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THE BURKE PHASE: NATIVE AMERICANS AND SPANISH CONQUISTADORES IN THE WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA PIEDMONT

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Abstract

Several years before English settlements at Roanoke and Jamestown, Spanish colonists traversed the western edge of the North Carolina Piedmont, and they attempted to establish permanent settlements in the upper Catawba and Yadkin river valleys. Archaeologists attribute sites and artifacts dating from A.D. 1400 to 1600 in the Western Piedmont to the Burke phase, which is best known from sites in the upper Catawba Valley. This paper summarizes current knowledge about the Burke phase, and about encounters and interactions between Native Americans and Spanish conquistadores and colonists in the North Carolina Piedmont during the sixteenth century. From 1540 to 1568, the Western Piedmont formed the northern edge of the Spanish colonial province of La Florida, and before 1540, the Western Piedmont formed a frontier between South Appalachian Mississippian societies to the south and west, and Piedmont Village Tradition societies to the north and east.

During the late prehistoric and early historic periods, the upper Catawba and Yadkin valleys constituted a cultural frontier. During late prehistory, these areas formed the northeastern edge of the Mississippian world—with South Appalachian Mississippian towns and chiefdoms to the south and west, and Piedmont Village Tradition societies to the east and north (Baker 1974; Beck 2013; Beck and Moore 2002; Davis 2002; Davis and Ward 1991; Fitts 2006; Hudson 1970, 1976; Levy et al. 1990; Merrell 1987, 1989, 2006; Moore 2002; Ward and Davis 1993, 1999:190, 2001; Woodall 1999:55–56, 2009:2–3). During the sixteenth century, these areas also formed the northern edge of the Spanish colonial province of La Florida (Figure 19-1; Beck 1997; Booker et al. 1992; Clark 2007:21–26, 2010; DePratter and Smith 1980; Hudson 1997, 2005; Lyon 1976, 1990; Worth 1994). Given the status of the western Piedmont as a cultural frontier, we might expect evidence for different forms of settlement, diverse social structures, and varying degrees of political centralization and hierarchy. In this paper we review documentary evidence of Spanish expeditions led by Hernando de Soto (Figure 19-2) and Juan Pardo (Figure 19-3), and we review the archaeology of the Berry site, the location of Pardo's outpost of Cuenca and Fort San Juan, and selected other sites attributed to the Burke phase (A.D. 1400–1600). Together, the historic sources and unique archaeological resources support the identification of Native American chiefdoms in the Western Piedmont, and they provide evidence for experimentation and innovation in response to the Spanish invasion.

Burke-phase sites are located in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, along the upper reaches of the Catawba and Yadkin rivers, and they date to the 1400s and 1500s. The Burke phase was defined to describe a regionally and temporally distinctive distribution of earthen mounds and soapstone-tempered pottery (Figure 19-4; Beck and Moore 2002; Keeler

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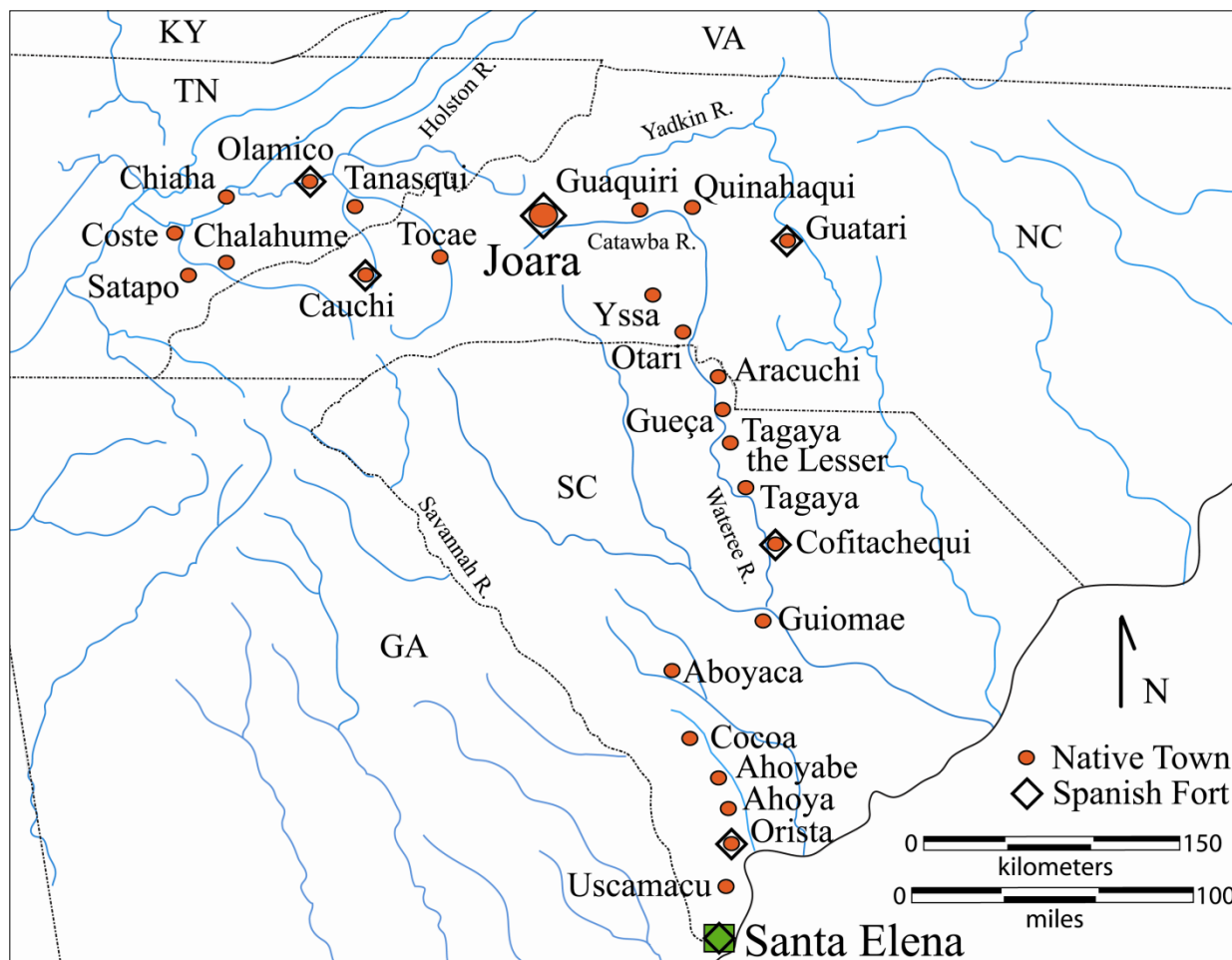


Figure 19-1. Spanish forts and Native American towns and villages in the northern borderlands of La Florida (after Beck et al. 2011:22).

