

Moundville Palettes—Prestige Goods or Inalienable Possessions?

VINCAS P. STEPONAITIS

Over the years the so-called prestige goods model has been highly influential in the study of middle-range societies. It was initially developed in the 1970s by Frankenstein and Rowlands (1978) and later was adopted by others trying to understand the origins and political economy of middle-range societies. In essence, the model presumes that chiefs acquire and maintain power by gaining control of the production and/or distribution of socially valued objects—that is, prestige goods—which are often elaborately crafted and made of exotic materials. The root of chiefly power, according to this model, lies in giving such objects away in order to attract followers, to cement alliances, or to inflict debt.

This model was applied to the Mississippian world by a variety of scholars (e.g., Peregrine 1991; Trubitt 2000; Wesson 1999), and to Moundville in particular by Welch in his seminal treatise *Moundville's Economy*, which appeared in 1991. During the same year, I published a paper showing that the highest frequency of exotic items in burials coincided with Moundville's emergence as a paramount chiefdom (Steponaitis 1991). Arguably, this finding was consistent with the prestige-goods model, and it led to a program of research that I have pursued ever since. This research involves various attempts, in collaboration with many other scholars, to determine the geological sources of these “prestige goods” and to trace their movements across the ancient American South (Gall and Steponaitis 2001; Steponaitis et al. 1996; Steponaitis and Dockery 2011; Steponaitis et al. 2011; Whitney et al. 2002).

Originally, I assumed that the mechanism of movement was the one posited by the prestige-goods model: gift-giving by chiefs. In recent years,

however, I have come to believe that the prestige-goods model may not be the best way to understand this movement. A number of younger scholars have raised questions about this model, based on the quantity of exotica at Moundville and the absence of evidence for extensive production (Marcoux 2007; Wilson 2001). My own doubts stem not only from such evidence, but also from the nature of the objects themselves: the more I examine the functions of these fancy Mississippian artifacts and the contexts in which they are found, the less they look like “prestige goods” at all—at least in the economic sense implied by the Frankenstein and Rowlands model.

To illustrate this point, I will focus on one particular class of objects: the so-called stone palettes. Although these items are widely distributed across the South (Holmes 1883: 277–79, 1906; Webb and DeJarnette 1942: 287–91), the vast majority of palettes, particularly whole palettes, come from only two sites: Moundville and Etowah. Here, I will principally discuss the palettes from Moundville, although I will also harness some evidence from Etowah to help make my case. After providing some basic information about the palettes themselves, I will organize my discussion around three key questions: (1) Where were the palettes made? (2) How were the palettes used? (3) How did they move across the Mississippian world (i.e., what were the mechanisms of this movement, and what does this tell us about the nature of Mississippian societies)?

Description and Context

Moundville palettes are typically the size and shape of a modern dinner plate: most are circular, 15–25 cm in diameter, and about 1 cm thick (figure 7.1). Both smaller and larger examples exist, with diameters as small as 9 cm or as large as 41 cm. A few rectangular examples are known, but these are uncommon. In cross section the palettes are invariably tabular (figure 7.2), undoubtedly because of the parallel planes of cleavage in the sedimentary rock of which they are made.¹

The top (or obverse) face of these palettes is usually decorated with a scalloped or notched edge and a band of parallel lines along the rim (see figure 7.1). At first glance this design may not seem to have much iconographic significance, but in fact it does. The simplest way to illustrate this point is by means of comparison. Note that the palette design is essentially the same as that found on copper gorgets at Moundville, except that the

