The structure of the Mississippian world: A social network approach to the organization of sociopolitical interactions

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ABSTRACT

The structure and organization of macroregional networks have long captured the attention of archaeologists working in eastern North America, especially in regard to the overall character and spread of Mississippian culture across the midwestern and southeastern United States. In this paper, we use distributions of marine shell gorgets to evaluate the organization of relationships across the Mississippian world and to understand how social capital was accumulated and reciprocal relationships were established in the context of emerging organizational complexity. We use data on 1980 shell gorgets from 165 sites across eastern North America to investigate the social networks related to the distribution of these materials and, indirectly, to the types of social capital that were produced through regional social relationships. We employ a framework that articulates social network topologies with different forms of social capital to explicate the relational structure of Mississippian sociopolitics and to identify the sociospatial scales at which different forms of social capital, reciprocity, and relationships underwrote these structures. We conclude that resources (both material and immaterial) were likely drawn from community, local, regional, macroregional, and continental-scale networks while multiple types of networks were maintained across these multiscalar relational fields.

1. Introduction

The structure and organization of macroregional networks have long captured the attention of archaeologists working in eastern North America, especially in regard to the overall character and spread of Mississippian culture across the midwestern and southeastern United States. The onset of "Mississippian culture" is often defined by an increase in political centralization, the development of socioeconomic inequality, the widespread adoption of shared politico-religious iconography, and the manipulation of large-scale political economies underwritten by intensive maize agriculture. However, the exact nature of "Mississippian" and processes of "Mississippianization" remain the subjects of much debate (e.g. Anderson and Ethridge, 2009; Blitz, 2010; Clay, 1976; Ford and Willey, 1941; Pauketat, 2013, 2007; Pauketat and Alt, 2015; Peregrine, 1992; Scarry, 1996). While the shared iconographic practices and the circulation of non-local goods throughout the Mississippian world have been studied in great detail (e.g. Brain and Phillips, 1996; Brown and Rogers, 1989; King, 2007; Muller, 1966, 1989; Phillips and Brown, 1984, 1978), many of these studies focus on tracking the distributions of particular styles, motifs, and elements as well as formal iconographic analyses. While yielding invaluable

information about Mississippian iconography, symbolism, and world-view, there is a continued need for large-scale, macroregional approaches to Mississippian societies. Indeed, detailed studies of social, political, and economic organization are often situated at the community or polity scales (or geographically defined river valleys) (e.g. Anderson, 1994; Blitz, 1993; Blitz and Lorenz, 2006; Boudreaux, 2007; Hally, 2008; King, 2003, 2001; Knight and Steponaitis, 2007; Pauketat, 1994, 1997; Welch, 1991; Wilson, 2008) while the continental-scale structures of Mississippian sociopolitics are often assumed *a priori*.

Wright (2017:38-39), in her recent synthesis of the Middle Woodland Southeast (200 BC-AD 600), has referenced Lesser's (1961) concept of the "social field" to conceptualize the macroscalar character of the cultural phenomena that permeated the societies of the Eastern Woodlands, pointing out that we may "think of any social aggregate… as inextricably involved with other aggregates, near and far, in weblike, netlike connections" (Lesser, 1961:42). Just as Wright (2017:38-39) uses this perspective to argue that the Hopewell Interaction Sphere likely represented a "global" phenomenon for Middle Woodland peoples "linking, to various degrees, individuals and groups across much of their known world" so too may we apply such a concept to the Mississippian world. Indeed, Cobb (2005) has offered a similar perspective

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for Mississippian phenomena, pointing out the ubiquity of population movements, the unique articulations between local and extralocal relationships in the production of society, and the likely multiethnic and multilingual nature of these societies at every scale, from the community, to the locality, to across the Eastern Woodlands. As Cobb (2005:567) points out, the fact that the symbols, practices, and ritual materials that came to constitute and reproduce Mississippian societies "played such a small to nonexistent role in the reproduction of [antecedent] Woodland communities a mere century or two earlier, speaks to a qualitative shift in the ideological underpinnings of culture and power" across the Eastern Woodland during the Mississippian period. As such, like the Hopewell Interaction Sphere described by Wright (2017), the continental scale processes related to the emergence, spread, adoption, rejection, and transformation of new social, political, economic, and religious practices ca. AD 1000 would have likely represented a "global" experience for many contemporary, and diverse, individuals and groups. In this context, this paper attempts to evaluate how a small portion of this global experience, namely the expanded potential for the accumulation and production of social capital, was constituted in the relationships between individuals and groups.

