

# NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES IN THE PRECOLONIAL SOUTH

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Contrary to what many people believe, Southern history does not begin 500 years ago with the Spanish exploration and subsequent incursions by missionaries, traders, and colonists. Rather, the South has a much longer history, one that stretches back at least twelve thousand years (Bense 1994; Smith 1986; Steponaitis 1986). This precolonial, Native history of the South—accessible principally through archaeological research—has been a fruitful area of inquiry for nearly two centuries. Indeed, many early-nineteenth-century residents of the Natchez District—including William Dunbar and Benjamin Wailes—took an active interest in the antiquities of this region and made written observations that are still used by archaeologists today (Kennedy 1994; Sydnor 1938).

My goal here is to review this ancient history in line with the second Historic Natchez Conference's theme, "Becoming Southern in Time and Place." The word "becoming" implies origins, and if we are to consider the origins of "Southernness," we must note that the South was a culturally distinctive region not only during the Colonial and American periods, but in precolonial times as well.

At the time of first contact with Europeans, the Native Americans who lived in the South had a way of life that was recognizably different from that of the Northern and Western tribes. Early on, Euro-American observers recognized this difference by speaking of the Southern tribes as being more "civilized" than the rest. However ethnocentric and inappropriate this description may have been, it did call attention to a very real distinction, which, as we shall see, had very deep historical roots. Later, in the twentieth century, anthropologists codified this distinction by recognizing the South as a "culture area," that is, a geographical unit within which

there was a high degree of cultural uniformity (e.g., Swanton 1946). While scholars have sometimes disagreed over the boundaries of this unit, no one has disputed the unit's existence. Indeed, the boundaries of this older South, what I call the Native South, are remarkably similar to those of the American South as we think of it today (Figure 1).

In the pages that follow, I'll examine two questions that pertain to the origins of this Native South: First, when did a distinctively Southern regional culture first appear? And second, to what extent (and how consistently) did this Southern cultural identity persist through time? While exploring these questions, I will present a brief chronicle of the South's precolonial history, both to familiarize the reader with its major trends and to provide a context for the other papers in this volume. In line with the volume's focus on the Natchez District, I will also pay special attention to developments in the Lower Mississippi Valley, and how these fit within the cultural fabric of the South as a whole.

The human history of the South really begins with the first peopling of North America, which occurred during the last Ice Age. Based on archaeological, genetic, and linguistic evidence, there is little doubt that this continent's first inhabitants came from Asia (Fagan 1987). They arrived by way of the Bering Strait, which, because of lowered sea-levels during the Ice Age, was largely free of water. In effect, there was a thousand-mile-wide "land bridge" connecting Asia with the Americas, a land mass that geologists call Beringia. Exactly when people first arrived by way of this land bridge remains a controversial issue: most archaeologists believe that the first crossing occurred sometime between 25,000 and 12,000 years ago. But whatever position one takes on the timing of the *first* arrival, everyone agrees that human populations were well established here by 12,000 years ago, or 10,000 BC. This is the date at which the most ancient inhabitants of North America crossed the threshold of archaeological visibility and started leaving abundant evidence of their presence, evidence that we can find and interpret today.