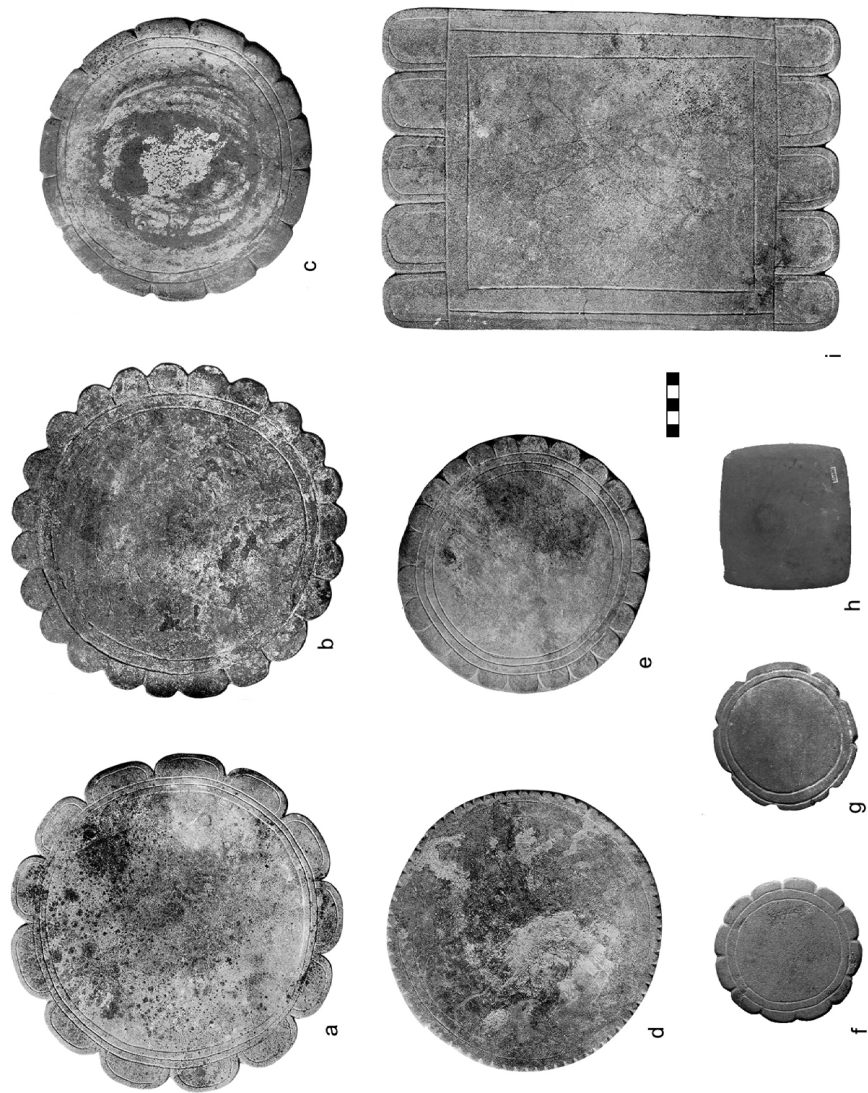


Figure 7.1. Typical stone palettes from Moundville: (a–g) circular palettes; (h–i) rectangular palettes. (Collections: a, National Museum of the American Indian [NMAI], 17/1474; b, NMAI, 17/1475; c, NMAI, 17/1483; d, NMAI, 17/1489; e, NMAI, 17/1476; f, Alabama Museum of Natural History [AMNH], EE296; g, AMNH, SEH12; h, AMNH, Rho86; i, NMAI, 17/1493. Images: a–e, i, after Moore 1905: figures 19, 23, 65, 110, 111, 116)

