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Pilgrimage to Poverty Point?

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> From time to time the archaeologist is confronted with the need to
> explain human products that seem to go well beyond the needs of what
> we would ourselves consider "rational."
>
> <div align="right">Renfrew 2001:17</div>

Much has been written in the last 50 years about the enigmatic character of
Poverty Point, the Late Archaic site located on the stone-free Macon Ridge
in the Lower Mississippi River Valley (LMV) (Gibson 2000, 2004, 2007;
Kidder 2010, 2011; Sassaman 2004, 2010:53–66; Sassaman and Heckenberger
2004). The material remains uncovered there continue to elude easy ethno-
graphic analogy and description, leading to the proposal of a wide diversity
of models to account for the archaeologically defined characteristics of the
site. The challenge of accurately describing Poverty Point is derived not only
from its atypical archaeological assemblage but also from the full weight of
the history of hunter-gatherer and North American archaeological research.

We argue that none of the previously proposed models adequately explain
the assemblages excavated from Poverty Point. After a fresh analysis of data
at the Poverty Point site, we have come to believe that looking away from
traditional hunter-gatherer behavioral models and toward other avenues of
analogy potentially offers a more fruitful path of conceptualization. Hunter-
gatherer behavior is more often described as having an economic impetus and
is less often attributed to the kinds of symbolic, social, or ritual intentions
regularly ascribed to agricultural groups (Kelly 1995; Lee and DeVore 1968;
Sassaman and Holley 2011). This focus on cultural ecology causes a blurring of
behavioral events over time. No individual agent or action is privileged over
another because they are all geared toward the same end. We argue that the
behavior seen at Poverty Point does not follow this logic.

One of the major stumbling blocks that prevents researchers from consid-
ering other models is the way in which we, as archaeologists, have been con-
ceptualizing time and history at Poverty Point. Approaching analysis and in-
terpretation with the expectation of discovering a contiguous material-culture
group, whose members behaved as in a simplistic hunter-gatherer model, has
yielded sparse results. The models do not fit. The people did not behave as

expected. Instead, we propose replacing this traditional viewpoint, which regards large archaeological sites as loci of single, discrete culture groups occupying space over long periods of time, with a scale and conceptual framework more akin to an "event." Converting our own thinking on Poverty Point to an event-based approach helps orient our analysis with recent findings about mound construction chronology (Ortmann and Kidder 2013); trade networks (Ortmann 2010; Spivey 2011), and site abandonment (Kidder 2006; Kidder and Sassaman 2009; Sassaman 2010:189–204) within the search for analogous models.

In broadening our thinking about Poverty Point and the people who inhabited that space during the Late Archaic, we have come to believe that the site may have been a place of pilgrimage. To explain how we arrived at this conclusion, we discuss the nature of pilgrimage and its relevance to non-Western societies. Then, we lay out our evidence for and argument on why we have concluded that Poverty Point is a place of pilgrimage.

Because none of the explanatory models proposed thus far for Poverty Point accurately describe the behavior the extant data supports, we must look outside of traditional ways of conceptualizing hunter-gatherer behavior, as well as the prehistory of North America, to find an appropriate analogy. In this vein, we follow Ken Ames (2004) and imagine what hunter-gatherer complexity might look like in resource-rich temperate climates before colonization transformed cultural organization. Poverty Point offers an unprecedented opportunity to do just that.

What is Pilgrimage?

In the most basic sense, pilgrimages are made to places of real or constructed origin; to quote the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, pilgrimages are made to "locations where the gods or heroes were born or wrought some great action or died, or the shrines where the deity had already signified it to be his pleasure to work wonders. *Once theophanies are localized, pilgrimages necessarily follow*" (Jarrett 1911; emphasis added). The largest assemblies of humans on earth occur at the pilgrimage sites of world religions. Turner argues that pilgrimage invokes *communitas* (1974; Turner and Turner 1978). Pilgrimage emphasizes the universal quality of unmediated communication with others; secular and hierarchical statuses are ideally (but not always) flattened in favor of egalitarian relations, and social identities are exchanged for universal participation (Turner 1974:200–202). Geographic identities are rendered moot by pilgrims' incorporation into the membership of a liminal community; the pilgrim is

marked as one who has crossed boundaries, real and imagined, which confers status and prestige (Turner 1974:196, 202; Turner and Turner 1978:7–9).

Throughout the history of its study, pilgrimage has been reserved as a trapping of "state-level" societies or communities with "history" (Turner and Turner 1978:17–19). The Turners deny that "rites of passage," as they describe pilgrimage-like behavior, are present in groups without "history" (Turner and Turner 1978:8–17). The basis of this exclusion, the Turners claim, is that while tribal groups expect a pilgrimage to heal the malady that spurred it, Western pilgrims expect to find no "corporeal remedy" for their ailments through the action of pilgrimage (Turner and Turner 1978:14). The Turners also differentiate between pilgrimages taken based on a religion with a "historical foundation" and those religions based on "myths" derived from a historically untraceable deep time, again affirming the former as true pilgrimage and the latter as a poor fascimile (Turner and Turner 1978: 17). Their "classification of pilgrimages" is solidly Judeo-Christian in focus and fails to account for the possibility that the act of pilgrimage is innately human and spread throughout human cultures (McCorriston 2011).

