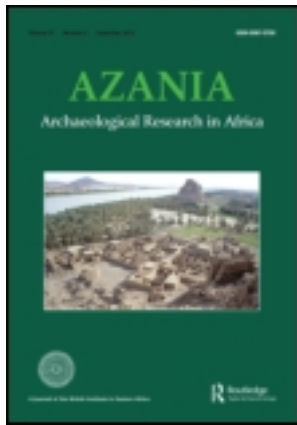


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## Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/raza20>

### Early monumentality in North America: another comparative perspective for Africa

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Published online: 26 Jun 2013.

To cite this article: Susan D. Gillespie (2013): Early monumentality in North America: another comparative perspective for Africa, *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa*, 48:2, 301-314

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0067270X.2013.794591>

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## Early monumentality in North America: another comparative perspective for Africa

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This article briefly considers early monumental constructions in North America, including Mesoamerica, presenting similarities and differences with the African examples in this special issue. Comparing monumentality in Africa with another major world area expands the potential types of archaeologically visible processes involved in building monumental or quasi-monumental structures, while still recognising their different material and historical trajectories. Such comparison reveals the great variety of types of monumental constructions and of the theoretical approaches that are being engaged to investigate them. What the selected examples of early North American monumentality discussed here have in common, which can be of value for African archaeologists, is attention to building as a form of social practice, rather than to the design forms or functions of built structures, or the intentions of their makers.

**Keywords:** monumentality; North America; Mesoamerica; practice theory; mounds

Cet article fait un survol des premières constructions monumentales en Amérique du Nord, y compris la Mésoamérique. Ces constructions présentent des similitudes et des différences avec les exemples africains examinés dans ce dossier. Comparer la monumentalité en Afrique avec ses manifestations dans une autre région du globe nous permet d'élargir la palette des processus potentiels, visibles archéologiquement, qui sont impliqués dans la construction de structures monumentales ou quasi monumentales. Il faut évidemment garder à l'esprit les trajectoires distinctes dans la culture matérielle et le développement historique qu'ont connues les différentes régions. Ceci dit, une approche comparative s'avère très fructueuse car elle révèle la grande diversité qui existe dans les types de constructions monumentales et dans les approches théoriques adoptées pour les examiner. Les cas d'étude d'Amérique du Nord qui sont présentés ici ont ceci en commun qu'ils mettent l'accent sur le bâti comme une forme de pratique sociale, plutôt que sur les caractéristiques formelles ou fonctions des structures bâties ou sur les intentions des constructeurs. Ceci peut être un enseignement utile pour les archéologues africains.

### Introduction

In this special issue of *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* on African monumentality Davies comments on the unfortunate Eurocentricism implicit when assuming that the African past can somehow be equated with the much better known European megalithic cultures to the north because it runs the risk of misrepresenting

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African prehistory. At first glance comparing African examples of monumentality to those from a quite different world area — North America — may seem to exacerbate rather than to resolve this problem. However, there is no attempt here to force the African cases into an American mould. On the contrary, examples of monumentality in North America provide new possibilities for exploring social processes through the similarities and differences in monumental constructions on the two continents. These cases also highlight the variety of theoretical and methodological approaches to monumentality in Africa and the Americas.

The papers in this special issue were written against the backdrop of Bruce Trigger's (1990) influential discussion of monumental architecture, especially his assumption that it is always associated with social hierarchy and is erected in order to manifest the power of the ruling élites. Trigger justified on theoretical grounds the conventional archaeological assumption that a social hierarchy must be in place in order to carry out the erection of monumental structures, including megaliths. Egalitarian societies, on the other hand, are believed to lack monumentality or, at best, to erect only modest buildings for certain multi-family purposes (Trigger 1990: 120). These propositions allow archaeologists to infer substantive differences in scale of social complexity between monument-building and non-monument-building societies. A corollary to Trigger's thesis is that monumentality is not only a hallmark of complex societies, but that it ostensibly functions to maintain social hierarchy. He suggested that élites are motivated to design and command the erection of hypertrophic structures (i.e. those beyond that pragmatically required to fulfil survival needs) in order to communicate their political power and to express their legitimacy to the non-élite majority that is cajoled or forced into building them (Trigger 1990: 122; 2003: 564–565).

