

CERTAIN ABORIGINAL MOUNDS AT MOUNDVILLE:
1937 EXCAVATIONS IN MOUNDS H, I, J, K, AND L

by

Vernon James Knight, Jr.

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I want to use this occasion to focus attention on pottery from Mounds H, I, J, K, and L at the Moundville site. This pottery constitutes a small part of the Moundville collections curated by the Alabama State Museum of Natural History. The material was excavated in the spring of 1937. My main interest in re-examining these sherds is to see how they might illuminate the chronology of mound building and mound use at Moundville.

It is perhaps commonly known that the majority of Depression-era excavations at Moundville took place in various off-mound occupation areas, around the site's central plaza (Peebles 1979). Less well known is the fact that some minor work was done in the mounds as well, most of it in connection with the restoration of the site as a public park. In addition to the excavations I plan to discuss here, there were formal excavations placed into Mounds A, S, and T. Collections also exist from Mounds B, R, and P, mostly, I think, acquired as a result of stump grubbing and restoration work.¹

Mounds H, I, J, K, and L are all on the southern margin of the plaza (Figure 1). This location has a current significance. These mounds are, for one thing, on the opposite side of the site from the largest mounds at Moundville, which are all on the north. Also, the mounds in question lie at several hundred meters distance from that part of the site now believed to be earliest, namely, the terminal Woodland West Jefferson phase village located west of Mounds O and P (Walthall and Wimberly 1978). Mounds I, J, K, and L, moreover, since they define the southern margin of the plaza, undoubtedly postdate the planned aspect of the site and its partitioning of architectural space. For all these reasons, there is no a priori sense that these should be among the earlier constructions at Moundville.

A plausible scenario of the growth of Moundville was published by Steponaitis (1981), based upon his subdivision of the original Moundville phase into three shorter ceramic phases labeled Moundville I, II, and III. This was in turn accomplished by a gravelot seriation of pottery vessels, done under the auspices of Christopher Peebles's NSF-sponsored Moundville project. As applied to the chronology of the mounds, Steponaitis had to rely almost exclusively on pottery recovered from mound contexts by Clarence Moore in 1905 and 1906. Even though these data were less than completely satisfactory, Steponaitis was able to suggest that during the Moundville I phase, dating to about A.D. 1050-1250, Moundville was a relatively small mound center. Only one mound, Mound O, could be confirmed as having a construction dating to this phase, and Mound O is located near an early focus of activity on the west side of the site. It was only later, during the Moundville II phase, of about A.D. 1250-1400, that Moundville rose to prominence as a regional center. The formal plaza arrangement was laid out by the early part of this phase. According to this scenario the final configuration, essen-