1971; Moore 2002:93–99; Ward and Davis 1999:189–190). Like other regional variants of late prehistoric and protohistoric Lamar pottery across the greater southern Appalachians, Burke pottery includes large globular complicated stamped jars with folded and notched rims, and carinated bowls with bold incised motifs (see Figure 19-5; Hally 1994b; Holmes 1903:143–144; Moore 2002:257–280; Rodning 2008).

Burke-phase sites provide evidence of earthen mounds, large structures, mortuary practices marking elite statuses, and hierarchical settlement patterns centered on large sites. At least 50 Burke-phase sites are located in the core phase area along Upper Creek and Johns River in Burke County (Beck and Moore 2002; Moore 2002:50–99), and in the vicinity of the Nelson Mound and Triangle sites in the extreme upper Yadkin valley in Caldwell County (Moore 2002:100–124, 315–321; Thomas 1894:333–350). Surveys along Upper Creek and Warrior Fork have identified the locations of small sites representing Burke-phase farmsteads and larger sites representing villages, and a single site, Berry, whose location, large size, and earthen mound all support its identification as the focal settlement within the province of Joara (Figure 19-6). Based on our research during the past ten years, we focus here on four lines of evidence—mound construction, settlement patterns, mortuary assemblages, and documentary sources—in arguing

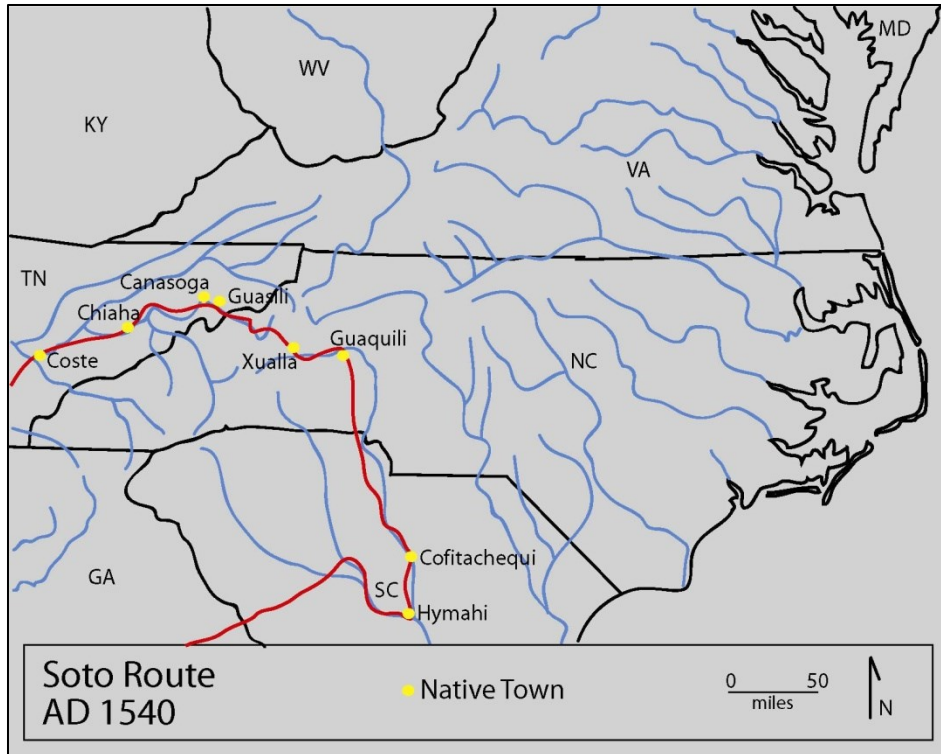


Figure 19-2. Route of the Soto expedition through the North Carolina Piedmont and surrounding areas.

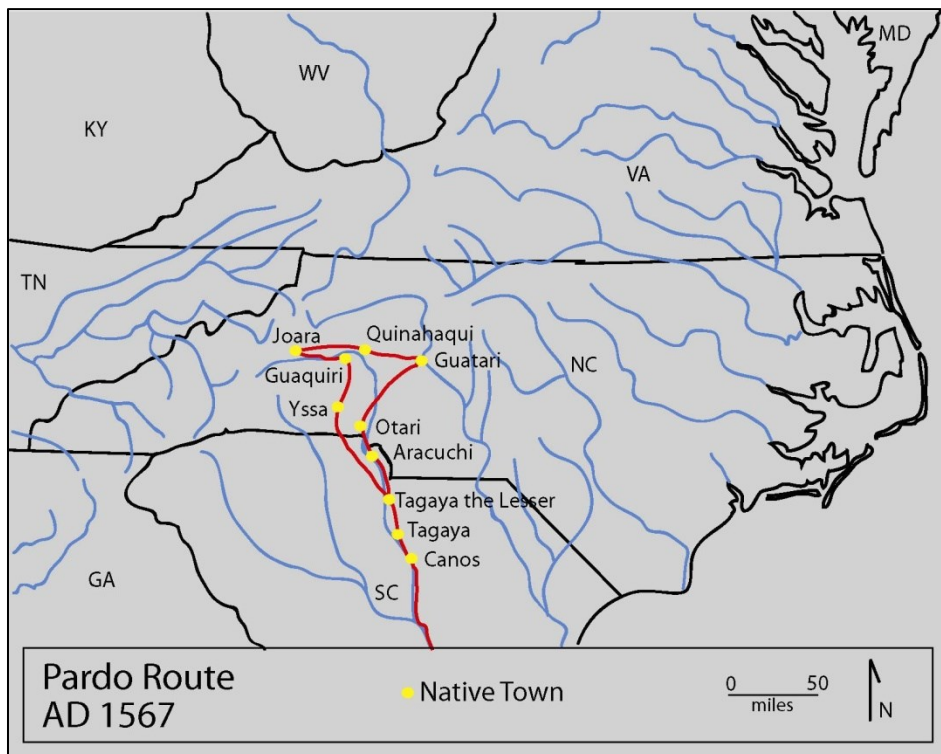


Figure 19-3. Route of the first Pardo expedition through the North Carolina Piedmont and surrounding areas.

