

SECTION IV
The Mississippian Period in Tennessee

Chapter 10
The Early Mississippian Period
(AD 900-1100)

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Introduction

There is no simple, straightforward way to clearly define the origin and development of Mississippian culture throughout the Tennessee area. Variable physiographic zones that crosscut Tennessee accommodated a wide range of human adaptations stretching from the Mississippi River Valley in the west to the Upper Tennessee River in the east. A heading for this section entitled “Sedentary Agriculturalists” may be the simplest way of introducing one to Mississippian culture. A shift in agricultural production from marginal to monumental scale from the preceding Woodland period is one way of classifying such a nebulous concept as the Mississippian culture. But even this does not happen quickly in the Tennessee area. Agricultural dependency has not been inferred until much later during the middle Mississippian period.

As discussed in the Woodland section, platform mound building was a tradition in Tennessee 500 years prior to the Mississippian. Furthermore, a widely shared suite of imagery and ritual was original to the Hopewell Interaction Sphere, which had passed its prime 400 years before the onset of Mississippian culture. Even the standard of use of shell temper in pottery production was already common in the Central Mississippi Valley by AD 700 (Morse and Morse 1990). It seems, based on the traditional trait list, that Mississippian cultures were different in degree, not kind, from Woodland cultures in the Tennessee area.

This chapter evaluates the development of Mississippian lifeways specifically within the Tennessee area through an evaluation of extant archaeological research related to many different specialty areas. Each major physiographic region is covered (East,

Middle, and West) in separate sections in order to maintain a semblance of regional cultural continuity. Questions related to *where*, *when*, *what*, and possibly even *why* are particularly relevant to ongoing research and comprise the bulk of discussion topics in this chapter.

Defining Mississippian

The range of dates for this early part of the Mississippian period were chosen for specific reasons, not because we know exactly when the transition took place (certainly not in a single year), but as a result of general dating trends. Research in eastern, central, and western Tennessee has identified a relatively short interval during which distinctive Mississippian activities were in practice (**FIGURE, Tennessee map of culture phases**).

Distinctive Mississippian activities have been recognized from decades of culture historical investigations and the resulting typologies particular to specific times and places. Archaeologists construct typologies in order to understand the past. This is a human quality that is impossible to dispense with. With this in mind, certain key traits of Mississippian culture have been set forth that adequately define how this period is different from preceding and succeeding periods. First is the presence of platform mounds. As mentioned before platform mounds were nothing new by AD 900. However, if we look at how they were *used* there are distinct differences. Mississippian mounds were often constructed for residential purposes. That is, they were constructed as platforms for buildings. There is no evidence of buildings on top of any middle Woodland or late Archaic mound or shell midden. Thus, platform mounds with structures are distinctly Mississippian. Second is the presence of large villages. Clear evidence of village organization has been identified in the Normandy Reservoir during the Owl

Hollow phase 200 years prior to Mississippian villages in the area (Faulkner 1978).

Again, we are dealing with differences in scale not kind. While Owl Hollow phase structures hint at village organization, Mississippian structures display clear organization of space over long periods of time. Third is the amount of refuse from agricultural practices. The use of corn dates back to around AD 800, when it was presumably introduced into the region from the south (Shea and Chapman 1981). Corn was grown sparingly during the Woodland period, but it was depended on as a source of food in most areas during the Mississippian period (but see the Banks phase in central Tennessee for an exception). Thus, an *intensification* of agriculture leading to nutritional dependence, and in some cases monoculture, is one indication of Mississippian society. These three themes are common across the state during the Mississippian emergence and progress into more elaborate, organized, and intensified versions over time.

The Environmental Context

The Tennessee area was not a drastically different landscape during the Mississippian period than it is today. Environmentally, we harbor many of the same plants and animals that the people 1000 years ago were familiar with. In a similar way that modern climate patterns fluctuate year to year through variations in temperature and rainfall, climate was erratic in the past. Pre-contact peoples living in Tennessee were more dependent on favorable environmental conditions than our society is today. Traditional agricultural communities require a narrow range of climate conditions to produce bountiful crops (Schroeder 1999) and were thus impacted by dramatic climate fluctuations.

The climate conditions in eastern North America spanning from approximately AD 900 to 1200 has been defined as the Medieval Warming period or the Medieval Optimum (Anderson 2001; Esper et al. 2002; Osborn and Briffa 2006). Paleoclimatic data obtained from tree rings and pollen cores indicate a slight warming trend in the northern hemisphere that brought about milder temperatures and increased rainfall (Anderson 2001; Meeks 2006). The effects of this climatic shift on native subsistence strategies and social organization have intriguing possibilities. The Medieval warming interval coincides closely with the emergence of complex social organizations across the central and southeastern United States. Again, if climate influences the productivity potential of agricultural societies, then this period was suitable for producing surpluses and all of the inherent social benefits.

East Tennessee

The eastern portion of Tennessee contains a diverse mix of ridge and valleys intersected by fertile rivers and streams. The main physiographic feature is the upper Tennessee River and its many tributary rivers and smaller streams that were once home to a majority of settlements dating to the Mississippian period. Eastern Tennessee is framed by the western edge of the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Cumberland Plateau. These physical boundaries certainly did not inhibit population movements but redirected the flow of information and people to more easily navigable routes within individual drainage systems. Early Mississippian sites are most often identified in close proximity to river and stream settings, usually bordering the floodplain or on an alluvial terrace. In eastern Tennessee, the majority of early Mississippian settlements and farmsteads were located along first terrace floodplains adjacent to major river systems (Davis 1986). It is

difficult to contrast this mode of settlement with those of late Woodland sites in eastern Tennessee due to our current lack of well-defined late Woodland settlements anywhere in the region.

Regional Chronological Sequence

Martin Farm

The earliest evidence of Mississippian cultural traits in the eastern portion of Tennessee has been defined as the Martin Farm phase. This period from approximately AD 900 to 1000 was identified based on excavations at the Martin Farm site (40MR20) in the Tellico Reservoir. Settlements dating to this period used a combination of remnant Woodland cultural practices along with advances typical of a Mississippian tradition. We do not know why some traditions persisted for some time while others were replaced by new technologies.

The Martin Farm phase is considered a transitional period, during which people started to organize themselves into consolidated settlements not previously recognized during the late Woodland period. These settlements may contain small platform mounds built over buildings that had been purposefully razed, clearly defined habitation areas, abundant remains of both wild and cultivated foods, and no human burials. This transitional culture is also evident at the Hiwassee Island (40MG31), Hixon (40HA3), and certainly at the Davis (40HA2) sites in the Chickamauga Basin in the southern corner of the state and also at the Lea Farm site (40AN17) in the Norris Basin in the northern section of the state (Chapman 1985).

Settlement Patterning

The Martin Farm site (40MR20)

The site was located on a wide bank of the Little Tennessee River just upstream from the confluence with Toqua Creek in Monroe County. Two small earthen mounds were located along an escarpment above the Little Tennessee River. The occupation at Martin Farm was not large, estimated at roughly half a hectare, but represents one of the earliest settled villages in the upper Tennessee Valley for the Mississippian (**FIGURE, plan of Martin Farm**). The earliest occupation was identified from excavations into one of two platform mounds, a submound structure, and a village structure with a large refuse trench dug alongside of it. The platform mound was built in at least two stages. The first mound stage was built over the remains of a single set post building but did not support any identifiable building of its own. Adjacent to this early mound was a long and wide trench that was originally interpreted as a refuse dump (Schroedl et al. 1985) but has recently been considered the trench for a palisade wall (Schroedl 1998). No human burials were associated with this early occupation at the site. Burial likely had taken place nearby in one of the conical mounds that date to the late Woodland period (Schroedl and Boyd 1991). Subterranean storage pits were numerous at this time, whereas a later re-occupation utilized above-ground storage granaries. The differences between the two may deal with periodic settlement abandonment or purposeful concealment of food surplus (DeBoer 1988).