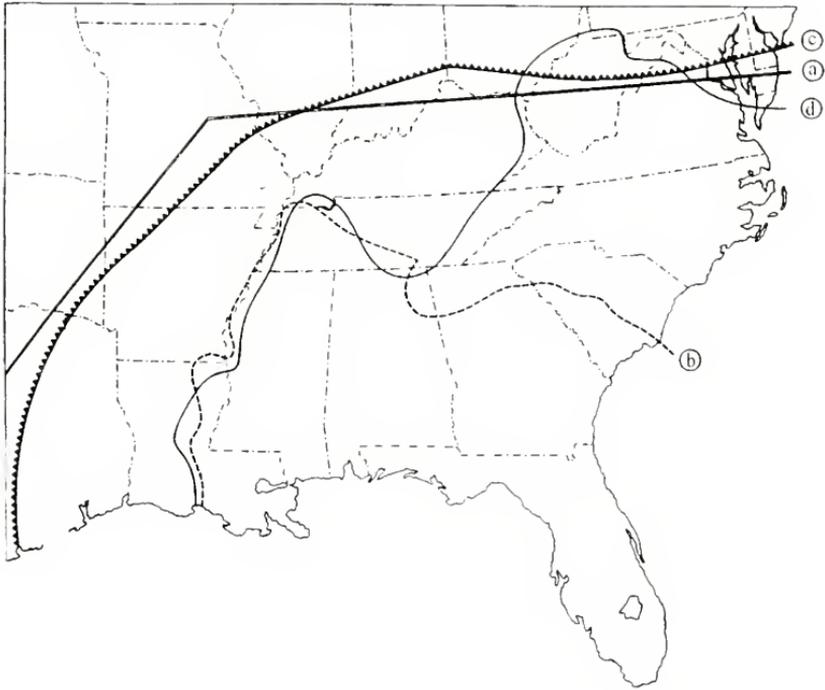


Figure 1. The boundaries of the South as a “culture area” or “ethnological province,” based on similarities among Indian cultures at the time of European contact, as defined by various authors: a, Clark Wissler (1922); b, Alfred Kroeber (1939); c, John Swanton (1946); d, George Murdock (1960). (Adapted from Smith 1986: Figure 1.1.)

From this date onward, we can trace the history of the South—and its regional distinctiveness—through the four major periods that archaeologists conventionally recognize: Paleoindian (10,000 - 8000 BC), Archaic (8000 - 700 BC), Woodland (700 BC - AD 1000), and Mississippi (AD 1000 - 1500). Each of these periods subsumes a great deal of cultural variation, both temporal and geographical. (We are obviously dealing here with Braudel’s *longue durée*—the broad patterns of economic and social history, not a detailed chronicle of individual lives and events.) Nevertheless, despite their great length, these periods provide a convenient frame within which to sketch the outlines of the South’s ancient history.

## Paleoindian Period

Some twelve thousand years ago, at the start of the Paleoindian period, the South was a very different place than it is today. Ice-age fauna (such as mastodons, ground sloths, and bison) roamed the land. We know that these large animals were occasionally hunted for food. Evidence for the hunting of mastodon and bison have been found at a number of sites from this period, but nowhere more graphically than in the Florida panhandle, where amateur archaeologists found the skull of an Ice-Age bison, with a stone spear-point embedded between the horns (Webb et al. 1984).

We know from archaeological evidence that this Ice-Age landscape was inhabited by groups of foragers who lived off the land. They gathered edible plants, hunted wild game, and fished as opportunities arose. Settlements were relatively small and impermanent, consistent with a nomadic way of life. We believe that population densities were low, social groups were relatively small (say 50-100 people), and that these groups moved over large territories, encompassing many thousands of square kilometers. Evidence of these movements can be seen in the geographical distribution of distinctive types of rock, which were quarried at known sources, made into tools, and eventually discarded hundreds of kilometers from where they originated (Goodyear 1979).

In terms of basic lifeway and artifact styles, perhaps the most striking thing about the Paleoindian period is the uniformity one sees across the entire North American continent. Styles of spear-points and other stone tools used in the South at this time are virtually identical to those found as far north as Canada and as far west as the Pacific coast (Figure 2). The combination of low population density, high mobility, and large territories facilitated sustained communication across vast areas, which made possible the broad cultural similarities so evident in the archaeological record. While there were undoubtedly some regional differences based on the idiosyncracies of local environment, at this early date the Native South as a distinctive *cultural* region had not yet come into being.

## Archaic Period

This continental uniformity did not last more than a couple of thousand years (which is not long by archaeological standards). By the beginning of the Archaic period at 8000 BC, we have the first clear evidence for the emergence of a regional culture in the South. This culture, called “Dalton” by archaeologists, was marked by a distinctive spear-point and a tool assemblage that included adzes for heavy-duty woodworking—the first known examples of such tools in North America (Figure 3). The “Southernness” of this culture is clearly evidenced by the archaeological distribution of its artifacts: the geographical extent of this ancient style corresponds closely to our modern conception of the American South, except for an anomalous (and possibly spurious) bulge to the northwest (Justice 1987: Map 12). By this time, the Ice Age had ended, and although these people still foraged for their food, the plants they gathered and the animals they hunted were all species we find in the South’s forests today—such as acorns, hickory nuts, and deer.

