Review of Ancestral Mounds: Vitality and Volatility of Native America, by Jay Miller

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sold away. In chapter 5, Moyer focuses on the period following the death of Charles Carroll the barrister, when his wife Margaret took up the management of the plantation. Moyer emphasizes Margaret’s role in widowhood as slave manager, and uses a life history approach to understand how enslaved people of different ages lived, labored, and died under Margaret’s control.

Chapter 6 focuses on the effects of Margaret’s decision to grant her slaves delayed manumission upon her death. This directive promised freedom but at some later unspecified date to be determined by her estate’s executor. Moyer uses the historical record to follow the breakup of families by sale and the wait for freedom that stretched into decades for some. This chapter also presents more detailed portraits of several black individuals as their lives moved beyond Mount Clare. Most impressive and sweeping is the history of Henry Harden, who became a leader in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Baltimore. Harden, Moyer argues, shows that not all “great men” from Mount Clare were wealthy and white.

In the final two chapters, Moyer reviews the history of Mount Clare from Margaret’s death in 1817 to the present. She shows how later events altered the plantation landscape in ways that supported the erasure of black history. For example, the late nineteenth-century construction of a German beer hall led to the destruction of outbuildings in which enslaved people had worked and lived. In the twentieth century, European-American preservationist societies pursued a valorizing narrative about the Carrolls that promoted white heritage. Yet, Moyer argues, making black history visible is not only possible at Mount Clare but is also necessary. Only a more inclusive historical outlook can help visitors better understand the foundations of continuing inequities in the present.

The primary weaknesses of this book are evidentiary. Broader engagement with archaeological data would strengthen the author’s position. Moyer also sometimes seems overreliant on analogy with other plantations when trying to infer ways of life at Mount Clare. Yet these small objections must be contextualized within a full account of everything Moyer has given us—clean and accessible prose, a moving and meticulous black history at Mount Clare, and a thorough and convincing analysis of the role of power in the production of history.

Ancestral Mounds: Vitality and Volatility of Native America by Jay Miller


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In Ancestral Mounds, linguist Jay Miller draws on a wide variety of anthropological data and Native perspectives on mound building to craft a story that complements, refocuses, and corrects traditional archaeological perspectives. Anyone who studies Native American mound building would do well not just to read this book but to seriously engage with its arguments and critiques. Miller suggests that academic scholarship has forgone why questions to focus on the who, what, where, when, and how of mound research, leading to an overemphasis on Eurocentric understandings of the political and economic aspects of mounds. He argues that the necessary corrective must be found through conversation with contemporary Native mound-building populations in combination with reliable ethnographic, ethnohistoric, and archaeological reports. The book is effective in drawing together the first three of these lines of evidence, though it is much less successful in integrating the fourth.

Miller highlights the continuation of mound building in Native towns removed from the Southeast to Oklahoma. His extensive fieldwork is a clear strength of the manuscript, allowing him to develop models for understanding mounds that are explicitly grounded in Native beliefs and traditions. He draws on written, spoken, and observed data to create a corpus of information with which all mound archaeologists should be familiar. His conclusions center on: (1) the function of mounds as places to safely house the vitality of communities in the face of an unstable, shifting world; and (2) the dynamic nature of their construction. Miller’s work adds important ethnographic support to existing trends in archaeological research (e.g., seeing mounds as representative of active processes rather than static outcomes of past action [Pauketat 2007], understanding the importance of specific properties of raw materials and their arrangement [Kidder and Sherwood 2017], and viewing mounds as microcosms of Native worldviews [Knight 1989] or sociograms representing inherent dualities [Knight 1998]). His data likewise provide important new analogies from which to understand specific practices identified in the archaeological record (e.g., topsoil being removed before mound construction [p. 5], and practices surrounding standing posts on mound summits [p. 18]).

Ironically, while critical of contemporary archaeology, Miller’s work mimics an archaeological approach by drawing
together “tiny bits and pieces of traditions scattered across the continent” (p. xii); as such, it is plagued by many of the same pitfalls as traditional archaeological accounts. By relying on geographically dispersed, best-case examples, Miller privileges certain explanations over others, ignores those that did not survive into the present, and downplays variability in the history of mound building. He focuses on groups who share direct linguistic ties to Mississippian communities of the relatively recent past (especially Mvskoke Creek); however, mound building has a 6,000-year-long history in North America, and the variability in the archaeological record of these mound-building populations (see Lindauer and Blitz 1997; Saunders 2012) highlights the issues with interpreting earlier mounds through the lens of Mississippian society.

Despite discussion of this variability in chapter 2, Miller’s consolidation of time and space into a unitary narrative in later chapters presents an unintentionally static view of Native American mound building. In much the same way that archaeologists need to read and engage with this work, the author needs to truly grapple with the archaeological literature in order to correct this tendency. The extent of his misunderstandings of archaeological data are clear from the beginning, when dramatic errors in dating are included in his archaeological chronology (p. xxvi) and when he suggests that archaeologists have not been interested in why mounds were built or what they meant (p. 4). That said, I urge archaeologists to look past these issues and use this work to truly consider how a four-field approach to mound construction may augment current interpretations.

Ancestral Mounds is an important reminder that mound building is an ongoing practice and that linguistic and ethnographic work with contemporary communities can provide evidence that is often ignored in archaeological research. Miller successfully peoples both past and present mound landscapes through thoughtful ethnographic and linguistic research. He convincingly argues that while today’s mounds may look different from ancient mounds, the processes at work in their construction may not differ as dramatically. Though often undercited, he draws on a wide variety of case studies that do an important service of broadening our thinking about what counts as a mound and what functions and meanings such places may have had and continue to have.

REFERENCES CITED


Bridging the Gaps: Integrating Archaeology and History in Oaxaca, Mexico by Danny Zborover and Peter C. Kroefges, eds.


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Bridging the Gaps is a collection of essays emanating from a session at the annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in 2007. Shortly before the meeting, Bruce Byland, one of the session’s participants and a major figure in the archaeology of the Mixteca region of Oaxaca, was diagnosed with cancer, and he passed away shortly thereafter. The volume is dedicated to Bruce and includes a moving tribute by his friend and collaborator John Pohl (chapter 3) as well as shorter tributes in several other chapters.

The goal of the volume, as skillfully articulated in the opening chapter by Zborover, is to integrate archaeological and historical data, including Indigenous documents, Spanish colonial texts, and oral traditions. Zborover provides an overview of the twenty-seven centuries of literate societies in Oaxaca followed by a summary of the history of integrative research and the theoretical schools that informed these works. These themes are extended by Zborover in his chapter on decolonizing historical archaeology in Oaxaca (chapter 12), which includes a