Powhatan’s Werowocomoco: Constructing Place, Polity, and Personhood in the Chesapeake, C.E. 1200–C.E. 1609

ABSTRACT Colonial encounters within the Powhatan village of Werowocomoco in Tidewater Virginia have captured the public’s imagination through romantic literature and popular films. Shifting the focus of inquiry away from English colonial narratives and toward a history of landscape provides an alternative understanding of Werowocomoco as a Native place. Archaeological investigation has identified evidence of earthworks and related social practices that altered Werowocomoco’s built environment and subjective experiences of its spaces in ways that colonial chroniclers failed to appreciate. A landscape history combining built environments, cognitive maps, and spatial practices across the historic–precontact divide indicates that the settlement became a ritualized location for the production of political status and social personhood well before English colonization in the Chesapeake. Spatial practices rooted in Algonquian cosmology and centered on Werowocomoco shaped the origins of the Powhatan chiefdom and early colonial history through which Powhatans sought to incorporate Jamestown colonists into their world. A biography of Werowocomoco as a Native place illustrates how a deep historical anthropology may challenge notions of a “prehistoric” past comprised of homogenized societies lacking history.

Keywords: historical anthropology, colonial encounters, landscape archaeology, chiefdoms, Powhatans

IN DECEMBER 1607, Jamestown colonist John Smith took the colony’s shallop westward five miles to the mouth of the Chickahominy River (Smith 1986d:43–59). Seven months prior, 104 English men and boys had landed on Powhatan’s River (now the James) and began constructing James Fort and the first permanent English colony in the Americas. While separated from his men near the Chickahominy’s headwaters, Smith was attacked and captured by a large Native force led by Opechancanough, the Pamunkey weroance (commander) and brother of Wahunsenacawh, paramount of the Powhatan chiefdom. In the following weeks, Smith’s captors conducted him on a circuitous pathway through Tidewater Virginia, moving from the hunting grounds of the interior eastward to the horticultural village of Werowocomoco, Wahunsenacawh’s principal residence. Smith’s accounts of his captivity emphasize the manner in which Opechancanough, Wahunsenacawh, and Powhatan priests orchestrated his experience of the Chesapeake landscape, steering him through a series of Native places and rituals.

Centuries later, Smith’s writings have been translated into evocative narratives focused on his near-death experience and purported rescue by Wahunsenacawh’s daughter Pocahontas. These stories have entered the realm of U.S. folklore, initially as a result of 19th-century novels and poetry centered on Pocahontas’s relationship with Smith and more recently through animated and live-action films emphasizing similar themes. Largely lost in these representations, though, is Werowocomoco’s role as a politicized and ritualized place within which Wahunsenacawh sought to remake Smith as a weroance. After being abandoned by Wahunsenacawh in 1609 and largely forgotten in subsequent centuries, the site of Werowocomoco has become, once again, a politicized place as heritage promoters, Powhatan descendants, and local citizens prepare for the 400th memorial of Jamestown’s founding, often with differing agendas.

Recent efforts to study the Werowocomoco site seek to resituate the settlement’s past by looking beyond events involving Wahunsenacawh, Pocahontas, and Smith and toward a broader set of cultural practices that left traces in the archaeological record, documentary accounts, oral traditions, and ethnographic accounts of related Algonquian groups (Gallivan et al. 2006). One method of making this shift involves contextualizing colonial narratives within a history of built spaces, conceptual landscapes, and spatial practices. Encounters with places of Native power often appear as an initial chapter in the annals of European
colonialism. From Hernán Cortés’ arrival in the imposing Mexica center of Tenochtitlan (Todorov 1984) to William Bartram’s experiences within the Cherokees’ less monumental council houses and plazas (Bartram and Squier 1853), colonial histories highlight Amerindian landscapes of political and sacred authority.

As discussed in the following, Werowocomoco’s landscape history indicates that social practices centered on the village incorporated Algonquian conceptions of space, which shaped the precontact emergence of the Powhatan chiefdom and subsequent colonial encounters in the Chesapeake. The settlement was redefined as a ritualized and politicized node within a social landscape of central places constructed by Algonquian communities in the Chesapeake after C.E. 1200. During the subsequent Protohistoric and early colonial periods, Werowocomoco’s spaces were fundamental to the creation of new forms of political status and social personhood, including those assumed by Wahunsenacawh and by Smith.

The impact of cultural practices within such lived spaces over the long term—that is, landscape’s “temporality” (Ingold 1993)—makes archaeology essential to a historical anthropology that takes seriously the pasts of “people without history” (Wolf 1982). Indeed, some “silences” (Trouillot 1995) in documentary sources may be addressed through the study of landscapes that substantiate the histories of social institutions (e.g., Hirsch and O’Hanlon 1995). By tracing the history of landscape features that were overlooked or misconstrued by European chroniclers, archaeology offers the potential to challenge colonial narratives and to recover meanings otherwise lost (Norman and Kelly 2004). The social creation of meaningful space (i.e., place) incorporates a wider vision of spatiotemporal references (i.e., landscape) indicating how a place is connected to others. Landscapes are, of course, multidimensional. They include perceptions of physical spaces, representations of conceptual space, and lived experiences of space that tie together the tangible and imagined (Lefebvre 1991:38–46; Soja 1996:68).

Research combining historical, archaeological, and ethnographic methods has considerable potential to recover meaningful elements of past landscapes. A “deep” historical anthropology that explores spatial practices and the social construction of place in precolonial settings may begin to challenge reifications of a “prehistoric” past comprised of homogenized, traditional, and static societies (Cobb 2005:563; Heckenberger 2005). The past becomes suffused in landscapes not only through arrangements of communities, houses, and objects but also through habitual movements of bodies that establish meaningful orientations (Bourdieu 1977:87–95; Merleau-Ponty 1962). Bodily experiences of landscape—specifically, the ways people dwell within and move through space—situates locations as recognizable places, giving meaning to space and time in the process (Weiss 1996:3–8). Production, exchange, and consumption each have spatial and temporal dimensions related to the creation of social status, so that landscape, economy, and personhood are closely intertwined (Munn 1986).

