CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Survey Area

The Upper Tensas Basin is defined by Fisk (1944:28) as the lowland area lying west of the Mississippi River and east of Macon Ridge and extending from Eudora, Arkansas, in the north to the latitude of Sicily Island, Louisiana, and Natchez, Mississippi, in the south (Fig. 1). This area is approximately 100 miles long and varies in width from a maximum of 35 miles at the latitude of Vicksburg, Mississippi, to a minimum of some 3 miles at Eudora, Arkansas.

Macon Ridge, forming the western border of the Basin, is a dissected alluvial plain representing a section of ancient Arkansas River outwash fan. This ridge stretches the entire length of the Basin and rises some 20 feet above the adjacent flood plain. Attaining a maximum width of 25 miles at the latitude of Winnsboro, Louisiana, Macon Ridge forms a natural physiographic boundary between the Upper Tensas Basin and the extensive alluvial lowland areas, Boeuf Basin and the Ouachita Lowland, to the west (Fisk 1944:30-1).

Fig. 1.--Map of the Upper Tensas Basin, showing the location of sites with Routh, Fitzhugh and Transylvania phase components.

20-K-2	Bloomfield Church
21-K-4	Tensas Bayou
21-L-2	Rose Hill
21-L-3	Lake Providence
22-K-14	Welch
22-K-20	Panther Lake
22-L-2	Julice Mound
22-L-3	Transylvania
23-J-1	Mott
23-K-1	Fuller
23-K-3	Indian Bayou
23-K-15	Taxodium
23-K-16	Joe's Bayou
23-K-25	Bear Lake
23-L-1	Fitzhugh
23-L-7	Yerger
23-L-8	Mound
23-L-9	Compton Lake
23-L-10	Hopkins
23-L-11	Willow Lake
23-L-16	Point Lake
23-L-17	Willow Bayou
23-L-21	Kimbrough
24-J-5	Grovell Place
24-J-8	Turkey Point Landing
24-J-9	Canebrake
24-J-24	Preston
24-J-27	New Hope
24-J-29	Chelly Landing
24-J-30	Ulmer
24-J-31	MacMurray
24-K-6	Blanche
24-K-8	DuRosset
24-K-19	Frisby
24-L-1	Balmoral
24-L-2	Somerset
24-L-5	Muir
24-L-6	Quimby
24-L-7	Routh
24-L-9	Clark Bayou
24-L-12	New Ground
24-L-13	Elk Ridge
24-L-14	Beasley
25-J-2	Peck Mounds
25-J-3	Natchez Fort
25-J-5	Ditto Lake[1]
25-J-7	Alphenia
25-J-14	Hoover Lake
25-J-17	Graves
25-K-5	Avondale
25-K-9	Sundown
25-K-10	Aubrey
25-K-11	Cooter Point
25-K-14	Azucena
25-K-19	Formosa
25-K-21	New China Grove
26-J-3	Elkhorn
26-J-4	Indian Village
26-J-7	Dunbarton
26-J-12	Section 35 Mound

[1]This site has only a Balmoral component.