In contrast to the Turner model of *communitas*, Eade and Sallnow (1991) argue that the act of pilgrimage and pilgrimage places are loci of conflict and contestation. In this frame, the ritual place is a site of contested meaning and interpretation; multivocality and pluralism, as opposed to *communitas*, are the important concepts. These competing perspectives, however, crystallize around the concept that pilgrimage is about creating and recreating community. To assume there is only one worldview embedded in pilgrimage participation is nonsensical and glosses one of the most critical elements of the pilgrimage process: the creation of identity and participation through the suspension of the normal rules of behavior. Through their deconstruction of the Turnerian concept of the pilgrimage, Eade and Sallnow propose the other extreme, calling such a place "a religious void" (1991:5) available for each person to paint with their own interpretation (Coleman and Elsner 1994:3). Their rejection of *communitas* aligns with historical data that demonstrates that community building is not, in fact, the end result of all pilgrimages (Coleman and Elsner 1994:5).

There are many models for pilgrimage in the culturally Western and geographically Eurasian world. The Muslim hajj (Petersen 1994), Christian and Catholic pilgrimages across the world (Coleman and Elsner 1994; Harbison 1994), Hindu pilgrimage (Stanley 1992), and secular travels such as Star Trek fans attending a national convention (Jindra 1994) are just a few examples. Pilgrimages often have temporal cycles: some are associated with feasts and

others with calendrical punctuation; others are more regular (e.g., the pilgrimage to Lourdes, France); and still others are episodic or even single acts undertaken by individuals acting alone. In short, whether their event horizons are timed to cycles (calendars or celestial events) or follow a personal schedule, pilgrimages are events—occurrences that are sharply localized at a single point in space and time. In theory, the accumulation of archaeological remains at pilgrimage sites represents the palimpsesting of events—across space (e.g., different mounds/temples/shrines) reflecting the temporal boundaries of these pilgrimage events.

In 1994, *World Archaeology* published a special issue on pilgrimage in the archaeological record. None of these articles focused on pilgrimage in American Indian societies. In fact, no rigorous narrative or analysis of pilgrimage in the archaeology of North America has been published, its first substantive treatment being Wesler (2012:260–27; but see also Pauketat 2008, 2010, for insights that foreshadow our argument). While in the modern world the concept of pilgrimage has been explored largely in relation to the great world religions, we know that pilgrimages also take place among the so-called tribal societies outside of North America. Nuer pilgrims from the Nile River valley in Africa, for example, traveled long distances and constructed a mound nearly 15 m tall to mark and honor the place of the prophet Ngundeng. This mound served as a sacred "vessel" for containing the pilgrimage offerings brought from far-flung villages and placed within the mound as a way of participating in a larger community.

> Ngundeng's Mound fixed a permanent site through which Divinity could be approached and at which it could appear. The very solidity of the Mound helped to expand Ngundeng's influence. . . . Those who came to help build the Mound, and those who brought mud and ashes to maintain it became part of a moral community and were involved in an activity which was supposed to bring life to them and their kin. . . . Individuals could come . . . whole sections [of the Lou clan] would send delegations . . . Many of Ngundeng's sacrifices were intended to have a universal effect, ensuring the well-being not just of individuals, or single sections, or even just of the Lou, but for all adherents of DENG. 'He built the Mound so that people will sit in one place,' one of his grandsons commented [Johnson 1994:105–106].

We are also reminded that a prophetic person or persons can galvanize social actions in ways that will be archaeologically difficult, though not always impossible, to recover (Pauketat 2010:179–181). Prophets and prophetic

leaders are often found at points of conflict and crisis; however, they are also synchretizers. Their behavior required community building and culture making; historically, American Indian prophetic leaders (e.g., Wavoka, Handsome Lake, the Shawnee Prophet and his brother Tecumseh) repackaged or reinvented traditions in very active, charged, and dynamic ways. Native American leaders built a lasting cultural legacy that was contingent on the "materiality" and "spatiality" of the narrative they preached (Pauketat 2010:179). Their ideas and prophecies were realized in practice. The Ghost Dance may be one of the best examples of this practice, but we could include material items (e.g., clothing, staffs, prayer sticks, medicine bags, belts, maps, and art), songs, oration, and especially places (e.g., Prophetstown) in the list of materiality and spatiality.

We have in the historical record of Ngundeng's Mound an exemplar of how a prophetic person—in this case a minor player initially proclaimed as a healer—materialized and localized his prophesy and the ways this theophany was "used" by leaders and followers, to create community and to suspend the nominal cultural rules and norms, at least for a period of time.

> He [Ngundeng] fell into a trance. . . . At the end of this period word was passed far and wide summoning all tribesmen of the Nuer clans. . . . Blood feuds were forgotten. . . . [From a large area of southern Sudan] tribesmen foregathered at the behest of Ngundeng. . . . At dawn on the following morning he carried the first load of earth to the site he had chosen . . . and thus was begun the building of the Pyramid [Coriat 1939:224].

> The building of the mound was a gigantic task. It was constructed of wet ashes mixed with baked and unbaked earth, for the material was excavated from two large vacated cattle camps. . . . It does not seem that there was any systematic conscription of labor . . . but people came voluntarily from all over the countryside to assist . . . and often brought sacrifices. . . . When the food they had brought with them was finished they would return home and their place would be taken by other pilgrims. . . . It is said that people brought handfuls of ashes to add to the mound . . . as an act of piety [Evans-Pritchard 1935:62–63].

