Modeling Mississippian as non-State: a Narrowness of Vision?
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Abstract

A few scholars have treated Mississippian society, and particularly the polity centered on Cahokia, as a state organization. Most Mississippianists dismiss the idea reflexively, using the (admittedly broad) label of chiefdom instead. Aspects of medieval Europe, Southeast Asian mandala organizations, and retainer burial phenomena worldwide suggest that a broader vision provides intriguing comparisons. I suggest that our models of state and chiefdom do not fully represent the variety and continuum of complex organization in past societies, and that multidimensional models based on archaeological data must be developed for a more appropriate evaluation of complexity in a worldwide perspective.

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In considering a comparative archaeology, I take as my starting point something that Lewis Binford said a few years ago: that archaeology is the explanation of the archaeological record. He was, as I have done, arguing against the idea that historical archaeology and prehistoric archaeology are fundamentally different disciplines. Indeed, I think that we need to attack forcefully the compartmentalization of our archaeologies into the various communities that hardly ever speak to one another. It seems to me that historical, Classical, Near Eastern archaeologies, and the archaeologies of literate societies anywhere have similar goals and similar methodological problems in using the textual and archaeological records as independent sources of information against which to test each other, with particular opportunities to refine interpretations when the two records seem to disagree.

In this sense, I see the archaeologies of literate societies as subsets of the archaeology of complex societies, because literate societies tend to be state-level systems. But we need to expand our horizon still farther, because not all complex societies were literate. A comparative archaeology of complex societies should develop methods of comparison that do not automatically place literate and non-literate cases in opposed categories, but can discern subtle resemblances at various levels of abstraction.
In Eastern North America, the indigenous complex societies were the Mississippian societies of the last half-millennium or so before European contact brought them into a historical record. By and large, Mississippianists have agreed to call these groups chiefdoms, and although there is some disagreement over what exactly that term means, there is broad consensus that the term “state” does not apply.

This was not always the case. In the 1960s and '70s, there were a few voices suggesting that there were state-level societies in the North American Southeast. In 1962 W. H. Sears made a case for states, based on tiered settlement patterns, ceremonial centers, social ranking, named districts in the historical record, and a “state cult.” We now know that Sears’s data conflated some non-Mississippian with Mississippian manifestations, and Sears has been politely but roundly ignored.

Sears himself ignored the preeminent Mississippian center: Cahokia, in the American Bottom of Illinois. It’s Cahokia that gives us the most trouble in our comfortable relegation of Mississippian to chiefdom status. In the 1970s, several accounts of Cahokia called it a city. Most of these were in non-technical literature, and might be waved off as a bit of hyperbole. More recently, Dena Dincauze and Robert Hasenstab suggested applying a world-systems model, with Cahokia as a core for a periphery reaching as far as the Iroquois area of the far
Northeast. Although they carefully did not label Cahokia a state, Dincauze and Hasenstab have been less politely received than Sears was: the Mississippianists who bothered to acknowledge their paper dismissed it peremptorily and, one might say, with some hostility.

But I’m not sure that these arguments have been refuted so much as suppressed by a consensus that amounts to tradition in the anthropological sense: an agreement that this is the way we do it, because this is the way it’s done.

If one definition of a city is a population too large and densely concentrated to feed itself, thus requiring a hinterland to supply it, then there’s still room to argue whether Cahokia was a city. Cahokia minimalists argue that the population was not so big, that only a small area within Cahokia was actually occupied at any given time. Similar arguments about another big center, Kincaid, are now challenged by magnetometer data showing house after house in areas where surface collections had suggested minimal activity. There’s a lot of data we still need from Cahokia before we can be sure of its population size.

Then again, a number of researchers have looked at the scale of Cahokia in terms or area and/or volume of monumental architecture. We can’t graph Cahokia with the other Mississippian sites. Cahokia is just off the scale. The graphs make Cahokia look like a primate city. Primate cities, as
cities in general, are often taken to imply state organization. Except, of course, that Mississippian societies were chiefdoms.