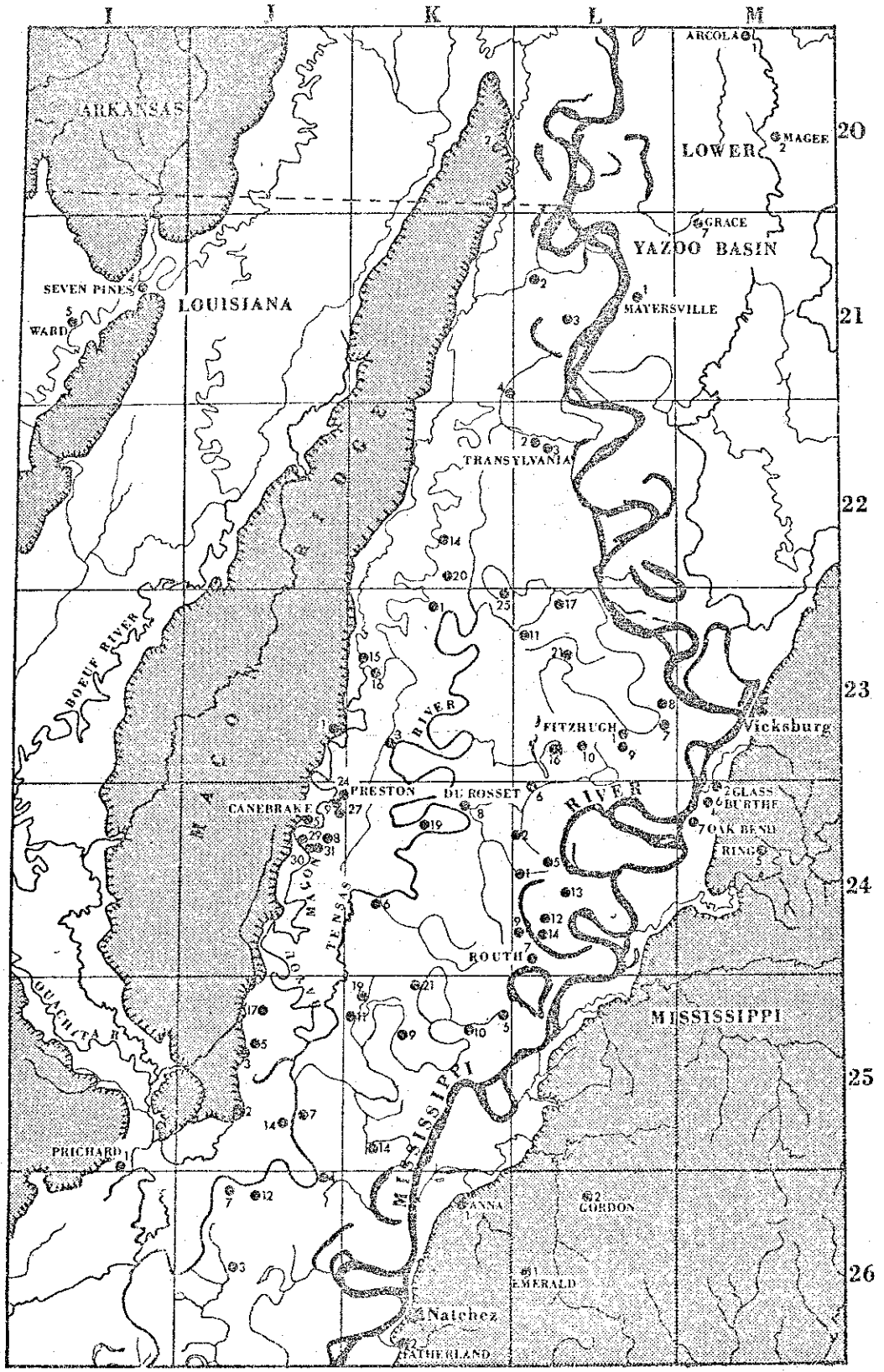

Fig. 1.--The Upper Tensas Basin

Physiographically, the entire Upper Tensas Basin is alluvial flood plain, and, as such, is characterized by a number of distinctive topographic features. Foremost, are the ridge-like formations or natural levees that develop along the active channel of the Mississippi River and its tributaries. Along the Mississippi River, these range in size from 10 to 15 feet in height in the northern part of the Alluvial Valley to 25 feet or more in the southernmost part (Phillips et al. 1951:9). The levee ridge must have been of extreme importance to aboriginal inhabitants of the Alluvial Valley as it afforded the only high ground with well-drained, arable soil within the flood plain. Aboriginal sites in the Survey Area are almost always found on natural levees.

