

Terminal Woodland and Mississippian ceramics
from the Bessemer site,
central Alabama

by

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The Bessemer site, named after the town it sits in (Figure 1), is, or was, a three-mound Mississippian village. All three mounds and a small proportion of the village were excavated, beginning in the fall of 1934 under the direction of Carl Guthe, teaching at Birmingham Southern College while on leave from the University of Michigan. David DeJarnette of the Alabama Museum of Natural History finished off in 1935 the mound begun by Guthe in the previous autumn. In 1939 and 1940 the other two mounds were excavated by WPA crews directed by Steve Wimberly, under the general supervision of DeJarnette. All the artifacts from the Alabama Museum of Natural History excavations were processed through the WPA Central Archaeological Laboratory in Birmingham. In 1941 DeJarnette and Wimberly published a final report on the excavations (DeJarnette and Wimberly 1941), and this well-illustrated and exceedingly clear account of the excavations has for the past 40 years constituted the sum of our knowledge about the site. Using the ceramic chronologies developed in the last five years for the Black Warrior and Tombigbee drainages, Bessemer sorts itself out neatly as an early Moundville I center preceded by, or partially contemporaneous with, a Terminal Woodland West Jefferson phase village.

Given what we now know about the changes of settlement pattern (Peebles 1979; Bozeman, in press; Welch, in press), subsistence (Scarry, in press; Michals, in press; Caddell 1981; Scott 1981), ceramics (Jenkins 1979; Steponaitis

1980b), and social organization (Jenkins 1976, 1979:272-273; Peebles 1979; Steponaitis 1980a; Schoeninger and Peebles, in press) which produce the Moundville phase chiefdoms along the Black Warrior river, Bessemer has turned out to be a particularly interesting site. It is just about the only known site which seems to have been occupied throughout the period when many, if not all, of these changes were transforming social life in central Alabama. Despite the site's present urban setting, it seems to be intact, little changed from the end of excavations in 1940. If I can get the necessary money I hope to excavate there next summer in an attempt to sort out the precise chronology of the changes besetting society at ca. A.D. 1050. In the meanwhile, I spent most of last summer restudying the Bessemer pottery collection at the Alabama Museum of Natural History. The collection is generally well documented and provenienced, and despite some minor problems with missing, contradictory, and ambiguous provenience information, the bulk of the collection can still be used in analysis. I resorted the sherds, using the type-variety typology developed by Steponaitis (1980b) for the Moundville phase, and by Jenkins (1979) for the middle Tombigbee valley. The 2162 sherds consisted of 50 named types and varieties and an additional 15 unclassified categories (Table 1). A minor proportion of the sherds are early Late Woodland or earlier, and of no further interest here. About half of the sherds are grog tempered plain, the rest shell tempered.

The grog tempered plainware is Baytown Plain var. Roper, a Late and Terminal Woodland type which is nearly the sole ceramic type found on sites of the Terminal Woodland West Jefferson phase in the Black Warrior drainage. However, there is a striking difference between the var. Roper assemblage at Bessemer and the assemblages from most West Jefferson phase sites. Aside from Bessemer, nearly all West Jefferson phase rim sherds are from hemispherical or straight sided bowls with simple direct rims (Bozeman, pers. comm.). Jar forms are rare. In contrast, jars predominate at Bessemer, two to one. The typical jar form is shown in the middle row of Figure 2; there is no rim fold, the rim is usually vertical or in-slanting above the neck inflection point, and many jars have two opposed loop handles. On those rims which do have rim folds (19% of Roper rims), the overall jar profile seems to be much the same as for the unfolded-rim jars, with the fold acting principally to thicken the lip. The lip is usually squared-off, either horizontal or in-slanting. This particular rim profile was called 'folded flattened' by Steponaitis, who argues that it is a diagnostic for the early part of the Moundville I phase (1980b:127-128, 180).