Landscapes associated with Amerindian chiefdoms—that is, regional polities with social ranking and institutional governance that organized a population of several thousand—often include large-scale or “monumental” architecture that transformed space within sacropolitical centers. Chiefly elites have come to dominate political relations by controlling military power, surplus staple production, “prestige-good” exchange, and ideology (Earle 1997). Societies classified as chiefdoms, though, are diverse and historically contingent (Feinman and Neitzel 1984) such that their material and symbolic processes can only be understood in local terms (e.g., McIntosh 1999). Indeed, chiefdom studies in regions with detailed archaeological records highlight such historical processes as culture contact, migration, diaspora, and the social negotiation of rank (e.g., Nassahey 2001; Pauketat 2004).

The archaeology of Amerindian chiefly centers indicates that elites frequently recognized the power of place, taking steps to transform settlements into politicized locations by segmenting space and by directing massed labor projects (e.g., King 2003; Lekson 1999). Within the Mississippian tradition, such strategies incorporated monumental construction, feasts, and elaborate death rites centered on landscapes that embodied authority and framed public ceremony (Knight 2001). In pre-Columbian Southern Amazonia, chiefly power was manifested in ritualized spaces, knowledge, and bodily dispositions that subsequently escaped the notice of ethnographers (Heckenberger 2005). Though easily recognized monumental architecture was absent from this region, place making and chief making were nonetheless intertwined in historical processes played out within village plazas over centuries.

Because of, in part, the perceived absence of monumental architecture marking central places, studies of chiefly societies in the Chesapeake region have focused on warfare (Axtell 2001), dominance of staple production (Turner 1976), control over wealth items (Potter 1993), interaction with neighboring Native societies (Rountree and Turner 1998), and the intervention of English colonists (Rountree 1989). Nonetheless, recent ethnohistorical and archaeological studies have demonstrated that Native cosmology played a fundamental, if often overlooked, role in the region’s history (e.g., Gleach 1997; Huntman 1990; Mallios 2006; Williamson 2003).

The following builds on this research by tracing a landscape history through which Werowocomoco became a ceremonial place central to the region’s political dynamics. The discussion is in three sections. First, I review current understanding of Powhatan culture and history relating to Chesapeake social landscapes during this period. Next, I turn to Werowocomoco as understood in the perceived spaces of ethnohistory and archaeology and through the conceptual maps of actors during the early colonial era. Finally, I outline a biography of place incorporating spatial practices and lived experiences of the village’s spaces from
C.E. 1200–1609. Shifting the focus of inquiry away from English narratives and toward a long-term history of place provides an alternative understanding of colonial encounters at Werowocomoco as a continuation of place making that began centuries before the arrival of the Jamestown colonists.

SITUATING WEROOWOCOMOCO WITHIN NATIVE LANDSCAPES OF THE CHESAPEAKE

Primary accounts of Contact-period Native societies in the Chesapeake come principally from Jamestown colonists (e.g., Smith 1986a, 1986b, 1986c, 1986d; Strachey 1953). These authors emphasize a world centered on the overwhelming authority of Powhatan, whose “proper name” was Wahunsenacawh. Social life in Tidewater Virginia was defined by inequities of status, authority, and wealth dominated by weroances, whom the English described variously as kings, commanders, or chiefs. Wahunsenacawh was known as the Mamanatowick (“great king”) of the Tidewater communities referred to by the English as “Powhatans.” Colonial authors initially borrowed this collective meaning of “Powhatans” from Wahunsenacawh himself (Smith 1986d:67). Following Wahunsenacawh’s usage, Powhatans included those Algonquian speakers of coastal Virginia who came under the influence of the Mamanatowick late in the 16th century. Residing in dozens of settlements and grouped into about 32 political districts, approximately 15,000 Powhatans lived in settlements lining coastal rivers (Rountree and Turner 2002).

The Powhatans’ mixed horticultural–foraging–fishing subsistence economy centered on riverine villages much of the year with a winter dispersal to the uplands. Five seasons marked the annual cycle (Smith 1986b:156–157). During the winter, households departed villages and traveled to hunting grounds in the western interior. Spring signaled a return to the village for fishing and planting. Social life remained focused on villages during summer, the earing of the corn, and harvest season. September through November coincided with the “chiefe feasts and sacrifice” (Smith 1986b:157), marking a transition between female-dominated horticultural pursuits and male-centered hunting activities. This cycling between eastern horticultural villages and western hunting grounds linked production practices to notions of landscape and gender (Williamson 2003:219).

Though the English focused on weroances, Native social structures in Tidewater Virginia involved multiple fields of authority that included sacred practitioners, glossed as priests or conjurors, in addition to the weroances with whom the English typically dealt. Weroances, and Wahunsenacawh himself, ruled only after consulting and receiving the consent of priests and councils comprised of men who had undergone the Huskanaw rite of passage, a term translated as “he has a new body” (Gerard 1907). The Powhatans considered such men to be quioccosuks (priests), who embodied a divine status (White 1998:140–141). Priests existed on the periphery of settled spaces and outside the social order more generally, tending quioccosuks (temples) located outside the village core. Weroances mediated between priests and commoners in Powhatan society, at times exercising an executive power to enforce priestly authority (Williamson 2003:202).

