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Timelessness and the Legacy of Archaeological Cartography

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Across eastern North America in the nineteenth century, individuals with training in engineering and natural history and a keen interest in antiquities were directly involved in field surveys of earthen monuments. The maps they created from these surveys were developed with a false understanding of a shallow time depth predating the European occupation of the region and crafted with an emphasis on descriptive elements (e.g., Squier and Davis 1848; Thomas 1894). These nineteenth-century depictions of mound sites helped to establish a timeless view of the past that persists today in some interpretations of the physical layout of mound sites, and many of these sites continue to be depicted in maps and artists' renderings as the enduring sum of their parts—earthen mounds, plazas, and other structures.

As an example of the hegemony of archaeological cartography, we scrutinize the history of interpretations of site organization at Aztalan, a mound center encircled by wooden palisades and situated in southern Wisconsin (figure 7.1), which has been persistently perceived and described in terms of a timeless picture of the past (e.g., Barrett 1933; Birmingham and Goldstein 2005; Hyer 1837, 1838; Lapham 1855; Lewis 1894; McKern 1946; Richards 2007). The accumulated data from more than a century of excavations at Aztalan have confirmed two major archaeological traditions at the site: a Late Woodland presence (ca. AD 800/900–1150/1200) that is evident in some of the ceramics and a Middle

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Mississippian occupation (ca. AD 1050/1100–1200/1250) that is substantiated by some of the pottery, other forms of material culture, platform mounds, palisades, and various architectural features (Birmingham and Goldstein 2005; Richards 2003; Richards and Jeske 2002). The joint Late Woodland and Mississippian occupation history, which likely spans fewer than two centuries, and a coarse-grained ceramic chronology (with the exception of Powell Plain and Ramey Incised types from Cahokia) that has been challenging to parse into temporal components shorter than the life span of the site, have further contributed to the timeless perception of Aztalan. Drawing on interpretive frameworks that make use of time perspectivism (Bailey 2007; Sullivan 2008), migration, coalescence, and hybridity (e.g., Alt 2006; Anthony 1990; Bhabha 1985; Ethridge and Hudson 2002; Kowalewski 2001; Liebmann 2013), and on comparisons with some other stockaded Mississippian sites in the southeastern United States, we propose that Aztalan's site structure developed rapidly through a process of population coalescence. Among the material manifestations of the development of a blended community was the interweaving of architectural conventions with novel ideas that led to recurrent redefinitions, reconstructions, and modifications of place and space.

ANTIQUARIAN ENCOUNTERS WITH AZTALAN

In 1836, a man named Nathanial Hyer heard rumors of an "ancient Walled City" about three days travel west of Milwaukee in what was then known as the Wisconsin Territory. After one failed attempt to reach the site in the spring, Hyer succeeded in finding the ruins in October and prepared a crude sketch map of the site that he copied and shared widely among his friends (Hyer 1837). When he saw the earthen pyramids within the "ancient Walled City," he was reminded of an engraving of the Toltec pyramid at Cholula that he had seen in Baron Alexander von Humboldt's published account of his travels in Mexico and of descriptions of Aztec pyramids contained elsewhere within the volumes (von Humboldt 1814:I:81; von Humboldt 1814:I and II; see Richards 2007 for a more detailed historical chronology of documents that mention Aztalan). Von Humboldt asserted, "we must look for the first country of the Mexican nations, Aztlan . . . at least north of the 42d degree of latitude" (von Humboldt 1814:II:66). As Hyer's "ancient Walled City" lies at 43 degrees north, he borrowed the name of the mythical origin of the Aztec empire, thus conferring the name Aztalan on this site. He returned to the site in early 1837 with surveying equipment, which allowed him to produce a map with somewhat greater detail (figure 7.2; Hyer 1837). His descriptions of the