Identifying specific uses for refuse-filled pits is difficult to quantify, but function is likely related to food storage and processing but can also be used to mine soils for pottery production, mound building, and plaster for buildings. Domestic architecture is more straightforward. Square, round, and rectangular structures were all present at Martin Farm. Some buildings, such as small round granaries, are diagnostic of a later settlement

at the site, while others, such as wall trench buildings, were built in the early settlement. Both wall trench and single set post buildings were uncovered, but a single set post type found under the early mound was the earliest uncovered. The early wall trench structure was dated to AD 1080.

The Bat Creek site (40LD24)

The site was located upstream from the confluence of Bat Creek with the Little Tennessee River in Loudoun County. This location garnered the early attention of archaeologists working for the BAE under the direction of Cyrus Thomas (Thomas 1894: 391-393). Modern testing of Mound 1 and the village area uncovered middle and late Mississippian site features (Schroedl 1975). At the time of the BAE excavation, Mound 1 measured 8' high (Thomas 1894: 391) but was barely visible at the time of work in 1971 (**FIGURE**, plan of Bat Creek).

Mound 1 was constructed atop at least one single set post structure and probably more that were not fully uncovered. The structure was burned before being capped with a clay and ash mound stage. The fill overlying this stage contained few features and no structures. The village area flanking the mound was highly disturbed from plowing but still exhibited signs of a dense occupation. A total of 12 structures were uncovered along with fence lines in between and many associated pit features. Some of these structures and features were from a late Mississippian occupation of the site so it is not clear just how large the early occupation was. Important early Mississippian features are the prepared pre-mound surface with single set post buildings, refuse pits, and hearths. The artifactual material has not been compared to other early sites in the Tennessee Valley, so it has not yet been defined as a Martin Farm phase site.

The Davis site (40HA2)

The site was located on the northern bank of the Tennessee River in Hamilton County. The settlement consisted of a village area and a small mound. The village did not develop a deep occupational midden suggesting this was a short occupation. Two structures were uncovered in the village along with a long refuse trench dug nearby but not much cultural debris. The mound was about 10 feet high in an oval form with at least 4 building episodes over an old village level complete with features and postholes but no clearly identified buildings. The initial building episode consisted of a set of paired mounds and lacked any structures on the summit (**FIGURE, plan of Davis**). The next building episode filled in the gap between the two mounds, along with a building constructed on the north side of the conjoined mound. This building was a large circular rotunda composed of single set posts. The next building stage supported two additional structures, one a large rectangular wall trench and one a medium sized rectangular single set post building. An additional building stage was apparent from the eroded remnants of an additional circular rotunda above these last two buildings but was mostly eroded by plowing.

Important features from Davis include eight individuals interred in the mound area, six of which were adults. One young adult in a stone cist burial was accompanied by hundreds of shell beads in the form of wrist, ankle and neck bracelets. The paucity of diagnostic artifacts from Davis precludes making a strong argument for this site being early Mississippian, although the pottery tradition retains portions of late Woodland technology coupled with basic Mississippian vessel forms and decorations. The practice

of burial in the mound is not seen at other early sites but the inclusion of many shell beads and no pottery is typical in late Woodland/early Mississippian burial practices.

The Lea Farm site (40AN17)

The site is located on a rise above the Clinch River in Anderson County. The Lea Farm settlement consisted of three earthen mounds and a village area. The village site contained numerous features related to intense freshwater mollusk processing, storage and refuse (Webb 1938). Two structures were identified in the village; one built of single set posts in a rectangular pattern while the other was constructed from wall trenches in a rectangular pattern and contained the burial of a male on the floor. Mound 1 was built over an old rectangular single set post structure. Mound 2 was circular in shape and supported a rectangular single set post structure on its second building stage. There was no recognizable structure under Mound 2, but it lay on top of dense village debris. Mound 3 stood on the high point of the hill and projected out like a ridge. The remnants of a “sweat house” were found in this mound as well as a large single set post structure on the summit with a ramp leading down from the mound.

Lea Farm has also not been carefully scrutinized since it was dug and reported on in the early 1930s (Webb 1938). There are clear similarities between this and the other possible early Mississippian sites in the Tennessee Valley. Mound construction over a prepared surface, sometimes over a burnt building, are good indications along with the processing of mussel shells for food and tool use. Pottery from Lea Farm is strikingly plain, with little in the way of decoration. This seems to be an early trait in eastern Tennessee.

Social Organization

Early attempts to classify culture in the eastern Tennessee area tried to affix prehistoric cultures to historical ethnic groups, such as the Cherokee (Harrington 1922; Moore 1915; Thomas 1890). It was not until the work of Lewis and Kneberg in the 1930s in southeastern Tennessee and Webb in northeastern Tennessee that models were tested for the origin of Mississippian culture (Schroedl et al. 1990). The established framework was a standard for years to come but was eventually contested, in part by the Tellico excavations along the Little Tennessee.

Cross-cultural models developed to explain the spread of complex social organizations similar to the Mississippian culture are rooted in agricultural surplus production (Flannery 1968), endemic warfare and social circumscription (Carniero 1970), and more efficient evolutionary adaptation (Rindos 1984). Faulkner (1975: 22-28), Schroedl et al. (1990), and Salo (1969: 138) all adhere to an *in situ* development of Mississippian culture in eastern Tennessee. Archaeologically, the development of Mississippian occurred simultaneously over a large portion of the Southeast from AD 800-900 (Schroedl et al. 1990). The shift from Woodland to Mississippian culture seems dramatic if looked at in the long run, but is not represented by any striking changes in material culture from the late Woodland to early Mississippian period.

It would be beneficial to our current understanding of how Mississippian society emerged in this region if there was a better understanding of what late Woodland social structure was akin to. Since occupation areas have not been well-defined, conical burial mounds encompass some of the best contextual information on the late Woodland to early Mississippian transition south of Knoxville; they are noticeably absent from areas to the north (Schroedl 1990: 183). The use of conical mounds for burial was not exclusive to

the late Woodland period. Archaeologists have dated the use of similar mounds from AD 700 on up to AD 1200 (Cole 1975; Schroedl 1978; 1990).

Mortuary Patterning

In East Tennessee, mortuary patterning of the early Mississippian Martin Farm culture differs little from the preceding late Woodland Hamilton focus. Radiocarbon dating and the presence of certain burial inclusions such as shell tempered pottery and early Mississippian effigy pipes suggest continuity between the late Woodland - Mississippian transition (Cole 1975; Schroedl 1978, 1990; Chapman 1985). For instance, radiocarbon samples from three mounds at the McDonald (40RH7) site yielded dates ranging from A.D. 800 for the premound surface of Mound D to A.D. 1335 for level three of Mound A (Schroedl 1978). **(TABLE, dates for Hamilton Burial Mounds)**

Similar to the Hamilton period, the Martin Farm mortuary program appears to be almost exclusively confined to conical burial mounds. A notable exception to this pattern is among the youngest age categories. The extreme scarcity of sub-adults within Hamilton/Martin Farm burial populations suggests that differential burial placement rather than differential preservation as a more likely scenario. Unfortunately, differential treatment in death of the littlest ones within these communities has to remain pure conjecture. Most Hamilton/Martin Farm burials were simply placed in a flexed position while a smaller number were secondary, or bundle, burials or cremations. Offerings associated with internments are rare. When they are present the types are confined to shell decorations and utilitarian items. Differential social ranking in these cemeteries, if it existed, was not materialized through grave offerings or burial treatment (Schroedl and Boyd 1991).