As Mamanatowick, Wahunsenacawh’s authority bridged the political and spiritual. The term Mamanatowick contains a variant of the Algonquian term manitou, a spirit-force permeating the world and apparent in the marvelous, the beautiful, and the dangerous (Bragdon 1996:184). By 1607, Wahunsenacawh’s influence was felt across Tsenacomacoh, an area stretching from the James to the Potomac and from the Fall Line to the Eastern Shore (see Figure 1). As envisaged in Smith’s (1986b) Map of Virginia, the Powhatan political landscape consisted of “kings’ houses,” settlements where weroances resided, and “ordinary houses,” situated along rivers. Tribute in the form of surplus staples, shell beads, copper, and deer skins flowed from commoners to weroances and from weroances to the Mamanatowick. In mortuary rituals reserved for weroances, the Powhatans interred the dead with such materials in temples. More than solely markers of “prestige,” shell and copper objects conveyed meaning because of their color symbolism, rarity, production process, and sources at the edges of Tsenacomacoh (Gallivan and Klein 2004).

The origins of the Powhatan chiefdom have been linked to changes in social organization and regional interaction during the Late Woodland (C.E. 900–C.E. 1500) and Protohistoric (C.E. 1500–C.E. 1607) periods (Dent 1995; Potter 1993; Rountree and Turner 1998). A recent analysis building on these studies (Gallivan 2003) focused on a reorganization of riverine villages beginning in the 13th century. Within these settings, Native societies transformed household organization (particularly storage), community arrangements, and regional exchange. Through gift giving, feast sponsorship, and other forms of patronage, surpluses that had previously remained within the domestic realm became funds of power wielded in the political arena. Archaeological evidence of elite residential architecture, council houses, palisades, communal feasting, and differential mortuary ritual appears during the Protohistoric 16th century, paralleling the development of a more hierarchical social setting in the Chesapeake. Oral traditions recorded by the Jamestown (Smith 1986b:173) and Roanoke (Lane 1955:60–61) colonists likewise describe Wahunsenacawh’s rise to power as beginning sometime prior to the 1580s. During the 16th century, palisades distinguished places dominated by chiefly elites. Mortuary practices that conveyed heightened social differentiation indicate that copper and shell items with a sparse distribution in the precontact era appear more frequently during the 16th and early 17th centuries. In short, through their association with palisade construction, elite mortuary ritual, and communal feasting, certain villages in the Chesapeake became places of chiefly authority.
Werowocomoco represented one such place. Smith (1986c:147) counted 40 “able” males at Werowocomoco, implying a total population of 133 to 200 (Potter 1993:22; Turner 1976:144). Though colonial accounts offer few details regarding Werowocomoco’s layout, Smith (1986d:69) did report that Wahunsenacawh’s house was “thirty score” from the river front—a distance of 600 feet or paces. Smith’s (1986b:173–174) description of Orapax, Wahunsenacawh’s residence after his departure from Werowocomoco, echoes elements of such spatial separation and links it to priestly authority. Wahunsenacawh’s house there was a mile from the main settlement in a thicket of woods in which he kept copper, beads, pearls, and skins. Frequentied only by him and by priests, the structure was longer than most residences and adorned with images of animals and a giant human at the corners.

Jamestown colonists visited Werowocomoco on six documented occasions between 1607 and 1609. The first such event began in December 1607 when Smith was captured, brought to the village, and released after several weeks (Smith 1986d:43–59). Nearly half of the colonists were dead by this time from starvation, disease, and hostilities with the Powhatans. Wahunsenacawh apparently followed the colony’s struggles carefully, sending gifts of maize and other provisions at opportune moments. Once Smith arrived at Werowocomoco, Wahunsenacawh spoke with him about areas and peoples under his command, insisting that the colonists leave Jamestown and resettle in Capahosic, located immediately downstream of Werowocomoco (Smith 1986d:57). Wahunsenacawh would see to it that
the colonists were fed and protected if they followed his instructions and produced hatchets and copper for him. Smith was then released and escorted back to Jamestown. In a later version of these events published in 1624, Smith (1986a:151) added the well-known story of an execution ordered by Wahunsenacawh and aborted after Pocahontas’ intervention. Two days later, Smith was taken to a structure in the woods where Wahunsenacawh announced publicly that Smith was now his son.

In February of 1608, Smith (1986d:63–79) returned to Werowocomoco with Christopher Newport, commander of the English fleet at Jamestown. Wahunsenacawh reminded Smith that he was now a weroance and that the colonists were no longer Tassantasses (strangers) or Paspaheghs (the territory surrounding Jamestown) but “Powhatans” (Smith 1986d:67). When Newport offered hatchets and copper in return for maize, Wahunsenacawh demanded that he present all of his items so the Mamanatowick could select those he wanted and reciprocate as he saw fit.

Instructed by the Virginia Company to crown Wahunsenacawh as a vassal to King James, Smith revisited Werowocomoco during the fall of 1608 to invite Wahunsenacawh to Jamestown for the ceremony. Smith (1986c:235–236), arriving during the harvest season of feasts and sacrifices, was led to a field where 30 women ran from the woods. Clothed with leaves and adorned with white, red, and black paint, the women formed a ring around a fire and began to dance and sing. The group’s leader wore deer antlers on her head while others carried bows, arrows, clubs, and swords. After this “maskarado” (1986c:236), Smith invited the Mamanatowick to Jamestown for his coronation. Wahunsenacawh angrily refused, demanding that Newport travel to Werowocomoco for the ceremony.

Following his coronation, Wahunsenacawh commanded his people to cease trading with the colonists and allow them to starve (Smith 1986c:245–250). In a situation of growing desperation, Smith planned to raid Werowocomoco to seize maize by force. Wahunsenacawh provided an opening for a visit when he sent word that he would provision Jamestown if the colonists built an English-style house for him and provide a grindstone, swords, guns, a rooster, a hen, copper, and beads. Returning to Werowocomoco in December 1608, Smith (1986a:196) reminded the Mamanatowick of his promise of provisions, and Wahunsenacawh repeated his demand for guns and swords. A brief standoff ended with an exchange of copper for maize. After Smith left Werowocomoco, interaction between the colonists and the Powhatans became increasingly violent. He visited Werowocomoco a final time early that year and learned that Wahunsenacawh had deserted the village, moving west to Orapax.

