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Agency in a Postmold? Physicality and the Archaeology of Culture-Making

Timothy R. Pauketat^{1,2} and Susan M. Alt¹

Architecture embodies human agency in all of its dimensions and effective scales. Specifically, the wooden posts of Mississippian peoples in the American mid-continent were simultaneously spatial, material, and corporeal dimensions of the process of cultural construction and contestation. Our reconsideration of the lowly postmold is based on the principle of physicality that, in turn, alters the ways in which we pose research questions and interpret archaeological data. A historical-processual methodology involves three procedural fundamentals: identifying practical variability, comparing genealogies of practices, and tacking between lines of evidence at multiple scales of analysis.

KEY WORDS: agency; practice; architecture; Mississippian.

Recent trends in archaeology bring fundamental anthropological questions back to the drawing board: What causes cultural change? How are we to understand it? Admittedly, some contemporary answers to these questions may seem more complicated than the questions themselves, involving theories—agency, practice, performance, landscape, embodiment, etc.—around which a succession of avant-garde camps have pitched their tents (e.g., Bradley, 2000, 2003; Dobres, 2000; Hodder and Cessford, 2004; Joyce, 2000, 2003; Meskell, 1996, 1999, 2004; Meskell and Joyce, 2003; Mills, 2004; Spielmann, 2002; Thomas, 1996, 2001; Van Dyke and Alcock, 2003). However, while these camps have their own theoretical spins, they are under-girded by what we might label the same “historical-processual” principles (see Pauketat, 2001, 2003a).

Our purpose here is to examine one principle—physicality—that unifies these approaches and raises methodological issues of concern to all archaeologists. Our examination involves some of the most mundane and commonplace of

¹Department of Anthropology, University of Illinois, 109 Davenport Hall, MC-148, Urbana, Illinois 61801.

²To whom correspondence should be addressed; e-mail: pauketat@uiuc.edu.

archaeological features, postmolds, in their historical contexts. These stains in the earth, where wooden posts were once implanted, embody the unifying principle of physicality. Our present examination of this principle leads us to ask new questions and to more systematically identify practical variability, to compare genealogies or histories of practices, and to “tack” between scales and lines of evidence (cf. Wylie, 1989).

THE PHYSICALITY OF CONSTRUCTION

Few would deny that physical constructions have an objective materiality. They are material features that occupy space, and enable or constrain how people move about and experience space and time. That is, we might also speak of physical constructions in terms of their other dimensions: spatiality, corporeality, and temporality. For present purposes, we need not distinguish these overlapping dimensions. Rather, we will discuss them all as aspects of the fundamental physicality of human agency.

Thinking about the dimensions of physical construction in this way allows us to broach a broad theoretical point: in the process of physical construction, people construct, de-construct, or re-construct cultures. Consider that each of us walks around with our own cultural “subjectivities” or “dispositions” (*sensu* Bourdieu, 1990; Merleau-Ponty, 2002). These are the filters through which all of us interpret, experience, and know the world around us. Of course, our subjectivities and dispositions keep changing, generally through our ongoing encounters with the world and with the subjectivities and dispositions of others in it. But physical constructions make manifest our subjectivities and dispositions and those of other people involved, at least as these exist in specific moments of construction. Indeed, the various moments of construction are also “intersubjective” experiences that shape the ways we think about others, objects, and the spaces of experience.

So, in this way, physical constructions (among other things) may be understood as cultural constructions. They involve people forming and experiencing identities, making and inscribing memories, and re-interpreting practices and traditions materially, spatially, temporally, and corporeally. In other words, people make or contest cultures continuously, and they do this through their bodies, in space, and through matter in ways that draw on the past, define the present, and constrain the future. Cultures may seem to reside in the head, but they are made in the physical world. In a sense, then, an archaeology of agency is more properly an archaeology of culture-making (or “cultural practices,” compare Dobres and Robb, 2000).

Why Postmolds?

Unfortunately, archaeologists have insufficiently translated this sense into methodologies that will permit us—in our attempts to answer the big questions of

global human history—to do more than reify the conclusions of sociologists, cultural anthropologists, geographers, or philosophers (e.g., Archer, 1996; Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984; Merleau-Ponty, 2002; Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1989). And yet archaeologists are well situated to observe the everyday practices or microscale events of social life said by these theorists to be key to understanding culture change. Take, for example, the lowly postmold.

Like a fossil, a postmold is the deteriorated remnant or cast of a wooden pole implanted in the ground. It was produced in one of a number of different ways. The post or pole itself, in some instances, might have been jammed into the soft ground and, after serving its purpose, left to rot in place. In this case, the postmold and post hole were one and the same. Alternately, posts might have been set into hand-excavated post holes or builders' trenches that were subsequently backfilled or shimmed to keep posts in place. Whether the post was then left to rot in place or was pulled out at a later point, the postmold would have been distinct from the post hole or builders' trench. That is, the backfill placed around a post when first implanted typically can be distinguished from the organic cast of the rotted post or from the later fill that washed or fell into the hole where a later-removed post had been.

In any case, a single postmold embodies at least one short-term event or specific cultural practice, and possibly a sequence of such events or practices that are readily recovered by archaeologists through detailed field observations of postmold and post hole stratigraphy, superpositioning, and sedimentology. Of course, there are very real difficulties associated with archaeological recovery. Postmolds, for instance, are notoriously difficult to locate with certainty, depending on field conditions, degree of bioturbation, and excavation approach (e.g., whether one sections the postmold or removes the fill without sectioning [see Hester *et al.*, 1997]). Archaeologists struggle to define them, try not to overlook them, confuse them with animal burrows and, all too often, relegate them to the background of interpretations. Typically, once identified, counted, and measured, they are lumped together as a static type of archaeological feature or as a benign characteristic of houses, settlements, or monuments. Treated this way, they are almost meaningless background noise in the larger interpretive schemes of archaeologists. But are postmolds really so inconsequential to our larger understanding of human history?