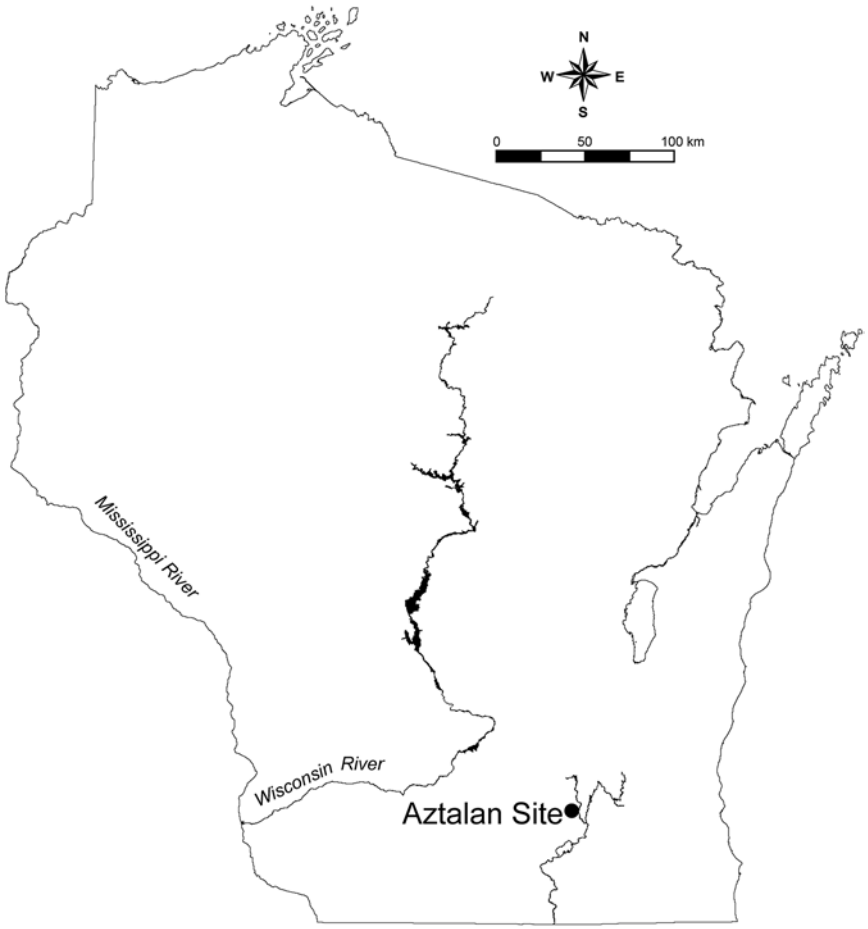

Figure 7.1. *Location of Aztalan in southern Wisconsin.*

earthen platform mounds and walls of so-called brick (baked clay) at Aztalan established an enduring narrative of the site as a unique, timeless, and even mysterious place (Hyer 1837, 1838).

A little more than a dozen years following the appearance of Hyer's map of Aztalan, Increase Lapham, a naturalist and professionally trained engineer who had moved to Milwaukee from New York State in 1836, resurveyed Aztalan and produced a more accurate and detailed map of the site (figure 7.3; Lapham 1855). Without question, the focus of these early explorations was on the visible earthen architecture of the site, particularly the platform mounds and walls.

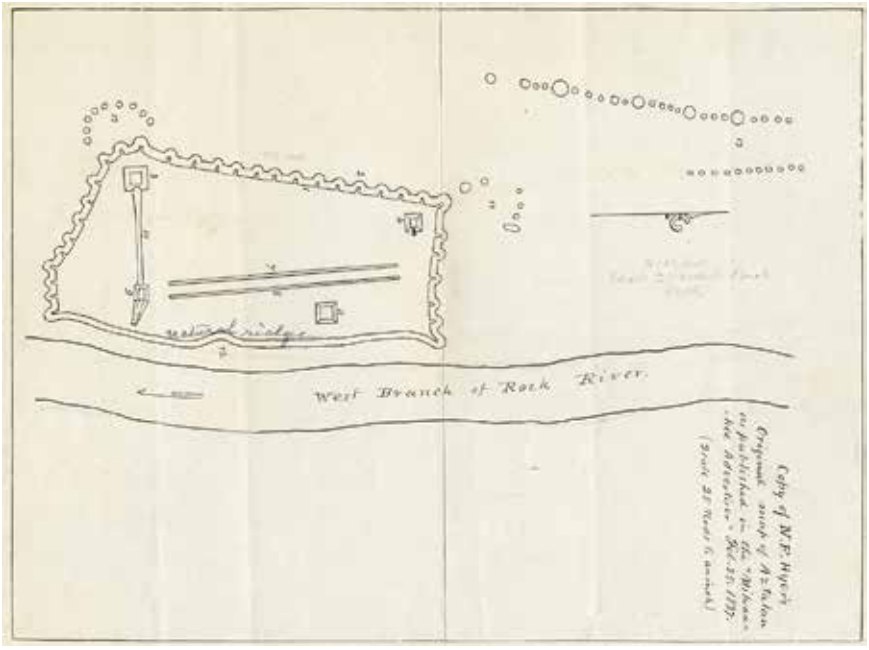

Figure 7.2. *1837 map of Aztalan by Nathaniel Hyer (Wisconsin Historical Society Image ID 53061).*