Rims of Mississippi Plain var. Warrior, the shell tempered unburnished plainware, also most commonly come from jars (76% of Warrior rims). However, there are few other similarities between grog tempered Roper and shell tempered Warrior. While simple recurved rims predominate in grog

tempered jars, folded rims predominate in shell tempered Warrior jars. The shape of the few Warrior simple recurved jar rims also differs from the grog tempered simple recurved jar rims (compare Figures 2 and 3): Warrior rims flare outward above the neck inflection point, rather than being vertical or slanting in. Further, the folded Warrior rims differ from the few grog tempered folded rims. Folded flattened rims are found on Warrior jars just as on grog tempered jars, but equally common are the shapes shown in the three sherds on the left in the bottom row of Figure 3. These shell tempered folded everted rims are not matched by any grog tempered rims. Another difference between grog tempered jars and Warrior jars is the shape of handles. O'Hear (1975) noted in a small sample of handles that Warrior handles were more strappy (wider than thick) than the grog tempered handles. The larger Bessemer sample confirms this (Figure 4): most Warrior handles are more than twice as wide as they are thick, while most grog tempered handles are not.

There are two types of unburnished incised shell tempered ceramics at Bessemer. One of them, Moundville Incised, has long been known as a Moundville phase type. It is defined by the presence of incised arches on the shoulders of jars, with varieties defined by the absence, presence, and nature of additional decoration above the arches. Steponaitis's work indicates that varieties Moundville and Carrollton date to the Moundville I and early

Moundville II phases, while variety Snows Bend may date a bit later. At Bessemer vars. Moundville and Carrollton far outnumber (97% of Moundville Incised) var. Snows Bend. Estimating minimum vessel counts by differences of paste, vessel shape, incision style and motif, Moundville and Carrollton outnumber Snows Bend 48:2. These two varieties of Moundville Incised also outnumber the other type of incised unburnished shell tempered pottery at the site, Barton Incised. Known to be present at a few Moundville phase sites, and thought to date to Moundville I due to the occurrence of the incised decoration on folded flattened rims, the Bessemer sherds confirm that the type was a locally produced part of the Moundville I ceramic industry. At least 13 vessels at Bessemer had the wet paste, rectilinear parallel line incision defined as Barton Incised. There are quite a variety of motifs (Figure 54), the most common being a band of alternating line-filled triangles. All the Barton Incised sherds are from jars, most frequently jars with folded flattened rims and overall profiles more similar to the grog tempered jars than to the Mississippi Plain var. Warrior or Moundville Incised jars.

Burnished shell tempered pottery, plain, incised, and engraved, is found at Bessemer. For the most part, it is standard Moundville I phase pottery as described by Steponaitis (1980b). There are three points worth noting. First, burnished wares at Bessemer are almost exclusively coarse shell tempered, even the incised and engraved types.

In contrast, at Moundville the burnished wares are almost always tempered with fine shell. Second, hematite or other pigments rubbed into incised or engraved lines, supposedly a Moundville I trait, is present at Bessemer only on one sherd and one vessel from a burial. This is a far lower incidence than expected. The third important point about burnished wares at Bessemer is that they appear, or at least become common, later than the rest of the shell tempered ceramics.

Some degree of relative chronology at the site can be extracted from the mound excavations. One of the mounds was a rectangular platform mound surmounted by wall trench structures. This mound was rebuilt, or added onto, five times (a total of six mound stages). Underneath the mound was an intact humus with village debris and structure patterns. As the sherd frequencies by level show (Figure 5), shell tempered ceramics were being produced before the mound was built, but all the shell tempered sherds from this level contain both shell and grog. In subsequent levels this mixture of tempers is rare. No burnished wares were present in the old humus zone, but appear in the first and subsequent mound fills. (The easily apparent shift in the ratio of grog vs. shell plainware indicates, I assume, some change in the source of fill dirt rather than indicating anything directly about the proportions of ceramic types in use at any specific time.) So far as this kind of stratigraphic data can be trusted, then, burnished shell wares appear later than unburnished shell tempered wares.

My study of the Bessemer pottery is far from finished, but I have several tentative conclusions. The grog tempered ceramics appear to come from a very late West Jefferson phase component. An unpublished field map of the features beneath one of the mounds shows literally hundreds of postmolds and features, many of which I suspect relate to this Terminal Woodland village. Shortly after crushed shell comes into use as a tempering agent, at least one substructure mound is started. The shell tempered ceramics being produced at this time often also contained grog, and were either unburnished plain or Barton Incised. Because the Barton Incised rim profiles resemble the grog plain rim profiles, while Moundville Incised profiles do not have the same shape, I suspect that the incised arch motif of Moundville Incised was a later addition to the ceramic repertoire than the the rectilinear Barton incision. The stratigraphic data do not say much of anything either way about this interpretation, and I should also add that even if I am right about this chronology at Bessemer, the relation need not hold at other sites. In brief, restudy of the Bessemer pottery is certainly adding to our knowledge of the early Moundville I ceramic industry.

