

Archaeological Facts in Transit

The “Eminent Mounds” of Central North America
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INTRODUCTION

Archaeological facts have a perplexing character.¹ They are often seen as tangible, less likely to “lie” and more likely to bear impartial witness to actual actions, events, and conditions of life than do, for example, the memories reported by witnesses or participants. At the same time, however, they are notoriously enigmatic and incomplete; they are sometimes described by critical archaeologists as inherently multivocal and malleable (Habu, Fawcett, and Matsunaga 2008). The anxiety that haunts archaeological interpretation, surfacing at regular intervals in sharply skeptical internal critique², is that the tangible, surviving facts of the record so radically underdetermine any interesting claims archaeologists might want to make that archaeologically based “facts of the past” are inescapably entangled with fictional narratives of contemporary sense-making. And yet, these same internal critics make effective use of the recalcitrance of archaeological facts (of the record) to unsettle entrenched convictions that have given presumptive facts of the past purchase, that have allowed them to travel unchallenged.

This jointly solid and uncertain character of archaeological facts is the source of epistemic hopes and anxieties that are by no means unique to archaeology and that have everything to do with the ways in which archaeological facts travel. I consider here a set of cases, drawn from longstanding traditions of archaeological investigation of the earthen mound sites of the central river systems in North America, that illustrate strategies by which contemporary archaeologists appraise the integrity of archaeological facts in terms of what can usefully be described as their trajectories of travel. In the process I disentangle several different senses of “fact” that figure in these appraisals.

To anticipate: In what follows I rely on distinctions between facts of the record and mediating facts, and between two types of historical facts: facts of the past and narrated facts.³ For purposes of this discussion, facts of the record consist of the surviving material traces on the basis of which archaeologists build reconstructive and interpretive claims about the cultural past that produced them (of which they are record). These inferential moves are mediated by facts that originate in fields ranging from nuclear physics to ethnography, ethnobotany to geology; that is to say, they depend on facts that travel into archaeology from collateral fields where the types of material that make up the traces of interest to archaeologists are a primary focus of inquiry, quite independent of their archaeological significance. As noted, I also distinguish between facts of the past – the actions, events, and conditions that actually happened in the past – and narrated facts about the past that are intended, in various ways, to capture, convey, interpret, and explain facts of the past. I draw this distinction in the provisional way recommended by Trouillot (1995, p. 8, 26), not because I believe we have any independent, epistemically secure access to historical reality, but because this is a distinction on which we inevitably rely in the course of making and evaluating historical claims. As Trouillot puts it, there is no prospect for eliminating the systematic ambiguities inherent in the way we use the term “history” to refer both to events in the past and to the narratives by which we understand the past in the present. The line between history and fiction depends on a distinction between narrated facts about the past and facts of the past; although this distinction is undermined in innumerable ways, conceptually and in practice, it bears important epistemic weight.⁴ Indeed, it animates the practice of archaeology insofar as it characteristically demands more of inquiry than fictionalization. A constructivism that

systematically collapses this discussion undercuts the “cognitive purpose” of fields like history and archaeology; it “cannot give a full account of the production of any single narrative” (Trouillot 1995, pp. 11, 13).

I return to these distinctions in the conclusion. In what follows I will argue that it is the interplay between these types of facts that archaeologists exploit in making nuanced judgments about the credibility of claims about the past, and that these judgments depend fundamentally on appraising what can usefully be described as the trajectories of travel of “archaeological facts.”

THE VAGARIES OF TRAVEL: ONE HUNDRED SIXTY YEARS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON “EMINENT MOUNDS”

The earthen mound sites of the Mississippi, Tennessee, Illinois, and Ohio River valleys are among the most intensively studied archaeological sites in North America; they have been mapped, described, excavated, interpreted, and speculated about since the mid-nineteenth century.⁵ These sites are typically attributed to two distinct cultural traditions. The earlier Hopewell sites consist of earthworks and settlements ranging from 200 BC to AD 400 (Middle Woodland), associated with horticulture based on indigenous domesticates and with assemblages of artifacts characterized by a distinctive design tradition that incorporates material traded from as far away as the Rocky Mountains and the Appalachians, the Gulf Coast, and the Great Lakes. The later Mississippian sites date to AD 950–1550 and are characterized by elaborate ceremonial complexes that include earthworks and extensive palisades as well as mounds, a related design tradition – the Southern Ceremonial Complex – and well-established practices of maize agriculture. These, then, are the received facts about the past that define this archaeological subject of inquiry.