Three Anecdotes

Consider the questions raised by three post emplacement anecdotes. The first takes place in Arkansas in AD 1542. Traveling through the American Southeast, Spanish conquistador Hernando de Soto arrived at the principal town of Casquí. He “was offered the residence of the chief, on a high mound on one side of the town” and, 3 days later, “asked by the chief to petition his obviously powerful god to make it rain. A cross, which took more than 100 men to move,

was built of the largest and thickest ‘pine’ (probably cypress) in the whole region” (Morse and Morse, 1983, p. 309). A large post hole was excavated on the mound summit to accept the enormous base of the cross, which was then hoisted into place. “Spanish priests held an appropriate ceremony while 15,000 Indians watched from across the river. A heavy rain began to fall that night and lasted for 2 days, greatly impressing the Casquí natives” (Morse and Morse, 1983, p. 309).

The question is this: What was the impact of this post emplacement event on the native audience? Perhaps we could refine that question by considering a second, oddly similar incident, this time in AD 1923. The scene is a huge rally of a resurgent Ku Klux Klan that, like the previous example, was held on and appropriated sacred American Indian grounds. One late-May night in 1923, 12,000 Euroamerican members or sympathizers of the KKK drove their automobiles to the Cahokia site, in southwestern Illinois, parking them in the site’s 19-ha Grand Plaza. These openly bigoted and racist “native-born” Euroamericans sought to thwart the perceived threat posed by the possible unionization of low-paid southern immigrant laborers—African American, Irish American, and Catholics generally—in the industrializing greater St. Louis region (Chappell, 2002:134). So, there, at the ancient Mississippian capital, the assembled throng of men, women, and children erected a huge wooden cross in a post hole atop a prominent Indian mound bordering the plaza. That night, they burned the cross atop the mound in full view of all (see Chappell, 2003, figure 102). So, the question is this: How were the participants’ notions of family or community identity re-invented that night, and what were the long-term cultural-historical consequences of this and similar events for the people of the American Midwest?

Thinking about tacking back and forth between the specificities of agential moments and long-term historical effects leads us to a final more recent example. During the late nineteenth and twentieth century, scores of work crews and linemen set hundreds of thousands of telegraph and telephone poles, cut from North American forests, in holes across the United States and Canada. They covered the continent with wires. In the process, they effectively inscribed the national landscapes with cultural meanings rooted in a particularly North American history of capitalist-labor relations, technological fetishization, and environmental exploitation. North Americans live with the posts and wires in our present-day reality, typically without much conscious thought. Again, to what extent did these post-setting practices define and continue to define contemporary sensibilities? And moreover, how can archaeologists recover sufficient information to answer such a question?

Implications

Our answers to such questions involve first recognizing the convergence of those theoretical principles that underlie today’s archaeologies of agency, practice,

performance, landscape, and embodiment. In general terms, we note that post-setting practices were not culturally neutral: each post hole excavation, tree cutting, post transport, post emplacement and, later, removal or decay was an intersubjective moment. It exposed the diverse dispositions of the various participants to those of others. And each practice repositioned people, places, and things vis-à-vis others in ways that could never be truly duplicated.

In more specific terms, we propose that, in the case of the three anecdotes above, there were *chaînes opératoires* of post hole digging, post preparation, and post setting (in the spirit of Dobres, 2000). That is, the cultural knowledge required to cut and prepare a post, then dig the hole to a certain depth and width, and finally set the post (as part of some larger construction project) would have varied according to the previous experiences of the people involved. Based on those varied experiences, localized ways of constructing—social, ritual, and technological know-how—presumably would have arisen from the repeated post emplacement practices. Such localized know-how also would have been contingent on or motivated by attempts to conform to or avoid someone else's construction practices or the memories and meanings associated with them, adding a political element to the process. To the extent that any given practice involved collective labor or coordinated performances, it probably created communal sensibilities—or resistance to such sensibilities—memorialized in physical form by the post or post structure (*sensu* Bradley, 1998; Joyce, 2004; Pauketat, 2000; Paynter and McGuire, 1991).

Similarly, we posit that the corporeality of cultural practices would have recursively created sensibilities or subjectivities in relation to the wider landscapes within which bodily experiences took place (e.g., Fisher and Loren, 2003; Joyce, 1998; Meskell and Joyce, 2003). Those experiences, for example chopping down trees and preparing posts, may have inscribed spaces and imbued landscapes with memories and meanings (Ashmore, 2002; Ashmore and Knapp, 1999; Joyce and Hendon, 2000; Kus, 1983; Pauketat and Alt, 2005; Thomas, 2001; Tilley, 1994). Posts marked space in durable ways and, through the experiences of setting, resetting, or viewing, they would have constructed collective memories of some duration, entailing and then constraining certain bodily movements and sensuous experiences in relation to the earth and to wooded landscapes.

Then again, posts could be moved and reused in ways like other portable cultural objects, giving them potentially significant biographies. Certainly this was the case with various "sacred" posts among Plains Indians (many of whom, incidentally, were descended from Mississippian or Mississippianized progenitors). For instance, among certain Siouan-speaking peoples of the eastern Plains, in the nineteenth century, important posts were honored objects curated for generations inside sacred buildings and carefully moved with the people from homeland to homeland (Hall, 1997). The Omaha's "sacred pole," for instance, was more than just a marker of group identity. The pole itself was a social person (see Gillespie, 2001). Called the "Venerable Man," the pole desired food and offerings, was revered "by young

and old,” and was the subject of song and legend (Fletcher and La Flesche, 1992, p. 248). Similar poles, staffs, and “sacred trees” are well known in the iconography of Mississippian peoples elsewhere (see Phillips and Brown, 1978).

