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The genesis of monuments: Resisting outsiders in the contested landscapes of southern Brazil

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we examine the emergence of the funerary mound and enclosure complexes of the southern Brazilian highlands during the last 1000 years in relation to processes of population expansion, contact, conflict and the establishment of frontiers. We test the hypothesis that such monuments emerged among the local southern proto-Jê peoples as a response to the migration of a foreign group, the Tupi-Guarani. We compared the spatio-temporal distribution of mound and enclosure complexes in respect to sites of interaction between the two groups. The results indicate that the rise of funerary architecture coincides with the first incursions of the Tupi-Guarani to the southern proto-Jê heartland, and that mounds are concentrated in areas devoid of interaction. We conclude that highly monumentalized landscapes emerged in areas where local groups chose not to interact with the Tupi-Guarani, showing that funerary monuments were an important component in the establishment of impermeable frontiers to resist outsiders.

1. Introduction

With the advantage that we are no longer bound to the essentialist approaches of culture history, archaeologists are once again recognizing that the movement of peoples and ideas occurred frequently in the past and had major consequences for trajectories of ethnogenesis (Heckenberger, 2005, 2011; Politis and Bonomo, 2012). Under novel theoretical approaches, we are now assessing the impact of migrations in the congealment of ethnicities, the creation of political landscapes, and the invention of traditions in the past (Bernardini, 2005a, 2005b, 2011; Hornborg, 2005; Pauketat, 2005, 2007, 2010; Pauketat and Loren, 2005; Sassaman, 2005, 2010; Whitehead, 1994). Of prime importance to archaeology are the material expressions of those processes; one phenomenon that is repeatedly observed during periods of intense cultural interaction, hand in hand with the establishment of frontier zones, is the rise of novel architectural expressions that materialize and shape the formation of new identities (Dillehay, 2007; Pauketat, 2007; Sassaman, 2005).

The monumental funerary earthworks of the southern proto-Jê groups in the southern Brazilian highlands are a case in question. Despite more than six decades of research (Chmyz, 1968; Chmyz et al., 1968; Menghin, 1957; Naue et al., 1989; Ribeiro and Ribeiro, 1985; Rohr, 1971), only recently have archaeologists shifted their focus in the study of southern proto-Jê earthworks from more descriptive approaches to the investigation of ritual practices, the degree of political complexity and territoriality (Copé et al., 2002; De Masi, 2009; De Souza, 2012; De Souza and Copé, 2010; Iriarte et al., 2013, 2008, 2010; Saldanha, 2008). Interestingly, renewed archaeological work in the Rio de la Plata basin is beginning to provide a broader picture, showing that the southern proto-Jê monuments developed over the last 1000 years amidst a regional mosaic of migrations, increased population densities and intensifying interaction (Bonomo et al., 2015, 2011; Iriarte et al., in press, 2008; Politis and Bonomo, 2012; Politis et al., 2011). However, the role of such an ethnic mosaic in the rise of a novel architectural tradition in the southern Brazilian highlands has never been assessed.

In this article, we test the hypothesis that the appearance of southern proto-Jê mound and enclosure complexes over the last 1000 years is related to the largest population expansion in lowland South America in recent times, that of the Tupi-Guarani language family (Bonomo et al., 2015). We hypothesize that the rapid advance of the Tupi-Guarani along major river routes led to the circumscription of some southern proto-Jê groups in the highlands. Specifically, a core area of the southern proto-Jê groups in the Canoas–Pelotas river basins chose not to interact with the

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outsiders, establishing an impermeable social frontier. This is where the earliest funerary monuments were raised. We propose that these groups reacted to the Tupi-Guarani advance by designing an unprecedented political landscape, dotted by funerary monuments dedicated to chiefly lines as a powerful statement of resistance to the outsiders.

2. Monuments, frontiers and identities

The emergence of monumental architectural expressions, especially with a public character, during moments of rapid socio-political change and cultural interaction (or conflict) is a phenomenon observed in many parts of the world and time periods. Migrations are particularly prone to triggering this process, as local and long-distance relocation of groups leads to the juxtaposition of identities, resulting in novel socio-political arrangements and traditions that are ultimately projected on the landscape (Pauketat, 2007; Pauketat and Loren, 2005). The role of population displacements, multi-ethnic formations and the negotiation of identities in the rise of new architectural traditions has been extensively debated by North American archaeologists, from the Archaic period earthworks and exchange network of Poverty Point (Sassaman, 2005) to the Mississippian period shaping of authority in the elite mounds of Cahokia (Pauketat, 2005, 2007), and to the southwestern Puebloan communities (Bernardini, 2005a, 2005b).

