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INTRODUCTION

As with all cultures, that of Dahomey is the product of its historic past; hence the more this past can be recovered, the greater the insight with which its civilization today can be studied.

(Herskovits 1938: 4)

WEST AFRICA IN THE ATLANTIC ERA (THE SIXTEENTH THROUGH nineteenth centuries AD) rests uncomfortably at a point of articulation in scholarly debates on the origins of social complexity and the state. A bewildering diversity of societies developed during this period, from expansive centralized states and empires, through smaller-scale segmentary lineage societies, whose survival rested on complex relationships with neighboring polities and European mercantile interests along the coast (Figure 1.1). Given the historical richness of the period, and unbroken cultural continuity into the twentieth century, West African kingdoms that emerged during the Atlantic Era figured prominently in scholarly discussions of non-Western political dynamics for much of the twentieth century (Forde & Kaberry 1967; Herskovits 1938; Law 1977b; McCaskie 1995; Smith 1969; Wilks 1975). Until the past few decades, however, scholars commonly downplayed the local underpinnings of West African polities, attributing the rise of the first cities and states across the region to the arrival of conquerors and traders from distant shores (cf. Levtzion 1973). The precolonial state in West Africa was thus viewed largely as “a superstructure erected over village communities of peasant cultivators rather than a society which has grown naturally out of them” (Oliver & Fage 1962: 47), defined in terms of markers of civilization introduced from elsewhere (Connah 2001; Mitchell 2005).

The core assumptions that supported these ideas have deep roots in colonial mythologies of the exogenous origins of African civilization, and have been dismissed whole handedly (R. J. McIntosh 1999; S. K. McIntosh 1999b; Monroe 2013; Stahl 1999a), yet they have had clear and long-lasting consequences for the archaeological study of West Africa’s past. On one hand, as anthropologists of the



Figure 1.1. Eighteenth-century political map of West Africa (Snelgrave 1734, courtesy of the New York Public Library).

1960s turned to archaeology to uncover material traces of the core, unadulterated processes of cultural evolution, West African cases were deemed inconsequential (S. K. McIntosh 1999b). Despite the clear contributions of West African case studies to earlier anthropological and historical visions of non-Western political institutions, the global archaeological community largely neglected West African examples. Rather, scholars turned to the “core” areas of “pristine” state formation in the past (Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Mesoamerica, the Indus Valley, China, the Andes, etc.). In recent years, however, cultural contact has been recentered within discussions of sociocultural change in the past (Cusick 1998; Stahl 2001; Wolf 1982), and archaeologists have shifted from outlining universal evolutionary trajectories to tracing variable pathways toward social complexity, resulting in a broadening of perspectives on the dynamics of complex societies worldwide (Stein 1998). West Africa of the Atlantic Era has subsequently reemerged as an ideal context in which to explore the dynamics of political centralization in the past (Monroe & Ogundiran 2012b).

This volume explores the rise and expansion of the kingdom of Dahomey on the Slave Coast of West Africa from the seventeenth century until its eventual conquest by French colonial forces between 1892 and 1894. Dahomey emerged out of the political turbulence of the Atlantic Era, weathering the expansion of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the eighteenth century and a destabilizing shift toward the export of agricultural products (chiefly palm oil) in the nineteenth century. Dahomey thereby established itself as a principal partner in trans-Atlantic

commerce and an oft-cited example of political centralization in West Africa. A century of serious academic scholarship on Dahomey, paralleling similar trends in the archaeology of social complexity, has revealed a confluence of Dahomean political, military, and ritual institutions, what I refer to throughout this volume as the *royal palace sphere*, geared toward extending the reach of the Dahomean state in powerful ways (Akinjogbin 1967; Bay 1998; Diamond 1951; Herskovits 1938; Johnson 1980; Law 1991; Manning 1982; Monroe 2007a; Polanyi 1966; Ross 1987b; Soumonni 1995). However, this same body of research has unveiled deep fracture lines within this royal palace sphere – fractures that resulted from the aggrandizing tendencies of powerful factions of palace residents, nobles, bureaucrats, ritual leaders, and wealthy merchants; fractures that the royal dynasty struggled to mend over the course of two centuries.