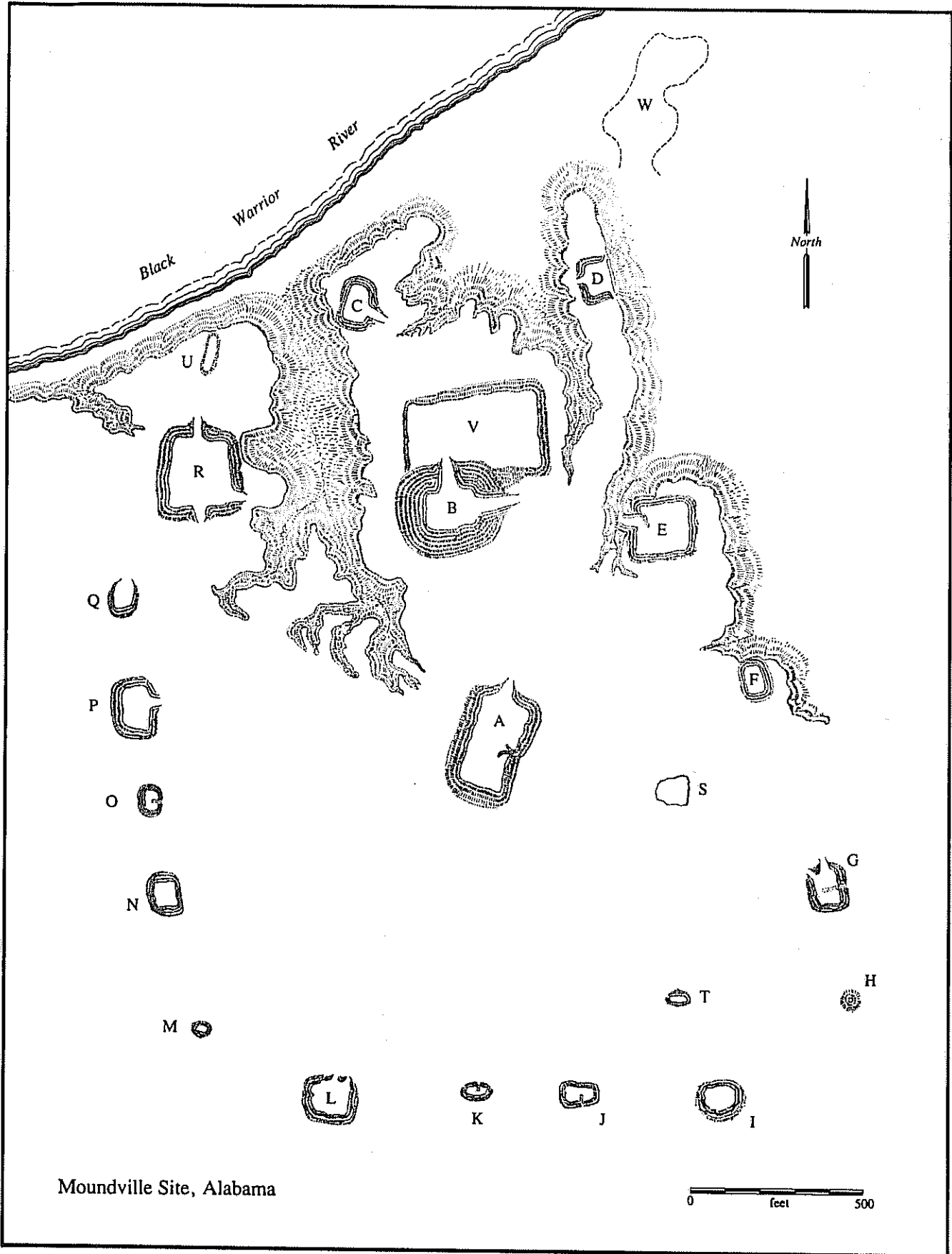


Figure 1. Moundville site, Alabama, showing location of mounds mentioned in text.

tially the one we see today, was achieved during the Moundville III phase at about A.D. 1400-1550.

Except for Mound H, from which Clarence Moore recovered pottery now datable to the Moundville II phase, the mounds we are considering here did not directly enter into this formulation since they yielded no pottery vessels. Nonetheless, following this general reconstruction one could argue that Mounds I, J, K, and L were probably in use during the Moundville III phase, without ruling out the possibility that some or all of them had core constructions begun during the earlier Moundville II phase (see Steponaitis 1981; Peebles 1987). In fact, were it possible now to assign a date to the core constructions of Mound I, J, K, and L, one would essentially be dating the initial layout of Moundville's "town plan," a notable event in the rise of the site to its regional supremacy. This question of dating is one that can be explored using the collections from the 1937 mound trenching project.

1937 Excavations

Let me describe briefly the work that was done in 1937. But before I do so, I want to caution that my account and my results should be thought of as preliminary. I have made no systematic effort to comb the records for all items pertaining to this minor project, so it is entirely possible that something I have overlooked may yet surface. Also, I have studied only the sherd collections resulting from these excavations. There are also nonceramic artifacts, human skeletal remains, and grave goods in the collections that came from this project, and any final account would need to consider these.

