

A PLURAL SOCIETY IN PREHISTORIC ALABAMA

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## A Plural Society in Prehistoric Alabama \*

This paper will present an alternative explanation for a set of data from the West Jefferson Phase of the Late Woodland Stage and the Bessemer Subphase of the Moundville I Phase of the Mississippian Stage. The two entities will not be described since adequate summaries appear elsewhere (Jenkins 1976, DeJarnette and Wimberly 1941, Welch 1981 and Steponaitis 1981). It is our premise that observations from the West Jefferson sites and the Bessemer Site indicate a direct relationship between these two groups, that of contemporary and interacting ethnic groups.

The first area of comparison is the dates. A series of nine radiocarbon dates are available from the West Jefferson sites which range from A.D. 892 to A.D. 1065 (Jenkins and Nielsen 197 ). The one reasonable date from the Bessemer Site is A.D. 1070+-55 (Wathall and Wimberly 1978). Cross dating with other Mississippian sites which have been dated suggests a total time range from A.D. 900 to A.D. 1100 for the Bessemer Site occupation.

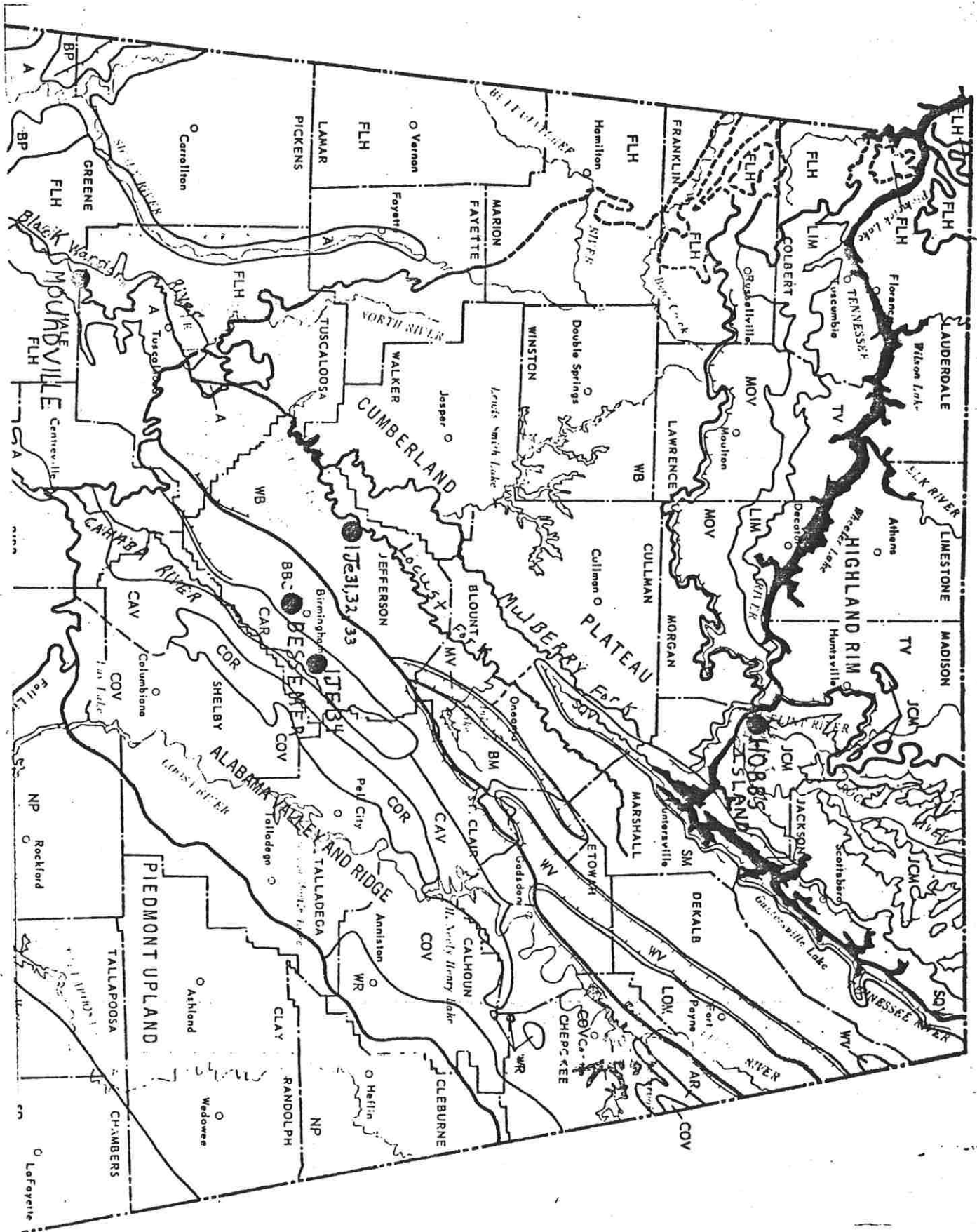
Ceramically, the West Jefferson Phase is defined by between 90 and 98% grog tempered ware of which 99% is plain and between 2 and 10% shell tempered ware. The Bessemer assemblage consists of 100% shell tempered wares.