Artifact styles and lifeways changed continually throughout the Archaic period, resulting in cultural variants far too numerous to discuss individually here. Suffice it to say that, with these changes, the Southern identity first seen in Dalton times waxed and waned a number of times. In general, Southern cultures tended to be different from those found farther north and west, but cultural boundaries shifted in ways that sometimes cross-cut modern regions, particularly the upper South and lower Midwest. In addition, there was a trend toward ever-greater “regionalization.” That is, even within a larger cultural region, distinctive subregions became much more clearly distinguishable.

Indeed, by Middle Archaic times the Lower Mississippi Valley had emerged as just such a subregion. Its distinctiveness was expressed not just in artifacts but also in architecture. Around 3400 BC and perhaps even earlier, the people of this valley began building monuments of earth—substantial mounds that marked places of sacred or social importance (Saunders et al. 1997). In recent years, more than a



Figure 2. A stone spearpoint of the "Clovis" type, a style used throughout North America in Paleoindian times. This specimen was found in Durham County, North Carolina. (Photo by I. Randolph Daniel.)



Figure 3. Dalton adzes from the Hardaway site in Stanley County, North Carolina: top, unfinished adze preforms or blanks; bottom, finished adzes. (Courtesy of Research Laboratories of Archaeology, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; photo by I. Randolph Daniel.)

half-dozen mound sites dating to Middle Archaic times have been identified in eastern Louisiana, and many more still remain to be found.

These mounds were built in a variety of configurations. Some, like Watson Brake near the city of Monroe, Louisiana, had multiple mounds in a circular arrangement. Other sites, like Hedgepeth, had fewer mounds, in this case only two (Saunders et al. 1994). The function of these mounds is a mystery. We assume that they were public buildings, with religious and political significance to the people who built them. But exactly what that significance was, we just don't know. However this mystery is eventually resolved, the important thing to remember for now is that these earthen mounds were the earliest in North America by far, and comprised an architectural tradition unique to the Lower Mississippi Valley at this time.

Toward the end of the Archaic period, around 1100 BC, this architectural tradition culminated in one of the largest pre-Columbian earthworks in North America: the Poverty Point site (Figure 4), about 100 kilometers west of Vicksburg (Ford and Webb 1956; Webb 1977). The most obvious feature at this site is a very large mound, about 210 m long at the base and 21 m high. Some believe that its cross-like shape was intended to represent a bird. In addition to this enormous mound, the site contains six concentric earthen ridges, which form a semicircle 1.2 km in diameter. The scale of these ridges is so big that they were not even recognized as artificial constructions until the aerial photos of the site were examined in the 1940s. While the mounds seem to have been purely ceremonial structures, there is good evidence that the ridges were places of habitation.

Interestingly, the people who built Poverty Point still relied on foraging, hunting, and fishing for their basic subsistence (Fritz, this volume). Apparently, the floodplain environment was so rich in wild foods that large concentrations of people could be supported without farming. While plant husbandry and small-scale gardening were already being practiced in some parts of the South and Midwest by 1000 BC, these innovations were relatively slow to be adopted in the Lower Mississippi Valley.