The main document describing the work is a 13-page report by Dr. Walter B. Jones entitled "Mound and Lake Restoration, Mound State Monument" (Jones 1941). Jones was Director of the Alabama Museum of Natural History, and this document, dated 1941, was prepared for submission to the National Park Service as a final report on restoration work accomplished by the Civilian Conservation Corps at Moundville. They were carrying out the Master Plan for the Development of Mound State Monument, conceived a few years earlier.

When the property was acquired during the 1930s, the mounds along the southern margin of the site -- those in Hale County -- were generally in poorer shape than the remainder. Even during Moore's visit these mounds had already suffered from sustained cultivation and consequent flank erosion. Because of this condition Mounds S, T, H, I, J, K, and L were all re-contoured to something approximating their original shape.² This original shape was determined by trenching into the mounds from the four cardinal directions, and by noting in profile the position and slope of the latest intact construction stage. Washed soil and

slumped overburden surrounding the base of the original mound was then removed, replaced on the summit, and squared up, after which the mound was re-sodded.³

The trenches designed to reveal the original mound contours were 5 feet wide and were of variable length. They were labeled by mound and they also received a letter designation indicating their position. For each mound that received four trenches, trench "A" went into the south flank, trench "B" into the west flank, trench "C" into the north, and trench "D" into the east. Measured profile drawings were prepared in at least some instances (Figures 2, 3), and a series of 19 photographs on file depict the freshly cut profile walls with mound stages delineated with a trowel. These photographs were all taken by David DeJarnette. From the photographs and profile drawings it is apparent that Mound H had at least two construction stages, Mound I had at least 3, Mound J at least 2, Mound K at least 3 or 4, while finally the Mound L trenching revealed only 1 construction stage. Many of the mounds have distinctive premound midden deposits, and some of them have submound pit features and post holes.

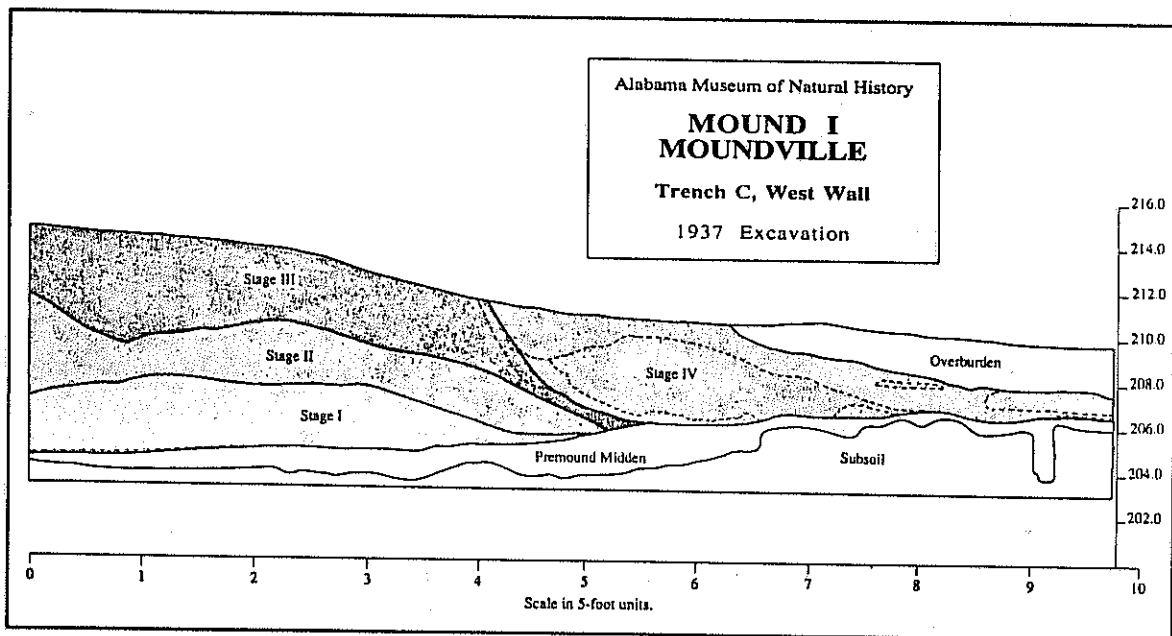


Figure 2.

