

Anthropology Book Forum

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KASSABAUM, M.C., 2021, *A History of Platform Mound Ceremonialism: Finding Meaning in Elevated Ground*, Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 288 pp., ISBN: 978-1-68340-241-1

Dr. Megan Kassabaum reviews the 7,500-year-long history of platform mound ceremonialism in the southeastern US with a clear objective: to write the biography of this monumental architectural feature chronologically, thoroughly, and accurately to the archaeological sequence of events. By offering a forward-looking and multiscalar storyline, the author succeeds in presenting platform moundbuilding as a consistent tradition both geographically - as mounds are distributed from southern Florida throughout the Atlantic and Gulf Coastal Plains, west to Oklahoma, and north to the upper Midwest, and temporally - from the earliest iterations in the Archaic period to the Historic times, continued past European contact.

The monograph is divided into five chapters, followed by an epilogue. Chapters 1 and 2 have great contextual value in introducing the tradition of mound architecture among Native American cultures in the American Southeast, the scientific research conducted on mounds for the past 150 years, and Dr. Kassabaum's goals for this book.

Chapters 3 to 5 synthesize seven centuries of moundbuilding. In Chapter 3, Kassabaum examines 24 Archaic sites in the St. John's River Valley (SJR) in Florida and the Lower Mississippi Valley (LMV) in Louisiana that feature some of the earliest monumental platform constructions. Although these mounds vary greatly in size, shape, construction materials and techniques, and functions, platform mounds share one common feature—they are diachronically persistent forms of public architecture that appeared in the monumental repertoire since the inception of moundbuilding in the late Middle and early Late Archaic (ca.5500 BCE)

Chapter 4 details the proliferation of platform mounds during the Middle Woodland period (100BCE-500), which was associated with the Hopewell phenomenon but influenced by the preexisting Archaic background. The analysis of 111 sites from the coastal Southeast, STRV, MRV, and Middle Ohio Valley indicates Woodland communities appropriated earlier local rites, symbols, ceremonial processes, site layouts, and architectural forms. The continuation of mound ritualism, through the constant inhabitation or the sporadic or periodic return to these sites over generations, not only shows the persistence of memory tied to the landscape but the indisputable knowledge of, or the connection to, previous cultures and traditions. Consequently, Kassabaum claims the transition from the Archaic to the Woodland periods is better described as phyletic gradualism than a revolution (p.101).

In Chapter 5, the author addresses the continuation of Woodland platform ceremonialism at the Woodland-Mississippi temporal frontier around the year 1000, and its peak in the Mississippian period. In addition to archaeological data, she uses instances of language, folklore, and ritual practices of the Muskogee, Yuchi, Seminole, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Cherokee to prove the unbrokenness of platform ceremonialism through temporal horizons and the maintenance of precontact traditions among post-contact tribal groups. This connection is highlighted in the Epilogue: the author concludes that the history of platform mound construction in the US is not over, thus it is essential to incorporate contemporary native voices in the study of mounds.

The most valuable contribution of this book is Kassabaum's attention to time as a multifaceted resource—a theoretical construct, a measuring instrument, and a framework of reference. The intellectual cornerstone of, and the novelty that brings scholarly significance to this volume is the forward-looking and time-perspectivist approaches to the history of moundbuilding. Whereas traditional moundbuilding narratives are retrospective, tracing history from Mississippian mounds back, Kassabaum adopts Arnold's (2008) notion of “begoing instead of becoming.” Subsequently, she examines flat-topped mounds from their earliest forms onwards at different scales, considering a long-term, large-scale overview of the history of mounds over the centuries and across a large region; as well as a short-term, small-scale approach to look at individual monumental histories in detail. Kassabaum maintains that flat-topped mounds are not exclusively Mississippian, as the archaeological record summarized in this book shows; instead, she argues that moundbuilding ceremonialism is a continuum, with episodic discontinuity when analyzed at the local scale, in

which early platforms are the antecedents to later manifestations. This narration helps overcome the harmful effects of retrospective-thinking and the unfounded assumptions and anachronisms resulting from teleological determinism. For instance, she contends that designating the cultures that developed early forms of platform mounds as “proto-Mississippian” is unfair as this term ignores their genius, creativity, and capacity. A more accurate term to designate these societies is “pre-Mississippian.”

Moreover, the prospective historical account helps blur the sharp boundaries dividing pre-Mississippian and Mississippian traditions. This leads to one of the most enriching discussions in this book—the translation of spatial boundaries into time scales. Inspired by Parker and Rodseth’s (2005) and Feuer’s (2016) spatial literature, Kassabaum advocates for a timeline built upon “core periods” with buffer zones -what she calls “borders” and “boundaries”- and divided by “frontiers” (see p.165). This time construct helps achieve more nuanced temporal transitions than horizons and more accurate views of social change, as borders and boundaries are the time windows where culture hybridization originates and is expressed. This better defines the Woodland-to-Mississippi transition.

In addition to the bird’s-eye view of platform mound ceremonialism, Kassabaum offers a human’s-eye perspective of moundbuilding. By applying phenomenological and biographical approaches, she focuses on the process of mound construction over the final product or the post-construction use, thus highlighting the vitality and dynamism of ceremonial platforms. Mounds were not static symbols, but vibrant and ever-changing: they compelled an extensive centripetal force to bring numerous communities dispersed across the region to collaborate on a monumental project, and often involved several phases of construction, reconstruction, and maintenance throughout their functional life. Yet, they were persistent, and the knowledge involved in the construction methods, forms, and meanings was passed down generationally and across cultures, becoming the integrative link that connected different cultures to each other and their predecessors.

Although the multivalent usage of time as a tool and context for archaeological interpretation is, in my opinion, the greatest strength of this book, it also brings reflexivity concerns. Kassabaum’s goal is to react to the well-established “privilege of retrospect” (p.37) and to address the problems of back-projection by evaluating the history of moundbuilding linearly, from the initial construction of platform mounds in Archaic times to our days. By proving that there is no breakage

or compartmentalization in history other than the unnatural creation of independent horizons imposed by academia, she shows that Mississippian mounds are not an original invention but the product of a long history of mound ceremonialism. Despite the undebatable merit of Kassabaum's detailed, chronological examination of ceremonial architecture, and the epistemological value of prospective over retrospective views of history, this book falls short of breaking free from the "myth of progress" that is criticized here. Switching from a back- to a forward-projection changes the narrator's position but does not erase the Western gaze from the chronicle. Alternatively, a much-needed contribution to the study of moundbuilding requires the introduction of Native American worldviews, which conceive time as rhythmic and cyclical rather than linear (Brown and Cousins 2001), into archaeological interpretation. I would have enjoyed learning from mound ritualism through the lenses of indigenous time patterns, or at least, an in-depth discussion of how the Native American cyclic processes dictated the life of mounds in their recurrent patterns of blossoming and abandonment, the ongoing construction of mounds in ritual sequences, and the periodic revisitation of ceremonial sites by different groups.

This book offered a solid stepping-stone to initiate the transformation of archaeological interpretation; now it is time to completely break away from Western intellectual impositions over time perspectives and decolonize the centuries-long biography of ceremonial moundbuilding in the Southeastern US.

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