This volume adopts an archaeological perspective on space and landscape, enriched by oral and documentary data, to explore how Dahomean kings sought to, and sometimes succeeded in, mending these fractures, resulting in lasting political order over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The central argument of this volume is that the rise of palace *institutions* in Dahomey was made possible by architectural campaigns to build palace *spaces* that extended the reach of the state across its rapidly expanding territories. Focusing on the design and regional distribution of royal palaces built across the Abomey Plateau, the political heartland of greater Dahomey throughout its history, this volume reveals that Dahomean kings deployed a suite of spatial strategies designed to (1) extend political and economic control down to the local level; (2) refashion public memory vis-à-vis the emerging state; and (3) accentuate status distinctions between ruler and ruled. The Dahomean example reveals, therefore, how states are “built” in two senses. On one hand, this analysis provides insights into how kings constructed a civil society from the ground up, tracing the rise and expansion of Dahomean palace institutions designed to centralize power and authority and minimize factional conflict. On the other hand, the following analysis reveals how state political projects depend, in a very literal sense, on architectural strategies designed to inculcate political order within their territorial domains. States emerge from this analysis as a set of spatial as much as bureaucratic practices, designed to maintain political order in the face of opposition.

ARCHAEOLOGIES OF THE STATE: FROM MACROSTRUCTURE TO MICROPOLITICS

Explaining how decentralized political systems transformed into centralized states has been the focus of sustained archaeological research for more than a century. Scholars once defined the state in reference to a series of cultural advancements (agriculture, urbanism, monumental architecture, literacy, etc.) that were first initiated in a limited number of world regions (Childe 1936; Morgan 1985 [1877]). Drawing from Enlightenment-era models of government,

anthropologists of the mid-twentieth century examined the functional role of political institutions, an approach that generated a range of “managerial models” for the origins of the state in prehistory (cf. Service 1975). These models held that early states emerged to resolve social and ecological problems requiring a complex political apparatus. Archaeologists sought to identify the economic and environmental “prime movers” that provided the stimulus for the evolution of state management systems in the past, privileging factors such as population pressure, agricultural intensification, geography, resource competition, warfare, and long-distance trade (Carneiro 1970; Sanders et al. 1979; Wittfogel 1957). The state was viewed as a set of specialized and centralized political institutions that evolved in response to complex interactions between multiple cultural and environmental stimuli (Adams 1966; Earle 1991; Flannery 1972; Haas 1982; Johnson & Earle 2000; Plog 1975; Redman 1978; Wright 1970, 1994; Wright & Johnson 1975).

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, however, archaeologists began to reconceptualize the origins of the state dramatically. Drawing largely from Marxian perspectives on political organization in non-Western societies (cf. Fried 1967), scholars argued that political centralization was marked by the creation of institutions designed to centralize control over a variety of spheres of social interaction, and they identified the seeds of this process in a range of prestate political formations (Earle 1977, 1987a, 1991; Kristiansen 1991; Price & Feinman 1995). The near exclusive focus on political *integration* as an adaptive response to socioenvironmental stress was replaced by an emphasis on political *inequality* and social *hierarchy*. Archaeologists increasingly sought to tease out the range of strategies emerging elites deployed in order to centralize power in the past (Earle 1997). The coordinated use of military force (Carneiro 1970; Haas 2001; Johnson & Earle 2000), the control of material wealth (Brumfiel & Earle 1987; D’Altroy & Earle 1985; Earle 1987b, 1997), and the promulgation of state-centric ideologies (Ashmore 1989; Demarest 1992) were all seen as centrally important strategies in this process (Yoffee 2005: 38). Power, and the material strategies for achieving power, thus took center stage in archaeological discussions of the emergence of social complexity and the state worldwide.