As monumental as these sites are, the archaeological record of the “mound builders” has proven to be highly vulnerable to destruction. Even by 1848, when Squier and Davis published *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley*, the mounds and earthworks characteristic of these sites were rapidly being destroyed. Indeed, the motivation for this Smithsonian-sponsored survey was concern that, as the “tide of emigration” brought Euro-American travelers and settlers into these central river valleys, their rich “antiquarian” resources were rapidly being looted and plowed under (1998 [1848], pp. xxxi-xxxiv). There is a palpable sense of urgency in Squier and Davis’s observation that the “sites selected for settlements, towns, and cities, by the invading Europeans, are often those which were the especial favourites of the mound-builders, and the seats of their heaviest population”; unless their material legacy could be documented immediately, all record of these cultures would be lost (1998 [1848], pp. 6–7). This pattern of destruction has continued apace: The vast majority of earthworks and mounds documented by Squier and Davis and their nineteenth-century successors⁶ have been destroyed to make way for construction, or more slowly dispersed by successively deeper and more destructive plowing as agriculture was increasingly mechanized and industrialized. With no legal framework for protecting archaeological sites on private land in the United States and the trade in antiquities growing exponentially, even the most aggressive campaigns to “save the past for the future” have proven to be distressingly ineffectual.

There are, in addition, the vagaries of rapidly proliferating and evolving traditions of archaeological research to reckon with; in the course of the last one hundred sixty years professional and avocational archaeologists of various stripes have excavated and recorded the “facts” of these sites in widely varying, often inconsistent ways. This variability is as much a function of shifting goals – changing interests in and competing understandings of the mound builders – as of pressures to professionalize embodied in evolving standards of field practice and analysis. From the time these sites were first reported, European travelers, traders, and settlers recorded profound ambivalence about them: The mounds stood as a reproach to any presumption that the rich lands along the interior waterways were uncultivated and unpeopled until the advent of Euro-American settlement. Despite Jefferson’s pioneering arguments (Jefferson 1787: pp. 97–100; Thomas 2000: pp. 29–35), the working assumption, through the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries, was that none of the indigenous peoples living in the region at the time of contact were capable of such monumental construction. Some “mysterious

race,” now vanished, must have achieved a level of social complexity and sophistication that proved unsustainable or that was destroyed by incursions of more primitive peoples (Squier and Davis 1998 [1948], p. 7); the “mound-builders” were linked to populations from locales as diverse as Irish monasteries and the fictional lost Atlantis. For those who accepted that they were an indigenous North American population, the dominant problem was to locate the mound builders in a hierarchy of social, cultural forms that were presumed to lie along a linear trajectory of cultural evolution. The result was a selective practice of excavation and recording of these sites that focused on the highly visible, the monumental, and the exotic, and was structured by the question of who could possibly have built the mounds: Facts of ancestry figured prominently; the industry in measuring skulls and calculating evolutionary affiliation got under way in earnest, and evidence of their artistic accomplishment was routinely juxtaposed with supposed facts of “cannibalism,” a penchant for elaborate ritual, and barbaric mortuary practices. The foundational assumptions of nineteenth-century anthropology, and the collecting interests of emerging research and educational institutions, structured the recovery and description of the archaeological facts.

In the 1930s, large-scale archaeological projects supported by the Work Projects Administration (WPA) generated vast quantities of archaeological data, but despite a more open-ended research agenda and a commitment to build robust chronological and spatial schemes – a necessary step toward establishing key narrative facts about the cultural past – the quality of work was highly variable, even by the standards of the day. Some of the most detailed and systematic stratigraphic excavation and recording of mound sites ever undertaken was supported by the WPA in this period. But some projects were little more than artifact-collecting expeditions and, as Depression-era work projects, the emphasis was on fieldwork; often little provision was made for analysis and curation of the material recovered, much less public reporting. Sometimes nothing at all was published, even for sites that became the anchors for regional cultural histories. A case in point is Marksville, which was identified as a type site for the Middle Woodland in the Lower Mississippi River valley, significantly extending the range of Hopewell traditions into this region from the sites in Ohio with which they had chiefly been identified (McGimsey et al. 2005, pp. 1, 4). In other cases, only superficial summaries appeared, as at Shiloh Indian Mounds, a regionally significant Mississippian site on the Tennessee River, where a four-page report was the only publication produced by excavations that had opened up thousands of square feet (Welch, Anderson, and Cornelison 2003; Welch 2006, p. 26). Often even the most substantial publications were highly selective; many of the features reported in field notes went unmentioned in published reports, and when they were described, it was in the most general terms, without stratigraphic profiles or sufficiently detailed locational coordinates to allow even the reliable reidentification on the ground of the excavation units in which they were exposed, much less an assessment of their chronological association with other mapped or excavated features (Welch 2006, pp. 30, 35–40). This pattern of expansive excavation and selective recording and publication continued, on a smaller scale and with a focus on typology and chronology, through the 1950s.

