

Acknowledgments

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Vincas P. Steponaitis

The Moundville site on the Black Warrior River in west-central Alabama is one of the largest Mississippian sites in eastern North America. The site contains at least 20 artificial mounds, most of which surround a large rectangular plaza. The plaza itself covers some 32 ha, and the site as a whole some 100 ha (Moore 1905; Peebles 1978, 1979).

Despite the fact that Moundville is a well-known site with a long history of investigations, many aspects of its internal chronology have, until recently, remained obscure. Previous workers generally were forced to deal with Moundville in a static framework, as though all the remains seen archaeologically pertained to a single moment in time. This synchronic outlook did not stem from a lack of interest in diachronic patterns, but rather from a lack of fine chronological control. The "Moundville phase", as it was previously defined, encompassed a 500 year span within which no temporal distinctions were recognized (e.g., McKenzie 1966). As long as this block of time remained undivided, developmental studies could not proceed.

My own recent work at Moundville has been directed especially toward solving this problem. Based on a seriation of whole vessels and on a stratigraphic analysis of sherds, it has been possible to subdivide the "Moundville phase" into three shorter units—Moundville I, Moundville II, and Moundville III (Steponaitis 1980a, 1980b). Adding these three new units to the two previously-defined phases which come before and after (West Jefferson and Alabama River), the entire late prehistoric sequence now consists of five phases spanning the period from A.D. 900 to 1700. Using this new chronology, it is now possible to trace how the size and configuration of the Moundville site changed through time.

Changes in Community Patterns through Time

All the evidence we have suggests that people at Moundville were usually buried in close proximity to residential areas—in the floors of dwellings, just outside the dwellings' walls, or in cemeteries nearby (Jones and DeJarnette n.d.:3; Peebles 1978:375-381, 1979: passim). Burials also occur in many of the mounds. Therefore, by plotting the distribution of dated burials and vessels for each time period separately, it should be possible to get at least a rough idea of when different parts of the site were occupied, and when various mounds were built.

The present discussion of community patterns is based on a series of maps, each showing the distribution of burials and unassociated vessels belonging to

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a particular phase of occupation (Figs. 1-5). To assure reliability, only the most narrowly-dated vessels and burials are plotted—those which could be securely assigned to a range that spanned no more than two adjacent time segments (e.g., Moundville I/early Moundville II, early Moundville II/late Moundville II, late Moundville II/early Moundville III, etc.). Thus, one should keep in mind that the number of vessels/burials plotted on these maps actually represents a minimum, since numerous vessels and burials which lacked sufficiently diagnostic features are excluded (for further details, see Steponaitis 1980a:232-268).

West Jefferson Phase (ca. A.D. 900-1050). This component, unlike the others, cannot be defined by plotting the spatial distribution of burials, since West Jefferson gravelots have never been found to contain pottery (see Ensor 1979:12-15). There are literally thousands of burials without ceramics reported at Moundville, but for now it is impossible to tell which ones are West Jefferson and which ones are later.

The principal evidence for a West Jefferson component at Moundville exists in the form of sherds, mostly from excavations which took place in the 1930s. Although these collections have never been fully analyzed, a number of preliminary reports indicate that most of the West Jefferson pottery was recovered from the western periphery of the site, in the area to the west of Mounds O and P (Wimberly 1956:18-19; Walthall and Wimberly 1978:122-123). Walthall and Wimberly (1978:123) recently estimated that the West Jefferson occupation was a village of approximately .5-1.0 ha in size; judging from the position of the excavations which produced the greatest number of grog-tempered sherds, this village was located within the area shown on Figure 1.

Moundville I Phase (ca. A.D. 1050-1250). The greatest concentration of Moundville I burials and vessels occurs in the western part of the site, showing considerable continuity in location from the previous phase (Fig. 2). The core of the site at this time appears to have consisted of at least a single mound, an early stage of Mound O. Immediately to the west of this mound was a cluster of burials—probably a small cemetery. The overall distribution of burials also suggests scattered occupation to the north, south, and east of the mound, especially in the areas along Carthage Branch. It is difficult to tell whether the absence of burials and vessels in the central portion of the map represents an actual lack of occupation, or merely the paucity of excavations in the area that was later to become the plaza.