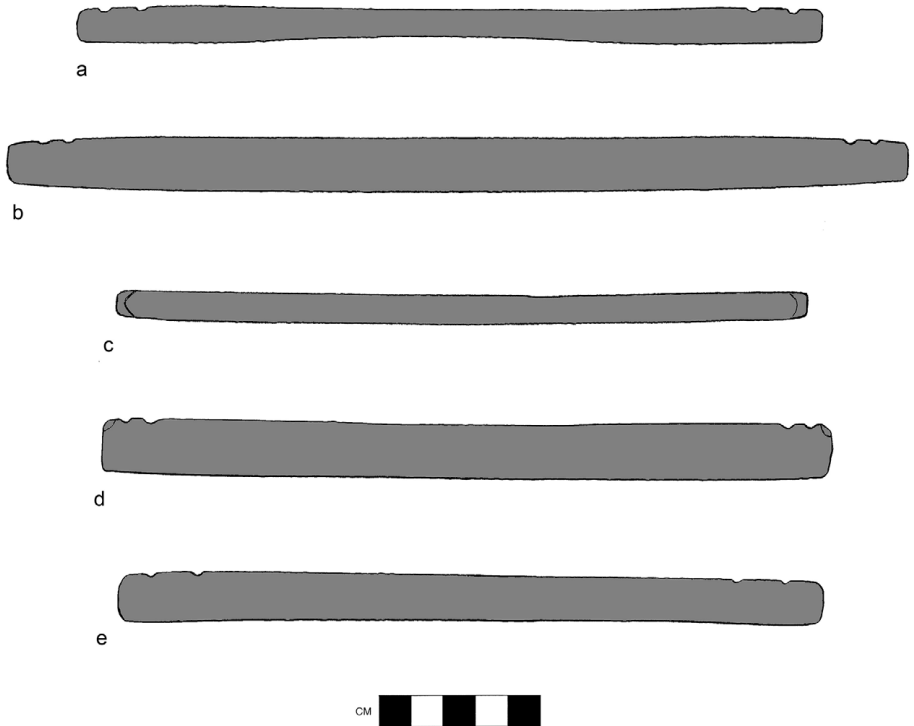


Figure 7.2. Cross sections of typical Moundville palettes. (Collections: *a*, AMNH, WP206; *b*, AMNH, WP125; *c*, AMNH, SM51; *d*, AMNH, SD2; *e*, AMNH, NG14)

gorgets have a cross in the center of the design field, whereas on the palettes this portion of the field is blank (figure 7.3). These representations all express a theme called “centering,” whose meaning entails defining a center, or *axis mundi*, a place that is by definition sacred or spiritually powerful (Knight and Steponaitis 2011: 219–26).

A few palettes are also decorated with elaborate representational designs on the reverse face (figure 7.4). Such palettes are rare, and the design on each is unique, which has led to the practice of giving these objects proper names. The so-called Rattlesnake Disk is among the best-known and most-illustrated artifacts from Moundville (Moore 1905: figure 7; Steponaitis and Knight 2004: figure 1). It depicts intertwined serpents surrounding a hand, which thematically is thought to represent a portal to the Path of Souls (Lankford 2007c; Knight and Steponaitis 2011). The Willoughby Disk, just as famous, shows a melange of elements, including

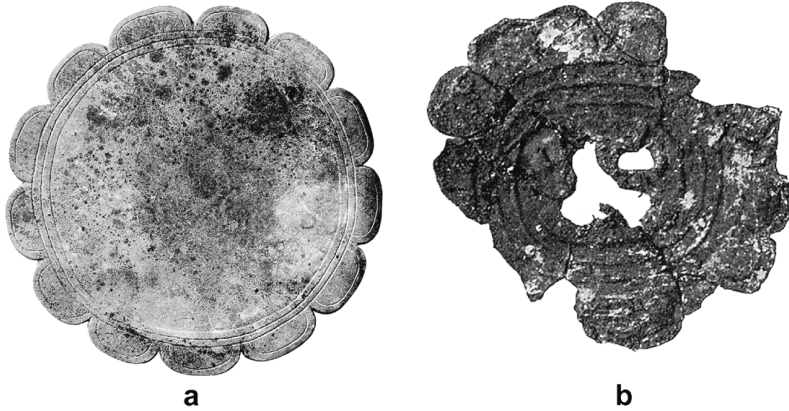


Figure 7.3. The centering theme in stone and copper: (a) stone palette; (b) copper pendant. Note the similar design structure. Images not to scale. (Collections: a, NMAI, 17/1474; b, NMAI, 17/3095. Images: a–b, after Moore 1905: figures 19, 29)

a supernatural moth, a bilobed arrow, hands, and a central element with bindings and skulls, which Reilly interprets as a sacred bundle (Moore 1905: figures 4–5; Reilly 2007; Steponaitis and Knight 2004: figure 13). Less well known is the Brannon Disk, which has a bilobed arrow in the same off-center position as on the Willoughby Disk (Brannon 1923; Knight and Steponaitis 2011: figure 9.22d). Not surprisingly, the reverse face of these palettes is always the one illustrated or displayed, but if one turns any of these palettes over, on the obverse side one finds the typical notched edge and multilinear band.

When one compares the palettes found in mound versus nonmound contexts, an interesting difference emerges. Palettes from mound contexts tend to be larger, with a mean diameter of 23 cm, as compared to 19 cm for nonmound contexts. The smallest palettes, with diameters in the 9–13-cm range, are found only in nonmound settings. About 20 percent of the palettes in both mound and nonmound settings are undecorated.

At least 52 whole palettes were discovered at Moundville between 1868 and 1941. These were typically found in burial contexts (Moore 1905, 1907; Peebles 1979; Steponaitis 1983b: 132). In most cases the specific position within the burial was not recorded, but where we do have such data, the palettes were usually placed near the head, and less frequently near the feet, torso, or arms.

