

## CHAPTER 6

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# THE NORTH AMERICAN *OIKOUMENE*

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THE title of this paper employs the term *oikoumene*, meaning the inhabited or known world. Among European archaeologists, it has long been assumed that by at least the Bronze Age local populations were in regular contact with one another, forming an *oikoumene* within which processes or events in one region might have an impact on processes or events in another, perhaps distant, region (e.g., Kristiansen and Larsson 2005). In this paper, we explore the value of a continental perspective for North American archaeology, one assuming that populations in North America, like those in Europe, existed within an *oikoumene* of mutually known polities.

We know from historic documents that native peoples living in Eastern North America were well aware of peoples and polities outside of their local area. For example, in 1670 the Jesuit priest Claude Allouez visited a village of Miami Indians near Green Bay, Wisconsin. He asked about the region to the south and was told about the Mississippi River and the peoples living along it who

are all obliged to burn peat and animal excrement dried in the Sun,—until we come within twenty leagues of the sea, when forests begin to appear again. Some warriors of this country who tell us they have made their way thither, declare that they saw there men resembling the French, who were splitting trees with long knives; and that some of them had their houses on the water,—for thus they expressed themselves in speaking of sawed boards and of Ships (Thwaites 55:209).

Thus in 1670, two years before its “discovery” by Marquette and Joliet, Allouez was told about the Mississippi River and its inhabitants as far south as the Gulf of Mexico, by native peoples who had allegedly traveled the entire length of the river and back.

Not only were native peoples well aware of others far distant from them, events at far distances had a profound effect on their lives. Allouez, for example, came to northeastern Wisconsin because it had become a haven for refugee populations “driven by their fear of the Iroquois from their own territories” (Thwaites 55:183) including Huronia, more than 500 miles to the east. These people apparently lived in fear of the Iroquois, despite the fact that raids had largely ceased almost a decade earlier and the closest the Iroquois had ever come was about 200 miles (raids resumed in the 1680s but were still well to the south). Fear of Iroquois raiders led people to consolidate into large palisaded villages (some with more than 3,000 residents), often multiethnic in composition, and apparently having formal political leaders despite the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of their inhabitants (e.g., Kinietz 1965:179–182, 309–314).

To understand the lives, motivations, and actions of the peoples of northeastern Wisconsin in 1670, then, one must consider both local and supralocal processes. Certainly, local activities and relations were of vital concern (particularly conflict, which by the early to mid-1700s had erupted into regular hostilities; see Hickerson 1970) and must be understood. But the multiethnic composition of villages, and their compact, palisaded forms, can be fully understood only with recognition of events unfolding hundreds of miles away, and by the 1670s decades earlier. If understanding society in a northeastern Wisconsin community in 1670 benefits from a continental perspective, then it may benefit the study of other time periods as well.

Similarly, Native societies of the greater Southwest were densely connected within their region, and beyond. In 1540, Indians at the mouth of the Colorado River knew of Coronado’s inland invasion and reported it to the Spanish fleet moving up the Gulf of California—500 kilometers distant from the army they were supposed to support (Flint and Flint 2005:186: “About two months after the vanguard of the Coronado expedition arrived at Cibola . . . linguistically unrelated people more than 350 miles away already had detailed and quite accurate descriptions of the Europeans”). Later, native guides led Coronado east across the Plains, almost certainly toward the indigenous cities and towns of the Mississippi Valley (Kehoe 2002:155, 165; Lekson 2009:25–26). And the peoples of the Southwest and Mesoamerica clearly knew each other: ten years before Coronado, an Indian called Tejo offered to guide conquistador Nuño de Guzman’s army north to Southwestern cities that Tejo’s father had serviced as a trader (Lekson 2009:25). Guzman’s expedition misfired, but the lesson is clear: Native peoples had continental connections, sufficiently detailed to launch and lead Spanish armies.

## SOUTHEAST-SOUTHWEST-MEXICO

Regional-scale analysis of Southwest-Mexico interaction has a long history. Until 1846, the U.S. Southwest was, in fact, part of Mexico. More important, a great many artifacts and objects of undeniable Mexican origin have been found in the Southwest:

more than 600 copper bells, more than 400 scarlet macaws, chocolate, and literally tons of shell from as far south on the Mexican Coast as the Bay of Banderas, to name a few. The flow of material was not one-way: considerable quantities of turquoise found in Mexico came from the Southwest, much of it having been processed in Chaco Canyon (an 11th-century center in northwest New Mexico) and the later, even more cosmopolitan Casas Grandes (a 14th-century city in northern Chihuahua).

