Long-Term History, Positionality, Contingency, Hybridity: Does Rethinking Indigenous History Reframe the Jamestown Colony?

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This chapter is concerned with the writing, and centering, of the long-term indigenous history of the Powhatan (Algonquian) and Monacan (Siouan) Indians of the Middle Atlantic / Chesapeake Bay region of North America (see Figure 1). Such research is of importance unto itself for the descendant populations living in the Chesapeake region today as well as for more global and comparative anthropological questions. The particular purpose of this essay is to better understand long-term indigenous history in the Chesapeake region so as to provide a richer and more complex historical and cultural context in which to describe English and Native interactions at Jamestown in 1607 and following. In 1607, 104 English colonists established the James Fort under a charter granted to the private Virginia Company of London. Situated approximately 64 km (40 miles) above the mouth of the James River as it enters the Chesapeake Bay, Jamestown is known as the first permanent English colony in North America. This oft-cited matter of permanence takes on post-hoc significance as England and the newly formed United States would later establish colonial control over most of North America by the nineteenth century. The issue of permanence is complicated by the fact that Jamestown was, in fact, abandoned twice by the colonists. More critically, the issue of permanence is
related as much to the cultural and political actions of the indigenous people of the region, as to the colonists’ resolve, or that of the Virginia Company in London. It is the actions of the indigenous people which this paper explores.

By 1607, the English were late-comers to the financial gains and commerce already established by the Spanish and French elsewhere in North America (Alan Taylor 2001). But, there had long been an unfulfilled interest in finding a safe harbor in the Middle Atlantic region, and especially, to find the long sought after river passage to the continental interior, and theoretically, to Asia. To exploit the potential mineral and other natural resources (e.g., timber, deerskins, and furs) of the American continent, and to be the European nation to take control of the Chesapeake and the rivers that flowed into it, the English under Queen Elizabeth I and King James focused on the region that they named Virginia for the Virgin Queen. They looked to a large area near and far beyond the Chesapeake Bay which included the failed Roanoke Colony of 1585 and post-Jamestown exploration and settlement in New England.

England was not alone in its interests in the Chesapeake. Spanish colonial interests in North America included the Chesapeake which was known as the Bahia de Santa Maria on sixteenth-century Spanish maps (Lewis and Loomie 1953). The Spanish made an earlier, but disastrous, attempt to establish a mission on the Chesapeake in 1570, and they continued their interests with espionage relating to English settlement up through the early seventeenth century. But, neither England nor Spain was successful in colonizing this important region in the sixteenth century, even as Spain and France met with success elsewhere on the American continent. In 1607, as the traditional narrative states, the English established a permanent presence on the American continent at
Jamestown. Even then, the Jamestown experiment between 1607 and 1610 was at most times an unmitigated disaster.

The colonists actually abandoned the first permanent English colony in America. Far from permanent in the minds of the colonists, they left it and attempted to sail home to England, but were returned to the fort by an approaching supply ship with new rules and a new governor sent by the Virginia Company. Jamestown, which then grew to become a small urban place, was later literally abandoned in 1699. Permanent is a relative term. But, it is clear that had the 1607 Jamestown settlement not taken hold, had there not been something to which to return in 1610 to forestall Spanish settlement, then the subsequent English settlement of North America may have taken a different shape. Why was colonization of the Chesapeake so late in coming, relatively? And, why did things change in 1607? Centering indigenous history provides us with critical new perspectives with which to answer that question.

Centering Indigenous History

In an earlier exploration as to the ‘why’ of the 1607 date and subsequent permanence of the English settlement, I suggested that unequal access to prestige trade links between coastal Powhatan elites and the interior Monacans created a culturally defined space for the English, defined by the Powhatans, which eventually made possible a long-term English colonial presence in the Chesapeake (Hantman 1990). But, many more key issues must be considered to understand the colonial encounter, as well as longer-term colonial relations beyond the initial moment of contact. The issues with which I hope to center long-term indigenous history include the concepts of
positionality, contingency, and hybridity. These issues can all be subsumed within the concept of long-term indigenous history, but can also be isolated for particular attention as I will do in this chapter. Each will be examined below in order to construct indigenous cultural histories before and including the focus year of 1607. Each allows us to better understand Native histories beyond the descriptions of English colonial records and observations, and each provides a more nuanced context for the longer-term events of the seventeenth century in the Chesapeake. Taken as a whole, and merged with colonial motivations and interests which could and should as well be parsed through the lens of positionality, contingency, and hybridity, we can better explain the colonial events and processes in the seventeenth-century Chesapeake.