The fact that the Mississippi River is a "poised" stream[1] and therefore characterized by a meandering course has important effects on local flood plain topography. As meander bends develop, expanding laterally, point bar deposition along the inside bank of the bend gives rise to the characteristic undulating ridge and swale topography that geologists refer to as meander scrolls (Leopold et al. 1964:317). Point bar ridges attain heights approximately

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[1]With "poised" streams, both aggradation and degradation occur along the flood plain and both scouring and filling occur along the stream channel, but through time there is little change in valley slope (Russel 1967:55).

equal to those of the levee ridge developing on the outside bank of the meander. These ridges also are suitable for habitation as is evident by the occurrence of prehistoric sites on them.

In the normal course of development, a meander bend is eventually cut off from the main stream channel and forms an oxbow lake. Such lakes, in various stages of silting-in, dot the area today. Stratigraphic and chronological evidence indicate that the high ground bordering these abandoned meander bends was a favorite location for residence in prehistoric times.

The formation of oxbow lakes and their filling with fine-grained sediments tends to restrict the meandering of rivers to a relatively narrow zone known as a meander belt. With prolonged confinement, there is superimposition and coalesence of natural levees which results in the growth of a low ridge. Along the course of the Mississippi River, such meander belt ridges, as they are called, range between 10 and 20 miles in width and attain an elevation of 10 to 20 feet above the surrounding flood plain. In addition to the present course of the Mississippi River, there are three meander belt ridges within the Upper Tensas Basin. Fisk (1944:28-9) describes these as follows:

> The Walnut Bayou Meander Belt Ridge. The Walnut Bayou meander belt ridge merges with the present meander belt of the Mississippi River at both its upper and lower ends. It extends for over 100 miles in Louisiana from Tallulah to near the mouth of Red

River. The meander belt receives its name from Walnut Bayou, a small stream which occupies a portion of the last channel position east of Tallulah. The general continuity of the last channel position of the Mississippi is traceable except near St. Joseph, La., where it is cut out by the present Mississippi River meander belt. . . . Cut-off meanders along the Walnut Bayou meander belt retain characteristics exhibited by cut-off channels along the present river. The last channel of the Walnut Bayou meander belt, in contrast to the cut-offs, has lost many of its original characteristics through occupation by smaller streams. Reworking of point bar deposits by these later streams, shifting of their courses into the shorter chute channels, and a general change in channel alinement has resulted.

. . . . . .

The Upper Tensas Meander Belt Ridge. The Upper Tensas meander belt ridge extends southward from near Alsatia, La., for 40 miles to the latitude of Newellton, La. The meander belt ridge is low and rises only 5 to 10 ft. above the adjacent backswamps. It holds traces of a meandering stream comparable in size to the upper Mississippi.

The meander belt is followed by several streams, the most important of which is the upper part of the Tensas River. It extends southward for 50 miles from Alsatia to Newlight, La., where it is intersected by the Walnut Bayou meander belt.

The Bayou Macon Meander Belt Ridge. A segment of an abandoned belt of the Arkansas River follows the lowland at the foot of Macon Ridge for 70 miles from Lake Providence, La., to near Tensas Lake in the latitude of Sicily Island. The low alluvial ridge averages 3 miles in width and holds meander loops slightly larger than those normally found in Arkansas River meander belts. It is possible that during their formation the Arkansas River flow was augmented by that of the White River.

Bayou Macon enters the meander belt at Delhi, La., midway between Lake Providence and the southern end of the belt. North of Delhi the meander belt is followed by Joes Bayou.

The general location of these meander belts is indicated in Fig. 67. The low basins or backswamps lying between meander

belt ridges are characterized by poor drainage and soils that are predominantly stiff clays.

