

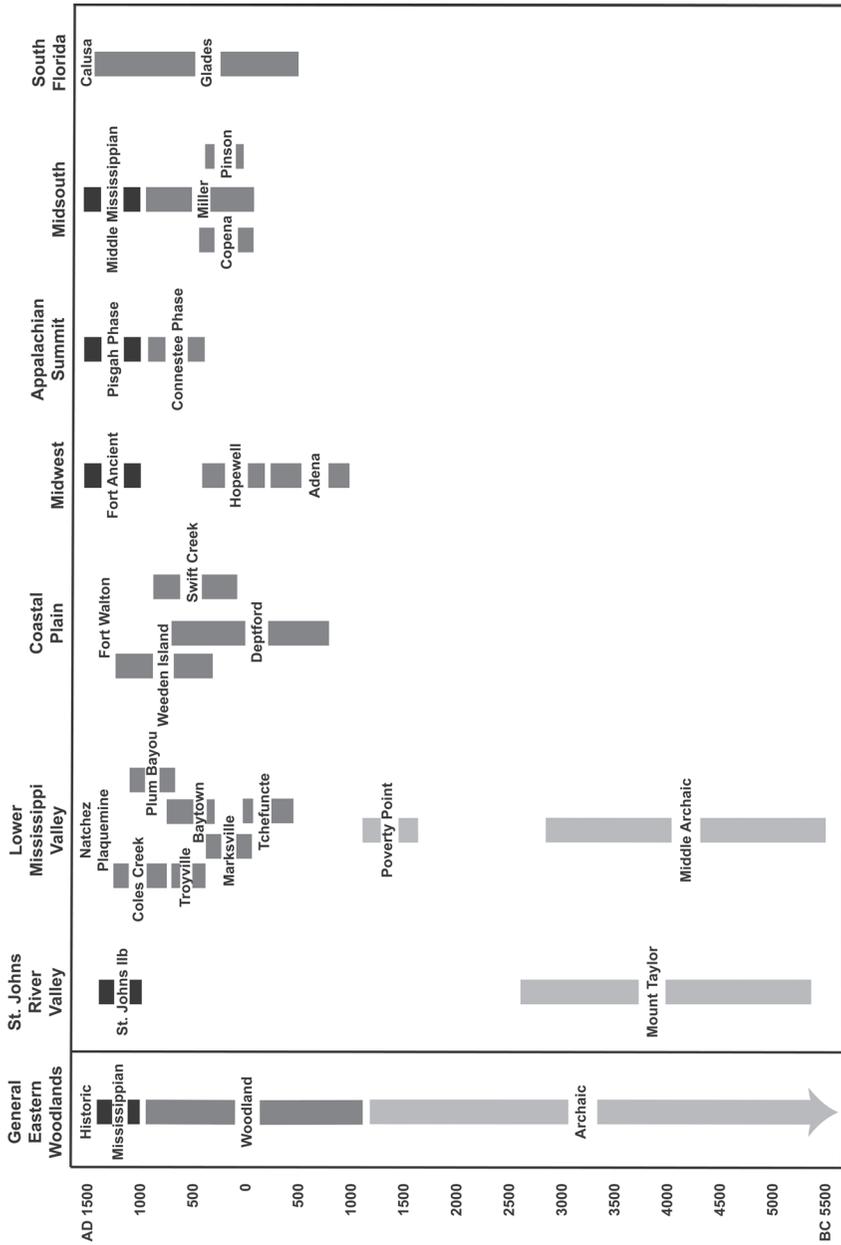
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Finding Meaning in Elevated Ground