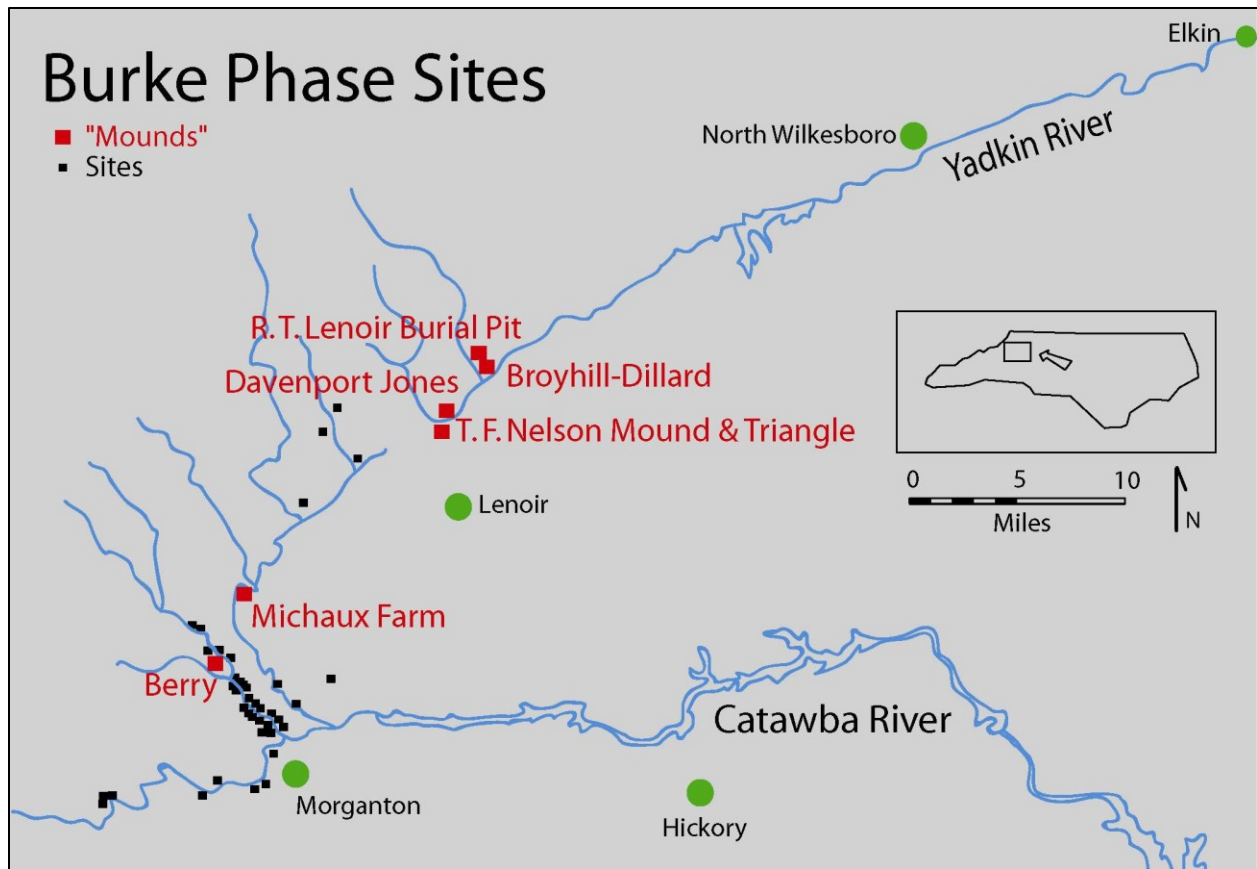


Figure 19-4. Burke-phase sites in the Western North Carolina Piedmont (after Beck and Moore 2002:193; Moore 2002:51, 101).

that the Burke phase represents a single regional polity or chiefdom, and, specifically, the chiefdom known to the Pardo expeditions as Joara.

The first encounter between Europeans and Native American towns in the Western North Carolina Piedmont took place in 1540, when the Hernando de Soto expedition marched through the upper Catawba Valley, stopping briefly at the town of “Xuala” (Hudson 1997:185–189). During the Soto expedition, the most powerful chiefdoms in the greater southern Appalachians were Cofitachequi—centered in the Wateree Valley of central South Carolina (Beck 2009; DePratter 1994; Fitts and Heath 2009; Hudson 1997:172–184; Hudson et al. 2008)—and Coosa, centered at the Little Egypt site in northwestern Georgia (Hally 1994a; Hally et al. 1990; Hudson et al. 1985; Smith 1987, 2000, 2001). In 1567, Pardo and 250 men arrived at Santa Elena, where the fort and settlement were in bad shape. After helping to build Fort San Felipe at Santa Elena, Pardo and an army of 120 men set forth from Santa Elena, the colonial capital of La Florida, to establish an overland route connecting Santa Elena to the Spanish silver mines near Zacatecas, Mexico; to pacify Native American groups; and to establish Spanish outposts along this route (Hudson 2005). After departing Santa Elena, Pardo marched northward, visiting several of the towns Soto had visited in the Carolinas, and he arrived at “Joara”—the same community as Soto’s “Xuala”—in late 1566. Construction of Fort San Juan, adjacent to the native settlement of Joara, was completed in January of 1567, and Pardo also established a colonial town, Cuenca,



Figure 19-5. Burke pottery from the Berry site (31BK22; after Beck et al. 2006:69; Moore 2002:85).

at this locale. Together, Cuenca and Fort San Juan formed Pardo's principal outpost along the frontier of La Florida.

The Pardo expeditions built five more forts in the fall of 1567 and winter of 1568, but Pardo chose Joara as the location for his major outpost at the northern edge of La Florida. Joara was one of three towns visited by Pardo—the others were Cofitachequi and Guatari—at which he met community leaders known as *micos*. *Micos* were powerful chiefs who outranked village chiefs known as *oratas*. Joara was a powerful and prosperous town, and Joara mico was a powerful chief—making the town of Joara a good candidate as an ally for Pardo and the setting for his primary outpost. Pardo met the leaders of Joara and other native towns, he gave them gifts, and he asked the people of Joara to build houses for his men—which they did. When Fort San Juan was first built, Pardo stationed 25 men and related supplies at the fort. There were favorable relations at first between the people of Joara and the Pardo expeditions, but by May of 1568, news reached Santa Elena that Fort San Juan and Pardo's five other forts had been attacked by Native American warriors, and had been abandoned.