From the dates on the photographs it appears that Mounds S and T were the first to be trenched, during February of 1937. The trenching of the remaining five mounds to be restored evidently took place all at once, since the photographs documenting them were taken on just two consecutive days in March of 1937.⁴

These trenches were designed with the single-minded purpose of producing a profile to allow accurate re-contouring, and for

that reason they were not excavated stratigraphically. The recovered material was cataloged by mound and by trench, but never by level or stratum. Naturally this circumstance inhibits the interpretive potential of the collections, since they could (and probably do) incorporate material mixed from premound middens and features, slope deposits resulting from summit activity, reworked mound fill, and overburden. Nonetheless that in itself allows us to expect in a crude sense a certain "signature" for any mound whose final period of use can be estimated. For example a mound in use primarily during the Moundville III phase might yield diagnostic pottery of that phase with some admixture of earlier material combined from underlying construction stages, mound fill, and premound deposits. How do the sherd collections stack up against these expectations?

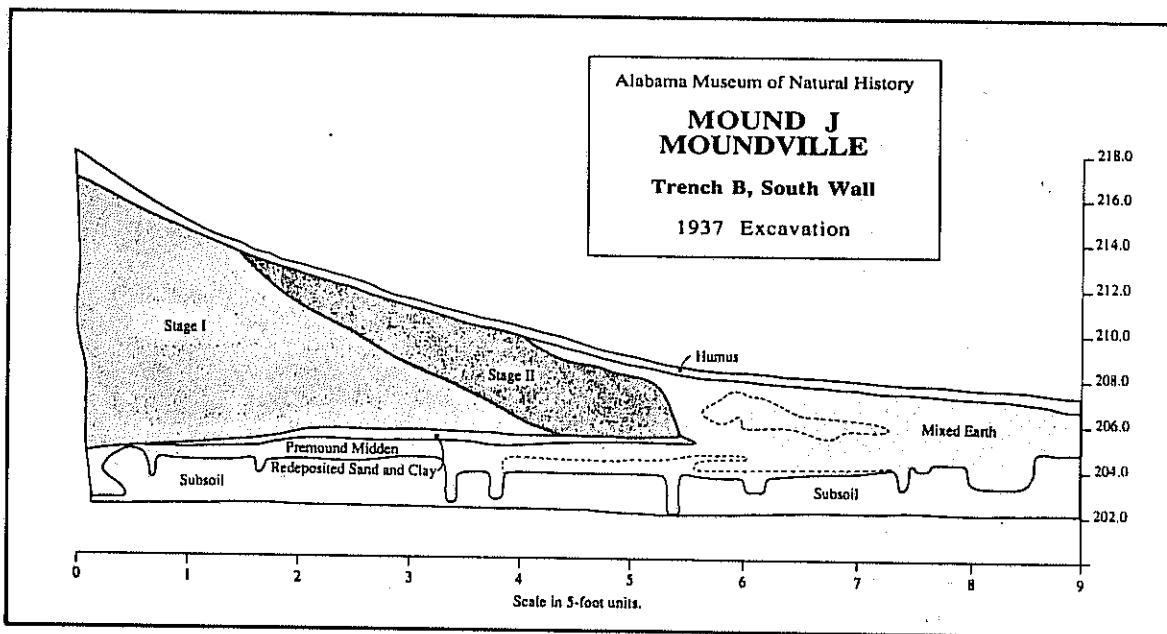


Figure 3.

