

The West Jefferson Phase:  
Terminal Woodland tribal society  
in West Central Alabama

by

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The Moundville Project included, as part of the fieldwork, surface collection of Terminal Woodland sites of the West Jefferson phase on the floodplain of the Black Warrior River. We collected, in fact, at least 10 Terminal Woodland components, and we know of but did not collect an additional 4 sites. Basic information on artifact assemblages and site catchment characteristics is being presented in this symposium by Tandy Bozeman. My intent is to skip over the crude data and present my 'refined' interpretations. In a nutshell, I believe that there is fairly good support for the following hypotheses:

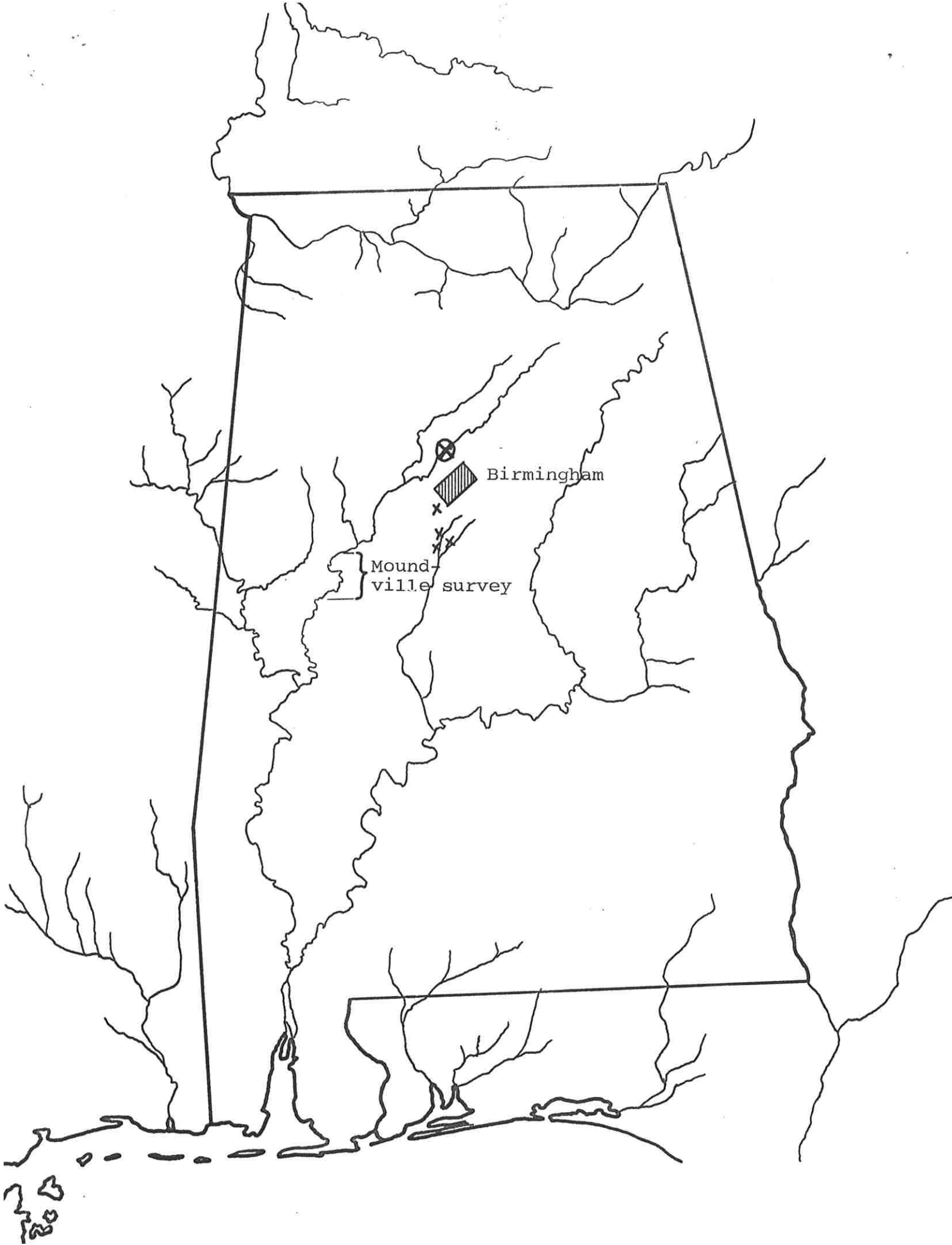
- 1) Subsistence was based primarily on collected and hunted resources with a contribution from cultigens grown in garden-sized plots, rather than a primary dependence on field agriculture.
- 2) The settlement pattern consisted of late spring through fall occupation in villages on the Black Warrior floodplain, with partial abandonment of the villages during winter through early spring. During the abandonment, the population was dispersed in small, quite possibly nuclear family, groups in upland areas away from the floodplain.
- 3) That this pattern of subsistence and settlement is generally similar to, or at least not radically different from, contemporary archaeological cultures elsewhere in Alabama.
- 4) That this pattern is consistent with a general prevalence of tribal, egalitarian social organization.

