

Preliminary Report on Excavations at Mound Q, Moundville

by Vernon James Knight, Jr.
Department of Anthropology
University of Alabama

Presented at the 49th Annual Meeting of the
Southeastern Archaeological Conference,
Little Rock, Arkansas

October 22, 1992

Reader's note: Much of the information in this preliminary report
is subject to revision.

In the summer of 1989, The University of Alabama began a new program of investigations directed to the Mississippian mound group at Moundville, Alabama, center of the Moundville chiefdom. This is a long-term project involving both collections research and new excavations. Sponsorship is by the Department of Anthropology, with cooperation and assistance from the Alabama Museum of Natural History. In this presentation I will outline the overall goals of this project, and then give particular attention to preliminary results from work at Mound Q.

Those who direct research on Mississippian culture in the Black Warrior Valley of Alabama have the luxury of building on a large foundation of baseline knowledge (Peebles 1981), and of working in an atmosphere of activity on several fronts. The fact that much is already known on certain basic questions means that we can focus our attention on some very specific topics of theoretical interest.

The scale, spatial characteristics, and public architecture of the Moundville site are all implicated in considerations of how and why a stratified social formation emerged and prospered in the Black Warrior River Valley. Unfortunately, most of what we know about the mounds themselves comes from Clarence Moore's exploratory work during five weeks in 1905 (Moore 1905). The large-scale Depression-era work at Moundville largely ignored the mounds in favor of productive off-mound locations, as Moore himself had done during his second season of work in 1906 (Moore 1907). With the exception of some work at the toe of Mound M by a

University of Alabama field school in 1970-71, all excavations conducted at Moundville since World War II have focused on domestic areas and the palisade system.

A casual look at the arrangement of the mounds at this primary center gives the impression of an orderliness of public architecture. Rows of mounds can be seen as defining a quadrilateral plaza with one large mound (Mound A) in the middle, and the largest mound (Mound B) opposite Mound A on the north central margin of the plaza. Smaller mounds (C and D) containing very elaborate burials are found along two narrow ridges extending from the Mound B area northward toward the river.

There are symmetries and asymmetries in this arrangement that certainly look deliberate. As Christopher Peebles has pointed out (1971:82), one can see a bilateral symmetry along a north-south axis running through Mounds A and B, and a regular alternation in the plaza periphery mounds between large mounds without burials and small mounds with them. In line with a gradation in what Peebles calls "status space" from the north side of the side going south, one may notice that the alternating larger mounds without burials show regularly decreasing volume as one moves from Mound B around the plaza in either direction. It is tempting to speak of a Moundville "town plan" similar to that suggested by Fowler for Cahokia, with all the implications that term carries about power relationships and their imposition on a domestic and ceremonial landscape. In fact, one might go further in suggesting that Moundville's "town plan" had a special signif-

icance: that it was diagrammatic of a social order of hierarchically arranged segments.

But to be candid, the data from Clarence Moore's mound excavations at Moundville are inadequate to demonstrate the precise character of such an arrangement. We now believe that Moundville was an active center for more than four centuries, and there is reason to doubt that any static spatial order should have held over that entire span of years. At a site which surely has a complex history, it means little to merely point out an apparent orderliness of public architecture, when that architecture is poorly dated. In what sense was Moundville a "planned" community? And if there was an overall order, when and how was that order imposed? What did it signify? How long was it in effect?

At the risk of oversimplifying, various scenarios might be discussed. One could envision, as Steponaitis (1983) has done, that Moundville started out as a small center and grew by accretion, adding new mounds in a gradual fashion, and only assuming its apparent order in mid-career. Steponaitis attempted to support this idea using the available gravelot data, but (as he recognizes) the force of this argument wanes when one considers that Clarence Moore's sample of mound burials is probably greatly skewed in favor of later interments (i.e., those found within the upper five feet of the mounds). One might go further in arguing that the apparent spatial order is an illusory representation of anything static, since we are only looking at the terminus of the

sequence. Or, to take an opposite tack, perhaps the symmetries are not only real but were imposed from the very beginning of Moundville's career as a center. If true, that would be an interesting commentary on the emergence of political power in this social system.

Our mound project tries to shed some light on that emergence by focusing on public architecture: its chronology, spatial relationships, and use. By building sets of data on the chronology of mound construction at Moundville and the uses to which the mounds were dedicated, we hope, by a combination of collections study and prudent excavations, to contribute something to discussions of how emerging nobilities operate strategically in relation to their followers and to one another.