In short, posts (and their post holes and postmolds) were simultaneously portable objects, pieces of landscapes, and embodiments of labor, sociality, and identity. Postmolds, in a way, embody all dimensions—materiality, corporeality, and spatiality—of the fundamental physicality of the process of cultural construction. Archaeologists can—and in fact necessarily always do—locate this process as artifacts, features, human remains, and patterned distributions in space and through time. Some of these things, like certain posts, were components of momentous, historical events. But most were not. In either case, it seems reasonable to suggest that postmolds were neither negligible components of the physicality of culture-making nor the exclusive domain of elites and their “official” histories (*sensu* Trouillot, 1995). Instead, most were related to the unofficial histories of the ordinary people who defined family values, created communities, and built civilizations.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF MISSISSIPPIANIZATION

Postmolds prove particularly instructive in crafting an explanation of one well-known North American case, Cahokia. While we will not provide a comprehensive overview of that case here, suffice it to say that Cahokia was an unusual “proto-urban city” at the heart of a regional political phenomenon that had profound historical effects throughout the American Midwest and Mid-South (Pauketat, 2004a). Its foundations rest on certain pre-Mississippian peoples who were politicizing identities in ways that would invert pre-Mississippian communalism. Around AD 1050, in a portion of that valley (called the American Bottom region or greater Cahokia), people coalesced to plan and construct the huge complex of Cahokia (Fig. 1). The result was the earliest and largest of the so-called Mississippian polities, recognized archaeologically as a rapid and pervasive transformation of all aspects of social life and cultural practice.

During the subsequent Lohmann (AD 1050–1100) and early Stirling (AD 1100–1150) phases, it appears that the diverse social identities, traditions, and practices of both local families and recent immigrants were entangled in a thick political–cultural web whose center was Cahokia (see Pauketat, 2004a). At this time, the population of Cahokia proper may have exceeded 10,000 people, with a regional population in the low tens of thousands. By the late Stirling phase (AD 1150–1200), there are signs of the beginning of a region-wide depopulation accompanied, not incidentally, by the construction of palisade walls around Cahokia and its outliers (see Pauketat, 2003b, 2004a). Forestalling collapse for a time (called the Moorehead phase [AD 1200–1275]), the region was almost completely abandoned during the Sand Prairie phase (AD 1275–1350).

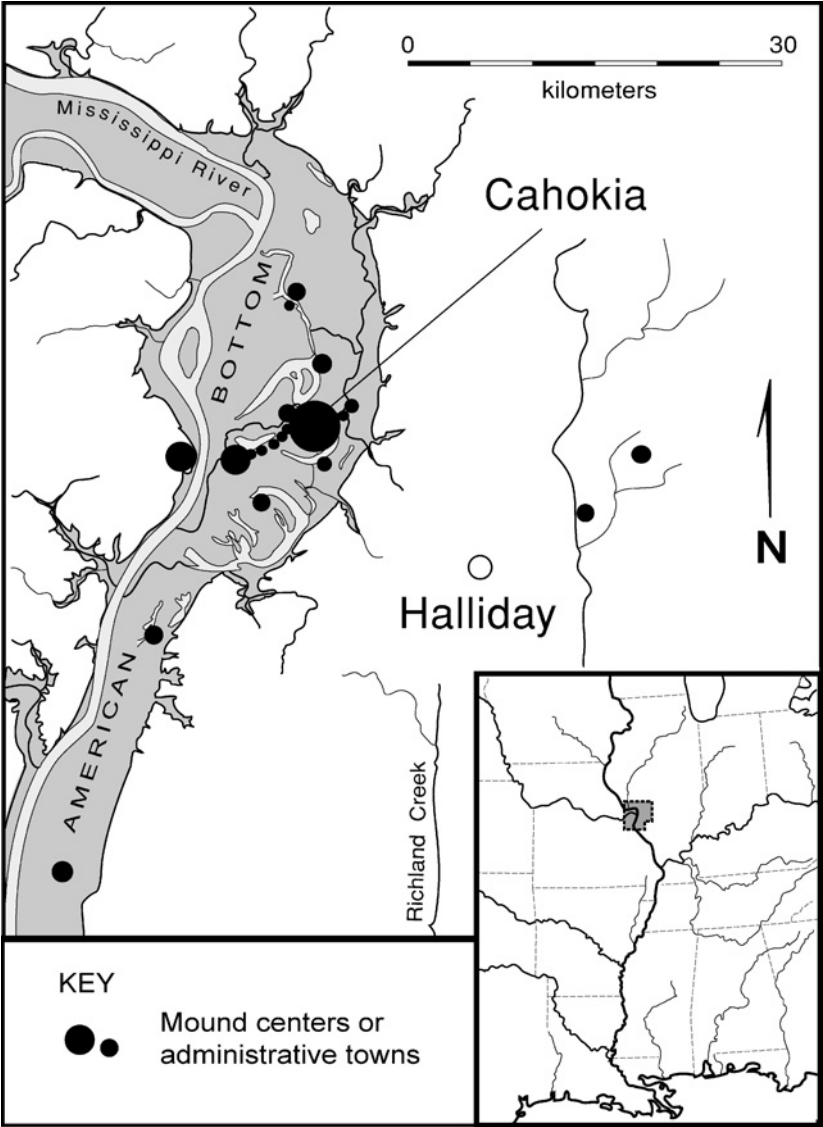


Fig. 1. Location of the Cahokia and Halliday sites.

It Takes a Village

As underscored by the earlier post emplacement anecdotes, we assume from the outset that the digging and filling of post holes during the Mississippian period

around Cahokia were not benign or normative behaviors. Rather, we propose that all such things were part of the active and contingent production of gendered and corporate Mississippian identities, temporalities, and social histories involving adults and children. Certainly, our own approach to postmolds stems in part from the experience of excavating and analyzing thousands of them associated with hundreds of pole-and-thatch buildings at Cahokia, outlying villages, and scattered small homesteads dating to the Lohmann phase (see Alt, 2002a; Pauketat, 1998a,b, 2003b). These studies, in turn, build on an already impressive regional database involving scores of other completely excavated sites, a database that owes much to the ongoing efforts of the region's "transportation archaeology" (Bareis and Porter, 1984; Walthall *et al.*, 1997).

