Constructing Monuments, Perceiving Monumentality and the Economics of Building: Theoretical and Methodological Approaches to the Built Environment


Reviewed by Jerrad Lancaster

For as long as humans have been constructing monuments, the product (whether a tomb, palace, temple, memorial, or other) has held a place not only within the physical landscape but also as a part of the social, political, and economic environment of the culture in which it was built. This book examines how the archaeological record may be utilized to interpret how monuments reflected their respective societies, not only in the physicality of the structure in its environs but also in the processes, via material and human resources, of construction. Divided into three parts (“Theoretical and Practical Considerations on Monumentality,” “Methodological Approaches to Studying Architecture,” and “Architectural Energetics Methods and Applications”), the text flows well from discussions of monumentality through applications in archaeological contexts to results from praxis.

The opening chapter presents an in-depth introduction that goes beyond summarizing the book’s contents. Brysbaert familiarizes the reader with the many different forms in which monumentality can be conveyed: from large, awe-inspiring funerary tombs (beehive tombs of Mycenae) and ostentatious palaces (Versailles) that flaunt wealth and social status, to smaller, more inconspicuous objects such as coins or paintings (Mona Lisa). In doing this, she highlights the ever-changing relationship between monumentality and the people who experience it. Brysbaert also introduces us to the SETinSTONE project at Leiden University, researching Late Bronze Age Greece, which led to the production of this book. This section continues with Scarre analyzing Neolithic burial mounds (ch. 2) and their purpose not just as monuments to the deceased but also as active parts of the society before, during, and even after any associated religious or funerary activities. The fortifications and acropoleis of Tiryns and Mycenae architecturally support, as Efkleidou attests (ch. 3), a conspicuous separation of sociopolitical classes. For instance, a ceremonial path at Mycenae winds through multiple gates that serve to winnow gradually the ranks of society until only the elite are present. In a study of long barrows of Early Neolithic southern Britain (ch. 4), it is the materials and the construction process themselves that McFadyen explores, not the completed object. This chapter is difficult to follow at times, but this may simply be a consequence of the abstract perspective (“I want to think of long barrows as effects of force, of differentiation, of emergence through difference” [95]) from which the author’s argument is presented. It is a fitting end to the theoretical section of the book aimed at changing the way monumentality is perceived.

In part 2, the focus turns to methodological approaches to studying monumentality. This begins with Boswinkel’s analysis (ch. 5) of architectural surface finds from ancient Koroneia (Boeotia), in which he associates larger blocks with monumental structures. However, while the results are inconclusive, as it is difficult to analyze objects without context or provenance (more than 90% are not in situ), the methodology seems sound enough that it would be interesting to see such a study with material of known provenance.
Pakkanen (ch. 6) has recognized the importance of technological advancements in data collection. Through the combination of total station (laser) line drawing and UAV-based photogrammetry, site and object recording becomes more detailed and less time-consuming. The same methodology was used on the Mycenaean fortifications of the Acropolis of Athens, which Sioumpara presents (ch. 7) with preliminary findings. Unfortunately, although 20 sections of fortifications are discussed (encompassing over half the article’s length), three-dimensional analysis is implemented for only three sections. The in-depth review of the site would have fit better in a more substantial publication after completion of the survey. Voutsaki, van den Beld, and de Raaff (ch. 8) introduce a new methodology for labor cost analysis in the study of an Early Mycenaean cemetery in Laconia, Greece. Their focus is on the qualitative social practice of labor investment, not quantitative expenditure of energy, making their methodology worthwhile as a step toward viewing labor as social, not temporal. This methodology has arisen in opposition to architectural energetics (the focus of the book’s part 3), which the authors feel is too subjective and can omit some menial tasks that are “beyond the scope of this paper” (175). Yet, they follow this critique with an assessment of three factors (grave size, construction quality, and stone value) on a subjective 1–5 scale. Further, they admit that these values are schematic not absolute (therefore, a 5 is not five times more than a 1) and that these values could be improved upon, but this too is “beyond the scope of this paper” (179). As a measurement of labor investment as a social practice, this methodology may perhaps be a step in the right direction, but one must question how it improves on the temporal analyses of architectural energetics.

Calculations of labor costs have been implemented in archaeological analyses for more than a half century, with “architectural energetics” being perhaps the most popular term applied to the methodology. This approach to the built environment, the focus of the last part of this book, largely remained within anthropological contexts until the publication of DeLaine’s The Baths of Caracalla: A Study in the Design, Construction, and Economics of Large-Scale Building Projects in Imperial Rome (JAR Suppl. 25 [Portsmouth, R.I. 1997]). Her work has since become a key text for subsequent approaches to structures within the Mediterranean (in fact, eight of the 14 chapters in this volume reference that publication). Turner (ch. 9) begins part 3 with cross-cultural comparisons of manual earthmoving rates. One aim of this article is to create a guide of labor rates for quick reference—including the sources, the method by which the rates were attained (ethnographic, experimental, historical), the context, material type, and even specifics of tools used. Next, Torras Freixa (ch. 10) explores the socioeconomic and political aspects lying behind the construction of the Moon Pyramid, Sun Pyramid, and Feathered Serpent Pyramid in Teotihuacán. The archaeological evidence of the building phases indicates an increase in central authority and throws into question the previously accepted chronology of the city and its historical phases. At Ostia, DeLaine (ch. 11) studies a public memorial monument, warehouse, and three sets of colonnades to examine monetary and social choices behind construction. Labor costs to transport, shape, finish, and build using various materials make it apparent that Romans were often economic with their choices while still quite aware of prestige and social status. The imperial fora of Tarraco (Gutiérrez Garcia-M. and Serena Vinci, ch. 12) show economic impact on the local and regional levels. The text of this chapter is quite descriptive, the analysis clear, and the conclusions demonstrate well the prominence of this provincial capital. Recko outlines a computational approach (ch. 13), with an emphasis on precise figures, in calculating the labor costs to construct the Temple of Isis in Pompeii. Precision in calculations is always desired with architectural energetics, but it remains largely impossible, which the author admits, as unknown factors lead to ranges of estimates. Bonetto and Previato conclude the book (ch. 14) with a detailed study of fortifications at Aquileia, construction of which was not a straightforward process for the Roman colonists, as marshy soil in the alluvial plain required significant foundations to support monumental structures. The authors present not only an analysis of monumental construction but also a study of humanity overcoming the natural environment.

This book originated in the SETinSTONE project (to which a few chapters relate), and what becomes evident are the various ways in which monumentality can be treated through scientific investigation. By and large, each chapter could be referenced individually, benefiting multiple avenues of theoretical and
methodological inquiry. Overall, the editors have put together a body of research that should become important for any archaeological study of monumentality, especially for students of architectural energetics.

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