The “archaeological facts” that comprise the legacy of these midcentury excavations – the assemblages of artifacts recovered and the associated field notes, profiles, maps, and feature and artifact drawings – have suffered a similarly patchy history of curation. Contemporary archaeologists routinely describe the difficulties they encounter working with surviving collections from the WPA-era excavations. Sometimes the problem is fragmentary documentation that provides artifact assemblages little provenience (Welch 2006, pp. 23–24). Often, no records survive that could give artifacts secure context even when, as in the case of Marksville, they have been widely used to define distinctive cultural types and periods, setting the terms by which facts of the record travel within archaeological contexts. In the case of the enormous collections generated by the excavations at Marksville in the 1930s, McGimsey and his collaborators note that the original documentation “would have been of great value as the ceramic characteristics and culture history of the Marksville period were being defined” but that many of the original field records had been lost (2005, p. 3). Describing the archaeological record of Mississippian sites in the Etowah Valley, Georgia, King reports that, not only had all the documents been lost that might link artifact collections to specific excavation contexts, but “a substantial percentage of the artifacts collected [by WPA excavation teams] were discarded after the original analysis was

performed”; all that remain are type collections “composed of unique sherds and representative examples of more common types” (King 2003, p. 36). Another all-too-common problem that King encountered at Etowah is that even these surviving collections have been dispersed; “working with the Etowah data is made more complex by the fact that four different institutions sponsored excavations at the site, so collections are housed in six locations...[each of which] has its own history, organizational system, and procedures for accessing collections” (King, pp. 33–36, 50–52).

Ironically, although facts of the record have proven distressingly vulnerable to dispersal and attrition, a number of interpretative claims-cum-facts about the past (narrative facts) have demonstrated remarkable staying power; they “haunt our current understanding” (Cunningham, Goldstein, and Gaff 2003, p. 1; see also Goldstein and Gaff 2003), setting “interpretive frameworks...that persist in popular and even in scholarly reviews” (Muller 2003, p. 1; Muller 2002).⁷ Even though the mound builder debates of the nineteenth century were resolved, at least in professional contexts, when excavation revealed burial populations whose morphology was well within the frame of that typical of contemporary Native Americans, the fascination with burials (the presumption that all mounds are mortuary sites), with the ceremonial and the savage (especially evidence of warfare and cannibalism), and with questions about how the mound builders fit into grand evolutionary schemes – whether they were civilized, or on a trajectory to civilization, or an example of arrested evolutionary development – dominated archaeological thinking well into the twentieth century and persists in museum presentations and the public imagination. The legacy of this interpretive tradition is an entrenched practice of selectively collecting and emphasizing archaeological facts (of the record and of the past) that fit comfortably with dominant narratives about precontact indigenous cultures as a history of culturally distant and vanished, alternately noble and savage, “others.” In short, contemporary archaeologists working on these sites wrestle both with failures to travel – as the primary (in situ) archaeological record is destroyed and the secondary, recorded facts are lost or dispersed – and with the travel-hardy persistence of a canonical set of interpretive facts about the past that have long dominated archaeological thinking.

In the last fifty years, archaeologists have developed more sharply focused and technically sophisticated projects designed to refine the regional chronologies and culture-historical schemes that structure Hopewell and Mississippian research, and to develop a more fine-grained understanding of the internal structure and histories of particular mound sites. These are not just internal puzzles generated by antecedent research; they are foundational questions that must be resolved before archaeologists can assess claims about the relationships between specific sites and features or address broader questions about shifting interaction spheres on a regional scale or the internal organizational structure and power dynamics of particular site-based communities or, most provocatively, the meaning of the distinctive symbolic repertoire of precontact Hopewell and Mississippian cultures. The difficulty is that postwar land development has taken a substantial toll on what remained of the mound sites that were excavated in the 1930s and 1940s. Increasingly, the only surviving mound sites are protected state or national parks, subject to regulations that strictly limit any destructive investigation of intact deposits. Archaeologists are under growing pressure to find ways of enlisting old data – existing records and collections – to answer new questions. To this end they must work against a tendency to dismiss surviving collections and records as too fragmentary, partial, and enigmatic to be useful for contemporary purposes, at the same time as they explore creative ways of retrieving useable facts that survive, often unrecognized, in maps and photographs, field notes, and collections that are all too often all that remain of sites that have long since been destroyed.

CRITICAL HISTORIES OF TRAVEL

I am particularly interested in two broad strategies by which archaeologists extract new facts from old that are exemplified by the work presented in a symposium sponsored by the Society for American Archaeology: “Emblems of American Archaeology’s Past: Eminent Mound Sites of the Eastern Woodlands Revisited” (Schroeder 2003, and discussion in Wylie 2008). In this context a dozen archaeologists currently working on Hopewell and Mississippian sites took stock of the

trajectory of research through the 100 to 150 years they have been investigated, with the aim of assessing the potential for making effective use of the complicated legacy bequeathed them by antecedent generations of archaeologists. In the process they illustrate what I will refer to as strategies of secondary retrieval.⁸ The facts (of record) that archaeologists find lodged in existing archives and collections are rendered useable for contemporary purposes by “repositioning” them in relation to one another and to new facts of record, sometimes in a quite literal sense, but also, crucially, in a more metaphorical Foucauldian sense by which they are situated in the context of the research traditions that produced them. In connection with this last, the practice of Eminent Mounds archaeologists shows how detailed histories of the travel of these collections, records, and interpretations – itself an empirically grounded undertaking – can play a critical role in the process of secondary retrieval, not only bringing discarded archaeological facts of the record to light, but also grounding the adjudication of their epistemic integrity as a basis for framing factual claims about the past (narrative facts). The effect of these strategies is to put archaeological facts back into circulation, to send them off on new travels. Here are two examples drawn from the projects reported in the “Eminent Mounds” session that foreground these strategies and throw into relief key conditions that have an impact on how well archaeological facts travel.