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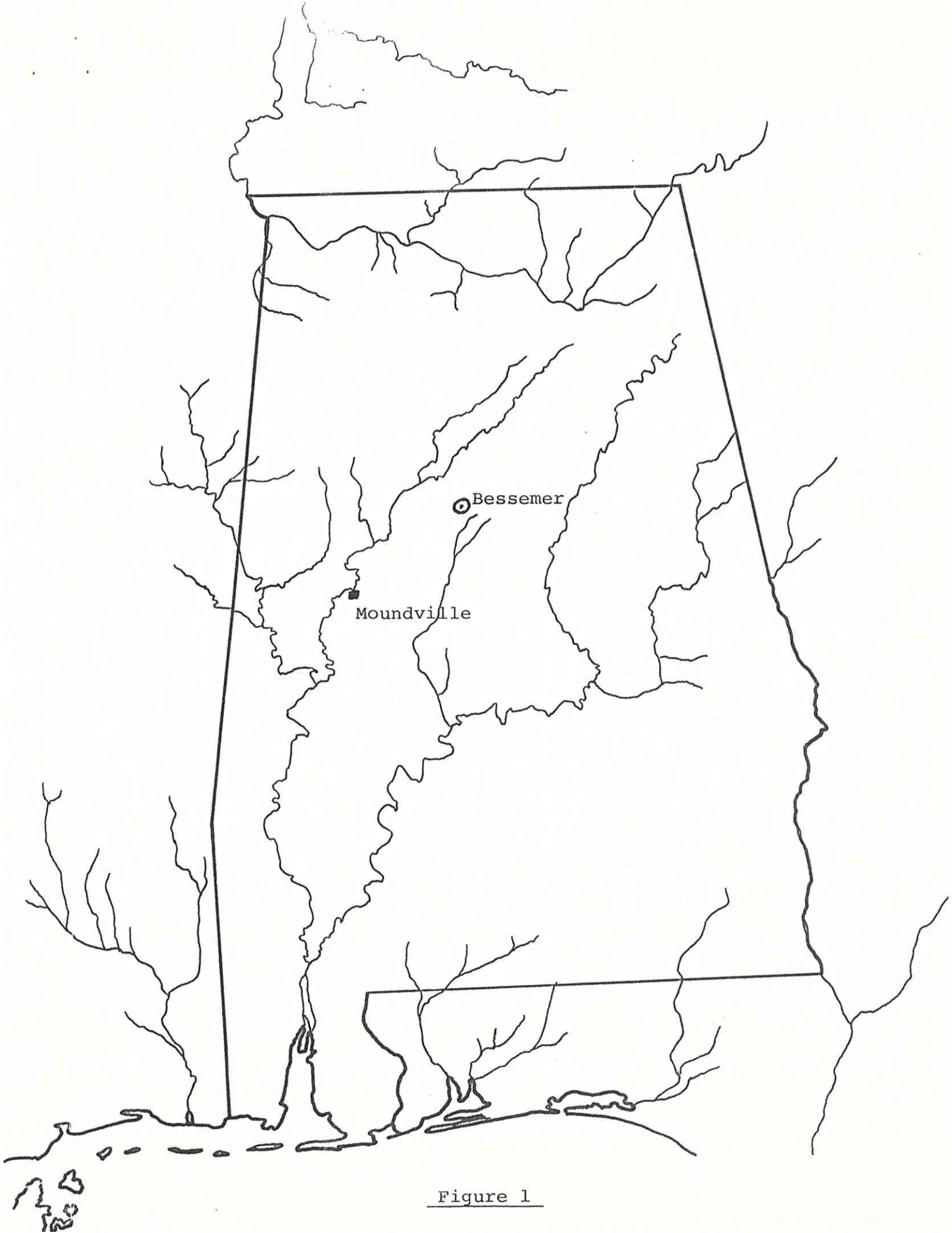
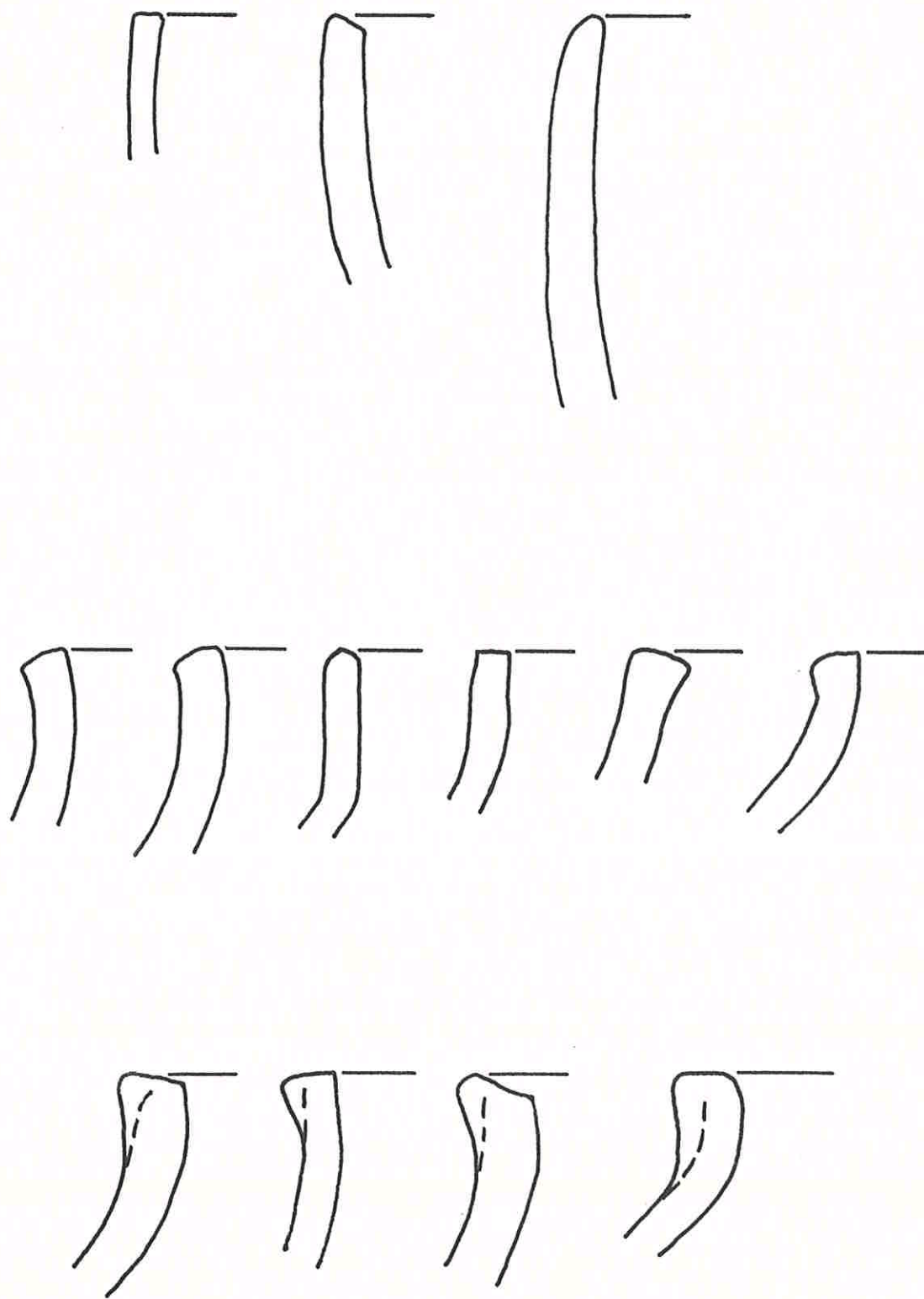