The Upper Tensas Basin is drained by the Tensas River and an array of sluggish bayous that are its tributaries. Bayou Macon, which parallels the eastern escarpment of Macon Ridge for much of its length, is the largest Tensas River tributary. Water fairly dominates the landscape, a situation that Phillips (Phillips et al. 1951:10) has accurately characterized:

> The dominant note in the landscape is muddy water. Along the courses of present and former meander belts are scores of oxbow lakes in various stages of degeneration into swamp--in this country almost every group of trees conceals a body of water--which, with their connecting waterways into the backswamp, spread a labyrinthine pattern of "lakes," "old rivers," "bayous," "bogues," "sloughs," "brakes," etc., across the almost level plain. These frequently intersect in such a way as to convert large areas into "islands." Probably no other section of the United States has so many bridges per mile of highway. Ask the first passer-by where he lives and the answer, two to one, will be "across the bayou." With all this mileage of natural drainage channels, however, the land is poorly drained.

History of Archaeological Research in the Upper Tensas Basin

Archaeological research in the Upper Tensas Basin begins in mid-19th century with the investigations of Montroville W. Dickeson, a medical doctor from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Dickeson conducted excavations in the Natchez, Mississippi, area over a period of at least four years beginning in 1841, and reported on his findings in a

short-lived Philadelphia magazine, The Lotus. His published accounts, written in the romantic style of the day and accompanied by his own drawings of artifacts and mound profiles, make entertaining, if not highly enlightening, reading.

In the survey area, Dickeson investigated a large site with eight mounds located at the junction of Black and Cocodrie Bayous in what is now the town of Ferriday.[1] Four mounds were trenched, resulting in the discovery in two instances of platforms on which occurred extended and bundle burials. A third mound yielded a single historic burial which Dickeson identified as "Choctaw," apparently on the authority of local tradition.

In his recognition of the importance of stratification, Dickeson was well ahead of his time. Describing one of the Ferriday mounds, he writes:

> Commencing at its base, the first formation was composed of a conglomerate of ashes, coals, burnt bones and fragments of bricks and pottery, two feet thick. This our force had great difficulty to penetrate. No particular form could be given to it. It emitted a caustic smell, not unlike that from ashes while being slacked. We found nothing of importance, save a few arrow points, of beautiful navaculite, and of elaborate workmanship. Several fragments of mica, well burnt, and two fragments of terra cotta pipes lay near the top surface of this stratum. Above this one, the formation was of a dark rich loam, filled with broken pottery, of an unusual fine texture, and in some instances painted.

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[1] The LMS was unable to locate this site during the 1963-64 survey.

> The next stratum contained the skeletons, it was a light yellow loam, three feet through. The bones lay in small heaps; and apparently in some system. . . .
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> The fourth stratum was fifteen inches thick and was of a sandy loam; and the continuation from this to its summit was of a light yellow loam (Dickeson 1848:146).

The same year, 1848, that the above was written saw the publication of Squire and Davis' important Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley. Mississippi and Louisiana are somewhat neglected in this study, but one site in the Upper Tensas Basin, Fitzhugh, was described and illustrated with an accurate map (see Chapter II, Fig. 28).

Following the Civil War, Ebenezer Swift, Medical Director of the 4th Military District which included Mississippi and Louisiana, excavated a mound in Louisiana opposite Vicksburg. No report of this excavation exists in manuscript or published form. The artifact collection, together with a brief cover letter from the Assistant Surgeon General, U.S.A., George Otis, are, however, in the possession of the Smithsonian Institution.[1]

The earliest known description of the Poverty Point site appears in 1783 in a brief account written by a

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[1]Smithsonian Institution accession number 1869-1946. See Appendix I for a description of this site and its artifact collection. The site can not be identified with any known sites in the Survey Area due to lack of documentation. There are, however, several mound sites of the appropriate age within a 20 mile radius west of Vicksburg.

surveyor, Samuel H. Lockett. Not long afterward, Cyrus Thomas (1894) published descriptions of the Troyville site, located just south of the Survey Area, and a second mound site situated 4 miles southeast of St. Joseph, Louisiana. Thomas may have received his information and site maps from George Beyer, a professor at Tulane University, as Beyer himself published descriptions of excavations he conducted at Troyville and 4 mound sites in the Survey Area in 1896 and 1897.

