

Building the Past

**Prehistoric Wooden Post Architecture
in the Ohio Valley–Great Lakes**

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University Press of Florida

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Building the Past, an Introduction

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In our view, the term “architecture” refers to more than just the design and decoration of buildings. It embraces what happens whenever human thought or action makes order and meaning of random space: naming places, designating sacred parts of “wilderness,” clearing village areas and garden plots, claiming food-gathering areas, planning and constructing buildings, and arranging the spaces that surround and connect them. Finally, it includes the often unseen social and religious meanings which are encoded into buildings and spatial domains.

Nabokov and Easton 1989: 11

Such an all-encompassing definition of *architecture* as the statement quoted above puts this concept in a much wider perspective than that normally perceived by archaeologists. To be sure, much previous theorizing and study of the human “built environment” attempts to highlight the multidimensional ways by which humans modify their environment and thereby explore key aspects of human social life (notable examples of such studies include Birch 2012; Lacquement 2007a; Parker Pearson and Richards 1994; Pauketat and Alt 2005; Rapoport 1982; and Van Gijseghem and Vaughn 2008). In many cases, however, studies default to the simple identification and description of individual shelters of one kind or another. This is not an unexpected outcome given that much of the world’s archaeological record preserves the barest of architecture. Indeed, many regions, and the temperate deciduous forest zone of eastern North America in particular, lack virtually all the original materials of building, the wood, cordage, grass thatch, and even mud plaster having long disappeared. In their places, we are regularly faced with mere organic residues such as soil stains from decayed wall posts, a few charred timbers, layered debris marking occupation floors, and trenched wall foundations. But even from such a heavily fil-

tered record, careful field documentation and study can create surprisingly detailed pictures of the wooden-post constructions formed by those who occupied this land centuries to millennia in the past. Yet even such careful reconstructions alone are insufficient.

To adequately construct useful narratives of this past, archaeologists must adopt a broader description of architecture, much like that quoted above, and thereby strive to understand “the often unseen social and religious meanings” that lie behind such a difficult-to-interpret material record. The contributors to this volume strive in their own ways to do just that by examining the complex archaeological residues of the built environment over four millennia in one region of the greater Midwest.

The core of this book is derived from papers presented at a thematic symposium sponsored by the Ohio Archaeological Council and held during the October 2012 meeting of the Eastern States Archaeological Federation in Perrysburg, Ohio. In organizing this session, my intention was to bring to a wider audience newly discovered evidence of pre-European contact, “wooden post” architecture in the greater Ohio region. Then to broaden the geographic scope of the study area, I solicited three additional contributions from locations adjacent to Ohio, namely, in Kentucky, Indiana, and Ontario. Consequently, this widened geographic perspective is combined with a deep temporal dimension that covers the Late Archaic to Late Prehistoric periods, or circa 2500 BC to AD 1600. From the beginning, my ultimate goal was to bring these discoveries to an even wider audience through publication, ultimately in the present volume.

Why this objective struck me as worthwhile has to do with the general lack of comparable studies in the recent past. We may need to go as far back as 1971 to Raymond Baby’s “Prehistoric Architecture: A Study of House Types in the Ohio Valley” for something similar. This short article surveys the existing database on wooden-post architecture of Ohio, from the better-known Adena and Hopewell submound structures of the central Ohio Valley through the highly variable Late Woodland (Cole) dwellings of central Ohio. Baby concluded with the briefest mention of Fort Ancient structures at the Buffalo site in West Virginia and newly acquired data from “Erie” sites in northern Ohio. Since then, many publications—and many more unpublished, CRM-generated reports—have described prehistoric architecture in the form of partial to complete postmold patterns of diverse forms and ages at numerous sites. But many of these descriptions lack a comparative context and, more importantly, the kinds of detailed information (such as the diameters, shapes, and depths of postmolds; the identi-

fications of utilized wood types; the dimensions and contents of interior features; and, rarely, informed reconstructions of building superstructures) that permit comparisons of architectural development across broader geographic and temporal dimensions. But such is the purpose of the present volume.

As noted above, the chapters that follow cover a long period of regional prehistory—nearly five thousand years—and range in scope from multisite comparative treatments to site-specific case studies. These chapters examine architectural remnants across a wide geographic area that includes the valleys of the central Ohio River and several major tributary streams in southern Ohio and northern Kentucky, the upper reaches of the White River in central Indiana, the south-central tributaries of Lake Erie in Ohio, and farther northward to the Ausable River in the southern Lake Huron basin (figure 1.1). Moreover, all of these contributions offer new or previously unpublished data on a variety of architectural forms, as well as the social-cultural and environmental contexts within which they were created.

Some of the most exciting studies contribute to a growing body of evidence for increased sedentism during the Late Archaic period, a temporal interval once thought to be characterized by dispersed and highly mobile hunter-gatherers. Purtill's survey of Late Archaic architecture across the Ohio region (chapter 2) details a variety of architectural forms, which include both single-family and communal dwellings that appear in impressive numbers at substantial base camp locations, primarily in the central Ohio River valley. Ellis and colleagues' detailed discussion of the Davidson site (chapter 3), located not far from Lake Huron, reveals striking evidence of Terminal Archaic pit structures that were likely occupied during the cold season by small family units. Accumulating data now point to sites like Davidson as representative of the first recurrently occupied, large settlements utilized for perhaps centuries by dozens of families. Such studies are drastically changing our view of Late Archaic sedentism in the region.

Chapter 4, by Abrams and Patton, begins the discussion of Woodland architecture with a survey of structural forms in the Hocking River valley of southeastern Ohio. Years of survey and test excavation of numerous sites have revealed an early shift from circular to rectangular dwellings that began in the Early Woodland period and surprising evidence for the long-term reuse of structural sites as revealed by the superpositioning of postmolds and domestic features.