This reorientation has had a number of unintended consequences for the comparative study of state formation in the past. First, research on elite power strategies has revealed significant variability in how leaders rose to prominence (Earle 1997), suggesting alternative pathways toward social complexity involving a variety of corporate and exclusionary power strategies (Blanton et al. 1996; Demarest 1992; Earle 1991; Flannery 1983; Flannery & Marcus 1983; Fox 1987; Fox et al. 1991; Hayden 1995; Kristiansen 1991; R. J. McIntosh 2005; S. K. McIntosh 1999a, 1999b, 1999c; Trigger 2003). In light of emerging evidence for variability in political structure, scholars have become increasingly sensitive to the role of cultural and historical contingency in shaping political culture in the past (Ashmore 1989; R. K. McIntosh 2005; S. K. McIntosh 1999b, 1999c;

Monroe & Ogundiran 2012a; A. T. Smith 2003, 2011; Stahl 1999a, 2001, 2004; Yoffee 1993, 2005).

Second, the surge of interest in the role of elite agency has revealed a range of political agents who actively participated in the construction of political order in the past. As Elizabeth Brumfiel (1992) observed, the dynamics of gender, class, and faction have emerged as centrally important themes in the analysis of complex societies worldwide. Indeed, archaeologists are revealing how counterstrategies deployed by agents from a range of political identities can both underwrite and undermine the process of political centralization, dramatically shaping the contours of political organization in the past (Blanton & Fargher 2008; Brumfiel 1992; Ehrenreich et al. 1995; S. K. McIntosh 1999b). *Power* emerges as diffuse and multicentric, rather than a resource to be captured and controlled (cf. Foucault 1980).

African polities are playing an increasingly visible role in this discussion (S. K. McIntosh 1999a, 1999c). On one hand, African contexts have illuminated *heterarchical* pathways to social complexity, in which overlapping and decentralized political institutions are integrated by forms of corporate power that resist, or at least restrain, the development of social hierarchy (Crumley 1995; S. K. McIntosh 1999b). Whereas archaeologies of social complexity have privileged *vertical* differentiation, that is, social hierarchy, in gauging political organization in the past, the heterarchy concept demands that social complexity be reconceptualized “as the degree of internal differentiation (horizontal as well as vertical) and the intricacy of relations within a system” (S. K. McIntosh 1999b: 11; see also Paynter 1989). Although the heterarchy concept was first applied in African contexts as a counterpoint to the chiefdom, the implications for the study of the state in Africa are clear. Anthropologists worked for the better part of a generation to identify the key processes whereby political systems rooted in kin-based power (i.e., chiefdoms and the conical clan) transform into centralized bureaucratic states (Fried 1967; Haas 1982; Johnson & Earle 2000; Service 1975). Many African societies present the unique opportunity to examine how political entrepreneurs centralized power in the face of deeply rooted heterarchical principles of social organization, in which a lineage-based route to power is but one of many options (Monroe 2013).

Africanists have long recognized that political authority in many African polities varied between two ideological poles – the first accentuating the powers of kings and royal dynasties, and the second seeking to diminish the aggrandizing tendencies of elites in favor of the corporate body as a whole (Kopytoff 1999; Vansina 1999). Southall, for example, long ago advanced the notion of the *segmentary state* to describe expansive polities in which the ritual suzerainty serves as the primary integrative mechanism and in which the spheres of ritual and political power do not coincide neatly (Southall 1988). In such polities, exclusionary forms of power are counterpoised by various corporate associations (age sets, secret societies, title societies, etc.). Leaders disperse wealth and services to

attract followers, a political model Guyer and Belinga described as “wealth in people,” which depends on the “composition” of people, knowledge, and skills, rather than the “accumulation” of wealth and material resources, to successfully navigate complex social and natural environments (Guyer & Belinga 1995).