While this may well have been the case in some instances (e.g. *Pikirayi*, this issue), this assumption is being contested in Africa and elsewhere. Hildebrand observes that it creates a dichotomy between monumental and more prosaic architecture that does not match up with the archaeological record in Africa and instead creates an ill-fitting classification system. Most problematic is the more specific assumption that monuments are an archaeological marker for state level societies, something that, as MacEachern and David note in their contribution, plays a strong role in evolutionary arguments for the various African examples while not allowing for any mid-level political configurations such as chiefdoms. Instead, its insidious though unintended consequences have been the evolutionary upgrading of any society with monuments to the state level, or conversely, if state level of complexity is not warranted by other evidence, the downgrading of the structures themselves to non-monumental status.

Another major problem reiterated by many of these contributors is the uncertainty among archaeologists as to what constitutes a 'monument' and whether a certain minimal size, restricted range of form and function, material or degree of durability should be invoked in designating something as such. Indeed, many examples of African 'monumentality' outside the Nile Valley have often seemed unworthy of that characterisation. The majority do not fit all, or even most, of the criteria of monumentality in terms of scale or magnitude of construction, managerial and labour requirements, expenditure of energy or the deployment of specialist skills and knowledge. Furthermore, most of the quasi- or proto-monumental constructions in the African past were erected under circumstances that clearly do not fit the

expected model of social hierarchy and sufficiency of food and labour resources, for example by mobile herding societies lacking evidence of non-egalitarianism.

The value of bringing these papers together here is to demonstrate the great range of variation in what archaeologists choose to call a monument, and there can be no simple criteria for that designation. Di Lernia reminds us that the word derives from the Latin *monere*, to remember, and so is properly associated with commemoration of some kind. The commemorative function of monuments, especially in the context of mortuary remembrances, is indeed brought out in many of the papers, despite the wide variety of structures deemed to be monuments. Di Lernia seeks to expand the designation even further to encompass rock shelters and rock art sites, while Fleisher wants to include monumental 'spaces' as a 'built exterior.' Several authors thus extend the spatial scale of monumentality from the singular monument to that of a 'monumental landscape' (e.g. Davies, Fleisher, MacEachern and David).

The guest editors' intention in drawing together these papers, which examine public structures and spaces at a variety of spatial and structural scales, was to stimulate archaeologists to reconsider concepts of monumental architecture and to re-evaluate the circumstances under which such construction developed and the purposes it served. This includes a concern for the origins of monumentality, which Trigger's arguments seem to raise (Rosenswig and Burger 2012: 5). A reasonable conjecture is that early instances, or at least more modest examples, of monumental constructions may manifest certain forms of social and economic organisation, including heterarchy, in the absence of political hierarchy. The editors further suggest that archaeologists should explore the likely variability within developing social complexities that would have given rise to the first public, if not yet truly monumental, structures. Such investigations would open up productive avenues for cross-cultural comparison, as well as allowing a more significant place for African monumentality in such comparative studies.

Unfortunately, as all the authors reiterate in their contributions, very little archaeological work has been done on African monumental sites and architecture compared with elsewhere in the world and African archaeologists continue to cope with the undesirable legacy of assumptions that associate monuments and megaliths with social hierarchy. Most of these papers thus constitute initial attempts to identify, describe, classify and date types of monuments in specific regions (Davies, di Lernia, Grillo and Hildebrand, MacEachern and David). Despite the risk of injecting bias, the nascent state of studies of African monuments should motivate comparisons to monumentality in other world areas, especially areas in which more progress has been made by archaeologists in carrying out these fundamental tasks. Although the types and functions of monumental constructions will vary, the methods of analysis and theoretical approaches for interpreting social and historical processes of monument construction should be applicable cross-culturally.

Like their Old World counterparts, New World archaeologists have been concerned with the origins of monumentality in terms of how it relates to the evolutionary development of major subsistence and settlement practices (fully mobile, semi-sedentary, mixed horticultural, fully agricultural) and the emergence of social inequality and dominating political élites in chiefdoms and states. New World archaeologists can draw on theories and interpretations developed by Old World colleagues, and *vice versa*, without having to defer to antiquated notions of trans-oceanic diffusion to explain the coincidence of monumental platforms and

pyramids, tombs and megaliths in both hemispheres. These examples of obviously independent innovations of social complexity in co-ordination with monumentality should prove especially valuable for archaeological investigations on both sides of the Atlantic.