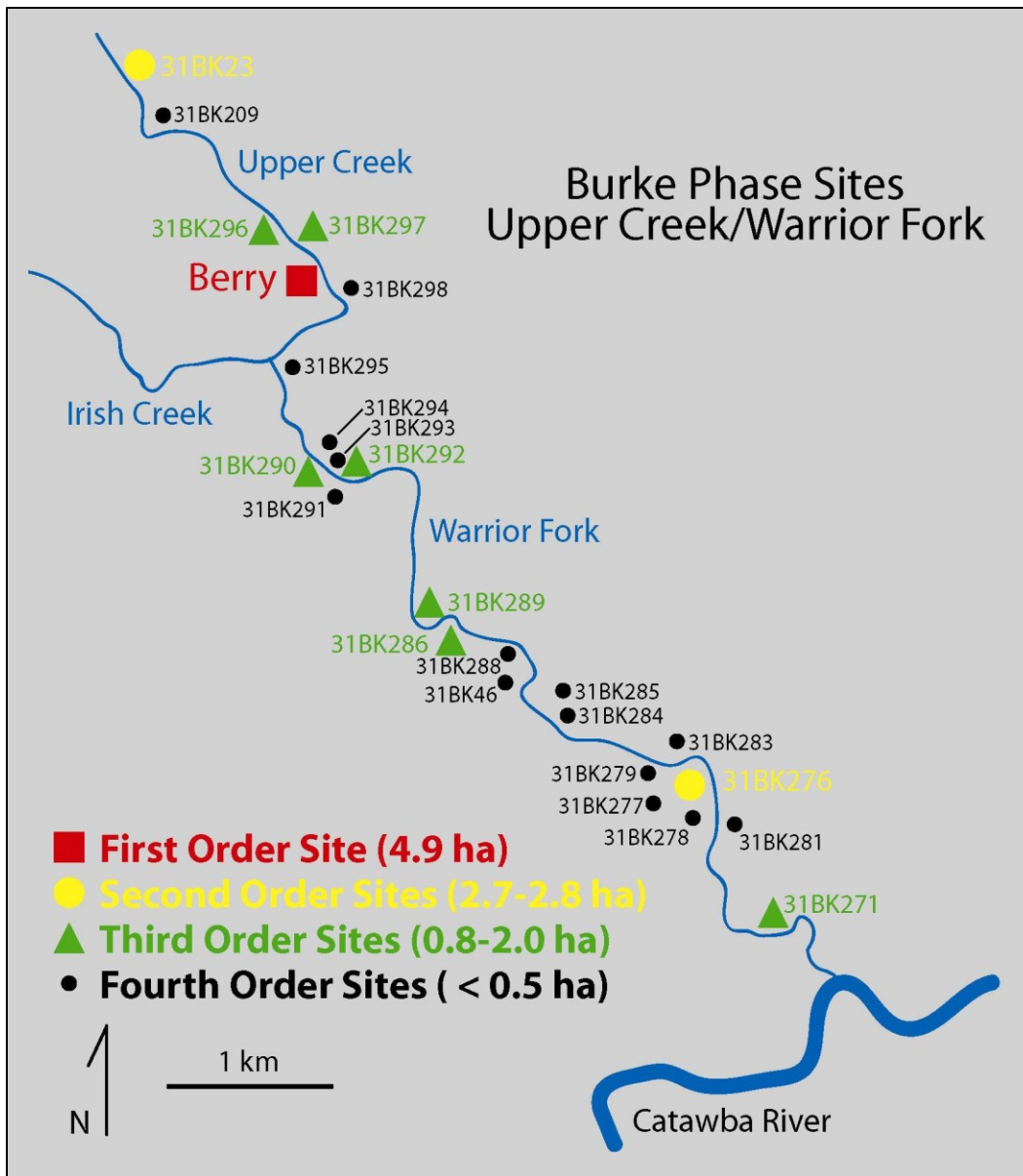


Figure 19-6. Burke-phase settlement pattern along Upper Creek and Warrior Fork (after Beck and Moore 2002:200; Moore 2002:98).

Thus ended Spanish colonial settlement in western North Carolina, but these direct and sustained interactions between native groups in the Western Piedmont and Spanish expeditions must have had dramatic impacts upon the people of Joara and other native groups in the upper Catawba Valley and surrounding areas. As it happens, not only were there attacks on all six of Pardo's forts in the northern borderlands of La Florida in 1568, but several Spanish forts and settlements in the southern borderlands of La Florida were also sacked by Native American warriors during the same year and soon thereafter. Meanwhile, documentary evidence indicates that the 1560s and 1570s were dry years—prolonged droughts may have made it difficult for native groups to support themselves and to generate surpluses to support Spanish settlements

(Anderson 2001; Anderson et al. 1995). Warfare nearly erupted between native chiefdoms near Santa Elena in 1570, and Native American warriors burned down the settlement and fort at Santa Elena in 1576 (Hoffman 1990; South 1988; South et al. 1988).

Archaeological evidence and written accounts of the Pardo expeditions support the identification of Joara and other Native American groups in the upper Catawba Valley and surrounding areas of North Carolina as chiefdoms. The Pardo chronicles refer to a hierarchy of leaders within native communities, including *micos*, *oratas*, *caciques*, *mandadores*, and *Indios principales*—the chief of Coosa is referred to as “*cacique grande*,” or paramount chief. The Pardo documents refer to practices of paying tribute—in fact, many native groups probably thought of Pardo as a new chief to whom they could pay tribute, and some groups built houses for the Pardo expeditions and set aside stores of food for him specifically to shift their allegiances to him.

Pardo noted differences from one chiefdom to another—for example, there were differences between the Joara chiefdom in the upper Catawba Valley, and the chiefdom of Guatari in the Yadkin River Valley. Guatari mico was a woman, for example, and the village chiefs within her domain were less amenable to donating labor and resources to the Pardo expeditions than were chiefs from the province of Joara. The location of the main town of Guatari is not known with certainty, but our archaeological investigations at the Berry site, near Morganton, in Burke County, have identified this site as the location of Joara, Cuenca, and Fort San Juan (Beck 1997; Beck et al. 2006, 2011; Moore 2002; Moore et al. 2004, 2005).

Written accounts of the Pardo expedition do not include any detailed descriptions of architecture or earthen mounds in the province of Joara, but they do specify that Chisca villages to the north were enclosed by log stockades, that people in the province of Chiaha to the west lived in semisubterranean houses, and that the circular houses of villages in the province of Guatari were different than houses in the province of Joara. While it is difficult to directly correlate regional archaeological survey data with the Spanish observations, we can describe some aspects of sixteenth-century aboriginal settlements in the upper Catawba Valley based on excavations at Berry and at several other Burke-phase sites.