Rather than a hard and fast category defined by measurable thresholds and clearly defined boundaries, the state has been recast as a work in progress that depends as much on elite political maneuvering as on socioenvironmental stimuli. This reflects an overall shift in archaeological questions focused on *macro*-political structure, to the *micro*-politics of power (A. Smith 2011). Indeed, the state can be approached as an eclectic set of power strategies and political practices, which are often overlapping and mutually reinforcing, but are always shaped by political contest and struggle. This perspective elevates political *practice*, that is, the day-to-day doing of politics, over political *organization*, that is, the structured outcome of long-term political processes, as a critically important locus of analysis in the study of systems of inequality in the past.

As archaeological perspectives on politics have shifted from questions of integration and adaptation toward questions of power, domination, and resistance, archaeologists have drawn from a range of material sources as a window into the practice of power politics in the past. Archaeologists have been particularly attentive to exploring how elites manipulated the production, distribution, and consumption of material goods to integrate regions economically, to promote elite-centric ideological values, and to create social ties and accentuate distinctions among leaders and followers (Brumfiel & Earle 1987; Costin & Hagstrum 1995; D’Altroy & Earle 1985; DeMarrais et al. 1996; Earle 1987b, 1994, 1997; Feinman 1980; Renfrew & Shennan 1982; Sinopoli 1988; Wright & Johnson 1975). As a sphere of material practice that, by definition, both reflects and constrains human interactions at multiple social scales, the importance of space as a tool for shaping the outcomes of political struggle has been highlighted in recent archaeological research on states in the past (Ashmore & Knapp 1999; Monroe & Ogundiran 2012a; Pearson & Richards 1994; A. Smith 2003).

SPACE AND POWER IN COMPLEX SOCIETIES

Anthropological concepts of space and power have been intimately connected since the nineteenth century, providing a variety of vantage points from which to examine the origins and maintenance of state political institutions. Since the emergence of a cultural evolutionary agenda within anthropological archaeology in the nineteenth century, a central focus of research has been the identification of material signatures of social hierarchy in the archaeological record. Scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries focused enormous attention on the study of buildings and monuments as a window into the rise and regional extent of ancient civilizations (Childe 1936; Morgan 1985). Such studies read the built environment as closely determined by a host of various environmental,

cultural, social, or economic stimuli (Trigger 1968). The analysis of spatial patterning within buildings, across sites, and between sites within regions emerged as primary tools with which archaeologists sought to interpret cultural patterns in the past (Chang 1968). Politics and space were implicitly linked in this emerging paradigm, often referred to as *settlement archaeology*, and archaeologists spent a generation identifying rules of thumb for gauging social evolutionary change in the past (Flannery 1998).

In recent decades, archaeological thinking on spatial patterning at the regional level has transformed significantly. For one, archaeologists have expanded their conceptual gaze considerably to appreciate a broader range of archaeological features produced by human social and cultural practice, providing new vantage points from which to examine the dynamics of political practice in the past. Shifting away from a nearly exclusive emphasis on the study of settlements as a discrete unit of archaeological analysis, various “landscape” archaeologies have emerged to explore more diffuse remains of human behavior (Bintliff & Snodgrass 1988; Bradley 1978; Dunnell 1992; Dunnell & Dancey 1983; Ebert 1992; Foley 1981; Gosden & Head 1994; Knapp 1997; Rossignol & Wandsnider 1992; Yamin & Methany 1996). Additionally, archaeological research has built productively on anthropological interventions that theorize space and landscape as a key component of cultural production. Such theories declare that space does not exist a priori as a natural stage on which social processes unfold, but rather is *produced* by human social and cultural practice (Hirsch & O’Hanlon 1995; Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003b). This *relational* concept of space and landscape is increasingly mobilized in archaeological research to explore the dynamics of political maneuvering in complex societies (A. Smith 2003).

