Geospatial modeling approach to monument construction using Michigan from A.D. 1000-1600 as a case study

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DOI
10.1073/pnas.1603450113

Publication date
2016

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America

License
Other

Citation for published version (APA):
Building monuments was one way that past societies reconfigured their landscapes in response to shifting social and ecological factors. Understanding the connections between those factors and monument construction is critical, especially when multiple types of monuments were constructed across the same landscape. Geospatial technologies enable past cultural activities and environmental variables to be examined together at large scales. Many geospatial modeling approaches, however, are not designed for presence-only (occurrence) data, which can be limiting given that many archaeological site records are presence-only. We use maximum entropy modeling (MaxEnt), which works with presence-only data, to predict the distribution of monuments across large landscapes, and we analyze MaxEnt output to quantify the contributions of spatioenvironmental variables to predicted distributions. We apply our approach to co-occurring Late Precontact (ca. A.D. 1000–1600) monuments in Michigan: (i) mounds and (ii) earthwork enclosures. Many of these features have been destroyed by modern development, and therefore, we conducted archival research to develop our monument occurrence database. We modeled each monument type separately using the same input variables. Analyzing variable contribution to MaxEnt output, we show that mound and enclosure landscape suitability was driven by contrasting variables. Proximity to inland lakes was key to mound placement, and proximity to rivers was key to sacred enclosures. This juxtaposition suggests that mounds met local needs for resource procurement success, whereas enclosures filled broader regional needs for intergroup exchange and shared ritual. Our study shows how MaxEnt can be used to develop sophisticated models of past cultural processes, including monument building, with imperfect, limited, presence-only data.

Significance

Monumental construction was one way that past societies reconfigured their landscapes in response to social and environmental factors. Given that these factors changed through space and time, societies often constructed multiple types of monuments. We develop a maximum entropy modeling (MaxEnt) framework for identifying the spatioenvironmental factors that mattered most in the placement of different monument types. We turned to MaxEnt, given its ability to model spatial distributions from presence-only data. With modern development continuing to destroy archaeological sites across the globe, archaeological datasets, including monument locations, are evermore restricted to being presence-only data. Our framework shows how archaeologists can harness MaxEnt to develop robust models of past cultural processes, including monumentality, even when faced with limited, presence-only data.

Author contributions: M.C.L.H. and M.W.P. designed research; C.H.M. performed research; M.W.P. analyzed data; and M.C.L.H. wrote the paper. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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This article contains supporting information online at www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1603450113/-/DCSupplemental.

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to the distribution of mounds and enclosures. Doing this analysis, we identified key differences between the spatioenvironmental variables that mattered most to mound and enclosure landscape placement. These differences extend the view that precontact indigenous peoples in Michigan used these two types of monuments to answer different but simultaneously pressing social, economic, and ideological demands: mounds for local ones and enclosures for regional ones.

MaxEnt Framework for the Study of Monumentality

Geospatial technologies have made connecting cultural activities and environmental variables at large scales more feasible. Archaeologists have increasingly looked toward advanced geospatial modeling to investigate past landscapes (6, 7). Many available geospatial modeling approaches, however, are not designed for presence-only (occurrence) data and therefore, present problems for archaeologists. Archaeologists often know where some but not all sites were, and they rarely know for certain where past sites are absent. Given that many archaeological site records are occurrence data, including monument locations, archaeologists need modeling approaches that can tie environmental and geospatially derived data layers together with presence-only data. MaxEnt is one such approach.

The principle of maximum entropy originates in statistical mechanics (8), but its application has been expanded to many disciplines. MaxEnt has been especially developed as a species distribution modeling approach in ecology used for predicting habitat suitability of plant and animal species from presence-only records (9–13). MaxEnt allows for any number of continuous or discrete spatioenvironmental factors to be used as predictor variables for the species of interest (11–13). Predictor variable values are extracted from occurrence locations and randomly located background points across the sampling area to develop a statistical model that extrapolates a species habitat probability map across the landscape (13). Paleodistribution modeling, where floral and faunal species distributions are hindcast, has also been examined during the past decade (14, 15).

