Review

Historical archaeologies of spatial practices and power

Jonathan Walz*

J. Cameron Monroe. *The precolonial state in West Africa: building power in Dahomey*. xvii+265 pages, 83 b&w illustrations, 3 tables. 2014. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 978-1-107-04018-2 hardback £65 & $99.

James A. Delle. *The colonial Caribbean: landscapes of power in the plantation system*. xv+265 pages, 64 b&w illustrations, 7 tables. 2014. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 978-0-521-74433-1 paperback £20.99 & $32.99.



Archaeologists who employ regional landscapes as an organising principle tend to be more concerned about how landscapes—natural, built and imagined—*reflect* cultural values than how landscapes *shape* human relations and community perspectives. As the authors of these two volumes skilfully demonstrate, communities deploy landscapes to materialise, and even to naturalise, claims to political authority and power. They reveal how the study of landscape at multiple scales spurs narratives and counter-narratives about how people experience the world and vie for control of it. Together, J. Cameron Monroe and James Delle advance the inherent possibilities of space and scale in historical archaeology.

Social hierarchy and the struggle to maintain, redirect and undermine power lie at the crux of these investigations. The authors use archaeology to unveil spatial practices of power. In their projects, they address agency, community practices and global processes in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Benin and colonial Jamaica, respectively. In doing so, Monroe and Delle emphasise political economy and landscape. For instance, each author employs archaeological techniques and spatial analysis to evaluate the micro-politics of power within overarching political structures. Thus, new interpretations emerge about struggles for power, between African elites and commoners in the Kingdom of Dahomey (in the region of modern Benin) and between European planters and enslaved Africans in Jamaica. The patterns, subtleties and contingencies of power are laid bare. In the best tradition of historical archaeology, both of these long-term projects make textured pasts that challenge and substantially extend—rather than simply reiterate—known histories.

In *The precolonial state in West Africa*, Monroe addresses Dahomey's political character and its degree of integration into the Atlantic commercial economy between 1774 and 1892. He examines the strategies of Dahomean kings to consolidate, extend, maintain and reorient political order. With clarity and sophistication, Monroe shows that elites developed a 'royal palace sphere' to advance their agenda. He details the evidence for the rise and expansion of the Dahomean royal palace sphere and for landscape as its organising principle. The 'sphere' rendered local political subjects visible to economic exploitation by elites, it monopolised and refashioned cultural memory to naturalise state power ("gerrymandering history", p. 149), and it accentuated the sense of social distance between ruler and ruled in intimate architectural spaces. Monroe demonstrates how spatial (and other material) strategies within and among palace sites served the political ambitions of kings to ground order. These practices were spatial as much as bureaucratic in character.

Through archaeological survey and evaluations of oral traditions and historical documents, Monroe

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locates a number of royal palace complexes and sites, including country palaces, ritual structures, military outposts and craft centres. Moreover, he traces the taxation schemes and trade networks tied to slaving and, later, 'legitimate' commerce in West Africa. He concludes that space mitigated factional control by palace residents, nobles, bureaucrats, ritual leaders and wealthy merchants. In other words, no single elite group controlled the political order on the ground. Rather, landscape worked to inculcate a balanced order in Dahomey's expanding territory during a period of turbulence. Monroe, however, is equally drawn to the diverse (and, to this point, underemphasised) cultural practices of non-elites who contested political centralisation.