Excavations of this magnitude permit observations of practical variability in a local population. For example, the depths of nearly 3000 house-wall postmolds (associated with 101 house constructions) at the Halliday site, a rural village 16 km distant from Cahokia, are consistently variable (Pauketat, 2003b). That variability is sometimes seen even in the outer walls of individual houses. One possibility is that the shorter arms of children and the longer arms of adults may have taken turns, digging the post holes in a leapfrog fashion. If so, then the children and adults might have continued to labor together to build their houses, placing individual sapling-sized posts into each post hole and then pulling the tops of the pliable uprights together to form an arbor roof. That arbor roofs were the preferred construction style seems affirmed by the slight inward slant of the houses' exterior-wall postmolds, as seen in cross-section (at Halliday and elsewhere).

At this same settlement, there is variability in the number of times that house walls were rebuilt, each rebuilding involving the removal of posts from the old walls and the excavation of new post holes parallel to the abandoned ones (Fig. 2). House walls were built and rebuilt from one to four times. However, that variability was not random, but correlates with specific clusters of houses around isolatable courtyards (i.e., the central unsullied open spaces, each marked with a modest center post [10–20 cm in diameter]). Of six discrete courtyard groups identified in our excavations (of about half the site), all of the buildings in one group were built just once, those in three other courtyard clusters were built and then rebuilt, and two more courtyards saw their buildings rebuilt three times after the initial construction. Some of these houses probably had their wall posts pulled out during abandonment, apparent in a halo effect around the outer margins of the postmolds, presumably produced from wiggling the posts back and forth in their post holes (Fig. 3).

Thus, it seems that all of the domiciles of individual courtyards were built together, reconstructed together, and even abandoned as a group (Alt, 2001). The same seems to have been true of the pre-Mississippian occupation at Cahokia as well (Pauketat, 1994, p. 31). Based on the number of house reconstructions, it seems likely that some of the courtyard groups had shorter occupation spans than did others. Indeed, it appears from the postmold data that this particular

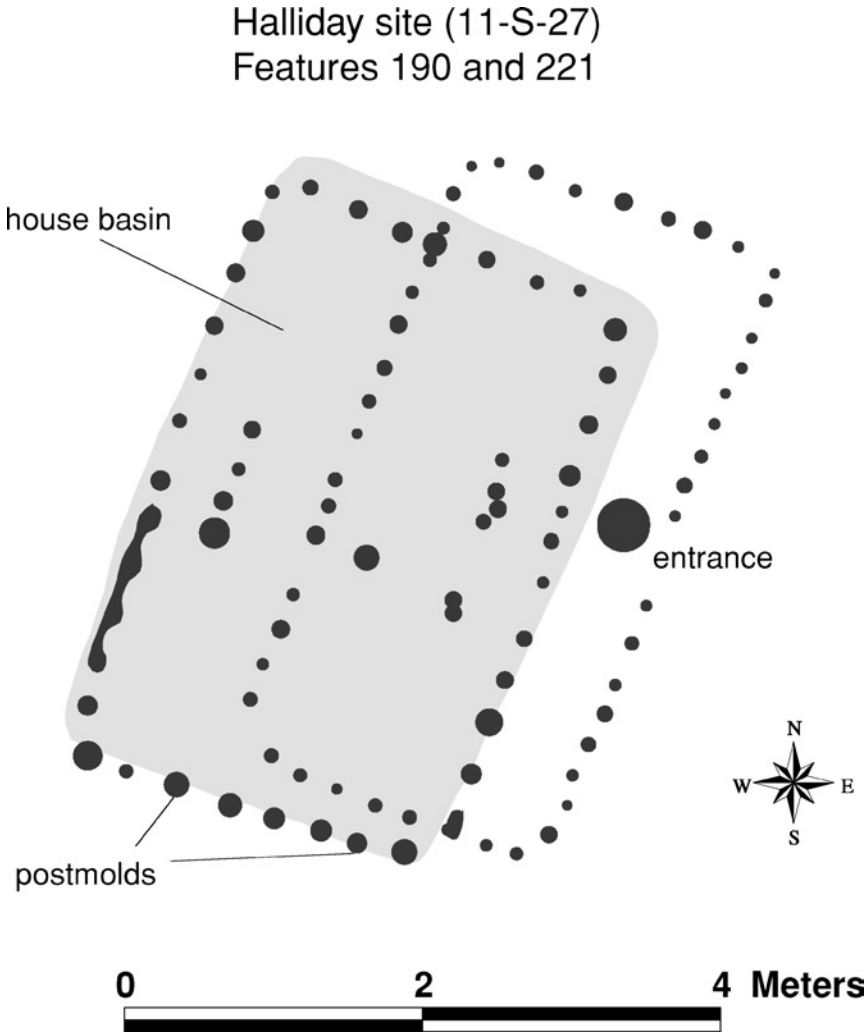


Fig. 2. House plan at the Halliday site, Illinois, showing evidence of reconstruction.

settlement was founded first as a large multi-courtyard village sometime around or immediately preceding AD 1050. Then, over the subsequent decades, it lost population one courtyard group at a time (Pauketat, 2003b, 65 fn).

This observation seems affirmed by three lines of evidence. First, the number of times that the center post of each courtyard was reset roughly correlates with the number of times houses were rebuilt. As the center post of each courtyard appears to have been periodically pulled and reset, the central post of the shortest-term courtyard had been reset just once, while in others it was done repeatedly



Fig. 3. Sectioned house basin at the Halliday site, Illinois, showing halo-effect postmolds on floor.