Twentieth century archaeology in the Upper Tensas Basin begins with the investigations of Clarence B. Moore (1913, 1918). Sailing his steamboat, the "Gopher," well up the Tensas River and Bayou Macon in 1913, Moore managed to record twenty-nine sites and conduct excavations at several of them. The Tensas River produced few sites, a fact that Moore blamed upon the area's heavy forest cover; and few of the sites he did find produced the features he loved best, burials with grave goods.

> The archaeology of Tensas river is in the main uninteresting. Burials (which were made in mounds and not in cemeteries) had so few artifacts with them that that feature constitutes the most interesting part of the archaeology of the stream (Moore 1913:34).

Bayou Macon, while yielding more sites, was disappointing also. The pottery he found was generally of poor quality, not equal to that found just a short distance to the west along Bayou Bartholomew and the Ouachita River.

Perhaps his best success came at Canebrake site, where birials intrusive into earlier mounds yielded several pottery vessels comparable to those from the rich historic Glendora and Keno cemeteries.

Moore's journey up Bayou Macon ended at Floyd, a village just above the Poverty Point site. This site is given considerable attention in one report (1913:66-76) with accurate descriptions of the mounds and earth embankments, and a drawing of the large mound being included.

In 1917, Moore returned to the Upper Tensas Basin briefly to sink a few pits into the large, multi-mound Transylvania site in East Carroll Parish. In line with his previous experience in the Survey Area, the results were unrewarding; only three burials were obtained (1918: 577).

Taking time off from excavations at the Marksville site, Avoyelles Parish, Louisiana, Gerard Fowke (1928) visited six mound sites along Bayou Macon above the town of Delhi. Apparently no excavations were undertaken, but descriptions and one site map were published in the Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology for 1928.

The early 1930's saw the most extensive survey of prehistoric remains in the Basin to date conducted by James A. Ford and associates at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Surface collections and site descriptions were eventually compiled for some thirty-one

sites, and the first excavation in the area undertaken for the purpose of demonstrating time depth and cultural succession in the prehistoric occupation was conducted at the Peck village site near Sicily Island (Ford 1935; Williams 1962). Utilizing his pottery collections from over 100 sites in northeast and east-central Louisiana and adjacent Mississippi, Ford (1936) was able to define seven archaeological cultures, referred to as "decoration complexes", and demonstrated their chronological relationships. Fifteen sites in the Upper Tensas Basin figured in this analysis and demonstrated the existence of the Coles Creek and Marksville "decoration complexes" there.

Beginning in 1952, the first large scale excavations in the Survey Area were conducted by Ford at the Poverty Point site (Ford and Webb 1956) Several developments seem to have stimulated this investigation. In 1944, Clarence H. Webb reported on a cache of steatite vessels excavated at the site; four years later he postulated a late Archaic Poverty Point focus in northeastern Louisiana on the basis of what was then known of the culture (1948:229). Stratigraphic excavations at the Jaketown site in the Yazoo Basin in 1951 demonstrated that Poverty Point culture did indeed precede the earliest known ceramic cultures, Tchula and Tchefuncte, in the Lower Mississippi Valley, and indicated a date for it somewhere between 400 and 1500 B.C. The major result of

Ford's Poverty Point investigations was recognition of the high level of development that this culture had attained.

The last archaeological investigations in the Upper Tensas Basin prior to the 1963-64 LMS survey were undertaken by Phillip Phillips. Phillips conducted site survey and test excavations in the Lower Yazoo Basin during 1954-55, and, in the first year, he made a brief foray across the Mississippi River into the Tensas Basin. Surface collections were made at several sites, and seven previously unreported sites were found and recorded (Phillips, unpublished field notes).

Method and Theory

The research and analysis underlying this thesis have been conducted within the framework of the cultural taxonomy proposed by Willey and Phillips (1958) and the type-variety approach to ceramic classification (Wheat et al. 1958; Phillips 1958; Smith et al. 1960). Aspects of both methodological devices require comment here.