Reassessing Attributions of Mortuary Function and Interpretations of Funerary Traditions

One area where the influence of nineteenth-century preoccupations is especially clear is in the preoccupation with mortuary remains. Given an intense interest in skeletal morphology as the key to determining the identity and affiliation of the mound builders, early investigators paid particular attention to mounds that were burial sites, and to evidence of what were taken to be especially exotic funerary practices. Their assumptions, and their records and interpretations, have had a profound impact on Eminent Mound archaeology, structuring patterns of (selective) recovery, description, and analysis of facts of the record that have set in motion a number of presumptive facts about the past that have proven to be resolute travelers. Certainly, there are many spectacular mortuary sites, and some of them yield just the kind of mass burials, dispersed and fragmentary remains, and evidence of violent death that are the stuff of mound builder legend. Famous examples are Mound 72 at the Mississippian site of Cahokia (outside East St. Louis), where 272 burials were excavated in the 1960s and 1970s, or Aztalan, a culturally related Mississippian village in Wisconsin at which similarly complex internment practices have been the basis for attributions of cannibalism that have proven hard to dislodge (Cunningham, Goldstein, and Gaff 2003, p. 2). It should be noted, however, that these are often not the most prominent features on mound sites; archaeologists report great variability in the function of mounds, ranging from refuse dumps, platforms on which various kinds of structures were built (some of which seem to have been the locus of ceremonial activities), and elements of astronomical alignments, as well as cemeteries and crematoria.

Although this understanding of the complexity of mound sites is now well established, it is still a matter of conventional wisdom – a staple of popular accounts and of museum presentations – that all mounds are mortuary sites. Puzzled by the persistence of these well-traveled interpretive facts, an archaeologist working at Fort Ancient in Ohio traced the origins of these claims about this site to the reports of excavators in the 1890s and 1930s (Connolly 2003, pp. 3–4; Connolly and Lepper 2004, pp. 85–113). Connolly discovered that, far from presenting robust evidence of mortuary remains, in one case, the original excavator described a puzzling *lack* of skeletal material, and in another he speculated about the possibility that unidentifiable bone fragments, long since disappeared from collections, might be human.⁹ This quite straightforward example illustrates how consequential it can be to trace circulating narrative facts back to the facts of record that are their purported ground and warrant: This is a matter of undertaking a secondary retrieval of facts of the record and of holding interpretive facts accountable to them.

At the famous Mississippian sites of Aztalan and Cahokia, recent excavations bear witness to the intensive use of (some) mounds as funerary sites that would seem to reinforce dominant interpretative narratives of cannibalism and “deviant” ritual (Balter 2005, p. 613), a legacy of nineteenth-century fascination with the Mississippian “other” as exotic and barbaric. Rather than holding conventional interpretations accountable to newly recovered or neglected

facts of the record, a crucial strategy here has been to reassess the background assumptions that inform conventional interpretations of these funerary remains. Goldstein (who has worked at both Cahokia and Aztalan) argues that attributions of cannibalism or human sacrifice are only plausible if archaeological interpretation is informed by a narrowly ethnocentric set of assumptions about mortuary practice (2001, 2006). When the facts that mediate these interpretations are scrutinized and supplemented by insights drawn from broader ethnohistoric sources than has been typical, it becomes clear that the collective burial of disarticulated and dispersed skeletal material is the archaeological signature for a variety of mortuary traditions that involve elaborate preparation of the dead and secondary burial, but not necessarily cannibalism or human sacrifice. Indeed, some of these traditions are to be found in the heartland of western European tradition. Consider, for example, the mortuary practices typical for royal and aristocratic members of European dynasties (Babenberg and Habsburg). As described by Weiss-Krejci (2005), these involve all kinds of body processing, including evisceration, defleshing, treatment with salts and dyes, separate burial for disarticulated body parts, as well as temporary storage or exhumation, relocation, and dispersal in a series of secondary burials – practices that produce just the kinds of mortuary signatures taken to be evidence of the barbaric and exotic in North American mound sites.¹⁰ In this case, it is the role of quite another kind of archaeological fact that provides critical leverage in reassessing received “facts about the past”: mediating facts about how particular material signatures could have been produced and about the conditions under which one causal-cultural pathway would more likely be instantiated than another.¹¹

Reassessing Site-Specific Culture Histories, Regional Interaction Spheres, and Evolutionary Trajectories

The secondary retrieval of archaeological facts, as undertaken by Connolly at Fort Ancient, typically involves not just searching out critical anchoring facts, but often the labor-intensive process of reconstructing how surviving material was recovered, how surviving fragments (of material and of data) relate to one another, and how they relate to what has not survived. As Welch describes the groundwork laid by a colleague for understanding the history of research and surviving records of excavations at Shiloh since the 1860s, it took decades to assemble scattered documents, and then weeks of work with collections held by the National Museum of Natural History to “piece together what is recorded and to discover what information is truly missing” (Welch 2006, pp. 23–24, 28). As tedious and painstaking as it is, this labor of secondary retrieval and quite literal repositioning of facts of the record can yield quite dramatic, destabilizing results.