(Fig. 4). Second, there is an inverse relationship between the density of garbage in abandoned house basins of each courtyard and the number of times that house wall posts or courtyard center posts were reset, as if the open house basins of those courtyards abandoned first were immediately used as receptacles for the garbage of everyone who remained (Wesselmann, 2000). As it turns out, the longest occupied courtyard group was also the most centrally situated one, and the only one whose buildings (including a possible public or high-status house) also had specially prepared yellow clay floors, our third line of evidence. In this courtyard group and in several houses at other nearby Mississippian villages, the floors and postmolds

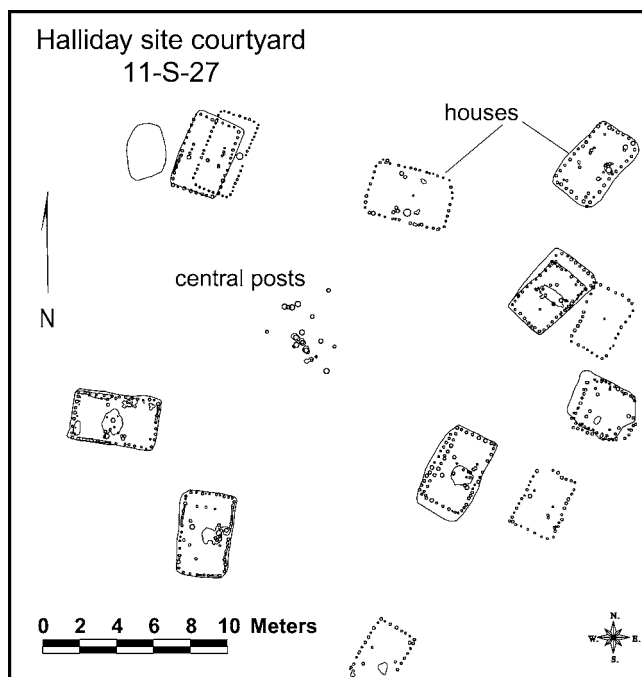


Fig. 4. Halliday site courtyard cluster, showing sequential center posts.

of buildings (and some extramural pits) were coated by hand with the colored clay, smeared down into the interiors of post holes themselves prior to setting the wall posts (Fig. 5).

Given these lines of evidence, it seems likely that post setting and other aspects of architectural construction were important, coordinated practices that involved familial or communal groups. Thus, it is likely that these periodic practices of reconstruction—and the constituent practices such as post hole excavation and post preparation—were highly meaningful. Just how meaningful they were can be gauged by gaining a regional perspective on the adoption of a new Cahokian architectural technology.

Culture-Making and Contestation: Wall Trenches and Post Pits

In the mid-eleventh century, and seemingly within the span of a generation or so, people practicing single-post house construction founded a series of new peripheral villages in the hills surrounding the Mississippi River floodplain and Cahokia (Alt, 2001, 2002; Pauketat, 1998b, 2003b; Wilson, 1998). At one of these new settlements—the Halliday site—the settlers constructed single-set-post

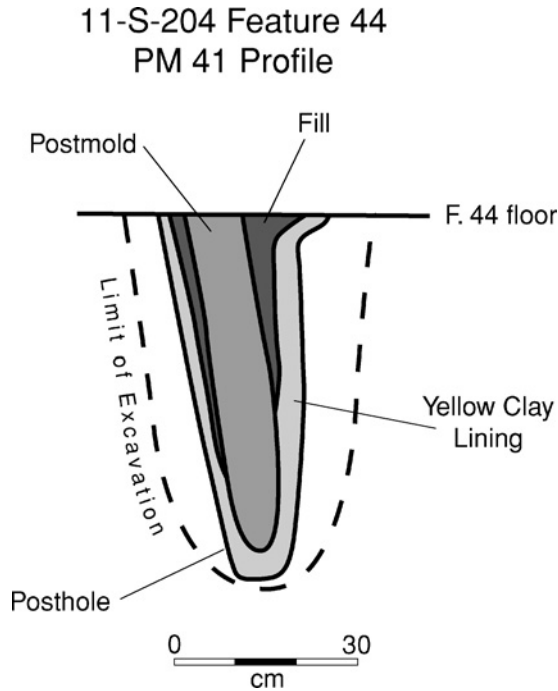


Fig. 5. Profile of clay-lined wall-post feature at the Pfeiffer site, Illinois.

houses in clusters around small courtyards. At other settlements, either immediately or over the course of a few years, resettled farmers adopted a new house-wall-construction practice ostensibly invented at and emanating from Cahokia proper (Alt, 2001, 2002a,b).

According to one school of thought, this invention process had extensive trans-regional, political-historical impacts (Pauketat, 2005a). That is, the adoption of wall trenches—a hallmark of Mississippian peoples in some parts of the eastern United States—has a history that matters. At present, we are concerned only with the appearance and adoption of wall-trench construction techniques in the vicinity of Cahokia.

At Cahokia proper, wall-trench adoption was abrupt and total at ca. AD 1050. There, the pre-Mississippian practices of setting posts into their individual post holes virtually disappeared as a feature of ordinary domiciles after AD 1050 (Collins, 1990, 1997; Pauketat, 1994, 1997, 1998a). The abrupt transition to wall-trench housing at that time corresponds with a suite of other changes, not the least of which was the planned construction of Cahokia's enormous central precinct of earthen pyramids and plazas (Dalan *et al.*, 2003; Pauketat, 1994, 1998b, 2004a).