- 5) That Terminal Woodland tribal society in Alabama was characterized by geographically stable populations, relatively rapid shifting of political alliances, and the presence of intergroup conflict or warfare.

I also believe, but do not have sufficient time to explain why, that there are good reasons to believe that the West Jefferson and Moundville phases are a unilinear sequence, *good!* an in situ transition. It is a dirty trick to say this and not explain why, so I invite pointed questions later.

The Terminal Woodland material recovered by the Moundville Project is assigned to the West Jefferson phase, which was defined by Ned Jenkins and Jerry Nielsen on the basis of fieldwork near Birmingham, Alabama, in 1973 (Jenkins and Nielsen 1974). They excavated three sites characterized by ceramic industries in which nearly all sherds were grog-tempered and plain surfaced. A series of 9 carbon dates established the material as dating to the A.D. 900-1050 range. An analysis of feature contents by John O'Hear (1975) showed these sites to be special-activity, temporarily occupied sites, one occupation being referable to warm weather and one to fall/early winter. Subsistence remains included some freshwater mussel shell, but no other fauna was preserved. Botanical analysis of pit fill contents by Margaret Scarry shows a predominance of hickory nut shell, with minorities of acorn, ~~beechnut~~, maize, grape, persimmon, and various other edibles.

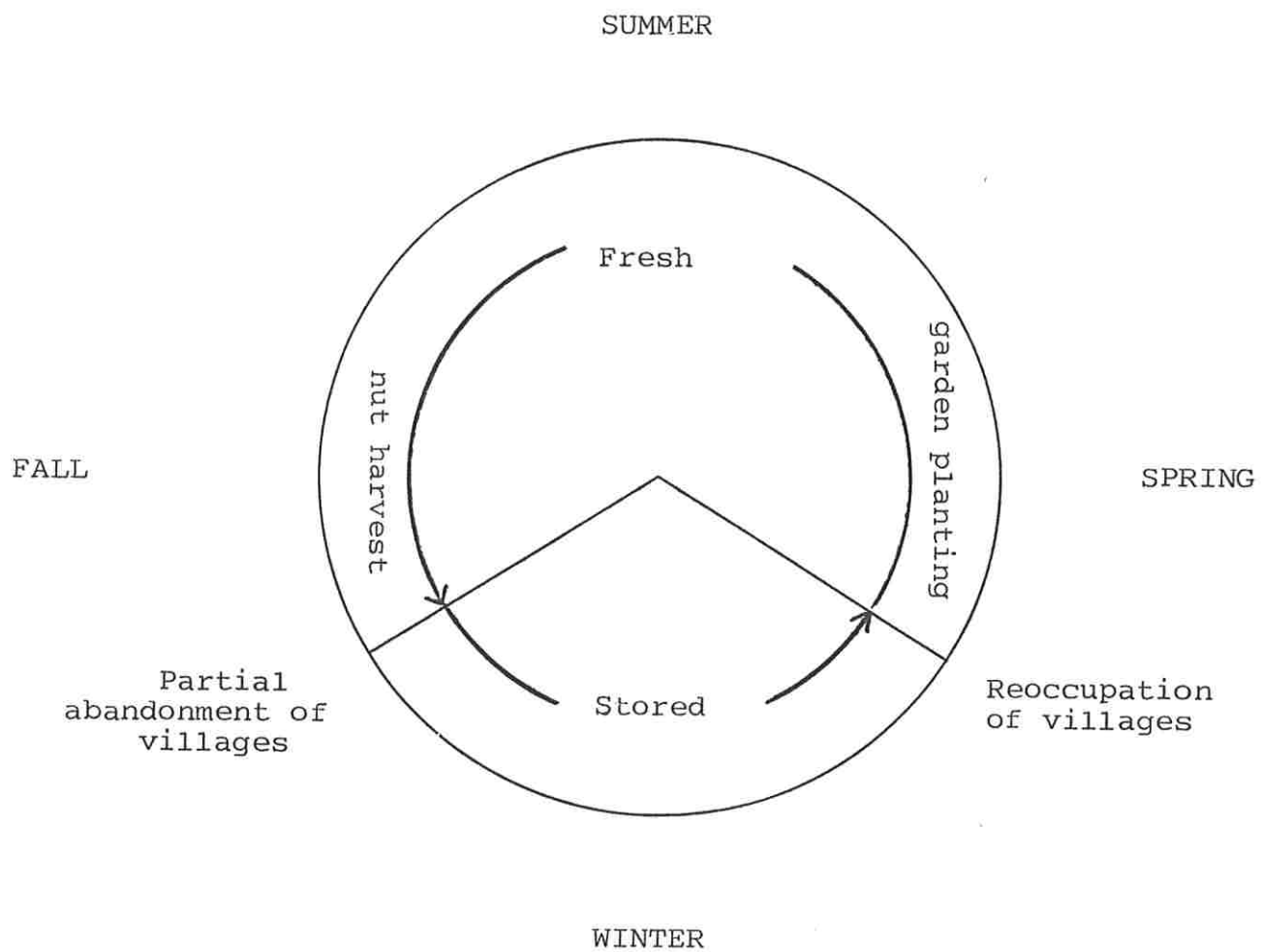
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The dominance of hickory over other wild and cultivated species is also a characteristic of West Jefferson phase pit fills from sites in the Warrior floodplain below the Fall Line. The midden-like fill of a pit excavated by the University of Alabama in 1977 duplicates the pattern, and preserved fauna included freshwater mussel, several fish, birds, turtles, small mammals, a snake, and a minimum of three deer. (Susan Scott: pers. comm.) A feature with similar fauna but a predominance of maize <sup>over</sup> hickory (M. Scarry: this symposium) was excavated at another floodplain village by the Moundville Project in 1979. While there is no sound reason to conclude that this pit is not West Jefferson phase, we are not as certain as we would like to be that the pit belong to the West Jefferson phase rather than an overlying Moundville phase component. A charcoal sample from this pit with the unusually high frequency of maize was dated at A.D. 960, which is fully in accord with the AD 900-1050 range established by the other West Jefferson phase dates. Seasonality of the occupation of floodplain villages appears to include spring through fall, with minor evidence of winter.