In the case of the Mississippian site of Jonathan Creek in Kentucky, Schroeder (2005) has constructed integrated Geographic Information System (GIS) maps that incorporate all the locational data recorded by the generations of archaeologists who have surveyed or excavated a particular mound site, in the process cross-checking their accuracy across existing records (comparing photographs and maps of various eras) and against data derived from new fieldwork (e.g., testing for old trenches and geological markers that make it possible to tie features recorded on archival maps to coordinates on contemporary maps).¹² Schroeder demonstrates, through analysis of this systematically coordinated and repositioned data, that it is impossible to sustain the WPA-era claim, formative for much subsequent work, that Jonathan Creek was occupied by two successive, ethnically distinct populations. The divergent architectural styles identified in the 1930s and 1940s by Webb, the original excavator, show complex patterns of overlap and juxtaposition that suggest simultaneous or seasonal occupation rather than a pattern of temporal alternation (Schroeder 2005, p. 65). In building this argument, Schroeder does more than just impugn factual claims about particular features of the site and its occupants. She offers a critical history of the theoretical presuppositions and methodological conventions that shaped the work of Webb at Jonathan Creek (and WPA-era archaeologists generally), showing how Webb’s impressionistic archaeological field observations could authoritatively ground an expansive narrative about ethnic group migration and interaction. The inferential tracks on which his facts traveled were supplied by a conception of “archaeological cultures” according to which stylistic differences must mark the boundaries between static, culturally autonomous ethnic groups; it was assumed that stylistic variability within a site and across a region must be

explained in terms of the migration of populations (Schroeder 2005, pp. 57–9). By contextualizing Webb's archaeological practice in this way, Schroeder calls into question a set of much broader, travel-hardy narrative facts: accepted facts about cultural difference that underpin the categories of description and analysis in terms of which Webb retrieved and documented what became the surviving archaeological facts (of the record) with which Schroeder now works.

Often, this conjoint process of secondary retrieval – the recovery, synthesis, and reanalysis of facts of the record, as well as the appraisal of the conditions of their initial retrieval – takes archaeologists back to the field. Where they lack chronological control or details of provenience they reopen the trenches excavated by earlier generations of archaeologists with the aim of locating surviving traces of recorded features in the walls and balks; sometimes this allows them to build a repertoire of stratigraphic profiles that make it possible to tie these features into a site-wide chronology, refining and substantially correcting histories of site occupation. In some cases the results have destabilized broader regional as well as local facts about the mound builders, with ramifying implications for the repertoire of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century narratives about prehistoric cultures that underpin archaeological conventions and dominate popular thinking about Mississippian and Hopewell sites.

For example, it is conventionally assumed that the major Hopewell and Mississippian sites must have been occupied continuously, showing sustained growth in size and density as they attained their status as regional centers and extended their influence into the hinterland, until they suffered precipitous collapse and were abandoned. The cultural markers of distinctive stylistic traditions that appeared across a region – commonalities evident in the structure and distribution of earthworks and various classes of material culture and, by inference, in ceremonial practice – are assumed to have diffused from dominant population centers to smaller sites through lines of regional influence or actual migration. These local and regional histories are, in turn, understood in terms of the conventions of a linear evolution from bands to tribes to chiefdoms to states. The lines of disagreement have long been drawn between those who are inclined to push the mound-building cultures of North America toward one or the other end of this continuum. On one hand, there are those who emphasize the internal complexity, the degree of social differentiation, hierarchy, and centralization of power associated with emergent mound centers, characterizing them as protostates on the model of state formation familiar from Mesopotamia and central Mexico. And on the other hand, critics of this line of thinking see these communities as inherently unstable chiefdoms that realized variable degrees of complexity; they emphasize the repetitive structure and relative autonomy of local polities that periodically coalesced into regional networks but did not develop the infrastructure – the social hierarchies and divisions of labor – presumed necessary to sustain a functioning state and its projects of monument building.¹³