Jamestown colonists’ experiences at Werowocomoco include Wahunsenacawh’s efforts to incorporate the English by creating lasting social and political dependencies through the language of kinship and the material of food and symbolically potent goods. Meanwhile, the English sought to confer a subservient status on Wahunsenacawh through the authority of the English crown and the power of coronation. The struggles and negotiations between the English and Powhatans from 1607 to 1609—reflected in speeches, material exchanges, tactical maneuvers, and sacred rituals—meant that Werowocomoco served as a place of new social connections and novel cultural meanings. Scholars have long debated whether or not Pocahontas truly did rescue Smith (Rountree 2005:76–82; Townsend 2004:52–56). More significant for our understanding of Werowocomoco as a Native place, perhaps, are indications that during Smith’s captivity the Mamanatowick adopted him as a Powhatan, effectively transforming his social personhood in the process (e.g., Barbour 1970:23–26; Gleach 1997:129; Strong 1999:48–71; Williamson 1992).

WEROWOCOMOCO’S LANDSCAPE AS PERCEIVED ARCHAEOLOGICALLY

Recent investigation at the Werowocomoco site began with a survey that identified a large (18 hectare) Late Woodland–Contact-period settlement along Purtan Bay (Harpole et al. 2003). The surveyed land form varies in elevation from three to ten meters above mean sea level and is bounded by Leigh Creek, Purtan Bay, Bland Creek, and the ten-meter contour line on the northeast (see Figure 2). Subsequent excavations have focused on the site’s landscape history, horticultural practices within the settlement, and exchange relations before and after contact (Gallivan et al. 2006). Field methods have included remote sensing and a sampling strategy combining randomly placed excavation units with nonrandom blocks keyed to the survey and remote sensing. The remote sensing survey identified a dense scatter of anomalies along Purtan Bay, declining to the East until they cease approximately 125 meters east of Purtan Bay. Excavation in the western portion of the site has confirmed that the river front comprises the core area of late precontact and early colonial Native settlements with dense and overlapping array of post molds from house construction.

The river-front portion of the site also includes a series of intact soil layers beneath the plow zone. These stratified deposits contain Late Woodland and Contact-period diagnostics, anthropogenic soils, and well-preserved archeobotanical materials documenting the history of landscape use. Radiocarbon dating of these deposits indicates that they were formed during the late 13th through early 17th centuries C.E. (see Table 1). Application of an absolute ceramic seriation (Klein 1994) yielded dates consistent with the radiocarbon assays. This dating method, which relies on measurable changes in ceramic attributes over time, also indicates that most Protohistoric and Contact-period materials occur in the plow zone, heightening the importance of these deposits for understanding Werowocomoco’s history as a political center. Artifacts recovered from these deposits were predominantly Townsend ceramics (shell-tempered, fabric-impressed, or plain), quartzite lithics, and Jasper artifacts obtained from sources within the Chesapeake. Dispersed across eight hectares, materials from this settlement...
core record a marked expansion of the settled space and a sharp increase in the density and diversity of artifacts over the previous Middle Woodland period (500 B.C.E.–C.E. 900).

The eastern portion of the site contained a pair of remarkably long, parallel ditch features fundamental to Werowocomoco’s landscape history. Given the importance of water routes in Contact-period transportation systems and the location of the village’s residential core, this portion of the site likely represented the settlement interior. Separated from the village core by a distance of approximately 90 meters that contained few features or artifacts, these linear landscape features appear to segregate the spaces behind them. Parallel features 161 and 162, approximately 1.5 meters apart, extend roughly north to south for 210 meters before gently arcing to the east on the north side and turning more sharply eastward on the south side (see Figure 3). A break in the features of two meters—likely an entryway in a set of earthworks—appears near the center of the land form. The features have a maximum east–west width in plan of 1.75 meters and a maximum depth of 0.75 meters from the plow zone base. Excavated portions reveal a roughly basin-shaped profile and a series of soil horizons indicating that the ditches filled gradually over time with colluvial wash (see Figure 4). Recovered artifacts included Native ceramics, lithic debitage, and fire-cracked rocks. A series of radiocarbon dates from the feature fill reflect construction and use of the ditches during the late 13th through early 17th centuries C.E.

Their consistent orientations, sizes, and shapes indicate that the ditches are cultural features constructed in tandem or close in time. The overall size and layout of the earthworks are unclear at this point, though there are indications that they were part of a curvilinear ditch and embankment feature in the site interior. Circular earthworks surrounding Native settlements similar to features 161 and 162 have been identified in the Potomac River drainage (Blanton et al. 1999; Slattery and Woodward 1992; Stephenson et al. 1963). Ditches at these sites, though, were associated with palisades and surround nucleated settlements, unlike the more dispersed layout of the Werowocomoco site. Two concentric ditches encircle the Buck site.
TABLE 1. Radiocarbon Dates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Conventional C14 Age (bp)</th>
<th>Two-sigma Calibrated Low (C.E.)</th>
<th>Intercepts (C.E.)</th>
<th>Two-sigma Calibrated High (C.E.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Riverfront</td>
<td>Midden base</td>
<td>750+/−40</td>
<td>1220</td>
<td>1270</td>
<td>1300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverfront</td>
<td>Pit feature</td>
<td>730+/−60</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>1280</td>
<td>1320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverfront</td>
<td>Midden base</td>
<td>640+/−70</td>
<td>1260</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>1420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverfront</td>
<td>Midden base</td>
<td>610+/−40</td>
<td>1290</td>
<td>1320,1350,1390</td>
<td>1420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverfront</td>
<td>Midden</td>
<td>570+/−40</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>1400</td>
<td>1430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverfront</td>
<td>Pit feature</td>
<td>510+/−40</td>
<td>1400</td>
<td>1420</td>
<td>1450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riverfront</td>
<td>Midden top</td>
<td>270+/−70</td>
<td>1460</td>
<td>1650</td>
<td>1950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior</td>
<td>Ditch feature 161 base</td>
<td>770+/−50</td>
<td>1180</td>
<td>1270</td>
<td>1300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior</td>
<td>Ditch feature 162 fill</td>
<td>500+/−40</td>
<td>1400</td>
<td>1420</td>
<td>1450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior</td>
<td>Ditch feature 161 fill</td>
<td>490+/−40</td>
<td>1400</td>
<td>1430</td>
<td>1460</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior</td>
<td>Post mold</td>
<td>350+/−40</td>
<td>1450</td>
<td>1510,1600,1620</td>
<td>1650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interior</td>
<td>Ditch feature 161 top</td>
<td>340+/−40</td>
<td>1450</td>
<td>1520,1590,1620</td>
<td>1650</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