The Berry site covers roughly five hectares along the west side of Upper Creek, 12 kilometers above the point at which this stream enters the Catawba River. Its size makes the Berry site one of the largest Native American settlements in western North Carolina. Based on the surface scatter of artifacts, it is by far the largest Burke-phase site in its drainage—the densest concentration of pottery on the ground surface at Berry corresponds to the remnant of an earthen mound at the site. Archaeologists affiliated with the Smithsonian Institution noted in the late nineteenth century that this mound was “about 15 feet high and unexplored” (Thomas 1891:151). The mound was still standing until 1964, when it was bulldozed to fill in low-lying areas in the surrounding fields (Moore 2002:60–61). Excavations in 1986 uncovered evidence of intact, basket-loaded mound deposits, as well as pits and burials near the southern edge of the mound itself (Moore 2002:213–256)—some of those include large postholes, probably representing large town posts, like those seen at the Town Creek site in the North Carolina Piedmont (Boudreaux 2007a, 2007b; Coe 1995), and at the sixteenth-century town at the King site in Georgia (Hally 2008), dating to the period of the Hernando de Soto (1539–1543; Hudson 1997) and Tristan de Luna (1559–1561; Milanich 1990) expeditions. Excavations near the Berry site mound remnant in 2013 uncovered features related to Fort San Juan itself, and more detailed discussion of these finds is forthcoming.

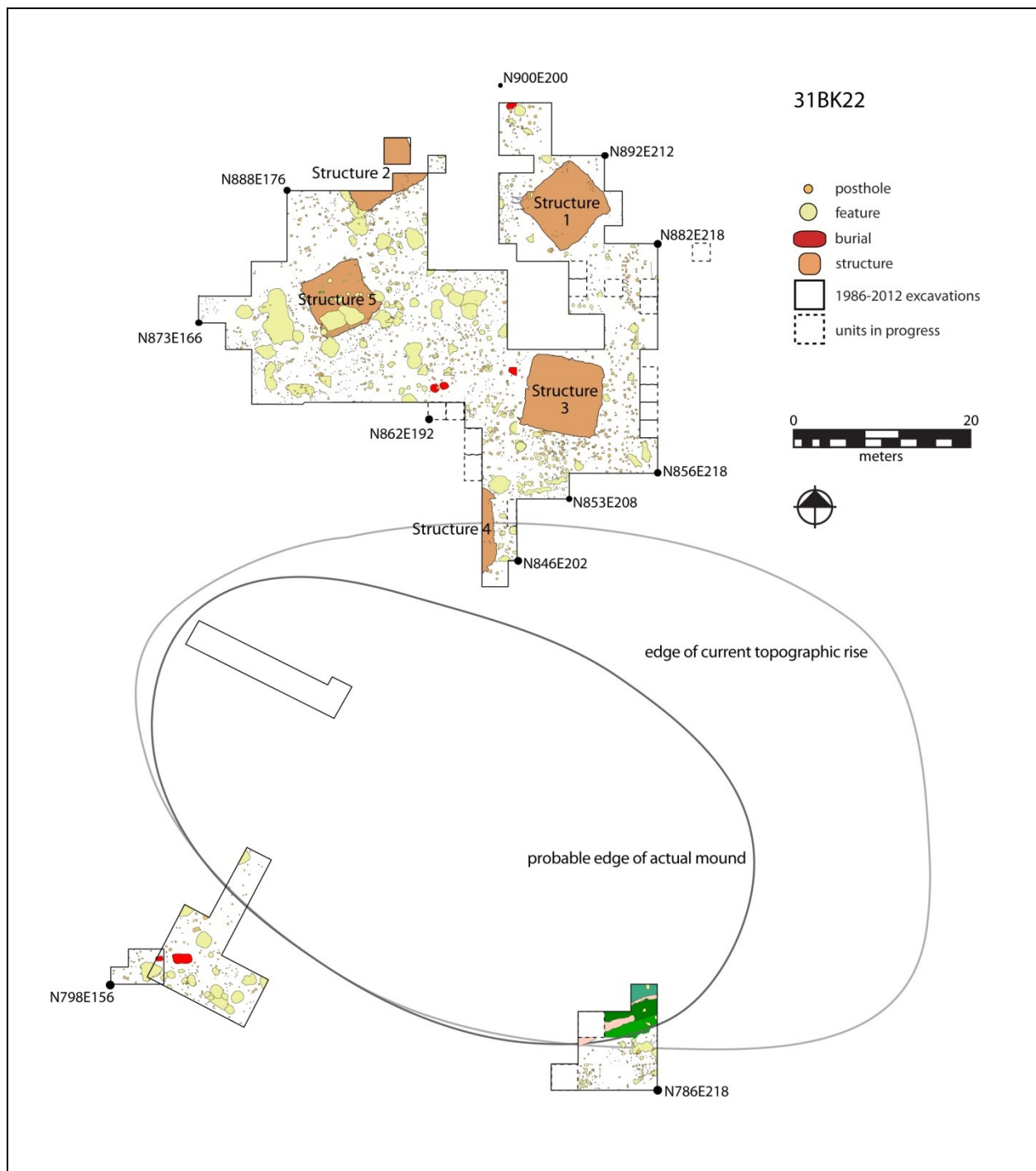


Figure 19-7. Structures and pit features at the Berry site (31BK22; see also Beck et al. 2006:66; Moore 2002:215, 219, 220).

North of the Berry site mound are remnants of five burned structures and numerous postholes and pit features related to the Spanish colonial town of Cuenca, and excavations from 2001 through 2012 have focused primarily on this area of the site (Figure 19-7; Beck et al. 2006). Pit features in the vicinity of these structures include large circular pits that may have



Figure 19-8. Structure 3 at the Berry site (31BK22).

been daub pits associated with the construction and maintenance of buildings, and several small circular pits or postholes are filled with charred corncobs and stacks of Burke-phase potsherds. The structures themselves are square with rounded corners, they range from roughly eight to nine meters per side—Structure 3 is the largest, at an estimated 81 square meters in area (Figure 19-8). At least two of these buildings, including Structure 2 (Figure 19-9) and Structure 5 (Figure 19-10), were built in areas with dense concentrations of large circular pit features, most of which seem to predate the buildings themselves—although it is possible that these structures were built relatively soon after these pits were utilized and, then, filled in. Although these buildings generally resemble Native American structures from the greater southern Appalachians from the late prehistoric and protohistoric periods, they are 20–30% larger than typical domestic structures. Excavations of collapsed architectural debris and the floor of Structure 1 have revealed an arrangement of four roof support posts around two successive stages of a central hearth (Figure 19-11). Excavations in Structure 1 have recovered many Burke potsherds, as well as sixteenth-century glass beads and pieces of iron wire that may represent chain mail (Beck et al. 2006).