Three phases, Routh, Fitzhugh, and Transylvania, are defined in the present paper and are identified with either one of two cultures, Plaquemine and Mississippian (Fig. 2). Archaeological units such as these can be seen as arbitrary slices of cultural continuums in time and space (Willey and Phillips 1958:15) or, according to an opposing view (Spaulding in Willey and Phillips, ibid.),

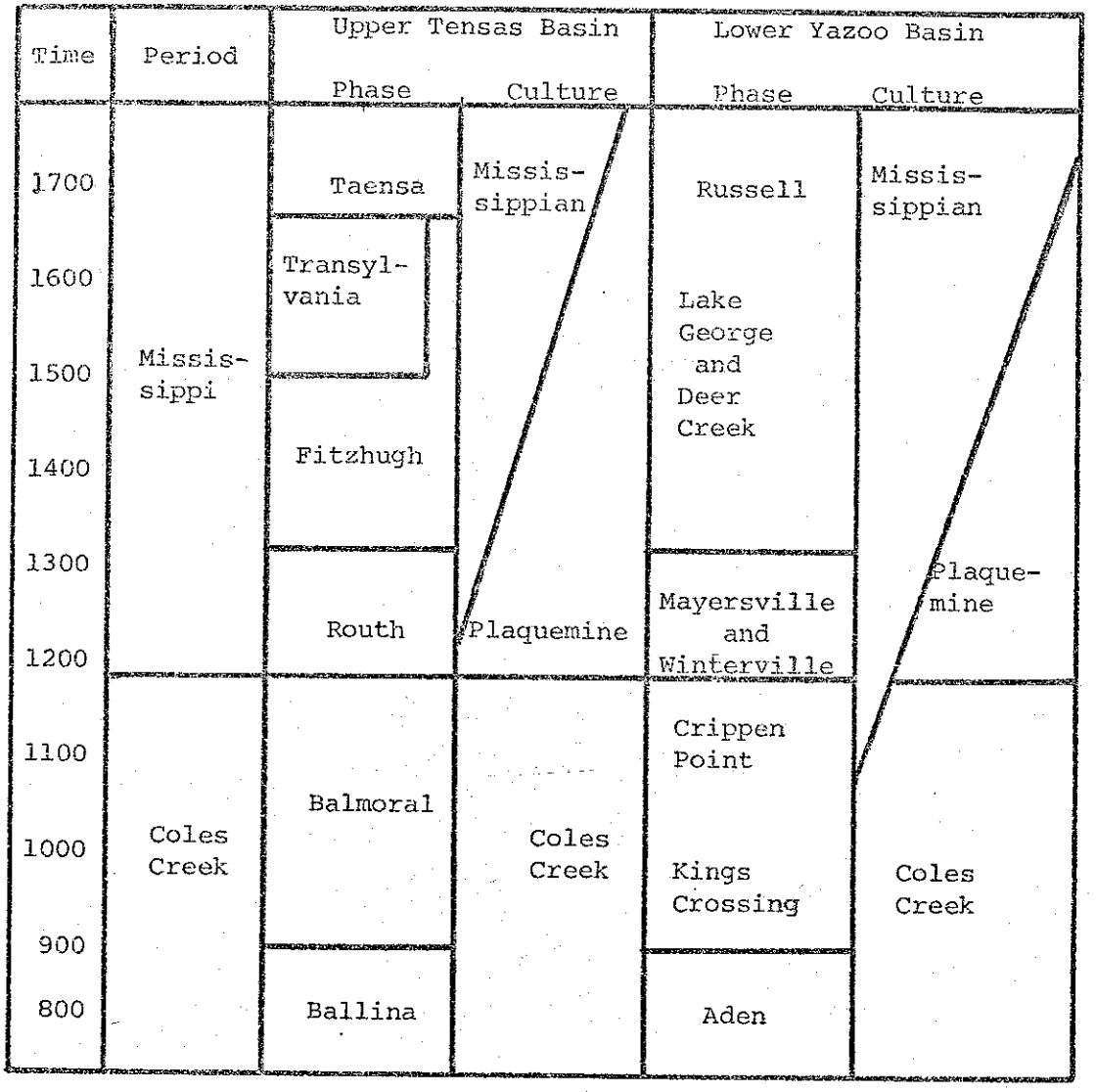

Fig. 2.--Archaeological sequences for the Upper Tensas and Lower Yazoo Basins.