Pottery Analysis

For this analysis I have examined, re-classified, and tabulated 1,153 potsherds cataloged as coming from the trenching project in Mounds H, I, J, K, and L (Table 1). Being interested here mainly in chronological indicators, I used the type-variety typology devised by Steponaitis (1983). In addition to the local Moundville types there are a few probable imports, most notably a frog effigy which I classified as Carson Red on Buff using Lower Mississippi Valley nomenclature, and a few Pensacola series sherds which would be at home on the Gulf Coast. The latter I have classified as Pensacola Incised variety Jessamine, and D'Olive Incised varieties Dominic and Mary Ann. Let me make a few comments now on the marker types found in these collections.

Mound H Ceramics

Chronologically useful pottery occurring in the Mound H collection includes examples of Moundville Incised, variety Moundville; Carthage Incised, varieties Summerville and Moon Lake (the latter on the flaring-rim bowl shape); and Moundville Engraved, varieties Havana, Hemphill, and Taylorville. By reference to Steponaitis's seriation, all these probably overlap in their chronology of use during the early part of the Moundville II phase. Early Moundville II, then, may be taken as the most likely median dating for the collection. In this regard it is notable that an isolated vessel from the same mound was also assigned by Steponaitis (1983:156) to the Moundville II phase.

On the early side, some of this pottery actually may have been made during the Moundville I phase. This is suggested by the occurrence of sherds assigned to Carthage Incised, variety Moon Lake (on the vessel shape specified above) and variety Summerville, as well as Moundville Incised, variety Moundville. All of these varieties, according to the information available, are most common during the Moundville I phase. However, it is also to be observed that Moundville Incised, variety Moundville is represented here by only a single sherd. This is much divergent from the collections from Mounds I, J, K, and L, all of which possess this variety in greater frequency, and which exhibit more conspicuous Moundville I phase components.

Likewise some material later than the Moundville II phase might be indicated by the occurrence of Moundville Engraved, varieties Hemphill and Taylorville. According to the seriation of reference, both of these, though present throughout Moundville II, are more common during the early part of the Moundville III phase. No pottery is present that would indicate a use of Mound H postdating the early Moundville III phase.

Mound I Ceramics

Decorated pottery of use in dating the Mound I collection consists of sherds assigned to Moundville Incised, varieties Carrollton, Moundville, and Snows Bend; and Moundville Engraved, varieties Havana, Maxwells Crossing, and Stewart. As with the Mound H pottery, all of this pottery could be contemporaneous in an early Moundville II phase context. But rather in contrast to our sample from Mound H, here a case can be made for a distinct Moundville I phase component. This Moundville I component is signalled by the presence of all three defined varieties of Moundville Incised, dominated by the early variety Moundville. In addition there is a sherd of Moundville Engraved, variety Stewart, a class that is so far reported only in Moundville I phase contexts. One of the sherds of the Maxwell's Crossing variety is "hemagraved," another probable Moundville I marker (Steponaitis 1983:129).

Taken as a whole, the Mound I collection might be more specifically assigned to the late Moundville I -- early Moundville II phase. This takes into account the possibility that some material later than the Moundville I phase is present, and indeed two of the varieties of Moundville Engraved which are present (varieties Havana and Maxwells Crossing) extend on present evidence as late as early Moundville III. However, no pottery from Mound I is assignable to the latter half of the Moundville III phase, and the overall evidence for a Moundville III phase component is meager.

Mound J Ceramics

Chronologically diagnostic pottery from Mound J is as follows. As with the Mound I assemblage, all three varieties of Moundville Incised occur, again predominated by variety Moundville. The type Carthage Incised is present as variety Moon Lake on the flaring-rim bowl form. Moundville Engraved occurs as varieties Elliots Creek and Hemphill. In addition to these there are some non-local sherds assignable to Early Pensacola (Bottle Creek phase) types found on the Gulf Coast. Both identifiable classes are plate forms: D'Olive Incised, varieties Dominic and Mary Ann (Fuller and Stowe 1982).

