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Considering Early New World Monumentality

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Monumental construction projects have always been a conspicuous re-
minder of past societies and thus have long been the subject of archaeologi-
cal inquiry. Culture historians have cast their interpretive net across large
areas and tried to explain why monumentality diffused from one region to
another (e.g., Childe 1958, 70; Ford 1969; Griffin 1952; Tello 1943). Proces-
sual archeologists later shrank the geographical scale of inquiry to study
monumental works in terms of local adaptation and sociopolitical organi-
zation (e.g., Renfrew 1973; Steponitis 1978; D. Wilson 1988). Postmodern
archaeologists exploring agency and practice deemed the way past peoples
experienced monumentality to be most important (e.g., Barrett 1994; Brad-
ley 1998; Tilley 1994). Clearly these perspectives are not mutually exclusive
in the questions they ask. However, none specifically address the issue of
how and why large construction projects began. Diffusion cannot explain
how things got started in the first place. And while particular forms of
social organization can facilitate large work projects, they certainly do not
necessitate that such endeavors will occur. Further, while specific histori-
cal conditions and the ability to coordinate people to undertake large labor
projects obviously required specific cultural knowledge, this does not ex-
plain why monumentality is such a pervasive phenomenon in early cultures
all over the world.

A comprehensive analysis of early monumentality incorporates a con-
cern with labor and its mobilization as well as the longer-term impact of
spiritual awe and political organization that can be both generated and nat-
uralized by such undertakings. The large pyramids and impressive monu-
ments that attract attention, as well as equally large but less conspicuous

public works projects such as road or irrigation facilities provide a common starting point for a comparative study of the development of complex societies in the New World. Our goal in this volume is to compare early monumentality through a series of New World case studies that consider economic foundations as well as the lasting effects of large building projects. In this chapter, we provide a comparative starting point by considering two time scales from which to consider monumental construction projects. The first is the relatively short-term construction events that create architectural features. The second is the longer-term use of these features once they have transformed the landscape. Framing different temporal scales in such a manner is consistent with what has been called time perspectivism, the idea "that changes in the time scale at which we make observations change what we see and that varying time scales bring into focus different variables and processes that are not visible, or not so easily visible, at other time scales, thus requiring different sorts of concepts and explanatory principles" (Bailey 2008, 13).

Comparing Early Monumental Building Projects

In a much-cited article, Bruce Trigger (1990) employs the concepts of least effort and conspicuous consumption to argue for a cross-cultural meaning of the labor invested in monumental-scale public works. He observes: "Monumental architecture embraces large houses, public buildings, and special purpose structures. Its principle defining feature is that its scale and elaboration exceed the requirements of any practical functions that a building is intended to perform" (Trigger 1990, 119). This conspicuous consumption of human labor violates the principle of least effort, which is what gives monumentality salience cross-culturally. He continues by observing that "the most compelling demonstration of power is the ability of a ruler to consume some of the energy he controls for nonutilitarian purposes. It is because of this that monumental architecture constitutes a universally understood expression of power and also why the basic significance of monumental architecture and luxury goods is so readily apparent to archaeologists" (Trigger 1990, 125).

While this 1990 paper "aroused speculation that at last Trigger was about to become a processual archaeologist, [it] was written somewhat tongue-in-cheek" (Trigger 2004, 238). He explains that "by labeling my construction a 'thermodynamic explanation' I had, in mimicry of many early processualists who discussed anything other than subsistence behaviour, built into

my argument without acknowledging it to my readers a non-adaptive, and hence a non-ecological explanation" (ibid.). Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption is not thermodynamic but instead psychological. Trigger is therefore proposing a cross-cultural theory for the symbolic meaning of monumentality among early civilizations rooted in the biology of the human mind.

In the chapters that follow, authors explore less complex forms of cultural organization than those addressed by Trigger for his thermodynamic model, but ones that nonetheless undertook monumental building projects. Trigger's proposal to explain the cross-cultural meaning of monumentality has much to offer the study of the origins of such building projects. The pervasiveness of monumental building projects around the world "suggests that conspicuous consumption was universally equated with power in these societies . . . [and this] . . . runs contrary to what relativist cultural anthropology or postprocessual archaeology would predict. The creation of such structures was grounded not in reasoning that was specific to individual cultures but in cognitive and behavioural tendencies that are pan-humanly grounded" (Trigger 2004, 246).

Trigger's analysis of monumentality was used to examine fully developed secondary states and empires, but his formulation raises the question of how it all got started. In this volume we do not presume to provide a definitive answer as to why monumentality began. Instead, we present a series of case studies that document where and when some of the earliest monumental construction projects were undertaken in various regions of the New World. The early monumental building projects discussed in this volume were endeavors undertaken by groups of people over extended periods of time. But precisely how much labor was mobilized? What purpose(s) did it serve? And how did these societies differ from non-monument-building peoples that preceded and/or surrounded them? These are some of the questions that need to be answered if we are to better understand the origins of monumentality.

The "Utility" of Building Projects

The dichotomy between utilitarian and non-utilitarian labor specified in Trigger's thermodynamic model is not emphasized in this volume, nor is the division between building projects that are "utilitarian" (e.g., roads and administrative buildings) versus those that are "non-utilitarian" (e.g., stone monuments and temple mounds). Public works projects undertaken for

"utilitarian" purposes, while perhaps not as conspicuous, can equally express the power of rulers that commission and/or coordinate such projects or the collective potential of the communities responsible for them. The ability to build roads, aqueducts, irrigation canals, or agricultural terraces (to name but a few utilitarian public works projects—see Frost and Quilter, Chapter 9; Paradis, Chapter 7; Roosevelt, Chapter 10) can reflect the power of rulers. Inca and Roman road systems and the walls around Uruk were signs of power that were as clear as any of the temples Sumerians built in their cities.

