

**Chronological markers and imported items
from the Roadway excavations
at Moundville**

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Introduction

[slide 1]

During the 1930s the archaeological site of Moundville, Alabama, was made into a state park. That undertaking required extensive construction--of buildings and facilities--as well as reconstruction of some of the mounds. Most of this work was preceded by archaeological excavation (see Peebles 1979). The most extensive of the 1930s projects was the construction of the Roadway that loops around the mounds and plaza. Before the Road was actually built, however, the course of the Road was examined archaeologically. The Roadway excavations were the largest single excavation at the site, at least since the time of C. B. Moore, and the collection of artifacts from those excavations comprises nearly half of the total extant collection of artifacts from the Moundville site. The Roadway collection is potentially a major source of information about the kinds of artifacts present, and their distributions around the site.

The potential of the Roadway collection has been underexploited for fifty years. This underutilization is particularly surprising because the collection was not just packed willy-nilly into boxes and left to sit. The entire collection was shipped, over a period of three years, to the Central Archaeological Laboratory in Birmingham, Alabama, then directed by Christine Wimberly. There, every item was washed, sorted, catalogued, and labelled with a unique

serial number. The sherd collection, 98,850 pieces, was bagged by type within the provenience units of the excavation. The provenience units were often rather large by today's standards, e.g., 50x50 ft, and there is no depth or stratigraphic control, but the precision of the provenience units was reasonable in light of the standards of that time and the excavators' understanding of the Moundville site. After being processed through the Birmingham lab, the Roadway collection was returned to Mound State Monument for curation. Steve Wimberly (1956) published a tabulation of the Roadway sherds in the 1956 SEAC Newsletter, but Wimberly explicitly identified the information as coming from the Birmingham Lab's analysis rather than from a reanalysis of the sherds. Some of the boxes of Roadway sherds were opened from time to time by archaeologists at Moundville, but there does not appear to have been any systematic investigation of the collection until 1987 or 1988.

A year and a half ago, the Alabama Museum of Natural History began their program of recataloguing and repackaging the Moundville collection by tackling the roughly 100 boxes of Roadway material. Eugene Futato announced at the SEAC meeting in 1988 that the Roadway collection was again available for analysis, and a few months later I began reanalyzing part of the collection.

I sorted roughly 7% of the collection. Since the sherds are bagged by ceramic type within provenience unit,

the ceramics can be sampled by provenience unit and/or by the 1939-1941 ceramic typology. I combined these two approaches, sampling within the 1930s types by selecting proveniences evenly distributed along the whole length of the Roadway. [Sample fractions are as follows: 100% (1289) of the sherds identified as not having shell temper, 2.6% (2101) of the sherds identified as Plain Shell-tempered, 16.3% (671) of the Moundville Incised sherds, 15.7% (1407) of the Moundville Black Filmed sherds, and 40% (1239) of the remaining shell-tempered sherds (including all the identified decorated sherds)].

There were two questions I wished to address by examining the Roadway collection:

1. What do the distributions of chronologically sensitive ceramics tell us about the chronology of occupation at the Moundville site?
2. What information does the sherd collection provide about ceramics imported to the site?

Chronology

Currently our picture of the chronology of occupation at Moundville comes from the work of Vincas Steponaitis (1981). He used the sample of whole vessels from the site to produce a ceramic sequence for the 500-year occupation at the site, and then used the ceramic sequence to date vessel-containing burials. Plots of the locations of dated

burials, by phase, were then used to show how the site grew through time. The picture that emerged from this enterprise showed that in the Moundville I phase (AD 1050-1250), activity at the site was localized [slide 2] near one mound (Mound O) at what is now the west side of the plaza, ~~at the west side of the plaza~~. In contrast, the ring of mounds around the plaza [slide 3] was clearly at least partly in place in the Moundville II phase (AD 1250-1400), and the entire mound-plaza complex [slide 4] was completed in the Moundville III phase (AD 1400-1550). Steponaitis acknowledged that this "motion picture" contained potential biases or inaccuracies, chief among which were factors that might make the development of the mound-plaza complex appear to occur later than was actually the case.