Although archaeological use of the landscape concept has tended to focus on material patterns at the regional scale, landscape perspectives can integrate modes of spatial practice at multiple scales of analysis, thereby bridging the gap that exists between individual agency and the regional and global processes in which such agency is embedded (Gosden & Head 1994; Marquardt & Crumley 1990; A. Smith 2003). The study of space, diffracted into a palimpsest of cultural practices at multiple social scales, has been coupled with renewed interest in exploring power and inequality in archaeology more generally. This shift has resulted in spatial archaeologies of power that are transforming our understanding of how state agents extended their political reach across territories, and how they sought to naturalize political power among subjects, providing valuable new perspectives on the nature of political power in the past. The following discussion highlights three interrelated spatial strategies elites employ to construct political regimes, what I refer to as the *spatial practices of power* in complex societies. These involve strategies designed to (1) render subjects visible, and thus exploitable, by political regimes; (2) manipulate cultural memory to establish historical precedent for elite power; and (3) naturalize a sense of social distance and status distinction between leaders and followers.

Visibility

The production of space is implicated in attempts by the state to track the flow of wealth and people across territories, thereby providing new ways of “seeing,” and therefore potentially exploiting, political subjects (Scott 1999). Archaeologists working at the regional scale have long examined the role of the state in constructing rural administrative facilities (Schreiber 1987), agricultural terraces and irrigation systems (Kolata 1986; Stanish 1994), complex road networks (Ur 2003), and other modifications to the physical environment, providing a valuable window into the emergence of state political economies in the past. Roads, settlements, irrigation systems, fortresses, and so forth combine to form a material transcript that can be read in terms of political centralization at the macropolitical scale (Wilkinson 2003).

However, such features reveal the range of political strategies elite agents adopt to extend political control across territories, highlighting how the production of space plays an active role in shaping relations of political power. Indeed, the construction of such features across regions provides leaders the opportunity to restructure the nature of production, extraction, and circulation of key resources necessary for underwriting elite authority. In the process, the production of such spaces carves out and defines new fields of social interaction between leaders and subjects, creating both opportunities and controls for those participating in the broader dynamics of civic life. The production of space at the regional scale thereby connects political centers within territories and binds towns and their rural countrysides, yielding complex webs of political power that materialize elite claims over specific spheres of social and economic activity. State-sponsored building projects stand, therefore, as centrally important tools for expanding the political viewshed of the state, rendering “the terrain, its products, and its workforce more legible – and hence manipulable – from above and from the center” (Scott 1999: 2). Archaeological analysis of state-building schemes at the regional level can therefore cast substantial light not only on political and economic organization of complex societies in the past, but also on the degree to which political regimes were able to assert their agendas within local communities.

Memory

The production of space is implicated in elite attempts at establishing a sense of the historical inevitability of political power. It is one thing for elites to construct such regional webs of political control. It is quite another to *naturalize* social inequality in the hearts and minds of political subjects. The production of space is clearly implicated in strategies to achieve this goal as well. Thinking on this issue has been powerfully influenced by the symbolic turn taken by anthropology during the 1980s. This intellectual shift resulted in a deeper understanding of the role of space in underwriting political inequality in the past. Specifically, scholars

came to appreciate the active role of space in shaping cultural conceptualizations of the world (Hodder 1994; Knapp & Ashmore 1999; Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003b). Initially, this intellectual turn resulted in the florescence of archaeological research that saw cultural landscapes (constructed, conceptualized, and ideational) as embedded with symbolic meaning (Knapp & Ashmore 1999). The built environment was seen as a form of nonverbal communication, a cultural text meant to be “read” (Blier 1987; Cosgrove & Daniels 1988; Duncan 1990; Hattenhauer 1984; Rapoport 1982).