In 1919, Samuel Barrett of the Milwaukee Public Museum initiated excavations into portions of the platforms mounds, the walls, and a knoll in the southeast corner of the site, and conducted some limited excavations of the interior of the site (Barrett 1933). Only a decade earlier, William Henry Holmes's classification of ceramics in the Mississippi Valley had appeared in print (Holmes 1903), and Barrett recognized that some of the pottery that was being recovered from Aztalan was of the Woodland type,while other pieces were similar to the Middle Mississippian type, which was distinguished on the basis of shell temper, smooth exterior surfaces that were sometimes painted or polished or incised, and certain vessel forms. Barrett also noted that the shell-tempered sherds and vessels from Aztalan closely resembled materials from the site of Cahokia near St. Louis (Barrett 1933).

THE SALIENT ELEMENTS OF A MISSISSIPPIAN SITE

Middle Mississippian sites are concentrated along major waterways and tributary drainages in the southeastern United States (Smith 1986), across

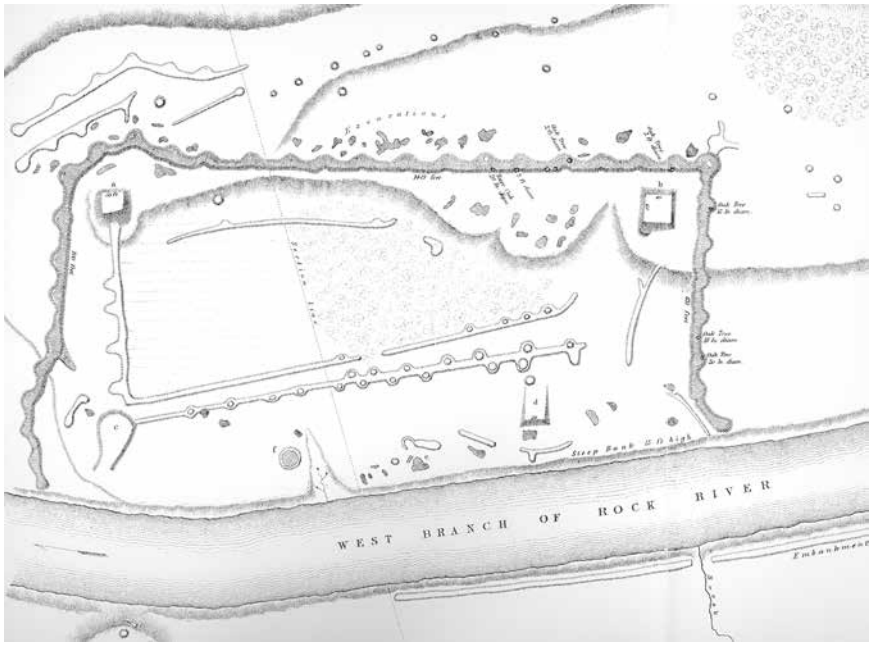

Figure 7.3. *1850 map of Aztalan by Increase Lapham (Lapham 1855, reprinted with the permission of the University of Wisconsin Press).*

southwestern Indiana, southern and western Illinois, and into Missouri, but small numbers of them are found along the Mississippi River as far north as Red Wing, Minnesota, and along the Rock and Crawfish Rivers in southern Wisconsin (Schroeder 2004: figure 4). Aztalan, in particular, and the other northern Mississippian sites in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa have long been viewed as anomalous in their locations, consequences of the migration of people whose origins are commonly attributed to Cahokia (Benden 2004; Finney 2013; Finney and Stoltman 1991; Gibbon and Dobbs 1991; Goldstein 1991; Green and Rodell 1994; Pauketat et al. 2015; Rodell 1991), which is by far the largest of all Mississippian sites and is situated in a broad expanse of the floodplain of the Mississippi River across from St. Louis in present-day Illinois (e.g., Iseminger 2010; Milner 1998, Pauketat 1994, 2004). The atypical location of Aztalan along with the allure of Hyer's account of Aztalan, which captured the imagination of the public and scholars alike, hindered the recognition that the site was composed of the same basic building blocks that Phillips, Ford, and Griffin listed in 1954 as the traits of a Mississippian site: platform mounds, one or more plazas, and walls, as well as residential and

ritual structures (Goldstein and Freeman 1997:223; Phillips, Ford, and Griffin 1951; see also contributions to Lewis and Stout 1998).