To summarize present evidence on West Jefferson phase subsistence: maize is present but not abundant, nuts appear to be a staple, and a wide variety of other foods are consistently present; faunal remains are dominated, in terms of contribution to diet, by deer, with contributions from birds, mussels, fish, and a variety of small mammals.

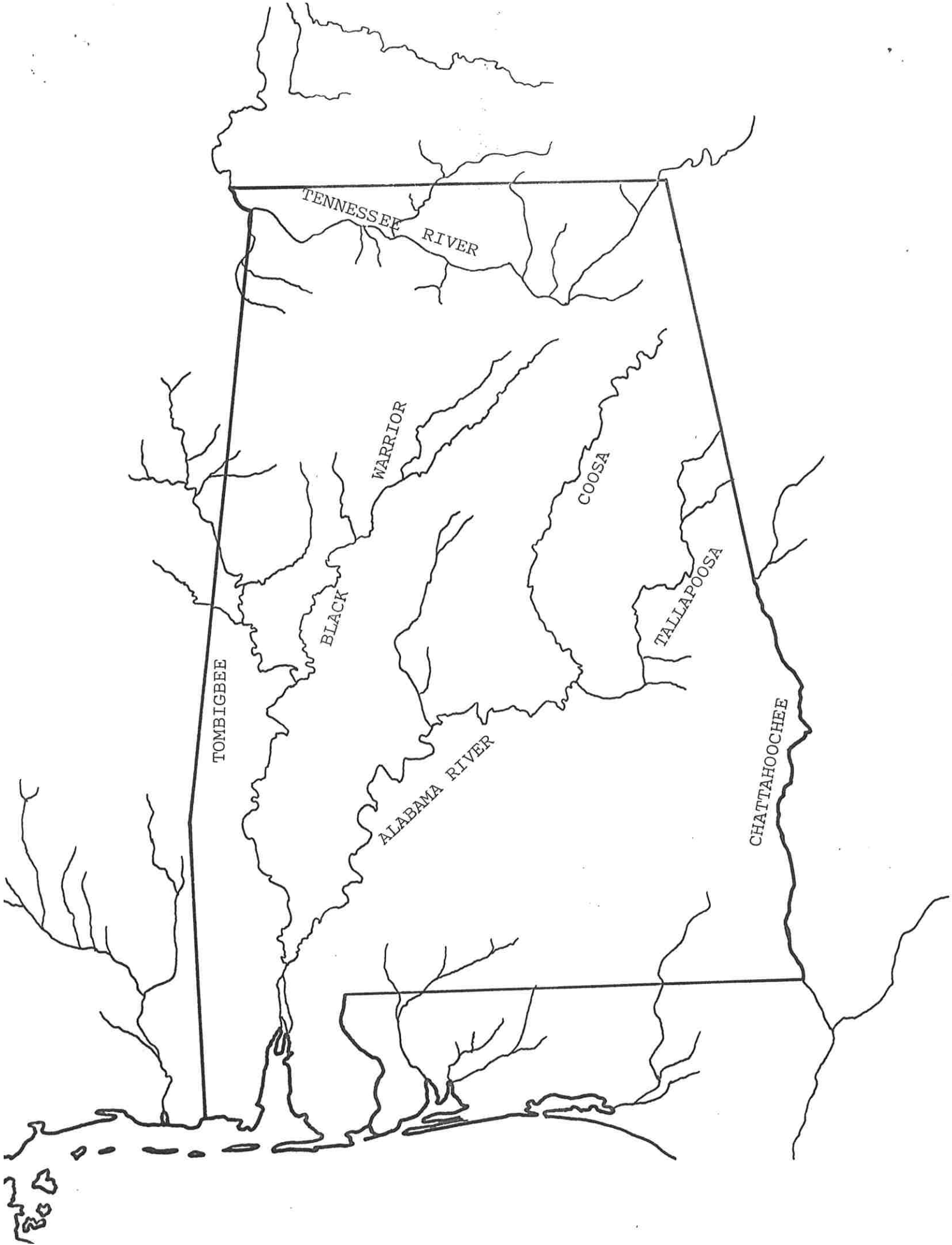
As for the seasonal movements of the population required by scheduling of resource exploitation, current evidence is equivocal. Occupations of the same seasons are present in the floodplain below the Fall Line, and along small tributaries in the uplands. However, while the floodplain villages have these seasons all at the same site, the upland sites appear to be single season sites. There is also a marked contrast between the single-structure, single-family upland sites and the 0.5 - 1.0 ha floodplain villages. Though I am going out on a rather thin limb here, I suggest that the floodplain villages are partially abandoned during late fall or winter, with the population dispersing in small, family-sized, groups. The single-structure occupations in the uplands with edible botanical inventories consisting principally of nuts are, I suggest, winter camps. The rockshelter hunting camps described in northwestern Alabama by Jolly (1974) are probably also winter camps. The West Jefferson population remained dispersed in small groups, subsisting principally on nuts and a variety of fauna, through late winter and early spring. The floodplain villages were reoccupied in late spring, after the spring floods. At that time the storage pits at the floodplain villages were opened, providing seeds for the summer garden plots and stored foods to tide over the occupants until wild vegetable foods were again available. This subsistence and settlement model is not radically different from that originally proposed by Jenkins and Nielsen (1974), who lacked the new data on the floodplain villages.