The lithic assemblages, other than projectiles are quite dissimilar. The points of both assemblages are easily subsumed under the Madison type parameters. A significant, we believe, observation is the covariation between finished and unfinished pecked and ground stone discoidals and West Jefferson and Bessemer assemblages. That is, the general lack of unfinished examples at Bessemer and the low number of finished discoidals at the West Jefferson sites.

Feature sets in the two assemblages are distinctive. The West Jefferson feature set can be classified into five basic categories; bell, cylindrical, basin, and trough shaped pits and rock hearths. The Bessemer feature set is limited to few categories other than the basin shaped fireplace. No large pit features are present other than burial pits.

Subsistence in the West Jefferson communities appears to be a good Late Woodland hunting, gathering, limited gardening pattern. Botanical material examined to date has been characterized by a majority of hickory nuts and acorns with a small amount of zea maize present (Smith 1974, M. Scarry 1981). It is difficult to be precise on subsistence remains at Bessemer simply because few were recovered. It is interesting to note that a small amount of maize was present at the West Jefferson sites with some floatation and a small amount was recovered at Bessemer with no floatation. The presence of only 2 nutting stones perhaps suggests nuts were relatively insignificant in the Bessemer diet compared to the West Jefferson diet. Nutting stones were the most numerous ground stone artifact category at the

Figure 1



West Jefferson sites (Jenkins and Nielsen 1974).

There are, of course, several avenues of explanation for the observed phenomena. One could invoke site unit intrusion, in place development, a combination of both, and so on. For clarity's sake, we choose two potential avenues to discuss. Others have approached the data as fitting within a developmental sequence (Welch 1981a, 1981b, Steponaitis 1981, Bozeman 1981). They contend the West Jefferson Phase precedes the Bessemer Subphase and that the latter is, at least in part, descended from the former. If this were the case a number of problems are evident:

- (1) Numerous, apparently reliable, radiocarbon dates would have to be discarded.
- (2) Our hypothesized supply of discoidals to Bessemer from the West Jefferson sites would obviously have to be discarded.
- (3) The covariation of Mississippian and Woodland attributes on the same vessel do not travel this avenue very well.
- (4) The apparent association of West Jefferson and Bessemer components at Bessemer would have to be attributed to mixing by post depositional factors rather than to artifacts in use at the same time.
- (5) A rapid change from the 90-98% to 2-10% grog to shell tempering ratio would have had to occur unless the dates are discarded.

In light of these problems, another avenue of explanation, that of ethnicity appears to effectively deal with the observations. Our proposition of the West Jefferson and Bessemer populations represent two ethnic groups in interaction is supported by the data.

#### CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF ETHNICITY

Rather than get into a general consideration of ethnicity, we choose to build our discussion on three crucial elements of the phenomenon: Ethnic groups, ethnic group boundaries, and plural society. To Barth (1969), the composition of ethnic groups is determined by emic factors. In his words they are categories of ascriptions and identification by the actors themselves. He rejects more standardized definitions and proposes two criteria for their recognition:

- (1) The presence of boundary maintenance, and
- (2) Socially relevant factors, namely if an individual claims to be an "A" then that individual is an "A" and not a "B".