The pattern evident in Figure 2 is quite intriguing.

WEST JEFFERSON PHASE

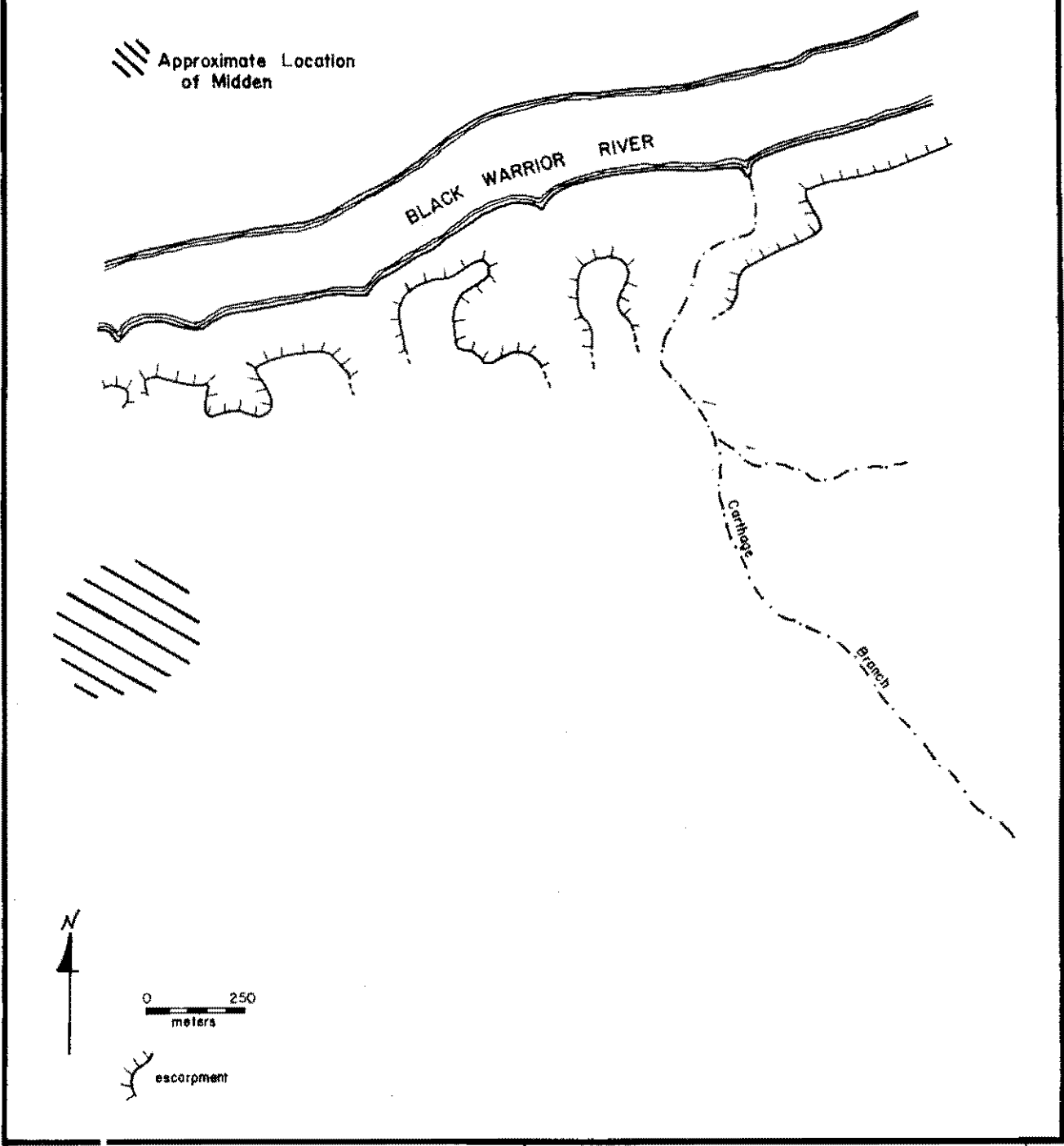


Figure 1. Approximate location of West Jefferson phase component.
CORRECTION—Meters scale should read 0-125.