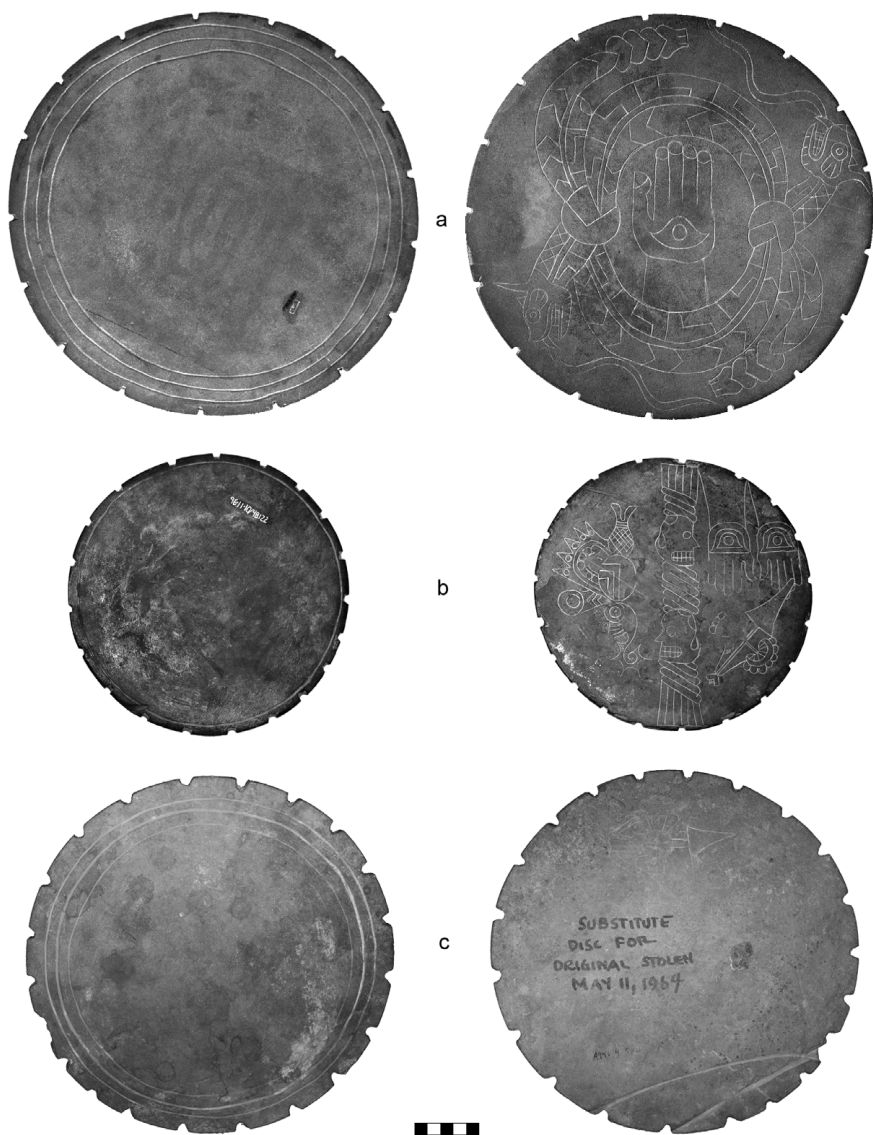


Figure 7.4. Palettes with engraved designs on reverse face: (a) Rattlesnake Disk; (b) Willoughby Disk; (c) Brannon Disk. Both faces of each disk are shown, obverse on the left and reverse on the right. Note that the obverse face on each of these palettes shows the typical lines around the rim. (Photo *a* obverse courtesy of David H. Dye. Collections: *a*, AMNH, Mi922; *b*, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 96-11-10/48122; *c*, AMNH, Mi993)

As recent excavations have amply shown, broken palette fragments are also found on the summits and in the flank middens of mounds (Knight 2010: 61–62, 148–49). These are often associated with other elements of what Knight has called the “pigment complex”: limonite, galena, glauconite, mica, and other colorful or specular minerals, found either as lumps or in ceramic containers (Knight 2010: 158–59). Clearly, palettes were not only buried with the dead but also actively used on or near mounds, and occasionally were broken and discarded. Whether this breakage was accidental and informal, or deliberate and ritualized—as in a formal “decommissioning”—we simply do not know, but a case can be made for the latter interpretation, at least in some instances. Perhaps the best example of ritual decommissioning was found in a cemetery west of Mound R at Moundville, where fragments of the same broken palette were placed with five different burials (Peebles 1979: 665–66; see also Davis 2010; Phillips, this volume). Most palettes probably date between late Moundville I and early Moundville III, or ca. AD 1200–1450.