The utilitarian versus non-utilitarian dichotomy has the additional drawback of implying that "utility" was conceptualized in the same way in all societies or remained constant over time within a given society (see Benfer, Chapter 12). Even if we limit utility to mean economic utility, the dividing line is no more clearly drawn. For example, the number of square meters of domestic space in which most Americans live has steadily increased during the twentieth century despite a decline in average family size, but is the extra floor space non-utilitarian? More important, economic utility need not necessarily be assumed to be of greater importance than social or spiritual utility in the functioning of society. Each would have been necessary, especially among those societies with weak central authority and little means of coercive control. Large temples or public monuments can awe foreigners and reassure residents, thus serving important social functions. Think of the Statue of Liberty or the Arc de Triomphe—it would be hard to argue that these emblematic national monuments serve *completely* non-utilitarian purposes. Or that Big Ben is *simply* an oversized public timepiece. Our approach to monumentality therefore does not discriminate on the basis of function and includes all large-scale work projects.

Monumentality as Evidence of Power

The comparative perspective adopted in this volume attempts to elevate analysis above that of a single case. Monumental construction projects can be undertaken by nonhierarchical societies or can potentially serve nonhierarchical functions within hierarchical societies. It is ill advised to equate the existence of a single characteristic such as monumentality a priori with the presence of political power or the social hierarchy that often accompanies such authority (Arnold 1996; Gibson 2004, 256–258). Haas and Creamer (Chapter 11) propose that their chapter "diverges from others in this volume by proposing that *all* monumental architecture

requires leadership and centralized decision-making." There is little doubt that large public works projects require organization that extended beyond the household group and that such organization has the potential to be used to establish and maintain an elite sector of society. However, it is not *necessarily* the case that such organization reflects social stratification or political hierarchy. This is discussed by Sassaman and Randall (Chapter 3) and Saunders (Chapter 2) for the Archaic period in the U.S. Southeast. Roosevelt (Chapter 10) reviews similar ideas for the Archaic in Amazonia, as do Burger and Salazar (Chapter 14) for the Initial Period Lurín Valley and Chavez (Chapter 15) for the Yaya-Mama religious tradition in the Lake Titicaca Basin. Each of these chapters proposes that factors other than social stratification can explain early public works projects.

In addition to the relationship between large construction projects and sociopolitical organization, another unwarranted assumption is an a priori relationship between monumentality and the subsistence economy. This consideration is important due to the long-standing assumption that the workers undertaking public works projects needed to be provisioned by intensive agriculture and that a great deal of organization is required. Rosenswig (Chapter 5) argues that this assumption accurately describes the Soconusco region of southern Mexico, where intensification of food production and a network of conical mounds occur together beginning at approximately 1000 cal. BCE along with a clear increase in the degree of social stratification (see Rosenswig 2007, 2010). However, other cases of early monumentality presented in this volume preceded intensification of the subsistence base by many centuries (Benfer, Chapter 12; Haas and Creamer, Chapter 11; Sassaman and Randal, Chapter 3; Roosevelt, Chapter 10).

It is best to seek independent evidence of the function(s) of monumental features, the presence of social hierarchy, and the existence of food production so as to not construct circular arguments. A large conical mound at a site center should not in itself be used to argue for the existence of an elite priestly-chief class that organized the labor of others and depended on stable crop production to feed a subservient work force. However, if independent evidence of rulers exists (using mortuary patterns, iconography, etc.) along with evidence that the mound served a distinct function (by documenting trash comprising different types of objects than other contexts at the site and/or distinct features) and the society depended on agriculture (using isotopes and fauna and flora remains), then such a model may be reasonable. Illuminating comparisons may then be made with societies that built equally big mounds but where evidence of social stratification

or agriculture (or both) is lacking. This is particularly instructive when comparing these relationships among multiple cases, as we do here.

Circular reasoning when interpreting monumental architecture has been widespread. Renfrew's (1973, 1974) well-known classification of Neolithic chiefdoms provides one example of this. The Neolithic societies that built mounds in southern England were classified as chiefdoms because they built large barrows. Renfrew (1973, 554) used the same barrows as evidence of food redistribution and centralized control and for his conclusion that such control was vested in an individual. Further, the spacing of these barrows, particularly in the west Salisbury Plain, suggested to him that each mound defined the territory of a separate chiefdom (Renfrew 1973, 544, Figure 1). Renfrew still considered societies that lacked the expected mortuary evidence of social differentiation (ibid., 556) to be chiefdoms, but of a newly defined "group-oriented" variety (Renfrew 1974, 75–77). Renfrew's argument is hampered by his assumption that building a mound is necessarily evidence of an individual (or limited group of individuals) exercising political power and controlling a territory. According to this logic, a society was a chiefdom because it built a big mound and it built a large mound because it was a chiefdom. As Jon Gibson (2004, 258) argues in relation to Archaic mounds and political complexity in the southeastern United States: "You simply cannot use mounds to prove the existence of the very phenomenon they are assumed to represent, at least not their presence or absence." We agree.

Energetic Baseline

Regardless of the utilitarian versus non-utilitarian nature of large building projects or the hierarchical versus nonhierarchical nature of the societies that created them, energy expenditure provides a baseline with which to compare one case to another. Descriptions of each society's largest or most impressive monument remain anecdotal, but energetic calculations, in contrast, provide a comparative framework for assessing the "cost" of structures relative to each other within a site or total construction programs from one community or society to another.

Individual structures or monuments and entire sites can be compared to each other in terms of labor costs required for their construction. Labor estimates (generally derived from volume of fill in the case of platforms,