for it seems to be consistent with patterns found elsewhere in the Warrior valley at the same time. Recent surveys have indicated that during this phase, Moundville was one of a series of small, more or less equivalent political centers, each with a single mound, and a number of small hamlets or farmsteads scattered in its immediate vicinity (Peebles et al. 1979; Bozeman, personal communication). The elaborate three-level settlement hierarchy, which many of our previous

models took for granted (e.g., Steponaitis 1978), clearly had not developed by this time.

Moundville II Phase (ca. A.D. 1250-1400). In Moundville II times, the situation changed dramatically as Moundville grew to become a major political center (Fig. 3). There were considerably more burials dating to this phase at the site, probably indicating a much larger population. Moreover, the evidence suggests that this was a time when a considerable amount

MOUNDVILLE I PHASE

- Burial/Gravelot - Moundville I
- + Unassociated Vessel - Moundville I
- Burial/Gravelot - Late Moundville I or Early Moundville II
- x Unassociated Vessel - Late Moundville I or Early Moundville II
- ▣ Mound - Definite

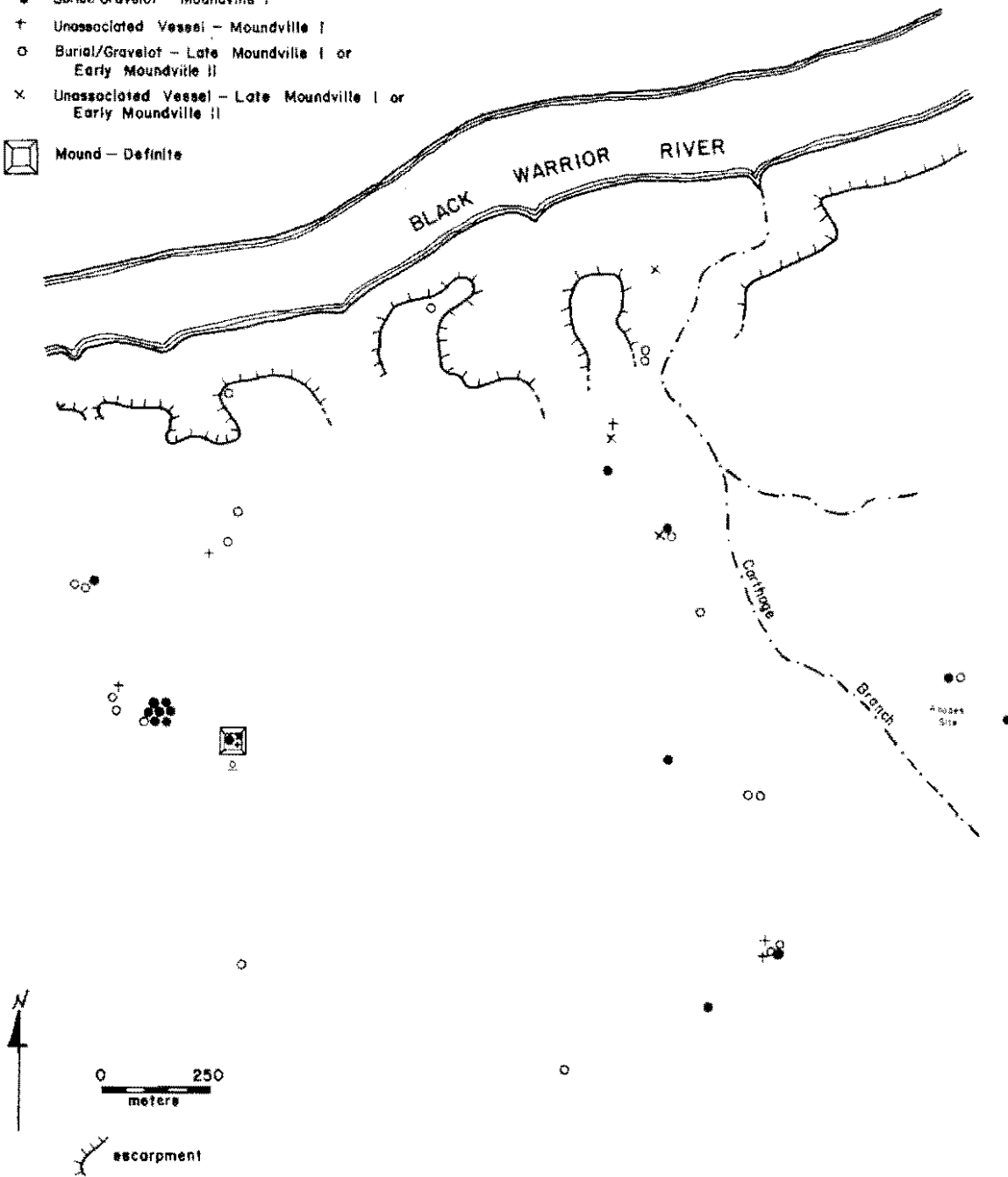


Figure 2. Spatial distribution of burials and unassociated vessels, Moundville I phase (some possibly early Moundville II).
CORRECTION—Meters scale should read 0-125.

of public labor was mobilized to build mounds. There is definite evidence in the form of inclusive pottery vessels that at least five mounds (C, D, F, H, O) were standing by the end of this phase. Moreover, given that the securely-dated mounds occur at both the northern and southern extremities of the site, it seems likely that early stages of many of the intervening mounds, from which we have no datable artifacts, were standing as well.

Mortuary activity during this phase continued in the area west of Mound O, and large burial concentrations also began appearing elsewhere on the site, mainly to the east and north. Especially prominent were burial concentrations north of Mound R, southwest of Mound M, and (late in Moundville II) the large cemetery areas near Mounds D and E.

Moundville III Phase (ca. A.D. 1400-1550). Most of the patterns established in Moundville II times con-

