
Chieftoms and Other Archaeological Delusions

by Timothy R. Pauketat. AltaMira Press, Lanham, MD. 257 pp. ISBN 0-7591-0828-5 (hardcover) US\$70. ISBN 0-7591-0829-3 (paperback) US\$29.95. 2007.

THIS BOOK IS A PASSIONATE POLEMIC about several “delusions” Pauketat believes lead archaeologists into serious theoretical and methodological errors that contribute to the destruction of North America’s heritage through bad CRM (and bad academic) projects. Ideas, theories, and models really matter. The book is about what is wrong with the study of social complexity, Mississippian archaeology, and North American archaeology generally, and how to fix it. It is not the standard academic polemic, where accusations of idiocy, rigidity, and even bigotry are couched in delicately mellifluous, polysyllabic, obscure prose that can mask an iron fist of apposite thought and evidence or merely be rapid verbiage. The prose here is informally sardonic and, in unabashed imitation of Kent Flannery’s famous vignettes in *The Early Mesoamerican Village* (1976), Pauketat uses a small cast of characters to personify his case.

Pauketat’s notion of delusions comes from Marvin Harris’ concluding commentary in *New Perspectives in Archaeology* (1968), the New Archaeology’s founding edited volume. Pauketat quotes Harris’ warning against the “sophisticated delusions” of socio-cultural anthropology. Among the most pernicious of these delusions, in Pauketat’s view, is the concept of the chiefdom, particularly as it is applied to the Mississippian. This book does not lend itself to the standard review format in which the reviewer summarizes the chapters. It makes

more organizational sense to present the author’s main points, and, along the way, introduce his characters and the book’s organization. I start by looking more closely at Harris’ warning and what he thought archaeologists should be doing.

Archaeologists should shrive themselves of the notion that the units you seek to reconstruct must match the units in social organization which contemporary ethnographers are tempted to tell you exist... To set yourself free, you have only to reflect upon the prodigious research effort now being expended by your colleagues in cultural anthropology upon the attempt to state the cognitive rules by which sociocultural systems are allegedly governed... You have knowledge of the material remains of populations, and thus you can... [measure] variations in the demographic and behavioral characteristics of such populations over long periods of time in relationship to specific complexes of biological, natural and cultural features of their ecosystems (Harris, *New Perspectives in Archaeology* 1968:360).

Harris, in short, was advocating the materialist, adaptationist archaeology being advanced in *New Perspectives* and which Pauketat unrelentingly attacks in *Delusions*. Pauketat turns Harris on his

head, using his warning to archaeologists against the archaeology he supported.

However, Pauketat believes he and Harris would agree on Pauketat's key claim: that the material archaeological record—stuff in time and space—is far closer to the reality of the past and human behavior than are observations by ethnographers or historians' written texts. The reality of the past, in Pauketat's words, "was *what people did* and *how people experienced* social life. As it turns out, such a doing and experiencing almost always has a material and spatial dimension ... Archaeologists have access to this dimensionality through artifacts, spaces and dimensions" (p. 2).

So what are the title's delusions? The most serious, at least from the standpoint of Mississippian studies, is that of chiefdoms. The chiefdom concept is flawed for any number of reasons, but chief among them is that as a typological construct, it reifies social and political institutions and masks enormous social and political variation across space and time. For Pauketat, chiefdoms, or any institutions for that matter, are real only to the extent that people act as though they are and thus continually create and recreate them. Application of the concept produces an impression that the Mississippian was everywhere the same, and that it developed everywhere in lockstep. Also, the concept of chiefdoms is closely tied to the sort of social or cultural evolutionism that comes to us from Spencer, via Tyler, White, Service, and others. Pauketat rejects this out of hand, along with anything that smacks of evolution, at one point lumping Spencerian social evolution with modern biological evolution and dismissing both as inapplicable to human social affairs. He argues instead for a position he calls "historical processualism," an appellation that, if taken literally, would have Binford spinning in his grave, if he were dead.

The historical part is clear: Pauketat wants narratives rich in human agency. I don't understand the processual part unless it is the broad comparative approach he advocates and uses.

Other delusions include what he terms the "Minimalist" position. There are actually several of these. One is exemplified by "Yoffee's Rule." In dealing with debates about whether particular ancient societies were states or not, Norman Yoffee once stated something like: "If you have to debate it, it isn't" (Yoffee, *Archaeological Theory: Who Sets the Agenda?*, pp. 60–78, 1993). If you have to debate whether an ancient social formation was a chiefdom or not, it wasn't; if you have to debate whether there were occupational specialists, there weren't; and so on. Applied more as an attitude than a hard rule, it downplays the potential complexity of Southeastern, even Native American, social and political dynamics by relegating them to a residual category: "they were never sufficiently complex to preclude debate." The minimalist position also downplays or ignores the spatial scale of those dynamics and the data requirements for addressing important questions of the North American past.

For Pauketat, those dynamics play out most importantly at the community level. Most human actions related to institutions and the material record (e.g., mounds) center on identity and community building. Communities are and were fluid; people singly and in groups move around and their actions in one place affect people and communities elsewhere, sometimes at great distances. Thus, there are multiple spatial scales—some quite large—at which these variable dynamics reverberate and need to be understood. Methodologically, we can only come to grips with them if we collect appropriately

large samples, which is something he strongly thinks we are not doing.