### **Questions arising from the study of monumentality**

In keeping with the goals of comparison and of investigating the origins or innovative examples of monumentality, this paper briefly considers early monumental constructions in North America, including Mesoamerica (see also Burger and Rosenswig 2012). To maintain maximum flexibility, I do not limit myself to a specific set of definitional criteria for ‘monumentality’, but rely instead on how the term is deployed by North American archaeologists, despite some problematic usages. Rather than attempting a comprehensive examination, I draw on a few specific case studies in order to direct attention to certain key questions:<sup>1</sup>

- (1) Is social hierarchy a prerequisite for monumentality? Should archaeologists read monumentality principally as a sign of the presence of social strata, a material proxy for a level of societal development that might otherwise be difficult to discern archaeologically? This limited perspective on monumentality is a legacy of the culture classification approach. For example, Gordon Childe’s (1950) inclusion of monumentality as one of ten criteria for urbanisation was subsequently challenged by dating western European megaliths to the time of simple farming societies, long before urbanism appeared (Sherratt 1990: 147). The many African instances of monumentality (of some kind) among mobile herding peoples equally challenge this long-held assumption, something that also holds true for North America.
- (2) If, as the archaeological record demonstrates, a political élite with control over economic and social resources is not a pre-condition for monumentality, then what were the various motivations for and functions of monumental constructions? Who designed and co-ordinated their erection? If they do not necessarily represent, communicate or make materially manifest existing inegalitarian political structures (cf. Pikirayi’s contribution to this issue), what rationale can there be for creating monuments and ‘conspicuously consuming’ societal resources that could have served more practical ends, as in Trigger’s (1990) hypothesis?
- (3) If monumentality can be achieved in non-hierarchical societies, what role might it have played in the subsequent development of social complexity? Or, alternatively, in the maintenance of social egalitarianism? This critical question for comparative approaches at a regional (e.g. Sherratt 1990; Bradley 1998) or global scale allows for multiple configurations, contexts and rationales for monumentality and social differentiation, only some of which gave rise to the better known but more limited types of ranked and state-level societies.
- (4) Following on from the above, how important are design and intention in considering the causes and consequences of monumentality? Given that archaeologists usually cannot know what was planned but only what was eventually built, what part should unplanned structures and unintended

consequences have in investigations of monumentality? This question introduces the important factor of time. Many of the great monuments of the past — Stonehenge is a prime example — were not designed and built at one time. Instead, what archaeologists see today is the accumulated material consequences of building, dismantling and rebuilding in the same locale by different peoples even over millennia. Thus, we should consider the temporality of monumentality and the potential emergent properties of the acts of building, as Davies, for example, discusses here.

### **Monumentality in North America**

Mesoamerica, at the southern tip of the North American continent, is especially known for its long history of monumental architecture and stone monuments (megaliths), many of which were embellished with imagery and even writing. The hundreds of pyramids erected by peoples of central Mexico and the Maya civilisation of eastern Mexico and western Central America have often been compared with much earlier Bronze Age Mesopotamian ziggurats and Old Kingdom Egyptian pyramids, although they cannot match the scale of their African counterparts. Virtually all of them were pyramidal platforms for a structure, usually a temple, and they were equipped with stairways to reach the summit, although a number were erected atop subsurface tombs. The stone pyramids in urban settings in central Mexico include the largest pre-industrial human-built structures in the New World. The most impressive are at Teotihuacan, a huge city near modern Mexico City that was over 20 km<sup>2</sup> in size, with a population estimated at 100,000, as early as AD 200 (Cowgill 2003: 37). Its massive city centre, a walled district covering some 150–250 ha, was filled with many stone structures (Cowgill 2003: 40), among them three great pyramids, the largest of which, at about 75 m high, is now known as the Pyramid of the Sun. There were also open spaces for performances or ceremonies whose participants and audiences varied in social status, something that warrants comparison with the points raised here by Fleisher. Other great pyramidal platforms were built at contemporary cities such as Monte Albán and Cholula (the latter city's great pyramid was constructed of adobe bricks), beginning in the last few centuries BC through much of the first millennium AD. The late prehispanic Aztecs (*c.* AD 1200–1520), whose Great Pyramid so impressed their Spanish conquerors, were the cultural descendants of these earlier states.