along the Chickahominy River, and ditches occur on other sites in this drainage after C.E. 1200 (McCary and Barka 1977). The Buck Site ditches enclose an area containing scattered post molds and shallow pit features interpreted by the excavators as ceremonial rather than residential. Excavations at the Powhatan village of Kiskiak have identified a linear ditch feature similar to Werowocomoco’s (Blanton et al. 2005:49–52). As in the Werowocomoco site, there are no indications of a palisade accompanying the ditch at Kiskiak. Clearly, Native societies in the Chesapeake constructed a range of ditches and earthwork enclosures to segment spaces within a number of communities. Although such landscape features defined meaningful places across the region, particularly after C.E. 1200, the ditches at Werowocomoco are unique in the Chesapeake for their considerable size and separation from the residential core of the community.

Archaeological patterns in the area east of the ditch features differed significantly from those in the core area. Native features in this portion of the site were limited to post molds and shallow pits containing few artifacts, though radiocarbon assays indicate that structure use continued into the Contact period. Also present in this portion of the site were early-17th-century trade goods obtained from
Jamestown. Twenty copper-alloyed pieces identified at the site match the chemical signature of trade copper from Jamestown’s Early Fort period (Hudgins 2005). All but two of these were recovered from the area east of the ditch features described above. The objects are generally square or rectangular “scrap” copper whose dimensions range from three to eight centimeters. Five of these artifacts were folded in a shape resembling a rolled bead (see Figure 5).

In addition to the presence of trade copper, artifacts recovered from the site interior and those in the village core differ markedly. A comparison of materials from deposits dated to the 16th through early 17th centuries reveals significantly higher densities of ceramics and lithic artifacts in the village core (see Figure 6). Though present in higher numbers along the river front, ceramics from Protohistoric–Contact-period deposits in the interior portion of the site contained a greater diversity of surface treatments and tempers. During this period, ceramic surface treatments and tempers were typically associated with geographically bounded social networks and, in some cases, linguistic groups. Ceramics identified within the Werowocomoco site interior include not only the locally abundant Townsend ware but also a range of other ceramics including Roanoke ware associated with the lower James, Gaston ware associated with the upper James, and plainsurfaced, sand-tempered pottery similar to the Potomac Creek ware associated with the Potomac and Rappahannock drainages.

**FIGURE 5.** Early 17th-century copper-alloy trade goods from the Werowocomoco site.
Ceramic vessels in the interior of the site were not only more stylistically diverse but also typically smaller in size than those in the village core. Native ceramics in the Chesapeake generally adhere to simple, baglike shapes with minimal decoration, though variation in vessel sizes and shapes has been detected (e.g., Klein and Duncan 2004) through the use of the two-curvature method to detect vessel morphology (Hagstrum and Hildebrand 1990). With their greater average volume and wider range of volumes, the ceramics recovered from the village core match an assemblage that includes cooking, storage, and serving vessels. By contrast, the smaller vessels recovered east of the ditch features accord with a more restricted set of forms, primarily small to medium-sized bowls. The ceramics from the interior portion of the site appear to be related to serving vessels, and possibly to feasting, rather than the more varied activities evident in the assemblage associated with the village core.

On an elevated terrace overlooking the earthworks, human remains and associated artifacts were recovered prior to the involvement of professional archaeologists at the site. The burial included the remains of a two- to four-year-old child of probable Native American ancestry (Rankin-Hill 2004). Associated materials included an iron lathing hammer, a copper-alloy skillet, a copper-alloy spoon, copper-alloy beads, two copper-alloy “King’s Touch” tokens, and several thousand white and blue glass beads—European-produced objects dating to the early 17th century (Lapham 2004; Straube 2004). These objects include materials critical to early colonial exchange in the Chesapeake—copper, glass, and iron—that embody the red, white, and black color symbolism that recurs throughout Powhatan cosmology (Williamson 2003:247–254).

Archaeobotanical data related to changes in local environment and subsistence at the Werowocomoco site complement this evidence (McKnight 2005). From the Middle Woodland period through contact, the presence of deciduous wood and nutshell declined (see Figure 7). These patterns correspond with the establishment of a sizable community, a process that consumed wood for fuel and building materials and in the process of clearing land for gardens. The rise in early successional taxa (specifically pines) indicates an expansion in cleared land. Absent entirely from Middle Woodland deposits, maize increased during the Late Woodland period until maize fragments appeared in roughly half of feature contexts. A slight decline in the presence of maize occurred during the Protohistoric–Contact period, measured according to its presence in features and according to the density of maize per feature volume.

The decline in maize at Werowocomoco during the Protohistoric–Contact period may be linked to severe droughts recorded during this period (Blanton 2000), complicating the notion that Wahunsenacawh built his authority on a foundation of “staple finance” (D’Altroy and Earle 1985) that supported followers and elites at Werowocomoco. Nor is there any archaeological evidence indicating that the village represented a large repository of symbolically powerful goods prior to the arrival of English colonists, limiting support for a “prestige-goods” model of Wahunsenacawh’s chiefly origins (Friedman and Rowlands 1977). There are, however, clear indications of landscape features that set the village apart prior to contact.