When the complexities of refined site chronologies and occupational histories are taken into consideration, however, neither set of interpretive conventions fits these sites well. Internal site chronologies routinely show that even the most substantial mound sites were periodically abandoned, sometimes for as much as 100 years at a time in occupational histories of 450 years (Sullivan 2009). Even when mound sites were continuously occupied, they cycled through periods of expansion and contraction; often their periods of major florescence were not the culmination of a history of successively larger and more visible occupation (King 2003, pp. 60–4, 81–3, 140–3). At a regional level, although there is evidence of a distinctive Hopewell architectural grammar marked by standard units of measure (Connolly 1998, pp. 85–113), astronomical alignment in the internal structure of Mississippian sites (Kelly 1996), and widely distributed stylistic conventions (e.g., of the Southern Ceremonial Complex), it is increasingly implausible that these commonalities can all be accounted for in terms of patterns of population movement and cultural diffusion. In some cases, sites identified as regional centers prove to have been abandoned during the very periods in which their influence was assumed to have been at its height (Sullivan 2009). Other sites that had been interpreted as outposts, subject to the influence of regional centers, show persistent and puzzling anomalies, which suggest that they were more likely manifestations of a locally derived tradition that assimilated some features of the regional culture; McGimsey describes the Hopewell aspects of Marksville, presumed to define the southern limits

of Hopewell influence, as a thin “veneer” overlaid on a robust local tradition (2005, p. 11). Moreover, many local traditions prove to have been highly variable within the regions and periods of their influence. As in the case of Jonathan Creek, within-site stylistic diversity that had been interpreted as evidence of a sequence of culturally distinct occupations proves to have been contemporaneous, challenging any assumption that precontact cultures were sharply bounded, internally homogenous, static, and aligned with distinct populations.

The upshot is that as enigmatic as they are, the “facts of the record” originating in these intensively studied, much-speculated-about sites do prove to have a capacity to travel that exceeds, and disrupts, the conceptual foundations of the research traditions that set them in motion, as Valeriani argues (this volume). There is growing consensus that conventional assumptions about cultural evolution, succession, and interaction – the “restrictive and static cultural categories” derived from evolutionary schemas – must be fundamentally reassessed (Muller 2003, p. 20; Muller 1999, pp. 157–8; Muller 1995, pp. 321–4, 335–6). Cultural complexity cannot be equated with stratification (Goldstein 2001), or assumed to mark a stage on the path toward stratification; the facts about mound builder cultures generated by the secondary retrieval, reanalysis, and repositioning of facts of the record – their patterns of cycling “through periods of formation, florescence, and fragmentation” – undermine the expectation that they were on track to become “truly stratified sociopolitical systems” (Milner and Schroeder 1999, pp. 96, 103). These precontact cultures do not fit any of the models of social and cultural formation projected by conventional evolutionary schemas. Some recommend a thorough overhaul of this framework. They direct attention to a range of ethnohistoric cases in which chiefly elites exercise political authority through diverse social mechanisms that do not necessarily give rise to or anticipate statelike structures; these, they suggest, offer resources for explaining how Mississippian and Hopewell societies could have produced monumental earthworks and mound sites without exaggerating their stability or the degree of vertical hierarchy (King 2003, pp. 140–3; Cobb and King 2005, pp. 167–92). This is a matter of repositioning facts about the mound builders in the context of new mediating facts about the range of possibilities by which communities can mobilize to take on ambitious projects (like building large-scale earthen monuments), coordinating collective effort, and engaging in highly complex cultural practices that extend across regions and over long periods.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FACTS AND THEIR TRAVELS: THREE QUESTIONS

What, then, counts as a fact in archaeological contexts? And what ensures that some archaeological facts travel well, altogether too well in some cases, while others prove to be highly vulnerable to misrecognition and attrition? As I suggested at the outset, there are a number of different kinds of “facts” at issue here, each with distinctive trajectories of travel and capacities for success in traveling. I close by enumerating four of these, adding a fifth, and identifying two strategies by which the integrity of traveling facts is adjudicated in archaeological contexts.

Facts of the (archaeological) record, my point of departure, are most obviously conditioned in their travels (temporal, spatial, and disciplinary) by their own intrinsic physical characteristics, and by the conditions of their deposition and preservation.¹⁴ They include the full range of artifacts and material traces, produced by both routine human behavior and intentional action, that make up the built environment that cultural actors produce and that constrains their action. In the case of the cultural past studied by Eminent Mounds archaeologists, these include, for example, the monumental earthworks themselves and an array of material traces that testify to their date and mode of construction; the uses to which they were put; the size of the communities that built them; their social relations and the subsistence practices that sustained them; and their motivating beliefs and intentions, as well as the local and regional histories in which they were enmeshed.

These surviving traces only become components of an archaeological “record,” however, when they are retrieved, documented, and curated. Consequently, facts of the (archaeological) record include not only the primary surviving material but also facts about its composition, provenience, and associations generated by the process of recovery and analysis. For example, post-moulds excavated by Webb at Jonathan Creek, as well as his original maps and notes, and

also the spatial and temporal patterns Schroeder identified when she constructed a composite GIS-based map of these features, are all facts of the (archaeological) record. So, too, are the chemical signatures of the source contexts in which traded material originated (e.g., obsidian) and of the firing temperature and production techniques used to produce distinctive ceramic artifacts, the ratios of decayed (radioactive) C¹⁴ to (stable) C¹² and C¹³ in organic material (the basis for calculating cutting or burning dates), the isotope values of bone marrow extracted from the skeletal remains of individuals, and differences in these values across populations. It follows that the travel fortunes of archaeological facts depend on the technical resources and dynamics of research traditions and the motivating ambitions of practitioners, collectors, and curators, as well as an immensely complex range of political-economic and institutional factors that, together, determine which traces will be retrieved, documented, and curated as facts of the (archaeological) record.

