



## Sacred landscapes of the southern Brazilian highlands: Understanding southern proto-Jê mound and enclosure complexes

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### ABSTRACT

Fieldwork involving survey, detailed topographic mapping, and excavations in Pinhal da Serra, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, has revealed a highly-structured landscape revolving around funerary/ceremonial structures that began around A.D. 1000. This paper focuses on the results of detailed topographic survey of mound and enclosure complexes and their interpretation in light of southern Jê ethnohistorical and ethnographic data. We compare the architectural patterns of mortuary architecture from this study with fundamental spatial features of historic Kaingang's social organisation, mortuary rituals and cosmogony myth. Our results suggest historical continuity in the organisation of space in cardinal directions (E–W), topography (low and high places), and in circular/concentric spatiality revealed in the southern proto-Jê mound and enclosure complexes. It is argued that small paired mound and enclosure complexes are associated with the material representation of a dual ranked opposition materialised in proto-Jê moiety cemeteries where important persona were buried.

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### Introduction

Archaeologists studying the Formative period in the Americas and the Neolithic in the Old World have long been concerned with the study of the economic, social and ideological roles associated with the arrival of burial monuments and the creation of built sacred landscapes in intermediate level societies (Barrett, 1996; Beck, 1995; Bradley, 1998; Carr and Case, 2005; Iriarte, 2006; Dillehay, 2007; Fleming, 1973; Scarre, 2002). Traditionally, the debate has focused on how these processes reflected changes in subsistence, population growth, territoriality and the rise and development of social distinctions (Binford, 1971; Renfrew, 1973; Tainter, 1978). More recently, discussion has turned to aspects related to the perception, memory, ideology, and underlying structural principles and meanings of monumental landscapes (Ashmore and Knapp, 1999; Barrett, 1996; Bradley, 1998; DeBoer, 1997; Dillehay, 2007; Edmond, 1999; Feinman, 1999; Thomas,

1999; Thompson and Pluckhahn, 2012; Tilley, 2007). Several authors have emphasised the importance of the landscape as a means of encapsulating and transmitting historical memory (Bender, 1993, 2002; Santos-Granero, 1998, 2004), as well as a crucial factor in polity-formation associated with more complex social formations and the appropriation of new territories (Dillehay, 1995, 2007; Heckenberger, 2002, 2007; Siegel, 1999; Zucchi, 2002).

The southern Brazilian highlands is one of the few regions in the world where mortuary rituals associated with mound-building have been recorded among the southern Jê groups in early European accounts during the 17th–19th centuries and investigated by ethnographers during the 20th century in the Kaingang (Baldus, 1937; Becker, 1976; Crépeau, 1994; Henry, 1964; Maniser, 1930; Métraux, 1946; Nimuendajú, 1993 [1913]; Paula, 1924; Veiga, 2000, 2006). Importantly, funerary and post-funerary rituals are reported to be their most important ceremony, when these groups gathered together showing their dual organisation (Baldus, 1937; Crépeau, 1994; Métraux, 1946; Nimuendajú, 1993 [1913]; Veiga, 2006). These events included the burial of important chiefs, secondary burials, the inheritance of the chiefly office by the eldest son of the deceased chief, initiation rites, name-giving ceremonies, performance and re-creation of the cosmogony myth, and feasting (Da Silva, 2001; Iriarte et al., 2008; Maniser, 1930; Métraux, 1946; Veiga, 2006). Therefore, the emergence and development of the

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pre-Columbian southern Jê mortuary tradition in the southern Brazilian highlands during the second millennium AD presents an exceptional case study to understand the role of mortuary practices, feasting, and the creation of built landscapes related to the emergence of social hierarchies (Dietler and Hayden, 2001; Dillehay, 2007; Gumerman, 1997; Hayden, 2009; Iriarte et al., 2008; Kertzer, 1988). Combining archaeology, ethnohistory and ethnographic studies among the Kaingang provides a unique opportunity to assess the long-term transformation of the principles of social and political organisation materialised in the layout of mortuary earthworks and the structure of the built landscape.