Sourcing and Distribution

Moundville’s palettes are made of a very distinctive sandstone—gray in color, very fine grained, and micaceous. As early as the 1870s, at least one observer noted the similarities between the rock used to make palettes and that which outcrops at the Fall Line near Tuscaloosa, only 20 km from Moundville (Maxwell 1876: 70). This similarity has since been confirmed by a petrographic study (Whitney et al. 2002). The rock is clearly local in origin, and we have every reason to believe that palettes made from this rock were crafted somewhere in the vicinity of Moundville.

Indeed, excavations at Pride Place (1Tu1), a small residential site dating to the Moundville III phase, have yielded evidence of such crafting (Johnson 1999, 2001; Johnson and Sherard 2000; Sherard 1999; Davis, this volume; Scarry et al., this volume). The site is located north of Moundville, just below the Fall Line, and right next to the sandstone outcrops that served as the source of raw material. Additional evidence of palette crafting has been found in refuse associated with the summits of Mounds E and Q at Moundville (Knight 2004, 2010: 148–49, 221–23). Taking this evidence at face value, one might conclude that palettes were made in both commoner and elite contexts. As Davis (this volume) points out, these contexts might also represent different stages of production, with

the initial shaping located near the source, and the final shaping and decorating occurring on the mounds.

Regardless of how their production was organized, the finished palettes made of this distinctive stone have a wide geographical distribution. In addition to being common at Moundville, they have been found at numerous sites in the Lower Mississippi Valley, some 300 km to the west. These sites include some of the most important Mississippian mound sites in the area, including Lake George, Glass, and Anna, as well as smaller mound sites, such as Landrum and Rosedale (Knight and Steponaitis 2011: figures 9.27, 9.28; Weinstein 1984: figure 3; Williams and Brain 1983: figure 7.41a). From the standpoint of both style and raw material, there can be no doubt that these palettes were made in the Moundville region and were transported to the Lower Mississippi Valley.²

Evidence of Use

Long ago, Moore pointed out the most obvious evidence for how these objects were used: the presence of white, red, and/or black mineral pigment on the obverse face (Moore 1905: 145–47, 1907: 392). He surmised that these objects were used to prepare the pigments—which is why he called them “palettes.” Soon after, Holmes (1906: 105) took this functional argument a step further and suggested, correctly in my view, that these palettes “filled some important sacred or ceremonial office, as in preparing colors for shamanistic use or religious ceremony.”

Understanding more specifically how these objects were used requires that we look in detail at their archaeological contexts and surface residues. At Moundville, such interpretations are hampered by two practices that were common when the site was excavated, prior to World War II. First, critical information on the specifics of artifact placement within the burials was often not recorded. And second, the palettes were heavily scrubbed, thereby removing all but the most persistent residues.

To take our argument further, therefore, we must digress a bit and consider the evidence on similar palettes from Etowah. Although they were made of a different raw material, I believe the Etowah palettes were functionally similar to those from Moundville, and the fact that they were excavated in the 1950s gives us a much richer body of evidence to consider (Steponaitis et al. 2011). For present purposes the salient facts on Etowah palettes are as follows:

- The palettes found in burials tend to occur in “kits,” consisting of the palette, a large lump of pigment, and a large piece of a heavy, metallic mineral—usually galena (Steponaitis et al. 2011: table 6).
- The elements of these kits tend to be found in the same relative positions, with the pigment and galena resting against the palette’s obverse face, and these relative positions remain the same regardless of the kit’s orientation, that is, whether the kit was placed in the ground right-side up or upside down (Steponaitis et al. 2011: 91–94).
- Virtually all the palettes found at Etowah have fabric impressions on the reverse face, as though they were wrapped with this fabric. This fabric presumably surrounded everything in the kit. The weave of this fabric is a type often found in ethnographic medicine bundles from the Great Plains (Steponaitis et al. 2011: 94–98).

These observations, taken together, clearly indicate that the Etowah palettes were ritual gear kept in bundles.