Spatial patterns thereby emerged as a valuable analytical window into the process of cultural production. Archaeologists explored how regional patterns and settlement plans reflected cultural cosmologies, standing as material microcosms of the universe (Ashmore 1989, 1991; Ashmore & Sabloff 2002; Buikstra & Charles 1999; Fritz 1986; Knapp & Ashmore 1999; Marcus 1973a; J. Richards 1999; Vogt 1983; Wheatley 1971). Additionally, scholars explored how buildings are designed according to culturally shared principles of spatial organization (Deetz 1996; Glassie 1979; Hodder 1994). Transformations in the design of space at multiple analytical scales were read as indicative of shifts in cultural worldview, intimately tied to broader patterns of cultural-historical change (Ashmore 1989, 1991; Ashmore & Sabloff 2002; Deetz 1996; Fritz 1986; Glassie 1979; Hodder 1984, 1994; Vogt 1983; Wheatley 1971). However, initial forays into the symbolic nature of built environments were more concerned with revealing how buildings *reflected* cultural values, rather than illuminating the mechanisms whereby they might *shape* those values. Indeed, this symbolic turn did little to illuminate how subjects internalize cultural statements materialized in space, let alone explain their role in underwriting elite claims to power.

At a fundamental level, however, the production of space is a labor-intensive activity, and thus elite representations of space are most visibly materialized in architectural practice (Lefebvre 1991), an insight with profound implications for the study of space and power in the past (Ashmore 1991; Ashmore & Sabloff 2002; Fritz 1986; Innomata 2006; Lefebvre 1991; Moore 1996; A. Smith 2003). Monumental spaces, in particular, provide symbolically rich contexts in which the public can partake in elaborate displays of elite power. The performance of power in architectural space creates emotional ties between leaders and followers (Thrift 2004), ties forged not simply as a product of the conspicuous consumption of labor in the form of monumental buildings (Trigger 1991), but rather as a product of the particular cultural statements symbolically amplified in such spaces (Monroe 2010a). Although monumental architecture is thus often read simply as an important vehicle for expressing cosmological symbolism, the performance of power within such contexts creates powerful material links between existing power structures and deeper historical narratives of political or cosmological origins, thereby materializing claims to political authority in reference to deeper mythological pasts (Ashmore 1989, 1991; Fritz 1986; Helms 1999; Innomata 2006; Leone 1984; McAnany 2001). Monumental spaces thereby

provide contexts in which to narrate histories of power to a wide range of political constituencies.

Distinction

The production of space is implicated in elite strategies to accentuate social distinction between leaders and followers. The aforementioned insights have immediate implications for our understanding of how public monumental spaces promulgate elite-centric cosmologies, thereby underwriting claims to political authority. But what of the more subtle expressions of power politics that unfold in monumental spaces and in less dramatic or overtly symbolic settings? Indeed, how might the production of space have contributed to broader attempts to shape everyday political negotiations in the past? Whereas the symbolic power of public buildings and monuments to impact collective consciousness is often taken for granted, only recently have archaeologists paid attention to the mechanisms whereby space reflexively shaped cultural values in the past. Important moves to outline the mechanisms through which this process unfolds have come from explorations into the close connection between space, memory, and everyday practice. Potential insights into this issue have come from realms of social theory focused on how space conditions the physical and sensory practice of the world, thereby linking time and space in novel ways. Critical to these have been theories of practice (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Giddens 1984; Ortner 1984) and phenomenology (Heidegger 1982; Husserl & Gibson 1962; Merleau-Ponty 2002), which highlight how historical memory is rendered through spatial practice, an observation with significant implications for our understanding of both the possibilities for and the limits to political power in the past.

Phenomenological approaches to human sensory experience have contributed to our appreciation of how the production of space conditions an existential sense of “being-in-the-world” (Heidegger 1962), thereby shaping the cognitive dispositions of those who routinely move through those spaces. Phenomenological perspectives on architectural space draw from a broad philosophical tradition that advocates for “the reflective study of the essence of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view” (Husserl, cited in Smith 2007). Space thus emerges as the “totality of external world as mediated through subjective human experience” (Cosgrove 1993: 8–9). As such, the production of space is a historical process in which cultural memory is concretized in everyday experience. The production of space thereby produces narratives that order the way people both think about and experience the world (Basso 1996; Bender 1998; Tilley 1994). Buildings, monuments, and other landscape features shape the popular experience, perception, and imagination of that world (A. Smith 2003), grounding the historical memory of communities in *place* (Basso 1996; Cosgrove 1993: 8–9).