The assemblage of sixteenth-century Spanish artifacts from the Berry site includes glass beads, wrought iron nails, possible chain mail, lead shot and lead sprue, olive jar fragments, pieces of Mexican Red Ware, one piece of Caparra Blue Majolica, copper aglets, copper beads or bangles, pieces of scrap copper, and the iron knife from Burial 1 (Figure 19-12; Beck et al. 2006; Moore 2002). These artifacts have been recovered from surface and plowzone contexts as well as from pit features and structures north of the mound. All of these items are comparable to



Figure 19-9. Structure 2, and pit features at its corner, at the Berry site (31BK22).

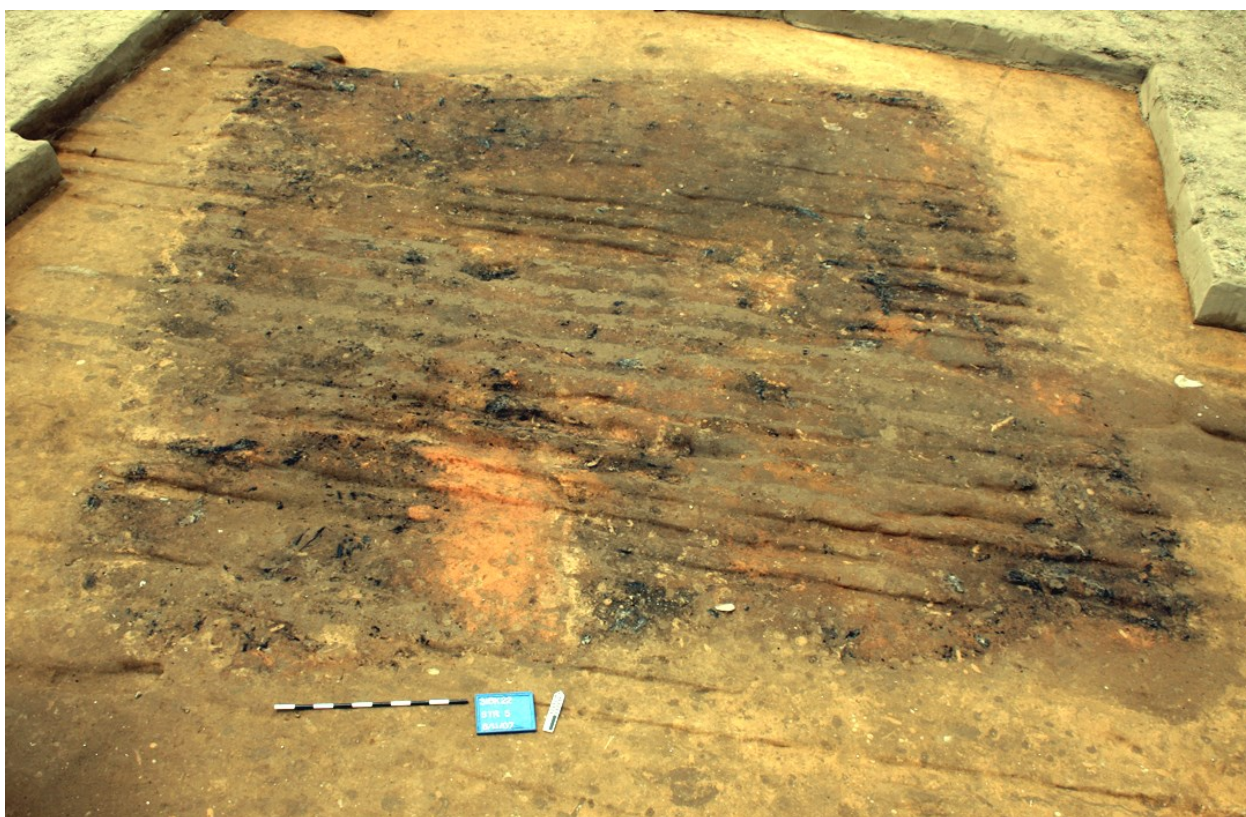


Figure 19-10. Structure 5 at the Berry site (31BK22).



Figure 19-11. Structure 1 at the Berry site (31BK22).

artifacts found at Santa Elena, and all are consistent with the lists of provisions issued to Pardo and to his forts (Hudson 2005; Lyon 1976; South 1988; South et al. 1988). One of the more remarkable sixteenth-century Spanish artifact finds at Berry is an iron steelyard scale from Structure 5. Such a scale would have been helpful in keeping track of supplies in a setting that was far from the settlement at Santa Elena, the primary source of what provisions Pardo had. It also would have been valuable for evaluating rock samples—members of the Pardo expeditions are known to have brought samples of quartz crystal back to Fort San Juan (Hudson 2005:160–161). Lying near the steelyard scale in Structure 5, as it happens, was a faceted quartz crystal. Other metal artifacts from Structure 5 include a large piece of wrought iron wedged in the side of a large posthole near the southwestern corner of the structure, and a piece of possible chain mail from a pit feature underneath the floor (Beck et al. 2006; Beck et al. 2011:33–36).

These structures are thought to have housed members of the Pardo expeditions stationed at Fort San Juan. While we identify this configuration of five such buildings in a small area at the Berry site as Cuenca, it is also clear that similar large structures are common on other Burke-phase sites in the upper Catawba Valley. Located on the Johns River, roughly four kilometers southeast of the Berry site, the Ensley site includes a series of large structures that were built and rebuilt in place. It was impossible to differentiate floors in the sandy deposits uncovered during salvage excavations of the Ensley site in 2006, but stratigraphic profiles and the presence of six stages of the hearth do indicate that this structure was built and rebuilt in place at least three times (Figure 19-13). Another Burke-phase domestic structure has recently been uncovered—and partly excavated in 2010—at the Catawba Meadows site, located at a bend of the Catawba River on the grounds of Catawba Meadows Park in Morganton (Figure 19-14). Other Burke-