The residues on the Etowah palettes also tell an interesting story: they consist of multiple layers of different colorful or shiny minerals—calcite, graphite, hematite, and mica, to name a few—as well as some sort of organic, resinous substance. I suspect these materials were viewed as spiritually potent substances rather than paints, and that the palettes themselves were portable altars on which spiritual medicines were prepared (Steponaitis et al. 2011: 90–91, 98–99).

Returning now to the palettes from Moundville, one also finds evidence, albeit not as consistently, of these items being wrapped. One palette shows very clear impressions of a soft wrapping, which could be either leather or textile, on its reverse face (figure 7.5a). Another has impressions from a (cane?) basket or woven mat visible in the white pigment on its obverse face (figure 7.5b). There was also a burial in Mound C where C. B. Moore observed a stack of three palettes that were “covered with decayed wood,” suggesting some sort of decomposed container or covering (Moore 1905: 149–50). Overall, the number of palettes with direct evidence of wrapping is small, but the fact that such evidence occurs at all is significant, especially given that the artifacts have all been heavily scrubbed and that details of the context of discovery were usually not recorded.

One other line of evidence, albeit indirect, bears mention. Palettes found in burials at Moundville often exhibit areas containing circular



Figure 7.5. Palettes exhibiting clear impressions of wrappings or containers: (a) circular palette with impressions of soft wrapping on reverse face (obverse face shown in fig. 1c); (b) rectangular palette with matting or basketry impressions visible in white pigment. The impressions on palette (a) consist of manganese-rich black stains that are probably microbial in origin (see text). These stains may have formed in air pockets between the folds of a wrapping material, perhaps made of a textile or soft leather. (Collections: a, NMAI, 17/1483; b, AMNH, NE137)

black stains of varying size, typically less than a centimeter in diameter, which appear to be postdepositional in origin (see figures 7.1a, 7.1c, 7.3a, 7.5a). These bear a strong resemblance to the manganese-rich stains that occur on west Mexican ceramic figurines, which are caused by metal-fixing bacterial or fungal colonies in microenvironments created by shaft-and-chamber tombs (Pickering and Cuevas 2003).³ I strongly suspect, but cannot yet prove, that the stains on Moundville palettes are also biological in origin, a byproduct of objects being buried in an organic wrapping, which provided the nutrients and perhaps air pockets in which these microorganisms could thrive. The fact that some of the wrapping impressions described previously consist entirely of these stains lends credence to this idea (figure 7.5a), although the hypothesis remains to be tested by geochemical and microscopic studies.

As mentioned previously, the pigment residues found on Moundville palettes are mostly white or red in color, and sometimes black. The only chemical analysis ever done on these pigments was commissioned by C. B. Moore in 1905, when his colleague, H. F. Keller, determined that the

white substance on one of the palettes was cerrusite, a weathering product of galena (Moore 1905: 145–47). There can be little doubt that the red consists of hematite, but the black remains a mystery. Clearly, much more work needs to be done along these lines.

All in all, it is reasonable to conclude that palettes at Moundville were kept in bundles, like those at Etowah. Unlike at Etowah, however, there is little evidence that these bundles contained anything other than the palettes themselves, or at least anything nonperishable. Lumps of colorful or specular minerals—such as galena, hematite, glauconite, psilomelane (black hematite), and mica—are not uncommon at Moundville, but they tend *not* to occur in the same burials with palettes. Of the 36 palette burials that are reasonably well documented, only seven contained lumps of pigment, and in only five of these cases were the pigments placed near the palette itself. In other words, even though palettes and pigments were clearly used together—as indicated by pigment residues on palette surfaces and their co-occurrence in mound contexts (Knight 2010: 158–59)—they were not consistently placed together in the same graves. This suggests that the palette rituals at Moundville entailed a division of labor in which various elements used in the ritual were contributed by different groups or individuals. Such an interpretation is entirely consistent with the kind of partitive ritual structure that Knight (2010: 348–60) has inferred for Moundville, based on the overall distribution of ritual paraphernalia among the mounds.

Implications

If we accept, at least for the sake of argument, that Moundville palettes were ritual gear kept in sacred bundles, what does this tell us about Moundville and the other Mississippian sites where these objects were found? Let us consider some implications, which are informed by the extensive ethnographic literature on bundles and their use in the Eastern Woodlands and Great Plains (see Hanson 1980; Richert 1969; Sidoff 1977; Zedeño 2008; and references therein).