In 2007 Virginia and the United States as a whole commemorated the 400th anniversary of the establishment of the Jamestown colony. Following a decade of planning, for 18 intensive months leading up to May 2007, Virginians and visitors including Queen Elizabeth II engaged in commemorative events. Since 1807 the Jamestown anniversary has been celebrated in strikingly ritualized fashion every fifty years, and a very brief review reveals a fairly unchanging narrative of events as told by the American inheritors of the Jamestown colonial legacy, especially Southern Americans. There are three dominant themes in these historical narratives. First, as already noted here, Jamestown was the first permanent English colony in America, older than Plymouth (though few outside of Virginia care about this claim and the 1620 Plymouth colony maintains its prominence and priority in the public imagination). Second, it is said that democracy in America was born in Jamestown, as a representative government met in the statehouse building there in 1619, though it should be recalled that that was also the year
the first enslaved Africans came to Jamestown. Third, the Jamestown story always includes Native people who are said to have saved the colony. But, for most of the last two centuries, the “Native people” were winnowed down to one individual – Pocahontas, the twelve-year-old daughter of the paramount chief, who it is said saved colonist John Smith’s life, and therefore the colony itself (Gleach 2003). In 2007, as John Smith’s reputation suffered and the facts of his Pocahontas story were widely challenged, another single individual was inserted into the narrative in a similar role. That individual is Pocahontas’s father, Wahunsonacah, or as he is more famously known, Chief Powhatan. Chief Powhatan is said to have had the individual authority to allow the English to stay, and he apparently invoked that authority in 1607.

These constantly reappearing framing themes marginalize other stories and other histories, particularly larger stories of indigenous history. Such stories can hardly but transform our modern understanding of the legacy of Jamestown. If Jamestown was permanent, why was it, and why was its permanence so late in the European colonial process? While Native history has long been stereotypically and marginally acknowledged with reference to Pocahontas and Powhatan, such references are ultimately lacking in cultural contexts. Individual models of agency in the colonial exchange are much needed. But, the European and Euroamerican renditions of individual action by Pocahontas or Powhatan were not written with any anthropological grasp of Indian history or Algonquian cultural values. Pocahontas and Powhatan become players in a familiar colonial story that was written all over the continent, from the Caribbean to the California coast.
In reframing Jamestown with a focus on indigenous history, I hope to make some breaks with previous models and to suggest that the history of the seventeenth-century colony can only be understood in a long-term historical context. In that deep history, the geographic and economic positionality of the Powhatans vis-a-vis their neighbors on the American continent matters enormously, though it has only rarely been considered. Positionality and perspective change over time, thus actions taken in the colonial period by indigenous people were in part contingent on the moment. What were the relationships within and between Virginia Indian societies, as well as with Europeans, in the first decade of the seventeenth century? Finally, did Indians and Europeans transform each other and create new hybrid identities, as has been described elsewhere in colonial America and in colonial context around the globe. In Virginia, they may not have that great an impact on each other. That will be explored in the final section of this chapter.

Archaeological and Ethnohistoric Data: Writing Long-Term History

This chapter is largely a synthesis of data collected on indigenous societies in the Chesapeake Bay region that began in 1570 with the first Spanish observations of the region (Lewis and Loomie 1953). English colonial ethonography is comparatively rich for the Roanoke colony (Miller 2000) and is remarkably rich for the Jamestown colony, with particular attention paid to the records kept by colonist John Smith (Barbour 1986). Many syntheses and interpretations of indigenous cultures are based on this ethnohistoric record (see e.g., Rountree 1989, 1990; Gleach 1997; Williamson 2003).

Archaeological data for the Virginia interior region associated with the Monacans began in 1784, with Thomas Jefferson’s famous excavation of an Indian burial mound,
reported in his book *Notes on the State of Virginia*. That excavation is important in that it brings to our attention the presence of formidable burial mounds in the Virginia interior which contained, as Jefferson noted the remains of as many as 1,000 people in them. I and my colleagues have suggested that that these mounds were constructed by Monacans between 1000 and 1700 (Gold et al. 2003; Hantman at al, 2004; but see Boyd 2004). Collectively the mounds mark Monacan territory, and their collective study has revealed a great deal about the ritual life, regional organization, and continuity of the Monacan people and their landscape (Gold 2004). Permanence is a word often mentioned about Jamestown, but few places mark permanence on the landscape as dramatically as the Monacan mounds of the Virginia interior. No similar burial mounds are known in Virginia outside of the territory of the Monacans. Village excavations in the Monacan area which yielded information on village size, sedentariness, surplus storage and regional political economy are synthesized in Gallivan (2003). Survey data, which provide a general sense of regional demography and put the excavated villages in context, can be found in Hantman (1985) and Gallivan (2003).

The Virginia Coastal Plain, home to the Virginia Algonquians, or Powhatans, has seen a good deal of village excavation dating to pre 1600 and post 1600, best synthesized in Potter (1993) and Rountree and Turner (2002). Burials have been found in village-based ossuaries and have been studied by Curry (2000) and Potter (1989). Survey data allowing the calculation of regional demographic patterns are rare; two exceptions are Potter (1993) and Turner (1976).

The interpretations which follow in this paper are drawn from the archaeological data and the ethnohistoric data just described, as well as the effort to have those sources
engaged in a constant dialectic, each raising questions for the other. A basic overview of
the region’s indigenous history follows.