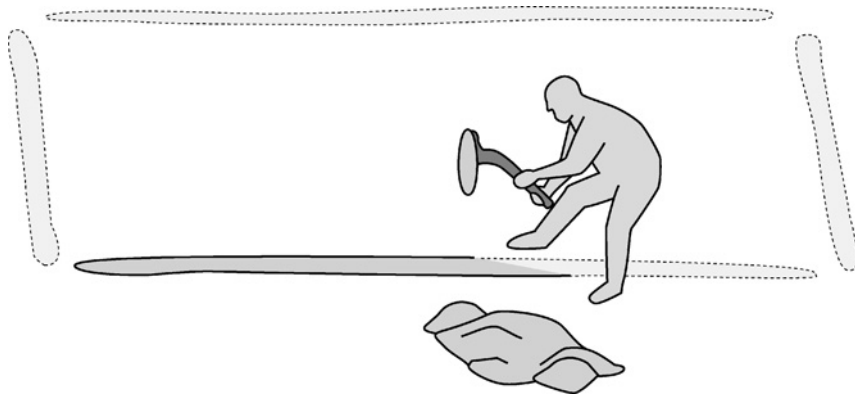


Fig. 6. Wall-trench excavation technique.

This was the centerpiece of a “new political-administrative capital and a remarkably pervasive transformation of people, their cultural practices, and even the meanings of their bodies. . . . It involved all aspects of life, death, domesticity, religion, bodily movement, and sensuous experience” (Pauketat, 2004a, p. 94).

So, why would wall trenches have been adopted during this brief phase of great social change? The seemingly simple answer, ignoring the many contingent lines of evidence for present purposes, is that wall trenches allowed a single person wielding a stone-bladed hoe to excavate the entire wall foundation (Fig. 6). But that answer is not so simple after all, since it has social-historical implications; digging wall trenches meant that house-foundation-excavation need not have remained the same sort of family effort that it had been. That is, by digging wall trenches, many house foundations could have been dug in a single day by a solitary work crew (Pauketat, 1994, p. 172). In addition, wall trenches may have been about much more than just digging a house foundation. These builders’ trenches may have been the basal component of an entirely new or revamped architectural technology that entailed the prefabrication of walls (see Pauketat and Woods, 1986, p. 111; cf. Lewis and Kneberg, 1946, p. 61).

At Cahokia or anywhere else, prefabricating a wall would have meant building the framework on the ground, lifting each wall upright and slipping it into its respective wall trench, tying the walls together at the corners to stabilize them and adding a separate thatched hipped roof to the structure. This further meant that, if house size was standardized (arguably the case at any number of Mississippian places), then work crews could have built any number of walls off site for use in large-scale urban renewal efforts, such as those that accompanied the founding phase of early Cahokia (Pauketat, 2004a).

Given this, our finding that wall trenches were not immediately adopted at certain rural villages, ca. AD 1050, outside of Cahokia constitutes another line

of evidence that permits us to evaluate the significance of a series of practical histories or genealogies. Based on a sample of 250 houses at eight upland villages, Alt (2001) has inferred that the rate of wall-trench adoption varied by site, implying that wall-trench practices may have been adopted almost immediately in some locations, but decades later at others (Halliday residents, in particular, lagged behind). Whatever accounted for the complete transition of wall-trench architecture at Cahokia, in other words, did not apply in the same way outside of Cahokia.

Indeed, there is one more architectural practice (or case of practical resistance) that bears consideration in genealogical terms. At some resettled villages, the junior author has identified both hybrid houses and “faux wall trenches” dating to the Lohmann phase (Alt, 2001, 2002a). Hybrid houses include those with some mix of trench and single-set-post walls, while faux wall-trench buildings mix the two technologies in a different way. These anomalous constructions (of which several are known) appear on house floors like wall trenches (Fig. 7). However, faux trenches were only several centimeters deep, too shallow to accept a prefabricated wall. Instead, hidden at the base of each faux trench is a single row of individually dug post holes! In other words, it appears that the construction of a faux wall-trench house started off by someone either emulating or feigning the practice of digging a wall trench, while in actuality the builders—perhaps re-inventing their “traditional” familial construction techniques—stepped in at some point to separately dig each post hole by hand beneath the shallow faux builder’s trenches.

Viewed as a time-series, these unusual buildings were transitional in each case where they appeared (Pauketat, 2003b, figure 7). Thus, the hybrid or faux wall-trench constructions appear to be the physicality of a short-lived cultural negotiation between certain resettled rural farmers and Cahokians. Perhaps the former accommodated the latter through these composite practices. Why? As these variable site-based architectural genealogies attest, such practices embedded the old within the new, a phenomenon previously noted to have been a pervasive characteristic of early Cahokia (Pauketat, 2000; Pauketat and Alt, 2003; Pauketat and Emerson, 1999; Pauketat *et al.*, 2002). Regardless, this negotiation appears to have involved a partial adoption of a Cahokian technology by some farmers who were, literally and figuratively, going through the motions. Whether lacking the wall-trench know-how or knowingly avoiding it, they nevertheless adhered to a Cahokian sense of how-to-build-a-house even while incorporating the old familial-communal practices of setting posts individually (Alt, 2001, 2002).

Elsewhere, we have argued that such dispositions as noted above were inculcated through inclusive, periodic ceremonies in the new public spaces of Cahokia (e.g., Pauketat, 2000; Pauketat and Alt, 2003; Pauketat and Emerson, 1999). It seems likely, again for reasons we will not elaborate here, that the labor of culturally diverse, resettled farmers was mobilized in the apparent group-oriented monumental constructions of the Lohmann phase (Alt, 2002; Pauketat, 2003b,



Fig. 7. Faux wall-trench building at the Halliday site, Illinois: top, faux trenches visible at floor level; bottom, postmolds visible with faux trench fill removed.

2004a). Among the labor-intensive and regularly prosecuted Cahokian constructions were large public buildings, high-status housing, and prominent marker posts (Collins, 1990, 1997; Kelly, 1997; Pauketat, 1993, 1998a, 2005b; Porter, 1974). All of these structures required sizeable timbers. Large posts and beams supported the weighty roofs of oversized public buildings, temples, and elite domiciles.

