Mapping the Mississippian Shatter Zone: The Colonial Indian Slave Trade and Regional Instability in the American South
Robbie Ethridge and Sheri M. Shuck-Hall (editors)
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Archaeologists are often asked to identify prehistoric artifacts, with a common accompanying question being: What tribe is it from? The book Mapping the Mississippian Shatter Zone, which focuses on the turbulent period following first contact between Europeans and Indians in the southeastern United States, repeatedly demonstrates why there are few straightforward answers for such a seemingly simple question. The chapters in this volume approach the extraordinary transformations that occurred during the contact period through the concept of the Mississippian shatter zone, a model which recognizes that multiple factors created conditions of profound social and political instability across the Southeast from the late 16th through early 18th centuries. The concept of the Mississippian shatter zone sees the persistent and region-wide instability of the contact period as having developed from the social and political void left when the Southeast’s politically complex but inherently unstable Mississippian societies were unable to withstand the epidemic diseases, integration into the world economy, and intensification of violence that were inextricable elements of the colonial process. Global economic forces and violence were fused at the local level in the practice of Indian slaving, the dominant economic activity of the shatter zone, which involved the commercially oriented capture and sale of Native Americans for labor in the colonial economy. It was within the region-wide turmoil of the shatter zone that the native cultural landscape of the Southeast was transformed, as the numerous, autonomous native societies encountered by the De Soto entrada in the 1540s either went extinct, or coped with the aftermath of depopulation through disease and Indian slaving by dissolution, migration, and/or coalescence into new social and political entities. In the 1730s, at the end of this transformative period, the native political landscape mostly consisted of a few, large Indian polities, which constitute the historically known tribal groups of the Southeast (e.g., Catawba, Creek, Choctaw) that had been formed by the unique conditions of the shatter zone, as remnant groups came together to create new socially and politically viable societies.

Mapping the Mississippian Shatter Zone begins and ends with chapters by Robbie Ethridge, including an introduction that is impressive for its insights and breadth. The intervening 14 chapters are case studies that largely follow the chronology and geography of the effects of the shatter zone across the Southeast. William Fox’s chapter shows how incessant raiding by the Iroquois displaced into the Southeast a group—the Westos—who would become the region’s first militaristic slaving society. Maureen Meyers’s consideration of Westo slaving as an effective, albeit short-lived strategy, shows their history of displacement, coalescence, empowerment through slaving, and extinction through colonial-sponsored warfare, as an example of the shatter zone in microcosm. Eric Bowne focuses on the pivotal role played by the Westos in initiating the cycle of slaving, displacement, and coalescence that would persist across the region for nearly two centuries. Robin Beck, Jr., traces the development of the Catawba from the Mississippian chiefdoms of the Carolina Piedmont to their emergence in the 18th century as a coalescent society of groups seeking refuge from slaving by the Westo and Occaneechi. Mary Elizabeth Fitts and Charles Heath focus on strategies—such as coalescence, ethnic soldiering, and shifting settlements to take advantage of trade with Europeans—that allowed the people that would come to constitute the Catawba not only to survive, but thrive within the shatter zone. Stephen Warren and Randolph Noe explore how navigating the shatter zone’s ever-changing political landscape probably shaped the cultural ideals of mobility and travel.

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among the Shawnee, and led them to develop an identity that was not bound to any particular place. Ned Jenkins uses archaeological evidence to trace the prehistoric social foundations of the Creek confederacy, and to show that the migration, dissolution, and formation of societies had been occurring for centuries prior to contact. Sheri Shuck-Hall focuses on strategies, namely movement and coalescence, used by the Alabama and Coushatta to redefine their society within the context of the shatter zone. Matthew Jennings uses the formation of the Creeks to explore the use of violence as a strategy for empowerment and achieving goals. John Worth discusses the transformation and destruction of native societies in Florida through the strategic distribution of guns via colonial machinations and Indian slaving, which illustrates a process that occurred repeatedly across the region. Paul Kelton considers how the conflicts that led to the Yamasee War were exacerbated by population losses through epidemic diseases, increasing both demands by the English for Indian slaves, and native cultural practices of adoption as an alternative to slavery for enemies captured during raids. Patricia Galloway uses the Choc-taw to illustrate the importance of considering native perspectives and motivations concerning their interactions with Europeans. Marvin Jeter explores the shatter zone in the lower Mississippi Valley, especially regarding the possible movement of the Quapaw away from the slave raids of the Iroquois and into a region that had been depopulated since De Soto. George Edward Milne discusses the Natchez, who are often presented as the last Mississippians, as a product of the shatter zone—a coalescent society that successfully carved out a place in the tumultuous world of the shatter zone by incorporating different ethnic groups through strategies such as diplomacy and intermarriage.

Mapping the Mississippian Shatter Zone is an excellent volume that is essential reading for anyone interested in the late prehistory and early history of the Southeast. Its outstanding introduction and case studies provide an insightful and comprehensive overview of the shatter-zone concept and its application in the Southeast. This volume should be of much interest beyond the region as well, because of its more general contributions to the study of the aftermath of European and Native American interactions within a colonial context. One more general contribution is the shatter-zone concept’s explicit recognition that multiple factors interacted in complex ways to create the instability that characterized the contact period. Although a number of scholars have studied Mississippian political organization and the effects of European diseases, trade, and warfare on native peoples after contact, the shatter-zone model considers how the forces of colonialism—namely disease, capitalism, and violence—acted on preexisting conditions in native social and political organization to create a 200-year period of region-wide instability. Another contribution, perhaps the volume’s most important, is its emphasis on the extraordinarily disruptive and transformative effects of Indian slaving. One profound effect of Indian slaving was the development of numerous militaristic slaving societies, groups whose incredibly effective and destructive tactics caused the dissolution, migration, and extinction of other native groups. Ethridge (p. 26) states that “Indian slaving was one of the hammers that shattered the world in which they themselves existed,” and nearly every chapter in this excellent volume demonstrates the profundity of the social and political transformations that resulted.

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