as reflecting real and important breaks in prehistoric cultural development and distribution. From his own experience in the Upper Tensas Basin, the present author would suggest that neither viewpoint is totally correct or incorrect. Rather, some archaeological units are arbitrary while others are culturally and historically significant. The author's distinction between Routh and Fitzhugh phases is patently arbitrary. The development of Fitzhugh from Routh is gradual and occurs without any recognized break in the tempo of ongoing change. In like fashion, the distinction between Fitzhugh and historic Natchez phases or, in the Lower Yazoo Basin, between Kings Crossing and Crippin Point phases, would seem to be rather arbitrary divisions of spatial and temporal continuums.

In the relatively short period between A.D. 1000 and 1200, however, there are extensive and important ceramic changes in the general Survey Area as Coles Creek culture gives way to Plaquemine culture. There would seem to be nothing arbitrary about this cultural distinction, and most researchers would probably recognize it. In the Lower Yazoo Basin, the shift from Plaquemine culture (Mayersville and Winterville phases) to Mississippian culture (Deer Creek and Lake George phases) seems also to represent far-reaching culture change during a relatively brief interval of time. Spaulding's (ibid.) hypothetical

pattern of culture change, which sees a period of "relative stability, then rapid growth through the introduction of a critical new element followed very quickly by a number of other new elements, then a period of relative stability, . . ." seems to conform to the archaeological situation in the Lower Yazoo and Upper Tensas Basins at least since A.D. 1000. It would seem that points of rapid cultural growth or change have been recognized by archaeologists in the Lower Valley at the level of culture, while the intervening periods of relative cultural stability have been sub-divided at the phase level.

Frequent reference is made in the following chapters to periods and to the early and late portions of certain phases. The time interval under investigation in this report is divided into two periods, Mississippi (Phillips 1970:18-19) and Historic. In the northern half of the Upper Tensas Basin, Fitzhugh phase is superseded by Transylvania phase around A.D. 1500. To the south, Fitzhugh phase endires for nearly 400 years (from A.D. 1350 to 1680) and manifests considerable internal ceramic change during that time. No phase distinction can be made there, however, because no large "pure" artifact collections are available for the later centuries of the Mississippi period and because new ceramic elements appear at different times in different parts of the area. While no phase distinction can be made at present, it is nevertheless

possible to identify components as falling early or late within the time span covered by Fitzhugh phase. This has frequently been done, but as a matter of convenience, not as an attempt to impart a chronological dimension to what is basically a cultural unit.

The three phases defined in Chapters III-V have been distinguished entirely through the use of ceramics. Non-pottery artifacts are described for each phase, but they were assigned to phases only after the latter had been established on ceramic evidence. Because of the importance of ceramic typology to the present report, it is necessary that the author make clear his views regarding its proper use.

In his recent survey report on the Lower Yazoo Basin, Phillips (1970) has attempted to reclassify all published pottery types for the Lower Mississippi Valley within a type-variety framework. The resulting classification has been employed with only minor modification in the present analysis of Upper Tensas Basin ceramics. Phillips' classification is essentially one of historical types (Rouse 1960). In his own use and modification of the classification, the present author has certainly been motivated by the desire to distinguish pottery types that have restricted chronological and spatial distributions. The author, furthermore, is a "splitter". He believes that the finer typological distinctions one can make in a

