality of mound building to Native identities. In a third volume, editor-archaeologists C. Margaret Scarry and Vincas Steponaitis, and 12 other authors, present the latest archaeological synthesis on Moundville, a great town in Alabama often cited as the civic-ceremonial core of a stereotypical Mississippian-era chiefdom (*c.* AD 1120–1650). Tacking between the three texts, we might come to appreciate more clearly how we know, or might know, the mound-builder past by contextualising and theorising that past better than we are currently doing.

To achieve such insights, I start with Barnhart's superb historiography: *American antiquities.* In this University of Nebraska Press text, Barnhart covers ground familiar to many North American archaeologists, in particular the fact that American archaeology emerged from a colonial and racist antiquarianism. But Barnhart's analysis goes further, providing a more detailed contextualisation of French, British and Euro-American encounters with indigenous places, primarily those dotting the eastern seaboard and the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys. His point, as a good historian, is not to construct a new explanation of the connection between mound explorations and archaeology, but to provide a more nuanced reading of that history. To wit, there were many more players with alternative viewpoints and divergent agendas than we commonly recognise. Chapter 1 opens with the earliest explorers and ends with Thomas Jefferson's (slaves') excavations into a Virginia mound. Chapters 2–4 delve deeply into the settlement of the Ohio Valley and the diversity of opinion and approach on the Adena and Hopewell mounds and embankments found there. By the 1830s, we learn, early appraisals of Hopewellian geometric earthworks as fortifications were giving way to the 'new hypothesis' that they served religious purposes. Still, as we read in Chapters 5 and 6, the 'myth of the Mound Builders'—where anybody but American Indians were credited with having built the mounds—was becoming commonplace even as Euro-Americans (e.g. Increase Lapham, Montroville Dickeson, Emphraim Squier and Edwin Davis) were becoming more systematic in their surveying and mapping of sites. By the 1860s and 1870s,

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professional archaeology, according to Chapter 6, was emerging via the professors and curators of newly founded state and federal institutions. By the end of the book (Chapter 7), Cyrus Thomas and his associates at the Bureau of American Ethnology have transcended the mound-builder myth—or so they thought. Of course, other authors have pointed out that aspects of the colonial and racist mound-builder myth lived on in an overly 'scientised' and evolutionary twentieth-century archaeology. Maybe Barnhart can tackle that in his next book.

To some extent, that legacy may have inspired Jay Miller to write *Ancestral mounds,* another book from Nebraska that in some ways complements Barnhart's text. Sensing that most archaeologists lack an appreciation of the 'vitality' of mounds, Miller presents what amounts to an ethnological perspective on them, drawing on some unspecified amount of qualitative personal experience at American Indian dance grounds in Oklahoma. There is a fair bit of homogenising of native practices here, with historical and ethnological generalisations drawn mostly from Muskogee Creek sources. He even makes up new words to capture his pan-Indian generalisations, including '*powha*', which he defines as the "pulsing flow of power-vitality-force-energy" (p. 17) materialised by mounds. Miller does review, in brief, the histories of Euro-American mound exploration (Chapter 2) and historic-era Euro-American contacts and tribal confederations (Chapter 3), before moving on to such pan-Indian generalisations (Chapters 4 and 5). But he does not analyse mound vitality, which would involve considering the sensorial powers of earth or the recent theoretical turn towards the 'new materialisms'. Such theoretical moves, unfortunately, are not being made by Miller or by archaeologists studying the Mississippian forebears of contemporary American Indian peoples. Instead, *Ancestral mounds* is content to assert the existence of a uniform, Eliade-esque, Native American 'cosmovision', seemingly obviating the need for historiography and archaeology, and, not incidentally, stripping ancestral peoples of their rich and varied histories. And yet, there is something important, lacking in most archaeological accounts of the past, that Miller senses when he recognises that mounds invigorate communities and provoke people to act.