Maybe the problem is not with Cahokia, or the chiefdom-philia of Mississippianists, but with our models. Maybe our band-tribe-chiefdom-state stepladder is too simple, too categorical, to help us think through these problems. Maybe we need a more nuanced set of benchmarks, and a new set of scales.

Let’s compare the medieval societies of North America and Europe, for example. The immediate reaction on both sides of the Atlantic is: no! Can’t do that. Europe is steel, ships, wagons, animal and wind power, feudal kingdoms, cathedrals, literate records. Mississippian is Neolithic: stone, canoe and foot travel, human muscle power, dirt mounds, no writing. Europe is state. Mississippian is chiefdom. No comparison.

Okay. The average medieval European peasant lived in a one-room wattle-and-daub house with a dirt floor and no loft. He (and she) rarely saw a metal tool, and owned few possessions. A small percentage had chairs or stools, hardly any had a bed. The large landowners held the agricultural tools, or else the town did, and the average householder had to trade labor for the use of the tools. The average height and lifespan were about the same as in North America. For the average guy trying to scratch a living in the field, the material quality of life was not so different from the Mississippian, and maybe poorer.
The medieval European had a world view that Carolly Erickson calls an “Enchanted World,” in which “… life… is an inescapable quality of existence which is shared by stones, water and fire as surely as it is by trees and angels.” The medieval person believed in the "miraculous potency of sanctity" and had, simply, "a broader and different conception of reality." Strip away the details of Christianity versus Native American spirituality, and the world view of the medieval European was much more like that of the Southeastern Indian than like ours.

Literacy? As Lynn White says, apart from the church, "until the later thirteenth century" medieval culture "was largely an oral culture."

Organization? Let's not get distracted by technology. Chiefdom Cahokia circa A.D. 1150 was likely bigger than state-capital London. London was supplied by ship and wagon, firewood was cut with steel. Cahokia didn't have that technology. Does that mean that Cahokia had to be more organized, rather than less?

We assume that the power of a Mississippian chief was too limited to dominate a large enough region to constitute a state. But the power of a medieval king was uneven and limited in its extent. Though kings ruled large geographic regions in principle, their actual control was limited to the reach of their armed retainers. Medieval kings maintained power by traditional rights
to services and goods, their most powerful strength the "aura of majesty" derived from divine sanction.

Is it so hard to imagine a king at Cahokia, whose formal power reached much farther than his actual control?

Given the scale of Cahokia, even those of us who insist on the label “chiefdom” might admit that it’s a chiefdom kicked up a notch. Is there a term for that?

Maybe we need another model of state. For instance, we could look to the mandala states of Southeast Asia, the state that Stanley Tambiah calls a “galactic polity.” Manda means core, and la means container. The mandala is a design of satellites around a center. In a galactic polity, the center is the king’s capital and region of direct control. That region is encircled by provinces ruled by princes or governors appointed by the king, in turn surrounded by tributary polities more or less independent. It has inherent instabilities due to multiple heirs vying for power, and can be found in stronger and weaker phases depending on the strength of the ruler. Stronger rulers expand links of personal connection by appointing provincial governors, but for the most part, the king’s reach extends only so far as his armed retainers can carry it.

I don’t want to drag in all of the Asian spiritual connotations of the mandala as some psychic unity of Asiankind. But the organizational aspects sound very much like our cycling
chiefdoms. In particular, I remember from my introductory anthropology that a state is based on territory, while a chiefdom is embedded in kinship. But the Southeast Asian galactic polity is a state without territorial definition, in which control of populations, not territory, defines it. It strikes me as a chiefdom kicked up a notch.

So, again, I think our stepladder categories, chiefdom versus state, create a false dichotomy. We need to look at scales of multiple dimensions.