Schroedl and Boyd (1991) have argued that burials are not found at early Mississippian habitation sites since dispersed communities may have shared communal burial mounds removed from residential areas. A similar statement was posited by Lewis and Kneberg (1946) for the late Woodland communities as well. Cole (1975) speculated that these burial mounds may represent separate kin lineages. Without a tighter temporal control over the use of these multi-mound clusters we do not know whether they represented contemporaneous use by multiple lineages or represent corporate groups.

The remains of individuals interred in the mounds may shed some light on the social organization of these people. Helmkamp's (1985) biological distance study for several Hamilton/Martin Farm mound burial samples suggests little genetic interaction between clusters of burial mounds. Phenotypic skeletal traits (those observable on the surface of the bone) appeared more variable compared with those of later Mississippian populations. This means that populations did not interact with one another as much as in later times, although the reasons are not clear at this point.

A similar pattern has been proposed for adjoining regions in Georgia and Alabama. The model is that autonomous groups became increasingly dependent on maize agriculture associated with the increased prevalence of intercommunity warfare (King and Cobb 2005). Although Helmkamp (1985) briefly mentions the prevalence of skeletal trauma in his study, no systematic survey has been conducted regarding trauma in late Woodland/early Mississippian burial populations in eastern Tennessee. The transition from late Woodland to early Mississippian is usually expressed through trait lists and radiocarbon dates. Yet, when it comes to ideological and organizational changes as represented by mortuary patterning, little appears to have changed.

Technology

Ceramics

The greatest time-sensitive tool by which to track this change is pottery. Lithics and subsistence information do not provide reasonable resolution at this time. The temporal sensitivity of pottery technology, much like the prehistory of Tennessee, exhibits evidence for stability and change. Mississippian peoples from the Tennessee area continued the ceramic tradition initiated during the early Woodland period, but they developed entirely new ways of producing their vessels. Mississippian potters used new shapes and sizes in constructing their ceramic pots and, most clearly, new tempering agents in the clay the pots were formed from. Unlike Woodland period vessels that used broken up limestone for temper, Mississippian vessels were mostly tempered with crushed mussel shell. Mussels were readily available from the many rivers and streams throughout the state and make a stronger ceramic pot than those tempered with limestone (Bronitsky and Hamer 1986; Feathers 1989, 2006).

A shift in pottery making tradition was not instantaneous in any area. Early Mississippian pottery technology in eastern Tennessee included limestone-tempered plain and cordmarked vessels along with equal amounts of shell-tempered plain and cordmarked forms (Kimball and Baden 1985) (**TABLE, composition of ceramic assemblages**). The interesting thing about Martin Farm phase pottery production is that the Woodland technique of tempering persevered for some time while shell was being used to make a majority of the ceramic vessels. The co-occurrence of two tempering traditions is not wholly uncommon; the uniqueness is that both techniques were used to make similarly shaped and decorated pots. This indicates that pottery producers (likely

women) during the early Mississippian period were transitioning from one ceramic technology to another.

Madeline Kneberg's (1961) seriation of pottery assemblages from stratified Woodland sites along the Tennessee River defined a transitional late Woodland/early Mississippian tradition referred to as the "Roane-Rhea complex". Her conclusions were later substantiated by work at the Martin Farm site and radiometric dates from Hamilton burial mounds in Roane and Rhea counties (Schroedl 1978, 1990). In essence, ceramic types did not change substantially over time, but rather the relative use. The ratio of vessels using limestone or shell as a tempering agent changed, but virtually no other differences existed for other tool classes. In many ways, the early Mississippian culture in eastern Tennessee was a continuation of a Woodland period technological tradition with minor shifts in production technique.

Lithics

The most comprehensive data on early Mississippian lithic assemblages in eastern Tennessee is by Clifford Boyd (1982). Boyd examined the lithic assemblage from early and middle Mississippian components at Martin Farm, an early Mississippian component from Tomotley (40MR5), and a late Woodland feature from Jones Ferry (40MR76). In his study of projectile points the Hamilton Incurvate, Madison, and incurvate base/straight blade types were most common in early and middle Mississippian contexts. Of the 410 complete, fragmented, and preforms of points recovered from contexts at Martin Farm, the Hamilton Incurvate type was most commonly represented. Hamilton Incurvate points, once thought to be cultural markers for Woodland occupations, were found in direct association with both early and middle Mississippian components at

Martin Farm. Boyd (1982:122) concluded that a close association of late Woodland and Mississippian point forms “supports the in situ development explanation for the origin of the Mississippian culture. This association also weakens previous ideas about the validity of these types as diagnostic temporal markers for Woodland and Mississippian manifestations.” Somewhat similar to pottery technology, the lithic production of points did not undergo substantial modification during the early Mississippian period in eastern Tennessee.

At Martin Farm raw materials utilized were primarily locally available Knox cherts. The use of locally available materials was above 90% for early and middle Mississippian occupations (Schroedl et al. 1985:302-305). A third of all chert tools were heat-treated to improve chipping (Boyd 1982:123). Additional chipped stone tools present at Martin Farm included side scrapers, end scrapers, perforators, and drills.

While numerous projectile points were recovered from the Davis site, most were recovered from an earlier Woodland component. Triangular Madison (middle Mississippian) and Hamilton (late Woodland/early Mississippian) types were recovered although their association has not been scrutinized as closely as the Martin Farm material. Chipped stone tools were represented by scrapers, drills, and knives. Ground stone tools included celts, and abraders. Interestingly, the most common non-ceramic artifact was shell beads. Close to a thousand shell beads were recovered from Davis (Lewis et al. 1995: 440). Bone awls and turtle shell rattles were also present. Davis was a multi-component site so the association of shell beads and lithics is presently uncertain. Early Mississippian lithic assemblages at other sites in eastern Tennessee display point type and raw material similarities to those previously discussed for Martin Farm.

Botanical

Starting in the late 1960s new approaches for the recovery of small animal and plant remains, by water screening and floating excavated fills, were utilized in an effort to better understand prehistoric food use in the region. Archaeobotanical analyses of sites from the Tellico Project spanned the formative era of the “flotation revolution” (Chapman and Shea 1981: 62) so consistency was not upheld in all cases.

Hickory (*Carya* sp.) and walnut (*Juglans nigra*) nutshell remains were the most abundant plant foods recovered at Mississippian sites in the valley. Early Mississippian botanical assemblages contained closely equal amounts of gathered and cultivated foods. Goosefoot seeds (*Chenopodium* sp.) were relatively abundant along with Knotweed seeds (*Polygonum* sp.) during the early Mississippian period and continued to be utilized thereafter. Maygrass seeds (*Phalaris caroliniana*) were found at early Mississippian sites but in no great numbers. Squashes and Gourds (*Cucurbitaceae*) were consistently found in sites dating back to the Woodland period but only in small amounts during the Mississippian period. Sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*) and Sumpweed (*Iva annua*) seeds were found in most Mississippian contexts in the valley and exhibited a distinct increase in seed size. Corn (*Zea mays*) remains were ubiquitous in Mississippian contexts. Beans (*Phaseolus vulgaris*) were the last cultigen in the Little Tennessee Valley, not arriving until at least middle Mississippian times.