As with Miller, the authors in Scarry and Steponaitis's *Rethinking Moundville and its hinterland* take up neither the methods of a sensorial archaeology nor the metaphysics of the new materialisms. Indeed, there is no explicit theoretical direction advocated by the editors in here, but there are significant new contextualisations and insights. In their introductory chapter, Steponaitis and Scarry note four recent research directions: chronology, mounds and social memory, iconography and religious practices, and hinterland studies. In the chapters that follow, a theoretical agenda is clearest in those by John Blitz and Gregory Wilson. Blitz shows that one early mound at Moundville was decommissioned and removed, an act of intentional forgetting with historical effects not unlike those implied by Miller. Wilson advocates a similar focus on memory and materiality, arguing that early Mississippian architectural and mortuary practices, for all intents and purposes, produced the later Mississippian kin groups and sodalities known in the region. There are other strong analyses in this volume by V. James Knight (on Moundville's design), John Scarry, E. Edwin Jackson and Mintcy Maxham (on rural social practices), and Jackson, C. Scarry and Susan Scott (on ritual performances involving plant and animal foods and paraphernalia). Three chapters by Vincas Steponaitis, Erin Phillips and Jera Davis call the once-dominant 1990s 'political-economic' models of craft goods into question, not surprisingly finding little evidence to support them. A summary of regional settlement patterns by Scott Hammerstedt, Maxham and Jennifer Myer similarly calls into question old assumptions about political-economic centralisation, although their settlement study is based mostly on site location and chronological affiliation (a good comparative sample of excavated domestic occupations of the kind needed to rethink the rural practice and lived constitution of a 'Moundville polity'—in contrast to, say, the Cahokia region—has never materialised). Seeking alternative organisational principles to Moundville society, George Lankford hypothesises that Midéwiwin-like ceremonialism might have swept through the region in the past. This is a tantalising notion that could lead to a true rethinking of Moundville, if Lankford and others would sideline their rigid hypothetico-deductive methodology, where ethnohistoric generalisations are used to derive hypotheses that, once tested, are invariably found to be an imperfect match for the data.

In a final chapter, C. Scarry and Steponaitis ponder the evidence from the volume, which is robust, and ask whether or not Moundville was a town or more than a town, perhaps a 'ceremonial

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ground'. Apparently, they believe that designation as a ceremonial ground will lead us to different conclusions than some made in the past about the rise and fall of Moundville. This might especially be the case in the absence of answers to historical questions. Who, specifically, designed Moundville? When and to what effect? Who, specifically, built it? Everybody? How did they do this and to what effect? What were the long-term historical implications of building a town of earth and perishable materials? What were the relational implications of crafting inalienable goods from sandstone originating from a single quarry (*à la* Steponaitis, Davis)? Was the palisade wall emplaced at the beginning or later? What were the effects of its construction on Moundville's brand of community and on south-eastern geopolitics generally? How did Moundville's "politically pluralistic and consensual" councils (*à la* Knight, p. 41) shape a 'Moundville polity'? Might we think of such councils not as functioning organisations, but as dynamic relational configurations of various sorts of beings, constructions and objects?

Surely it matters less what we call Moundville than it does to know what Moundville—as a lived experiential history comprised of any number of moving parts—did, and how it did it. Surely history matters? To their credit, Steponaitis and C. Scarry ask some of these questions in Chapter 1. Answers to a few such questions are in the offing in the chapters by Davis, Phillips, Steponaitis, Jackson and colleagues, and by J. Scarry and associates; and more answers might be forthcoming if the common-sense functionalism that lurks beneath the surface of *Rethinking Moundville and its hinterland* could be jettisoned. That is, we need not imagine first which specific human organisations or societal configurations produced historical change and development in order to understand historical change and development. Indeed, the former are in many ways the products of the latter (*à la* Wilson).

Rather than concluding that "ceremonialism [. . .] fueled the Moundville chiefdom" (p. 231)—perhaps an improvement over older political-economic models—we might instead seek to understand *how and to what extent* ceremonialism infused various Moundville relationships. In the end, seeking the functions of particular features, say mounds, is a poor substitute for untangling the complicated causal relationships between people, places, things and other non-human substances, materials and phenomena. Such relationships were contingent on cultural biographies (*à la* Blitz and Wilson), to be sure, but they were also affected by what Miller would label the 'vitality of mounds': the power of their materials, shapes, orientations and other qualities was realised in the moments of construction, crafting and communing as—not at—Moundville. Understanding those relationships cannot come from either assuming or narrowly hypothesising whether or not some kin organisation or cosmology, known in the historic era, was present in the past. Rather, we need to theorise the mounds, mound-builders, and moundvilles of North America more effectively. Better historical contextualisations, as seen in both *American antiquities* and *Rethinking Moundville and its hinterland*, are the beginning. Reimagining the locus of change in the past, as anticipated in different ways and to various degrees in both *Ancestral mounds* and *Rethinking Moundville and its hinterland*, is the next step.

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