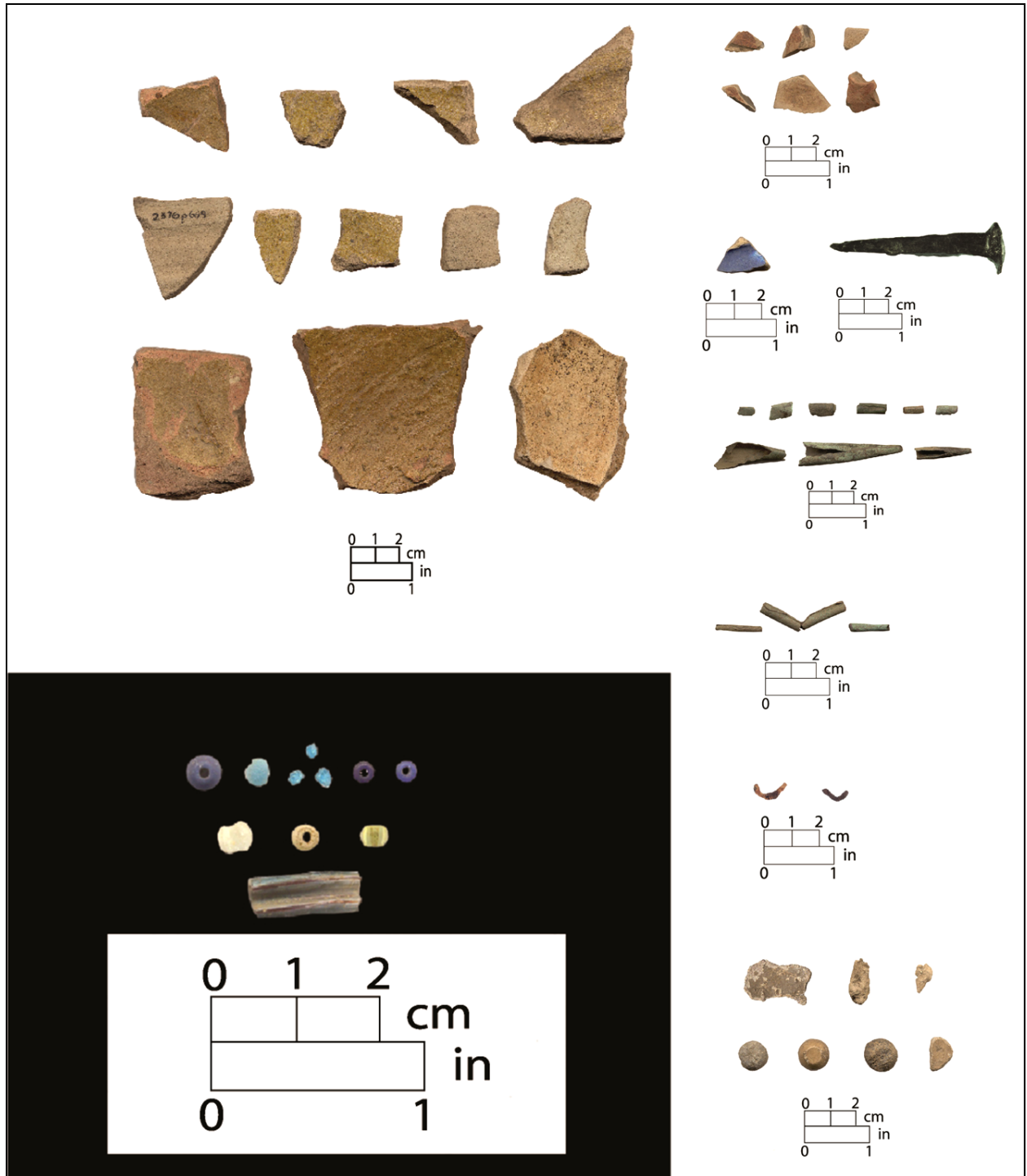


Figure 19-12. Spanish goods from the Berry site (31BK22; see also Beck et al. 2006:70–74).

phase structures have been found at the McDowell site, located on the Catawba River in McDowell County—including a probable public structure on or near an earthen mound, and a domestic structure nearby (Moore 2002:197–211).



Figure 19-13. Structure 1 at the Ensley site (31BK468) on the Johns River.

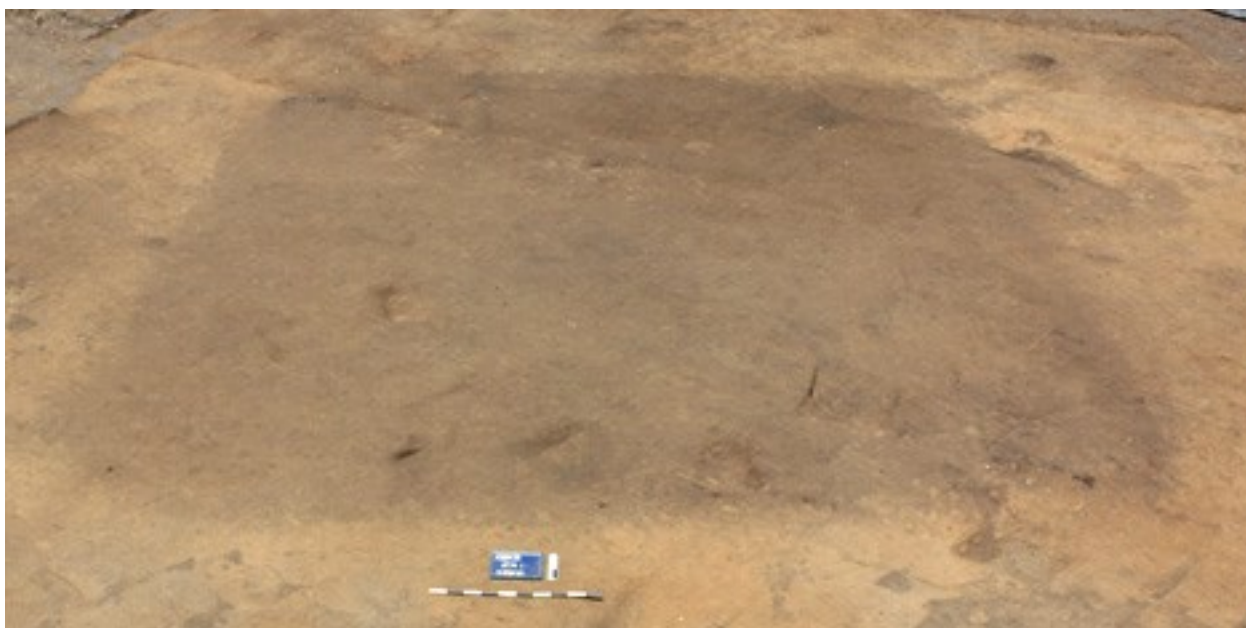


Figure 19-14. Structure 1 at the Catawba Meadows site (31BK18) on the Catawba River.