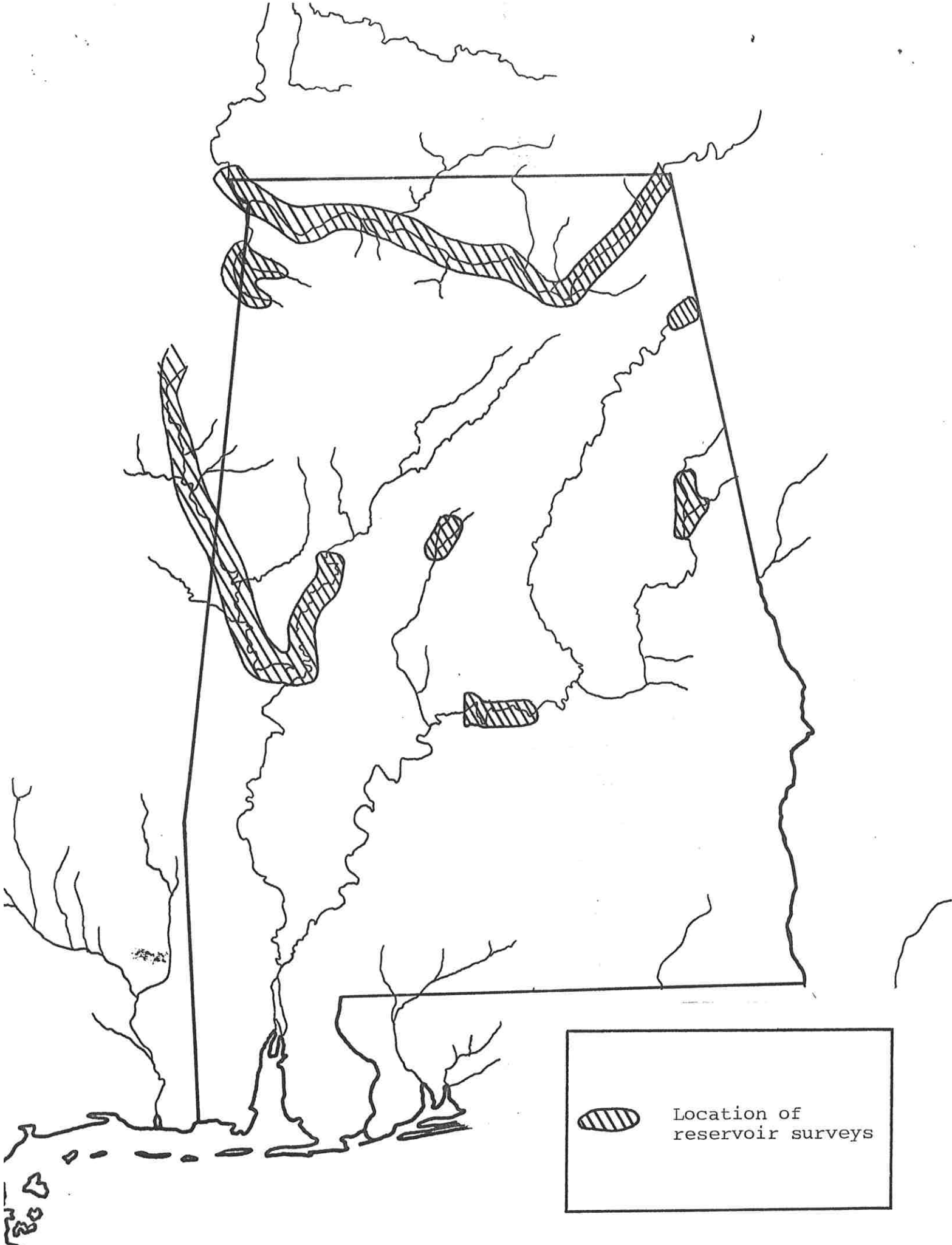


This pattern of settlement and subsistence is broadly applicable to Alabama Terminal Woodland as a whole. Reservoir surveys on the Alabama, Tombigbee, lower Black Warrior, and Tennessee rivers show widespread occurrence of Terminal Woodland villages on floodplains and terraces (Dickens 1971; Jeter 1977; Sheldon et al. 1980; Jenkins *et al* <sup>1975</sup>; Blakeman, Atkinson, and Berry 1977; Nielsen, O'Hear, and Moorehead 1973; Futato 1977). We have little systematic data from areas along smaller streams away from the principal rivers, but surveys by Jeter (1977) near Selma and by Schaffield (1975, ~~1975-1976~~<sup>1977</sup>) on the upper Cahaba reveal the widespread presence of Terminal Woodland occupations. These small sites might well be the dispersal phase of the proposed settlement cycle, though it would be awfully nice to have actual substantive confirmation of this. Analysis of faunal material from the Terminal Woodland at the Lubbub Creek locality on the Tombigbee is in close agreement with the subsistence model proposed here (S. Scott: pers. comm.).

Possessing this general outline of the settlement and subsistence systems of the West Jefferson phase in particular and the Alabama Terminal Woodland in general, it is necessary to inquire into the nature of the Terminal Woodland social organization. Mortuary data, our favorite base for such analysis, is all but lacking. Another source of data--the internal layout of villages, comparison of houses and household remains--is also not available since most of our data comes from small test pits and surface collections. Especially in light of the







limitations of the data, it is not entirely safe to classify the Alabama Terminal Woodland as one or another social organizational type--but I shall do so anyway. Taking note of the size of the villages (0.5 to 1.0 ha), the uniformity of artifactual remains between villages, and a fairly crude estimate of total population represented by the floodplain villages (2 - 5,000 for the West Jefferson phase south of Tuscaloosa), it seems likely that we are dealing with the kind of society Service called tribal. (This assumption has widespread popularity, cf. Jenkins 1976:22-25, Seckinger and Jenkins: this symposium, Steponaitis 1980:273, Nance 1976:200, Jeter 1977: 131, Jenkins 1979:272.) This will be a fundamental assumption in the remainder of the paper. I also assume that you are familiar with Service's characterization of tribal society, so I will not spend time rehashing it.