**Representations of Tsenacomacoh and of Virginia**

The process of place making at Werowocomoco may be considered in terms of the ways Tsenacomacoh was conceptualized and represented by different colonial actors, complementing the objective characterizations of Werowocomoco offered above. The earliest references to Native notions of “landscape” appear within Smith’s captivity narrative as he was brought to Pamunkey, near the core of the Powhatan chiefdom. Smith (1986a:149–150) was placed before a fire in a quioccosan when a “great grim fellow” entered, began

an invocation, and surrounded the fire with a circle of corn meal. Six more priests entered, painted half black and half red with white paint around their eyes. They encircled the corn meal with two rings of maize kernels while alternating between speeches and songs, and then added sticks between the rings of maize kernels (see Figure 8). Smith (1986a:149) describes the ceremony as a “conjuration” to divine his intentions. He understood the figure as a rendering of the Powhatan world: The circle of meal depicted Tsenacomacoh, the maize represented the edge of the ocean, and the sticks stood for the colonists’ country.

Contextual analyses of these events extending Smith’s exegesis suggest that the priests’ diagram represented a map conveying notions of cosmology, power, and the colonists’ alterity (Fausz 1985:249; Williamson 2003:226–228). Rather than a divination, the ceremony was more likely a means of redefining Smith to incorporate him, and metonymically the colonists, into Tsenacomacoh. Frederic Gleach (1997:112–120) develops this idea most fully, noting similarities between the divination and later accounts of the Lenape *Gamwing* (Big House rite). Both of these Algonquian rituals entailed mimesis and ritually prepared maps to affect a change in the universe. Represented as corn meal, Tsenacomacoh appeared in the ceremony as a center surrounded by two rings of unprocessed maize kernels—possibly representing the Native peoples surrounding the Powhatan world. Depicted as sticks, the colonists had crossed into Tsenacomacoh yet remained something completely outside of it.

The broader captivity narrative may be read as a protracted rite of passage through which Smith was separated from his old status through capture, held in a liminal state as he was conducted through the Chesapeake landscape, and reintegrated into a new status as a Powhatan weroance at Werowocomoco (Gleach 1997:120; Rountree 2005:67–85; Strong 1999:48–71). As part of this process, the “conjuration” was designed to incorporate a dangerously liminal Smith into the Powhatan world through the mimetic process of map making. In the following days, Smith’s body was brought eastward from the interior hunting grounds to the center of the Powhatan world, and his social persona was transformed in the process.

Referenced briefly and obliquely, Wahunsenacawh’s own cognitive map of Tsenacomacoh emphasized Werowocomoco’s centrality. He explained to Smith his rise to power as beginning west of Werowocomoco with inherited authority over six groups, while other communities came under his influence later through conquest (Smith 1986a:126). As part of this political consolidation, Wahunsenacawh moved his principal residence from his natal village, Powhatan on the James, eastward to Werowocomoco on the York. Wahunsenacawh pointed to his canoes at Werowocomoco to illustrate the social connections that defined his vision of Tsenacomacoh. The impressive fleet linked Wahunsenacawh to the rest of Tsenacomacoh through flows of tribute. Wahunsenacawh sought to incorporate the English into this system and to amplify it by including the colonists’ copper, iron tools, and glass beads. These materials factored into events at Werowocomoco as starting gifts for alliances and as representations of political authority (Sahlins 2005:5). By acquiring such goods, Wahunsenacawh enhanced his ability to exercise regional authority and, for a time, to expand it. Judging from his rhetoric at Werowocomoco, the arrival of the English—originally referred to as *Tassantasses* (strangers), defined by their profound difference— influentially Wahunsenacawh’s efforts to create a “Powhatan” polity that included all Tidewater residents.

Today most authors follow the English use of the term *Powhatan* to refer to the residents of the Virginia Tidewater, yet a close reading of the early history indicates that coastal Algonquians by no means comprised a bounded, homogenous society sharing a uniform posture vis-à-vis the colonists. Although Native references to a “Powhatan” identity in the earliest accounts come from Wahunsenacawh himself (e.g., Smith 1986d:67), colonial chroniclers relying on other Native informants frequently emphasized the regional diversity of social groups and shifting political networks (e.g., Archer 1998:122; Strachey 1953:37).
enhancing Wahunsenacawh’s influence, and by giving the Tidewater Algonquians a reason to unite as “Powhatans,” the presence of the English altered Native culture history in ways that are masked behind the Powhatan label.

A map depicting Smith’s travels across the Chesapeake landscape serves as the basis for a third depiction of the Tidewater landscape. The Zúñiga Map (see Figure 9) was originally identified in a Spanish archive accompanied by a 1608 letter from Don Pedro de Zúñiga, Spain’s ambassador to England, informing Philip III of developments at Jamestown (Barbour 1969:238). The map appears to be a copy or a stolen version of a field sketch Smith sent to England along with the letter that was published as Smith’s (1986d) True Relation. An English representation of a Native landscape, the Zúñiga Map depicts areas Smith had explored as well as settlement locations drawn from Native informants and the reports of Roanoke colonists. Notations on the map include the expression “20 miles above this C. S. was taken,” and dotted lines trace the route on which Captain Smith was taken during his captivity. Villages are identified as a scatter of dots, apparently depicting houses lining rivers. A unique set of symbols at Werowocomoco appear as dots surrounding a double D-shaped pattern, which in turn surrounds three additional dots. The document is particularly valuable as an informal map drawn by hand in the field rather than as a formal, engraved map produced by cartographers in London. The map reflects Smith’s recordation of a landscape that he experienced firsthand more broadly than any other colonist while Wahunsenacawh resided at Werowocomoco. The chaotic mix of dots, blobs, and odd marks on the Zúñiga Map likely reflects Smith’s efforts to characterize an unfamiliar landscape of dispersed villages (Turner and Opperman 1993:72).