In the horizontal dimension, mounds generally are orthogonally situated along the edges of a centrally located plaza that is usually rectilinear in shape (figure 7.4). One mound in the form of a truncated pyramid is typically larger than others and often is located along the edge of the plaza or, less frequently, in its center. Houses built of perishable materials were once distributed around the perimeter of these mound-and-plaza configurations, although not as densely as presented in figure 7.4, and the boundaries of the town often were demarcated by wooden walls studded with bastions. In the vertical dimension, there is a separation between mound summits, which are associated with elites and rituals, and ground level, where quotidian practices unfolded.

Explaining Site Structure the Old Fashioned Way

For decades, archaeologists have sought explanations for the seeming uniformity across archaeological cultural and linguistic boundaries in the Southeast for how these common elements were arranged to form Mississippian town-and-mound communities that served as the administrative centers of their respective geospatial polities (e.g., Lewis and Stout 1998; Lewis et al. 1998). Under the assumption that all archaeologically visible features at a site were present and in use at the same time, the explanations for the recurrent arrangement of these elements range from a shared architectural grammar, to celestial geometry or a physical expression of cosmology, to ritual proscription, to centralized authority within a society characterized by distinct socioeconomic status differences, to a form of factional competition or political aggrandizement, and to the now-discredited idea of influences from Mexico (e.g., Anderson 1994a; Hall 2004; Kelly and Brown 2014; Knight 1985, 1989; Nassaney 1992; Payne and Scarry 1998; Sherrod and Rolingson 1987; Stout 1984). The absence of a consensus derives from the ambiguity and incompleteness of archaeological evidence, the diverse theoretical and inferential frameworks that guide the research of different scholars, and variation in how archaeologists think about time as it applies to the spatial organization of a site (see Wilcox, chapter 9, this volume).

"*The Loss of Innocence*"[1]

If we start with the assumption that the visible features of the site were not all synchronous, that leads to questions like, "How much of a site was

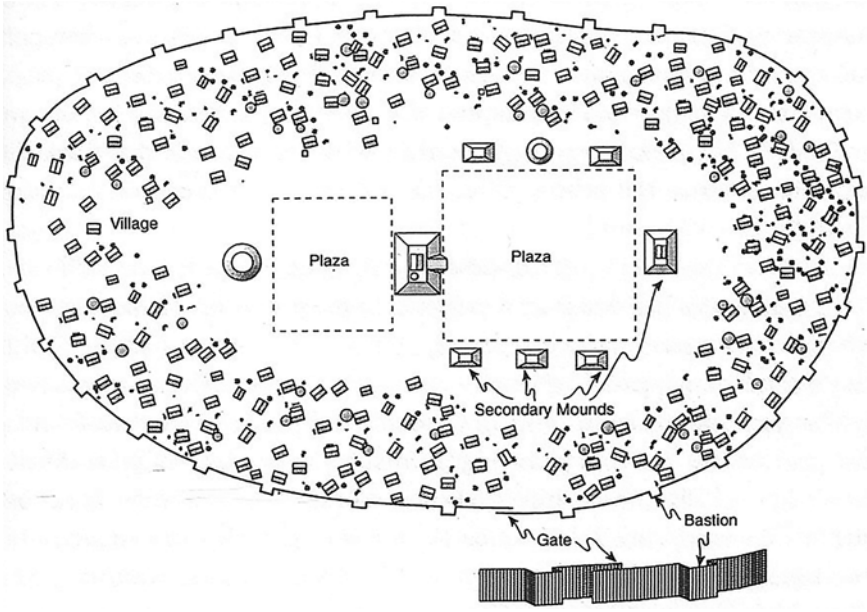

Figure 7.4. *Architectural elements of a Mississippian town and mound center (from Lewis and Stout 1998: Figure 1.2, reprinted with permission of the University of Alabama Press).*

simultaneously active?" "At what point in its history did the site take on its final appearance?" and "How was this final appearance attained?" The effort to address these questions reorients our attention to the formation histories of sites and has the potential to significantly alter our understanding of the temporality of site structure.