Chaco Canyon was the first near-urban center in Pueblo prehistory; Casas Grandes was the last. The presence of many Mexican objects and even a few architectural elements suggested to many archaeologists that Mexico played a role in Chaco's emergence. Indeed, primary researchers at Chaco in the 1970s concluded that Chaco was the result of direct Mesoamerican intervention, summarized by Alden Hayes (1981:63): "There is no place to look for the source [of Chaco] except ultimately in Mexico." Despite a marked retreat from this position over the last 20 years (see Mills 2002:95), there still remain an impressive number of Mexican objects at Chaco, and an extraordinary canyonwide industry of turquoise bead and tesserae production. Mexico may not be needed as a source for Chaco, but Mexico remains an essential context.

Casas Grandes (also known as Paquimé) was Chaco's successor—temporally, of course, but perhaps politically as well (Lekson 1999). Even more than Chaco, Casas Grandes embraced Mesoamerica; there are scores of west Mexican copper objects, hundreds of scarlet macaws from southeast Mexico, and two *I*-shaped ball courts, unquestionably Mesoamerican in inspiration. The site's excavator originally concluded that Casas Grandes was founded by Mesoamericans (Di Peso 1974); more recent scholarship sees the city as Southwestern, but with significant Mesoamerican entanglements (Lekson 1999, 2009; Whalen and Minnis 2003). Indeed, the Southwest's engagement with Mexico apparently increased from 11th-century Chaco through Casas Grandes and the Pueblos of the 14th and 15th centuries (Riley 2005)—although actual Mesoamerican artifacts and objects were notably clustered in political centers, specifically Chaco and Casas Grandes.

Although few items of Mexican manufacture have been found in the Southeast, the ties between the two areas may well have been deep and enduring (White 2005; White and Weinstein 2008). Iconographic forms such as birdmen and long-nosed gods, unique manufactures such as engraved shell and ceramic effigy forms (e.g., head pots, hunchbacks), and rituals such as arrow sacrifice suggest deep connections between Mexico and the Southeast (Hall 1997; and Hall, this volume). More concrete examples of the Southeast's connection to Mexico can be found in the triumvirate of corn, beans, and squash. These domesticates moved consistently, and perhaps repeatedly, into the Southeast, and they must have been accompanied by knowledge of sowing, harvesting, storing, and processing (Pearsall, this volume). We might well ask what other information accompanied corn, beans, and squash: means to reckon planting and harvest times? fertility rituals? knowledge of associated supernatural beings such as Tlaloc or Quetzalcoatl (Kehoe 2005)?

No less significant are the pyramidal mounds and plazas that form the core of Mississippian centers. Though based on patterns of settlement organization reaching back at least to Hopewell times (and perhaps well before), Mississippian communities show striking parallels to some Classic and Postclassic Mexican ones (Dávila Cabrera 2005). Flat-topped mounds elevate temples and elite residences above the surrounding community and are arranged around a plaza where public rituals and feasts are held. Plaza and mound groups are often isolated from the rest of the community either spatially or by walls; they are also aligned to cardinal points or in some cases to celestial objects, suggesting that astronomical observations were an important part of Mississippian polity and ideology (this seems especially true at Cahokia, where the presence of a “woodhenge” observatory highlights the important role of astronomy), just as they were in many Mexican ones.

Cahokia and its environs formed the preeminent Mississippian center, and the largest pre-Columbian settlement north of Mexico. Cahokia appeared suddenly out of a landscape of small villages around AD 900 (Alt, this volume). Its peak came about AD 1150, after which it declined dramatically, disappearing altogether by about AD 1350. At its height, Cahokia’s population may have reached 10,000 or more. It is a unique urban center in a landscape of smaller centers and even smaller villages. Explaining Cahokia’s rise and fall has been an exercise for generations of Mississippian archaeologists (Emerson, this volume). The presence of what appear to be clear Mexican parallels in the architecture and iconography led many early researchers to seek a Mexican source for Cahokia. Indeed, one prominent excavator suggested that Cahokia may have been established as a market center for *pochteca* traders from highland Mexico (Porter 1977). But not a single artifact of Mexican origin has been found at Cahokia (however, see Milner and Larsen 1991, and also Barker et al. 2002), and over time the idea that Mexico had any connection at all with Cahokia became anathema.