In fact, the Zúñiga Map may depict the earthworks identified at the Werowocomoco site. Researchers investigating early Jamestown have compared the sketch of James Fort on the Zúñiga Map to their excavation results, finding that the map provides a remarkably accurate rendering of the fort’s footprint (Kelso 1996:17). Likewise at the Werowocomoco site, the ditch features’ straight sides facing Puritan Bay and curvilinear patterns toward the site interior roughly match the line drawing depicted on the Zúñiga Map. Taken together, the map and the ditches identified at the Werowocomoco site raise the possibility that residents constructed large landscape features in the late 13th century that continued to exist through 1607, finding their way onto an early draft of the Map of Virginia. Smith’s (1986b) well-known Map of Virginia (see Figure 10) evolved out of the Zúñiga Map, though the later document had changed considerably as it was standardized according to the formal mapmaking style of 17th-century England. Where Smith had initially experienced Werowocomoco and surrounding areas through a series of bodily movements (as indicated by the captivity trail on the Zúñiga Map), the Map of Virginia effectively obscured the events and pathways leading to its creation. This concealment paralleled a broader colonial process: Beginning in the 15th century, European colonists’ narratives of new places were replaced by maps, documents that “colonized” space in the process (de Certeau 1984:118–122). Named places associated with complex and conflicting topologies, histories, and memories were conflated through their inclusion on the same Cartesian plane. Smith’s Map of Virginia achieves this by excluding much of the detail found on the Zúñiga Map, detail that may be critical to understanding the Chesapeake landscape circa 1607.

A BIOGRAPHY OF PLACE

Drawn together, Werowocomoco’s physical spaces and the cognitive maps of early colonial actors provide a basis for a history of spatial practices through which the location
became Werowocomoco, translated as “weroance’s ground” (Rudes 2005) or “king’s house” (Strachey 1953:188). The process of place making at Werowocomoco may be traced across the historic–precontact divide such that a biography of place begins to emerge. The creation of a larger, more permanent village community during the four centuries prior to the Contact period comprises the first evidence of altered social practices within the site. The expansion of the site with the creation of earthworks defines a second prominent episode of place making, one that required a considerable mobilization of social labor. Radiocarbon assays indicate that the features were expanded and used over several centuries, pointing toward episodic construction and a gradual process through which the ditches later filled with soil. The earliest dates from the features during 13th century C.E. indicate that the ditch construction coincided with or followed shortly after the establishment of a village along the river front. The features appear to define an enclosure or boundary within an area distinct from the community’s residential core.

Powhatan symbolism that contrasted centers with peripheries and associated the edges of villages with ritualized space provides a starting point for considering the social practices and meanings associated with the earthworks at Werowocomoco. Colonist William White’s (1998) account of a Huskanaw male rite of passage held at the village of Quiyoughcohannock offers a glimpse of an event similar to those that may have occurred within Werowocomoco’ interior. Translated as “making black boys,” the Huskanaw was periodically staged at different village locations throughout Tidewater (Smith 1986b:171–172; Strachey 1953:98–100). The Huskanaw commenced with a feast held in the woods during which initiates were painted white while adult men were painted black and adorned with antlers. For several days, the boys danced in two groups around a circuit measuring a quarter-mile led by a weroance and encouraged by repeated beatings (White 1998:138). The boys were then brought deeper into the forest, given hallucinogens, and held in cages. After the initiates were reintegrated into village life, they reportedly remembered nothing of their former lives (Beverley 1947:209). The Huskanaw imbued boys with a new social status obtained through spiritual contact beyond the village marked by the color black. The initial stage in this process occurred at the village’s edge and was centered on a large circular track that enclosed a series of dances, feasts, and other rites.

Referenced earlier with regard to the “conjuration” ceremony, the Lenape Gamwing (Grumet 2001; Speck 1931) involved ceremonial events among a related group of Algonquians that may also be tied to the spaces of Werowocomoco. The annual Gamwing was conducted in the fall in the nodal town of a regional community and centered on the exchange of crops raised by women and game hunted by men. The ceremonies expressed themes of responsibility and revelation through public events that renewed the universe (Miller 1997:114). The theme of responsibility related to community welfare and the leadership of a chiefly lineage associated with a specific river and a capital town near its mouth. The ceremony was held in a special building, the Big House, which represented the universe. On appointed days, dancers followed elliptical circuits that formed two parallel tracks traced by male and female participants. Families from different communities camped around the Big House during the rites and participated in communal feasting.

Though it is difficult to determine if and how Werowocomoco’s spaces related to these historic Algonquian rites, corresponding elements do appear in the large earthwork features that defined areas marked by activities distinct from those of the residential core. Artifacts recovered from this portion of the site imply social events that brought together people and objects from throughout the Chesapeake. Documentary references from the early colonial era characterize Werowocomoco as a place of frequent ceremony. Indeed, when the colonists proposed the staging of a new ritual, Wahunsenacawh’s coronation, the Mamanatowick insisted that the event be performed at Werowocomoco. Powhatan rites linked to Werowocomoco—the “conjuration” and “maskarado” particularly—emphasized maize processing and deer hunting. Such references to the two modes of Powhatan social life highlight ways in which riverine villages represented central places in the Powhatan cultural landscape. Social processes of production converged on village spaces during fall feasts and ceremonies. Such rites established meaningful orientations between social persons, landscape, production, and the annual cycle.

Although Wahunsenacawh’s establishment of his residence at Werowocomoco has been understood as a means of enhancing his centrality within Tsenacomacoh defined in objective geographic terms (Gallivan 1997), Werowocomoco’s landscape history suggests that other factors played a role in these spatial tactics. The initial construction of earthworks began centuries prior to Wahunsenacawh’s rise to power. Throughout the Chesapeake region Native communities constructed boundary ditches and enclosures within select villages after C.E. 1200, marking spaces in novel ways. The earthworks at Werowocomoco represented prominent landscape features that defined the location as a similarly powerful place, perhaps drawing Wahunsenacawh to establish his residence there.

