THE MEDIEVAL SOUTHEAST: MISSISSIPPIAN POINT AND EUROPEAN COUNTERPOINT

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About two years ago, I made a couple of resolutions about my research interests and goals. One was to become a crank on the subject of the relationship between prehistoric and historical archaeology. The other was simply to have more fun with archaeology. My paper today paper addresses both resolutions.

On the subject of the relationship between prehistory and historical archaeology, the short of it is this: I don't think they are entirely separate fields. I think, moreover, that we should begin explicitly integrating the two subdisciplines. One of the ways I would like to do this is by applying methods developed in historical archaeology to other complex societies.

I started thinking of this in relation to my Mississippian assemblages from the Wickliffe Mounds. My reasoning was that Mississippian society is the most complex society in prehistoric eastern North America, and that some of the techniques and methods from historical archaeology ought to be useful, in general, on other than Euroamerican sites--even, perhaps, Mississippian sites.

That thought led me to contemplate certain statements most of us make about Mississippian society. We call it a chiefdom level society, whether at Cahokia or a little country crossroads town like Wickliffe. Most of us so thoroughly accept this idea that a suggestion of an alternative model, whether Mississippian as state society or Cahokia as a central place in a core-periphery scenario that stretches over much of the Eastern United States, as "simply improbable given the scale of the societies involved" (to quote one colleague's recent statement).

But what are we comparing, really? Let's take the scale of the society. This is a map similar to what many of us draw to introduce the Mississippian culture area. It's a good sized area. Few of us, if any, would argue that one polity administered or even claimed it all.
The medieval Old World \textit{slide} (excluding sub-Saharan Africa) can be divided into five main spheres of culture, or what the historians call civilizations: Christian European, Byzantine-Russian, Islamic, Indic, Chinese. On the map, these are vast entities; compare them with the Mississippian culture area, and Mississippia looks pretty small. The scales fit our notions of chiefdom versus state societies.

But what are we comparing? Christian Europe, for example, was not one state, any more than we think Mississippia was one polity. Christendom was split among a number of kings, and the effective control of kings was pretty limited. Maybe the relative size of the culture areas has more to do with transport technology than sociopolitical integration.

More to the point, these lines were drawn on historical data, not on archaeological data. Could we draw the same lines on archaeological data alone? What would we use?--monumental architecture, artistic and symbolic works, perhaps ceramics, settlement patterns, perhaps characteristic subsistence bases if we had the data. What would be the difference, conceptually, methodologically, between these regions and the Mississippian culture area, and could we make any statement about chiefdom versus state levels?

Just as an exercise, I want to spend a few minutes thinking about a comparison between Medieval England and the Medieval Mississippi Valley. I got interested in European Medieval archaeology as a bridging case between our American historical archaeology and my Mississippian data set: Medieval society is Mississippian in time period, and is the ancestral tradition to American historical societies. I think the relevance to American historical archaeology is clear. How can it be compared to Mississippian society?
The knee-jerk reaction is, well of course it can't. Mississippian is Neolithic. Medieval is post-Iron Age, with steel weapons, wagons, ships, draft animals. Mississippian is chiefdoms. Medieval is state societies with market economies. No comparison. It doesn't work.

Really? Let's look at the burial statistics from a couple of Medieval British cemeteries. At Wharram Percy, the evidence of 368 burials is of an average life expectancy of 35 for males, 31 for females; less than 10% lived past 50. Males averaged 5'6" tall. At St. Helen's-on-the-Walls, York, 1041 burials gave average heights of 5'6" for men, 5'2" for women; 9% lived past 60, while 27% died as children (and infants were under-represented). These statistics sound very Mississippian to me.

Most rural folk in Late Wickliffe period England lived in wattle and daub, thatched houses, often with a single room and with ceilings open to the roofs. Most owned little more substantial than the clothes on their backs. 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 rural householder had to trade labor for the use of the tools.

So the British had steel, wagons, draft animals--how much difference did that make to the average guy trying to scratch a living in the field?

Is the world view so different? In the literature of Southeastern Indians, take Hudson for an example, we get a picture of Native Americans surrounded by spirits and forces of nature, monsters and fabulous animals. Things that we strictly separate as imaginary or fantastic were part of everyday life. The circle symbolized the interconnectedness of everything; all things were imbued with spiritual power, people, animals, plants, rocks. People were intensely concerned with purity and guarded against spiritual pollution. Hudson repeatedly cautions us that this is the way "preliterate" people think, so different from our own rational and sensible Western point of view.
Read Carolly Erickson's book, *The Medieval Vision*. The Medieval Europeans lived in what she calls an "Enchanted World." To them, "All creation is alive." "...all created things--including those we would term inanimate--participate in the chain of creation and follow its laws... life... is an inescapable quality of existence which is shared by stones, water and fire as surely as it is by trees and angels." Apparitions of supernatural beings, occurrences and omens were "well within the range of the possible." 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.

How does Hudson's distinction of "preliterate" societies fit into this? Apart from the church, "until the later thirteenth century" medieval culture "was largely an oral culture." (Lynn White) So, how much difference did literacy make to the average guy trying to scratch a living in the field?

Okay, so Mississippian means chiefdom and Medieval means state society. One of the questions about Mississippian society is about ranking. We identify ranked societies, chiefdoms, by settlement pattern, elite/monumental architecture, burial distinctions. How do we compare household to household, rural village to rural village, to see differences in lifestyle?

