



**Book Review - *Center Places And Cherokee Towns: Archaeological Perspectives On Native American Architecture And Landscape In The Southern Appalachians*,
by Christopher B. Rodning**

By: **Alice P. Wright**

Abstract

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In recent years, the integration of indigenous oral traditions into archaeological research has enriched our understanding of the late prehistoric U.S. Southeast. Christopher Rodning's *Center Places and Cherokee Towns* is a welcome addition to this body of scholarship. By interpreting the results of his extensive investigations of the Coweeta Creek site in southwestern North Carolina through the lens of Cherokee myths and early historical accounts, Rodning convincingly shows how Cherokee towns constituted the material and symbolic centers of indigenous societies in the southern Appalachians. His detailed examination of the centripetal nature of Coweeta Creek's built environment reveals the multidimensional connections between Cherokee people and places in the past and underscores the significance of ancestral places to living Cherokee communities.

Rodning outlines the theoretical underpinnings of his book in chapter 1 in a series of premises: because cultural concepts about places and people's relationships with places are embedded in the built environment, archaeologists can make inferences about social and historical processes on the basis of settlement patterns and architecture. More specifically, they can identify center places in past landscapes. For Rodning, the concept of center places derives from archaeological research in the American Southwest, which has highlighted how particular architectural features anchored the social lives and spiritual experiences of ancestral Pueblo communities. Such central places often witnessed long-term occupations that created archaeological palimpsests and were arranged according to various principles of sacred geography. As such, the communities attached to these places were situated not only at the enduring center of their lived experiences but also at the geographic center of the cosmos. Indigenous oral histories and traditions are especially important for understanding the cosmological dimensions of central places. To that end, Rodning engages

recorded Cherokee myths, legends, and ethnohistorical accounts to reveal and unpack center symbolism in the southern Appalachian landscape—an approach summarized in chapter 2.

Chapters 3 to 6 strive to link architectural features and activities described in these sources to the archaeological record of the southern Appalachians, in particular that of the Coweeta Creek site. While Rodning has published numerous articles drawing upon these data, their arrangement into a single volume yields a perspective on Cherokee place making that is greater than the sum of its parts. One chapter each is devoted to public architecture (townhouses), domestic architecture, hearths, and burials. The various locations of these features—for example, the superimposition of seven stages of townhouse reconstruction, the placement of hearths relative to structural support posts, and the concentration of burials and grave goods at the entryway to the townhouse—are richly interpreted vis-à-vis certain Cherokee myths, such as “The Mounds and the Constant Fire” and “The Daughter of the Sun.” Reading the book cover to cover, one notices that particular myths are summarized and alluded to repeatedly, but this highlights the consistency of center place symbolism in the Cherokee cultural tradition and—practically speaking—produces stand-alone chapters amenable to discussion in the classroom.

In chapters 7 and 8, Rodning shifts his emphasis from the materialization of mythic themes in the Cherokee built environment to the effects of historically documented events on Cherokee towns. In keeping with recent contact-period scholarship in the Southeast, he links 18th-century transformations in Cherokee settlements, including the abandonment of the Coweeta Creek site, to related challenges wrought by the colonial encounter: the Indian slave trade, the threat of warfare and raiding, the establishment of colonial trading posts, and shifting political relationships with colonial governments. Importantly, however, such physical displacements did not eradicate evidence for central places and center symbolism from Cherokee oral traditions. The idea that these aspects of Cherokee worldview persisted

in the face of colonial disjunction is fundamental to the connections Rodning proposes between Cherokee myths and legends on the one hand and the archaeological record on the other.

Even as *Center Places and Cherokee Towns* provides a deeply contextualized account of Cherokee architecture in the southern Appalachians, it also contributes to anthropological archaeology more broadly with nuanced considerations of landscapes, the built environment, and temporality. Each chapter includes a discussion of the topic of interest from a theoretical perspective and in comparative cultural

contexts; Rodning's treatment of burials and abandonment is especially strong in this regard.

If there is a shortcoming in Rodning's book, it is the subtitle, as *Center Places and Cherokee Towns* offers more than "archaeological perspectives on Native American architecture and landscape in the southern Appalachians." In reality, the book comprises a sophisticated multidisciplinary project, in which archaeological data, historical sources, and recorded oral traditions are skillfully combined to produce a rich account of Cherokee geography and worldview as well as an important contribution to the anthropology of landscapes.