

INDIAN POTTERY FROM MOUNDVILLE\*

Steve B. Wimberly - June 4, 1960

A. ANALYSIS OF POTTERY SHERDS FROM SURFACE COLLECTIONS AND MISCELLANEOUS  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS AT MOUNDVILLE

The following table shows the various pottery groups (by tempering material) as determined from a study of the pottery sherds from Moundville:

	<u>No. of Sherds</u>	<u>% of Total</u>
Alexander Dentate Stamped (Fiber-Tempered Pottery)	1	.04
Sand-Tempered Pottery	143	.14
Limestone-Tempered Pottery	12	.01
Clay-Grit-Tempered Pottery	1,133	1.15
Shell-Tempered Pottery	<u>97,561</u>	<u>98.70</u>
Total	98,850	100.00

To date, studies indicate that only Shell-tempered pottery sherds are directly related to the Classic Moundville period; that is, the period when the mounds were built and the site occupied by a large group of people. This is borne out by the fact that all of the pottery vessels so far found in burials at Moundville are shell-tempered.

The pottery sherds tempered with fiber, sand, limestone or clay-grit found at Moundville are considered to be earlier than the Classic Moundville period, and appear to be related (except perhaps for the single fiber-tempered sherd) to a large "Woodland Period" Village site adjacent to Moundville and occupied most likely several hundred years prior to the Classic Moundville period. The fiber-tempered sherd in all likelihood represents a minor occupancy of the area during a period substantially earlier than the period indicated by the sand, limestone, and clay-grit tempered pottery sherds.

As for the shell-tempered pottery sherds from Moundville, present studies would indicate that nearly all are from the Classic Moundville period. However, at least 255 of the shell-tempered pottery sherds represented by the pottery types McKee Island Incised, McKee Island Brushed, and McKee Island Cord Marked, suggest the site of Moundville to have been again occupied at a date later than the Classic Moundville Period, this time by a small band of Indians who were perhaps acquainted with White Men. Although no "historic" trade material such as glass beads and brass bells has been found at Moundville, the McKee Island pottery types are often found in other parts of Alabama in association with "historic" trade material. No McKee Island pottery vessels have been found with Moundville burials. It is very likely that the "McKee Island" occupants of Moundville found the mounds at Moundville in much the same state as White Men found them, out-of-use and grown over with trees and thickets.

Note (\*): Moundville as used here denotes Mound State Monument, located at Moundville, Alabama.

B. POTTERY VESSELS FROM MOUNDVILLE

Not all of the several-hundred whole or restorable pottery vessels from Moundville have been analyzed in detail. From pottery photographs, drawings, and descriptions in Clarence B. Moore's published papers on Moundville and from examination of pottery vessels excavated over the years by the Alabama Museum of Natural History, it is nevertheless possible to draw some rather definite conclusions concerning the Indian pottery of the Classic Moundville period as follows:

1. Classic Moundville pottery is Shell-tempered (a pottery trait of the Middle Mississippian Period)
2. Pottery vessels having a specialized style of decorating, consisting of engraving designs through the black-filmed vessel surface, ally Moundville with the "Southern Cult" and were especially significant as burial offerings.
3. Although studies are not yet complete, it seems reasonably conclusive that the various styles of pottery vessels found with the burials at Moundville are all culturally related; that is, possessed by the same people. Painted vessels, engraved vessels, incised vessels, black-filmed ware, coarse plain vessels, shallow bowls, deeper bowls with handles, wide-mouthed "water bottles", narrow-mouthed "water bottles", effigy vessels depicting animal and human forms, and various other pottery decorative styles are revealed by correlation ("cross-dating" by association) to have belonged to a single group of people, the people of the Classic Moundville period. The correlation method for determining that these various pottery decorative styles and forms are interrelated can be demonstrated briefly by the following (non-factual) simplified example:

SUPPOSE:

Burial I is accompanied by three pottery vessels:

- Vessel Style a. Engraved "water bottle"
- Vessel Style b. Two-handled bowl
- Vessel Style c. Frog effigy vessel

Burial II is accompanied by two pottery vessels:

- Vessel Style c. Frog effigy vessel
- Vessel Style d. Painted "water bottle"

Burial III is accompanied by three pottery vessels:

- Vessel Style d. Painted "water bottle"
- Vessel Style e. Four-handled bowl
- Vessel Style f. "Dimpled water bottle"

CORRELATE:

Vessel styles "a", "b" and "c" were definitely possessions of a single people since they were found together in definite association; that is, in the same grave, Burial I.

Another Vessel of Vessel Style "c" showed up in a different grave, Burial II, in definite association with still another Vessel style, Vessel Style "d". It is a simple matter of logic then to conclude that Vessel Style "d" is culturally related to Vessel Styles "a" and "b" as well as to "c", inasmuch as "c" is related to "a" and "b" in Burial I.

Similarly, Vessel Styles "e" and "f", found with Vessel Style "d" in the third grave, Burial III, are related through "d" to "c" found with Burial II and thence related to "a" and "b" via Vessel Style "c" found with Burial I.

It only does the tentative correlation of whole and restorable Classic Moundville pottery vessels indicate that Moundville was occupied during the Classic Moundville period by a single people, closely knit culturally; but that their culture remained quite stable, there being no evidence as yet of cultural development or change from the time they built the mounds to the time they abandoned them. All indications are, then, that the Classic Moundville period at Moundville did not extend over a period of several centuries but must have been compressed within a century or two at the most. Otherwise, we would expect to find evidence of significant cultural changes in the Classic Moundville material.