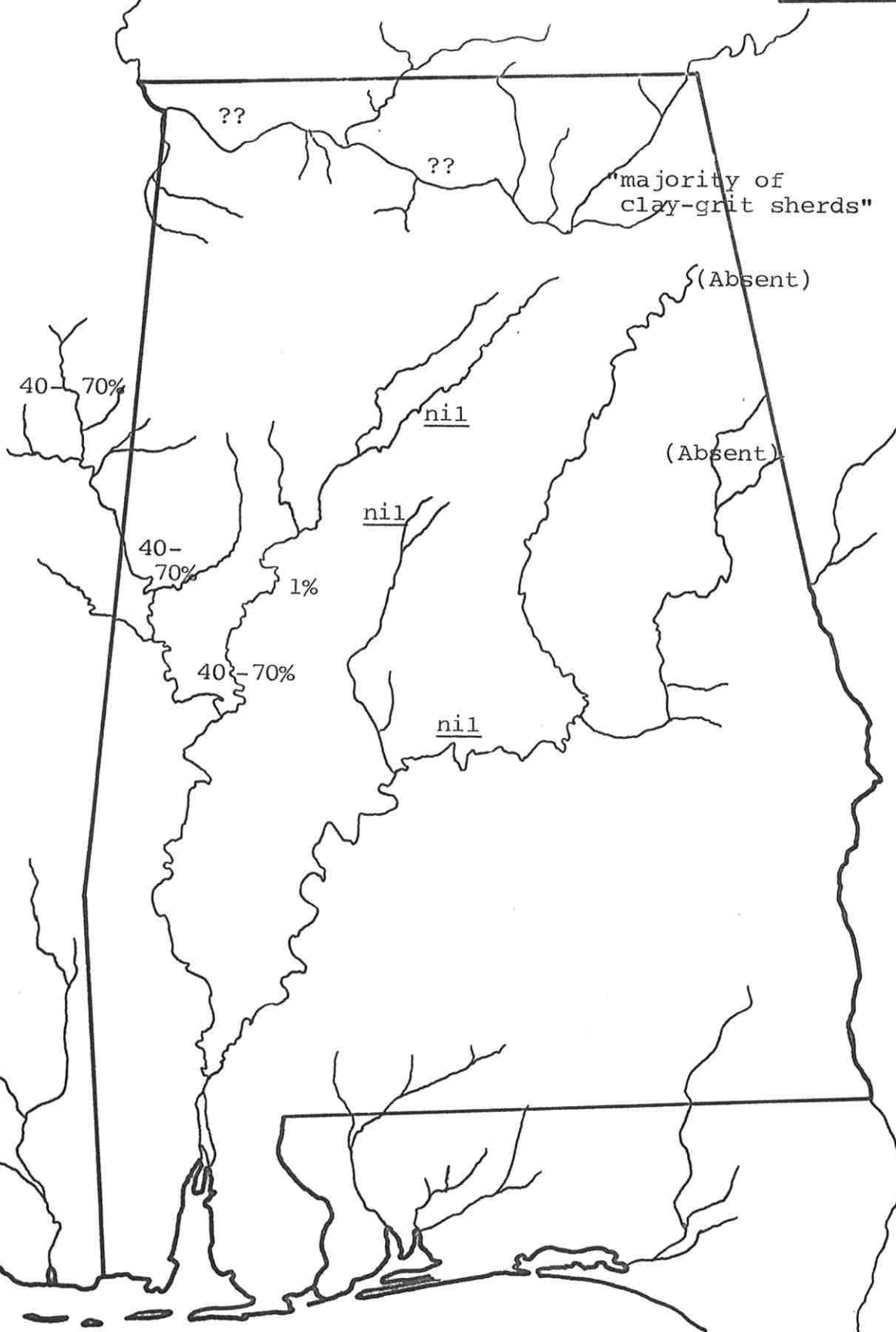
One aspect of Service's characterization which has been challenged is his description of the boundedness or discreteness of tribes. Morton Fried (~~1975~~, 1975) is the name most notably connected with the challenge, and his argument is based on two observations: first, that ethnographers often have difficulty finding social limits of egalitarian societies; and second, that even when clear limits or boundaries exist they are highly variable through time and can be crossed easily by individuals. I think Fried has missed the forest for the trees, but the issue of social boundaries in tribal society is both important to and much avoided by archaeologists.

The Alabama Terminal Woodland turns out to have a surprisingly good data base for examination of the archaeological character of tribal boundaries. And, not surprisingly, the data are our old friends the potsherds.