In the first year of the project (Knight 1989) I undertook a study of the curated collections from C.C.C. trenches excavated in 1937 into Mounds H, I, J, K, and L on the southern plaza periphery. These 5-foot wide trenches were meant to establish the original contours of these mounds in advance of their restoration. In examining the chronologically diagnostic pottery types and modes from these collections, it was discovered that every one of them had evidence of substantial activity during the Moundville I or early Moundville II phase. This suggests contemporaneity of use early in the Moundville sequence. Just as revealing was the fact that only one of these mounds, Mound L, had evidence of use during the Moundville III phase in the later

part of the Moundville sequence. The others had apparently been abandoned.

Since the time of that presentation, I have had the opportunity to study the extant collections for several additional mounds, including Mounds A, B, E, P, R, and S. While reserving the details of that analysis for a later time, I will simply report here that the same chronological pattern identified earlier for Mounds H through L is pervasive at the site, that is, contemporaneity of use early in the sequence, with spotty or ephemeral use later during the Moundville III phase.

Mound Q was selected as a good starting point for the new investigations for two reasons. First, as a modest example of the smaller class of alternating plaza-periphery mounds that tend to show evidence of mortuary activity, Mound Q offered the chance to examine probable special-purpose, non-residential architecture. Second, Mound Q had posed a special problem to both Clarence Moore and me. Moore had decided that it should have contained burials but did not; consequently it was the only mound he returned to re-investigate during his second 1906 season, but after having "fairly riddled" the summit with trial holes, he again came up empty (Moore 1907:337). Thus lacking burials, the mound appeared to violate the notion of an orderly alternation and probable pairing of plaza-periphery mounds. It was my initial guess that this apparent anomaly was just sampling error: a product of Moore's standard procedure of using "trial holes" as a discovery technique.

The new work at Mound Q was initially supported by a grant from the University of Alabama's Research Grants Committee. Since 1989 the work has been accomplished by annual fall semester field schools in the Department of Anthropology, plus the participation of the Alabama Museum of Natural History's summer expedition program during the summer of this year. Excavations are still ongoing, and we are presently working on the summit floor of what I will describe as Stage II. At the same time, we are seeking external funding to expand the work to sample certain other mounds at Moundville that probably exhibit different uses and different architectural types. I envision a total of at least seven seasons of fieldwork.

A stepped trench on the west flank of Mound Q was excavated in two parts. The first one-meter-wide segment, called the "reference trench," was excavated in arbitrary levels to gain an initial profile. This was then expanded to the south in a second one-meter-wide segment called the "stratigraphic control trench," which, as the name implies, was taken out using careful stratigraphic control from the vantage of the adjacent profile.

This little slice yielded quite a lot of information. It revealed the positions of the last four stages of mound construction, and produced a useful sample of artifacts from debris lenses on the flanks, associated with buildings on each stage. It allowed us to radiocarbon date the sequence, and gave some initial information on the character, abundance, and depth of various intrusive disturbances from the summit. By the second

season, it was known that the bulk of Mound Q had been constructed during the Moundville I phase, prior to A.D. 1250; that during the thirteenth century A.D. there were two closely-spaced construction stages with structure floors marked by thin lenses of yellow clay; and that the last use of the mound was during the Moundville III phase.

As expected, the upper part of the mound had been liberally violated by a combination of rodent burrows, tree root disturbances, fire ant colonies, and the "trial holes" of Clarence Moore and perhaps other people. I should note that there are six features I am reasonably sure may be identified as Moore's "trial holes." These are bathtub-shaped, semi-rectangular and very regular in outline, with straight sides and reasonably flat bottoms, extending to a uniform depth of about one meter below surface. They are, so far, absolutely free of any modern objects in the backfill.

It is also apparent that the upper section of the mound has been artificially truncated, and not because of plowing or erosion. Instead, it appears that the upper layer has been mechanically scraped off to a shallow depth, perhaps as a source of fill dirt during the nineteenth century when this part of the site was a cotton plantation. This interpretation might account for the mound's oddly drooping northwest corner. Remnants of structure floors existed in the upper meter of the mound, but it was necessary to go a bit deeper, to approximately one meter

below the present surface, to find one sufficiently intact to get a good look at its summit architecture.

In order to accomplish that, a 6 x 10 meter block has been excavated down to that floor (Stage II), which is the subject of attention during the current season. This was divided into 15 2 x 2 m squares leaving balks between them until the target floor was reached. Cuts roughly approximating the interpreted stratigraphy were employed in excavating this block of units, despite the high degree of disturbance in the upper mound.

Other supplementary excavation units have been excavated elsewhere on the mound. Two 2 x 2 m test units were placed near the eastern summit to test the symmetry of the mound and to penetrate below the floor targeted for exposure in the larger block unit. A block of four 2 x 2 m units was excavated at the northern toe of the mound after it was discovered that the off-mound midden deposit from a Moundville III phase occupation formed a massive blanket of debris on this northern flank (I must thank Dr. Mark Williams for his suggestion that I look for such a situation using a series of screened post hole tests).