Archeological operationalizing of this definition may indeed be difficult. While we agree in principle with Willey and Phillips (1958) that a relationship exists between the archeological use of phase and perhaps subphase, and the social anthropological use of society, we would prefer to modify their statement slightly. In some cases, this one we think, phase or

subphase has a closer fit to ethnic group than to the total society within which the ethnic groups operate. At the same time we realize most everyone uses phase and society in different ways so we choose not to belabor the point.

With current anthropological practice in mind perhaps the most convincing way to operationalize this definition is to focus on boundaries.

#### BOUNDARIES

The boundaries Barth refers to are social, not necessarily physical. Delimitation of boundaries are an important part of the analysis of ethnic groups for they "only persist as significant units if they imply marked difference in behavior" (Barth 1969:15). In many cases, this difference in behavior is archeologically visible. This visibility most likely varies from case to case.

Perhaps the argument most often heard against this contention of contemporary groups is that when two groups of varying social complexity maintain continuous or long term contact, the group of lesser complexity becomes acculturated to the ways of the more complex group. While no doubt this process has occurred, the ethnological record is not devoid of cases to the contrary. Two groups which have maintained their identity despite centuries of contact are the Fur and Baggara of the western Sudan. In their case the complementary subsistence systems is the point of articulation (Haaland 1969:59-60).

Apparent exceptions to this rule, upon closer examination, generally involve individuals or groups of individuals aspiring to the "other ways" (cf. Barth 1969:10). Examples of this kind would include the Highland Burma ethnic groups (Leach 1954).

#### PLURAL SOCIETY

Originally defined by Furnivall (1944:450), plural society consists of a society within which more than one ethnic group exists and maintains its identity. Results of Furnivall's analysis suggest that in a plural society the community is organized, not for social life, but for production. Furthermore, in his East Indies example, the tendency of each group to specialize in one or one set of production categories had as its end result distinct economic castes (Furnivall 1944:450).

The common thread which unites multiple ethnic groups into a society may vary from case to case; we have not sought to observe cross cultural regularities. In the example cited above, the groups were joined by a single common thread, resistance to outside aggression. Economics is surely another kind of linkage.

Why then, do we contend ethnicity is involved in the West Jefferson-Bessemer case. Before continuing, we wish to make it clear that this argument is one of alternative explanation rather than "proof". Perhaps, or most likely, West Jefferson populations did not vanish into thin air but were drawn into Moundville lifeways by one or more mechanisms of acculturation, etc. However, we see the evidence as supporting the suggestion there was a

time wherein these archeological entities were separate, contemporary, and interactive.

#### SUPPORT OF THE ARGUMENT

In summary, several kinds of information support the claim that the Bessemer Subphase and the West Jefferson Phase were contemporaneous and interactive. Relative dating of the Bessemer component at Bessemer with others in middle and western Georgia indicates an approximate date of A.D. 1000. The one reasonable date from Bessemer is A.D. 1070. O'Hear's (1975) weighted average date for the six features containing both shell and grog tempered pottery at the Jefferson County West Jefferson sites is A.D. 1014+-30. Two of the samples were assayed at A.D. 1060.

An amount of cooccurrence exists in the ceramic assemblages of the two components. Moreover, what appears to be a West Jefferson assemblage cooccurs in stratigraphic association at the Bessemer Site with an apparent Bessemer assemblage.

The elements of the two entities which do not cooccur seem to support the contention of the presence of two different, yet interacting, ethnic groups. The lack of nut storage facilities at Bessemer and the presence, by inference, of an agriculturally based subsistence system would seem to place their exploitation in different ecological niches than the more Woodland oriented West Jefferson folk.

The cooccurrence of Mississippian elements and grog temper in and on the same vessel is another strong suggestion of interaction.

Although other ideas on the relationship between the two entities (Welch 1981a, 1981b, Steponaitis 1981, Bozeman 1981) may interpret the data differently, we request you not lose track of a main point of this paper. That is, allowing only unilinear sequences can mask very important cultural and social information, of which ethnic group interaction and boundary maintenance is only one.



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