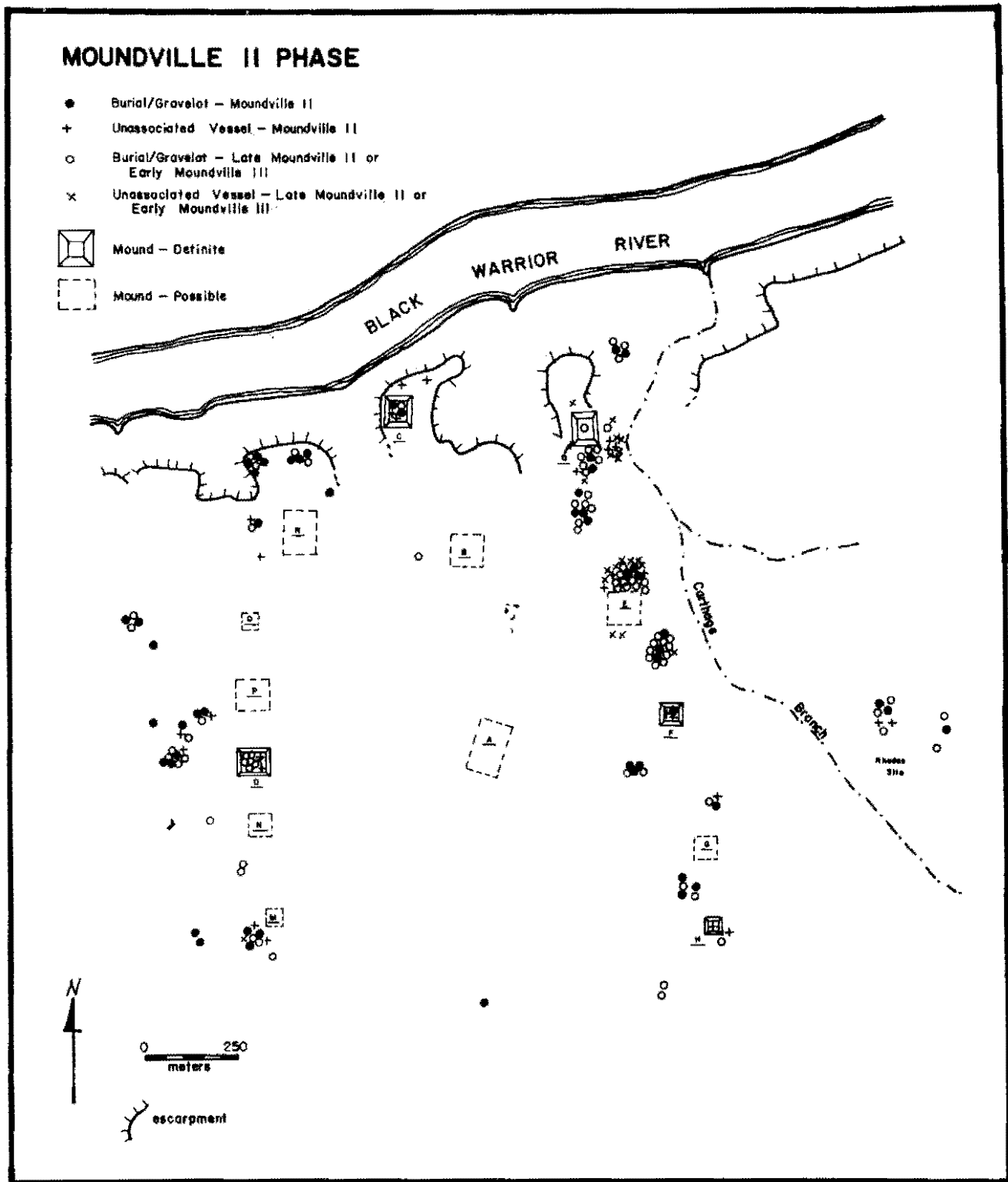


Figure 3. Spatial distribution of burials and unassociated vessels, Moundville II phase (some possibly early Moundville III).
CORRECTION—Meters scale should read 0-125.

tinued into Moundville III (Fig. 4). Judging from the distribution of burials, the area of settlement may have expanded somewhat farther to the west. Again, the largest concentrations of dated burials occurred in the vicinities of Mounds D and E, with smaller concentrations southwest of Mound G, southwest of Mound M, west of Mounds O and P, west and north of Mound R, and on the Rhodes site east of Carthage Branch. Mound building must have continued apace, with ves-

sels definitely of this phase occurring in Mounds B, D, and O. Without a doubt, all the mounds reached their final configuration by the end of Moundville III, because by the succeeding Alabama River phase, the site had been virtually abandoned.

Alabama River Phase (ca. A.D. 1550-1700). That a proto-historic component did exist at Moundville is indicated by the presence of diagnostic vessels and sherds; yet it is abundantly clear that the component