Spaces, spatial relationships and performances at certain sites forged cultural values on this changing landscape. As such, Monroe hypothesised at the beginning of his project that the balance of power among invested parties—elite and commoner—might best be identified in landscapes and performances of landscape. These performances include, but are not limited to, rural safe houses, annual feasts and the remarkable iconography contained within palaces. He shows, through a range of materials, that in Dahomey power was "diffuse and multicentric" (p. 165) and could not be captured or controlled in its entirety by any one constituency. Those who contested authority could underwrite *or* undermine political centralisation. Dahomey's regional dynamics suggest, therefore, a political form and set of relationships that responded to Atlantic commerce *and* internal politics, the latter now more evident through archaeological approaches to landscape.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, in *The colonial Caribbean*, Delle also employs historical archaeology to understand complex human relations during a time of societal change. He highlights the modes and dynamics of production tied to coffee plantations through time. Delle interprets Jamaican colonial society before, during and after the abolition of slavery in 1834. He produces a Marxist-informed archaeology of plantations; landscapes that the author views as "agents in the negotiation of social relations among members of a given social class, and between members of conflicting social classes" (p. 19). Island, plantation, village and household sites, and the "dynamic sociospatial landscape[s]" (p. 21) they formed (particularly in river valleys), played direct roles in negotiating human relations in Jamaica. In the author's framing, a 'dialectical conflict' arose between classes, which, inevitably, redefined the relations of production and shifted the layout of landscapes away from a strict maintenance of social hierarchy, enabling inequalities of class and race.

Landscapes, as well as day books, correspondence and plantation ruins, support Delle's interpretations. He interrogates the placement and layout of coffee plantations that advanced the elite networks and class consciousness of the time. But, among other points of investigation, the author also evaluates individual house yards within the cramped villages of enslaved persons. Marshall's Pen, a slave village, serves as a key case study. In Delle's estimation, the material world—landscape, architecture and artefacts—created and mediated the region's social relations between planters and enslaved workers, "not necessarily by display, but through action" (p. 12). Movement through such spaces helped to shape daily rituals and human relations with the physical and social world. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* is successfully applied (as it is in Monroe's work on performance in Dahomey) to material arrangements, both at and within Jamaican coffee plantations.

Delle grasps the realities of the slave-based plantation system, but, perhaps just as importantly, considers why, in the end, this forced arrangement failed. He emphasises, for instance, that excavations of houses and compounds indicate that yard spaces were loci of production for local (not export) markets. This evidence, Delle argues, presents an internal contradiction—namely, a robust export market for coffee and other goods *alongside* a successful market tradition that met local needs—which was partially responsible for the slave system's downfall. Based on material and other findings from his project, especially analyses of post-emancipation spaces, Jamaicans reconciled the contradictions in the plantation mode of production. *The colonial Caribbean* successfully demonstrates that external (global) impetus did not always dictate outcomes in the Caribbean during early European engagement. Thus, Delle's work aligns with that of other historical archaeologists critical of simplistic treatments of scale and power dynamics.

Landscapes, spatial practices, and power help to define the structure of diverse human communities as are found in Benin and Jamaica. Through their multi-year field projects and analysis, both Monroe and Delle remind archaeologists that space works at different scales to shape social relations. Field investigations and analysis discern meaningful

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patterns and any contradictions within and across scales. Historical archaeologists, in particular, have done a poor job eliciting scalar contradictions, perhaps because they tend to overemphasise 'global' and 'local' aspects at the expense of regions. Monroe and Delle offer robust correctives that are multi-scalar and attentive to 'effective scale'—the scale at which pattern and meaning are recognised—including regionally. They unveil the complexities of lives and social entanglements within and across communities.

As William Marquardt and Carole Crumley (1987; also Marquardt 1992) articulated decades ago, researchers who think dialectically tend to conduct multi-scalar analysis. With these two books, Monroe and Delle present archaeologies conscious to landscape and power that are transformative in their historical implications. Landscapes, as agents of a sort, help communities to negotiate developing relations within and among groups, particularly at times of substantial change. What other meaningful and textured pasts have been subdued by a failure to recognise landscape *and* our archaeological strategies as *shapers* of human pasts? To practise landscape archaeology at a regional scale and to consider forces within and beyond the region takes great resources, time and effort. Ultimately, Monroe and Delle show how such a commitment to historical archaeologies of landscape and spatial practices can enrich our understanding of human communities and make new histories.

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