The practice of building earthen mounds has tremendous time depth in the eastern United States, and the variation in these monuments across time and space has sparked debates regarding their functions and social significance that span the history of American archaeology. Beginning with early speculative accounts that developed out of racist notions of Native inferiority to contemporary theoretical and scientific studies of mounds, mound *form* has always been integral to discussions of these architectural feats and the various functions and meanings that they may have held for their builders. In this book, I present a temporally and geographically broad but detailed history of a particular form of Native American architecture, the platform mound (Figure 1.1). In doing so, I introduce a series of theoretical and methodological interventions that correct fundamental inadequacies in the way such constructions have been interpreted in the past and suggest a much more dynamic view of the vitality and creativity of their builders. Building on a variety of recent theoretical approaches (e.g., time perspectivism [Bailey 1981, 1983, 2007, 2008] and historical-processualism [Pauketat 2001a, 2001b, 2003, 2004, 2007]), I take seriously the call for history, context, and practice to be given appropriate weight in interpretations of platform mound architecture.

I define *platform mound* as a form of monumental architecture featuring a flat summit on which activities were conducted. This definition highlights that the fundamental traits of a platform mound are that it is communally constructed and creates elevated ground that can be used in a variety of ways. In the eastern United States, such structures are distributed from southern Florida throughout the Atlantic and Gulf Coastal Plains, west to Oklahoma, and north to the upper Midwest. They range in size from minute structures less than a meter in height and a few meters in diameter, to massive constructions such as Monk's Mound at Cahokia, where 730,000 m³ of fill covers 6 ha and rises 30 m above the Mississippi River floodplain (Schilling 2013). Beyond the

Figure 1.1.
 Chronological chart
 of major temporal
 divisions in the
 eastern United States
 showing the temporal
 spans of the platform
 moundbuilding
 cultures discussed in
 the text by region.



fundamental characteristic of having flat summits, platform mounds are generally (1) made of earth (though shell, stone, wood, and cane were also used as construction materials), (2) quadrilateral in shape (though circular and other forms also occur), and (3) built as multistage constructions containing sequentially used summits (though single stage monuments were also constructed). In their review of platform mound construction and use, Lindauer and Blitz (1997:169) state, “our knowledge of North American platform mounds is divided into what we know, what we think we know, and what we wished we knew.” Reviews like theirs, along with innumerable studies of specific sites, have significantly increased what we know; however, there remain many things we wish we knew, and I will argue here that there are also many things we do not understand as well as we think we do and many well-considered studies that have not been fully considered in previous discussions of the form.

Archaeologists have long seen platform mounds as hallmarks of Mississippian period sites in the eastern United States (Lewis and Stout 1998). Their construction around central plazas at sites such as Cahokia, Etowah, and Moundville has conceptually linked them with traits that differentiate Mississippian culture from those that preceded it, namely, chiefly social organization, permanent villages, and corn agriculture. This suite of characteristics is so well established that, for a long time, one of these traits could almost be taken as a proxy for the others; in other words, if a site had a platform mound, it was assumed to be a hierarchical, agricultural, Mississippian village.

We now know of many pre-Mississippian platform mounds that complicate this interpretation. The earliest flat-topped mounds date to the Archaic period and are coincident with the earliest mound construction in the country (see Chapter 3). Platform mounds became more common during the Woodland period, when they were built by a wide variety of cultures across the eastern United States (see Chapter 4). The number of known pre-Mississippian platform mounds has grown rapidly since the scholarly community stopped assigning flat-topped constructions to the Mississippian period based only on their formal attributes, and this trend will continue as undated or incompletely investigated sites receive professional attention. However, despite these important shifts in identification, *interpretations* of platform mounds and their builders, as well as broader-scale histories that discuss Native North American architecture, have still tended to utilize an anachronistic lens that does not fully engage with the long history of the architectural form and that implicates Mississippian traits such as agriculture, sociopolitical hierarchy, and coerced labor.