Does the lack of Mexican-derived material at Cahokia mean that Mexican-derived ideas were not present? Are pyramidal mounds arranged around plazas, birdman iconography, and other parallels between Mexico and Cahokia all independent inventions, or might we more usefully look at them as part of a larger landscape with a deep history—a North American *oikoumene*? For example, clear evidence of significant interactions between the Huasteca and Caddoan regions has been recognized since the 1920s, and Mexican archaeologists continue to explore the nature and extent of these interactions (e.g., Zaragoza Ocaña 2005). Given the importance of these regions to highland Mexico and the Southeast, respectively, it seems implausible to argue that there was no influence or interaction beyond them. Rather, it seems more realistic to assume that polities in both Southeast and highland Mexico were aware of, and perhaps even in contact with, peer polities in distant regions of the Postclassic world (White and Weinstein 2008).

Why are there Mexican sumptuary goods at Chaco and Casas Grandes, but not at Cahokia? We suggest the answer may lie not in Mexico but in the Chacoan and

Cahokian polities themselves. Mississippian polities built upon millennia-deep traditions of monumentality, exotic materials, and their meanings (Reilly and Garber 2007; Townsend and Sharpe 2004). Southwestern polities, such as Chaco, were “start-ups,” creating political symbolism on the run. They looked to Mexico for “ready-made” symbols of power. Fledgling Southwestern hierarchies needed legitimation from Mexico; Mississippian lords did not. Mississippian lords could use and manipulate continental-scale traditions that can usefully be considered as something like “Mesoamerica in the Woodlands” without the need for Mexican fripperies. The Southwest’s Mesoamerica was distant West Mexico, separated by the spectacular mountains and gorges of the Sierra Madre Occidental; the Southeast’s Mesoamerica was of far easier access, along the Gulf Coast to the Huasteca. Thus the great presence of Mexican objects, birds, and artifacts in the Southwest and their (apparent) absence in the Southeast may be misleading; the Southwest was perhaps less culturally integrated with its Mexico (West Mexico) than the Mississippian realm reflected the world and worldviews of its Mexico (Huasteca).

Framing these ideas in more familiar terms, we would argue that Chaco and the Pueblo world were a periphery of Mexico. Chacoan leaders used Mexico as a source of distant power; imported objects and ideologies supported emerging political hierarchies. In contrast, we would argue that Cahokia and the Mississippian world were a center in their own right, essentially equal to Mexican polities. Cahokia was the northernmost city within a landscape of historically deep traditions that stretched from Guatemala to Wisconsin. Mississippian leaders adapted deep internal histories of monument building and intraregional exotic exchange to symbolize new and complex political arrangements. They may have found inspiration in Mexican polities, but Mississippian leaders did not need Mexican objects to demonstrate their power; they were already lords in the North American *oikoumene*. Cahokia’s symbolism of power was at once a part of that larger *oikoumene*—especially the rarified world of elites—and the product of long, local histories along the Mississippi.

## NORTHEAST-NORTHWEST-CANADA

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Although interactions across the Mexican border seem difficult for North American archaeologists to accept and investigate, interactions across the Canadian border seem much more accepted and have not been a major barrier to research. One obvious factor behind this difference is language; the language of scholarship on both sides of the border is English, while a major language barrier separates scholars in Mexico from the United States. It is unfortunate that a modern barrier apparently influences our understanding of the past, but this indeed seems to be the case (Wilcox et al. 2008). There is, however, greater environmental continuity

between Canada and the United States than between Mexico and the United States. Where boreal forests, lakes, plains, and mountain ranges permit uninterrupted movement between Canada and the United States, the Rio Grande, the Chihuahuan desert, and the coastal desert of Tamaulipas form a distinct environmental fissure between Mexico and the United States. Thus the linguistic barrier only emphasizes an already existing environmental barrier between the two nations.