There have not been many studies of how wood was utilized by aboriginal populations in Tennessee. In most cases building materials have been eroded too much to determine species. In such instances where charred materials remained *in situ*, investigators have mentioned the presence of charred wood, but have rarely gone beyond

this assessment. One study of native wood use in eastern Tennessee deserves mention here. Richard Polhemus' (1985) analysis of Mississippian architecture from eastern Tennessee evaluated the different native species of wood found at the Toqua site (40MR6). He was able to organize performance characteristics for typically utilized wood and relate that to areas of a structure where the wood is most often found.

The physical properties of wood most significant for aboriginal construction may have been: resistance to decay, flexibility, and strength. According to Polhemus' study, the best species for each category was white and red oak, followed by pine. Each species has its own deficiency in one category or another, so function plays a large part in species selection. In archaeological contexts from the Toqua site, pine was the predominant recovered species, along with cedar and oak (red and white) in lesser quantities (Polhemus 1985). Cane was recovered in all contexts studied, implying the central role split cane played in construction (as lashings) and domestic use (baskets and matting).

Researchers often overlook the wood requirements of a large village during Mississippian times. Wood timber was needed for, above all, the construction of shelter and secondarily for heating and cooking. Although on this latter point, others have suggested applying a Firewood Indifference Hypothesis (Asch and Asch 1985: 175-177; Chapman and Shea 1981:76-77), by which households would choose the nearest and most abundant wood for burning fuel. This hypothesis is supported by an archaeobotanical study in the Little Tennessee River Valley in eastern Tennessee (Chapman and Shea 1981) in which charcoal species diversity increases over time up to the late prehistoric period.

Faunal

Early Mississippian peoples utilized a wide range of locally available fauna. White-tailed deer was exploited far more than any other animal for food, tools, clothing, and sinew. Smaller vertebrates also are represented in most assemblages in significant proportions. Some of the notable species include gray fox (*Canis lupus*), raccoon (*Procyon lotor*), beaver (*Castor canadensis*), turkey (*Melagris gallopovo*), and passenger pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*) to name a few. Some animals were revered by native peoples, such as the black bear (*Ursus americanus*), for their strength, cunning, and actions in mythical stories. The early Mississippian faunal assemblage at Martin Farm contained only two bear elements (Schroedl et al. 1985), a practice that is greatly expounded on at later eastern Tennessee sites. Schroedl and coworkers (1985: 389-390) also noted the abundance of mollusk remains from the early Mississippian occupation at Martin farm. This dietary regime of mollusks is low compared to other foods (Bogan 1980) so it is not clear why so many were collected. Mussel shells used as tools (perforated hoes) and tempering in pottery may be other reasons for harvesting this animal.

Middle Tennessee

The Middle Cumberland area comprises two major physiographic regions, the Nashville Basin surrounded by the Highland Rim in a roughly doughnut form. The Middle Cumberland area falls within the Temperate Deciduous Forest biome, with a combination of mixed and western mesophytic forests capable of supporting diverse flora and fauna characteristic of the Carolinian Biotic Province (Dice 1943). The Cumberland River flows in a southwesterly direction providing fertile soils replenished by periodic

alluvial flood deposits. The Duck and Elk rivers drain the southern edge of the area and eventually link up with the Tennessee River west of the Highland Rim.

Archaeologists previously considered this area part of the “Tennessee-Cumberland” culture, associated with major sites along the Tennessee, Cumberland, Lower Ohio, and Central Mississippi Rivers. New syntheses indicate that people in this area share more commonalities with the lower Cumberland-Tennessee region than any other (Smith 1992).

Regional Chronology

Spencer

The early Mississippian Spencer Phase (AD 900-1050) was recently defined for the earliest expression of Mississippian culture traits in the Middle Cumberland region. It was defined from excavations of the Spencer Youth Center site (40DV191) (in Walling et al. 2000). The site consisted of three oval structures, one large rectangular single post structure, associated refuse pits, and an enclosing palisade embankment. Dates for this phase range from AD 900 to 1150, which coincides with the adoption of corn agriculture (northern flint maize) around AD 800 in the region. Corn did not fill an important role in the aboriginal diet (as far as we can tell) until the Mississippian period. Even then populations did not depend on agricultural crops for a significant portion of their diet. The Spencer phase is similar to Martin Farm in eastern Tennessee in which there are no traces of burials within settlements.

Banks

Along the upper Duck River Valley, the Normandy Reservoir project defined the Banks Phase as an early Mississippian cultural manifestation. Kleinhans (1978) dated this

phase from roughly AD 700 to 1100. The Banks culture was known for its small settlements, consisting of only a few domestic structures and related features. These settlements are characteristic of sedentary peoples that exploited local wild plant resources along with limited plant cultivation. The upper Duck River offers a diverse biotic environment that allowed its inhabitants to settle and exploit the natural resources without needing to intensify agricultural production.

Settlement Patterning

The early Mississippian period dates roughly from AD 900 to 1050, which includes early occupations at the Mound Bottom (40CH8) and Pack (40CH1) sites on the Cumberland and Harpeth Rivers, the Duck's Nest site (40WR4) in the Nashville Basin, and the Banks V (40CF111) and Eoff I (40CF32) sites in the Eastern Highland Rim. The presence of Dover chert all along the Cumberland River, a similar iconography as the Central Mississippi River Valley, and clustering of settlements along river systems presents a picture of interconnected settlements in the region (Autry 1983: 40). Autry (1983) proposed that settlements in the Middle Cumberland Region were dispersed rather regularly in locations that did not always correlate with the most favorable soils. This is expected behavior in situations of intense warfare (Milner et al. 1991; Steinen 1992) where buffer zones are used to deter violence. Settlements along the Cumberland River clustered roughly into groups of 3 or 4 settlements within 10 miles of one another and separated from other settlement clusters by 20 to 40 miles of river. Similar settlement clustering has been observed in northern Georgia during the late prehistoric period (Hally 1994) and is likely related to autonomous political units.

The Mound Bottom site (40CH8)

The Mound Bottom site (40CH8) was initially designated the Big Harpeth site by Joseph Jones in the late 19th century (1876). The complex of sites on the north and south banks of the Harpeth River are regarded as the Mound Bottom and Pack sites (O'Brien 1977). The complex is located along the lower Harpeth River in the Western Highland Rim. Local topography is characterized by sheer cliffs and narrow bottomlands only a few kilometers in length adjacent to the river. Red cedar is abundant nearby and was used as construction materials along with some oak and hickory woods. Mound Bottom consists of two clusters of mounds and plazas stretching over a terrace 4 km long (**FIGURE**, plan of Mound Bottom).

The north settlement cluster contained 13 mounds surrounding a plaza area. Mound A was the largest of the earthworks, rising 11 meters over the village level. There was also a small embankment located on the eastern edge of the mound group that could have been defensive. The south cluster contained 6 mounds surrounding a plaza area. The plaza was roughly rectangular, formed by the six mounds and 7 to 8 house mounds. Mound A was the largest of these earthworks, rising 8 meters over the village level. A palisade line shielded the area to the northwest with bastions placed every 65 meters.

