

Building the Past

Prehistoric Wooden Post Architecture
in the Ohio Valley–Great Lakes

Edited by Brian G. Redmond and Robert A. Genheimer

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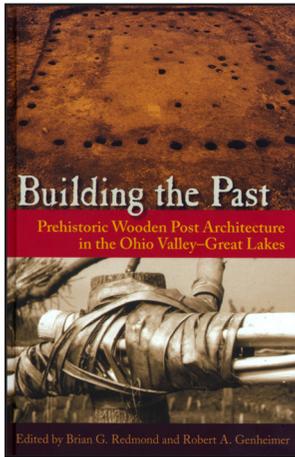
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Building the Past: Prehistoric Wooden Post Architecture in the Ohio Valley— Great Lakes

Brian G. Redmond and Robert A. Genheimer, Editors. 2015. University Press of Florida, Gainesville. xvii + 420 pp., 144 figures, 25 tables, references. \$84.95 (cloth).

Reviewed by William R. Iseminger, Assistant Site Manager, Cahokia Mounds Museum.

Redmond and Genheimer have compiled an important volume that includes 12 contributed articles first presented at a 2012 symposium held at the Meeting of the Eastern States Archaeological Federation. *Building the Past* focuses on post structures of many types from several cultural traditions, mostly from Ohio and the immediate areas of Indiana, Kentucky, and Ontario. All of the contributors present new or unpublished data and have reviewed existing information about prior research in their areas of interest, including some comparative studies. The articles are well illustrated with photographs, maps, and illustrations.

The authors take readers on an interesting journey through the target area in their discussions of the rare and sometimes innocuous Late Archaic domestic structures (that likely reflect small and possibly temporary or seasonal occupations), through the larger, more substantial, and mostly permanent domestic and public structures of the Woodland and Fort Ancient periods, although some of these later structures may be seasonal (e.g. cold vs warm-weather structures). Most of the authors prefer to use the term “public structure” for buildings that do not appear to be domestic houses, rather than using “temple,” “ceremonial,” “shrine,” or “council lodge,” since precise function is not clearly evident in most cases, and I applaud them for that.

Rather than just defining post and wall-trench arrangements, the authors also explore interpretations of functionality, seasonality, contemporary, and sequential variation in structures, regional variations, structural components, and methods of construction. Some also examine ethnographic examples of structures for comparative studies of form and function. Their discussions provide useful insights into the differences between rigid-framed and flex-framed structures, single- and multi-family dwellings, and those interpreted warm-weather or cold-weather structures, based on size, form, presence or lack of hearths, interior pits, types of artifacts present, etc. An interesting feature in many of the public structures found in different areas and traditions discussed in this volume is the use of yellow gravel, clay, or sand on floors or to line certain pits, indicating that yellow was a significant color and had ritual meaning to many people in the study region. This has also been observed in some Mississippian sites in the Cahokia area.

Another issue that several of the volume’s contributors discuss is the terminology used to describe structural components and the need to standardize the terms. For example, “post” should be used for load-bearing elements such as wall, roof, and bench supports and “pole”

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for non-loadbearing elements such as those for bent-frame structures or freestanding timbers; “posthole” is used for holes where the post was extracted and the hole filled in intentionally or naturally with mixed fill; and “postmold” where the post decayed in place with homogeneous fill. “Stakes” can be vertical elements driven into the ground with force or pressure creating a “stakemold” with a pointed-bottom. Stakes were best used for small buildings, screens and fences, or some bent-pole structures. Although not discussed in the text, I wonder if short stakes were pounded into the soil with mauls to create the stake hole, and then removed, and the longer stake elements of similar diameter then inserted, since it would be almost impossible to hit the end of a long, tall, slender stake without it flexing or snapping. Many more terms presented and defined in this volume should become commonly used in the archaeological literature.

A structure type discussed in these articles is the “single-post structure,” although some authors follow the current trend to call these “single-set post structures.” However, I prefer to use the term “posthole structure,” as I believe “posthole” more accurately describes how the posts were emplaced (into holes), much like “wall-trench” does for other structures—both represent excavated receptacles, and posthole structure is a less cumbersome term.

There are also useful discussions in the volume about wood types used, the energetics required to build different types of structures, the physics and structural engineering involved in shaping and placement of different structural elements, and the load-bearing capabilities of roof, wall and post elements. Both Hopewell Big Houses and their associated mounds, and Fort Ancient public structures are covered in detail—although some of the latter may be large enclosures rather than roofed structures. The enigmatic Moorehead Circle at the Fort Ancient site in Ohio is an intriguing feature that is also summarized here. I look forward to continued results and interpretations from that study.

It is impossible in this short space to review each chapter in detail, but the chapters in this book likely represent the most comprehensive and long-needed assemblage of information concerning structures in the greater Ohio area, and these studies obviously have important applications to research throughout the Eastern Woodlands, regardless of cultural period or tradition. This volume should be a primary reference for scholars documenting and interpreting prehistoric and historic period structures, as well as for those engaged in experimental studies of such structures.