Such paleodistribution modeling has recently been appreciated as a potentially powerful tool for understanding human prehistory (14). MaxEnt emerges as a particularly useful approach for archaeological applications, because it commonly outperforms other modeling techniques that use presence-only data, especially when dealing with small sample sizes or nonrandom sampling (16). Accordingly, MaxEnt has increasingly been used in creating predictive models of the distribution of past human activities (16–20). In this research, MaxEnt has been used to identify shared spatioenvironmental parameters among the locations of known archaeological sites/features and extrapolate other geographic locales where these parameters are present. Archaeologists have used these outputs to examine and compare the total ranges of culture groups adaptations, identify ecocultural niches (17, 18), and build predictive models of archaeological features (16, 19, 20).

The later Late Woodland/Late Prehistoric Period (referred to here as Late Precontact; ca. A.D. 1000–1600) saw the co-occurrence of multiple types of monuments in Michigan. Archaeologists have used these models to identify shared spatioenvironmental predictor variable in determining overall distribution can be statistically analyzed to determine which variables mattered most in monument landscape placement.

We suggest that using MaxEnt modeling in this way is powerful for examining the frequently occurring cases where regions host multiple types of monuments. Each type of monument in the landscape can be separated into its own occurrence dataset and run through the model using the same set of spatioenvironmental variables. The contributions of the input variables for each type of monument can be quantified. Similarities and differences in the contributing factors to the geographic distribution of each type of monument can then examined; this offers a robust means of understanding how monuments were built in response to varied socioeconomic demands.

Mounds and Earthwork Enclosures of Michigan

Mounds and earthworks are ubiquitous features across the eastern United States, and they have long been the focus of popular speculation, archaeological investigation, and post–Euro-American destruction (22, 23). These earthen constructions represent some of the most interesting examples of monument building anywhere in the world (2, 5, 24–27). Although overshadowed by striking sites in neighboring parts of the eastern United States, like Cahokia in Illinois and the Newark Earthworks in Ohio, earthen constructions are still a major part of Michigan’s archaeological record.

Michigan displays two different kinds of earthen constructions: burial mounds and earthwork enclosures (Fig. 1). Notable burial mound complexes were built in southwestern Michigan as part of Middle Woodland Hopewellian traditions (16). Less elaborate, normal use conical burial mounds became geographically widespread features across Michigan’s Lower Peninsula during the Late Woodland Period and remained so through Late Prehistory (after ca. A.D. 800–1000 to A.D. 1600) (29) (Fig. 1).

Earthwork enclosures, large-scale geometric earthen features, were less common than mounds, reaching their highest density in southern Michigan and continuing into northern Indiana and Ontario (30–37) (Fig. 1). These constructions almost always date to Late Prehistory (ca. A.D. 1200–1600). Michigan’s enclosures share a common form of being circular ditch and embankment enclosures with planned entryways. Depending on geographic and temporal factors, they range from 30 to 120 m in diameter (38).

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of these two types of earthen constructions. A variety of perspectives has been developed about these constructions, and debate continues, particularly about the nature of enclosures (30, 35, 38, 39). A striking aspect of the research on mounds and enclosures is that, despite being shared features across Michigan’s forager–fisher–horticulturists during Late Precontact, they are not typically investigated in conjunction with each other. However, it is the presence of both together that suggests that monument building was a particularly important part of life in Late Precontact Michigan.

Monuments are not superfluous to socioeconomic developments; they are intertwined with every aspect of community organization. These mounds and enclosures represent then a reconfiguration of the Late Precontact landscape tied to social, economic, and ideological developments (5). Here, we ask whether mounds and enclosures were placed in contrasting positions in the landscape in response to different spatioenvironmental variables and what insights these contrasts provide about their roles during Late Precontact.

Results and Discussion

The geospatial database of mounds and enclosures that we created (by working with archival archaeological files in Michigan) has 321 records: 60 enclosure locations and 261 mound locations (multiple enclosures and mounds are often found in one locale) (Fig. 1). Today, only 13 of these enclosure locales and 45 of these mound locales have a high certainty of still existing (that is, a destruction rate—since their recording in the late 1800s and early 1900s—of 78.33% for enclosures and 82.76% for mounds). These staggering rates of destruction show that it is imperative to use archives of early archaeological site records.