With the emergence of a new time perspective, some scholars have shifted their inferential frameworks to embrace variability rather than suppress it, and have begun to assemble empirical evidence that challenges theoretical and interpretive orthodoxy, thereby contributing to a dynamic view of the developmental history of cultural landscapes and their formation. For example, a Bayesian model of radiocarbon dates from Monks Mound has been used to argue that this prominent landscape feature was not part of the initial Mississippianization of Cahokia (Schilling 2010, 2012), a finding that has important implications for the various models of the origins of that site (e.g., Milner 1998; Pauketat 1994). A number of scholars working at Cahokia have made the point that the initial occupation of the site was strung out east-west along the banks of Cahokia Creek, while during its peak florescence as a

political center the occupation included a significant expansion to the south and a smaller expansion to the north; later, as the site began to go into decline, areas that had been occupied were abandoned (Beck et al. 2007:842–843; Milner 1998). Elsewhere in the Southeast, major mound sites like Moundville and Etowah each went through their own historical trajectory of shifting site organization and occupation (e.g., King 2001, 2003; Knight 2010; Knight and Steponaitis 1998).

THE ORTHODOX VIEW OF AZTALAN

Aztalan provides a case example of the influential yet problematic legacy of nineteenth-century archaeological cartography. For instance, Samuel Barrett of the Milwaukee Public Museum approached his excavations at Aztalan with a focus on tracing the numerous walls that were visible to early nineteenth-century visitors to the site (figure 7.5). In his 1933 publication, Barrett forcefully argued that the walls were contemporaneous constructions, a claim that aligns with the timeless view presented in the maps of the site produced by Hyer and Lapham. The strongest evidence that Barrett called upon to support his contention of contemporaneity was that residential architecture had been found only in the excavation units placed within the innermost wall (but see Goldstein and Freeman 1997 for an alternative explanation of the concentration of residential architecture within the innermost wall).

Barrett's vision of the site quickly became conventional wisdom, and most archaeologists since that time have pivoted their interpretations of Aztalan around the timeless view (Barrett 1933; Birmingham and Goldstein 2005:53–76; Goldstein and Freeman 1997; Richards 2007; but see Wittry and Barreis 1958:63 for a rare argument in alignment with the time perspectivism view and Goldstein and Gaff 2002:102). The residential space at Aztalan is found at the lower elevations of the site, adjacent to the riverbank and enclosed by a bastioned palisade that segregated most of the population (figure 7.6). It has been suggested that the two closely spaced walls in this area arose as an added defensive measure or from a slight expansion of the residential sector (Birmingham and Goldstein 2005:53, 58). One platform mound was positioned at the north end, and at the southern end of the residential area is the so-called gravel knoll, a landscape feature with a complex history of surface modification involving human-made deposits of gravel, shell, soil, and artifacts. To the west of this second wall around the residential district, the elevation rises until another wall is reached. This L-shaped enclosed area is referred to as the public plaza. At the northwestern corner of this plaza is an area called

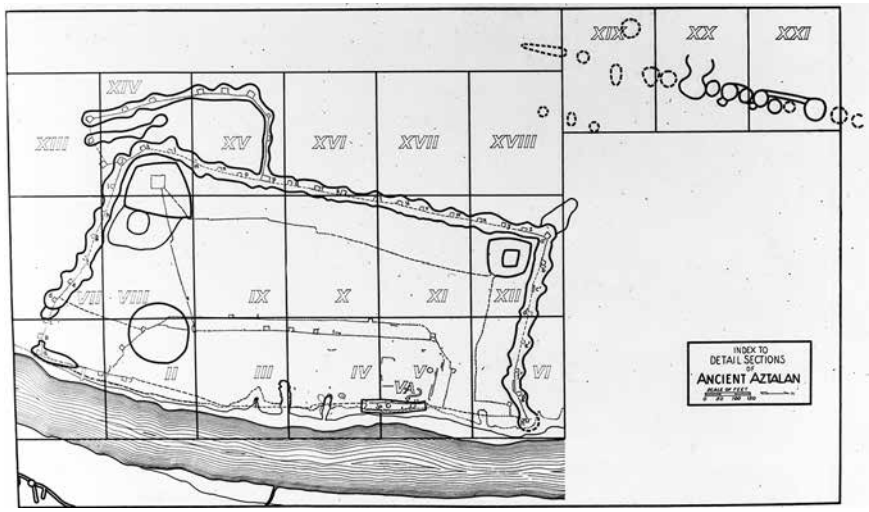

Figure 7.5. *Samuel Barrett's map of Aztalan (Barrett 1933, reprinted with permission of the Milwaukee Public Museum).*

the "sculptuary," where the land was modified to create three tiers in the glacial gravel that underlies much of the site, each of which contained an estimated one to two dozen very large clay-lined pits that may have been used for communal storage, mortuary ritual, and/or trash disposal during their life histories (Goldstein 2010). This area of the site would have been visually notable—a mass of light gravel with dark pits distributed across each tier. Beyond the wall that marks the western limits of the plaza are two platform mounds that anchor the northwest and southwest corners of the site and a stretch of land between them that has been designated as the elite precinct (Birmingham and Goldstein 2005:61–63, 65–74).