Let's not get distracted by technology. Chiefdom Cahokia circa A.D. 1250 was bigger than state-capital London. London was supplied by ship and wagon, firewood was cut with steel. Cahokia didn't have that technology. Doesn't 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 hardly absolute. Quoting Carolly Erickson again: "By whatever means power is measured--persuasive influence over the
actions of others, license to break laws with impunity, ability to terrorize and overawe, physical invulnerability—the real power of kings in the middle ages was uneven and limited in its extent. Though kings ruled large geographic expanses their actual influence was at any given time confined to the area they and their effectual servants patrolled. “Courtiers of all ranks were uncertain allies,” and kings slept poorly knowing the potential threats to their power. That doesn't sound very different from some current models of complex chiefdoms.

In twelfth century England, most justice was either popular or feudal, and was administered by the local lord, not the king. Medieval kings "were in one sense little more than scavengers," maintaining 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 titular power reached much farther than his actual control?

Let me spin out a couple of settlement models based on Medieval history. The royal courts of England, and the aristocratic households, are described as peripatetic. They moved. This practice had a function: it was much easier for the lord to move to the surplus produce than to move the produce to the lord; and the practice would "allow a lord to show himself in the areas of his rule," reminding people that he existed.

What is the archaeological signature of a peripatetic royal court? Can we show that a royal Mississippian court did not make the rounds of mound centers?

Before the thirteenth century, many lords of England maintained a dozen or more manor houses, and included visits to London as part of a regular round of manor-hopping. The growth of a market for agricultural produce allowed them to buy food locally, and by the late fourteenth to early fifteenth century—the post-Wickliffe, or Late Angel period—most aristocrats were maintaining only
about two country manors, plus a London town house. "Hundreds of manor houses (and not a few redundant castles) fell into ruin in the later middle ages." Archaeologically, this would look like a major abandonment of elite centers. Sort of like an abandonment of mound centers in the central Mississippi Valley?--especially since those redundant castles were as likely to be motte-and-bailey constructions, "the motte a mound, either natural or artificial, the bailey a palisaded court below," as the masonry castles we have in our collective image of Meieval England. "Masonry was too costly for the thinly populated rural districts." (Gies and Gies)

What can we do with comparative models of ranking, especially complex ranking? John Steane, in his summary of Medieval archaeology in England, says that "the Early Middle Ages in England saw a hierarchical society emerge, composed of classes each of which performed set functions in human affairs..." His statement is based entirely on historical data. How do we trace intravillage socioeconomic distinctions in archaeological patterning? How do we compare the complexity of village to village? How do the archaeological patterns in England compare to patterned distinctions in the development of ranking in Mississippian society?

I have recently been through the whole series of the journal Medieval Archaeology. I found that Medieval Archaeology is caught in the same particularistic, architectural, antiquantitative focus that Stan South attacked for us in the 1960s and 70s. Let me quote Lynn White: medieval studies are "word-bound, almost entirely focused on extant documents."

My reading of the journal found essentially no quantification, no research design, and only rare discussion of field methods. Volume 1 of Medieval Archaeology was published in 1957. The first "methods" section I found was in 1964. They shovel-skimmed and trowelled, but made no mention of using screens. The next such section was in 1969, and was the same. The first and so far only discussion of "sampling design" appeared in 1982. This author evaluated "seiving," and
suggested that screens made the excavators too careless about finding things in situ. The first, and only, solid article based on quantification of animal remains appeared in 1988. This is archaeology as illustration, not a historical archaeology at all. Nor is it an archaeology that allows quantification, evaluation of representativeness of samples, or comparative methods.

And yet, Medieval Europe as background to European colonization is crucial to what North American historical archaeologists do, even in a narrow sense. Some of our colleagues, of course, have recognized this. I think one of the more fundamental points of Deetz's *In Small Things Forgotten* is that the shift from a medieval to a modern world view happened largely during the eighteenth century. Studies of medieval foodways, among others, provided the background for that study. But the background studies were done for American historical archaeology, not by medieval archaeologists, and they were done with historical sources, not archaeological data.

The point is not that I think the medieval models fit Mississippian sites—I don't really think that they do—but that we don't know: we don't know what the archaeological patterns are, and we have no methods to compare the archaeological data to distinguish Medieval patterns from Mississippian patterns. And yet analyses suggesting that by standard models Cahokia fits the patterns of a state (O'Brien) are dismissed by Mississippianists (Milner), without a cogent comparative or contrastive model on which to base an argument. If we compared Mississippia to Medieval England on purely archaeological data, would we make the same distinction?

In fact, to compare them, we have to compare a historical database in Britain to an archaeological one in the Mississippi Valley. We can't compare archaeology to archaeology. We don't have the archaeological data base in Britain, and we don't have the methods to compare the archaeological data.
Historical archaeology is developing comparative methods--socioeconomic indexing, pattern recognition--but so far restricting them to a narrow range of sites. These are methods that compare household to household, village to village--the level at which the average guy scratching a living in the field lived his life. I suggest that we need to expand the general approach, if not the specific techniques, beyond European sites of the last few centuries; that we ought to be more careful about dismissing comparisons that violate our stereotypical images of, say, Medieval England, until we have a method of comparing like databases; that we all ought to watch out for being so narrowly specialized that we can't entertain farfetched comparisons once in a while; and that we ought to have more fun with archaeology.