Figure 1

Figure 2

BAYTOWN PLAIN

ROPER

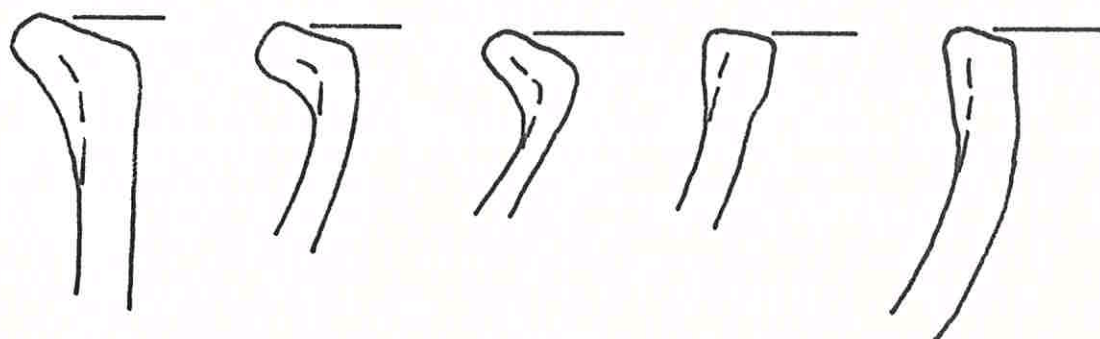
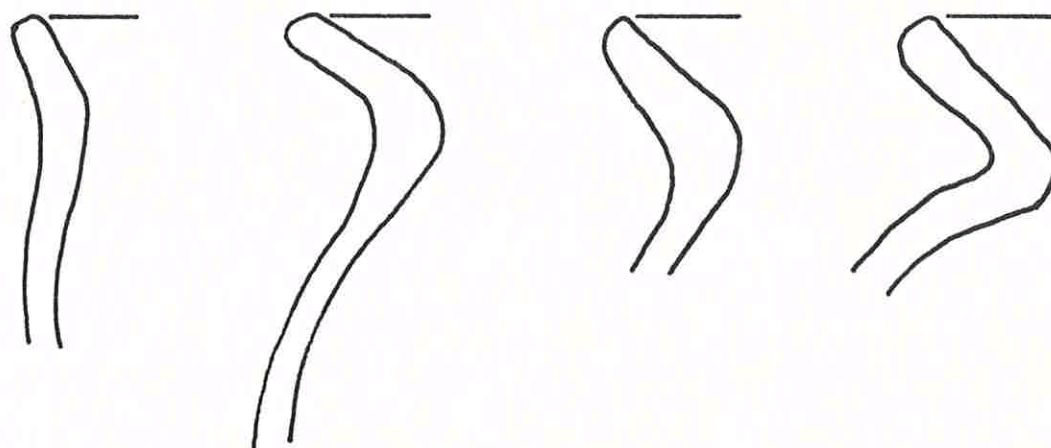