As one step toward a critique of this orthodox view of the internal organization of the site and the timelessness of its features, we consider the fact that Aztalan has not been completely, or even systematically, investigated through excavation (Goldstein and Gaff 2002). Barrett's fieldwork efforts focused on following out the stockades and testing the southwest and northeast mounds; the limited explorations he conducted beyond the palisade lines were mostly situated within the innermost wall. Thus, his "residential zone" may be an artifact of where he conducted his excavations. From the late 1940s into the 1960s the Wisconsin Archeological Survey and the Wisconsin Historical Society examined segments of the palisade, conducted excavations into all

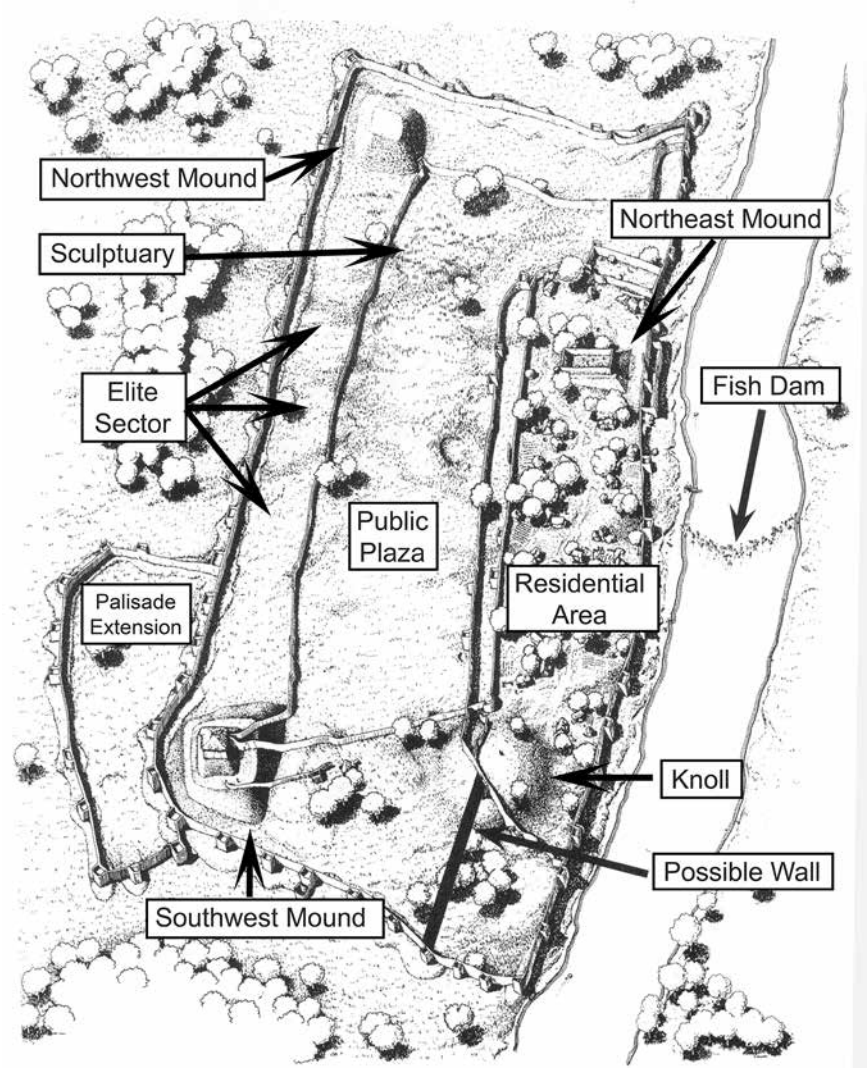

Figure 7.6. *Artist's bird's-eye view of Aztalan (modified from Birmingham and Goldstein 2005: Figure 4.5, original artwork by Eric Paulson, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Department of Anthropology).*

three mounds, and, significantly, excavated numerous units within the inner wall, finding additional evidence of residential use (Barreis and Bryson 1965; Freeman 1986; Hurley 1977; Maher 1958; Maxwell 1952; Ritzenthaler 1961, 1963;

Rowe 1958; Wittry and Barreis 1958). The take away message here is that the walls, mounds, and residential district were intensively investigated before the advent of modern methods of excavation and recovery and the availability of AMS radiocarbon dating. Beginning in the 1970s, Lynne Goldstein brought modern question-driven field methods to the site, which confirmed the presence of the plaza, revealed considerable landscape engineering in gravel, and added evidence that diverse economic, ritual, and mortuary activities were undertaken in the sculptuary. Nevertheless, the discoveries made through modern excavations at the Aztalan and the older discoveries remain unified because of their general reliance on the timeless view.