The Duck's Nest site (40WR4)

Duck's Nest is located on a ridge overlooking the Barren Fork drainage in the Eastern Highland Rim. Two superimposed wall trench structures and six associated features were uncovered dating to the early part of the 12th century (Kline 1978). The first structure was rectangular and formed from open-corner wall trenches closed off with posts stuck at each corner except the east, possibly the entrance, and a line of three central support posts. Based on the posthole layout, a gabled roof was likely used without

any evidence for daubed walls. The second structure was also rectangular and formed from open-corner wall trenches that also had a line of three support posts running down the center. A partition and storage pits were located on the inside and daub from a probable smoke hole in the center of the structure was identified. The date of structure one was AD 1180 while that for structure two was AD 1255 (Kline 1978).

The Banks V (40CF111) and Eoff I (40CF32) sites

Banks V was located along a first terrace bluff overlooking the Duck River and as such was an ideal location for maize agriculture and also collecting bottomland woods. Dates for the Banks V Mississippian component bracket the occupation between AD 700 and 1100, although the only structure at the site, a rectangular wall trench building, was erroneously dated to AD 80 (Kleinhans 1978). The Mississippian occupation at Banks V was limited to the single wall trench structure and associated trash pits and storage basins.

The Eoff I settlement was located on a first terrace bluff overlooking the Duck River. Dates for Eoff I were between AD 1068 and 1170 (Chapman 1978). The settlement consisted of two semi-subterranean structures. One structure was rectangular with a central fired clay hearth and internal support posts. Two associated features dated to AD 1170 and AD 1070.

Social Organization

Mississippian settlements in the central Tennessee area are readily recognized by the presence of stone box graves. These artifacts of the middle and late Mississippian periods clearly bias site visibility and investigation in favor of late sites. Early investigations in the region by Jones (1876), Thruston (1890), and later by Meyer (1928)

sought out the obvious remnants of Mississippian culture. Therefore, little study of early Mississippian adaptations in central Tennessee has been conducted to date. Kevin Smith (1992) recently provided a synthesis of Middle Cumberland Culture but hesitated to define an early component.

Smith (1992) proposed five site types for the Middle Cumberland region based on site architectural and activity patterns. The settlement hierarchy, from largest to smallest, was the mound complex, farming village, hamlet, farmstead, and limited activity loci. Substantial mound building took place from AD 800 to 1200 in few locations. There was also a distinct aggregation of distant and unrelated family units into communities. This led to the establishment of a social network of villages that were not drastically different from dispersed hamlets but offered protection during times of instability. Small political units developed around AD 1000 in the western area of the Central Basin. This may have been in response to increased complexity in the eastern Central Basin sites along the Harpeth River.

Mortuary Patterning

The Mound Bottom Site on the west central Highland rim contained at least 14 burial mounds in close proximity to public residential areas. Early dates for the site go back to AD 860, so it is clear that mound building began here quite early. One mound may have supported a charnel house based on descriptions of early excavations (Autry 1983). Descriptions of similar charnel structures were documented at Gray Farm and Patterson in western Tennessee (Bass n.d.). These two related features contained people of all ages, except infants, and both sexes. At the Mound Bottom site, Autry (1983) also reported on several stone box grave burial clusters. His interpretation of spatial patterning

was that cemetery clusters closest to platform mound exhibited more diverse mortuary treatments, were constructed well, and contained more funerary objects. Improved temporal control is required to determine if similar mortuary patterns were due to differences in personal rank or the elaboration of mortuary treatments over time.

Stable carbon isotopic analyses of Mound Bottom skeletal samples suggest that the intensification of maize based agriculture was more rapid and acute (Buikstra et al. 1988) when compared to the Mississippi Valley and Southern Ontario. The consequence of such a rapid dependence on maize is not known for this time. Nor is it known whether this pattern of rapid intensification is only centered on the Nashville Basin region or if it is indicative of the entire Tennessee region. Perhaps some of the impact of the dependence can be witnessed in the following chapters in our discussion of the highly stressed population at the late Mississippian Averbuch site (Harle et al. chapter 13, this volume).

Technology

Ceramics

O'Brien's (1977) analysis of Mound Bottom pottery used whole vessels and equivalent rim sherds to define early pottery traditions in the Middle Cumberland area. **(TABLE, composition of pottery assemblages)** Similar to eastern Tennessee, plain vessels were most abundant and were formed into flaring jars, rounded bowls, and vertical neck bottles. Fine shell-tempered plain vessels were often formed into bowls and bottles. Textile impressed and plain large pans were also prevalent.

Textile impressed "salt pans" are often found far from any known salt spring. Most pottery sherds are recovered from household contexts, which suggest domestic

functionality rather than simply salt brine evaporation. A study by Kuttruff and Kuttruff (1996) of the 345 individual fabric impressions from Mound Bottom concluded that these basin shaped vessels were similar to forms in eastern Tennessee. They were fairly shallow and open with orifice diameters ranging from 30 to 50 cm. The most common fabric structure was simple twining (at least two yarns are actively turned over a passive yarn strand to form a weave). Open twining was the most common variant, followed by alternate pair open twining, also known as twilled twining. Fabrics used in basin production required high flexibility, strength, and durability (Kuttruff and Kuttruff 1996). Longer fibers had more strength than shorter fibers and required less twisting, smaller yarn diameter, and more flexibility overall. Plied yarns (two yarns twisted together) were stronger than a single yarn but involved more time to construct. In the case of Mound Bottom over 95% of yarn structures were simple. We may therefore conclude that textiles were not designed for strength and durability but may have been leftovers from day-to-day use (Drooker 1996).

Pottery from the Spencer Youth Center (40DV191) site was unusual for the Middle Cumberland area, and as such may be the earliest Mississippian component in the area. Vessels were tempered with coarse shell, a mix of shell and grog, or a mix of shell and grit (Walling et al. 2000). The finely tempered plain surfaced pottery and simple cordmarked pottery was minutely represented. There were also minor amounts of textile impressing and a single incised sherd. Vessels were formed mostly into jars, blank-faced hooded bottles, basins, and an early type of bottle. Loop handles were noticeably rare, but were all riveted to the vessel wall along with a few lug handles, which is a standard early Mississippian practice in the central and eastern parts of Tennessee.

Duck's Nest site pottery was scarcely represented by only a few hundred sherds but still displayed strong characteristics of an early Mississippian adaptation. Interestingly enough, most sherds were limestone-tempered with only a few shell-tempered sherds. Some were mixed from shell, limestone, and chert tempering (Kline 1978). The presence of shell and limestone tempering is a trademark for the early Mississippian cultures in the upper Tennessee Valley and Middle Cumberland area. The proportions of shell to limestone are not usually as low as at Duck's Nest. Was this an early use of shell in the midst of alternative tempering agents? To answer this we must evaluate the ecological circumstances. Jolley's (1979) survey of the Barren Fork Drainage identified scant evidence for mussel beds in fast moving streams. It is certainly possible that potters at the Duck's Nest site did not have access to the same resources as sites located along other river systems. The chert-tempered wares, on the other hand, are more characteristic of late Woodland Elk River series pottery found in northern Alabama along the Tennessee River and the Duck River.

Early sites further to the south in the Normandy Reservoir displayed similar traits of temper mixing, simple jar forms, and minute decoration. Pottery from Banks V and Eoff I was dominated by plain shell-tempered vessels and contained few cordmarked vessels. As is typical at early sites, loop handles were the predominant form of vessel appendage. At Eoff I, at least three fragments of a hooded bottle were recovered. This form is often found in the Middle Cumberland culture area further to the north but is not seen much in the southern portion of the state.