Importantly, the well known stone pyramids were preceded by more modest earthen mounds. Not surprisingly, the presence of the earliest large earthen platforms interpreted as ceremonial architecture has been presumed to mark the beginning of rank society along the southern Pacific coast of Mexico by 1600 cal. BC (Clark 2004: 45, 53). By about 500 BC clay pyramidal mounds nearly 30 m high dominated civic-ceremonial centres at La Venta on the Gulf coast of Mexico and at La Blanca on the same country's Pacific coast (Love 1999). In addition, the Olmec culture on Mexico's southern Gulf coast innovated megalithic stone carving, producing hypertrophic 'colossal heads' — perhaps of rulers — and other monolithic three-dimensional carvings beginning before 1000 BC. These sculptures, which were both unprecedented and unequalled by later civilisations, are all the more remarkable because the volcanic boulders used to make them had to be hauled by hand over many kilometres of jungle terrain without the benefit of draught animals and because they

were carved in the absence of metal tools. Because Mesoamerica was home to multiple inter-related societies, some of them truly urbanised, the default assumption is that monumentality here, as elsewhere in the world, manifests the achievement of social hierarchy (e.g. Trigger 1990, 2003: 564ff.) ranging from chiefdoms to archaic states and fully-fledged civilisations.

North America north of Mexico is also characterised by monumental architecture, although less often constructed of stone masonry and with far fewer megaliths. As a result, this region is rarely mentioned together with the pyramids of Mesoamerica or Peru. Nevertheless, thousands of earthen mounds, most of them associated with mortuary ritual, dotted the major river valleys of eastern North America. Huge shell mounds dominated certain riverine and marine landscapes in the southeastern United States (e.g. Randall 2008). Almost all of these earth and shell structures were destroyed following European settlement, which is one reason why they have generally escaped notice outside the disciplinary confines of North American archaeology.

The florescence of the Moundbuilders of eastern North America occurred during the Mississippian period, from about AD 1000 to 1400 and ending before European contact (Milner 2004). Mississippian peoples relied on maize agriculture to support large populations in town settlements. Expansive earthen platforms in major civic-ceremonial centres in the Southeast and lower Midwest of the United States supported chief's houses, council chambers, or religious structures, while some sheltered the bodies of elite individuals in rich graves. The best known is Monk's Mound in Cahokia, a large town on the east side of the Mississippi River across from the modern city of St Louis. The largest pre-European structure north of Mexico, Monk's Mound was built of clay in several distinct stages, ultimately reaching some 30 m high. Thus, as in Mesoamerica, most instances of monumentality in North America seem to fit the archaeological presumption of social complexity supported by farming economies, although these were not state-level societies and they are not mentioned in Trigger's (2003) comprehensive overview of early civilisations.

Significantly, accumulating evidence reveals that impressive structures and earthworks were erected for millennia prior to the development of intensive agriculture and stratified society in North America and that there is no direct correlation between monumental architecture and institutionalised social hierarchy. This is an important finding to compare with the many cases of African monumentality within relatively egalitarian societies.

### **Case studies in the origins of North American monumentality**

Henrietta Moore (1995: 51) has observed that in their quest for origins, archaeologists create narratives 'determined not by their beginnings but by their endings'. Too often a continuous thread is presumed to connect later manifestations with their earliest prototypes, requiring the invention of 'missing links' to fill in the blanks (Moore 1995: 52). Multiple points of origin, dead-ends and side branches are usually ignored. In the Americas especially, archaeologists have tended to emphasise cultural continuities that seem to link the earliest monument-builders with later peoples subjected to European colonisation beginning in the late fifteenth to early sixteenth centuries. Knowledge concerning the function and meaning of monumental constructions drawn from written information in the colonial era is simply projected

onto earlier archaeological instances, even those deep into the past. This 'direct historical approach', as it is known, has created an interpretive bias that is difficult to overcome. For example, because written information from late Maya and Aztec sources indicates that their steep stone pyramidal platforms were meant to recreate or imitate mountains, this meaning and motivation have been broadened to apply to all Mesoamerican mounds, back to the earliest known examples in the first millennium BC. That is, it is assumed that the first and all subsequent mounds were raised to represent a mountain within a sacred landscape built at the behest of ruling élites (cf. Joyce 2004).