Wahunsenacawh’s relocation to Werowocomoco appears to have been fundamental to his becoming the Mamanatowick. Smith’s passage from Tsenacomacoh’s hunting grounds to Werowocomoco involved a similar transformation of social personhood. The colonist’s redefinition as a weroance occurred not only amidst a sequence of Algonquian rites but also across designated pathways. Captured at the western edges of Tsenacomacoh, Smith was conducted eastward to the center (Williamson 2003:219–220). He experienced several ceremonies along the way: a priestly “conjuration,” his purported “rescue” within Werowocomoco, and a third ceremony located in the woods just beyond Werowocomoco during which
Wahunsenacawh declared Smith to be his son. Across this three-part passage through the Powhatan landscape, Smith was separated from his former status, brought into a liminal state, and reincorporated into the Powhatan realm (Gleach 1997:114–122; cf. Turner 1969).

The colonists understood Wahunsenacawh’s 1609 abandonment of Werowocomoco as the reaction of an aging leader to rising tensions with the English and to Jamestown’s proximity (Smith 1986b:173). Because Werowocomoco represented the center of Powhatan political consolidation, this relocation also signaled changes in Wahunsenacawh’s social status and in Native responses to the English colonial presence. From 1609 until his death in 1618, Wahunsenacawh’s political influence declined with his move west. Wahunsenacawh’s relocation appears to parallel the Powhatan landscape of death in which quíoccosuks traveled westward toward the setting sun to join their predecessors (Smith 1986b:172). After leaving Werowocomoco, Wahunsenacawh and then his younger brother Itoyatin continued as paramount chief in name, though Wahunsenacawh’s next youngest brother Opechancanough gradually acquired a regional leadership role. Acting as a “war chief” (Gleach 1997:35; Williamson 2003:144–145), Opechancanough abandoned Wahunsenacawh’s strategy of incorporation for one of attack, with coordinated assaults against the English in 1622 and 1644.

**CONCLUSION**

A biography of Werowocomoco as a Native place illustrates ways that a deep historical anthropology may challenge notions of a prehistoric past comprised of homogenized societies lacking history. Histories of built environments and spatial practice highlight relationships between long-term regional trends and moments of cultural construction in the past. Werowocomoco’s landscape history illustrates the importance of spatial ideologies in the place making (and unmaking) central to the cycling of chiefly polities in eastern North America (Anderson 1994; Hantman and Gold 2002). A richer understanding of early colonial histories emerges from a historical anthropology attentive to the manner in which ceremonies, objects, and place were implicated in precontact negotiations of hierarchy and status.

The spatial dimensions of colonial encounters also highlight differences in Western and non-Western perceptions of place, indicating that European chroniclers often overlooked ritualized spaces and failed to appreciate the politics of landscapes that they experienced firsthand (e.g., Norman and Kelly 2004; Sahlins 1985). Though Smith visited Werowocomoco several times and described his experiences there, he wrote nothing of the landscape features identified archaeologically at the site. The only possible reference to the ditches at Werowocomoco appears on an early map of the region. Colonists’ accounts provide important details of the Powhatan cultural landscape, though they often emphasize leadership structures and military capacities. Werowocomoco’s ditches, narrow enough to step across, do not appear to have served a defensive function.

Though not recognized as such by the colonists, Werowocomoco was a place central to the creation of political status and social personhood in the Chesapeake. The spatial and temporal dimensions of Powhatan social life converged on riverine villages that included Werowocomoco, particularly during the rites of fall. Such villages represented nodes of Powhatan production, while Powhatan production centered on these locations in turn produced social persons. Other Tidewater villages also served as central places in the region’s social landscape, yet the built environment, cognitive maps, and historical experiences of spaces associated with Werowocomoco from C.E. 1200–C.E. 1609 set the village apart.

During the colonial era, Powhatans and English met at Werowocomoco and sought to socialize one another through exchanges of ceremony, discourse, and material. From Smith’s “rescue” to Wahunsenacawh’s “English-style” house, many of these transactions centered on efforts to create new forms of personhood linked to the evolving entanglements of the colonial era. Material expressions of this process appear in Werowocomoco’s archaeological record, which includes a Native burial accompanied by King’s Touch tokens from the English royal court, and in Jamestown with its abundance of Native pottery and indications that Powhatans lived within the fort (Mallios and Straube 2000). This evidence runs counter to the notion that the colonial Chesapeake witnessed a dichotomous confrontation of English colonizer and colonized Powhatan, conceived as bounded, homogenous entities existing independent of one another (Silliman 2004). An alternate conception of Werowocomoco as a place of struggle and negotiation that created and sustained new social categories and political strategies amidst the changing relations of colonialism emerges from a biography of place.

Archaeological and documentary evidence of physical landscapes, cognitive maps, and spatial practices provides a basis for a deeper sense of Werowocomoco as a Native place than one recognizable from English accounts alone. A sizable village for four centuries prior to Jamestown’s settlement, Werowocomoco was transformed on several occasions prior to 1607. The construction of Werowocomoco’s earthworks altered the objective built environment and subjective experiences of its spaces. Though the related events are more difficult to parse prior to 1607, such a process of place making likely played a fundamental role in the development of hierarchy in the Chesapeake after C.E. 1200 and in the Protohistoric origins of the Powhatan chieftdom. Spaces constructed at Werowocomoco circa C.E. 1300 framed material evidence of regional connections, feasting, and ceremony by the 16th century as Wahunsenacawh’s chieftdom coalesced. If we assume that a chiefly political economy must be preceded by the cultural logic for differentiation (Sassaman 2005:80), then the spaces of Werowocomoco no doubt witnessed the
negotiation of chiefly prerogatives centuries before 1607. Once he became Mamanatorick, Wahunsenacawh’s influence stretched across different fields of power in Tsenacomach, the sacred authority of priests and weroances’ worldly power. Wahunsenacawh’s relocation to Werowocomoco was a critical step in this transformation.

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NOTES

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