In all this work, primary deposits have been screened through 1/4 in mesh. Relatively large samples from all primary contexts have been processed by water flotation, resulting in very satisfactory samples of botanical and faunal remains, some of which are quite well preserved. I am enthusiastic about the information potential of this material.

The known stratigraphy of Mound Q is as follows. One should bear in mind that only a small proportion of the artifact analysis is complete, and that some of the following is subject to revision as the excavations and analyses proceed.

I have divided the upper stratigraphy into five major stages, numbered I - V, and two minor ones. The two "minor" stages reflect discrete summit activities of apparently short duration. Unlike the major stages, the minor ones lack any evidence for summit architecture.

Our "Stage I" is merely the earliest stage for which we have information, and is probably not actually the earliest construction. All we know about it comes from one deep test unit near the eastern crest. It is defined by a thin midden layer that overlies mound fill of light-colored clay.

Stage II is a well defined construction of mottled gray clay. At this point Mound Q stood about 2.3 m high. Its summit, currently under investigation, supports what seem to be multiple small buildings of light wall trench construction, some perhaps re-built over time. One hearth is a simple heavily-oxidized basin, lacking the puddled clay or raised rim common elsewhere at the site. A scatter of potsherds, pieces of sandstone, pieces of mica, small bits of sheet copper, and a few random fragments of human bone have so far been piece plotted on this summit floor.

The next stage, IIIa, is one of the "minor" stages. It is a level that seems to represent one very brief episode of activity, that occurred after the flanks of the Stage III construction were

finished, but before the summit was brought to its final height. In mid-construction, a level area of about 3 1/2 meters in diameter was subjected to fire. Scattered around the margins of this heavily burned area at the same level are abundant faunal remains, primarily deer. Our students have dubbed this the "builder's banquet." One interesting artifact piece-plotted on the margin of this burned area is a fragment of a small Moundville Engraved bottle thickly encrusted on the interior with glauconite, a bright green pigment. The burned area, but only the burned area, was sealed with a cap of yellow and gray clay before construction resumed. One corrected C-14 date suggests that this episode occurred around 1257 A.D (Beta - 44473: 790 \pm 60 B.P., 1193 (1257) 1278 CALIB 2.0, Stuiver and Becker 1987).

Stages III and IV are much alike and can be discussed together. Both constructions supported structures and both were capped prior to the next construction with a thin layer of yellow clay that extends down the mound flanks to cover the whole mound. Both floors are highly disturbed, and only for Stage III do we possess some fragmentary information on summit architecture. Apparently, there was a shift from several small buildings on Stage II to one larger building on Stage III, with more substantial wall trenches and central roof supports. Two small interior hearth basins are recorded, neither lined with clay. A thin lens of flank debris yielded daub fragments that show an outer wash of white clay. Charcoal from this Stage III debris lens yielded a C-14 date calibrated to A.D. 1263 (Beta - 44468:

760 ± 80 B.P., 1211 (1263) 1283 CALIB 2.0, Stuiver and Becker 1987).

In between these two stages is the second minor stage, IVa. This is an ashy humic deposit resembling midden, which seems to cover the entire mound including the flanks. At first this deposit was believed to be a primary midden associated with Stage III, but it clearly overlies the clay cap sealing that stage, and in places there is obvious mound fill between the Stage III clay cap and the lower margin of the humic deposit. This suggests a different possibility: that it is redeposited midden from somewhere else, added during the construction of Stage IV. Its surface was irregular and undulating, emphasized by an area near the center of the summit where a former low spot in the deposit grades into laminated, water-lain silt and sand. There are abundant artifacts and daub, particularly on the flanks where massive, discrete lensed deposits have been isolated. Although this minor stage, or depositional episode, had no summit structure, nevertheless Stage IVa does show certain unusual, irregular pit features and at least one post hole originating from this level.

Two C-14 dates suggest that this activity took place during the last quarter of the thirteenth century A.D. (Beta - 44469: 720 ± 70 B.P., 1257 (1279) 1377 CALIB 2.0, Stuiver and Becker 1987; Beta - 44471: 650 ± 60 B.P., 1279 (1296,1375) 1391 CALIB 2.0, Stuiver and Becker 1987). A third date is a bit earlier and out of line with the other two, reinforcing the idea that this

may be redeposited material (Beta - 44470: 850 ± 70 B.P., 1043 (1195,1196,1208) 1260 CALIB 2.0, Stuiver and Becker 1987).