AN UNORTHODOX VIEW OF AZTALAN

In the summer of 2013, we collaborated on a field school at Aztalan, along with Donald Gaff from the University of Northern Iowa. These excavations focused on the knoll (often referred to as the "gravel" knoll) in the southeast portion of the site, and an unusual palisade entrance just west of the southwest mound. In the summer of 2015, Schroeder conducted another field school at the site with excavations focused on the residential part of the site and the plaza. Both of these projects provided us with an opportunity to rethink the timeless interpretations about the emergence of the structure of the site.

We started this chapter with a discussion of the walls—those mapped by Hyer and Lapham, then so thoroughly excavated by Barrett. At other Mississippian sites with multiple palisades or stockades, these walls were mostly excavated after the 1930s, when chronology was a priority, and it has been systematically shown in these cases that wall construction proceeded sequentially, either rebuilding in place or through the dismantling of one wall as the next one was erected to accommodate a growing population or more tightly enclose a shrinking community (e.g., Anderson 1969; Anderson 1994b; Anderson and Schuldenrein 1985; Black 1967; Blitz 1993; Butler et al. 2011; Cole 1951; Hammerstedt 2005; Krus 2011; Krus, Schilling, and Monaghan 2013; Polhemus 1987; Schroeder 2006).

Taking this perspective that the walls were not synchronous allows us the opportunity to explore a possible dynamic formation history of Aztalan and the interplay between conservatism and innovation expressed through its internal features in a manner that complements and augments recent studies of multiethnic communities in the Southeast that formed through processes of migration and coalescence (e.g., Alt 2002, 2006, 2008; Cobb 2005, 2008; Cobb and Butler 2006; Kidder 1998; Pauketat and Alt 2005; Price et al. 2007;

Schroeder 2011). We propose an alternative hypothesis, informed by a consideration of time perspectivism, that the migrants who were involved in establishing the community in collaboration with local residents used Mississippian conventions of public architecture and monumentality to visually assert a new political, social, and ethnic order. Archaeologically, we identify the local people as part of the Late Woodland Tradition, which in Wisconsin included the construction of effigy mounds and occasionally erecting walls of small-diameter saplings (typically < 15 cm) to protect the perimeter of a compact village (Dirst 1988, 1995; Hall 1962; Overstreet 1995; Salkin 2000). In stark contrast, Mississippian peoples constructed walls out of large-diameter posts (typically > 15 cm); these walls were studded with regularly spaced bastions and enclosed a community that included considerable non-residential space (Milner 1999:118–120).

Current archaeological studies of migration posit that the moment when a group of people abandon their homeland and relocate to a wholly new landscape may provide sufficient rupture in practices that it presents a unique opportunity for a group to reexamine conventions and traditions, thereby creating an opening for innovations (e.g., Alt 2002; Cobb 2008). In selecting a new place to settle, people may choose a place without an obvious history, but they might, as was the case with Aztalan, join an established community, one that already has its own "archaeological" and historical past (see Roth, chapter 3, this volume). The circumstances of establishing a blended community will be highly variable given the different expectations of migrants and people already living at the site, the extent to which the past (an "archaeological record") is open to different interpretations, and the need for immigrants and residents to develop a common understanding of the place itself. In this context the blended community develops very rapidly, new "ways of being" materialize quickly, and notions of place and space are (continually) redefined as architectural conventions are interlayered with novel ideas that emerge from the idiosyncratic and unique configurations of the particular people at these places and in these moments (see Kidder 1998; Cobb 2005, 2008; Cobb and Butler 2006 for similar arguments).

Building on archaeological studies in the Southeast where this kind of thinking has been successfully applied to similar kinds of archaeological phenomena, it could be postulated that early efforts at monumental construction will emphasize symbols of the newcomers. The construction of a massive wall studded with bastions around a community would have been a particularly distinctive, dramatic, and likely early feature on the landscape, visually proclaiming the uniqueness of the newcomers to that setting, while simultaneously

establishing a method to control access. At the same time, platform mound construction may have initiated an internal reorganization of space.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF SOME EVIDENCE FROM AZTALAN

Now we turn to a consideration of some of the evidence from Aztalan that could be seen to align with these models. The construction of the northeast mound and possibly the modifications to the knoll in the southeast corner of the site may have been early cooperative events in the formation of the blended community. Based on differences in the ceramic assemblages between submound and mound contexts, Tom Zych (2013) has suggested that the northeast mound may have been a communal construction built by the local long-term Late Woodland residents and Mississippian newcomers.