Here again the chronological overlapping among these classes as presently dated yields an estimated range of late Moundville I -- early Moundville II for the Mound J collection. And again the varieties of Moundville Incised, in particular variety Moundville, are present in strength suggesting a definite Moundville I phase component. In support of this may be cited the occurrence of Moundville Engraved, variety Elliots Creek, a class currently assigned to the Moundville I phase. One of these sherds is "hemagraved," another Moundville I characteristic.

Some of this pottery, nonetheless, is apparently a bit later, probably dating to the Moundville II phase. Evidence for this is a sherd of Moundville Engraved, variety Hemphill and the non-local Pensacola sherds, the latter dating to a phase corresponding roughly in time to Moundville II. As before, the dating of some of this material as late as early Moundville III cannot be ruled out, but such a case is not strong and there is nothing to suggest a late Moundville III phase presence.

Mound K Ceramics

The Mound K ceramic sample reveals fewer chronologically diagnostic varieties than the other mound samples examined in this study. The type Moundville Incised is present in two of its defined varieties, variety Carrollton and variety Moundville. Carthage Incised, variety Moon Lake occurs as sherds from flaring-rim bowls. Moundville Engraved is also present in the collec-

tion but no sherds could be identified to the variety level.

Considered together these classes point primarily to a late Moundville I phase assignment. Particularly relevant to this assessment is the proportionately high frequency of Moundville Incised, variety Moundville. It is understood that either variety of Moundville Incised which occurs here could be as late as early Moundville II, and that the type Carthage Incised, variety Moon Lake on the stated vessel form is conceivably as late as the early Moundville III phase. Once again no varieties are present to signal a late Moundville III component.

Mound L Ceramics

The Mound L collection possesses the broadest range of chronologically distinctive decorated pottery among the five mound collections treated here. The type Moundville Incised appears with varieties Carrollton and Moundville, with the latter once more as the numerically predominant variety. Five varieties of Carthage Incised occur: varieties Akron, Carthage, Fosters, Moon Lake (flaring-rim bowls), and Summerville. The first three of these Carthage Incised varieties do not appear in the collections from Mounds H, I, J, or K. Of the type Moundville Engraved there are varieties Elliots Creek and Havana. Finally there are two non-local types that can be used as chronological cross-references. These latter are Carson Red on Buff, possibly a Nodena phase import from the Lower Mississippi Valley (Phillips 1970:62-63) and Pensacola Incised, variety Jessamine from the northern Gulf Coast, a Bottle Creek phase import (Fuller and Stowe 1982:77-78).

Much of this pottery is indicative of a late Moundville I phase component. The most diagnostic specimens are the sherds of Moundville Incised in two varieties, particularly variety Moundville, and the sherds of Carthage Incised, variety Summerville and Moundville Engraved, variety Elliots Creek. To reiterate, these varieties may extend in time to the early part of the Moundville II phase based on present knowledge. Three additional varieties from Mound L, Carthage Incised, varieties Akron and Moon Lake and Moundville Engraved, variety Havana, may date anywhere from the Moundville I phase through early Moundville III. Of the two non-local types, the Carson Red on Buff specimen is probably contemporaneous with Moundville III, whereas the Pensacola Incised specimen is likely somewhat earlier, on a par with Moundville II.

Most interesting is the fact that the Mound L collection is the only one of the group under consideration to yield an unambiguous Moundville III phase component. The most common variety of Carthage Incised from Mound L is variety Carthage, which, together with variety Fosters, are two of the latest pottery taxa at Moundville. Also indicative of a late Moundville component for

this collection are the presence of a frog effigy fragment and a sherd of Bell Plain, variety Hale exhibiting a "beaded" rim. These two pottery characteristics seriate late at Moundville (Steponaitis 1983:131).