In this paper, we use distributions of marine shell gorgets to evaluate the organization of relationships across the Mississippian world and to understand how social capital was accumulated and reciprocal relationships were established in the context of emerging organizational complexity. Here we argue that the continental-scale distribution of shell gorgets, namely the themes depicted on them, represents one dimension of the relational structure of the Mississippian world that was constituted materially. We use data on 1980 shell gorgets from 165 sites across eastern North America to investigate the social networks

related to the distribution of these materials (Fig. 1) and, indirectly, to the networks of social relationships that would have produced these patterns. As it has been demonstrated that particular themes and motifs depicted on shell gorgets (Figs. 2 and 3) are not evenly distributed, both within individual communities and across the region (e.g. Brain and Phillips, 1996; Hally, 2007; King, 2003), we work under the assumption that the composition of shell gorget assemblages at individual communities are meaningful indicators of the social relationships that bound these communities to other shell gorget-bearing communities. Given the restricted nature of access to marine shell and the iconography depicted on the gorgets, we argue that the social networks derived from the distribution of gorget themes can yield insight into the organization of Mississippian politico-religious institutions at the macroregional scale. We begin by providing an overview on the articulations between social networks and the political strategies that likely characterized Mississippian sociopolitics. Here we present an explicitly network perspective that emphasizes the relationships between communities and polities in structuring social, political, and economic practices across the Mississippian world.

2. Social networks and political strategies

The major organizational shifts that have come to define Mississippian society and culture (ca. AD 1000–1600) have been repeatedly linked to shifts in the political strategies of leaders and the emergence of socially, politically, and economically unequal classes of people (e.g. Anderson and Sassaman, 2012; Blitz, 2010; King, 2003; Butler and Welch, 2006; Pauketat, 1994). One way that these shifts have been conceptualized in Mississippian studies (e.g. Beck, 2003;
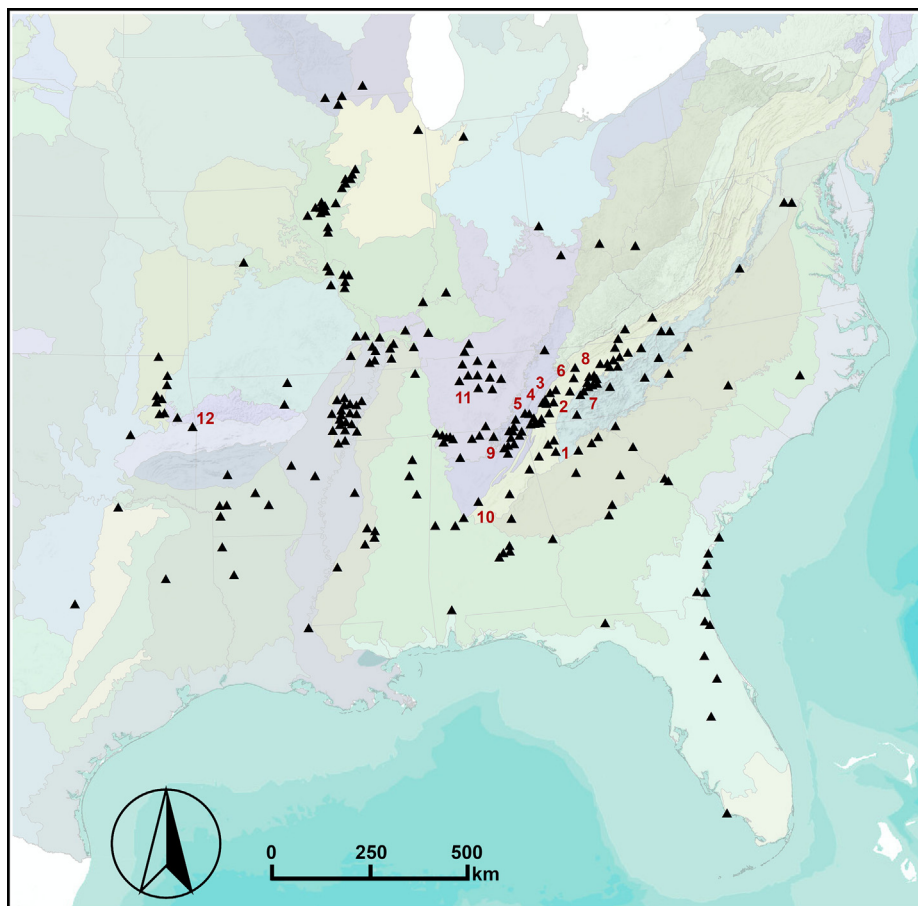

Fig. 1. Map showing sites used in this study with sites mentioned in text labeled: (1) Etowah; (2) Dallas; (3) Hixon; (4) Hiwassee Island; (5) Citico; (6) Talassee; (7) Toqua; (8) Fains Island; (9) Long Island; (10) Moundville; (11) Castalian Springs; (12) Spiro.