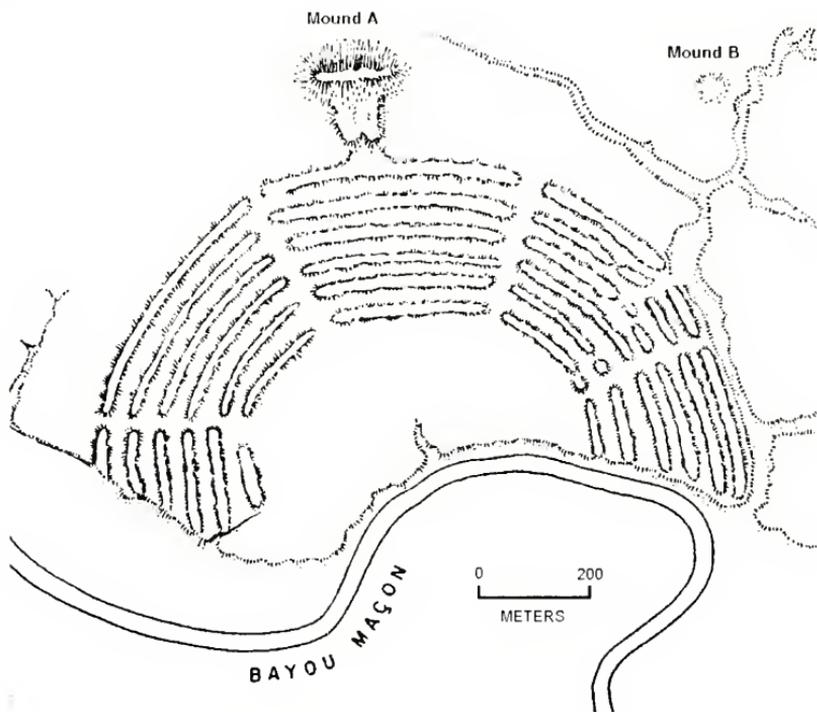


Figure 4. The massive earthworks at Poverty Point, West Carroll Parish, Louisiana. The system of concentric ridges is 1.2 km in diameter. Mound A is 21 m high and more than 200 m long; Mound B is nearly 7 m high and some 60 m in diameter. These earthworks date approximately between 1500 and 500 BC. (Adapted from Ford and Webb 1956: Figure 6.)

## Woodland Period

The Woodland Period was a time of considerable change, when agricultural economies spread and gained importance in many parts of the South and Midwest. Initially, the crops were indigenous species (such as squash, goosefoot, marsh elder, and little barley) that were planted in gardens and often domesticated. These crops, however, did not completely supplant wild foods, which continued to be very important. The subsistence economy was broad-based, with a mix of farming and gathering, as well as hunting and fishing (Smith 1992).

The practice of building mounds now became ubiquitous



*Figure 5. Mound 4 at the Marksville site in Avoyelles Parish, Louisiana. This conical burial mound, which dates to the Middle Woodland period (ca. 100 BC-AD 300), is 6 m high and 30 m across. The wooden fence at the base is a modern construction.*

across the Eastern Woodlands. From the Great Lakes to the Gulf Coast, and from the Mississippi Valley to the Atlantic shore, a new tradition arose of building mounds over graves or special areas used in ceremonies connected with the dead. These so-called “burial mounds” came in a variety of forms, and were used in a variety of ways (Figure 5). In some places, these mounds were reserved for the tombs of community leaders, who were given elaborate funerals appropriate to their exalted status. Elsewhere, burial mounds seemed to have a more communal character, expressing social relations that were more egalitarian. Both types of mounds occurred in the South, and in other regions as well (Steponaitis 1986).

Generally speaking, this was a time of widespread trade and interaction during which the cultural distinctiveness of the South as a whole seemed to dissolve. Or, to put the matter differently, cultural boundaries shifted in a way that made the South less of a discrete entity. With the spread of “Hopewellian” cultures, much of the South became part of a larger cultural sphere that included substantial portions of the Midwest and Northeast.

On the other hand, despite the South’s overall “disappear-

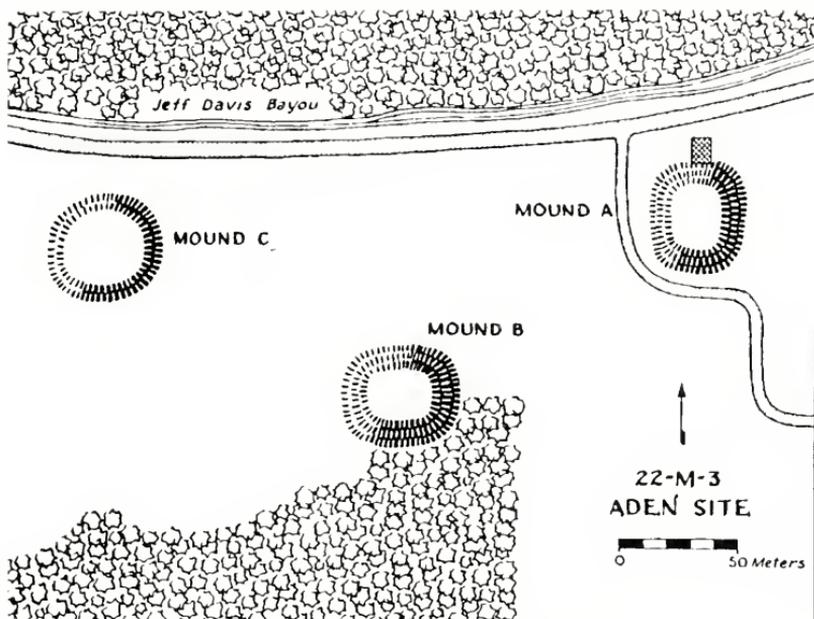


Figure 6. The Aden site, a Coles Creek period (ca. AD 700-1000) mound complex in Issaquena County, Mississippi (after Phillips 1970: Figure 142). The plan consists of three flat-topped, pyramidal mounds arranged around a plaza. When in use, each mound probably had a wooden building on the summit.