The principal source of this bias towards lateness was that the time of the construction of mounds was established by burials found in the mounds. The mound excavations were mostly the work of C. B. Moore (1905, 1907), in 1905 and 1906. Moore routinely excavated to a depth of only about 4 ft (1 m), though in a few instances at Moundville he explicitly states that he dug deeper. In general, Moore's excavations only penetrated the latest parts of the mounds, so that the burials he found establish the latest use of each mound rather than its earliest construction.

A second potential source of bias towards lateness is that there are relatively few burials with Moundville I vessels. It may be that there simply are relatively few

Moundville I burials. On the other hand, it may be that, compared to later burials, fewer of the actual Moundville I burials had vessels put in them. If so, then the distribution of the dated burials is an incomplete picture of the distribution of actual Moundville I burials. At the moment, we do not know whether this bias affects the scenario presented by Steponaitis.

A third potential source of bias in Steponaitis's pictures is that the locations of burials might not accurately correspond to the distribution of occupation at the site.

The Roadway sherd collection can provide information about the development of occupation at the site, information that is not affected by the biases described above. Since the sherds apparently were deposited along with other artifacts as sheet midden, the sherd collection can tell us about the chronology of occupation along the Roadway. Of course, the picture of occupational chronology developed from the Roadway sherd collection has its own potential biases, which will be addressed below. [slide 5--airphoto]

When reduced to presence/absence terms, the distribution of chronological markers around the Roadway is easy to describe. Nearly everywhere ceramics were found--much of the plaza is devoid of artifacts--there are ceramics from late Moundville I through late Moundville III. The distribution of early Moundville I ceramics is an issue I

will return to in connection with a discussion of the potential biases in this study.

In terms of the quantitative abundance of sherds of different periods, the picture is more complex. Ceramics of Moundville I date are found in abundance all around the site: nearly everywhere you look, most of the ceramics are of Moundville I date. Ceramics of Moundville II and III date are widely distributed, but are abundant in only two Roadway locations: in front of the Museum building (west of Mound P, to the west of the plaza), and in the area between Mounds F, G, and S (in the northeast corner of the plaza). Those two locations produced the majority of the Moundville III sherds [here defined as Moundville Engraved vars. Havana and Wiggins, Carthage Incised vars. Carthage, Fosters, and Poole, and red-on-white painted shell-tempered pottery]. On this basis, and all other things being equal, it appears that there was occupation all around the mound-plaza complex in Moundville I times, but that in Moundville II and III times there was a dense occupation in only a few places near the plaza.

The presence of dense occupation in only a few places near the plaza in Moundville II-III times does not necessarily mean that the site as a whole was sparsely occupied during that time. After all, the Roadway excavations are spatially extensive, and they do encircle the site's core, but the Roadway is not a representative sample of the whole site. The Roadway is generally close to

the plaza. In Moundville II-III times the zone of dense occupation simply may have been set farther away from the plaza than it was in Moundville I times. This is an issue that the Roadway collections do not allow us to resolve.

I return now to the issue of early Moundville I ceramics and their distribution around the Roadway. Currently, the principal ceramic markers [slide 6] for early Moundville I are folded and folded-flattened rims on Mississippi Plain var. Warrior and Moundville Incised var. Moundville jars. Rim sherds with these morphologies are in fact found all around the Roadway. This raises two possibilities, that are not mutually exclusive:

1. The Moundville site increased dramatically in size, and the plaza was laid out, much earlier than the burial evidence led us to believe.
2. Our current understanding of ceramic change in the AD 1050-1250 period may not be accurate. Our understanding of what constitute "Moundville I" ceramics is based largely on Steponaitis's seriation of gravelots, but there are very few Moundville I gravelots in his analysis. Steponaitis's seriation may be incomplete or inaccurate at the early end. This is not a criticism of his analysis, which appears to be flawless; what I suggest is that the data themselves may be misleading. If so, then the distribution of "early Moundville I" ceramics simply is not a reliable

source of information about how early the plaza was laid out.

Of course, it could be the case that the site grew to large size earlier than we thought, and that our understanding of the ceramic chronology is flawed. Based on the information now available, including Margaret Scarry's (1986) radiocarbon dates and associated ceramics from "late Moundville I" deposits at Moundville, I think that it is clear that the Moundville plaza was laid out during middle or possibly even early Moundville I times. In chronometric terms, I estimate that this occurred at least as early as AD 1150, or even AD 1100. This is roughly one hundred years earlier than the "classic" picture presented by Steponaitis (1981).