In a slightly different but perhaps more relevant context, Australian hunter-gatherers practice what we would define as pilgrimage as a part of "dreamtime." Dreamtime involves the physical movement of an individual or group

across a sacralized landscape with visitations to shrines and sacred places that follow songlines handed down across generations. These processions are events on the personal scale; the songs, dances, rock art, and shrines are the embodiment of ancestral theophanies.

For our purpose it is worth considering that there also is a topography of pilgrimage, an idea that Coleman and Elsner found was missing in some anthropological treatments of pilgrimage (1994:7). By neglecting the physical landscape's role in shaping and creating both the necessity and experience of the pilgrimage, anthropology has avoided one of the central aspects to both American Indian ritual life and the realities of archaeological research (Pauketat 2007). Given the importance of places as mnemonic anchors in the histories and moral construction of American Indian lives (Basso 1996; Nabokov 2002), this would further bias us against discovering the places of pilgrimage in North America.

Pilgrimages occur at different spatial scales: local, regional, and global. Participants at these different levels are drawn from distinct geographic and ritual/religious/national catchments. The geographic contexts of these pilgrimages are reflected in the spatial catchment of the pilgrims. As noted by Turner (1974; Turner and Turner 1978), for example, pilgrims don't randomly flow into a pilgrimage center; instead, they come, usually together, from defined places; in many instances these places have real geographic boundaries—valleys, certain towns, basins, or coastal localities. Thus, there exists the possibility that we could archaeologically detect the catchment area of a pilgrimage by examining the distinctive material assemblages of pilgrims—assuming of course that they are conveying to the pilgrimage center material offerings.

Given that most of those who study pilgrimage are focused on historical, rather than archaeological, data, few approach the task of defining material correlates for pilgrimage sites. In the most widely known attempt to discuss pilgrimages archaeologically, Colin Renfrew (2001) analyzes Chaco Canyon as a Location of High Devotional Expression (LHDE). He does not directly address pilgrimage sites as a category but instead encompasses pilgrimage sites within this less restrictive term, thus including sites originating from cultures with both "highly ordered" controlling bodies and those "lack[ing] any coherent organizing capacity" (2001:23). The material correlates for LHDE allow for both the sacred and the profane to occur and focus mainly on the existence of exotic and specialized materials (2001:18) and the discovery of features that would have required large populations to build and utilize (2001:19).

Wesler (2012:261, 268–269) most recently discussed the difficulty of correlating the material remains we find archaeologically with the concept of

pilgrimage, which has not been clearly defined in archaeological terms. He notes that researchers too often muddle the distinction between festival centers and pilgrimage centers. The vital difference is the size of the catchment area from which attendees are drawn. Local populations inhabit festival centers that may not be occupied year-round, but those who occupy pilgrimage centers may come throughout the year and often are from more distant locales. The important diagnostic artifacts in distinguishing the two types (i.e. festival centers versus pilgrimage centers) are the prevalence of trade items at the site in question and of tokens taken from that site to a place of more permanent residence for the pilgrimage attendees. Scholars of pilgrimage are careful to note that the trade items found at the pilgrimage site can, and are predicted to, be in small quantities and are not of nominally defined economic utility (Morinis 1992). Along the same lines, the souvenirs of the pilgrimage brought back home from the site by travelers are expected to be scarce and without the hallmarks of expected economic or technological value (Preston 1992; Wesler 2012:266).

Modeling Poverty Point

Attempts to understand and model Poverty Point have often been rooted in a traditional hunter-gatherer utilitarian framework. This paradigm was an obvious ill fit with Poverty Point data from the beginning, leading to Ford and Webb's argument for agrarian Mesoamerican influences on the site (Ford and Webb 1956; Ford 1969; Webb 1968, 1982). The lack of evidence for domesticated plants at Poverty Point (Ward 1998) led to a dismissal of this model (Gibson 1973, 1980). The proposal that Poverty Point was a complex chiefdom was then widely asserted (Gibson 1973; Webb 1968, 1982).

A handful of models have been proposed that take into account the stark differences between the archaeology we see at Poverty Point and the material remains of other hunter-gatherer groups. Gibson's interpretations are now that the mounds represent the physical manifestation of magic that buffers against a metaphysical but potentially real threat (Gibson 2000:185–186, 230, 270–271). To Hamilton (1999), the mounds are tangible means for reducing risk. In this scheme, the construction of mounds diverts human energy from reproduction to production and thereby acts to prevent overpopulation in the face of uncertain returns. Jackson's trade-fair model (1986, 1991) and Willey's vacant-ceremonial-center model (1957) were once popular but are now out of favor (Gibson 1987). Both explanatory models assume that the site was occupied seasonally, with the former attributing an economic purpose to site occupancy and the latter a noneconomic purpose. The final two perspec-

tives are Kidder and Sassaman's multiethnic aggregation model (Kidder 2011; Kidder and Sassaman 2009; Sassaman 2005, Sassaman and Heckenberger 2004) and Gibson's local population origin model (2007). The local population origin model argues that Poverty Point is an "integrated community or closed society" as opposed to "a unique event or specialized practice" (Gibson 2000:11, 222) whose raison d'être was the import of raw materials (Gibson 2000:219–28):

> Poverty Point's realm was an area confirmed by . . . exchange of a common array of technological materials. Exchange meant economics and politics. Any time more than a handful of people became involved in anything, especially in something economically vital, interaction inevitably becomes politically infused. Poverty Point's political economy focused on getting vital technological raw materials into as many needy hands as possible [Gibson 1998:29].