collection of pottery, the finer chronological divisions one can recognize in a prehistoric occupation sequence. Quantitative change in pottery, on the other hand, has been largely ignored by the author in defining Tensas Basin phases. There may be important and diagnostic quantitative changes, such as the replacement of Coles Creek Incised by Plaquemine Brushed, or the replacement of Plaquemine Brushed by Winterville Incised, but change in form would usually seem to be a far more sensitive indicator of time and space differences. While Coles Creek Incised remains the numerically dominant pottery type throughout much of the Coles Creek period, the qualitative change from variety Coles Creek to variety Mott and finally variety Hardy takes place and can be used in distinguishing several phases. This is not to deny that there are instances where quantitative data have been or could be, useful. Presumably the shift from Fitzhugh phase to Transylvania phase at the northern end of the Survey Area could be guaged in part by noting relative frequency of shell-tempered pottery.

Rowe (1959) presents a persuasive case for the superiority of modal analysis over typological analysis in chronological studies. The present author can see certain advantages to that approach, but it would seem to have its limitations. When working with whole vessels that are complex in design treatment and shape, modal analysis

may be the most sensitive approach to delineating ceramic change through time. Were the necessary data available, the Leland Incised design analysis in Appendix II would have been undertaken at least in part through the use of modes. On the other hand, it does not seem likely that modal analysis is necessarily better than typological analysis when sherds are being worked with almost exclusively. For one thing, the full complexity of the original whole vessels can not be appreciated, with the result that the full inventory of modes is not identifiable and the effectiveness of modal analysis is impaired. Furthermore, in the type-variety method, varieties frequently differ from one another in only a single attribute or mode; witness the distinction Phillips draws between Plaquemine Brushed, var. Plaquemine and var. Grace, or between Leland Incised, var. Natchez and var. Fatherland (1970:106-7, 153). When dealing predominantly with sherds, the type-variety method is probably as sensitive a measure of ceramic change as the analysis of modes.

Phillips employs both modes and types in his analysis of Lower Yazoo Basin ceramics. In the present study, the author has made use of a number of Phillips' vessel shape modes and has recognized several new ones. These have proven of great utility in the definition of Upper Tensas Basin phases. Plain pottery, which usually constitutes between 60% and 80% of the sherds in a

collection, is practically useless for chronological purposes except in regard to variations in vessel shape. Modes such as the "Preston" bowl[1], "early Tunica" rim and "late Tunica" rim and the "Walnut Bayou" bowl are good phase markers. The distinction between Routh and Fitzhugh phases, in fact, is based largely upon vessel shape modes such as these.

Certain decorative techniques and designs encountered in Upper Tensas Basin ceramic collections could have been handled as modes--cross-hatching and punctations used with pottery bearing Leland Incised designs being two possibilities--but the author was not able to determine that any had chronological significance. Shell tempering, when it occurs with standard Plaquemine types such as Plaquemine Brushed and Mazique Incised, var. Manchac, could very well have been recognized on the level of mode also, but this would have created inconsistencies in the total pottery classification and hence was not done.

While emphasizing types and modes with chronological and spatial significance, the author has almost invariably played down the importance of the difference between clay tempering and shell tempering. The reason for doing this should be explained. Obviously the aim in pottery

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[1]Modes will be designated throughout the report by enclosure in quotation marks.

classification of the sort used in the present study is to formulate types that reflect time differences and coincide with cultural and social boundaries in space. It should not be forgotten, however, that there is no necessary relationship between pottery types or modes, and human groups defined socially, politically, ethnically, or culturally (Trigger 1968:14-25). The distinction between Fitzhugh and Deer Creek phases, both of which are defined largely on ceramic evidence, probably does coincide with social and political boundaries, but it does not have to. On the other hand, we need not conclude that the Taensa nation, which seems to have been resident along the banks of a single oxbow lake at the time of historic contact, was formerly spread throughout the entire Upper Tensas Basin merely because there was considerable ceramic uniformity in the area during Routh and the early portion of Fitzhugh phases. The author is of the opinion that shell tempering has been given too much weight as an indicator of social, cultural, or political relationships between people, and, therefore, has tended to play down its importance in the ceramic classification of the present report.