First and foremost, it becomes implausible to think of these palettes as “prestige goods” in the Frankenstein and Rowlands (1978) sense. Ethnographically, we know that such bundles could never be given away as gifts. Owning a bundle required having the spiritual knowledge to handle the powers it embodied and the ritual paraphernalia it contained. One could

acquire a bundle either by holding an office with ritual responsibilities or by apprenticing oneself to someone who held a bundle, acquiring the necessary songs and other knowledge, and eventually gaining the right to make one's own copy of the bundle.⁴ These objects were more like what Weiner (1985, 1992) has called "inalienable possessions" than Frankenstein and Rowlands' "prestige goods."

Second, the individuals who used these palettes were "bundle keepers" who had acquired the necessary ritual knowledge and may have served as priests. This is entirely consistent with the finding by Phillips (this volume) that people buried with palettes could be either male or female but were always adults. Ethnographically, bundles varied along a continuum from "corporate" bundles, which were kept by religious or political officials on behalf of a social group, to "personal" bundles, which were kept by individuals for their own use. Elsewhere I have argued that the palette bundles at Etowah were corporate, based on their rarity and restricted contexts in Mound C (Steponaitis et al. 2011: 99). At Moundville, on the other hand, the relative abundance of palettes and their widespread distribution suggests that the bundles were personal. Sites and regions with unusual concentrations of palettes, such as Moundville and its environs, were places with many trained practitioners of the ritual in which the palettes were used. In other words, they were centers for certain kinds of religious practice.

Third, the dispersal of palettes from such centers does not represent trade or the giving of "prestige goods" as gifts, but rather the transmission of ritual knowledge. Ethnographically, the most plausible mechanism for such transmission would have been for those seeking ritual power to come to Moundville and apprentice themselves to the established practitioners. After acquiring the necessary knowledge, the new practitioner could then create a bundle containing a palette and bring it home as a tangible manifestation of this knowledge and the spiritual power it conferred.

In sum, the realization that palettes were parts of sacred bundles requires us to change our notions about the nature of Mississippian centers and how such objects moved across the landscape. In addition to seeing Moundville as a seat of political power, we must now also see it as a center of spiritual power, a place of priestly activity. Along the same lines, neither "trade" nor gift-giving can account for the movement of these objects over hundreds of kilometers. We must instead understand Moundville as a

place of pilgrimage, where people came from great distances to acquire the knowledge that its priests and other religious practitioners possessed.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the many individuals who helped me with access to the museum collections that are at the heart of this study: Mary Bade, Patricia Capone, Thomas Evans, Viva Fisher, Eugene Futato, Gloria Greis, Susan Haskell, James Krakker, Mary Jane Lenz, Pamela Edwards Lieb, Diana Loren, Patricia Miller-Beech, Jo Miles-Seeley, Patricia Nietfeld, and Bruce Smith. Crucial support for travel to these museums was provided by the Graham Research Fund at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. C. Margaret Scarry and Laurie Steponaitis, Jon Marcoux, and an anonymous reviewer gave useful comments on earlier drafts. But above all I wish to acknowledge, with heartfelt gratitude, my debt to Christopher Peebles, who in 1974 invited me to join him in his Moundville research and thereby started me on a road that I am still traveling today.

Notes

1. In this respect the Moundville palettes differ markedly from those at Etowah, which often have rounded bottoms and depressed centers on top (Steponaitis et al. 2011: 2, figure 2).

2. Another possible Moundville palette was found at the Long Island site in Roane County, Tennessee (Chapman 1982: figure 70). It currently resides at the McClung Museum in Knoxville (catalog number 42/29Re17). This palette is made of gray sandstone, and its decoration is consistent with the Hemphill style (Knight and Steponaitis 2011), but I cannot be certain of its source without examining the stone in more detail.

3. The literature on this staining, which is usually called “rock varnish” or “desert varnish,” is considerable (e.g., Aronson and Kingery 1990; Dorn and Oberlander 1981; O’Grady 2004; Taylor-George et al. 1983; and references therein). At Moundville these stains occur most often on palettes and pipes—exactly the kind of ritual gear that was likely to have been bundled.

4. Ethnographic accounts from the Great Plains sometimes refer to the “purchase” of bundles, but this term is misleading. Such transactions were actually more like apprenticeships, in which the owner instructed the recipient in the proper treatment and use of the bundle, and the recipient in turn was expected to compensate the owner with gifts (see Richert 1969; Sidoff 1977).