According to this view, Poverty Point was a regional center whose absorption of the surrounding population would account for the spike in population seen in the Late Archaic. In contrast, the multiethnic aggregation model argues against this perspective, given that the smaller populations in the local region during the Middle Archaic could not have supported the seemingly rapid gain in population numbers from the Middle to Late Archaic at Poverty Point. One of the notable recent findings in the region is the apparent mound-construction hiatus in this part of the LMV and in its tributaries after the Middle Archaic and before the onset of Poverty Point as a major site (Saunders 2010, 2012).

With the exception of the multiethnic aggregation and vacant-ceremonial-center models, each of these proposals are static and focused on—even obsessed with—the mundane tasks of daily living, to the exclusion of the kind of complex intentionality we ascribe to nonhunter-gatherer groups. There is an underlying assumption that the site exists to fulfill an economically utilitarian function. The local-population model fashions Poverty Point as an oversized town that exists to import lithics into a region where no lithics exist. The trade-fair model posits that the site served to facilitate the exchange of economically valued goods among far-flung communities. Underpinning this notion is the concept that hunter-gatherers who live in an uncertain and fluctuating environment practice risk-minimization strategies wherein information flow is a primary commodity (Whallon 2006, 2011). Even seeing Poverty Point as an elaborate contraceptive device (Hamilton 1999) relegates to the commonplace what appears to be exceptional monument construction by

nearly every measure. Many researchers present the banal, ordinary stuff of life as the only viable option, in spite of the fact that Poverty Point possesses one of the most enigmatic archaeological signatures ever found. There is no shortage of southeastern sites that are explained by the mundane; Poverty Point simply is not one of them. What, then, is the hard evidence separating Poverty Point from this gaggle of contemporary prosaic sites?

Poverty Point Data

Occupied since ca. 3600 cal b.p., Poverty Point's history of occupation is complex and marked by a series of construction events and spatial and, potentially, social reorganizations. Surface-collected remains show that the earliest occupation in the site area goes back to the Paleoindian period, and there are modest quantities of Early and Middle Archaic remains scattered across the eastern edge of Macon Ridge within the site boundaries. There is an apparent occupational hiatus ca. 4800–3600 cal b.p. Beginning ca. 3600 cal b.p. there is a substantial occupation across much of the core area of the site, most notably along and near the eastern edge of Macon Ridge. At the time of initial occupation there was limited earthen monumental construction. So far, only Mound B has been dated to this initial occupation period. Recent geophysical surveys and limited test excavations in the open plaza area indicate that the earliest inhabitants were erecting large 10–20 m diameter circular structures made up of 60–70 cm diameter single-set posts. These structures were eventually dismantled and the posts removed. The function of these structures or features is unknown, but their size and the use of large single-set posts indicates a considerable investment in labor. These structures can be considered monumental architecture, especially in the context of a purely hunting, fishing, and gathering subsistence lifestyle.

This initial occupation episode is widespread, and contemporary remains are found beneath the plaza and under what would become the ridges. Limited radiocarbon dating of these remains suggests that the occupation lasted some 200 years, from ca. 3600–3400 cal b.p. At present it is unclear whether this was a permanent village or whether these remains mark repeated visits to the site over the duration of the dated occupation span. The early inhabitants of the site were importing lithic materials across very long distances at this time. One of the most notable lithic raw material types in these early deposits is Burlington chert, sourced to the central Mississippi River area around modern St. Louis, Missouri, nearly 700 km to the north of Poverty Point. One study found that in seven test pits that penetrated to the earliest occupation zone, Burlington chert remains (tools and debitage) from the initial

occupation levels weighed nearly 16 kg In contrast, only 4 kg of so-called local pebble chert, which is derived from gravels along the edges of the Mississippi Valley 50–75 km from Poverty Point, was recovered from the same contexts. At this time other lithic sources were being tapped, but in much smaller quantities. Still, the network of chert imported to the site encompassed a good deal of the Mississippi Valley and its tributaries.

Beginning ca. 3400 cal b.p., the site underwent a dramatic transformation. The most notable occurrence was the construction of the six earthen ridges and some of the mounds (Figure 7.1). Associated with these physical changes are shifts in material culture use and alteration of the raw material resource network. Although the data should be understood as provisional because it contains relatively few radiocarbon dates, the sequence of events leading to the radical reconfiguration of the site appears to begin with the termination of the use of Mound B. This mound, which had begun its life as a flat-topped platform mound, was covered with a thick mantle of earth and the mound and its immediate surroundings seem to have been abandoned and never used again. Similarly, the single-post "buildings" were carefully taken apart and the postholes filled.

After these "terminations," there were several important additions. One is the beginning of the use of Mound C. Here, a series of thin (usually only a few centimeters thick) use or occupation surfaces were created, briefly used for unknown purposes, and then capped with carefully selected fills. This process of surface construction-use-fill was repeated multiple times, creating a low rise (the shape is not known at this time because of erosion on the east side of the mound). Mound C began as a low-rise, potentially platform mound and was used for perhaps 100 years before being capped by the addition of a conical mass of earthen fill that covered the underlying use surfaces. This fill was peculiar in that it was not midden- stained or organically enriched but nonetheless contained abundant artifacts.