Contributions by Greber (chapter 5) and Riordan (chapter 6) shift the perspective to ritual-ceremonial constructions, which, although well stud-

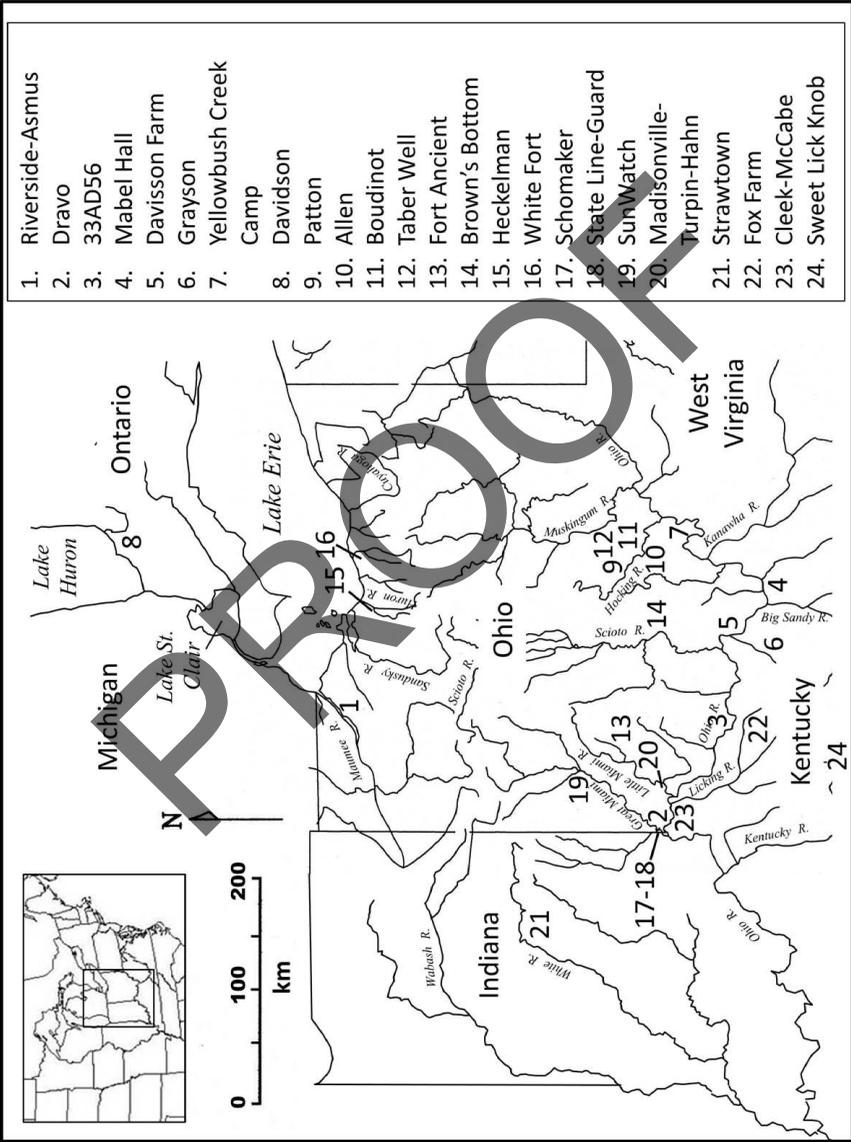


Figure 1.1. Map showing the locations of selected sites with wooden-post architecture described in this volume.

ied, still generate considerable uncertainty. The “Big House” architecture of the central Ohio Valley, as detailed by Greber, reveals a complex and long-term commitment by Ohio Hopewell societies to the creation of elaborate physical spaces in which humans interacted with the spirit world and consolidated earthly, social relationships. New interpretations of these enigmatic structures describe a multiplicity of uses and long-term commitments to sacred spaces. In a similar fashion, Riordan’s multiseason study of the Moorehead Circle, situated within the Fort Ancient hilltop enclosure, is also revealing a complexity of architectural construction that parallels the undoubtedly elaborate ceremonialism that took place within this substantial wooden-post monument. Research presented herein focuses specifically on the “end time” of the complex, when large posts were removed and gravel was laid down to mark the final conclusion of ritual use.

In chapter 7, the domestic aspects of Hopewell architecture are discussed in Kanter and colleagues’ analysis of three structures recently documented at the Brown’s Bottom locality in the central Scioto River valley. The archaeological contexts of these houses—the most complete Ohio Hopewell dwellings recorded to date—are discussed in unprecedented detail. This is followed by a structural engineering analysis of the three houses with the goal of (virtually) reconstructing their original superstructures based on the archaeological evidence.

My own account, with Scanlan, of architectural change at one long-term settlement in northern Ohio (chapter 8) is less technical than the Brown’s Bottom study but clearly depicts the evolution of substantial domestic dwellings during the transitional Middle to Late Woodland periods. The situation of such a structure within an earlier set of earthwork enclosures seems to signal a shift from ceremonial to domestic use of this site; however, the reality of this apparent transition was undoubtedly less clear-cut than our limited data set reveals. Regardless, the archaeological record at the Heckelman site does establish a final domestic function for this locality in the form of a Late Prehistoric period village settlement featuring seasonally specific dwellings of very different architecture.

The next three chapters continue to trace the evolution of Late Prehistoric architecture in the region by examining Fort Ancient domestic dwellings of highly variable form. In chapter 9, Cook and Genheimer discuss the appearance of wall trench structures in the Great and Little Miami Valleys by AD 1100. Although never replacing indigenous single-post construction techniques, wall trench architecture is viewed as direct evidence for signifi-