In our 2013 fieldwork at Aztalan we found that the knoll, long accepted to be a natural gravel feature and likely used for mortuary purposes (like a mound), had been subjected to considerable modification in prehistory as well as by past excavations, reconstruction in the 1950s when the site became a public park, and current land use. Our excavations at the apex of the knoll resulted in the identification of multiple pits, mounded features, and distinct fill episodes of gravel and soil, and yielded ceramics of Late Woodland and Mississippian types, rolled copper beads and other objects made from copper, and a large number of whole mussel shells interlayered with gravel—an occurrence that is not natural—that may have been used to cap pit features. Furthermore, the light yellowish-colored glacial gravel at Aztalan would have been a novel material to the Mississippian people who came to the site after having lived much of their lives in an alluvial floodplain that lacks gravel deposits. Based on ethnohistoric and ethnographic analogy, archaeologists have suggested that different colors, like red, black, yellow, and white, had deep symbolic significance to ancient Native Americans (DeBoer 2005; Pursell 2013; Rodning 2010). The choice to use yellow gravel and white shell in the intentional deposits on the knoll, along with the exposure of gravel on the ground surface in the sculptuary, would have given a highly distinctive visual appearance to the site.

Both the northeast mound and the knoll include the new, Mississippian materials, layered upon and amid the old, Late Woodland materials, in deposits that seem to have been intentional. In the case of one of the features on the knoll, gravel and shell were intentionally deposited in layers, fragments of at least two ceramic vessels of different types were then laid down on top of each other, and finally objects made of copper were placed before the feature appears to have been capped. Prior to the construction of the northeast mound,

a locally made Late Woodland–type jar was inverted and placed into a pit; as the mound was being built, five vessels were placed upside down in a line that corresponds with the central east-west axis of the mound; four of these vessels appear to have been placed while the mound was being constructed while the fifth and western-most of the vessels was placed upside down into a pit excavated into the mound (Zych 2013:114–118, 123, 145, 168, 169, 180, 184). Of the five vessels, two are Cahokia Mississippian types, one is an unidentified Mississippian type, one is too poorly preserved to determine the type, and one ceramic vessel is a hybrid variety—a classic Cahokia Mississippian vessel form tempered with grit instead of shell and likely made by a local potter (Zych 2013:116–117, 169).

COALESCENCE AT AZTALAN

We argue that it is profitable to consider the formation history of Aztalan from the alternative viewpoint of time perspectivism. The initial calculus of labor investment in monumental architecture may have included conservation of labor to ensure that wall and mound construction would be successful. Early in its establishment, the northeast mound was constructed, anchoring the northern part of the site and formalizing the coalescence of people at the site, while the knoll likely served as ritual space at the southern end of the site. As more members joined the community, some probably local, others coming from places as distant as Cahokia, the first wall may have been dismantled and a new wall erected to encompass the expansion of the town. The town likely evolved quickly, undergoing a major reorganization that included significant outward expansion, perhaps the establishment of a formal plaza, sculpting of the land and associated activities that created the sculptuary, construction of the northwest and southwest mounds, and the erection of a substantial new wall—all of which clearly express the emergent qualities of a coalescent community. The northwest mound contains distinctive Mississippian ceramics and burials of individuals whose strontium isotopes indicate that some were local, including one female, but most came from two isotopically distinctive regions, one consistent with the bedrock geology of the Cahokia area, the other associated with an as yet unknown region (Price et al. 2007). Pivotal moments in the dynamic history of the place—like the construction of the northeast mound, the erection of sequential walls around the community, the interment of individuals from diverse places in the northwest mound, the creation of the sculptuary, and the modifications to the knoll—were consequences of an ongoing coalescence process that created a new community and reset the history of

Aztalan. The end product of this coalescence was an archaeological record that appeared timeless to later antiquarians and scholars and became inscribed in the maps and artists' renderings of the site. The proposition that Aztalan was a coalescent community aligns better with a dynamic view of Mississippian than it does with a synchronous view.

NOTE

1. Borrowed from David L. Clarke (1973).

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