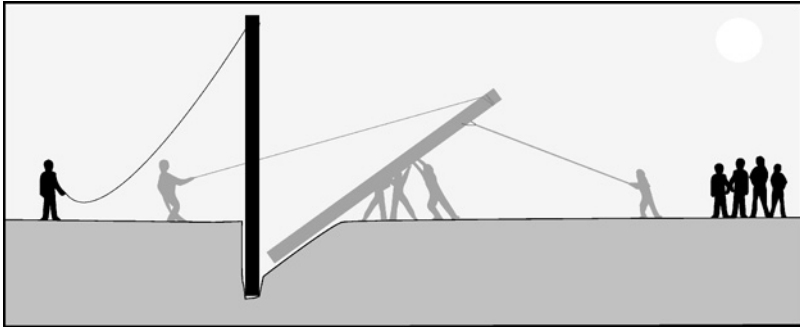


Fig. 8. Large post emplacement procedure.

They were used in a series of post-circle monuments or “woodhenges” and in compound walls. And they served as great “markers” in plazas, individually or in rows, oversized versions of the pre-Mississippian courtyard center posts (Pauketat, 1998a, 2005a). Like their counterparts in ethnohistoric accounts and Mississippian iconography, the marker posts may have embodied supernatural forces, legends, social memories, and identities. Some may have been painted and festooned with enemy scalps. And some or all may have been social persons, like the later Omaha poles, who were honored with offerings and prayers.

These marker posts are frequently associated with the surfaces of earthen pyramids and plazas. In these contexts, the posts exemplify the ways in which quotidian construction practices were scaled up at Cahokia, ostensibly inverting the familial-communal basis of post-setting practices. Cavernous post pits were dug by hand in order to set these monumentally large posts, cypress and red cedar logs that would have required considerable coordination to cut, haul (from sources possibly many kilometers away), debark, and then ramp into place (Fig. 8). The largest cypress logs, a meter in diameter, were hoisted into vertical positions throughout the inner sancta of the central precincts of Cahokia and its outlier towns, much as the Spaniards observed at Casquí centuries later (Fig. 9).

But even these most durable of cypress and cedar monuments in the most central of Cahokian marker posts and woodhenges were not left to stand long. Like all monuments at Cahokia, the point of construction appears to have been the act of construction itself, as attested in the many placed and replaced monumental posts (Pauketat, 1993, 1998b, 2000). Like earlier pre-Mississippian and rural early-Mississippian counterparts in village courtyards, these posts were routinely extracted and reset in all-inclusive ritual performances. As with earthen-mound construction, the labor entailed in the many contemporary post pit excavations and post emplacements suggests that the participation of men and women (although not necessarily children) in the public acts of post insertion and extraction was as important as the post itself.



Fig. 9. In situ cypress post base in bottom of post pit at the Mitchell site, Illinois (used with permission, Illinois Transportation Archaeological Research Program, University of Illinois).

Thus, central post-setting practices probably mimicked the familiar domestic constructions of the many different participants, gathering together the diverse meanings, emotions, and memories into a common project. That is, when put in motion by human bodies, repetitious physical constructions—particularly as they involved the simultaneously material, spatial, and corporeal dimensionality of posts—likely syncretized identities by blurring the boundaries between bodies, persons, things, and places. The result was a Cahokian *axis mundi*.

DISCUSSION

Why does the creation of a Cahokian *axis mundi* matter? Obviously, Cahokia's rise and fall structured in a myriad of ways, most still poorly understood, the social histories of many native peoples in North America (Pauketat, 2004a, 2005b). Equally obvious is that, in some ways, the Cahokia case parallels other ancient polities, regional cultures, or socio-religious movements around the world. Presumably, studying one such historical case might shed light on the processes that led to others, and vice versa.

Given this, how can we be certain that post-setting, or any similar low-level practice, was so important in this, or any other, case? Do we need to worry about agency in a postmold in order to make effective explanations of culture

change in the past? Our study of the Mississippian post-setting evidence from greater Cahokia indicates to us that the answer is yes. In postmolds, that is, we believe that we have the specific moments wherein particular people literally and figuratively constructed their worlds. These practices inscribed landscapes and constrained traditions of practice and bodily movements, recursively creating (and hybridizing) the very subjectivities and dispositions that motivated people in the first place. Even the lowly postmold, it seems, embodies the principle of the physicality of agency and culture-making.

It stands to reason that to ignore the variability and genealogies of posthole digging and filling is to suppress the agency of people who constructed agendas, asserted identities, made choices, and created cultures through such simultaneously mundane and meaningful acts. Of course, the same goes for other seemingly mundane aspects of cultural practice (e.g., from lithic technologies, food production, ceramic manufacture, and wood working to cooking, eating, weaving, gaming, etc.). After all, what are postmolds, projectile points, pots, baskets, pyramids, or military engagements if not brief intersubjective moments in thick histories of culture-making and contestation? All of these momentary and often-quotidian cultural practices have the potential to transform owing to their physicality. The extent that they did in any particular cultural-historical context remains an open question, but a question that now—from our present vantage point—needs to be asked.

Three Procedural Fundamentals

So, how does one go about asking the questions and gathering the sorts of data to address them? There are three procedural fundamentals of agency-centered (or historical-processual) approaches to the past to which we have adhered in our present study. First, and most importantly, it is necessary to document practical variability through time and across space (see Brumfiel, 2000, p. 252). In the case of greater Cahokia's posts, there is ample evidence of that variability, and it is patterned in nonrandom ways.

In fact, we have identified the pattern via our second procedural fundamental, which is to compare genealogies or histories of practices. While we have chosen for present purposes to deal almost exclusively with post-setting practices, we have compared post-setting genealogies between social groups (households or courtyard groups) and between contemporary settlements. Now, as opposed to a common misunderstanding, such a procedure does not alleviate the researcher from marshalling adequate evidence to support some claim. To the contrary, agency-based (or historical-processual) procedures entail considerably more empirical detail—all those postmolds—than previous sorts of materialist or idealist archaeologies (Pauketat, 2001).