ance,” the Lower Mississippi Valley and adjacent Gulf Coast continued to remain distinctive. This area was home to the Tchefuncte, Troyville, and Coles Creek cultures (among others)—all of which differed markedly from their northern and eastern contemporaries (Neuman 1984; Williams and Brain 1983). For one thing, their pottery styles were very different (and far more diverse), emphasizing incised geometric designs rather than the paddle stamping that predominated elsewhere. Moreover, public architecture also evolved in a distinctive way, with the appearance (in the Coles Creek culture) of flat-topped mounds with wooden buildings on top—earthworks called “platform mounds.” These mounds, sometimes found in groups of two or three, were typically arranged around an open plaza that served as a venue for community ceremonies and politics (Figure 6). As we shall see, this mound-plaza arrangement, which first became common in the Lower Mississippi Valley around AD 700, was soon to spread

across the entire South—yet another instance where the Lower Mississippi Valley was precocious in its public architecture.

### Mississippi Period

This brings us to the last stage in the precolonial history of the South, the Mississippi period, which began at AD 1000. This was a time when the cultural identity of the South re-crystallized in the form of the so-called “Mississippian” cultures, which were the ones eventually encountered by Europeans in the sixteenth century. The Mississippian cultural sphere stretched from the Lower Ohio River to the Gulf Coast, which, apart from minor extensions into southern Illinois, largely coincides with the South as we think of it today.

The major characteristics of Mississippian cultures were an intensively agricultural economy, a centralized political organization, and a common set of beliefs and ritual practices that were expressed by similarities in art and public architecture. Let me now briefly discuss each of these features in turn.

Mississippian agriculture was dominated by a single crop—maize—which was planted in large fields and provided up to 50% of the total diet (Figure 7). Other crops included squashes, gourds, tobacco, and a number of the indigenous plants that carried over from earlier times (C. M. Scarry 1993). It is interesting to note that the adoption of intensive maize agriculture was not so much a gradual process as a rapid event. The chemical signature of maize in human bones tells the story: the carbon isotopes associated with maize increased very rapidly around 1000 years ago, suggesting that the shift to intensive maize production happened in any given place within one or two generations at most (Ambrose 1987). It is also interesting to note that this change occurred later in the Lower Mississippi Valley than most everywhere else, not until after AD 1200 (Fritz, this volume).

This agricultural change took place across the entire Eastern U.S.: in the North as well as the South. What made