We conducted MaxEnt with 13 spatioenvironmental input variables (covariates) relevant to earthen construction location suitability and presence-only occurrence records of Late Precontact mounds/enclosures created through archival research. Covariates included temperature and precipitation regimes, elevation, and distance to key hydrographic features, representing a range of factors that impacted the subsistence practices, social developments, and settlement patterns of the region’s mixed fisher–forager–horticulturists. Using modern temperature and precipitation covariates carries limitations for archaeological modeling. In recognition of these limitations, we did not rely on these as actual values for Late Precontact but used instead to understand how areas across the landscape would have varied in temperature and precipitation relative to each other (i.e., warmer, wetter areas today would have been warmer, wetter areas during Late Precontact, even if absolute temperature and precipitation values have changed). The output produced a mound “habitat” suitability map and an enclosure habitat suitability map for all of Michigan (Fig. 2).

Visual inspection of these maps highlights that mound and enclosure features occupied, to extend the ecological metaphor, distinct “niches” in the landscape (Fig. 2). To quantify and compare the relative importance of input spatioenvironmental variables to the suitability of places for mounds and enclosures across the study area, we: (i) computed a table of variable overall contribution to MaxEnt model fit, (ii) ran jackknife tests for the training and testing datasets, and (iii) created individual variable response curves (40) (SI Text has expanded explanations and results of these analyses). Note that we also conducted an independent analysis of the discriminating power of input variables with nominal logistic regression and computed a multivariate correlation table for all input variables (presented in SI Text).

For mounds, two variables dominated the overall contribution to MaxEnt model fit: mean temperature of the warmest quarter (BIO10) and distance to an inland lake (61.9% together) (Table 1). In test and training jackknife tests, annual mean temperature (BIO1) very closely followed by mean temperature of the warmest quarter (BIO10) show the highest gains in isolation (SI Text). These two variables have the most useful information when used by themselves for predicting mound distribution (note that they are strongly positively correlated) (SI Text). The variable that decreases the gain the most when it is omitted from the model is distance to an inland lake; this variable contains the most information about mound distribution not present in the other variables (test results in SI Text). The response curve of distance to an inland lake shows that it is mound proximity to an inland lake that is the key to predicted suitability (Fig. 3).

For enclosures, annual mean temperature (BIO1) and distance to a river made the largest contributions to MaxEnt model fit (48.5% together), with topography (Shuttle Radar Topography Mission, SRTM) a notable third as the only other double-digit contributor (Table 1). In both test and training jackknife tests, the environmental variable with the highest gain when used in isolation is annual mean temperature (BIO1). The variable that decreases the gain the most when it is omitted is distance to a river (test results in SI Text) The response curve of distance to a river shows clearly that it is enclosure proximity to a river that is the key to predicted suitability (Fig. 3).

The juxtaposition of the importance of inland lakes to mounds and rivers to enclosures is striking. Michigan’s 11,037 inland lakes are localized hydrographic features positioned in single ecosystems covering small to moderate areas and having relatively circumscribed watersheds. Rivers, in contrast, are regional hydrographic features, traversing substantial distances, crossing ecosystems, and having large watersheds. These features seem then positioned to have distinct geographic reaches—local and regional, respectively. These results can be understood within the context of Late Precontact.

Although there is no consensus interpretation for Late Precontact, it is generally agreed that, after ca. A.D. 1000, the region saw an intensification of a mixed economy involving the variable adoption of maize horticulture, targeted fishing of seasonal spawns, and intensified use of wild plant foodstuffs (particularly those amenable to storage), such as acorns, berries, maple syrup, and wild rice (41–43). Spatial proximity became increasingly important with these economic shifts, and across Michigan, communities found themselves engaging in their annual mobility rounds within more restricted territories. With the (wild and cultivated) resource base of the region being both seasonally variable and unpredictable year to year, the reduction in the spatial range that communities could exploit to harvest food heightened the risk of experiencing resource failure and scarcity.