5 cm

Figure 3

MISSISSIPPI PLAIN

WARRIOR



5 cm

Figure 4

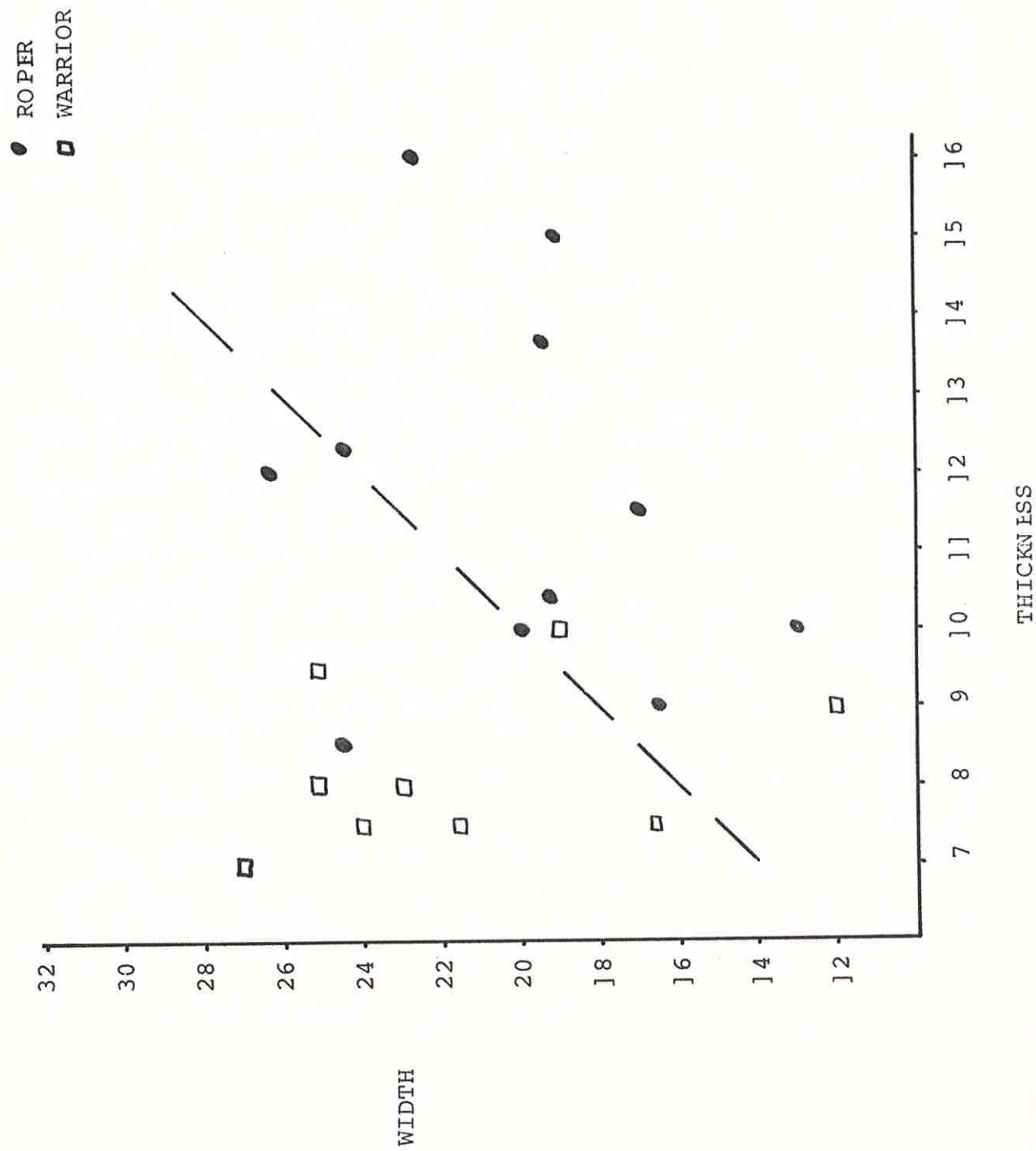
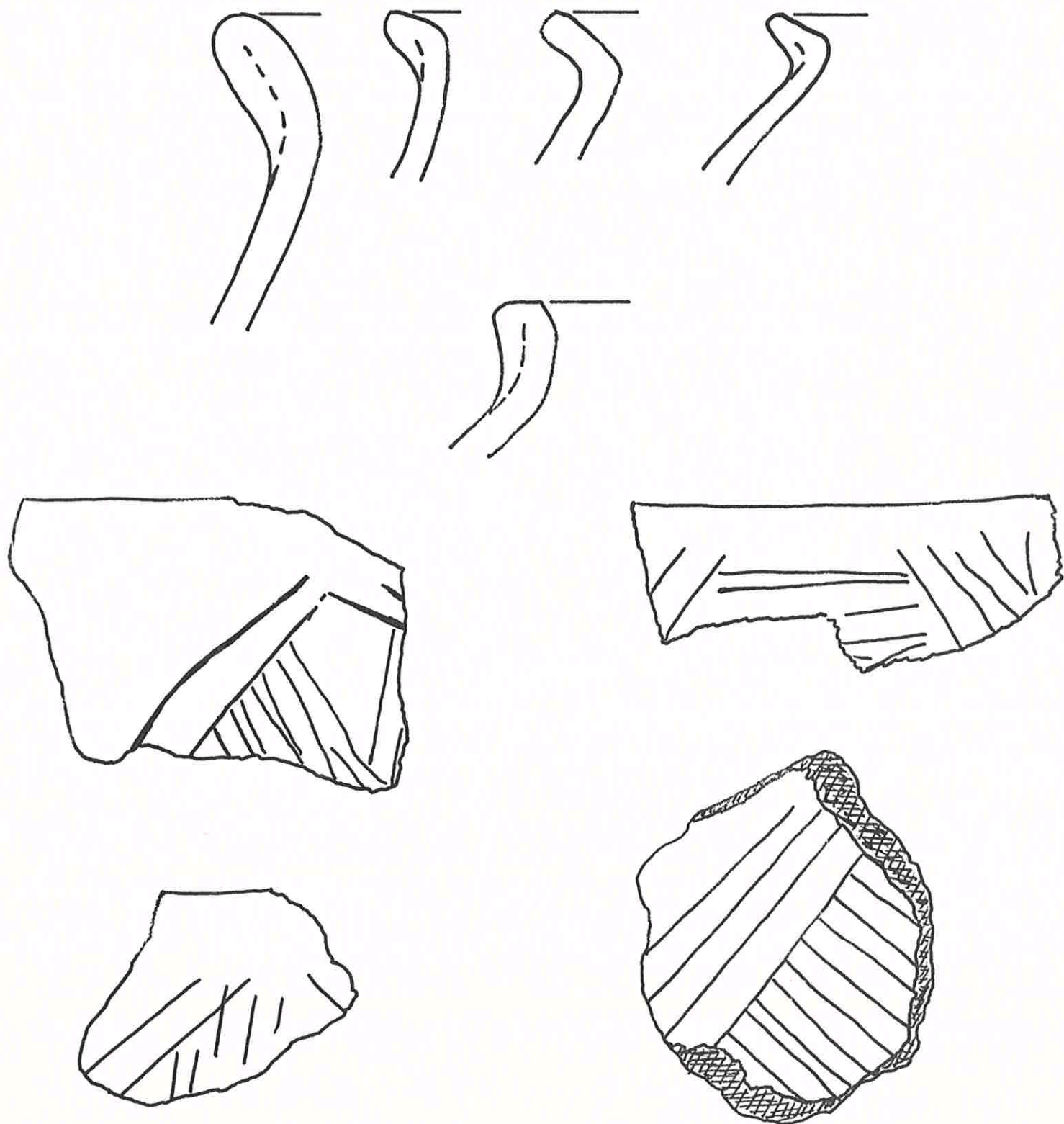


