

Abstract

This study utilises several theoretical perspectives and analytical scales to examine the constructed, conceptualised and socialised landscapes of the Hay Plain, characterised by the mounded cultural deposits, regionally known as 'mounds', 'earth mounds' or 'oven mounds'. Mounds are found in widely separated areas of Australia, with a major concentration on the Hay Plain and adjacent Murray Riverine Plain. Previous archaeological research into mounds has frequently failed to investigate explanatory relationships or investigate the dynamics of human behaviour. This study examines three major themes, each with different approaches and analytical scales.

Firstly, the search for a fundamental explanatory model for the tightly bounded spatial and temporal patterns of mounds concluded that the distribution of mounds in Australia is directly related to a mid to late Holocene focus on managed, dense, predictable carbohydrate-rich plant crops in varying habitats, which needed prolonged cooking in heat retainer ovens to maximise the energy return.

Secondly, the study aimed to provide evidence of the intertwining of environment, human agency and historical processes, leading to generalised models of socio-cultural change. The large and rapidly constructed mounds of the Hay Plain wetlands provide evidence of resource-use intensification proposed for the mid to late Holocene in other areas of Australia (Lourandos 1997, David & Lourandos 1998). Mounds appeared much later than suitable habitats for the wetland plant crops extensively cooked in mounds, and are not the direct response to evolving wetland habitats. They reflect complex social strategies constrained by habitat potential.

Thirdly, as envisaged by Dobres (1995), concepts of interpretive archaeology such as landscape archaeology, style and gender were used as tools to examine the finer details and complexity of social processes that occurred on the Hay Plain. Mounds are constructed to 'style' templates and form an element of composed landscapes, which are appropriated, inscribed and socialised, forming palimpsests of meanings and memories reflecting social structures and histories.

The results of this study demonstrate that a range of complementary theoretical perspectives, temporal and spatial scales are necessary to provide a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the mound-building phenomenon.