At the same time that Mound C was being erected and used, the concentric ridges were being built. The precise chronological relationships among these ridges is not clear at present—they may have been built in some order or they may have been constructed more or less at the same time In any case, they were built quite quickly, most likely within a generation. They were created by borrowing earth from areas immediately adjacent to the ridges, creating a shallow ditch between each of the ridges. The ridges are assumed to have been built to support houses or structures on their surfaces, but modern agriculture and more than 3,000 years of erosion and soil development have obliterated any obvious evidence of habitation, although some features, notably fire pits and earth-oven cooking pits, have been uncovered. Artifacts
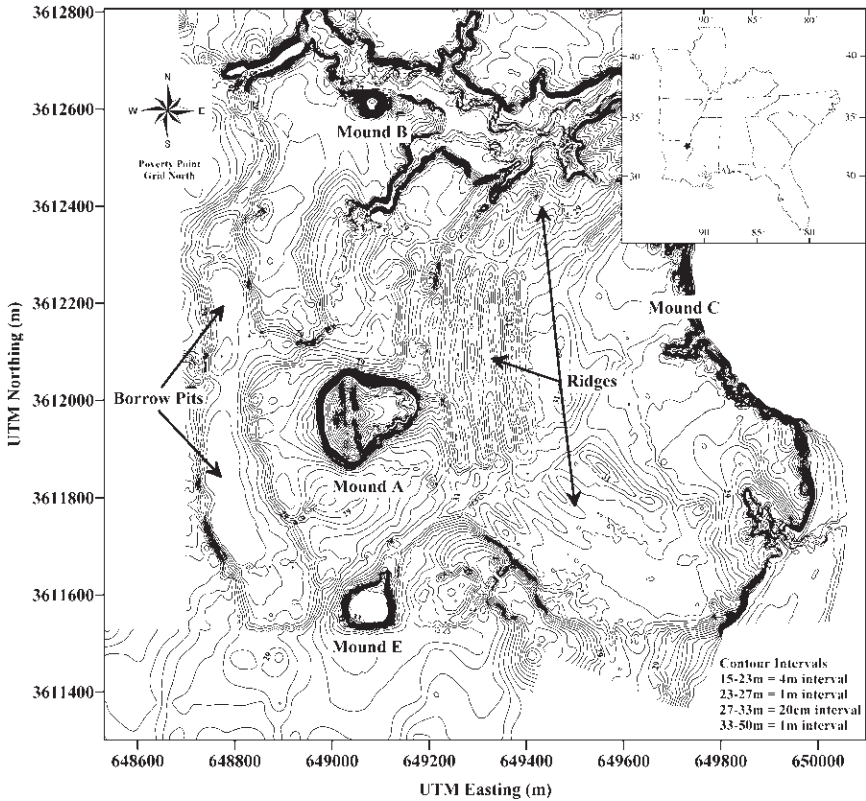
7.1. Map of the Poverty Point site. Map data courtesy of the Louisiana Division of Archaeology.

are common on the ridges, the flanks of the ridges, and the ditches at their bases. In contrast to the pre-ridge-construction deposits, the raw materials found in and on the ridges come from a very diverse and far-flung network of sources. It is clear that the catchment of interaction and importation of raw materials to the site had undergone a significant change starting with the building of ridges and mounds. At roughly the same time as the ridges were being built, and at least after the initial surfaces of Mound C were deposited, the inner or plaza part of the site was covered with up to 75 cm of fill, creating a level surface and burying the single-post structures previously erected on the ground surface.

The final construction activity at the site is the erection of Mound A. This mound, which is the second largest earthen monument in the United States, was built at the western edge of the outermost ridge. Excavations and coring of

the mound demonstrate that much of the mound was constructed over a wet, swampy depression roughly 1–2 m deep There is a reasonably clear sense of the construction sequence for Mound A. First, the vegetation of the swampy depression was burned. Immediately after, a thin (5–15 cm thick) layer of tan-to-white fine silt was deposited across the swampy depression. The mound was then erected very rapidly. We believe that the western conical portion of the mound was built first. This part was erected at the western edge of the swampy depression and only part of it covers this feature. The western conical part of the mound is built with distinctive, fairly homogenous soils that appear to have been mined or borrowed from the surface or an area near the surface of Macon Ridge. The platform along the east end of the mound was then added on. Here the soils are more heterogeneous and appear to come from contexts deeper within Macon Ridge. Shallow depressions to the north and to the west of the mound are likely borrow areas. Once the cone and platform were built a ramp was added to join the two features.

Radiocarbon dates from short-lived plant remains date the onset of construction to a mean age of 3264 cal b.p. (Kidder et al. 2009: Figure 75). Our data indicate that the mound was built very rapidly. Once construction started there is no evidence that it ceased until the mound reached its full form. There are no cultural stages, natural soil horizons, or erosion features within the mound except at the base of the ramp joining the cone to the platform. We posit that the mound was built in from as little as three months to not much more than a year. It certainly was not erected over multiple years or generations. With a volume of ~238,500m³, this duration of construction implies a workforce ranging from between 1,000 and 3,000 laborers plus their families. The function of the mound has never been established. There are almost no artifacts within the parts of the mound that have been cored or excavated, and no cultural features (floors, pits, houses) have been detected within or on the summit of the cone or the platform. The surface of the mound and its flanks are nearly devoid of artifacts, suggesting that if the mound was used for some purposes the inhabitants were careful not to leave behind material-culture residues. The construction of Mound A appears to have involved highly ritualized events and extremely complex construction techniques (Kidder 2010, 2011; Sherwood and Kidder 2011). The rapid yet structurally ordered events of monument construction at Poverty Point imply that the event of building these earthworks was itself imbued with ritual meaning.