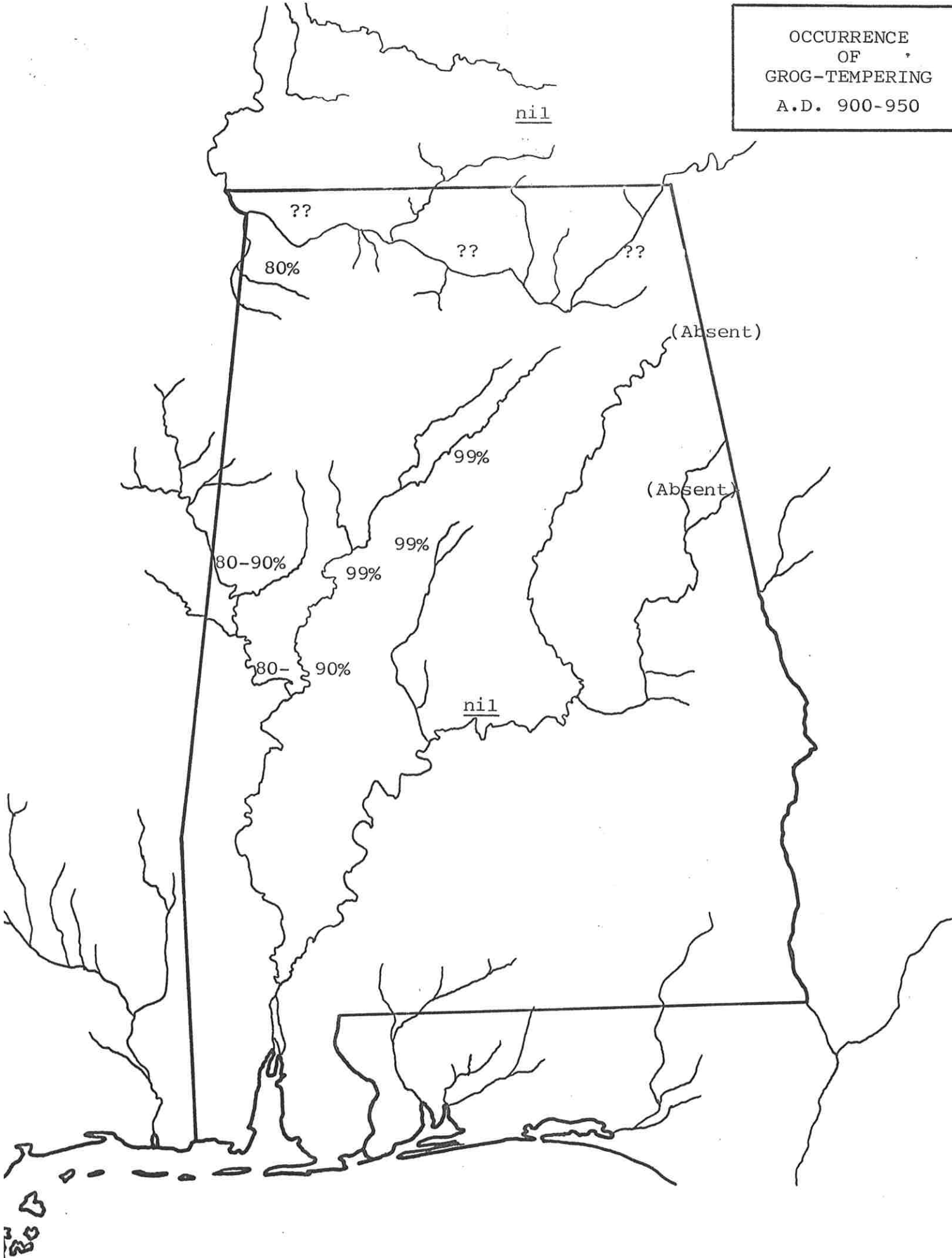
The potsherds are generally dull, at about A.D. 900 to 950. The vast majority are either plain or cordmarked. Wares are generally low-fired, with either grog or sand temper. (Jenkins and Nielsen 1974; Bozeman: this symposium; Nielsen, O'Hear, and Moorehead 1973; Sheldon et al. 1980; Jenkins 1979; Blake-man, Atkinson, and Berry 1977; Dickens 1971; Jeter 1977; Futato 1977; Heimlich 1952; Griffin 1939; Haag 1940; Nielsen, Stowe and Bunn 1971). If we compare two variables, surface treatment and temper, we see that they are more or less independent. Cordmarking is more frequent in the west, with plain dominant in the south and east. Grog temper predominates in the north, is absent in the south and far east, and is present in low frequency in the west. Jenkins (1979) has shown that grog tempering and cordmarking have separate histories--i.e. they do not systematically covary--through the Late and Terminal Woodland in the middle Tombigbee.

When considering only sand vs. grog tempering and only smooth vs. cordmarked exterior, I believe that the choice of temper and surface treatment is not a decision regulated by the intention of expressing social group affiliation. This assertion is based on Wobst's theory of style as a means of information transfer (Wobst 1977), which may be more familiar

OCCURRENCE OF  
CORDMARKING  
900 - 950 A.D.



OCCURRENCE  
OF  
GROG-TEMPERING  
A.D. 900-950