**Chesapeake Indigenous Culture and History: A Brief Overview**

The Chesapeake region has been occupied by indigenous people for as long as
indigenous people are known anywhere else in North America. The Cactus Hill site in
Virginia is one of the pre-Clovis sites gaining attention as the Bering Land Bridge and
Clovis-first models open to alternatives. That is a footnote here, simply to note that from
an archaeological perspective, long-term indigenous history in the Chesapeake can be
written back as much as 15,000 years. Of interest to the long-term perspective I bring to
the colonial-era history I am exploring here, I will simply note that the Chesapeake region
was occupied by ca. 1000 by three different linguistic groups – the Algonquians; the
Siouans, people of the interior Piedmont and Mountain regions; and the Iroquoian
speaking peoples who are known in southwest and southeast Virginia. Each of those
linguistic groups has been described by colonial observers and archaeologists as a
paramount chiefdom (Algonquian), moundbuilders (Siouan), and Mississippian polities
(Iroquian) or long-distance traders (also Iroquoian). These same three groups using
ethnic labels are perhaps best known as the Powhatans, the Monacans, and Cherokees
and Susquehannocks. For consideration of the Jamestown history, I’ll confine my
discussion to the Powhatan Algonquians, among whom the English settled directly, and
the Monacans, the people located on the James River immediately to the west of
Jamestown. The long-term interaction between these indigenous people, variably
organized over several centuries into different sociopolitical structures and political
alliances, is a necessary context for understanding the Jamestown colonial event. As competition with Spanish and French colonial powers in eastern North America affected English actions, so too, in different cultural and historical contexts, did the relations between indigenous peoples of the coast and the interior affect reactions and relations with the newly arrived English.

Jamestown was established in the territory of the Powhatan Algonquian Indians of the Chesapeake Atlantic coastal region, a polity which in 1607 is generally characterized as a paramount chiefdom (Rountree and Turner 2002). The Algonquian Indians of the Chesapeake were an agricultural society, with corn grown in relatively small garden plots adding to a diet largely harvested from the abundant aquatic resources of the Chesapeake Bay. The region between the Potomac River and the James River was organized into approximately thirty separate polities, often called petty chiefdoms, documented in John Smith’s writings and his famous early colonial map of Virginia. On that map, he identified these polities/towns by name and the presence of a “king’s howse” where found. He also provided a census for each by counting how many ‘bowmen’ or warriors were in each polity. Each of these polities had independent identities and histories, but for some time had been united by conquest or other forms of alliance into a tributary chiefdom ruled by a dominant paramount chief named Wahunsonacah, or Powhatan. Archaeological research at the Algonquian town of Werowocomoco (Gallivan 2007) has provided evidence of a place marked by elite residences and ritual trenches which date back to the 13th century. The presence of this elite place suggests a hierarchical structure within Algonquian society which extended well before Chief Powhatan. However, ethnohistoric evidence (Rountree 1990) suggests that Powhatan expanded his territory and tribute
relations extensively in the years between 1570 and 1607, inheriting six petty chiefdoms at birth, but expanding it to the thirty noted by John Smith. Based on John Smith’s count of bowmen in each polity, the population of the region in 1607 is believed to be reliably in the area of 14,000 individuals (Turner 1976).

That simple demographic parameter forces the question that drives the research of this chapter. In 1607 there were 14,000 Virginia Algonquians in the greater Chesapeake Bay region – these being the same people who eliminated the Spanish and the Roanoke colonies. The English colony at Jamestown in 1607 consisted of 104 men. They could not have survived without the support and willingness of the larger society into which they inserted themselves. Why were those 104 men allowed to stay, when the prior colonial efforts were squashed or allowed to fail (Fausz 1988; Hantman 1990)?

The Monacans of the Virginia interior, long interpreted on the basis of limited ethnohistoric evidence as a smaller population of predominantly hunter-gatherer peoples living along the narrower rivers of the Virginia interior, have recently been reconceptualized on the basis of archaeological and bioarchaeological evidence (see Hantman 2000, Gold 2004, Gallivan 2003). From excavations at villages sites on the interior sections of the James River (Gallivan 2003), and the excavation of the Rapidan burial mound (Dunham et al 2003), one of thirteen accretional mounds which are found in Monacan territory (Hantman 1990), the Monacans are here understood to represent a polity which also united smaller polities into a political alliance which linked the Virginia Piedmont and which is referred to collectively as the Monacans. Ethnobotanical and bioarchaeological evidence make clear that they were an agricultural people (Gold 2004), consuming corn, for instance, in approximately the same amount as the Virginia
Algqonuians Powhatans. They also had abundant natural resources on which to draw. While no documentary evidence details a tributary system such as that described for the Powhatans, it must be noted that no English colonist lived among the Monacans and our understanding of their political organization in 1607 is thus less well known. However, the construction of sizeable burial mounds associated with villages Smith also labeled with the term “king’s howses,” all suggests a society similar in structure to that of the Powhatans. The Monacans lived in and around the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, and thus had direct access to the mineral resources of that region, including copper and soapstone.