Early explorers describe North American native peoples having knowledge of other peoples and places across a vast expanse of the northern United States and Canada. For example, when the Hudson's Bay Company explorer Samuel Hearne first penetrated into the interior of Canada from the west coast of Hudson's Bay in 1771, he took with him native peoples who already had a good knowledge of his destination: the Coppermine River some 2,000 kilometers away (Hearne 1796). Not only did his Chipewyan companions apparently know the peoples who lived at that great distance, but they wanted to kill them. A key incentive for their accompanying Hearne was, apparently, to murder Inuit, perhaps in revenge for an earlier attack, though the reasons were never understood by Hearne (1796:115). What is clear, however, is that the peoples of the Subarctic knew one another across great expanses—knew one another well enough to carefully plan attacks at a great distance.

Interactions across the U.S.-Canadian border are also obvious in the archaeological record. For example, trade in dentalium shells (among other items, including copper, stone bowls, and foodstuffs) has at least a thousand-year history along the Northwest coast, stretching from southern Alaska through western British Columbia and into Washington and Oregon (see, e.g., Hayden and Schulting 1997). Similarly, along the Atlantic coast the peoples of the Maritime Archaic tradition (ca. 3000 to 1800 BC) shared a unique set of artifacts (slender ground slate bayonets) and burial customs (of "the Red Paint People") from southern Maine to Labrador (see Bourque 2001; Chapdelaine, this volume). Archaeologists have had no difficulty identifying and examining cultural interactions across the U.S.-Canadian border, and it is unfortunate that the U.S.-Mexican border appears so impermeable in comparison.

It is an interesting fact that political complexity increased dramatically in the southern California Chumash societies at the same time as Chaco and Cahokia (Arnold 2004; Gamble 2008). Analysis of cause, effect, and coincidence at that scale are beyond the scope of this paper. But certainly, the Southwest knew the Pacific Coast and vice versa; traffic in Pacific shell was less, perhaps, than shell from the Gulf of California and the coastal Mexico, but still quantities of California shell were considerable and Southwestern pottery is found in southern California (Ruby and Blackburn 1964). Closing the loop: a remarkable quantity of California shell found its way to Spiro, the great 14th- and 15th-century Mississippian center on the South Plains (Kozuch 2002)—probably via Pueblo trading centers such as Pecos—and lesser quantities of turquoise (Bell 1947:182).

## A CONTINENTAL PERSPECTIVE

Cultures are open systems of shared symbols and information. New symbols and new information enter cultural systems all the time, and they can have profound impact. New symbols and new information may come from neighbors, but also from far away. As Mary Helms (1979) described for ancient Panamanian chiefs, distant sources of information can be used to great political effect, particularly in smaller-scale societies like those that covered North America prehistorically (see also Helms 1988). A continental perspective on North American prehistory, then, allows us to look to distant places for sources of symbols, information, and ultimately power. It allows us to explore relationships between cultures that may not leave abundant material traces but that may have had profound cultural impact nonetheless.

Today there is increased interest in ecological disruptions and how they may have influenced ancient cultures (e.g., Redman 1999). We know that in the recent past ecological disasters in one area could have a profound impact on other areas, and we suspect the same might have been true in the distant past. A continental perspective allows us to take such ecological disruptions seriously, and consider how environmental degradation, climate fluctuations, diseases, and the like might affect societies far from the locality of the disruption (Chew 2007). In this way, social transformations that took place across large areas of ancient North America (e.g., the nearly simultaneous consolidation of populations at Chaco and Cahokia and their fragmentation some 200 years later) might make sense in an ecological model even if ecological disruption happened in only one location.

This brings us back to the start of this paper, for it is only in a continental perspective that the impact of colonialism on indigenous societies really makes sense. By understanding cultures as interacting across broad areas, we can understand and explain the dramatic impact of disease on native peoples far in advance of direct contact with Europeans (Ramenofsky 1987). We can explain why conflict on the East Coast might have bred conflict in the far distant “tribal zone” of the Great Plains and Midwest (Ferguson and Whitehead 1992), creating multiethnic palisaded villages in Wisconsin, and even spurring the emergence of an entirely new pattern of horse-based, nomadic bison hunting (Moore 1996). Such understandings of complex interrelationships among populations, polities, and environments are possible only with a continental perspective on North American prehistory.

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