



# The construction of monumental landscapes in low-density societies: New evidence from the Early Neolithic of Southern Scandinavia (4000–3300 BC) in comparative perspective (November 5, 2015)



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## ABSTRACT

The article presents new evidence from two recent, rescue excavations of Early Neolithic gathering and burial sites at Almhov and Döserygg in Scania, southern Sweden. Along with previous excavations of the Danish enclosures at Sarup, these central sites provide a sequence witnessing substantial development of monumental landscapes during a period of relatively low population density in Southern Scandinavia. An explanation for this rather surprising development is placed within a political economy approach: In situations of low-density populations, resource circumscription is thought to be ineffective as a means of political control. Rather, ceremonial monuments were built to create a strong and permanent allure of ritual spaces and ceremonies associated with mortuary practice, inheritance rights, and emergent leaders. Although inherently unstable, positive feedback apparently existed between the collection of food for feasts, labor to build ritual landscapes, and some central power based on authority. The construction of permanent monumental places helped create, we argue, overarching ownership rights represented in the engineered landscape. To demonstrate the generality of these hypothetical relations, the Southern Scandinavian sequence is compared to similar patterns of monumental construction associated with low-density populations during the prehistory of eastern North America.

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## 1. Introduction

Relatively low-density societies frequently, but not regularly, constructed impressive monumental landscapes in Asia (Rosner, 1959), Europe (Bradley, 1998; Sherratt, 1990), Africa (Hildebrand, 2013), and the Americas (Burger and Rosenswig, 2012; Gillespie, 2013; Roosevelt et al., 2012). Such engineered landscapes were linked neither to intensive agriculture nor to explicit displays of social inequality in personal possessions. Constructions of ‘permanent’ landscapes were, however, particular and provocative events that appear to have reordered society (Beck et al., 2007; Earle, 2004).

Mound constructions for the Early Neolithic long barrows, megaliths, and enclosures along Europe’s Atlantic fringe and for the famous Hopewell earthworks in the American Midwest are but two independent archaeological examples of monumental landscapes in relatively low-density societies. Such monumental constructions, we argue, required substantial coordination of feasting, logistical scheduling, engineering solutions, measurement of

formal plans, and other skills well beyond those involved in domestic housing or communal structures characterizing egalitarian societies (Adler and Wilshusen, 1990; Sherwood and Kidder, 2011: 71). The ability to coordinate labor in megalithic and mound constructions fits comfortably with simple chiefdoms (a.k.a. transegalitarian or intermediate level societies) as described ethnographically (Adams, 2007; Earle and Spriggs, 2015; Hayden, 2014).

Our jumping off point is Blanton et al.’s (1996) observation that human societies, across a spectrum of scales, varied according to the political strategies employed. One strategy of chiefly societies emphasized corporate ownership, defining the group through collaborative practice, ceremonial cycles, and constructed monuments. These include what Renfrew (1974) called group-oriented chiefdoms. They produced monumental landscapes that required substantial labor for constructions and produced new property relationships (Earle, 1991). Renfrew (2001) has called such monumental places “locations of high devotional expression” that held strong symbolic meaning and emotional effect. Earle (2004) and Brown (2012) have emphasized that these monuments gave permanence and regional scale to sacred places, thus creating an ideal medium to express larger scale political institutions.

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Our thesis is that the building of monumental landscapes in low-density societies created a strong allure of central places that extended far beyond the local community. We propose three processes—the linkage of social life to ritual practice, the building of new political institutions by emergent leaders, and the grounding of these institutions in labor practices that routinized surplus mobilization by developing new property rights. Stated simply, monumental construction in low-density societies formed regional political relationships by creating permanent places linked to centralizing ritual power, emergent property relationships, new means for staple mobilization, and the support of corporate strategies. Addressing the question of labor mobilization, feasting and labor at community and regional occasions must have obligated political and social relationships that were built up and managed by leaders of varying authority and power. Here we discuss the monumental landscapes of Early Neolithic (EN) Southern Scandinavia (4000–3300 BC) as compared to the dramatic monumental constructions in the American Hopewellian Midwest (100–400 AD).

## 2. A political economy approach toward monumental construction

Theoretical approaches to landscapes and monuments are diverse and often contentious, ranging from materialistic to phenomenological (Johnson, 2007). From the materialism of processualism's early days, landscapes often appear as patterned resource distributions, to which societies adapted with particular technologies and social organizations. Monuments then were envisioned as territorial markers that delineated corporate groups and their lands (Renfrew, 1976; Osborne and VanValenburgh, 2013). From a political economy perspective, Trigger argued, "the control of energy constitutes the most fundamental and universally recognized source of political power" (1990: 128). He saw monuments as conspicuous consumption, demonstrating power of a ruling elite especially in state societies. Thomas (1990), however, argued for a phenomenological approach, emphasizing that by building monuments, like the Early Neolithic Irish megalithic tombs, humans created particular sensual and emotional experiences (compare Relp, 1976; Feld and Basso, 1996). These diverse approaches to landscape may be complementary, each looking at different aspects of the social world (Johnson, 2007; Smith, 2003).