Ethnohistoric references from the first Spanish colony in the Chesapeake briefly allude to a long-standing enmity between the coastal people and the people of the interior (Lewis and Loomie 1953). The Jamestown era ethnohistories suggest that that relationship existed as well in 1607. One Powhatan informant told an English colonist that the Monacans were his enemy as they came down in the fall and invaded Powhatan territory (Barbour 1986). Those ethnohistoric sources thus frame the enmity as existing between 1570 and 1607, a time which also corresponds to the expansion of the Powhatan chiefdom. A necessary question is whether this enmity was, in fact, long-standing, or a product of indigenous politics of the forty year period prior to the Jamestown colony. Only a long-term history can address that question.

Long-Term Indigenous History: Hierarchy and Chiefdoms in the Chesapeake

The people of the greater Chesapeake were not anchored timelessly in geographic space, and migration and boundary permeability are a given. But, for several centuries
prior to 1607 ceramic type information and mortuary practice describe a cultural geography seen in the ethnohistoric record that minimally identifies two different groups living in the larger James River / Chesapeake region: an Algonquian speaking people of the Chesapeake and a Siouan speaking people of the Virginia interior and Blue Ridge Mountains. These two people were separated by a buffer zone of unoccupied territory and the dramatic falls of each of the major rivers flowing west to east into the Chesapeake. Each of these people has a different history.

Archaeological research at the principal town of the Powhatans, Werowocomoco, provides intriguing evidence to support the idea that the Powhatans embraced hierarchy in their social structure, whether it was based in ritual or politics, or most likely both. However, the extensive Algonquian polity of the 1607 Chesapeake, often called the Powhatan paramount chiefdom, was a relatively recent phenomenon in its scale and scope. Powhatan inherited six petty chiefdoms ca. 1570, and 24 or so more became tributary between then and 1607 (Barbour 1986, Rountree 1990). If Powhatan ruled and exacted tribute over 30 petty chiefdoms, he did so by virtue of conquest, marriage alliance and other forms of negotiation. He shared authority, or was subservient to Powhatan priests (Williamson 2003). While the exception may prove the rule, it is worth noting that one polity (the Chickahominy) in the heart of Powhatan’s territory refused to pay him tribute, and there is no record of any recrimination because of that.

The extensive paramount chiefdom joining 30 polities from the Potomac River to the James River appears from archaeological and ethnohistoric evidence to be both short-lived and therefore tenuous in the context of the deep history in the region. The archaeological record of the region shows precious little evidence of social differentiation
in the history of the Chesapeake before 1200, and it is not apparent that such differentiation exists above the village level or petty chiefdom level.

By contrast, the Monacans who occupied the Piedmont and Blue Ridge Mountains, show evidence of remarkable continuity and cohesion over a wide area in the centuries prior to 1607. Their territory is marked by substantial burial mounds with a distinctive secondary burial practice suggesting stable long-term regional alliance and relative stability (Hantman 2000). These mounds contain hundreds of burials each, and two contain more than 1000 individuals (Gold 2004). Some are associated with chiefly villages. The earliest evidence of their construction dates to approximately 1000, and at least one appears to be in use well into the seventeenth century. Jefferson’s famous report of his mound study lends added significance in that he describes seeing Indians make their way to a Monacan mound as late as the 1750s (Jefferson 1982). These mounds which linked a sizeable region of the Virginia interior were in use for centuries. The record of permanence of place, not at the village level, but at the level of the regional polity defined and reinforced by the multi-village mound, is substantial and long-standing.

In sum, with respect to long-term internal histories, both of these social systems were undergoing change in the centuries before Jamestown, as they adopted agriculture and a more sedentary village structure (Gallivan 2003). But, it would appear from archaeological evidence that it was the Powhatans who were undergoing the greatest political and structural upheaval and challenge, as Chief Powhatan extended the concept of the hereditary chiefdom to a regional scale not previously envisioned or managed. Rountree (1989) used the terms ‘core’ and ‘fringe’ to describe the identities of the Powhatan regional system. In the context of the long-term, Chief Powhatan’s control over
the ‘fringe’ may have been so short-lived and based on coercion, as to make it difficult to maintain. One of the ways he did assert and demonstrate control was in his ability to obtain, display, make offerings of, and gifts of, non-local trade goods. This leads to a specific dimension of long-term history relating to regional trade and here called **positionality**.

**Positionality**

Positionality is a familiar analytical perspective drawn from feminist theory that argues that all knowledge is “situated,” and produced by actors who view social interactions, historical events, or even the supposedly objective insights of science, from a relational place or position (Alcoff 1988; Haraway 1988). Relational in this context refers to the idea that knowledge is never objective, but rather filtered through the lens of lived experience (position, viewpoint) with regards to (typically) gender, race, class and other layered social identities. Awareness of these categories of identity do not reify them; instead they are reflexive and de-essentialize the actions of individuals and groups to contextualize them as positionality changes over time and in different contexts. Cultural geographers have broadened the concept to include spatial positionality (Rose 1997), and significantly they include globalization as a process perceived differentially and reflexively in changing spatial networks (Sheppard 2002).