Explanations drawn from neo-evolutionary theory are as teleological as those based in streams of culture history. The development of the state or civilisation as the highest political form takes precedence in these explanations and all pre-state configurations are classified in terms of where they fit in the ladder-like evolutionary scale (Yoffee 2005: 18), resulting in the same unilinear trajectory as the direct historical approach. If large monuments typify the state, then smaller or simpler monuments must typify complex societies on their way to becoming a state, fulfilling the same functions as in the state but at a smaller scale. In neither school of thought are early examples of monumental structures investigated for what they might have meant to the peoples who built them. Instead, priority is given to what they might have come to mean to their putative descendants in a distant unforeseen future. These biases must be recognised and put aside to consider how the earliest monumental constructions came into existence and to understand their historical consequences. The North American examples include remarkable 'precocious' monumentality in forms and circumstances that were unprecedented, quite variable and often historically unconnected to later, better known monument-building societies.

Not unlike in Africa, the earliest monumental constructions and public spaces were built by mobile pre-farming egalitarian societies. This was during the North American Archaic period (11,500-3200 cal. BP), a period broadly comparable to the European Mesolithic (Sassaman 2010: 21). The best evidence comes from eastern North America, although similar developments occurred in other parts of the New World, but only recently have the early dates of the North American earthworks become accepted because of the long-standing assumption that monuments are built only by complex farming societies. In the Middle Archaic period, about 4800 cal. BP, complexes of earthen mounds were erected by hunter-gatherer peoples in the Lower Mississippi River Valley, some of them evidencing a shared design plan in the arrangement of the earthworks (Sassaman 2010: 53-56; Saunders 2012). These mounds were long believed to date to the much later Woodland period that succeeded the Archaic, when pottery, horticulture and long-distance trade in preciosities developed into a Neolithic-like complex that also witnessed the erection of hundreds of earthen burial mounds. However, these Archaic earthworks predate the Woodland ones by over two millennia and there was a one-thousand-year-long hiatus in mound building between these earliest earthworks and the next significant monumental construction (Saunders 2012: 25).

Furthermore, this second mound-building episode occurred at a singular place: the Late Archaic site of Poverty Point, Louisiana. Sometime between 3600 and 3200 cal. BP, hunter-gatherer peoples erected an earthwork complex there composed of six concentric half-rings, two large effigy mounds and several other mounds covering an



area of 3 km<sup>2</sup>. Poverty Point has been called ‘arguably the most perplexing phenomenon of all of Archaic history’ and archaeologists will probably never agree on its function and meaning (Sassaman 2010: 53). Although it impacted other mound sites in this region for several centuries, the earthworks at Poverty Point were unprecedented. Not only is there no direct link to the earlier mounds in the Lower Mississippi Valley, but Poverty Point left no obvious historical legacy for later peoples (Sassaman 2010: 53). In sum, monument building in this part of the world was not a continuum or steady progression, but a series of centuries-long starts and stops (Saunders 2012: 47).

Another Middle Archaic phenomenon that archaeologists have been slow to recognise as evidence of monumental construction was the expansion of shell mound dwellers on the coasts and rivers of the southeastern and mid-southern United States. The huge mounds that hunter-gatherers created as a by-product of exploiting freshwater and marine molluscs were not ignored by Euro-Americans; indeed, most of them have been mined for their shell. However, until recently they were generally interpreted by archaeologists as accumulated refuse resulting from the thoughtless discard of unneeded animal parts by countless generations of foragers who merely returned to the same places for subsistence reasons to gather shellfish on a seasonal round (Sassaman 2010: 92). In the evident absence of any ‘intention’ or ‘design’ in creating shell mounds as the structures that they eventually came to be, their monumental status was ignored (Sassaman and Randall 2012: 54). New research is slowly challenging the assumption that mobile peoples do not act co-operatively to build monuments, the same realisation as that now being reached by African archaeologists as the contributors to this special issue demonstrate.