We have argued that, within this context, dual needs arose to (i) maximize and extend the use of local resources and (ii) increase interaction with other communities occupying different territories and resource bases (5, 39, 43, 44). As introduced above, we have suggested that the construction of mounds filled local needs and that the construction of enclosures filled more
Enclosures and Rivers. Despite being the largest features in Michigan’s archaeological landscape, enclosures have been subject to surprisingly little systematic investigation. They were first assumed to be fortifications, but work across northern and southern located enclosures has shown this to be an insufficient explanation. Today, instead, many agree that enclosures were special use, sacred spaces, but whether these were local or regional in nature is debated (30, 34–39).

Across our MaxEnt variable contribution analyses, we found that proximity to regional hydrographic features—rivers— mattered in enclosure distribution (Figs. 2 and 3 and Table 1). Canoe travel along Michigan’s major rivers enabled people to transport themselves and goods long distances (48). Enclosures were placed where there was access to regional transportation corridors. Looking at enclosures and mounds simultaneously helps highlight the fact that enclosure placement was meant to extend beyond the local. Looking at each monument type alone, we would miss their juxtaposition in the landscape. The fact that enclosures’ prime habitat proximate to rivers indicates a regional orientation becomes a more compelling conclusion when we see that the prime habitat for mounds is very different, oriented around local hydrographic features (inland lakes).

What was the purpose of such enclosure positioning? As we discussed above, Late Precontact communities across Michigan faced heightened risks of resource scarcity. Rivers, then, formed important avenues through which communities could increase their interaction with groups occupying different territories and resource bases. Such nonlocally circumscribed interaction would create opportunities for the trade of physical foodstuffs, providing immediate scarcity relief, while also securing future relief through the furthering of social relationships. In small-scale societies, like those of Late Precontact, the pooling of risk through sharing and storing social obligations, often through the creation and/or extension of kin relationships among dispersed communities, is a well-documented risk-buffering strategy (49). By placing enclosures (sacred monumental constructions), near rivers, communities provided designated, attractive, and accessible spaces for interaction, trade, and relationship building.

We have argued for the regional ceremonial importance of enclosures previously (5, 39). Some recent research emphasizes the importance of enclosures as locally embedded features, noting that, although they may share a circular form, they each have their own distinct layout and material signatures, reducing prospects that they had broader regional orientations (30, 35). In both our previous research and these recent arguments, the regional and/or local import of enclosures has been presented as an “either/or” scenario, and this is unrealistic. Enclosures, even as features visited by neighboring communities, were still built and remained perpetually present in a local landscape.

We found, beyond river proximity, that other, more localized variables also mattered in enclosure distribution. Enclosures were positioned in places that were generally warmer than surrounding locales (Fig. 3 and Table 1). Topography was also a notable predictor of enclosure suitability (and not mound) (Table 1). Looking at the response curve, enclosures were not just built on higher ground, but rather, they were built where the topography offered a kind of “sweet spot” higher than surrounding locales but not too high (Fig. 3). This kind of nuanced topographic placement may have been driven by how local communities wanted to connect these sacred constructions to their own local production of place, histories, and memories (35), which may, perhaps, have given local groups a level of “ownership” (spiritual and/or territorial) over specific enclosure locales, even as these were part of broader regional trends.

Conclusions

Monument building was one way that past societies reconfigured their landscapes. Understanding how such reconfigurations affect...
We used MAXENT, v3.3.3 (7447|0.852), indicating that July 5, 2016| was negative (Table 1) (normalized to percent-vol. 113 and the model was no. 27 Response curves of key variables for of predicted suitability as it patterns wi...
and enclosures was created (Fig. 3 and SI Text). These curves show the dependence of predicted suitability for the selected variable (40).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. We thank the University of Michigan Museum of Anthropology for access to state site files; Emma Pankey for her time in the archives; and Joyce Marcus, two anonymous reviewers, and the PNAS Editor for providing invaluable feedback on the paper. Research was supported by NASA Space Archaeology NNX112DA001N SAP Grant NNX13AO40G [to M.W.P. (principal investigator)]. An ACLS Digital Innovation Fellowship provided time for synthesis and writing (M.C.L.H.).