Positionality, in a long-term historical perspective, affects both how individuals view historical events and processes, and it can be taken to model how cultures (or polities) collectively view historical events. From the individual to the collective, positionality changes as local and regional conditions change. Positionality is about
perception; it is also about geography. Over the long-term, how events and processes are viewed by indigenous people living in the Chesapeake Bay in the centuries before and just after European colonization had to change. But, prior examination of the colonial encounter has not adequately built positionality, by any name, into the historical narrative.

I want to make two points in regard to relative geographic positionality in the Chesapeake. First, taking the long-term perspective further, the Powhatans of the coastal plain region had for centuries lived on the edge, on the margin, of the American continent. While the Chesapeake coastal area is as rich a biotic zone as one can find on the continent, it is strikingly devoid of mineral resources. In particular, it lacks the very minerals that archaeological evidence has shown were valued by Eastern Woodland societies – copper, steatite and mica, for example. From a positionality perspective, it is also bounded by other cultures, other language groups, and sometime enemies (as noted previously) which made access to the interior people of the Ohio and Mississippi River valleys difficult. Debra Gold and I have argued elsewhere (2002) from regional archaeological data of the Middle Atlantic region that these non-local minerals were not always markers of status or rank, but that something else from a distance, from the continental interior, fulfilled that role.

In the centuries just before the Jamestown colony, it was copper that was particularly important to the newly emerged paramount in maintaining his local status and authority (Potter 1989; Hantman 1990, Mallios 2006). The Monacans and the Iroquoians were positioned differently as compared to the Powhatans. They linked and transcended coast to interior. They had direct access to sources in the mountains or trade to the
Mississippian or Fort Ancient interior societies for which the coastal people would have had to negotiate. The Susquehannocks and other Iroquoian-speaking people were engaged in trade which linked the upper Chesapeake deep into the interior of the continent. They had also been engaged with non-English colonial traders in the century before Jamestown. The Monacans lived and built their mounds in a territory which included both soapstone and copper (Hantman 1993). Clarence Moore (1903:34) even argued on the basis of early experimental archaeology, that Virginia copper, hammered with stone tools, produced a finished product as good, if not better, than that obtained from Great Lakes copper. Whether or not that is accurate, or what ‘good’ means here, Moore was examining copper artifacts from throughout the Southeastern / Mississippian region. His observations are therefore compelling. Minimally, it is a fact that copper is found in the Blue Ridge Mountains, and in an area also marked by the Monacan mounds.

Positionality would suggest that the Monacans and the Powhatans may have viewed such goods differently as well. This is very hard to evaluate. We do know from ethnohistoric records and archaeological contexts that copper artifacts were status items of greatest value to the Powhatan elites (Potter 1989). This inference is drawn largely from the recovery of copper from funerary contexts in the years just before and just after the Jamestown settlement. Monacan use of the copper which was local to them has not been documented. This may be a result of poor preservation, or it may more likely reflect the fact that Monacan mortuary practice in the Late Woodland period did not involve burial goods. Unusual though that is, both the largest and the latest of the Monacan mounds do not contain prestige artifacts of any kind (Dunham et al 2003; Gold 2004). All burials are secondary, and the association of individuals with prestige items is not part of
the burial process we can see. Positionality may also help us to understand that from the view of the Piedmont and mountains, local copper was not a prestige good.

Second, I stated above that for centuries in this context the Powhatans were geographically peripheral. But, the English long-term settlement at Jamestown transformed a global equation for the Chesapeake. Now, the Atlantic trade with goods more distant and more exotic (cf. Helms 1988) in the local cultural ideology, became important. Now, the Powhatans were in the middle, and the Monacans were on the periphery vis-a-vis the Atlantic trade of prestige items. Events of 1607 permanently transformed these societies in terms of their geographic positionality. One measure of that is the very different response of the Powhatans and the Monacans to the English. The Powhatans engaged the English in trade, as has been richly documented (see especially Mallios 2006). The Monacans, in one famous exchange between a colonist and a Monacan, told the Englishman that the Monacans thought that the English were a people who “came from under the world” and that they understood the English wanted to take away their land. As such, they would have little to do with the English. Ethnohistoric evidence supports this – the Monacans did not come to the Jamestown, and they did not actively seek interaction of any sort with the English. When the colonists tentatively ventured into a Monacan town in 1608, they noted that “the people treated us neither well nor ill.” In one other of the rare recorded exchanges of the early colonial era, the Monacans attacked an English exploring party led by John Smith at the falls of the river leading to the Chesapeake, at the edge of Powhatan territory (Barbour 1986). They did not welcome the English to explore into Monacan territory, nor did they seek friendship or trade partner status with the English.
Archaeological studies at four village sites known to have early contact era occupations in the Virginia Piedmont of the James River valley have yielded no European trade goods (see Gallivan 2003 for summary of the Wood site, the Elk Island/Wright site, and the Lickinghole Creek site, as well as Pellerin (2001) for brief summary of excavations at Monasukapanough). After 1650, interior Piedmont sites do contain European trade goods. But, the position of the interior Monacans, from 1607 to at least 1650, is one that distinguishes them from the Powhatans in those years. From the Monacan position, in 1607, and for decades after, the English colonists at Jamestown were of little interest. The Monacans paid no price for that indifference except one which causes them much difficulty to this day. The price paid was that they were virtually ignored in the construction of historical memory surrounding Jamestown as they are rarely mentioned in the ethnohistoric documentation of the early seventeenth century. This is most unfortunate for political purposes relating to federal recognition today, and most unfortunate in that in the contingent events of 1607, knowing Monacan culture, history and foreign relations is essential to understanding the Jamestown event.