In Middle Archaic period northern Florida, the Mount Taylor culture peoples (7000-4500 cal. BP) erected shell mounds, as well as earthen mounds capped with shell, along the St Johns River and on the Atlantic coast (Sassaman 2010: 68–69). These were unmistakable intentional anthropogenic deposits of different kinds of shell, the result of generations of ritual activities (Sassaman 2010: 52). Unlike the Louisiana earthen mounds, many of the Florida shell mounds, as well as those along rivers in the mid-South (in the states of Kentucky, Tennessee and Alabama) were places to inter the dead, as well as places for the living to carry out their activities. Throughout the Eastern Woodlands, in Sassaman’s (2010: 66) interpretation, these ‘landscapes of historical practice’ that dramatically reshaped the earth’s surface constituted a ‘new world order’ in the Middle Archaic.

The mounds, as well as many of the trade items deposited in them, reveal hitherto unexpected degrees of population movement and interaction among a wide variety of mobile foraging peoples. The earth- and shell-works were typically consistently maintained, albeit by itinerant or temporary settlers, for up to several millennia and their abandonment is as much a historical problem for archaeologists as their continued usage. Sassaman and Randall (2012: 53, 56) observe that the ‘small-scale cyclical acts’ of ritual deposition by which the mounds slowly grew were just as purposeful as ‘large-scale public acts of building earthen mounds’ and that accretional deposition should be viewed ‘as a medium of discursive practice that structured the trajectory and pace of culture changes’ rather than as a sign of a prior social order (compare, here, the East African cairns investigated by Davies).

In addition to their proximate functions as places of burial or other ritual, the mounds were anchors in a larger landscape, named places associated with social

groups that contributed to the history (however mythologised) of the land crucial to the groups' identities, roles and relationships with one another (see the papers here of Davies, di Lernia and MacEachern and David). The mounds and other earthworks were indexes of past generations (some of whose members were literally incorporated within them), linked to property rights claimed by the social groups that maintained them. Sassaman (2010: 94) further suggests that 'for hunter-gatherers worldwide, places of aggregation enable diverse, regional populations to co-ordinate their immediate futures to alleviate risk and reduce conflict... [A] common set of ritual practice that integrates all parts into a cohesive whole underwrites the ability to cooperate.'

The eastern North American Archaic examples provide plausible scenarios to explain motivations and functions for monumental structures in the absence of an élite social stratum seeking to manifest and communicate its power over non-élites. Sassaman's arguments for the reshaping of a landscape of meaning through building practices are similar to those made for mounds and megaliths in Neolithic to Bronze Age Europe (e.g. Sherratt 1990; Thomas 1993; Barrett 1994, 1999). In Mesoamerica, monumentality also apparently became widespread in that region's Neolithic equivalent: the Pre-Classic (or Formative) period. At Early Pre-Classic sites (beginning 1800-1500 BC depending on the sub-region), evidence of early settlements by pottery-users, most of them at least part-time maize farmers, is abundant, manifesting the widespread adoption of a new way of life. This was a veritable Pre-Classic 'revolution' marked by 'unprecedented features in site form, artefact inventory, and use of materials' (Joyce and Grove 1999: 2). A new 'social landscape' emerged from peoples' activities, including 'an entirely new pattern of construction of monumental architecture and settings of monumental art creating unprecedented kinds of space in Pre-Classic sites' that 'disrupted' former social arrangements (Joyce and Grove 1999: 8-9).

Like their European counterparts (e.g. Thomas 1999), these New World Neolithic peoples engaged in practices that moved and rearranged significant quantities of earth and stone, including terracing, platform and pyramidal mound-building, massive pit-digging and transporting and carving huge stone boulders (compare this with MacEachern and David's analysis of the DGB sites in Cameroon). As noted above, this last activity was innovated by the Olmec culture of Mexico's southern Gulf coast, beginning at San Lorenzo *c.* 1050 BC, which was a major regional centre, home to an unusually complex society compared to its contemporaries. The site occupied an artificially modified plateau in the swampy coastal lowlands, which was gradually levelled with 1,300,000 m<sup>3</sup> of earthen fill sometime prior to 1400 cal. BC, and from 1400-1000 cal. BC was further modified by the addition of another 6-8 million m<sup>3</sup> (Cyphers and Zurita-Noguera 2012: 138). However, it is too simplistic (and unwarranted) to assume that the precocious San Lorenzo Olmecs influenced the rest of Mesoamerica in creating monumental constructions, and their specific sculptural style and forms had no lasting impact in central Mexico. To determine the 'origins' of Pre-Classic monumentality in Mesoamerica requires an investigation into building practices and insights into the builders' motivations, including the great possibility that early monumentality was unintended and had unforeseeable consequences.