Beyond that, Poverty Point defies purely rational economic models related to lithic procurement and/or resource-buffering scenarios. The materials that were imported were redundant in a purely functional sense. At Poverty Point, lithic material acquisition provides a unique window into the decision-making

process that the people at the site used, given that there is no naturally occurring lithic material on Macon Ridge (Bass 1981; Gibson 2000). Lithics are so numerous at the site that Gibson based his understanding of Poverty Point politics on their transport and utilization (Gibson 1998:29). What archaeologists term "local" lithic material at Poverty Point is Citronelle gravels found, at closest, a two-day round-trip from the site. To even acquire "local chert" (Citronelle gravel) an inhabitant would have to travel in excess of 50 km to the east or west. This is a two-day journey at a minimum, even accounting for the use of waterways, because these resources are situated across the grain of rivers and streams and thus require a considerable effort to reach (Bass 1981:4; Collins 1984:8; Gibson 1994:148). These source areas were occupied by populations that did not share all the obvious aspects of Poverty Point culture, which implies that there must have been a system of exchange that allowed material to cross social, political, and likely linguistic boundaries.

Although Citronelle gravel is the closest lithic source, and was often utilized for the creation of blades and microdrills (Johnson 1983,1993; Ortmann 2007:292; Webb and Gibson 1981), in almost every context at Poverty Point nonlocal chert—defined here as chert coming from in excess of 500 km away—predominates. Nonlocal chert almost always constitutes more than 50 percent of any given assemblage of lithics and frequently constitutes more than 75 percent (Gibson 2000:220–221). It is important to note here that nonlocal chert is not represented by a few pieces or even a few hundred pieces. The quantities found at Poverty Point of Burlington chert, Cobden/Dongala, "Northern gray," and novaculite, to name some of the most popular raw material variants, are remarkable and can be measured in metric tons (Gibson 2000:219–22).

One of the most common sources of nonlocal stone was the Burlington chert source, located at least 650 km upriver from the site (Spivey 2011). This well-known lithic source produces fine white chert and includes the Crescent Hills Quarry, which was used extensively during the Archaic and also in later precontact times (Ray 2007:194). The Burlington chert found at Poverty Point, however, is of low technological quality, containing voids and crinoids that make it unsuitable for most lithic tools (Gibson 2000:90; Spivey 2011:37, 78). Ives (1984:190) contends that crinoids are found less often than expected in Burlington chert, making the selection of this material for long-distance trade even more surprising. Lest we attribute this appearance of substandard Burlington chert to down-the-line selection of the more preferred materials, we must note that the Late Archaic groups located between the nonlocal sources and Poverty Point do not demonstrate this pattern in their assemblages (Gibson 2000:234–25; Johnson 1991; Sassaman 2004:356). We argue

instead that had the impetus for lithic acquisition been the retrieval of the closest lithic source appropriate for fulfilling a technological and economic need, the people at Poverty Point would not have been importing low-quality lithics from a geographically remote source.

Poverty Point's trade produced commodities that were incorporated into the functional domain: cutting tools, drills, axes, adzes, points, and the like. There was an emphasis on the mundane, but lost in the vast quantities of functional stone is a plethora of nonutilitarian material and material shaped into goods that arguably transcend nominal functionality. However, the context for these finds is not clear. Some exotic nonutilitarian goods are found in caches or pits (e.g., caches of copper beads, caches of plummets, and a pit filled with more than 300 broken steatite vessel sherds [Webb 1944]), but many are incorporated into middens and are found in what appear to be domestic-like contexts.

An enduring challenge to understanding Poverty Point as a source of economic exchange is the near complete absence of goods that can be clearly defined as having been traded out from Poverty Point. The major diagnostic of exchange from Poverty Point are small, red jasper owl beads that are distinctively manufactured and assumed to be produced at Poverty Point. A very small number of these beads have been found outside of the Poverty Point site area. Recently, Hays et al. have done in-depth analysis of baked-clay objects (BCOs), including Poverty Point Objects (PPOs), across the Southeast (Hays et al. 2010; Hays et al. 2011). In a petrographic thin-section study of the paste composition of these BCOs, they have found that BCOs from northwestern Florida and the LMV were likely made at the Poverty Point site (Hays et al. 2010). This poses a clear conundrum: Why would people trade a mundane object such as a PPO from Poverty Point to people in Florida? Hays et al. mention these as possible "keepsakes" but more strongly hypothesize that they were a part of a "traveling kitchen kit" (2010:8–9). We believe, though, that these PPOs could be the souvenirs or tokens of pilgrimage that Wesler (2012:266–267) was looking for as a diagnostic artifact that would separate pilgrimage centers from festival centers.