As archaeologists have pushed themselves to strive for richer and more detailed accounts of the lives of past people, they have often turned to the most

highly resolved archaeological cases and ethnohistoric analogies to provide the thick descriptions not easily afforded by archaeological data (Bailey 2007; Brown 1990:1; Galloway 1997; Kassabaum et al. 2011). In studies of platform mounds, this tendency has produced a retrospective narrative focused on tracing their history and the histories of associated societal traits backward from their heyday during Mississippian (or later) times to their origins. With this volume, I advocate for a more forward-looking approach that examines flat-topped mounds from their earliest iterations onward and eventually suggest that interpretations of early platforms provide important case studies from which to understand their later manifestations. My goal is to draw together the information necessary to undertake more nuanced studies of platform mounds that incorporate the rich archaeological record of pre-Mississippian flat-topped structures.

In the rest of this chapter, I examine the history of how mounds in general and platform mounds specifically acquired meaning within American archaeology. In doing so, I draw attention to the distorting effects that archaeology's backward gaze has had on the interpretation of platform mounds and their builders and suggest a forward-looking approach to understanding this enduring but dynamic monumental form that better integrates recent theoretical developments surrounding the importance of history, context, and practice. In Chapter 2, I develop this approach through a discussion of how archaeologists think about time. I highlight the rather obvious fact that, while later mound-building populations may have had knowledge of the architectural and cultural practices of the communities that preceded them (through cultural continuity, oral histories, and/or enduring landscape features), there is no mechanism that would have allowed them to be aware of how those characteristics articulated in later groups. In Chapters 3 and 4, I present a detailed examination of Archaic and Woodland period platform mound sites, respectively. I intentionally utilize a chronological approach that progressively moves from the earliest iterations of this architectural form to its later manifestations in order to develop a forward-looking perspective on the function and meaning of flat-topped mounds that more closely approximates how these ideas may have developed within past cultures. In Chapter 5, I turn my attention to terminal Woodland, Mississippian, and Historic period mounds in order to highlight continuity with their Archaic and earlier Woodland period predecessors. I do so by offering a detailed, forward-looking case study of two Coles Creek mound centers that have been the focus of my recent research. I then briefly suggest how similar work might be undertaken at Mississippian sites and how those trends culminate in Historic platform mound ceremonialism. Finally, in a brief epilogue, I consider

contemporary Native American beliefs about and uses of earthen mounds as a reminder to the reader that the history of platform mounds continues and will continue to be written for many generations to come.

Mounds in the History of American Archaeology

American archaeology emerged out of antiquarian fascinations with precontact mounds. Early European settlers were immediately interested in understanding the mounds' origins and what functions they served for their creators. In 1780, each of the thirteen colonies were asked a series of queries about their state's geography, natural resources, history, and government by the French legation in Philadelphia; Query XI asked about Native populations. Thomas Jefferson (1999 [1785]:103–106) answered by excavating a burial mound he believed to have been built by the ancestors of local tribes.

Less scientific speculation during this time led to the famous *myth of the moundbuilders*, which assumed mounds were the work of a lost civilization unrelated to contact period Native groups (Keel 1970; Silverberg 1968; Willey and Sabloff 1974; Williams 1991). The underlying reason for these far-fetched ideas was, of course, the perceived contrast between racist notions of the simplicity of Native American groups and the scale and complexity of the mounds themselves.

Even in these early accounts, differences in mound form and function were recognized, and platform mounds were deemed particularly important. For example, in William Cullen Bryant's (1832) poem, *The Prairies*, he stated:

And the mound-builders vanished from the earth.
The solitude of centuries untold
Has settled where they dwelt. The prairie-wolf
Hunts in their meadows, and his fresh-dug den
Yawns by my path. The gopher mines the ground
Where stood their swarming cities. All is gone;
All—save the piles of earth that hold their bones,
The platforms where they worshipped unknown gods,
The barriers which they builded from the soil
To keep the foe at bay.

While he evinced a lack of understanding of their origins, Bryant clearly differentiated the burial mounds, platform mounds, and geometric earthworks that we still recognize as the major forms of precontact monumental architecture today and focused on their variable functions.