Evidence of Burke-phase mortuary practices is rare in the upper Catawba Valley, but Burial 1 at the Berry site, near the south edge of the mound, is an adult male, whose grave goods include an iron knife, and a flintknapper's kit rather like those from several adult male burials at the King site in Georgia (Cobb and Pope 1998; Cobb and Ruggiero 2003; Hally 2008:238–244, 452–456, 474–486; Moore 2002:234–237). Pardo did give eight iron knives to the chief of Joara, and the knife from Burial 1 at the Berry site could be one of them. At Burke-phase sites in the upper Yadkin Valley, mortuary evidence is more striking. At sites like the Nelson Mound and the Nelson Triangle, the Davenport Jones Mound, and the Lenoir Burial Pit, there are mortuary facilities associated with Burke pottery, as well as prestige goods such as engraved shell gorgets, shell masks, stone pipes, spatulate celts, copper, mica plates, and European metal implements (probably Spanish), all of which suggest the presence of elite burials (Moore 2002:100–120, 315–321).

Ned Woodall (2009) has recently questioned our identification of these sites in the upper Yadkin Valley as “mounds.” Because these sites are critical to our overall understanding of the Burke phase, we would like to briefly address this point. We describe these sites as “mounds” largely because they have been described as such for more than a century. However, in our publications we have noted that what is important is not whether they were mounds or subterranean features, but the degree to which they represent mortuary practices new to the Western Piedmont during the early historic period. We argue that mortuary evidence from the upper Yadkin Valley reflects the presence of a new level of regional hierarchy—that is, a chiefdom—that developed in the Western Piedmont during the period just before or after European contact.

Taken together, Burke-phase sites demonstrate evidence of mound centers and hierarchical settlement patterns, mortuary practices marking elite statuses, and direct and sustained contact between Native American groups and Spanish colonists. Some of the Spanish artifacts from the Berry site, such as glass beads and copper scrap, probably represent gifts and trade goods—others, such as wrought iron nails and olive jar fragments, reflect Spanish settlement and domestic activity. Spanish colonists at Fort San Juan largely relied upon the people of Joara for food and other resources—eventually, warriors from Joara attacked the fort, but before then, there was support in the local community for the Pardo expeditions. People from Joara built houses for Pardo and his men, and they generated surpluses of food that were then shared with their new neighbors. Support for the Pardo expeditions was probably led by the chief or chiefs of Joara, who had the power to mobilize people and surplus resources to benefit Fort San Juan. Written accounts of the Pardo expeditions suggest that chiefs and villagers in the province of Guatari, in the Yadkin Valley, were less amenable to helping Pardo than were the people of Joara, and less active in supplying labor and resources to Fort Santiago and to the mission where Pardo installed Sebastian Montero as chaplain.

The archaeology of the Burke phase demonstrates the presence of South Appalachian Mississippian chiefdoms and Spanish entradas and settlements in the Western Piedmont province of North Carolina. During the 1400s and early 1500s, the upper Catawba and Yadkin valleys were situated along a cultural frontier differentiating South Appalachian Mississippian towns and chiefdoms to the south and east, and the less centralized, more egalitarian villages of Siouan speakers to the east and north. During the mid-to-late sixteenth century, the area associated with the Burke phase also marked the northern edge of the Spanish colonial province of La Florida.

Given the setting of the Western Piedmont in these cultural borderlands, there should be evidence for diversity in settlement patterns and sociopolitical organization in the Catawba and Yadkin valleys. This is, in fact, the case. There is archaeological and documentary evidence for chiefdoms, especially in the province of Joara, in the upper Catawba Valley, whereas in the middle and lower Catawba Valley, there were smaller villages and less centralized societies. While demonstrating the presence of settlements by sixteenth-century Burke-phase chiefdoms in the upper Yadkin Valley, the Burke-phase sites along the headwaters of the Yadkin—which are located only 20 to 30 kilometers north of the Berry site and the upper Catawba Valley—are different than any other currently known South Appalachian Mississippian sites.

Ned Woodall (1999) has related the spread of Mississippian culture to the Catawba and Yadkin valleys during the 1400s and 1500s to climatic changes during the Little Ice Age. Similarly, Tom Whyte (2003) has noted evidence for widespread abandonment of the Watauga Valley during the same period, arguing that sedentary settlement and farming were simply not sustainable during the Little Ice Age at high elevations in western North Carolina. These developments may have favored settlement in lower areas such as the upper Catawba and upper Yadkin valleys. Alternatively, they may have put Burke-phase groups already living in these areas at an advantage, as they were already situated in places where farming was still viable.

The Burke phase, dating to the 1400s and 1500s, corresponds with a period of considerable changes in the broader South Appalachian Mississippian landscape. Large areas along the Savannah River were abandoned during the fifteenth century (Anderson 1994; Anderson et al. 1986). Much of the Etowah Valley was abandoned during late prehistory, and only a relatively small town (Itaba) was situated at the monumental Etowah mounds when the Soto expedition visited Itaba and the province of Coosa in 1540 (King 1999, 2001, 2003a, 2003b). The Oconee Valley in Georgia, the province of the chiefdom of Ocute, was largely abandoned during the mid-to-late sixteenth century, following the Soto expedition's visit to Ocute in 1540 (Williams 1994; Williams and Shapiro 1996). It is possible that the abandonment of these areas contributed to population growth in the Western Piedmont—and to the appearance in several areas of North Carolina of material culture and settlements that represent regional variants of the broader Lamar tradition (Hally 1994b), including the Burke phase (Moore 2002), the Qualla phase associated with Cherokee towns in southwestern North Carolina (Dickens 1976; Keel 1976; Riggs and Rodning 2002; Rodning 2008), and the Pee Dee phase and Mississippian mound center at Town Creek (Boudreaux 2007a, 2007b; Coe 1995). If there was a broad spread of Lamar cultural groups across North Carolina during late prehistory, these developments would have taken place not long before the arrival of a new and dramatically different cultural tradition—that of the Soto and Pardo expeditions.

The Western Piedmont gives us the chance to study cultural dynamics along a cultural frontier—both before and after European contact. Continuing archaeological investigations in the Western Piedmont can and should explore the development of chiefdoms and other forms of social and political organization, the effects of climate on Native American settlements and societies, the nature of contact between Native American groups and colonial expeditions, and the combinations of environmental and historical forces that led to the abandonment of large areas of the upper Catawba and Yadkin valleys during the seventeenth century. Given the threats facing archaeological sites in this part of North Carolina, it is well worth studying them now, before more of our nonrenewable cultural resources are lost.

NOTES

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