These issues and many more are pursued through the book's nine chapters. The first is the essential Introduction, in which Pauketat lays out the delusions and his intentions. Chapter 1, "Principles and Principals," is Pauketat's manifesto in which he presents the book's core issues and their histories, and introduces the book's characters. In Chapter 2, he further develops his critique of chiefdoms, introduces minimalism, and further develops his characters. These include some real people: Pauketat himself and David Anderson, among others. The fictional characters are a female graduate student dubbed the Uncertain Graduate Student (UGS) to contrast her with the certainty and clarity of Flannery's famous Skeptical Graduate Student (SGS). UGS is the student of Dr. Science, SGS (or someone exactly like him) 30 years later, grown rigid and doctrinaire. I suppose I will wait in vain for a work of this kind to lampoon a Dr. Humanist. The core character is the Practical Southern Archaeologist (PSA), a government archaeologist who, according to Pauketat, has dug more Mississippian sites than most academic archaeologists can dream about. Finally, there is Darth Evader, a contract archaeologist who is presented as the quintessential slime-ball, including hints that he may be a sexual predator, who would certainly sell out his grandmother, or Cahokia, for a contract and who makes his living by successfully finding nothing.

The narrative arc of the characters has UGS struggling to write her proposal for an NSF dissertation grant to support her excavations—initially quite limited in extent—at a Mississippian centre. She contends with her adviser, Dr. Science, who personifies the minimalist stance and is (surprise, surprise) arrogant and

narrow-minded. On her way to the site, she attends a small regional conference where she encounters Pauketat, PSA, and Darth Evader. Pauketat develops much of his argument through long-running conversations between UGS and PSA. PSA is, of course, the quintessential character in the mythology of North American archaeology: the wise "dirt archaeologist" who has spent his life in the field, drives a battered pickup truck, sees through academic BS, and can drink academics under the table. This character has lyrical roots in Loren Eiseley's essays and poetry and his finest role in archaeological literature was in Flannery's "The Golden Marshalltown" (*American Anthropologist* 84:265–278). He is, of course, male and his expertise and wisdom are always based on years of fieldwork rather than, say, years spent in the laboratory analyzing all that detritus that puts us so close to the reality of the past.

At the beginning of Chapter 3, Pauketat has UGS to go to sleep for three chapters so he can build his theoretical and methodological arguments. He does so by examining aspects of the empirical record for the Southeast in general and Mississippian specifically. In Chapter 3 ("Breaking the Law of Cultural Dominance"), he looks at Archaic mounds (e.g., Poverty Point), continues the critique of chiefdoms, and builds the arguments underpinning the causal importance of communities. Chapter 4 ("Parsing Mississippian Chiefdoms") examines multiscalar diversity in the Mississippian. Chapter 5 ("The X Factor") synthesizes his case for the causal centrality of community building. Chapter 6 ("Yoffee's Rule and Cahokia") addresses the question of "what was Cahokia?" and in doing so explores our understanding of civilization, state, and cities. Along the way he argues that Cahokia was a city and at the center of a phenomenon that

encompassed much of the Southeast for a time. He extends this in Chapter 7 (“What Constitutes Civilization? Community and Control in the Southwest, Mexico and Mesopotamia”), comparing Cahokia to a number of key global examples of early cities. By this time, UGS has awoken and in Chapter 8 (“Truth, Justice and the Archaeological Way”) she is ready to begin work at her site and apply the lessons learned in the course of the book, one of which is the necessity of extensive excavations and large samples. Pauketat even lets her get the better of him in one exchange.

This is a very entertaining, creative, and irritating book. It would enliven a seminar class on complexity, archaeological theory, or North American archaeology, although students would need to be aware of rhetorical slights of hand, such as bringing in Harris to support an intellectual agenda he clearly would oppose. While I cannot speak to problems with the Mississippian, I found much with which to agree and much where I disagreed. Archaeologists do need, in Harris’ words, to shrive ourselves of the expectation that our temporal-spatial units can or should replicate those of social-cultural anthropology and we will not be taken seriously as a discipline until we do so. By trying to do paleoethnography, we are ill-equipped to deal with variability in the past. On the other hand, we cannot abandon the ethnographic and historical record. As I have commented elsewhere, to do so would leave us in the position of a paleontology cut off from living organisms. The problem of typologies masking variability is also real. On the other hand, classification is a necessary first step in coping with variability, and the chiefdom concept, despite its problems, has proven archaeologically useful, as a survey of the global literature attests.

The character Darth Evader was among the things that irritated me. Since

the majority of archaeologists in North America earn their living through CRM and the vast bulk of funding for archaeology derives from CRM, a character that actually grappled with the complexities of doing good ethical work in a competitive, market-driven field would have been interesting. I know many such archaeologists in the Southeast and I suspect at least two or three were in the bar when Pauketat, UGS, and PSA first saw Darth Evader at the regional conference. Perhaps Pauketat doesn’t know them.

Pauketat does put his finger on a serious methodological and intellectual issue: the incredible shrinking archaeological record. This is partially a result of actual shrinking through development-caused site destruction, but it is also shrinking in effect as the scope of projects gets smaller. Pauketat attributes this to the mistaken minimalist scientific position that significant archaeological questions can be answered by small amounts of data, as well as to evil CRM archaeologists (Darth Evader) doing small low-bid projects or just writing off sites. However, it is also a consequence of what Lipe (*Ethics in American Archaeology*, pp. 113–117, 2000) sees as a distortion of the conservation ethic in archaeology that unnecessarily and mistakenly restricts excavation. Pauketat’s fear, indeed his anger, is driven by the strong view that archaeology really matters, its questions about the past really matter, and these can only be answered by archaeologists so we need to get it right. We need to broaden our intellectual scope and ambitions. With that I heartily agree.

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