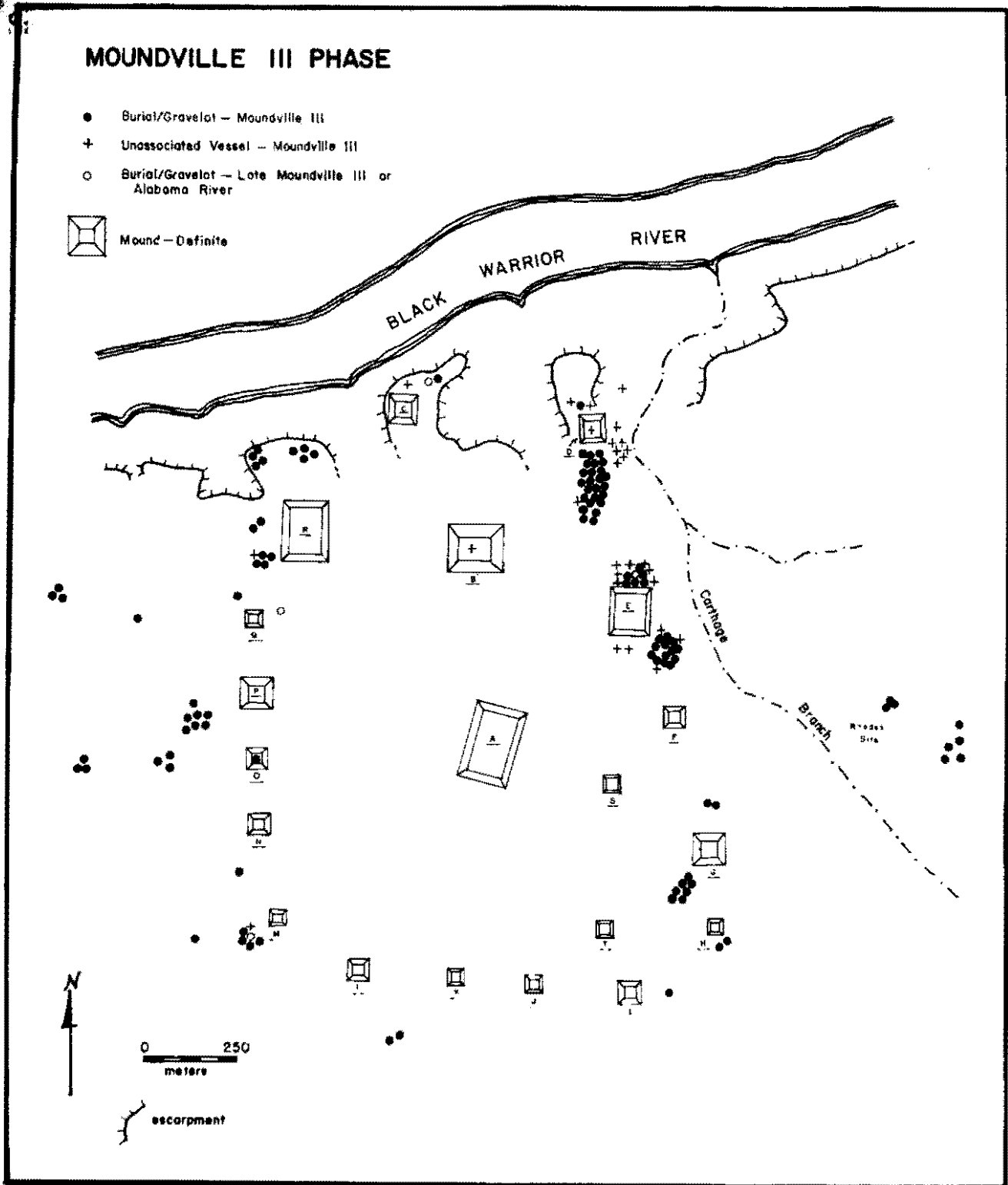


Figure 4. Spatial distribution of burials and unassociated vessels, Moundville III phase (some possibly early Alabama River phase).
CORRECTION—Meters scale should read 0-125.

was miniscule compared to those which preceded it (Fig. 5). Evidence of mortuary activity is minimal, with one burial southwest of Mound G, another north of Mound R, and two unassociated vessels (which probably came from burials) north of Mound B. Also possibly dating to this phase are two "urn-burials of infants," which Moore reported finding south of Mound D (1907:342-343). All in all, this sparse representation is suggestive of nothing more than a few

farmsteads or hamlets, scattered over what was once an enormous site.

Summary and Discussion

Summing up the evidence just presented, it appears that Moundville underwent a gradual development through time. The site began as a small nucleated village in the West Jefferson phase, then became

ALABAMA RIVER PHASE

- Burial/Gravelot — Alabama River
- + Unassociated Vessel — Alabama River
- Mound — Probably Abandoned