Discussion

Compared to the amount of material imported to Poverty Point sites, relatively little is exported; thus, Poverty Point appears to be an inwardly driven process, drawing people and raw materials to the site from across the Southeast. According to Wesler, this material signature is precisely what is expected from a pilgrimage site (2012:260–27). The variability in material culture at the

site points to the possibility of occupation by people of highly diverse backgrounds. We hypothesize that the massive construction projects undertaken at Poverty Point after ca. 3400 cal b.p. were about creating or re-creating a new, shared cosmology and cultural narrative to provide *communitas* for participants with varied geographic, ethnic, or social origins. Because pilgrimage has multivalent social properties, we do not discount the idea that the community constructed through visitation to Poverty Point reflects the contestations of various actors; in the end, though, the construction of earthen features and the complex topography of the site suggest an agreed upon plan or shared vision or at least shared participation in a vision. This creation of a new place, whose size would have been so large that the local "rural" population would not have been able to account for its scale, is a hallmark of Renfrew's version of a pilgrimage site, the LHDE (2001:19).

These data reflect that pilgrimage sites and their geography aren't static; meanings shift and mutate, catchments evolve, and power and prestige are transformed through practice. For example, Poverty Point's lithic catchment evolved through time. In the earliest stratigraphic levels the predominant raw materials are drawn from a circumscribed few geographic source areas. In stratigraphically later contexts, the catchment broadens and draws in an ever-larger and more diverse body of lithic materials from all directions, reflecting, we believe, an everlarger catchment of visitors (Spivey 2011).

The nominal explanation for the varying lithic selection is that these changes reflect adjustments to altered economic opportunities and to evolving functional requirements. Pilgrimage histories indicate just the opposite, however; economic functions follow ritual behavior, with pilgrimage entraining economic function (Morinis 1992; Turner 1974; Turner and Turner 1978). Pilgrims, attracted to the sacred, create a context for secular transactions, both along the way and at the place of devotion (Renfrew 2001:19). The pilgrim's progress is marked by a diversity of economic and utilitarian transactions— the exchange of food, gifts, information, and ideas (Preston 1992). As paths converge upon the center place, the networks of these interactions become denser and more diverse and increasingly reflect the breadth of the pilgrimage's catchment. Poverty Point is the indisputable center of these catchments, but it is only one of many sites that may have been part of the pilgrimage process. The pattern of rare, exotic, or long-distance lithic material being brought to the site from a diverse resource catchment is quite evident in the chipped stone assemblage, but it is also observed at Poverty Point with other nonlocal goods and materials. For example, steatite vessels were imported when local pottery was available (Webb 1982). Similarly, nonlocal pottery was imported when local pottery and steatite were already obtainable (Hays and Weinstein

2004; Ortmann and Kidder 2004). There is also a considerable investment in the production or importation of nonutilitarian items (e.g., quartz crystals, bannerstones, beads, gorgets, decorated tablets) made with exotic and unusual raw material (Webb 1982:58–6). We suspect that these materials were integral to the formation of group identities and alliances and indicate ritual or religious behavior that has been ignored or undervalued.

Pilgrimage surfaces most clearly "in periods of destruction and rapid social change, such as in the waning of the Roman Empire and in the waning of the Middle Ages." During "transitional period[s] of history, when many institutionalized social forms and modes of thought are in question," pilgrimage thrives (Turner 1974:172). Similar transitional periods can be seen in the archaeological record of the LMV, one of which is the gap found between the mound-building traditions of the Middle and Late Archaic. We used to think that Middle Archaic mound building marked the beginning of an uninterrupted tradition of earthen mound construction practiced in the LMV throughout later prehistory; however, data now reveal a long temporal gap (ca. 4750–3700cal b.p.) in mound-building traditions in the LMV (Saunders 2010, 2012). While we still lack a full explanation for the Middle Archaic hiatus, there are sufficient data to indicate that this hiatus is a real historical event. Recent work demonstrates episodes of avulsion at ca. 5200 and another between 5000–4320 cal b.p., the latter resulting in a major reconfiguration of the Mississippi River system, ca. 4500–4320 (Prokocki 2010). The LMV is not completely abandoned at this time, but settlement densities are certainly much lower in comparison to earlier and later times (Kidder et al. 2008a). Poverty Point emerges from just such an interval, marked by major reconfigurations of the social and natural landscapes of the LMV. It is in these environmentally uncertain contexts that we can see pilgrimage as one possible externally influenced way by which Late Archaic peoples created new histories and adapted to cultural plurality.

Anderson, Sassaman, and others argue that Late Archaic societies were undergoing major social, demographic, and ideological shifts, including increased sedentism, larger community size, and the emergence of strong territorial systems with less permeable boundaries (Anderson 2002, 2004, 2012; Anderson and Sassaman 2012:76–93; Russo 2004; Sassaman 2010:83–218, 2011). As a result, later Archaic fisher-foragers were developing strong group identities, and for the first time, much of eastern North America witnessed the emergence of societies characterized by social, economic, and ideological distinctiveness. Later Archaic communities had to find innovative ways to interact and coexist with each other.

To provide formal and safe places for interaction, Late Archaic commu-

nities constructed earthworks (shell rings, mounds, ridges, etc.) to serve as ritual precincts. These places emerge in resource-rich and highly productive environments where large(er) populations could congregate. In these contexts, ritual vouchsafed mutually beneficial interaction in the context of increasing territoriality toward the end of the Archaic.