One interesting aspect was the mix of vessels constructed from different tempers in the same contexts. Vessels constructed with shell temper co-occurred with vessels

made from either limestone or chert. Limestone and chert were both widely utilized as tempering agents during the Woodland period in the upper Duck River Valley; however, some vessels were formed in similar shapes as the shell-tempered wares. This was the case for one limestone-tempered loop handle found in the assemblage. Such melding of ceramic traits is also seen in early Mississippian sites in the upper Tennessee Valley.

Lithics

Projectile points during the early Mississippian in this area include a large number of Madison and other triangular shape variants. At the Spencer Youth Center site the Madison type was prevalent (Moore et al. 1993) while Hamilton incurvate points were reported from the Mound Bottom site (Smith 1992). Temporal placement of the Hamilton type is not as clear as data from eastern Tennessee but may still be an indication for late Woodland/early Mississippian technology. Chipped stone tools were commonly formed from Fort Payne variety cherts. A high quality Dover chert imported from western Tennessee was available throughout the region and was utilized in lesser amounts than Fort Payne cherts. Dover chert was used later in the middle and late Mississippian to chip very high quality “swords” that were found in elite contexts all across the state. Additional important chipped stone tools included drills, knives, scrapers, and abraders with common ground stone hammerstones and celts.

Botanical

Salvage archaeology in the Normandy Reservoir specifically examined local human adaptations to diverse forest environments along the Duck River Valley. A need for sustaining growing populations may have been a precursor to maize adoption in the region. This premise was tested at early Mississippian sites along the Lower Duck River.

Banks phase occupations were all found in the lower reservoir area, in a zone of wide floodplains not present in the upper reservoir. Banks phase populations utilized the greatest spectrum of wild plant foods in the whole project area (Crites 1978: 204).

Maize was produced in large quantities, but only increased in importance relative to other plant foods, and was never a dominant crop. Although corn was recovered in early Mississippian features it was not found in most refuse features. This could result from different processing, consumption, and discard practices for corn than other plant foods such as nuts and seeds. Harvested nuts were mostly hickory, with black walnut and acorn contributing lesser amounts.

The Duck's Nest botanical analyses further elaborated the dual use trend of wild and domesticated plants (Kline and Crites 1979). River cane was recovered from all proveniences while hickory followed by oak was the most common type of wood. The presence of hickory residue in structure postholes suggests this species was preferred in architecture. Nut remains included hickory, butternut, acorn, black walnut, chestnut, and hazelnut. Hickory accounted for over 80% of all nut remains with all others at less than a percent of total weight. However, hickory nuts are overrepresented for a reason. They are not only a good source of fat and protein, but are also found in great quantities around the site, are stored easily, and burn well. The latter being a primary reason why they preserve so well. Acorns have lower nutritional yields, so may be seen as a secondary resource to hickory. Black walnut is better than acorn, but still not as nutritional as hickory. Chestnut remains were also scanty but this may be due to poor preservation. Chestnut does not preserve when burned and identification of fragmentary remains is difficult because the shell structure is similar to acorn (Chapman and Shea 1981).

Knotweed, goosefoot, and maygrass were important cultivated plants while small amounts of sumpweed, and very little squash were recovered (Kline and Crites 1979). Knotweed (*Polygonum*) is a small herbaceous annual that grows in disturbed habitats. It seems to have been an important dietary source. Goosefoot (*Chenopodium*) is an herbaceous annual that thrives in disturbed habitats. It was also an important food source that could be added to breads and stews and that are quite tasty. Maygrass (*Phalaris caroliniana*) is an early maturing plant that provides edible seeds by summer. Maize was found in all but one context at Duck's Nest. Maize (*Zea mays*) remains appear to be a northern flint variety in 8-, 10-, and 12-row cob sizes. Sumpweed (*Iva annua*) is a weedy annual that thrives in moist and disturbed habitats. There is a noticeable trend of increasing achene, or seed, size over time. Duck's Nest sumpweed achene sizes are comparable to Woodland period sizes but still smaller than late Mississippian sumpweed recovered from a pot at the Toqua site (Harle et al. this volume).

At no point can floral remains be thought of as a direct measure of food use in prehistory. The differential preservation of certain nuts and seeds require non-linear thinking when it comes to food *importance*. Maize was evenly distributed across the site, but was not found in any great quantity. Knotweed, maygrass, and goosefoot were found in greater numbers but only in one feature. How this can be interpreted is unclear, however we do know that all three species were a part of the diet; sumpweed was probably being domesticated at the site, and not much maize was grown at the site. With this information it is clear that a *reliance* on maize agriculture is not always a necessary precept for Mississippian culture settlements. The availability of other domesticates and/or wild foods suggest that some peoples relied less on corn than previously thought.

Faunal

Studies of faunal use patterns in central Tennessee are noticeably absent in the literature.

West Tennessee

The western Tennessee area encompasses a short stretch of the Mississippi river and the western portion of the Tennessee River (the lower Tennessee River). This area may be split into two sections; the Mississippi river floodplain with its adjacent bluffs and tributary rivers and the interior Gulf Coastal Plain. The floodplains and river valleys that empty into the Mississippi River are poor in stone resources. The lower Tennessee valley provides some limestone and sandstone but is on the eastern extreme of western Tennessee. The majority of western Tennessee contains no stone resources. The region falls under the Western Mesophytic Forest Region and the Carolinian Biotic Province (Dice 1943). Uplands are dominated by a mix of oak and hickory forests that support an abundant wild fauna population along fertile waterways. Historically, the western Tennessee area shares commonalities with eastern Arkansas and southeastern Missouri, especially along the Mississippi River floodplain corridor where similar cultural traits were practiced.

Regional Chronology***Varney Red Filmed Horizon***

A marker for early Mississippian culture practices in western Tennessee is the use of distinctive red filmed pottery. This marker, or horizon style, dates from between AD 800 and 1000 in northeast Arkansas (Morse and Morse 1990) but has been identified in

northwest Tennessee at early sites in the Reelfoot Lake vicinity. Many sites during this time were settled adjacent to fertile soils. Usually these areas were natural levees located along relict stream channels. Large settlements of the Varney Red Filmed Horizon were found in Arkansas along the Eastern and Cairo Lowlands flanking the west bank of the Mississippi River as well as in the American Bottom of southern Illinois and Missouri. The red filmed pottery tradition was essentially gone by AD 1050 in western Tennessee and was replaced by a similar pottery tradition without the characteristic iron oxide finish.

Ensley

The earliest Mississippian occupation at Chucalissa near present day Memphis has been defined as the Ensley phase. Material remains are scanty but settlements are known in the loess bluffs in southwest Tennessee along the Mississippi River (Smith 1996). Buildings were constructed from open corner wall trenches at Chucalissa (Lumb and McNutt 1988) but there is much overlap with later occupations. Pottery from Chucalissa is more distinctive of this culture period. A preponderance of undecorated pottery was produced using mostly grog temper with some shell tempered vessels. A very small amount of the lower Mississippi Valley version of Varney Red Filmed known as Larto Red (Smith 1996: 111) occurs in these contexts along with very small amounts of incised motifs. Stone tool forms such as small triangular projectile points, ovate drills, knives, and polished celts were undistinguishable from later Chucalissa components (Smith 1996: 111).

Settlement Patterning

The Chucalissa site (40SY1)

The Ensley phase occupation at Chucalissa was ephemeral at best and mixed with early Boxtown (middle Mississippian) contexts in some instances. Whether the Ensley phase was an intrusive culture from the western banks of the Mississippi River or an *in situ* development has not been tested. Dates for the Ensley component at Chucalissa, which range from AD 900 to AD1060, are slightly earlier than those in middle and eastern Tennessee. The early date was derived from a submound village midden and the later from a pit feature below a structure at the site (Lumb and McNutt 1988: 135).