Conclusions

What do we make of these results? The first thing to be said is that they run somewhat counter to expectations, and that they do so in a fairly consistent manner. More precisely, the greater part of the collections falls rather strikingly on the "early" side (Table 2). The lack of pottery datable to the late end of the Moundville seriation is conspicuous in four of the five mound collections.

Mound L is the exception. Based on the collections it is safe to conclude that this mound was in use during the late Moundville III phase. Mound L also yields the expected admixture of earlier material, particularly Moundville I phase pottery.

The other mound collections, in contrast, show no clear indication at all of a Moundville III phase occupation. This is, to say the least, curious. The diagnostic pottery from these mounds is consistently earlier material, datable to the Moundville I or Moundville II phase. In fact the entire assemblage from Mound K could be considered late Moundville I, and the entire assemblage from Mound H as early Moundville II.

Unless there is some hidden sampling bias negating the recognition of sherds contemporaneous with mound use, it seems inescapable to conclude that Mounds H, I, J, and K were already abandoned during the Moundville III phase.

Should the abundance of Moundville I phase pottery in Mounds I, J, K, and L lead us to conclude that these earthworks were in place at this early date, that is, prior to about A.D. 1250? I believe it would be incautious to force this weighty conclusion upon these paltry and mixed sherd lots. What looms large in my opinion is the fact that these collections incorporate premound midden debris that, in this part of the Moundville site, almost certainly dates to the Moundville I phase (cf. Steponaitis 1986).

At any rate it now seems permissible to think of most of the mounds in the southern tier of the Moundville site as being of short-term construction and use. Whether they were initiated during the late portion of the Moundville I phase or afterward during some part of the Moundville II phase, as both of these constructs are presently framed and dated, cannot be determined. But we can propose that all of them with the exception of Mound L had already fallen out of use by the important Moundville III period of A.D. 1400-1550. What this suggests is that the formal partitioning of architectural space at Moundville involving the

full configuration of mounds and plaza had a relatively short life-span, and reached its culmination not during the later years of Moundville but rather in the middle of the sequence.

Notes

- 1 The elaborate steps taken to repair and restore Mounds R and B are discussed by Jones (1941).
- 2 The map labeled "Mound Park Preliminary Master Plan," dated March 16, 1937, indicates that "all mounds" were to be restored as "historic structures." The later "Mound State Monument Central Development Plan" of January 11, 1939 distinguishes between restored and unrestored mounds. Those depicted as restored are T, I, J, K, L, and R.
- 3 Evidently the re-contouring of these mounds was done without the knowledge or approval of the National Park Service. A year after most of the re-contouring had already taken place, Mr. Jerome A. Heywood, the project's Senior Landscape Foreman, prepared a policy statement entitled "Program for the Development of Policies and the Master Plan for Mound State Monument" (Heywood 1938). This stated in part, "No attempt shall be made at any large restoration program until such a time as an adequate study of the original shapes may be made and adequate conclusions reached." Reacting to this, the Museum's Director wrote in the margin, "Who determines these things? If our staff, O.K."

Dr. A. R. Kelly, then Chief of the Archaeological Sites Division of the National Park Service, critically reviewed the report entitled "Mound and Lake Restoration, Mound State Monument" (Jones 1941). In a memorandum written October 1, 1941 to the National Park Service's Regional Director, Kelly stated, "Frankly, I have always been rather dubious of the propriety of 'restoring' mounds to original contours and slope when the documentation for such modifications is incomplete... Such data is not yet available at Moundville... It would have been wiser to defer such work to the time when modern research could provide essential structural details of mound construction."

- 4 Dr. William G. Haag recalls participating in this work with a visiting TVA crew.