Contingency

Contingency speaks to the historical moment, why individuals or societies at large, act the way they do under specific circumstances. It presumes that no particular event is predetermined or predictable based on previously determined laws or presumed balances of power in historical encounters (as in the colonial exchange). Instead contingency stresses outcomes as the result of multiple processes coming together in unique ways that no laws of human behavior could have predicted as inevitable. In
evolutionary studies, Stephen Jay Gould spent a lifetime celebrating the multiple paths that evolutionary trajectories could have taken, but under certain environmental shifts, certain demographic conditions, and certain historical particulars or accidents, only one historical process took shape (Gould 2002: 1338-1342). And, we want to know why it was that one. Gould taught us that contingency in deep history was not an explanatory framework to invoke as a residual domain when laws of evolution did not hold. Instead, it is necessary to look constantly at the intersection of structures and particulars in historical moments.

In anthropology, the development of an appreciation of history and indigenous ways of knowing history, led to a similar appreciation for contingency (Sahlins 1985). Colonial encounters, as in Sahlins’ famous discussion of Captain Cook in Hawaii, must be understood in the cultural logic and history of the past, and in the moment, for both the colonized and the colonizer. Recent events, recent expectations, recent politics, and recent histories, set within a framework of long-term cultural structures, will best help us understand the colonial exchange.

Contingency as an analytical concern is ever-present, but what concerns me here is the contingent moment of the colonial encounter in the Chesapeake. The puzzle of Jamestown is why the Powhatans’ paramount chief, with military force available to him, allowed and helped the Jamestown colony to survive in 1607, when earlier colonial efforts had been destroyed or allowed to fail. Contingency – local and regional events specific to the years leading up to and including 1607, intersecting with the structure of local and regional cultural relationships – is a needed context in which the agency of individuals and groups in the encounter can best be understood.
Contingencies are theoretically limitless; many are, of course, not recoverable from the archaeological or ethnohistoric record. But, from what we do know from both of those sources, I suggest that we can identify three particularly important historical moments which put 1607 in a new light. First, for all the emphasis I and others have placed on the failure of the English to establish a permanent colony at Roanoke in 1585, it is nevertheless the case that a great deal of information about Virginia Indians returned from Roanoke to inform the Virginia Company as to how to prepare for a new colony, if there was to be one. Specifically, among more general discussion of Virginia’s native Algonquian people, the Roanoke colonists instructed future colonists to bring European copper, cut to specific shapes and sizes for trade with the indigenous elites, the next time they ventured into the Chesapeake. Archaeological data from the recent excavations at Jamestown bear dramatic testimony to how closely the Jamestown colonists followed this advice (Kelso 2006). Had Roanoke not happened, had that key piece of information regarding elite exchange networks not been obtained and passed on in the late sixteenth century, Jamestown, too, might have failed. Access to the English copper was a significant factor in Chief Powhatan’s highly contingent decision making in 1607 (Potter 1989; Hantman 1990).

But, Powhatan and the Algonquian elites clearly had been obtaining copper from interior indigenous trade partners before 1607, so why did this new European source that arrived in 1607 matter? And, matter differently than did the copper-bearing colonists who had come to Roanoke in 1585? I believe the answer lies in the many references made in the early colonial ethnohistories to the enmity that existed between the Powhatans and the Monacans in and just before 1607 (Rountree 1993). I have suggested
elsewhere (Hantman 1993), that there is little to no archaeological evidence of any long-standing enmity. Pottery surface treatment (style) and the movement of other trade items such as soapstone and copper had been moving in social exchange spheres that predated the arrival of the English. When the English colonists asked where the Powhatan had (previously) obtained their copper, the latter referred to the Monacan’s territory in the Blue Ridge Mountains (Hantman 1990).

I believe the Monacans and Powhatans were in a dynamic and changing relationship but not one marked by continuous hostilities. It is likely that the expansion and recent consolidation of the coastal polities into an organization often called an “expansionist paramount chiefdom” provided new tensions for the Monacans in the moment of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. In that context, the newly formed, and elite-trade dependent Powhatan chiefdom of the coastal plain was made more tenuous with regard to obtaining copper. When the English arrived, that problem was resolved, and Powhatan made his monopolistic interest in this metal clear to the leaders of the colony. I want to stress that this is one historical contingency among many – though I think it key to the actions of Powhatan elites in 1607.