The next and final stage, Stage V, has yielded consistent C-14 dates in the early 15th century (Beta - 44472: 530 ± 60 B.P., 1327 (1412) 1433 CALIB 2.0, Stuiver and Becker 1987; Beta - 44466: 510 ± 60 , 1331 (1418) 1438 CALIB 2.0, Stuiver and Becker 1987)¹, suggesting that Mound Q was abandoned for about a century after the capping of stage IV. When it was reoccupied during the Moundville III phase, a massive midden developed on the flanks around the east, north, and west sides of the mound. All direct evidence of the summit architecture has been destroyed because of the historic truncation, but there is sufficient burned daub in the flank deposits to indicate that there was a wattle and daub structure, and some summit features from this occupation have survived. One is a small, irregular midden-filled pit, and two others are burial pits. One of the latter is a child buried with a small vessel near the head, a pavement of sherds under the skull, and a stone discoidal at the elbow. The other pit lacks preserved bone, but there is little doubt of the identification. Near one end of the oblong pit was a Moundville Engraved bottle showing the winged rattlesnake motif, and nearby was a fragment of a copper-covered wooden object, perhaps an earspool.

The character of artifacts apparently associated with Stages III and IV deserve brief mention here. It is noteworthy that these two clay-capped constructions lack any evidence of mortuary

activity (leading to Moore's quandary), but nonetheless I am not presently inclined to regard them as residences, particularly in view of the contrast to Stage V, with its manifestly domestic-looking off-mound trash. A partial listing of Stage III - IV artifacts would include beveled stone discoidals, pottery discoidals, crude human figurines, galena crystals, pigments (glaucosite, hematite, and limonite), sandstone paint palettes (some engraved and scalloped), a limonite pipe, mica scraps, deliberately smashed greenstone celts, sandstone "saws," diminutive greenstone adze blades, and pottery trowels. Very interesting is the manufacture of chert bladelets, almost exclusively from imported blue-gray Fort Payne chert cores. The pottery includes fragments of terraced rectangular bowls, some decorated either with polychrome painting or incising. Most of this kind of material, which appears to echo craft activities and decorative arts, is missing in the later Moundville III midden deposits that come from the final summit occupation. At present it appears that Mound Q, through about A.D. 1300, supported a series of special-purpose buildings, after which it was abandoned and converted much later to a residential use around A.D. 1400.

1. One additional C-14 date has been recieved for this stage. It is Beta - 44467: 770 ± 70 B.P; A.D. 1210 (1261) 1281, CALIB 2.0 (Stuiver and Becker 1987). This is too early for the deposit, though it might be attributed to stray charred material mixed from the underlying premound midden.

References Cited

- Knight, Vernon James, Jr.
1987 Certain Aboriginal Mounds at Moundville: 1937 Excavations in Mounds H-L. Paper presented at the 46th Southeastern Archaeological Conference. Tampa.
- Moore, Clarence B.
1905 Certain Aboriginal Remains of the Black Warrior River. Journal of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia 13(2):123-244.
- 1907 Moundville Revisited. Journal of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia 13(3):336-405.
- Peebles, Christopher S.
1971 Moundville and Surrounding Sites: Some Structural Considerations of Mortuary Practices II. In Approaches to the Social Dimensions of Mortuary Practices, edited by James A. Brown, pp. 68-91. Memoir 25. Society for American Archaeology.
- 1981 Archaeological Research at Moundville: 1840-1980. Southeastern Archaeological Conference Bulletin 24:77-81.
- Steponaitis, Vincas P.
1983 Ceramics, Chronology, and Community Patterns: An Archaeological Study of Moundville. Academic Press, New York.
- Stuiver, Minze, and B. Becker
1987 Radiocarbon Calibration Program, Rev. 2.1. Quaternary Isotope Lab, University of Washington, Seattle.

Table 1. Radiocarbon Dates from Mound Q, Moundville.

Lab No.	Mound Stage/context	C-14 Age*	Calibrated Date**
Beta-44472	Stage V, N. midden	530 ± 60 B.P.	A.D. 1327 (1412) 1433
Beta-44466	Stage V, N. midden	510 ± 60 B.P.	A.D. 1331 (1418) 1438
Beta-44467	Stage V, N. midden	770 ± 70 B.P.	A.D. 1210 (1261) 1281
Beta-44469	Stage IVa, W. flank trench	720 ± 70 B.P.	A.D. 1257 (1279) 1377
Beta-44471	Stage IVa, W. flank trench	650 ± 60 B.P.	A.D. 1279 (1296, 1375) 1391
Beta-44470	Stage IVa, W. flank trench	850 ± 70 B.P.	A.D. 1043 (1195, 1196, 1208) 1260
Beta-44468	Stage III, W. flank trench	760 ± 80 B.P.	A.D. 1211 (1263) 1283
Beta-44473	Stage IIIa, unit 24R20	790 ± 60 B.P.	A.D. 1193 (1257) 1278

* All dates run on charred wood, not adjusted for C-13.

** CALIB program version 2.1, University of Washington Quaternary Isotope Lab. Intercepts are in brackets, one sigma range outside brackets.