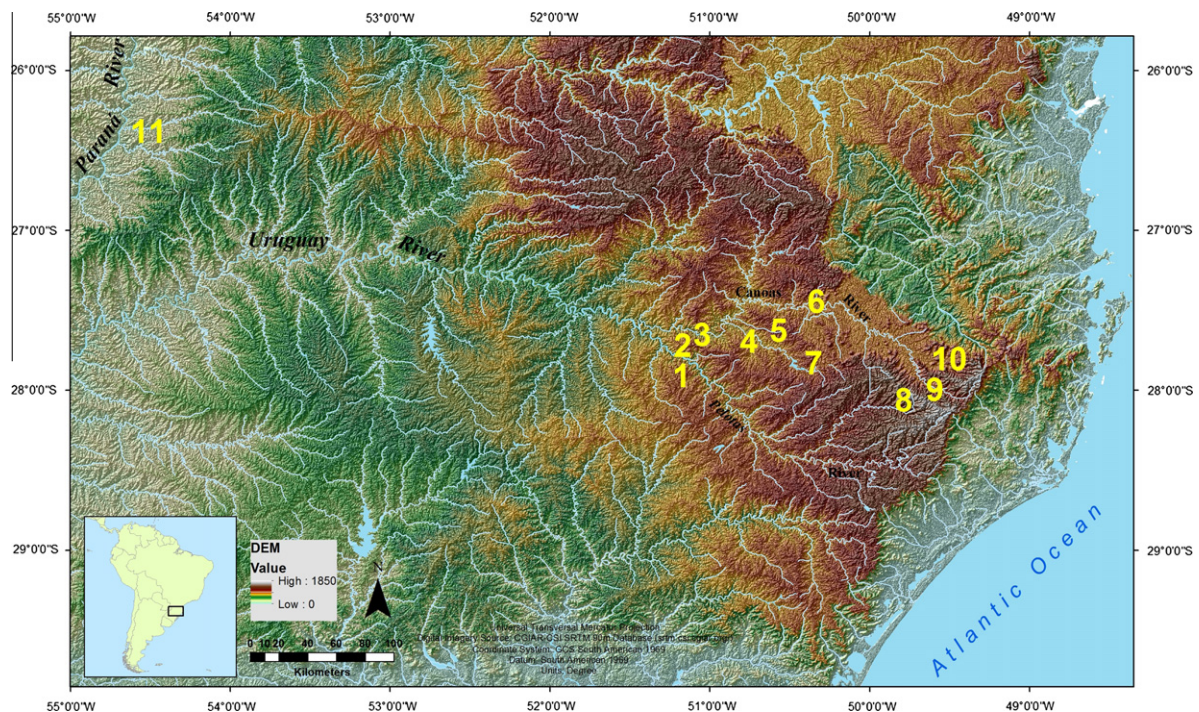
In this article, we focus on the investigation of the architectural layout of funerary and ceremonial structures concentrating on the following questions: (a) What is the spatial patterning of mortuary earthworks at the landscape level in the Pinhal da Serra region? More specifically, how were these mortuary earthworks structured in the landscape in relation to topography, prominent landforms, direction of view, intervisibility and transit routes? (b) What is the relationship between ceremonial sites and residential pit-house villages? And (c) What are the patterns in the architectural design of mound and enclosure complexes? What are the potential meanings expressed in the layout of these ceremonial sites in terms of the cognitive associations of the forms and their positioning in the landscape?

To address these questions we carried out an opportunistic survey across the Pinhal da Serra region (Figs. 1 and 2), producing detailed topographic models of mound and enclosure complexes with differential GPS and conducted out geophysical survey and excavation of select sites during two field seasons in 2009 and 2011. Our work built upon the long-term project of the *Núcleo de Pesquisa Arqueológica da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul* under the direction of Silvia Moehlecke Copé (SMC). In the first section of this paper, we will briefly introduce the archaeology of the pre-Columbian southern Jê groups (southern proto-Jê), followed by a history of archaeological investigation of mound and enclosure complexes, after which we will present the new results of our study. The second section will focus on the discussion and

interpretation of archaeological patterns from the southern proto-Jê in light of the ethnohistorical and ethnographic information.

### The archaeology of the southern proto-Jê

Following Da Silva (2001) in this article we referred to the broadly defined Taquara/Itararé archaeological tradition (Beber, 2005) with the name of southern proto-Jê groups. We used southern proto-Jê groups because (a) we wanted to emphasise the historical continuity of these groups in the southern Brazilian highlands from at least the start of the first millennium A.D. to the present and (b) we are not attempting to connect the archaeological record from the Late Holocene with any particular historically-defined southern Jê group, like the Kaingang or the Xokleng (see discussion in Da Silva, 2001). Dating back to around 2220 cal. yr BP, the southern proto-Jê occupied the southern Brazilian highlands and the Atlantic forest of the Brazilian states of southern São Paulo, Paraná, Santa Catarina, Rio Grande do Sul, as well as Misiones, Argentina and Paraguay (Fig. 1). Linguistic (Maybury-Lewis, 1979; Urban, 1992; Wiesemann, 1978) and archaeological (Araújo, 2001; Noelli, 2000, 2005) studies suggest that the historic Kaingang and Xokleng groups belonging to the Macro-Jê linguistic stock and, more specifically, to the languages of the Akwen (Xakriabá, Xavante, Xerente) and the Apinayé in the states of Minas Gerais, Mato Grosso and Goiás (Noelli, 2005: 178), migrated to the southern Brazilian highlands from Central Brazil during the Late Holocene. The southern proto-Jê practiced a mixed economy combining hunting, fishing and collecting Paraná pine nuts with slash and burn agriculture at lower altitudes dominated by subtropical semi-deciduous forest, where maize (*Zea mays* L.) was part of the diet (see Gessert et al., 2011: 35). They are broadly identified archaeologically by their diagnostic ceramics, the construction of pit houses, and their elaborated mound and enclosure complexes (hereafter MEC). Ceramics, the most diagnostic material culture item of the southern proto-Jê are characterised by simple, tall, small vessels exhibiting fine walls. They are generally



**Fig. 1.** Map showing locations of southern proto-Jê mound and enclosure complexes in south-eastern South America. (1) Pinhal da Serra. (2) Anita Garibaldi (UHE Barra Grande). (3) Anita Garibaldi (UHE-Campos Novos). (4) Abreu y Garcia. (5) SJC A2. (6) SC-CL-94. (7) SC-CL-37. (8) Lages. (9) Bom Sucesso. (10) Urubici. (11) Misiones.

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