The interest in copper as an elite exchange good has a long history in North America, as documented by archaeological research. That Powhatan chiefs, both petty chiefs and the paramount chief, strengthened and dispersed political and religious power and authority with copper, is clear from a reading of the ethnohistoric record from Jamestown. This is the structure of a society defined by hierarchy, and in which hierarchy is maintained, in part, by unequal access to long-distance prestige goods. Against that structure, the tenuous hold of Chief Powhatan over his rapidly expanding chiefdom, and
the increasingly tenuous link to copper coming from interior sources such as the now hostile Monacans, created a moment in 1607 in which Powhatan saw the English as a logical and controllable trade partner, with a principal interest in copper. With knowledge that was only available due to information provided by the failed Roanoke colonists, the English came prepared to trade, and to trade in a cultural manner familiar and acceptable to the Powhatans. In that contingent moment, the English colony of one hundred men looked to be as if it were a new polity which could perhaps be adopted into the Powhatan chiefdom, trading with and paying tribute to the paramount chief. In that historically contingent context, the English were allowed to stay at Jamestown. And, once establishing a foothold with a native-centered exchange system, within a decade they turned to taking land for profitable tobacco cultivation and export, and, in fact, became the first permanent English colony in America.

Hybridity

Postcolonial theory and its influence on archaeological approaches to the study of colonialism, have led many to move beyond the study of the contact event to the longer-term study of colonialism as a process (e.g., Lightfoot 2005; Silliman 2004). The influence of postcolonial theory and the interest in agency in the archaeological record have encouraged the study of hybridity, which is to say the ways in which colonial settings influence, redefine and de-essentialize all of the actors involved – both the colonized and the colonizers (Bhabha 1994, 1995). A long history of research in anthropology had focused on acculturation, largely the transformation of the colonized into cultural patterns associated with the colonizers. Hybrid identities assume that there are impacts
of indigenous people on the newcomers, and vice versa, but also imagine the creation of wholly new cultural expressions emerging – the hybrid being neither one culture nor the other. There is an interdependence between both, and there is a new theoretical space in which new cultural expressions occur. In this space, Bhabha (1994) has noted, the colonizers may be threatened and unstable. Hybridity theory, and the power it releases, force us to look at historical situations without restricting ourselves to the binary of colonizer and colonized (Ashcroft 1994).

Such mutual influences that the English had on the Powhatans and that the Powhatans had on the English, and that may have occurred on an individual level for many, is the least well-understood aspect of the colonial era in the Chesapeake. The rich archaeological studies of the last decade which took place within the boundaries of the original James Fort provide some striking new evidence of cultural interaction beyond political negotiation, the skirmish occurring just beyond the palisade, and beyond the famous (and real) marriage of Pocahontas to colonist and tobacco entrepreneur, John Rolfe. Even that documented marriage, and John Smith’s famed dalliance with the younger Pocahontas, folkloric though these stories have become, should have hinted at a great degree of interaction at the individual and cultural level greater than has previously been discussed and going well beyond the famous daughter of the paramount chief.

Excavations at the Jamestown fort have yielded abundant Indian artifacts from contexts that suggest Powhatan people may have been living there at times. Native pottery and flakes from stone point manufacture as well as debris from shell bead production have been found in-context with the early occupation of the fort (Kelso 2006). One building at Jamestown, identified just outside of the palisade of the fort, has so many
Native American artifacts that one tentative interpretation is that the structure marks an area reserved for Indians (Kelso and Straube 2004: 70). In the best dialectic manner of ethnohistoric and archaeological research, archaeological discovery has sent Jamestown researchers back to the ethnohistory to find references to the relationships that developed between men and women within and beyond the boundaries of the fort (Mallios and Straube 2000). Personal interaction between Powhatans and English, from work-related to sexual, no doubt took place. If this seems obvious, it is necessary to note it as in the early years of the colony, and the early ethnohistory, such cultural exchanges are rarely mentioned.

However, I think that an argument for hybrid identities in the Chesapeake is difficult to find over the century past the initial colonization. Every school child in Virginia learns that common words used in everyday language today, such as moccasin, raccoon, or the place name Potomac, are Algonquian words. But, the borrowing of words is not compelling evidence for hybridity (except in the all too optimistic, multicultural children’s books and museum exhibits that surrounded the 400th anniversary celebration of the Jamestown colony). In the coastal plain, violent resistance led by the paramount chief Opechancanough, who succeeded Powhatan, as well as emergent English apartheid-style policies, put up severe boundaries. The Monacans in the interior keep their distance, and the English kept their distance from them as well for half a century.