One of our favorite sources of social ranking is burial distinctions. Several colleagues have pointed out that there is a burial pattern that seems to be found in earliest states and perhaps the most complex chiefdoms: retainer burials. These are burials in which a focus individual is accompanied by extras. We see examples of varying scale in the Royal Tombs of Ur, Shang China, Early Classic Mayan Kaminaljuyu, Peruvian Sipan, the Scythians, Medieval Rus, Nubia, 19th-century Yao, 10th-century Igbo-Ukwu and... Cahokia. These are societies on the cusp of statehood, either early states, societies on the peripheries of powerful states, or, maybe, chiefdoms kicked up a notch. Maybe there is a retainer burial horizon in the stratigraphy of socioeconomic complexity.

I don’t want to interpolate another category, only to suggest that there are kinds of comparison that are independent
of our usual labels. I think we can also develop other scales. I’ve been playing with an assemblage measure of community complexity, for example. With samples from several communities, recovered, catalogued and organized with comparable methods within each community, I have used the Brainerd-Robinson coefficient of similarity to create an index of homogeneity of assemblages. Brainerd-Robinson is a very simple statistic, and I’m not here to argue about which favorite statistic to use—I like the simple ones. The B-R coefficient was derived specifically as a measure of similarity between assemblages (as opposed to diversity within assemblages) where artifact counts are expressed as percentages. It measures on a scale of 200, with 200 signifying identical assemblages and 0 signifying completely different assemblages.

I set up a functional scheme of artifact categories based on Stanley South’s pattern recognition in historic sites, modified for prehistoric sites but maintaining the same level of generality. I constructed a Brainerd-Robinson matrix for the assemblages for each of the communities of which I have multiple samples, and took a mean and standard deviation as an index.

At Wickliffe Mounds, a Mississippian site in western Kentucky, I have samples from Early, Middle, and Late periods within the occupation. For a number of reasons, I interpret the Middle period as being the strongest period of the chiefdom.
The Brainerd-Robinson index suggests that the Middle period samples are the least homogeneous of the three.

I have samples from three Taino sites on the north coast of Jamaica, spanning about AD 900 to 1500. The index values suggest an increasing complexity of assemblage. And, they are in the same range as the Mississippian samples.

I can compare that to a randomly selected sample of twelve excavation squares from Steve Davis et al.’s site of Occaneechi, a Siouan village in the Piedmont of North Carolina, generally interpreted as tribe, not chiefdom. The assemblages are more homogeneous, less complex, than the chiefdom assemblages.

I do not have comparable samples from historic or state-level societies. Those which I can sample from my own work or the literature are either small colonial communities, or in my Ohio-Mississippi Confluence samples, all upper-middle-class EuroAmerican families, and would be expected to show more homogeneity than samples across the whole spectrum of a historic American community. These indices are comparable to my chiefdom indices, and I’d like to think that a full community would show less homogeneity—more community complexity—in a state society.

I don’t mean to make any great claims for this—it’s just something I’m playing with between grading tests. But there are indications of a scale here, decreasing assemblage similarity with increasing socioeconomic complexity in our usual scheme.
Nor do I mean to say that Cahokia should be recast as a state. What I do mean to suggest is that we need more ways of thinking about issues of archaeological complexity and how to compare archaeological societies. I no longer believe that our four-rung typology of socioeconomic complexity is adequate for the needs of archaeology. I think, first, that the ethnographic and ethnohistoric cases our tribe-chieftdom-state model is based on do not reflect the full range of past societies, and second, that the ethnographic models do not have adequate archaeological correlates. I think we need our own models of complexity, based on archaeological criteria, specifically detached from ethnographic or literate data. I think we need numerous scales, independent scaling criteria, and systematic observation rather than reflexive and stereotypical labeling. Only then will we develop a truly effective cross-cultural archaeology that allows us to compare Cahokia with London, Mississippian with Great Zimbabwe or Igbo Ukwu or Kaminaljuyu or medieval Europe or galactic polities of Southeast Asia or anywhere, anywhen that archaeologists find societies we’d like to make generalizing statements about. I don’t think we’re there yet, but we should work on getting there.

Key references:

Sears, W. H.

Dincauze, Dena and Robert J. Hasenstab