The political elements of monuments, however, have been little studied in recent literature that has emphasized the egalitarian, volunteeristic charter of 'intermediate-scale monumentality' (Roosevelt et al., 2012; Hildebrand, 2013). Although recognizing that monument constructions were part of general social processes (Gillespie, 2013), critiques of political economy approaches obscure key elements of feasting and modest monuments, as described ethnographically (Adams, 2004, 2007; Hayden, 2014). We focus on how, by creating overarching ownership rights, leaders could manipulate the general economy to channel resources to support political strategies (Earle and Spriggs, 2015). Many chiefdoms and states appear to have been based on control over engineered landscapes with irrigation, terracing, and similar facilities (Earle, 1980; Earle and Doyle, 2008). Such systems represented relatively full land utilization such that farmers were tethered (circumscribed) to place (Carneiro, 1970). Through conquest warfare, leaders seized land from communities and established new property rights, whereby farmers owed labor to the conquerors. But what about cases of societies with low population density, where foragers, farmers, and pastoralists were not bound to particular subsistence facilities? We argue that religious monuments, often associated with the dead (and therefore to inheritance patterns), provided a landscape in some ways analogous to intensified agricultural facilities as a means to tether people to the land.

As exemplified by aggrandizers in transegalitarian societies, leaders gathered political support by feasting (Hayden, 2014). Food collected from supporters served for displays that demonstrate a leader's organizational capability and thus attracts supporters. This is an elemental form of staple finance, in which food is mobilized and used to support politically charged events by compensating labor with feasts. We believe that, for such systems to be elaborated in a positive feedback cycle, some sense of property rights must have developed to regularize mobilization.

Under conditions of relatively productive or risky subsistence production (Cypher and Zurita-Noguera, 2012; compare O'Shea, 1989), elites could make demands upon the harvesters of animals and foodstuffs thereby creating dependency relationships. Here we use the concept of property, rather than territory, because of its theoretical specificity in the political economy literature exemplified by Marx himself (Wolf, 1972). But to use the notion of property, we decouple it from its specific connotations of modern market systems and rather view it as the variable relationships connecting people to places and their resource potentials. Emergent obligations in chiefdoms were more than volunteeristic willingness to provide goods and labor; rather they included moral injunctions linked to rituals grounded in place (Brown and Kelly, 2015). The definition of ceremonial place included a set of economic, social and moral obligation out of indebtedness that held strong elements of property relations.

In her analysis of relatively low-density agricultural and pastoral economies of Africa, Guyer (1993) emphasized the importance of wealth in people (not things) as a means to create social hierarchy. To simplify her elegant analysis, the question is: how could emergent leaders control wealth in people when relatively low population densities made the cost of evasion small. We look at how monuments served politically, not simply to express power (Trigger, 1990), but to create power by structuring labor relationships linked to ceremonial places.

The central mobilization of labor is well illustrated ethnographically by feasting in Melanesia and Indonesia, where megalithic constructions have been integral to prestige competition and social inequality. Here societies varied from fairly egalitarian through simple and complex chiefdoms to archaic states. Construction of megalithic monuments was part of some intermediate-scale societies, but of a character often different from the 'classic' chiefdom model. On some islands in the Vanuatu archipelago, for example, recent volcanism created fertile soils, which were farmed without irrigation or other developed facilities. Chiefs here take grades in a regional, noncentralized ladder of offices by hosting feasts of particular scales, defined by the slaughter of full-tusked pigs (Earle and Spriggs, 2015). Around the ceremonial ground where the grade-taking feasts are sponsored to this day, they organize megalithic constructions including slaughter tables with large stone surfaces raised on supporting stones and stone menhirs memorializing individual grade-taking feasts.

Hayden (2014) has studied feasting and its linkage to prestige competition in transegalitarian societies throughout Southeast Asia, where social inequality is tied to extravagant feasts used to build dependency, obligations, and prestige. Critical to this complex is the mobilization of labor for projects that distinguish the individual and clan. Across Island Indonesia, social differentiation can be quite strong, and elite corporate groups construct megalithic structures associated with burials of their leaders (Hayden, 2014: 202–206). In the economically differentiated 'house society' on Sumba, for example, elite clans constructed megalithic tombs that materialized ownership of ritual places and associated land (Adams, 2007). Using this model, megalithic constructions can be seen to create permanent places associated with leaders, their ancestors, and inheritance of land with social obligations. In a positive feedback cycle, leaders mobilized staples to support

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