The Obion site is the only *inhabited* mound center that has been identified in the interior Gulf Coastal Plain. There are extremely few mound sites in the interior and only 59 Mississippian assemblages in the whole area (Mainfort 1992). Mound sites that have been investigated consisted of 3 or more mounds located on minor waterways. Each group lacked an identifiable village area and contained very few diagnostic artifacts. These sites may represent “vacant ceremonial centers” that failed to evolve into occupation loci (Mainfort 1992). The vacant ceremonial center site type may have also existed elsewhere but were masked by subsequent occupations.

Early settlements at large sites like Chucalissa are often overshadowed by later occupations making separation difficult. The hypothesis that some early sites were inhabited by intrusive populations (is supported by the sudden appearance of Mississippian culture traits at Chucalissa and Obion as well as analogous Lower Mississippi Valley ceramic types.

The Obion site (40HY14)

This site is located in Henry County on the south bank of the North Fork of the Obion River, 60 miles upstream from the Mississippi River. Obion is positioned on the

eastern edge of the Gulf Coastal Plain Physiographic Province. Obion was first visited by Joseph Jones (1876), but not investigated until a Peabody Museum expedition dug there in 1913 (Garland 1992). The Peabody expedition mapped and described seven mounds and fully excavated two of them. **(FIGURE, plan of Obion)**

Mound 3 was a large steep conical shaped earthwork 15 feet high with a rectangular underlying form. It had probably been plowed in a circular motion that rounded out the corners over time (Garland 1992). Many domestic structures and features were uncovered on the summit. There were at least four mound building episodes set over a submound square single set post structure.

Mound 4 was a true conical mound with burials found in the basal portion of a prepared surface. Interestingly, structures and features were uncovered on the summit. The earlier structure was made of single set posts in a rectangular pattern while the later structure was built from wall trenches.

Mound 7 was also a conical mound with a prepared basal surface. Sub-mound features were present, including a square single set post structure. Above this was another rectangular single set post structure.

University of Tennessee excavations at Obion were conducted under the direction of Thomas Lewis with labor supplied by WPA funds in spring of 1940 (Garland 1992). They designated the site HY14 and split it up the excavation among three mounds and the village area. A possible horseshoe-shaped palisade over a mile long may have enclosed the mounds and associated village site (Garland 1992:37). Structures at Obion were most often rectangular and constructed using single set posts. Square structures identified at

Obion and ranged from fourteen to twenty-two feet and the rectangular structures averaged thirty feet (Garland 1992:113).

Mound 6 was the most intensively investigated of the remaining six mounds. The Mound 6 profile exhibited four distinct building episodes on top of a village midden level although only the top level was fully excavated. Eight structures on the summit were both single set post and wall trench constructions and roughly square. A stockade wall was also located on the summit, dividing the north and south halves. A large rectangular wall trench structure was located on the south side that overlooks the plaza. An inventory of Structure 3 from this summit outlines a typical domestic artifact assemblage: ceramic jar, bowl, plate, and basin sherds formed from shell or clay temper along with ceramic gaming disks, a pottery trowel, stone celts, a chipped stone abrader, and a clay bead (Garland 1992).

The Obion site shares structural and ceramic affinities to the Jonathan Creek site (Brouwer and Schroeder 2005) in southwestern Kentucky and the Cairo Lowlands of southeast Missouri (Morse and Morse 1990). It could represent a fission group from the Central Mississippi Valley or Cairo Lowlands, an *in situ* cultural development, or a migration from the lower Tennessee River Valley (Garland 1992). A Cahokia stimulus for Obion is also possible based on affinities in early black polished jar formation techniques. These were distinctly similar in form and finish to Lohmann Phase vessels (AD 1000-1050) from the American Bottom region (Garland 1992: 121).

The Oliver site (40OB161)

This site is located within the Obion River drainage, which itself is within the Gulf Coastal Plain of western Tennessee. The Obion is a gently meandering stream

surrounded by oxbow lakes and ponds within a gently rolling to nearly flat terrain. The Oliver site exhibits qualities of both an emergent Mississippian tradition, represented by cordmarked ceramics, and an early Mississippian tradition, represented by Varney Red Filmed ceramics and Madison triangular points. Oliver site occupations have been dated to around AD 900-1000 (Mainfort 1994). Excavated features included numerous pits and postmolds but no definitive structure patterning. Mainfort (1994:119) notes the low artifact density at Oliver and other mound sites in the interior as a typical circumstance during the early Mississippian period.

Mortuary Patterning

Radiocarbon dates at the Obion Mound site suggest an early occupation from AD 1050 to 1150 during which some early burials were deposited (Garland 1992). Inhabitants of the Reelfoot Lake area also built conical burial mounds during the Red Filmed Horizon (circa AD 950 to 1050) (Mainfort 1994). Little in the way of formal mortuary analyses has been conducted at early Mississippian sites in the region. Brief descriptions indicate that burials were placed near submound structures at Obion but were not exclusive mortuary facilities. Pottery vessels were the dominant funerary object inclusion. While Obion is probably the most significant early Mississippian settlement located in western Tennessee, other mound groups dating to this time period have been identified. Looting activities suggest that some were burial mounds (Mainfort 1992). The occurrence of limited artifact density at early sites is similar to the explanation put forth for eastern Tennessee Martin Farm mortuary patterning. It appears that conical burial mounds were removed from habitation areas and perhaps communally used.

Technology

Pottery

Three ceramic complexes were identified at Chucalissa based on a stratigraphic seriation in a north village excavation block and a south village excavation unit (Lumb and McNutt 1988). The earliest of these complexes was defined as the Ensley phase and dates to around AD 1000 based on radiocarbon dates (Lumb and McNutt 1988: 135). Pottery remains were the only traces of this occupation so there is no indication of settlement, mortuary, or tool traditions beyond ceramics. Ensley phase pottery was formed mostly from grog-tempered paste with the addition of very small amounts of shell-tempered paste in the lowest excavation levels. Plain surfaced pottery was the dominant surface treatment with a small amount of red filmed and incised decoration. It is interesting to note the paucity of handles. This situation is mimicked in early Mississippian Spencer phase pottery traditions in central Tennessee and the Martin Farm culture pottery in eastern Tennessee. We may yet find some functional significance for such a wide distribution of similar vessel forms constructed in similar methods and with similar surface decorations (except for early Red Filmed wares). No functional studies have been performed in the Tennessee area for early Mississippian pottery to date.

Shell-tempered pottery was clearly a minority type at the Oliver site (Mainfort 1994). Plain surfaced sherds occur in smaller amounts than the decorated shell-tempered type Varney Red Filmed. Varney ceramics are defined by the presence of a thick red slip applied to the surface of a coarse shell-tempered body and are similar to the Old Town Red Filmed type defined in the Central Mississippi Valley. Other clay-tempered types include incising, cordmarking and incised lines cut into the surface, and fabric impressed vessel surfaces. This last type has long been established for use at salt processing sites in

the Midsouth (Brown 1980; Phillips 1970; Williams 1954) and is characterized by fabric impressions on the exterior surface of basin-shaped vessels that mostly have thick walls but may occur on thin walled vessels. This description is valid for all early Mississippian clay-tempered ceramics from the Reelfoot Lake Basin and the Oliver site in the Obion River drainage (Mainfort 1994).