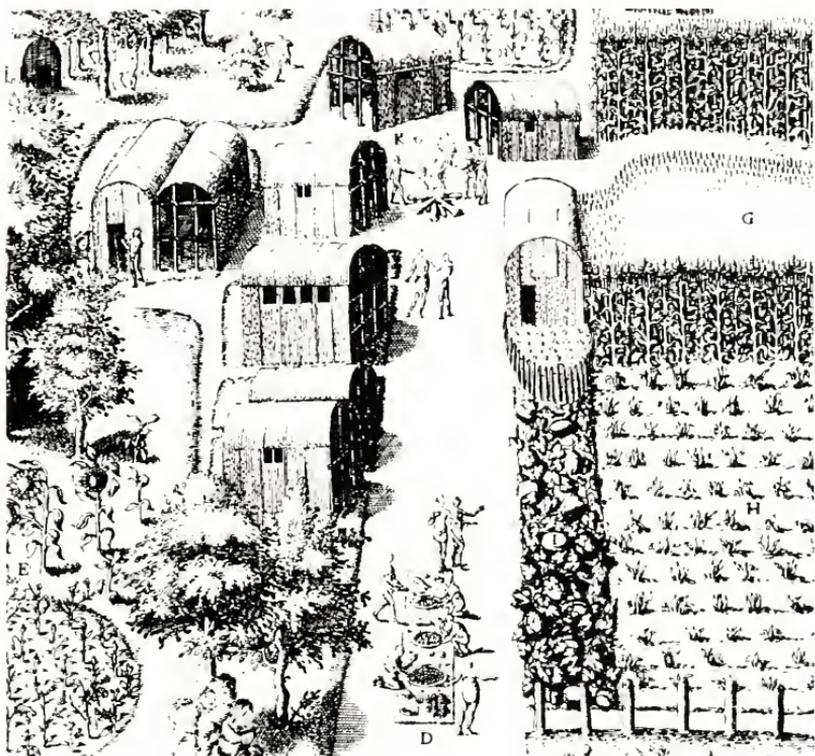


Figure 7. Detail from Theodor De Bry's engraving of the Town of Secota (Hariot 1590: Plate 20), based on a painting by John White made in the 1580s in coastal North Carolina. Note the fields of maize in different states of maturation on the right. At left, De Bry's engraving depicts fields of sunflower and tobacco; although these plants are not depicted in White's original painting (compare Figure 24 and Plate 36 in Hulton 1984), we have abundant archaeological evidence that such crops were grown during the Mississippi period.

the South different, however, were the accompanying changes in society, politics, and ideology. While Northern communities generally remained egalitarian, Southern communities became increasingly hierarchical. The dominant social formation became the chiefdom, with hereditary aristocracies and regional hierarchies of chiefs whose power rested on sacred authority, military prowess, and their practical ability to organize and carry out public works (J. F. Scarry 1996).

The most obvious archaeological manifestation of these new political arrangements was the proliferation of platform mounds across the Southern landscape. These Mississippian



Figure 8. Mound B at the Moundville site in Tuscaloosa County, Alabama. This earthen platform is 17 m high and about 75 m square at the base. On its summit is a modern reconstruction of a Mississippian building. The mound was built and used ca. AD 1200-1600.

mounds, like their Coles Creek prototypes, were typically pyramidal in shape and had a flat summit on which a building would be placed (Figure 8). Such buildings could be temples, mortuaries, or the residences of important chiefs. Groups of such mounds, arranged around open plazas, often marked the political and religious capitals of districts encompassing hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of square miles. Among the grandest of mound centers were famous sites like Cahokia in southern Illinois, Moundville in western Alabama, Etowah in northern Georgia, Lake George in the Mississippi Delta, as well as the Anna and Emerald mound sites in the Natchez Bluffs. These sites were undoubtedly built and inhabited by some of the most important political figures in North America during precolonial times.

It is important to stress that these Mississippian mounds were not simply the embodiment of some abstract architectural idea that was passed around and copied as whim and fashion dictated. Rather, in order to understand these mounds, we must view them as being firmly embedded in the context of the societies that produced them. Doing so requires that we appreciate two points. First, we must recognize that Mississip-

pian mounds required enormous amounts of labor to build, and the fact that these monuments were built presupposes the existence of political institutions capable of mobilizing sufficient labor for projects of this scale. Second, we must note that Mississippian mounds were not purely secular structures, but highly charged with religious and symbolic significance (Knight 1989). Not only were such mounds the focal point of community ceremonies, but also the construction of these mounds was almost certainly a ritual act, accompanied by offerings and an appropriate suite of ceremonies (Schnell et al. 1981).

Nor was the domain of politically important symbolic expression confined to architecture. During Mississippian times, there emerged a pan-Southern representational art style, an iconography that has come to be called the “Southeastern Ceremonial Complex” (Galloway 1989). This iconography was embodied in a number of media—shell ornaments, pottery, and stone, to name a few that survive archaeologically—and despite some local idiosyncracies, the thematic content of these representations was remarkably uniform all across the South: we see images of chiefs and priests in full regalia; a plethora of supernatural creatures with attributes of felines, serpents, and birds (Figure 9); and the accoutrements of war, including ceremonial weapons and trophies. While their meanings may be obscure to us, these symbols were understood across the Native South, and doubtless comprised a symbolic *lingua franca* that played a key role in political and religious discourse throughout the Mississippian world.