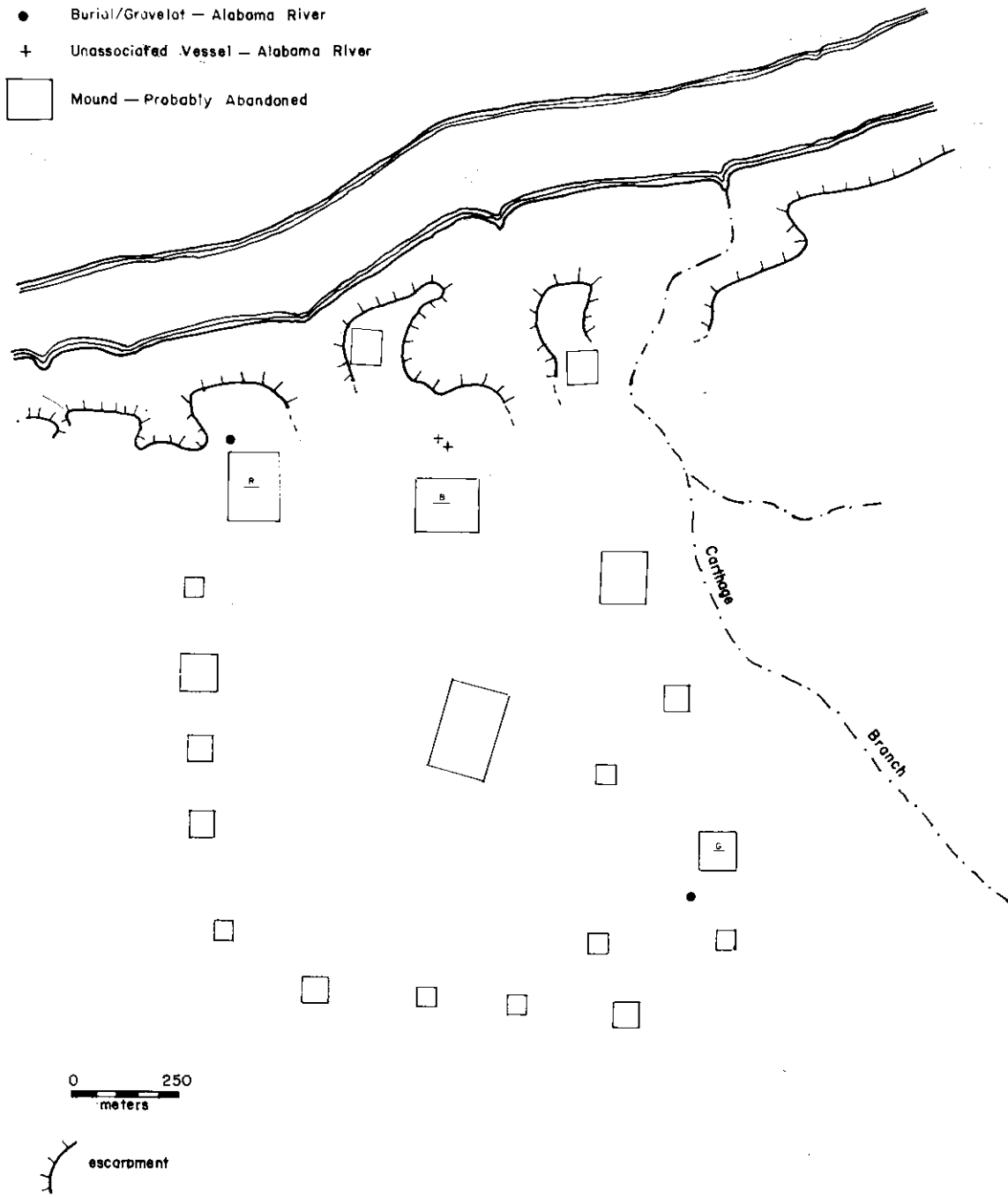


Figure 5. Spatial distribution of burials and unassociated vessels, Alabama River phase.
CORRECTION—Meters scale should read 0-125.

a small local center with a single mound in Moundville I, and finally evolved into a large regional center during Moundville II and Moundville III. Decline became evident only in the Alabama River phase, by which time the site had lost its political importance, and was left with only a trace of its former population.

Overall, the sequence is marked by strong continuities in settlement location from one phase to the next, especially notable in the transition from West

Jefferson to Moundville I. These continuities, together with certain continuities in ceramic style (Steponaitis 1980a:221-225), are fully consistent with the notion that the Moundville phases I-III—and the socio-political complexity they represent—evolved locally from the indigenous West Jefferson base, and were not the result of any migrations into the valley from outside (for a contrasting opinion, see Jenkins 1976).