to you from David Braun's analyses of lower Illinois valley Woodland pottery (Braun 1977, 1980). The tempering agent, as a relatively invisible aspect of a pot, would not be appropriate for the expression of social affiliation messages (Wobst 1977:328-329). The choice of cordmarked vs. plain exterior is immediately visible and thus might be appropriate for transmission of such messages. Nevertheless, I suggest that this was not the case, because along the middle Tombigbee these two surface treatments are typically found on distinct vessel forms: Baytown Plain var. Roper and Var. Tishomingo are dominantly on beakers; (Jenkins 1979:107-109) while Mulberry Creek Cordmarked var. Aliceville is found on conical vessels and hemispherical bowls (Jenkins 1979:127). There is some overlap, with var. Roper sometimes being found on hemispherical bowls, but the vessel lip diameters and interior depths show that plain pots are smaller than cordmarked pots (Baytown Plain var. Roper lip diameter 15-28cm, interior depth "probably around 15 to 16 cm" [Jenkins 1979:108]; Mulberry Creek Cordmarked var. Aliceville lip diameter 28-34cm, interior depth "approximately 22cm" [Jenkins 1979:108]). Thus, in the middle Tombigbee the difference between plain and cordmarked pots is at least partly, if not principally, functional. Elsewhere, assemblages are nearly all plain (though we do not know what an unmixed Tennessee river valley component would look like). Either the functional constraints are different or they were handled in different ways.