No less significant than the genealogical method is the final procedural fundamental. Agent-centered approaches necessitate tacking back and forth between lines of evidence at multiple scales of analysis. Such a tacking procedure involves comparing postmold genealogies with other practices, and it involves moving between macroscale patterns (e.g., Mississippian culture) and the specificities of places, people, or things (e.g., particular hybrid house constructions at outlying sites versus Cahokia's total conversion). This final procedure is open-ended, and brings to bear other sorts of comparisons that allow the archaeologist to triangulate to explanations. In our present study, these other sorts of comparisons will derive from experimental archaeology and studies of natural formation processes, technical performance, and choice (Schiffer and Skibo, 1997; Skibo and Schiffer, 2001). They will also derive from more extensive cross-cultural comparisons (in the present case used to isolate the big-picture issue, the emergence of political-cultural order).

Ultimately, cross-cultural tacking plays a larger role in evaluating the significance of hypothetical historical-processual relationships (such as the relative importance of routine practices in the construction of culture) than we can detail here. Clearly, we remain concerned with explaining a fundamental issue that is relevant to most all archaeologists and historians the world over: "How did cultures change?" However, from our vantage point, and based on the principle of physicality, the processes we seek to explain are different from those sought by many others interested in ancient chiefdoms and states. This is because we locate the processes of culture change in practices rather than explaining those practices as consequences of external factors or mechanisms to which people passively and uniformly responded (e.g., Pauketat, 2004b).

This shift in causality means that commonly invoked structural or material preconditions or external forces generally presumed to cause material, spatial, and corporeal changes have been abandoned in favor of the materiality, spatiality, and corporeality of the phenomenon itself. For example, we no longer view the Cahokia polity and its rural hinterland economy as the consequences of faceless environmental, agricultural, or economic forces predating AD 1050. Instead, we shift the burden of explanation onto the people of greater Cahokia at and after AD 1050. In our specific example, this means shifting the burden onto the physicality of construction via, among other things, postmolds. This, in turn, means that we are led to ask wholly new questions of our data (Brumfiel, 2000; Cowgill, 2000; Pauketat, 2003a). In the present case, the proximate question at hand might be summarized simply as "How did diverse people in one portion of the Mississippi valley build a Cahokian culture through post-emplacement practices?" The ultimate question, though, is "How do cultural orders and identities come about such that people, who may not garner immediately perceptible benefits, participate in the construction?" That is, "How does civilization and globalization happen?"

Conclusion

Once we begin asking such encompassing questions with the new historical-processual logic advocated here, we must necessarily adjust our methodologies and, as a consequence, muster the data that other researchers might have ignored. In this sort of archaeology, large detailed data sets are, of course, desirable. Our ability to observe agency (as a dimension of social life, not as coterminous with agents themselves) varies positively with the empirical content and the scale of our archaeology. To make even the initial inferences about the importance of postmolds in this paper, we have summarized sizeable bodies of quantitative and qualitative data from a whole series of contexts across a region and over a period of many years. To be sure, single postmolds (or individual objects, sites, or frozen Neolithic men) do not embody the totality of practices and contexts necessary to understand historical processes: how did cultures change?

And yet there are obvious constraints that all archaeologists face in terms of our abilities to gather, analyze, and curate large data sets. Few archaeologists have developed sufficient rigor of recovery and reportage to realize the potential of the various avant-garde approaches to the study of historical processes (following Shennan, 1993). But it can be done. It entails being better culture historians and students of formation processes than were the original cultural historians and behavioral archaeologists. And it involves measuring the genealogies, biographies, and histories of practices, things, and places by tacking back and forth between microscale details and macroscale patterns, all the while seeking other convergent or divergent lines of evidence (e.g., Alt, 2001; Joyce, 2003; Mills, 2004; Sassaman, 2000; Spielmann, 2002; Walker, 2002; Walker and Lucero, 2000).

In the end, this tacking procedure produces a set of inferences about historical processes that require continued testing, evaluation, and revision. This is, of course, what archaeologists do as a matter of course, and so there is every reason to be positive (although not positivist) regarding the prospects for investigating the big questions of human history. As it turns out, archaeologists are optimally situated to observe cultural construction, a general process the understanding of which requires a comparative evaluation of the many dimensions of unofficial histories. Indeed, only archaeologists possess the necessary spatial and temporal controls over the multiple lines of genealogical, biographical, and historical data on the many practices, events, landscapes, and bodies necessary to properly evaluate the large-scale patterns of world history.

Of course, given the scale of the archaeology we suggest, and the obvious constraints, it is equally true that an archaeology of human agency cannot remain the esoteric pursuit of an erudite few. It must increasingly take into account the accumulated results of numerous researchers over many years. And it must become the domain of public archaeology. An archaeology founded on the fundamental principle of the physicality of culture-making is to be done by all practicing

archaeologists. Like the wooden posts of the past, many participants will build the foundations of 21st century archaeology, from the ground up.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Support for the excavations summarized in this paper were provided by the National Science Foundation (SBR-9305404, SBR-9996169, and BCS-0219308), the National Geographic Society (Grants 6319-98, 7313-02), the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (Grant 5625), the Cahokia Mounds Museum Society, and the University of Illinois. We are grateful to Catherine Cameron, Marcia-Anne Dobres, Thomas Emerson, Matthew Johnson, John Robb, James Skibo, and an anonymous reviewer for their critical reading of an earlier version of this paper. For their stimulating thoughts regarding that earlier version, we are also grateful to Kira Blaisdell-Sloan, Rosemary Joyce, Jeanne Lopiparo, and the other participants of a UC-Berkeley conference on practice theory in archaeology. All remaining shortcomings are our own.

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