As Sassaman suggests, "Poverty Point was the ultimate ethnogenic event of ancient Native America" (Sassaman 2005:358) We agree: "Making men or other personages at this point likely involved journeys by individuals to locations of real or stipulated ancestry to acquire objects necessary for initiation or other life-stage ceremonies" (Sassaman 2005:358).

Ken Ames asked us to "Imagine Hunter-Gatherer Complexity," and we have taken his proposition to heart. Pilgrimage is alien in this context in part because hunter-gatherers—even complex ones—are not supposed to do this sort of thing, a point emphasized by the Turners (1978). They are not thought to have complex ritual behavior or elaborate religious practices because they are busy scratching out an existence in the face of uncertain environments. In this vein, social interactions among hunter-gatherers are driven by the need to minimize resource conflicts and uncertainty. The movement of exotic goods and tokens is seen as an epiphenomenon that provides a context for sharing information (Whallon 2006, 2011). Ritual elaboration is an excuse, even an unconscious action (Hamilton 1999), to undertake the real business of hunter-gatherers—eking out an existence.

We want to reframe the debate away from the presumption that economic imperatives are the sole driver of hunter-gatherer social change. People living at Poverty Point–era sites did not need to trade across vast distances to get their basic tool stone. From a wholly utilitarian position, in fact, the idea that people should go hundreds of kilometers out of their way to get raw material—some of it of dubious quality—is preposterous. We argue instead that economic interactions were entrained within more ritual-religious processes. This argument inverts the classic hunter-gatherer paradigm and insists that in this historical instance, outside of the basic tasks of daily subsistence needs, the economic activities of sharing and social mobilization are actually the outcome of a complex set of social interactions, perhaps across a very large landscape and multiple linguistic, political, and cultural boundaries.

There is, however, a wider context that asks us to pause to consider how we conceive of Poverty Point and, indeed, the entire history of eastern North America. Part of the Poverty Point paradox is that the site evidently plays a wider role in the larger Archaic world of the Southeast. Prior to Poverty Point, or at least prior to ca. 4000 cal b.p., the Archaic of the Southeast was integrated by a complex, overlapping, and geographically widespread network

of interactions and interconnections, moderated or mediated by the exchange of goods among and between communities and regions (e.g., Anderson and Sassaman 2012; Jefferies 1995, 1996, 1997 2004; Kidder and Sassaman 2009; Sassaman 2010).

These patterns conform for the most part to what Whallon called "network mobility" or "informational mobility." That is, "mobility involved in the establishment and maintenance of regional social networks and the flow of critical information through them' and which 'is a varied combination of individual, family, or ritual/ceremonial movements, few or none of which much resemble typical logistical or residential foraging movements" (Whallon 2006:261).

In effect, these exchanges situated economically vital materials and ideas within a context of mobility that was generated for a variety of reasons. In the Poverty Point context, it is important to note that there is, however, no evidence of a singular node of interaction in any location across the East. Some areas, for example, the Green River, may have participated more fully in some of these exchanges, but this may well be a reflection of demography (or even archaeology) as much as economic or social power (Sassaman 2010).

There is a decided shift, however, in the period after 3600 cal b.p. The shift is marked by a change in the flow of interaction and exchange. The networks of interaction that once wove together the Archaic of the East disappear, perhaps suddenly, and are replaced by a new phenomenon—one focused on and exemplified at Poverty Point and to a lesser extent at related and contemporary communities in the LMV. Poverty Point is now the attractor, and essentially the only attractor, in the East. The existing networks collapse or disappear. Nothing tangible exists that takes their place(s). Poverty Point becomes a black hole where goods flow in and little that is tangible flows out. Outside of the Poverty Point core area in the LMV, there is essentially no material sign of interaction with Poverty Point material culture at sites within the Poverty Point exchange catchment, which encompasses much of the midcontinent, the Southeast and the East. However manifest, Poverty Point enfolds into itself the role(s) once filled by the exchange networks that twined together the societies of the East.

Imagining this sort of complexity for Poverty Point may seem extreme, in part because it is exceedingly difficult to determine why pilgrimages occur. The reasons may be wholly idiosyncratic or they may be based on the emergence of prophetic persons or theophanies whose manifestation is archaeologically invisible or perhaps even intangible. Christian pilgrimage, after all, is based on miracle births, visions by children, and apparitions on walls, screens, or even in toasted cheese sandwiches. The archaeology of Poverty Point suggests that interpreting the site as a process or continuum of unbroken behavior may

not be the best approach. Considering it as an event-based process—where each monument and artifact has a distinctive history associated with a human action—provides a new way of framing Poverty Point in distinction to previous attempts to model its complexity. We have argued elsewhere that Poverty Point is sui generis and can only be understood by embracing its distinction (Kidder 2011; Kidder et al. 2008b). In this way our thinking resonates with Renfrew's argument that "there are some sites . . . which we can only begin to make intelligible to us as if we regard them as the product of a powerful imaginative symbolic system ('a dream') of which we have at first sight no very clear idea" (2001:17).

At this point we cannot and do not pretend to be able to *prove* that pilgrimage is the cause for the structure of Poverty Point and its associated sites. Nor do we claim to know *why* Poverty Point may have become a pilgrimage site. However, we are confident that the explanation for the production and reproduction of Poverty Point communities lies in understanding the ritual histories of these remarkable sites.

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