An analysis of the fabric structure of these sherds from positive clay impressions has yielded information on textile production during the Mississippian period (Drooker 1992). Twined structures are most abundant at the site, which is characteristic of Mississippian textile impressions across Tennessee. Two sub-types of twining have been identified; plain twining over a plied warp and plain twining over a braided/plaited warp. Oliver textile impressed pottery compares most favorably to the Obion site even though most textile impressed vessels were grog tempered, with only a few used shell or shell and clay temper. Oliver is similar to other Mississippian sites in the use of twined textiles, but exhibits far less elaboration in weaving structure. Larger settlements display greater elaboration in textile structure (i.e. the Mound Bottom site) impressed in basins. Why smaller sites such as Oliver do not have complex textile structures may be related to site function and/or the skill of weavers at the site.

Pottery at Obion was somewhat similar to other pottery assemblages in western Tennessee. (**TALBE, composition of pottery types**) Vessels were tempered primarily with burned clay, or grog, with only minor amounts of shell and mixed clay and shell temper. In no instance were sherds tempered with an abundance of shell. The primary clay-tempered types were dominated by plain surfaced vessels formed mostly into jars, with few bowls and bottles represented. Late Woodland grog-tempered cordmarked

pottery was also found in minor amounts indicating this settlement was not new to the landscape. Shell-tempered plain types (formed from coarse and fine temper) were recovered in minor amounts along with fabric impressed basins constructed from grog and a few shell-tempered examples. Fabric impressions were mostly simple twining, twilled twining, or alternate pair twining, and one example of a plaited weave sherd. There were four examples of twilled twining with crossed warps, noted as a complex design by Garland (1992).

Decorated pottery from Obion was limited to some painting and incising. Two types often found in Middle Cumberland Culture settlements, Matthews Incised and Beckwith Incised, were found at Obion. However, Matthews Incised pottery was constructed from local pastes while the Beckwith Incised examples were formed from shell temper that may not be local. A few examples of red filmed pottery were found although it is not clear if these could also be classified as Varney Red Filmed or the Lower Mississippi River type Old Town Red (Garland 1992).

Four partial vessels were found with polished black surfaces below Mounds 3 and 4. Both exhibited a mix of clay and shell temper with pronounced shoulders and flared rims. Stoltman's (1992) study of two of these vessels concluded that both were clearly manufactured locally. Interestingly, their similarity with American Bottom pottery was uncanny. Stoltman (1992) posited that the potters who created the Obion black polished jars must have had an idea of what the Cahokian vessels looked like in order to closely mimic the form.

Lithics

Madison triangular projectile points are the most common form found in western Tennessee. At the Oliver site 24 complete and partial Madison points were recovered (Mainfort 1994:161). This was by far the most common projectile point type recovered in addition to some chipped stone scrapers and drills, and a few ground stone hammerstones and celts. At the Obion site a large number of chipped stone hoes were present. A cache of ten was found below the floor of the summit of Mound 6 (Garland 1992:93). These are described as having a rounded working edge and are assumed to be for agricultural purposes. No such utilitarian implements were found at the early occupation at Chucalissa. Investigators were not able to distinguish between early non-ceramic tools and those from later periods (Lumb and McNutt 1988: 119).

Tan colored local gravel cherts are the most abundant raw material identified. Fort Payne and Dover cherts are present in small quantities for tool production. Stones recovered such as cannel coal, galena, and hematite have an uncertain function. Hematite (or red ochre) is commonly recorded from burial contexts and may also create shades of red in paint making.

Botanical

The only extensive study of botanical remains from western Tennessee was performed at the Oliver site (Mainfort 1994). Cane was recovered from most contexts but was not found in any great amounts. In order of importance, woods were represented by oaks, hickory, and ash although it is not clear which were derived from structural features such as postholes or heating features such as hearths. Knotweed, maygrass, lambsquarters, and morning glory were the most abundant seed foods. Maize remains were recovered in small quantities from most contexts as well as small amounts of beans.

This pattern of wild and cultivated plant foods is consistent with early Mississippian subsistence studies in eastern and central Tennessee. A roughly even mix of both is commonplace and may indicate transitions to an agricultural base but certainly not intensive agriculture during the early Mississippian period.

Faunal

Faunal subsistence strategies in western Tennessee are noticeably absent in the literature. Most studies of animal remains are limited to non-ceramic tools. Shell materials were used for a diverse set of crafts and tools such as beads, pendants, and perforated hoes. Bone was commonly used for utilitarian tools such as awls, fishhooks, and antler tine spears.

Conclusions

This overview of early Mississippian cultures in the Tennessee area attempts to evaluate the existing corpus of archaeological studies related to Mississippian research. This presentation is intended as a foundation for more complex social organizations that would come about later in the Mississippian. What should be obvious at this point is that the debate over what is or is not “Mississippian” has no straightforward answer. Tennessee was an area of great cultural diversity a millennium ago and continues to be so in the present day. The study of Mississippian culture must therefore factor in localized adaptations to physiographic constraints as well as differing local histories that may have influenced the adoption of cultural traditions in some areas and not others.

Prehistoric populations residing in Tennessee did not persist within a cultural vacuum, and as such their history is couched in terms of parallel developments in nearby

areas of the interior southeast. For example, ceramic evidence has shown that eastern Tennessee social groups had direct contact with similar cultures in northern Georgia, western North Carolina, southwestern Virginia and southeastern Kentucky. Furthermore, Middle Tennessee populations were connected in some manner with populations in northern Alabama along the Tennessee River to the south and with Middle Cumberland culture groups in central Kentucky to the north. The situation in West Tennessee is one of cultural drift across the Mississippi River in northeast Arkansas and in the Cairo Lowlands of southwestern Missouri.

Many societies living in the Tennessee area from AD 900 to 1100 built earthen platform mounds that served as the focal point of nucleated villages inhabited by populations of non-related family units or clans. Agricultural products such as maize, goosefoot, lambsquarters, and sunflower comprised a larger portion of native diet but were supplemented by almost equal amounts of wild gathered foods such as hardwood nuts, fruits, and berries. Settlements both small and large were established nearby reliable water sources on low alluvial terraces or floodplain settings. Settlement distributions indicate that local resource procurement played a significant role in where people settled, usually along transitional environmental zones that offered upland and lowland resources. Raw materials usage in different areas of Tennessee was also influenced by the availability of quality local resources. For instance, potters in eastern Tennessee used limestone and shell to create ceramic containers. This was possible because both limestone and shell were abundant in the region whereas western Tennessee potters had no access to limestone and instead utilized burned clay (grog) as an early tempering agent. Stone tools were formed from locally available cherts in most cases except for

high quality Dover cherts from western Tennessee and were complemented by utilitarian ground stone pestles, mortars, and celts. Agricultural implements were not abundant in most cases. The one exception is the Obion site in West Tennessee where high quality hoes were cached in mound contexts. Faunal resources may have played a larger role in early agricultural practices as evidenced by numerous perforated mussel shell hoes in central and eastern Tennessee. How local resource availability affected the level of extra-local interaction throughout Tennessee is an interesting yet un-studied variable in Mississippian cultural developments.

An elaboration of the aforementioned cultural practices during later Mississippian periods was based on traditions established by societies during the early Mississippian. Understanding the unique circumstances and variations in the origin of Mississippian social organization will continue to be a fascinating archaeological problem for many years to come. We are hopeful that future archaeological data will continually revise specifics and fill in some of the blank spots evident in this synopsis.