In South America, one of the clearest examples comes from the archaeology and ethnohistory of the Araucanians of Chile. Dillehay (2007) has provided a detailed account of how Araucanian leaders expanded their power through the sponsorship of ceremonies and mound building, creating a ceremonial mounded landscape and uniting a previously decentralized population in order to resist outsiders. The peaks in mound-building activity coincide with periods of invasion of Araucanian territory by foreign powers, first by the Inka, later by the Spanish. Dillehay (2007) argues that the contact with outsiders led the Araucanians to a world of awareness, manifested in the proliferation of chiefly burial mounds that created a "landscape of lineage" connecting people to places. In other words, the threat of invasion by outsiders led to the emergence of a constructed political landscape (Smith, 2003).

This phenomenon is not without parallels in the old world. For example, Sherratt (1990) offers a similar interpretation for the emergence of megaliths in Northwestern Europe during the Neolithic – a period for which the role of local invention versus foreign influences has been widely debated. He suggests that megalithic sites developed as an essential part of the interaction between local groups and newcomers. The migratory waves that undoubtedly were part of the Neolithic scenario would have provided an initial stimulus that gave rise to a complex reaction and interaction process. Sherratt (1990) argues that these foreign incursions coincided with the development of novel forms of megalithic architecture, in themselves the apparatus of new forms of cult, which Sherratt sees as a sort of "revivalistic religious movement". The European Neolithic has also been examined under a similar perspective by Vandkilde (2007), who appropriately labelled it an "extra hot" period, a transitory moment when the spread of new ideas and peoples led to fundamental changes of local identities. Periods such as these are called by Vandkilde (2007) "macro-regional phases of conjuncture", a concept that can be extended to the aforementioned cases.

The question that naturally emerges is why a new ceremonial apparatus, often in the form of monumental burial facilities and funerary rites, should so frequently develop in situations of intensified cross-cultural interaction and conflict. Perhaps part of the answer lies with the phenomenon of crisis cults long known to anthropology (La Barre, 1971). Crisis cults are defined as punctuated religious developments that constitute a "ritual reaction" by a society undergoing stress, and it has been noticed that they often appear in contexts of increased ethnic contact (Driessen, 2001; La Barre, 1971).

Another major question is why the situations of migrations, invasions and conflict that can lead to the formation of crisis cults also favors the expression of those rites by means of new monumental architectural traditions. In many of the cases reviewed above, the new ceremonial architecture that emerges in situations of ethnic conflict also materialize new forms of authority that appear during turbulent periods (Dillehay, 2007; Pauketat, 2007). Monuments have the potential of testifying to the ability of powerful individuals or groups to deploy labor and resources; to paraphrase Trigger (1990), monuments do not only make power visible, they also become power. Therefore, the construction of highly monumentalized landscapes needs to be understood as critical to the constitution of authority: built environments are not merely a reflection of the course of historical events, but also help to shape them (Smith, 2003).

Finally, the emergence of monuments has also been revisited by archaeologists working under an evolutionary perspective. They argue that behaviors such as conspicuous consumption and wasteful spending (for instance, in the construction of monuments) can be used to enhance social prestige because they are a form of "smart advertising" of the competitive abilities of leaders (Neiman, 1997). From an evolutionary point of view, the wasteful behavior represented by monument building can be considered as a form of "costly signaling", that is, a display of wealth that advertises a hidden quality of the sender (Ames, 2010; Boone, 2000). One corollary is that the proliferation of monuments in situations of inter-ethnic conflict can be understood as a form of advertising to outsiders that they will not be met without resistance. In that sense, the high visibility of monuments makes them a good candidate for the overt, intentional and assertive demarcation of territories (O'Shea and Milner, 2002).

3. The southern Brazilian highlands as a contested landscape

During the last 2000 years, southern Brazil was part of a regional mosaic of archaeological cultures, where a range of local traditions and migratory waves met, competed and interacted (Bonomo et al., 2015, 2011; Iriarte et al., in press, 2008; Politis and Bonomo, 2012; Politis et al., 2011; Rogge, 2005).

In the temperate highlands, the local Taquara/Itararé Tradition has long been recognized as representing the material correlate of speakers of the southern branch of the Jê linguistic family (Noelli, 2005). The depth of regional linguistic diversity within the Jê family points to the central Brazilian savannas as their likely homeland (Urban, 1992). The continuity between the archaeological Taquara/Itararé Tradition and the historical southern Jê peoples, as argued by archaeologists (Noelli, 2005), anthropologists (Da Silva, 2001) and historians (Dias, 2005) is the reason why we refer to them as the southern proto-Jê groups.

At the same time that the southern Brazilian highlands were settled by the southern proto-Jê groups, the warm subtropical deciduous forests along the major rivers of the Rio de la Plata basin were occupied by the Tupiguarani Tradition (Bonomo et al., 2015; Milheira and DeBlasis, 2014). It is a consensus that this tradition represents the ancestors of historical speakers of the Tupi-Guarani language family, whose internal diversity points to a southwestern Amazonian origin (Noelli, 1998, 2008; Rodrigues and Cabral, 2012; Urban, 1992).

We present now a brief overview of southern proto-Jê and Tupi-Guarani archaeology, before examining the cases of interaction and resistance. Because the focus of this article is those two archaeo-