If we accept the argument that neither the choice of sand vs. grog temper nor the choice of plain vs. cordmarked exterior surface is a decision regulated by the potter's intent to express social group affiliation, why do we see variation of these two variables across space? I believe the answer is that the Terminal Woodland population was geographically stable, in the sense that there was relatively little movement of individuals between drainages. The variation in ceramics may have been partly functional--pots being used in different ways in different areas--but I propose that the variation is mostly normative. The tempering agent and surface treatment used on a given pot was largely controlled by the way the potter learned to make vessels of that form (cf. Plog 1978 for the 'learning theory' approach to design variability). This sounds very much like the familiar equation of ceramic types with tribes, but I hasten to emphasize that I do not mean that one tribe lived in each river valley throughout the Terminal Woodland. All I wish to suggest is that the distinctive combinations of surface treatments and tempering agent divide more or less along drainage divides, and that this demonstrates that there was consistently less movement of individuals between drainages than within drainages. In light of the rapid shifting of political alliances characteristic of Highlands New Guinea tribal society, for instance (see Brown 1978:182-215 for an overview), I suspect that tribal boundaries often may have divided sections of a single river valley.



The nature of the Terminal Woodland tribal boundaries is the last issue I will attempt to skim over in this paper. Several minutes previously I mentioned Morton Fried's critique of the notion of tribal boundaries, saying that I think he has missed the forest for the trees. By that I mean that the impermanent, fluctuating character of alliances he notes in the tribal ethnographic record do not invalidate Service's description of the nature of tribal boundaries. The tribal boundaries are real, they exist, and people often get killed because of them, even though specific boundaries in specific locations may have lasted only a few years. The geographic stability of population I have tried to demonstrate for the Alabama Terminal Woodland existed despite relatively rapid shifting of political alliances, and this likewise does not imply that the shifting social boundaries were less real or less important than the geographic stability. This point is meaningful, of course, only if there is reason to believe that Terminal Woodland alliances were shifting rapidly relative to population movement.

There are two reasons I believe that political alliances were impermanent. The first reason is that pottery was not decorated. Wobst (1977:321-330) argues that stylistic conveyance of social-affiliation messages decreases as the longevity of the artifact increases relative to the expected length of time during which the message will be appropriate. Short-lived messages are best expressed in short-lived media.

Thus the absence of stylistic messages on pottery may imply, though not necessarily, that social alignments were changing too rapidly to be efficiently expressed on pottery.

My second reason for suspecting shifting political alliances is the well documented population growth in this time range. The Tombigbee, Black Warrior, and Alabama rivers all show a major increase in Late to Terminal Woodland population (Jenkins 1976; Nielsen, O'Hear, and Moorehead 1973; Bozeman: this symposium; Dickens 1971; Jeter 1977). As Margaret Scarry will discuss later in this symposium, this growth of population can be expected to create increasing relative scarcity of *Population Resource imbalance placing stress on subsistence system* wild food resources. With sizeable villages situated every 5 to 8km along a river, *there would be increasing competition for* floodplain resources apparently crucial to Terminal Woodland diet *to be there would be that* ~~would increasingly competed-for~~. That the competition may have involved active conflict is indicated both by the economically sub-optimal aggregation of population in villages (for defensive purposes?) and by the incidence of arrow-wounds in a skeletal collection from near Birmingham. Disarticulated individuals were thrown into a cave through a hole in the roof, and out of the minimum of 45 individuals present, 4 bones had imbedded arrowheads, 2 more had puncture wounds, and the overall mortality curve showed a normal population with an excess of young adults (Oakley <sup>1971</sup> ~~1972~~; see Bunn <sup>1972</sup> ~~1974~~ for additional demographic information, and Buikstra 1976:21-24 for comparative material).

The lack of decoration on pottery and the presence of intergroup conflict do not conclusively demonstrate that Alabama

Terminal Woodland tribal society was characterized by shifting alliances. Taken together, however, they are consistent with this interpretation. As you ought to be aware, many of the major points of this paper are similarly not proven. Other papers in this symposium deal with specific data sets in greater detail. This paper is an attempt to provide a framework within which those more narrowly focussed studies can be evaluated.

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