Figure 5

BARTON INCISED



5 cm

Figure 6

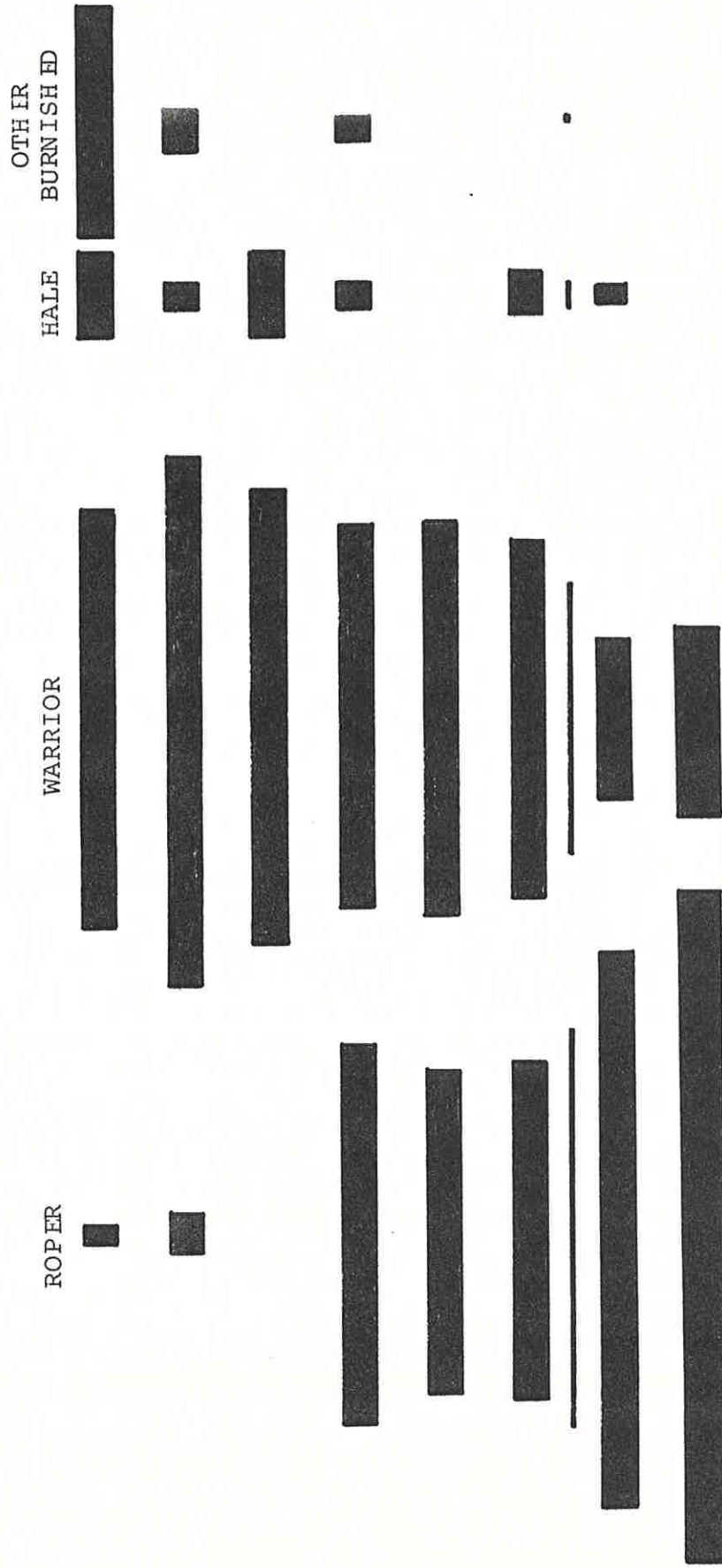


TABLE 1
Bessemer Ceramics

Temper	Type Variety	n	% by temper	% of total
Ls	Hardin Comp. Stamp. Hogeye	34	65	1.6
	" unspec. (diamonds)	4	8	.2
	" unspec.	4	8	.2
	Long Branch Fabric Marked unspec.	2	4	<.1
	Flint River Brushed unspec.	1	2	<.1
	Unclass. stamped	1	2	<.1
	Unclass. plain	4	8	.2
	Unclass. plain, Ls & grog	2	4	<.1
	Total Ls tempered	52		2.4
Sand	Baldwin Plain Lubdub	10	19	.5
	" Blubber	6	11	.3
	" Tishomingo	1	2	<.1
	" unspec.	12	23	.6
	McLeod Check Stamp. Bigbee	1	2	<.1
	" Wilkes Creek	2	4	<.1
	" unspec.	2	4	<.1
	Furrs Cordmarked Pickens	1	2	<.1
	Hardin Comp. Stamped unspec.	1	2	<.1
	Mound Field Net Marked unspec.	4	8	.2
	Cool Branch Incised unspec.	1	2	<.1
	Unclass. fine sand temp. inc. (? Basin Bayou Inc. West Greene)	1	2	<.1
	Unclass. stamped	8	15	.4
	Unclass. check stamped & punct.	1	2	<.1
	Unclass. sand & rock-grit temper	2	4	<.1
	Total sand tempered	53		2.5

Temper	Type Variety	n	% by temper	% of total
Grog	Baytown Plain Roper	1031	97	47.6
	" Tishomingo	6	.6	.3
	Mulberry Ck. Cdmkd. Aliceville . .	4	.4	.2
	Alligator Incised Geiger	1	.1	<.1
	" unspec.	2	.2	<.1
	Coles Creek Incised unspec.	1	.1	<.1
	Salomon Brushed Fairfield	7	.7	.3
	Larto Red Filmed unspec.	3	.3	.1
	Avoyelles (Benson) Punct. unspec. .	1	.1	<.1
	Unclass. incised	3	.3	.1
	Unclass. red-and-white painted . .	1	.1	<.1
	Unclass. grog & (Ls/shell) plain .	1	.1	<.1
	Total grog tempered	1061		49.1

Temper	Type	Variety	n	% by temper	% of total
Shell	Mississippi Plain	Warrior	709	71	32.7
	"	Hull Lake	26	3	1.2
	"	unspec.	3	.3	.1
	Moundville Inc.	Moundville	30	3	1.4
	"	Carrollton	25	3	1.2
	"	Snows Bend	1	.1	<.1
	"	unspec.	11	1	.5
	Barton Incised	unspec.	10	1	.5
	Parkin Punctated	unspec.	1	.1	<.1
	Bell Plain	Hale	103	10	4.8
	"	Big Sandy	4	.4	.2
	Carthage Incised	Akron	4	.4	.2
	"	Moon Lake	6	.6	.3
	"	Summerville	1	.1	<.1
	"	unspec.	3	.3	.1
	Moundville Engraved	Northport	10	1	.5
	"	Havana	1	.1	<.1
	"	Hemphill	2	.2	<.1
	"	Stewart	1	.1	<.1
	"	Northport or Wiggins	1	.1	<.1
	"	Prince Plant. or Stewart	2	.2	<.1
	"	unspec.	10	1	.5
	Unclass. unburn. inc. & punct.	. . . . .	1	.1	<.1
	Unclass. unburn. inc.	. . . . .	27	3	1.2
	Uncl. unburn? eng., hematite	. . . . .	1	.1	<.1
	Unclass. eroded	. . . . .	3	.3	.1
Total shell tempered			996		46.1
Other	Unclass. untemp. plain	. . . . .	1		<.1
	TOTAL	. . . . .	2162		