

The Archaeology of Villages

IN EASTERN NORTH AMERICA



Edited by Jennifer Birch and Victor D. Thompson

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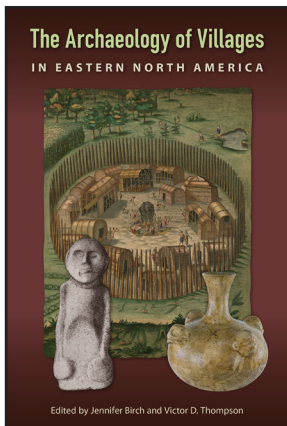
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The Archaeology of Villages in Eastern North America

Jennifer Birch and Victor D. Thompson, eds. 2018. [University of Florida Press, Gainesville](https://www.uflpress.com/). viii+211 pp., 36 figures, 2 tables. \$80.00 (Cloth).

Reviewed by Sarah E. Baires, Eastern Connecticut State University.

Jennifer Birch and Victor Thompson bring together premiere archaeologists to discuss and debate the ‘who, what, when, and where’ of village nucleation through a diverse set of case studies from the Archaic to the Mississippian periods. The volume opens with a thoughtful forward from

David Anderson who highlights the importance of community in the quest to examine the village. Anderson frames his comments through a relational perspective where “community itself was considered a social agent by virtue of its continuing creation and maintenance” (p. xv). This idea of community as active agent drives the remaining chapters, a worthwhile focus reminding the archaeologist to reflect on the ways humans (and other-than-human persons) relate to the world around them, and further, that communities were not static but fluctuate and change. Anderson’s forward is followed by an introductory chapter by Thompson and Birch, which frames the focus of the volume. Perhaps the most important question the editors pose is the ‘what’ of the book; or rather, What exactly is a village?, providing a definition that in its simplicity does two important things. 1) It focuses on the fact that village life requires at least some of the population to remain stationary for the year, and 2) assumes that there was regular “face-to-face interactions among the majority of a population” (p. 1). This is what separates a village from say a larger city like Cahokia, creating a more intimate experience of social interaction. The remainder of this introductory chapter lays out the rest of the volume through a set of questions that broadly focus on topics such as heterarchy and cooperation to considering the processes that lead to powerful and large villages. The strength here is in providing, for the reader, a concise summary of how villages can be studied as well as what they do.

The following case studies begin with Thompson examining some of the oldest villages in the Eastern Woodlands—Late Archaic shell ring sites located on the Atlantic coast. Thompson does a brilliant job of weaving together daily and ceremonial life, emphasizing the persistence of cultural traditions for millennia. Identities were shaped, Thompson argues, through the intersection of the monumentality of the landscape with the daily practices of hunter-fisher-gatherers. Building off Thompson and moving us forward in time, Neill Wallis examines the role of, “site placement and landscape features” (p. 36) in drawing new inhabitants to join Middle Woodland village communities. His focus on the village as a sociogram uses the Garden Patch site (located in the northern Gulf Coast) as a case study to demonstrate how the entanglement of the landscape with cosmic alignments served to legitimate the settlement of larger communities. Wallis’ approach is reminiscent of the ways Cahokian scholars (particularly Tim Pauketat) examine the driving processes of social aggregation, an important endeavor in tracing the historical connections of communities

in the Eastern Woodlands. Shaun West and colleagues explore the concept of the hypertrophic village using the site of Kolomoki as an example. Contextualizing the use of hypertrophic as a, “village of deliberately exaggerated size” (p. 55), the authors argue that Kolomoki’s power was manifest via the size and sprawl of the village itself, ultimately providing it with, “unrivaled symbolic power” and a mechanism for creating a, “bold declaration of identity” (p. 56, 64). Like Wallis, West and colleagues also emphasize the cosmological aspect of this oversized village, suggesting that site layout embodied common pottery designs reminiscent of the sun circle as well as cosmological ordering connecting the upper world, living world, and underworld. Again, we are reminded of the deep cosmological ties among Eastern Woodland societies. Eric Jones takes the reader on a slightly different direction examining the social processes that lead to a lack of village aggregation emphasizing that social organization can and does take many different forms. Jones’ significant contribution to the study of villages is in his methodology which utilizes GIS to create a multiscale model for the Yadkin River valley—importantly this method can be applied to any settlement area providing another useful way to examine settlement data.

The following two chapters by Jennifer Birch and Ronald Williamson, and Lynne Sullivan, are particularly important in moving the studies of villages forward. Birch and Williamson focus on how gender relations, enculturation, and the process of the adoption of agriculture all shaped village aggregation in the Iroquoian world. Through a fine-grained analysis of the data they argue that moving to village-life involved multiple layers of social relationships, including the raising of women’s roles through the emergence of matrilineal residence patterns, which created a ‘home-base’ dominated by matrilineages and social networks, bridged by the men who ultimately spent the majority of their time away from home. Similarly, Sullivan emphasizes the importance of gender in creating community highlighting that villages are more than monumental landscapes. Additionally, Sullivan’s examination of fourteenth century sites in East Tennessee demonstrates how older ideas of village and community life can still be followed even in the face of drastic societal change (i.e. the introduction of platform mounds). These two chapters require that we consider in our analyses the entirety (as best we can) of social life truly providing a multi-scalar view.

The remaining chapters by Robert Cook, Richard Jefferies, Martin Gallivan and colleagues, and Kurt Jordan address several topics ranging from migration, coalescence and hybridity, to the structural changes to community layout, and the arrival of nucleated villages. One important note considered is the relationship between the shift to village life and the intensive use of maize, an important socio-cultural milestone in the Americas. The volume is closed with a discussion from Charles Cobb, who rightly regards the introduction of village life as a monumental moment in human history. Cobb emphasizes that the ‘who, what, when, and where’ of the transition to villages underlines a big part of what makes us human, reminding us that our draw to aggregated communities was perhaps a nascent quality of the human species. This volume is a needed addition to the study of villages in the Eastern Woodlands.