Imports

The second question asked of the Roadway collection is whether it provides any new information about the sources of ceramic vessels imported to the Moundville site. I believe a disclaimer is necessary here: I do not pretend to be able to recognize sherds of vessels imported from everywhere in eastern North America. On the other hand, Moundville wares seem to be very consistent in paste characteristics and techniques of decoration, and recognizing anomalous sherds is fairly easy. The majority of the 'possibly' nonlocal sherds remain unclassified. The nonlocal material that I can identify specifically (to variety level, with a few

exceptions), is generally what would be predicted on the basis of the nonlocal vessels found in burial contexts.

The nonlocal whole vessels come from the Lower Mississippi Valley, from central Tennessee, and from south Alabama and north Florida. Conspicuously absent in the whole vessel collection are any pots from northwest Georgia, the area of Etowah. The Roadway sherd collection matches this pattern closely. There are sherds from Lower Mississippi Valley vessels (cf. Williams and Brain 1983):

[slide 7] Avoyelles Punctated var. Kearney;

[slide 8] Barton Incised var. Estill;

[slide 9] Carter Engraved vars. Carter,

" " Sara [slide 10 on left],

and [slide 11] Shell Bluff;

[slide 12] Harrison Bayou Incised var. Harrison Bayou;

[slide 13 on right] L'Eau Noire Incised

var. L'Eau Noire;

[slide 14] Mazique Incised var. Kings Point.

There are sherds from central Tennessee: [slide 15]

Nashville Negative Painted vars. Nashville and [slide 16]

Thruston (Williams 1979). There are ceramics from south

Alabama or north Florida: Mound Place Incised var. Waltons

Camp (Fuller and Stowe 1982); [slide 17] Ft. Walton Incised

var. Ft. Walton (Scarry 1985). Just as was the case with

the whole vessels, the majority of the identified nonlocal

ceramics are of Lower Mississippi Valley origin.

Unlike the sample of whole vessels, the Roadway collection does contain some ceramics from northwest Georgia or adjacent areas: there are sherds that appear to be Etowah Polished Black, and pieces [slide 18] of at least two sand-tempered complicated stamped jars (though the complicated stamped vessels may relate to an earlier component at the Moundville site).

There was a big surprise among the Roadway ceramics. The largest single set of nonlocal material is a very distinctive grog- and shell-tempered ware, compact and excellently smoothed, decorated with fine engraving and deeply excised areas [slide 19] sometimes filled with hematite. This material ~~is~~ does not appear to be of local origin, since it does not match other Moundville ceramics in ware [slide 20], surface finish, vessel form, [slide 21] technique of decoration, motif, or skill of execution [slide 22]. In short, it is altogether different from Moundville ceramics [slide 23]. Curiously, however, no other part of the Southeast [slide 24] has yet been willing to take credit for this material. The [slide 25] carinated bowl forms, fine engraving with excised areas, and [slide 26] motifs are at home in parts of the Caddoan area, but the paste characteristics do not seem to match. The closest matches in published illustrations that I have yet found come from the George C. Davis site in Texas (Newell and Krieger 1949). Some of the peaked rims [slide 27] in these Roadway sherds, however, have no match that I know of.

While it is tempting to pass these sherds off as generic "Caddoan", and thus raise the specter of a 'Moundville-Spiro Cartel', the abundance of these sherds in the Roadway collection makes me hesitate. They account of 40% of the sherds identified as nonlocal. They are more abundant than most of the varieties of Moundville Engraved and Carthage Incised, the "classic" Moundville pottery. Due to their surprising abundance and the lack of a definite source, I think we will have to use mineralogical or trace element analyses to determine whether these sherds are of local or nonlocal origin. If they are of nonlocal origin, it appears that we should look for evidence of particularly extensive exchange relations between the polity of origin and Moundville

Conclusion

The two questions addressed in this study deal with the development of the Moundville site and with the nature of imported ceramics. The Roadway sherd collection indicates that Moundville rose to prominence within its river valley 100 years earlier than previously thought. The Roadway sherds include the expected items from west, north, and south of Moundville, plus a few items from the east. There are a lot of very distinctive sherds that may be nonlocal, possibly Caddoan, though their origin is not yet definitely known.

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