Most critically, what must be noted is the uniquely extreme demographic collapse that took place in the Chesapeake as the apparent result of English colonialism. The levels of population decline are as dramatic, if not more so, then for any region anywhere in North America. Yet, this decline does not appear to be largely attributable to the impact
of European diseases. There is no evidence, in the form of mass burials, extensive commentary from English observers, or Native oral history, to suggest that population decline in the Chesapeake is largely a function of epidemic disease. Instead, one must consider a number of alternatives which are not well documented but which future research should address. First, it is clear that indigenous people migrated away from the English colony to join with tribal groups sharing linguistic ties and cultural histories. The Monacans, for instance, are said to have become part of the Catawba people to the south (Merrell 1982), and the Tuscarora Iroquoian people of North Carolina who merged with the Haudenosaunee to the north (Jefferson 1982). Powhatan out-migration is not described in similar terms, but examples of forced out-migration are noted in the early eighteenth century as an entire community was held responsible for a crime and sent to the West Indies, never to return to the Chesapeake (Rountree 1990). Research on the enslavement of Indians in the South, likely for export to the Caribbean English colonies, has only just begun (see Gallay 2002), but one wonders if Indian slavery, or the fear of enslavement, may have led to outmigration among both the Monacans and the Powhatans. And, the classic colonial model in the Americas of reduced birth rate, increased infant mortality and death due to the introduction of European diseases are without question, even if not discussed in the ethnohistory, issues to consider in the demographic decline.

The extent of the demographic collapse has been captured by Peter Wood (1989) in his comparative study of Indian, European and African/African-American population levels in Southeastern colonies in the seventeenth century. He notes of the Jamestown and Chesapeake Bay region, “nowhere else in the South had the native population been
reduced so low in either relative or absolute terms (Wood 1989:65). Based on his estimates of the number of Indians in the Jamestown area from 1607 (14,000) to 1700 (1,900), Wood (1989:64) estimates that one-third of the Indian population declined every fifteen years. Along with that extraordinary rate of decrease was the rapid increase in Europeans and Africans in the region over that same time. In 1607 there were 104 Europeans living within a Powhatan world. By 1700, 1,900 Powhatans were living among 63,500 Europeans and Africans in the Jamestown/Virginia colony. The stark reality is that in fewer than one hundred years, the indigenous population of Virginia went from being 99% of the regional population in 1607 to being 3% of the population of the region in 1700 (see Wood 1989, Table 1). It is unlikely that there is any other region in North America, not overwhelmed by epidemic disease at initial contact, which saw such a dramatic demographic decline in such a short time frame. We do not have a good explanation for that, though as I have suggested, it is important to consider demographic patterns beyond the impact of infectious disease. The extreme demographic decline is key to examining the concept of hybridity in the Chesapeake.

For indigenous people in the Chesapeake, the seventeenth century can be characterized by widespread outmigration, increased death rates, and a withdrawal from contact with the new and rapidly expanding colonial presence. Especially following the violent uprising against the English in 1624 (Rountree 1990), there was a steady trend toward a position which at least one historian has labeled as an early-American apartheid (McCartney 1985). Many absolute and legally enforced barriers were placed on interaction between the indigenous people of the Chesapeake and English settlers (Rountree 1990).
When one considers the decline and extremely small relative and absolute numbers of indigenous people living in the Chesapeake in the seventeenth century, and the choices made by Powhatans and Monacans and English to avoid contact and interaction rather than embrace it after the first years of contact, I think it unlikely that the postcolonial model of hybridity is appropriate to characterizing the Chesapeake experience for colonizer and colonized as a whole. Certainly, on the individual level any number of relationships are possible. And, there were, to be sure, moments when the English co-opted the political structure of the Powhatans as when they declared a descendant of Powhatan known as the Queen of Pamunkey, to rule over a reformed but greatly reduced Powhatan chiefdom (McCartney (1989). But, that was a colonial government in action and not a Powhatan leader constructing a new form of political structure merged from English and Powhatan structures. Her authority was drawn from the colony. Soon after 1607, the English had little use for the indigenous people of the region as traders, or as labor. The English imposed their expansive tobacco economy and plantations on the landscape, clearing forests and transforming the indigenous landscape. In short, between the distance kept between the two groups after 1610, and the relative invisibility of the indigenous population as the seventeenth century proceeded, there was little basis for the kinds of hybridity and inverted power relations postcolonial theorists and archaeologists have seen elsewhere. Such cultural forms are interesting and considering hybridity as a process has been enlightening as to the uniqueness of the English colony in the Chesapeake. It is interesting to contemplate that although it appears from archaeological data at James Fort that such processes may have begun in 1607, for reasons outlined above they did not produce long-term effects.
Conclusion

This chapter began with a consideration of the dominant themes that have long structured the context within which the events of the Jamestown colony are remembered. Those themes emphasize the actions of the colonists and, at best, the agency of one Native American who in some way helped the colony to survive. Perspectives inspired by concepts such as long-term indigenous histories, positionality, contingency and hybridity attempt to reframe the Jamestown story. These new concepts force a rethinking of Powhatan and Monacan history and culture, the central role of native people in the events of the early colonial era, and change the theater of the encounter from a small island in the James River to the American continent and its indigenous peoples. Such contexts are essential for understanding indigenous actions in the initial encounter and subsequent 400 years. The Jamestown colony was the first permanent English-speaking colony in North America. I have suggested here that it survived, barely, in its initial years of settlement only because of the actions of indigenous people. That they allowed Jamestown to survive, to become permanent, was a product of the long-term historical relationships within and between the indigenous polities of the Chesapeake, and the decisions they made, from the positions they occupied, in the contingent moment of 1607.

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