Mediating facts play a critical role in the trajectories and success of travel for archaeological facts. Facts of the record only have standing, as such, given elaborate conceptual and technical scaffolding.¹⁵ These are facts about the properties of various constituents of the record, and about the conditions (causal processes, cultural practices) that could or likely did produce surviving material traces and that affect their preservation, transmission, and recovery. Put to work in archaeological contexts, these interpretive resources, either developed internally or drawn from collateral fields, make it possible to identify facts of the record as travelers, and to reconstruct the conditions of production, use, and deposition by which they have traveled from, and can be linked to particular events and conditions in the past. Most are, by nature, facts that transgress disciplinary boundaries, so their capacities to travel also depend on a range of factors that include, for example, institutionally enabled transfers of technical skills and resources (e.g., post-World War II support for the development of radiocarbon dating); the accidents of cross-field interaction and individual interest (GIS); and, crucially, the comfortable fit with the conventional wisdom, professional or public, that underpins archaeological categories of description and analysis (the narrated facts of received ethnohistory).

Examples of mediating facts at work in the archaeology of Eminent Mounds are the geological facts that underpin stratigraphic analysis, making it possible to establish building and occupational sequences. The sourcing of artifacts, the reconstruction of how they were produced, and residue analysis that suggests how they were used all depend on facts of physical chemistry and material science that have traveled from their home contexts into archaeology. Facts of astronomy provide the framework that enables the identification of systematic patterns of alignment between sites and of features within sites. Experimental archaeology generates intriguing facts about how much labor is required to produce an monumental earthwork or mound (much less than has typically been supposed), and ethnoarchaeology provides a fine-grained empirical understanding of how ceramics are produced, reused, discarded, and how distinctive stylistic features diffuse in communities that use what they make (rather than producing for a market). The ethnography of feasting practices and performative ritual suggests a range of models for understanding how mounds might have been used, while comparative ethnohistories of burial practices suggest diverse ways in which the mortuary deposits of mound builder fame could have been produced. Finally, the ethnography of “tribes” and “chiefdoms,” and more recently of “house societies,” as well as the historical sociology of state formation processes, are all instrumental in suggesting how social groups that undertake the collective projects of monument construction could be organized.

The goal, of course, is to establish **narrative facts about the past** ranging from highly localized facts tethered to particular material traces, through empirically grounded inferences about site histories and their occupants (their migrations and interactions), to the factual underpinnings of framework assumptions about cultural differences and cultural dynamics. The research traditions that make up Eminent Mounds archaeology have generated an enormous body of narrative facts. These include facts about the function of particular artifacts or features of the kind archaeologists have painstakingly reassessed in recent years (e.g., that presumption that the Fort Ancient mounds were cemeteries, that Jonathan Creek was protected by a palisade, and that disarticulated skeletal material at Cahokia was the product of human sacrifice) as well as the

convention-disrupting facts about histories of site occupation, interaction, and internal diversity they have secured by means of secondary retrieval and the repositioning of localized facts (e.g., the cycling patterns documented at Hiwasee Island, the appreciation that Marksville was a Hopewell outpost, and that apparently distinct cultural groups coexisted at Jonathan Creek). And they extend to such framework-anchoring facts (many now disputed) as the conviction that Hopewell and Mississippian cultures are distinct, that they must have been chiefdoms or insipient states (given their complexity), and that cultural affinities across space reflect the migrations of distinct culture-bearing peoples.

Although these narrative facts are set in motion and authorized by facts of the record, they have their own distinctive circuits of transmission and reception, structured by lineages of disciplinary training and practice, and by a context-specific repertoire of narrative conventions.¹⁶ This is a primary source of the epistemic anxiety that archaeologists express about their facts: that these narrative frames have a life of their own; that they determine what can be recognized as a fact of the record, what mediating facts will be brought into play, what survival and circulation patterns they will have; that facts about the past reduce to narrative convention. On this view there is no distinction between fact and fiction; historical and archaeological facts just are whatever we narrate them to be.

In practice, however, the patterns of interdependence among archaeological facts, and their capacity for travel, is a source of epistemic possibility. Archaeological facts, like Trouillot's historical facts, prove not to be "infinitely susceptible of invention" (1995, p. 21). To stabilize any claim about the past is an accomplishment that depends on a complex articulation of resources – material, technical, and conceptual. The Eminent Mounds cases illustrate a subset of the strategies of triangulation by which archaeologists use critical points of convergence between, and friction among, different types of archaeological facts of the record to assess their integrity as facts about the past (Wylie 2003, pp. 205–10). It is the intransigent materiality of facts of the record, and the contingent independence of the mediating facts that allow their interpretation as facts of the past, that animates the presumption that there is a difference between narrative facts about the past and **facts of the past**, the fourth type of fact at issue here. As tenuous a construct as they are, archaeological facts (of the record) routinely bear witness to a past that proves not to be as imagined, not to fit any of our familiar narrative templates. We require more than fictionalization, as Trouillot puts it, precisely because facts of the record have a capacity to challenge even deeply held foundational narrative facts. We appreciate this distinction most clearly – we sense that "the facts" (of the past) have been revealed – when facts of the record do not conform to established narrated facts. It is only given this possibility that it makes sense to insist that it matters whether narratives are "fact or fiction" and to impose "tests of credibility" on them (Trouillot 1995, p. 11, 13).

