Landscape archaeology is the study of ancient social geographies, or how communities modified, experienced, and responded to past environments. Aerial remote sensing techniques have revolutionized landscape archaeology through the rapid and relatively inexpensive acquisition of geospatial data. For example, archaeological sites and their surrounding environs in difficult to reach locations can now be precisely mapped using LiDAR. Although incredibly useful, these datasets suffer the same problem of any map: they are static snapshots of long-term processes and they represent space in ways that were likely foreign to the original, non-Western inhabitants. These problems are particularly acute in the St. Johns River valley of northeast Florida, where large mounds of freshwater snail shells were constructed by hunter-gatherers 7500 to 3000 years ago. These mounds are situated within extensive wetlands and hardwood swamps, making them difficult to research, and moreover, many were altered or destroyed by 20th century land use practices. Based on archaeological research at a subset of mounds, we know that they were built or modified for a variety of purposes including residence, burial, and communal ritual, and have complex histories of use and abandonment. This talk will explore the how LiDAR-derived elevation models can be historicized and humanized when integrated with archaeological data, and problematized with social theory. In the case of the St. Johns, the argument is made that hunter-gatherer communities radically rearranged the social geography of the region during periods of political and ecological upheaval through mound construction.

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