These possibilities are explored by Rosemary Joyce (2004, 2007) in her analysis of the earliest clay platforms at Puerto Escondido, Honduras, during the late Early

Pre-Classic (c. 1100-900 BC). She hypothesises that in this egalitarian society the builders of the first platform mounds did not set out to create ‘monumental’ structures nor was it their intention to erect an artificial mountain (the default assumption, as mentioned above). Instead, the earliest such platforms were the outcome of already existing practices and social arrangements — not something out of the ordinary. Prior experiences of working with rammed earth to build low house platforms resulted in a great deal of minor variations in construction, none of which was likely considered risky or overly experimental. Builders seem to have begun seeking ways to expand the breadth, not the height, of platforms. However, an unintended consequence of making clay platforms broader was that they were more resistant to erosion, requiring less maintenance, something that changed the temporalities of co-ordinating social labour dedicated to their upkeep (Joyce 2004: 19). Another consequence of their unanticipated persistence was a change in peoples’ attitudes toward a locale marked by a novel, enduring structure as well as toward the social domestic group which built it, resulting in increased spatial, and thus social, differentiation.

The durable platform precipitated innovated ideas of time and temporality, including notions of enduring ‘persons’ who were indexed by new durable materials (especially jadeite) used to make the costume ornaments adorning their bodies. The idea of and value attributed to durability also separated actions and persons of the present with those in a now distinct but legitimating past, creating rights to property to those living in the present based on the ideology of a distant past (Joyce 2007; and for similar European Neolithic examples, Gosden and Lock 1998; Barrett 1999). Joyce’s thesis challenges archaeologists to account for the intended outcomes of existing technologies, expertises and task group organisation, to recognise the likelihood of unintended social, material and historical consequences and to distinguish later re-significations of monumental structures from their original meanings and uses. This requires focusing on the acts of construction themselves (Barrett and Ko 2009) within the context of ongoing practices and the different qualities and effects of material substances.

Complex societies evidencing social ranking were much more common during Mesoamerica’s succeeding Middle Preclassic period (900-500 BC), as were monumental structures and stone sculptures, suggesting a link between the two periods. Nevertheless, the historical sequence should not be read as one of cause and effect. Michael Love (1999) suggests that changes to the spaces of everyday practice among Pre-Classic village-dwelling farmers shaped the emergence of social complexity, such that monumentality preceded social hierarchy rather than *vice versa*. The erection of large public structures such as clay platforms or sunken plazas, and even the transport and carving of megaliths, did not require an élite managerial class. However, these new constructions did transform spatial practices by creating novel kinds of places with differential access to them, in concert with the recognition of innovated distinctions or categories of persons granted or denied that access. These new constructions ‘warp social space . . . ; they modify daily routines . . . . In a more significant sense, they become reference points for regionalisation and the social categorisation of space’ (Love 1999: 144), including more exclusive locales for burial (Joyce 2004: 15). Social difference of this sort, where it is influenced by the repetition of daily practice and the enduring presence of material structures, can lead to social hierarchy, although this is not inevitable (for European examples, see Sherratt 1990; Thomas 1993; Barrett 1994; see also Pikirayi 2013).

These instances of unplanned constructions and their unintended effects call into question the utility of requiring intentionality and formal design prior to building as a criterion for designating a structure as ‘monumental’ (see Davies 2013). Even among the Mississippian Moundbuilders of late prehistoric eastern North America, as Timothy Pauketat (2000: 120) has shown, none of their platforms were built as one-time projects. All evince incremental accretions, despite the existence in the region of hundreds to thousands of earlier earthen mounds that could simply have been copied. While acknowledging the correlation between the rise of civilisations and the appearance of conspicuous monumental constructions, Pauketat (2000: 117) takes issue with Trigger’s (1990) explanation of social hierarchy as the motivation and necessary condition for monumentality because it seems to deny the knowledgeable agency and historical effects of non-élite ‘commoners.’