The strategies by which archaeologists exploit these epistemic possibilities are all, fundamentally, a matter of making the trajectories of travel themselves an object of critical scrutiny. On the first such strategy, that of *secondary retrieval*, archaeologists cross-check narrative facts against facts of the record that are presumed to anchor them, and they reposition facts of the record, often extracting facts that were not originally recorded or deployed in building narrative accounts of the past. On the second, *recontextualizing facts of the record*, archaeologists expand the repertoire of mediating facts embodied in background knowledge, techniques, and skills of analysis by which facts of the record are linked (interpretively) to facts of the past. Both strategies depend on building a critical historiography of archaeological facts that serves not just to deconstruct illusions of epistemic security, but also to reanimate and recalibrate these facts. In the cases considered here, a fifth type of fact plays a pivotal role: archaeological facts in a Foucauldian sense, *genealogical facts* about the complicated travels of all the kinds of material, interpretive, and narrative facts that constitute archaeological practice. By understanding these circuits and conditions of travel, archaeologists put new facts of the record into circulation, they hold both new and old facts about the past accountable to them, and they identify a range of questions that have not previously been asked of them. Taken together, these constitute tests of credibility that depend jointly on the capacity of facts of the past to travel with integrity, and on the capacity of archaeologists to discern where and how their travel may be obstructed.

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¹ In commonsense parlance, and in much archaeological discussion, "archaeological facts" are the physical traces, artifacts, and features that constitute a material record of the cultural past. I use the term in this sense here, but will want to complicate this understanding of archaeological facts in what follows.

² The details of these recurrent debates are discussed in "How New Is the New Archaeology?" in Wylie (2002).

³ This distinction tracks, in some respects, those drawn by Valeriani in discussion of the Italian debate about the epistemic status of history versus archaeology (this volume), and in her treatment of the traveling facts that constitute architectural history (2006, 2008).

⁴ Trouillot's attention to the instability of this distinction resonates with Adam's discussion of the slipperiness of the distinction between fact and fiction (this volume).

⁵ I have discussed this research tradition in connection with "agnatology" (Wylie 2008).

⁶ See Burns (2008) for an account of the formation of networks of agents who documented and excavated sites in this region on behalf of the Peabody Museum and the Smithsonian Institution.

⁷ The staying power of facts, once set in motion, is a theme that connects this discussion of archaeological facts to a number of other contributions to the Facts project; I note some specific points of resonance in what follows.

⁸ The term "secondary retrieval" comes from Trouillot's discussion of the third of four moments in the production of history: the generation of textual traces; the compilation of these traces as an archive; the retrieval of these traces from the archive and the configuration of them as facts to be built into historical narratives; the construction of narratives that have retrospective significance (Trouillot 1995, pp. 8, 26). The archaeological counterpart to the creation and recurrent exploration of the "archive" is what interests me here; see Wylie (2008) for more detailed discussion of Trouillot's account.

⁹ This persistence of (narrative) archaeological facts in the absence of corroborating evidence, or even in the face of counterevidence, bears some similarities to the "imaginative dislocations" described by Wallis in connection with the Eyam plague narrative (2005).

¹⁰ I thank Lynne Goldstein for bringing Weiss-Krejci's analysis to my attention.

¹¹ Contrast this strategy of critical analysis focused on mediating assumptions with Goldstein and Gaff's use of direct archaeological testing to assess common assumptions about Aztalan (2002). For a more detailed account of the strategies by which archaeologists deploy facts drawn both from archaeological subjects and from interpretive sources, see essays on analogical reasoning and "The Constitution of Archaeological Evidence" in Wylie (2003, pp. 136–53, 185–99).

¹² There are some intriguing similarities between the strategies by which archaeologists aggregate localized data points into structural and distributional facts (which they then use to establish or to challenge consequential narrative facts) and the bioinformatics practices described by Leonelli by which small (local) facts are normalized and recontextualized so that they can be assembled into large facts (this volume and Leonelli [2008](#)).

¹³ This dynamic of debate is described in a number of contexts. See, for example, Milner and Schroeder [1999](#), pp. 96–9.

¹⁴ See, for example, Schiffer's influential discussion of the cultural and environmental formation processes ([1996](#)).

¹⁵ See Haycock's discussion of scaffolding, this volume.

¹⁶ See, for example, Wallis's (2005) discussion of the role that narratives play in making facts travel and Merz's account (this volume) of how the records of experiments may be understood in narrative terms.