Despite the overall similarity of Southern cultures at this time, the Lower Mississippi Valley retained a flavor of its own. The culture that developed in this area after AD 1000 is called Plaquemine, and its distinctiveness is such that scholars still debate whether it should be called Mississippian at all (cf. Williams and Brain 1983). This debate, of course, is about terminology rather than substance, and so the position one takes is largely a matter of preference. For present purposes, the important thing to remember is that, while the Lower Mississippi Valley clearly fit within the broader patterns of Southern Indian culture, its pottery styles and ritual practices continued to be noticeably different.



a



b



c



d

Figure 9. Examples of Mississippian iconography from Moundville, Alabama: a, ceramic bottle with engraved head of raptor; b, bottle with winged serpent; c, beaker with human head and longbones; d, stone palette with entwined snakes surrounding a "hand-and-eye" motif. (Courtesy of Alabama Museum of Natural History, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa.)

## Discussion

In outlining some 12,000 years of Native Southern history, from the Ice Age to the European invasion, I have mentioned only the broadest patterns. But in so doing I hope that I have conveyed the main idea: that the South, as a distinctive *cultural* region, has a much longer existence than historians have conventionally recognized. The earliest archaeological evidence of a distinctively Southern way of life—manifested in the Dalton culture—dates back to 8000 BC. Subsequent millennia saw many shifts in cultural boundaries, during which this Southern identity waxed and waned, and sometimes disappeared altogether. But despite these vicissitudes, the Native South's cultural identity re-crystallized by AD 1000, and persisted until the arrival of the Europeans.

This idea raises some obvious questions. What accounts for this long-standing regional identity, which was present both before and after the European arrival and exists even today? Is it simply happenstance, or can we identify specific historical or environmental processes that explain this phenomenon? I offer no sure answers here, but simply put forward a suggestion: that, over the broad sweep of time, the continually recurring Southern identity may in part be due to a kind of environmental "possibilism." In other words, the South's distinctive climate and landscape—warm deciduous forests bounded on the west by the arid Great Plains and on the north by colder, more coniferous forests—certainly did not determine the region's history, but yet, by encouraging commonalities in lifeway and economy, made it particularly easy for the regional identity to crystalize time and time again. Indeed, perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the South's environment is its suitability for high-yield agriculture—plenty of rain, long growing season, and abundant fertile soil. Thus, it should not be too surprising that the temporal span with the most intensive farming, from the beginning of the Mississippi period (AD 1000) to the present, coincides with cultural expressions of Southern identity that were particularly strong.

It is also worth commenting on the Lower Mississippi

Valley's distinctiveness within the South as a whole. Two broad patterns emerged in our consideration of this subregion's history. First, the Lower Mississippi Valley consistently *preceded* the rest of the South in political developments that permitted the mobilization of large amounts of community labor, as evidenced by the construction of earthen mounds. And second, the very same subregion consistently *lagged behind* other subregions in adopting new farming practices, both the Eastern Agricultural Complex and the later regime involving maize. Inasmuch as political centralization and agricultural intensification are often interrelated, this seems like a contradiction; yet, in this case, we again may be witnessing tendencies that were brought about by a distinctive environment. The Lower Mississippi Valley is not only one of the most fertile agricultural regions on earth, but also had one of the richest natural environments for human foragers. Due to the enormous "subsidy" of nutrients carried and deposited each year by the floodwaters of the great Mississippi River, the sheer quantity of fish, birds, game, nut-bearing trees, and other edible plants available in this subregion was unsurpassed anywhere on the continent. This abundance permitted larger aggregations of people (and labor) than anywhere else based on natural bounty alone. Thus, it provided an ideal setting for political centralization and made possible the construction of monumental architecture even in the absence of farming. At the same time, the great natural bounty delayed the point at which local populations—due to increase in numbers or the demands of the political economy, or both—felt obliged to intensify food production by artificial means, i.e., by planting fields or adopting new crops.

However valid these suggestions turn out to be, I hope that this paper has at least focused attention on some issues that would not have come to mind without a consideration of Southern history in its fullest form. Historians and archaeologists must realize that the divide between "history" and "prehistory" is an artificial one, and that both disciplines are ultimately engaged in the same enterprise. Until these disciplinary boundaries become more permeable, and conversations across

these boundaries become routine, everyone's understanding of Southern history will needlessly suffer.

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