In the case of Mississippian peoples, Pauketat suggests that monumentality emerged from existing practices and knowledges, similar to Joyce’s arguments for early platform mounds in Honduras. Archaeological evidence shows that these peoples engaged in collective ritual practices on a seasonal or annual basis that required the deposit of thin mantles of prepared silt or sand, perhaps to ‘sterilise’ or to sanctify a specific locale (Pauketat 2000: 120). With the return to the same places — commemorating prior gatherings or a founding event — new layers of earth were added, often alternating light and dark soils, creating an elevated ritual space through accretion (Pauketat 2008: 69). Pauketat (2000: 123) argues that a historical consequence of this sequence of actions was the structural reorganisation of society. People were drawn into a transformed ritual landscape that they had created but that was being co-opted, along with their labour, by rising élites. In effect they consented, albeit unknowingly, to their own domination. Pauketat (2000: 114) characterises this scenario as a ‘tragedy of the commoners,’ because, although operating within an egalitarian social configuration, these peoples were likely ‘unaware that their coordinated actions could restrict their own ability to coordinate action in the future’. Thus, the study of monumentality can lead archaeologists to investigate the ‘creation of people as subjects, and not simply the creation of material things’ (Barrett 1994: 4).

## **Discussion**

What these case studies of early monumentality in North America have in common is attention to building as a form of social practice. Construction was often part of commemorative actions undertaken by collectives — corporate groups, communities, or multiple communities. Rather than manifesting or reflecting pre-existing social and political relationships and ideologies separating élites from non-élites, the building and experiencing of monumental structures or megaliths, along with continued activities within the places they marked, helped to create or exacerbate social differentiations that, in some instances, gave rise to social ranking and more permanent hierarchies (see Barrett 1999: 257). To cite a similar argument made for Neolithic Europe: ‘megaliths (and non-megalithic) monuments were not initiated to inscribe a cultural order on the landscape, but by their construction were the medium that revealed how an order of categories might have operated’ (Barrett and Ko 2009: 289). It was the building of the monuments, not the ideas or truths that they represented or communicated, that was essential to remaking society; hence, the

'emergent properties' of building practices over time require our attention (Gillespie 2004; compare also with Pikirayi's paper in this issue). Furthermore, as in the African examples of continuous commemoration discussed here by Davies (adding a stone to a cairn) and Fleisher (adding a pebble to a Swahili tomb) the repeated reiterations of the meanings of these places contributed to their monumental qualities. These actions created an enduring attachment to certain places and contributed to the identity-formation of individuals who engaged in the commemorations, as simple as they might be. They thereby became linked to the identities of those nameless others who came before them and so obviously did the same thing, as the growing pile of stones or rising earthen or shell mound amply proves.

These case studies also draw upon theories that account for building within a suite of social practices that engage the physical materiality of substances such as clay, shell, sand and stone, as well as their taphonomic transformations and their shifting symbolic associations (Gillespie 2004). These practices thus incorporate perception, cognition, intention, cultural knowledge, technical and bodily skills, and sensual experiences. As social actions in space and time, they involve contingent spatialities and temporalities, including the scheduling and emplacing of social task groups, the temporality of human life spans, and especially the impact of durability on emerging historicities. As Sassaman (2010: 51) suggested for the Archaic moundbuilders of the United States, 'like all historically conscious beings, [they] drew from past experiences (memories) and existing material resources (artifacts) to politicize or mobilize historical knowledge as they responded to experience and planned for alternative futures.' As a final note, all of these practices are embedded in power relations at multiple scales.

In sum, despite the overt magnitude of monumentality achieved by North American peoples — constructions that astonished Europeans since the sixteenth century — the archaeological evidence reveals situations comparable to those of Africa, allowing for further useful and more detailed comparisons between the two continents. It can no longer be assumed that monumentality is a sign of social hierarchy, any more than that the lack of monumentality is a sign of societal organisation lower on some evolutionary ladder. Instead, the erection of monuments — intended or otherwise — likely played a key role in transforming social structures.

### Note

1. The dates provided by the authors of the case studies cited here include both calibrated and uncalibrated radiocarbon years as well as calendrical years, and no attempt is made to coordinate them, which would be difficult, if not impossible, to do. Dates are indicated as general temporal reference points and pinpoint accuracy in dating is not essential to the arguments made.

### Notes on contributor

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