Table 1. Pottery Counts from 1937 Excavations
in Mounds H - L, Moundville

	<u>Mound</u>	<u>Mound</u>	<u>Mound</u>	<u>Mound</u>	<u>Mound</u>	<u>Total</u>
	<u>H</u>	<u>I</u>	<u>J</u>	<u>K</u>	<u>L</u>	
Shell Tempered Types						
Barton Incised var. unspecified	1					1
Bell Plain var. Hale	36	12	71	34	48	201
Mississippi Plain var. Hull Lake	1	5	2	6	5	19
Mississippi Plain var. Warrior	104	65	219	186	215	789
Carthage Incised var. Akron					3	3
Carthage Incised var. Carthage					4	4
Carthage Incised var. Fosters					1	1
Carthage Incised var. Moon Lake	1		2	2	3	8
Carthage Incised var. Summerville	1				1	2
Carthage Incised var. unspecified			3	1	4	8
D'Olive Incised var. Dominic			1			1
D'Olive Incised var. Mary Ann			1			1
Langston Fabric Marked	1					1
Moundville Engraved var. Elliots Creek			2		1	3
Moundville Engraved var. Havana	1	1			2	4
Moundville Engraved var. Hemphill	1		1			2
Moundville Engraved var. Maxwells Crossing		2				2
Moundville Engraved var. Stewart		1				1
Moundville Engraved var. Taylorville	1					1
Moundville Engraved var. unspecified	1	1	4	2	3	11
Moundville Incised var. Carrollton		1	6	2	3	12
Moundville Incised var. Moundville	1	6	17	23	12	59
Moundville Incised var. Snows Bend		1	1			2
Moundville Incised var. unspecified		3			1	4
Carson Red on Buff					1	1
Pensacola Incised var. Jessamine					1	1
Shell Tempered Incised, unidentified				2		2

Table 1 (continued). Pottery Counts from 1937 Excavations
in Mounds H - L, Moundville

	<u>Mound</u>	<u>Mound</u>	<u>Mound</u>	<u>Mound</u>	<u>Mound</u>	<u>Total</u>
	<u>H</u>	<u>I</u>	<u>J</u>	<u>K</u>	<u>L</u>	
Non-Shell Tempered Types						
Baytown Plain var. Roper			2	1		3
Baytown Plain var. unspecified (black burnished)			2			2
Grit Tempered Plain (black burnished)				2		2
Sand Tempered Plain				1		1
Temperless Plain				1		1
Total	150	98	334	263	308	1,153

Table 2. Phase Assignments for Mound Ceramic Collections.

Mound	Best Estimate	Outside Limits
Mound H	early Moundville II	Moundville I -- early Moundville III
Mound I	late Moundville I -- early Moundville II	Moundville I -- early Moundville III
Mound J	late Moundville I -- early Moundville II	Moundville I -- early Moundville III
Mound K	late Moundville I	Moundville I -- early Moundville III
Mound L	late Moundville I -- late Moundville III	Moundville I -- Moundville IV

Appendix: A Note on Function

There are distinctive differences among the mound collections in their relative proportions of what we might call "service" versus "utility" ware. For example, it will be seen that Mound H, the known mortuary mound, has a higher proportionate representation of the type Bell Plain than the other mounds. Since Bell Plain, variety Hale is the black burnished fine ware or service ware in Moundville ceramics, does this indicate that the mortuary context is responsible for the high proportion of service ware?

Unfortunately there is little basis for concluding that it does. Our incapacity to control the dimension of time is the responsible factor, for, as Steponaitis (1986) has shown, the dating of the contexts clearly has a determining effect on the relative proportions in question. In this connection it will be noted that those mounds having the lowest proportion of Bell Plain (I and K) are the same mounds with the highest representation of Moundville Incised, generally an early marker type at Moundville. It seems, then, that ratios of service to utility ware may have little other significance than as a reflection of chronology, already a cloudy issue.

At any rate, until further information is obtained on these mounds, that reported here may serve a modest purpose in the continuing effort to comprehend the dynamics of growth at the largest Mississippian center in the South.

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