

Social and Spatial Dimensions of Moundville Mortuary Practices

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Moundville has an impressive mortuary data set with a long history of related investigations. Previous mortuary studies, however, have not focused on individual burial clusters as socially and spatially relevant units of analysis. Here we address this issue by documenting and interpreting the size, arrangement, and composition of selected Mississippian cemeteries at Moundville. These cemeteries were uncovered during the 1939 and 1940 excavations of the Moundville Roadway. Our analysis reveals that these cemeteries exhibit considerable internal variation in terms of age, sex, and mortuary treatment. Based on their composition, small size, strategic location, and duration, we argue that small corporate kin groups used these cemeteries to assert social and spatial claims within the Moundville polity.

Archaeological investigations have revealed that Mississippian mortuary practices were not uniform across the southeastern and midwestern United States (Brown 2006b; Conrad 1993; Emerson, Hargrave, and Hedman 2003; Goldstein 1980; Fisher-Carroll and Mainfort 2000; Peebles 1974; Sullivan and Rodning 2001). It has been clearly demonstrated that the intricacies of mortuary ritual varied along the dimensions of social status, gender, age, and regional tradition. This variability has often been used to draw conclusions about the social identity of the deceased (e.g., Binford 1971; Goldstein 1980; Peebles and Kus 1977; Saxe 1970). Scholars have only recently begun to investigate Mississippian mortuaries as important sites for the living as well as the dead. Central to this perspective is the point that mortuary ritualism commonly embodies socially relevant statements and negotiations that mourners and other surviving community members make about the current and future state of affairs (e.g., Kuijt 2000; Metcalf and Huntington 1991; Parker Pearson 1999). Accordingly, the archaeological signatures of mortuary practices not only reflect the status of the deceased but were also shaped by the social aspirations of the living (see Brown 1995; Marcoux, this volume).

By their very nature, sites of Mississippian mortuary ritual were situated at an important nexus between the living and the dead, between this world and the next, and between the past, present, and future. Indeed, the social meaning embodied by Mississippian cemeteries often appears to have been negotiated relative to the occupational history of the landscapes in which they were situated (Boudreaux 2007a; Rodning 2005; Wilson 2008). Mississippian groups who built mortuaries within the spatial boundaries of towns and villages did so in reference to mounds, plazas, domestic structures, and other places actual or remembered. Mississippian landscapes deeply sedimented with a history of past occupations would have contained many important sites of memory, the social relevance of which could have been appropriated, modified, or contested through the performance of and association with mortuary ceremonialism (Joyce 2003; Meskell 2004; Nora 1989). It is with these concepts in mind that we turn our discussion to the social and spatial dimensions of Moundville mortuary practice.

Moundville Community Organization

The Moundville site, located in the Black Warrior River valley of west-central Alabama, was the political and ceremonial capital of one of the largest and most complex Mississippian polities in the southeastern United States (Figure 5.1). Moundville's highly organized community plan has long been the subject of archaeological attention and analysis (Knight 1998; Peebles 1971, 1978, 1983). The Moundville site encompasses 75 hectares and consists of 32 mounds, mostly grouped in pairs around a rectangular plaza (Knight and Steponaitis 1998: 3). The largest mounds are located on the northern edge of the plaza and become increasingly smaller going either clockwise or counterclockwise around the plaza to the south. Knight (1998) has interpreted this community plan as a sociogram, "an architectural depiction of a social order based on ranked clans." According to this model the Moundville community was segmented into a variety of different clan precincts, the ranked position of which was represented in the size and arrangement of paired earthen mounds around the central plaza. The largest earthen mounds on the northern portion of the plaza were associated with the highest-ranking clans, while smaller mounds to the south were associated with lower-ranking clans.

Wilson's (2005, 2008) recent analysis of the 1939 and 1940 Moundville Roadway excavations has revealed that the Mississippian inhabitants of the Black Warrior River valley built and rebuilt the Moundville sociogram in a number of different ways and on a number of different scales over the course of approximately three centuries. In addition to demarcating clan precincts

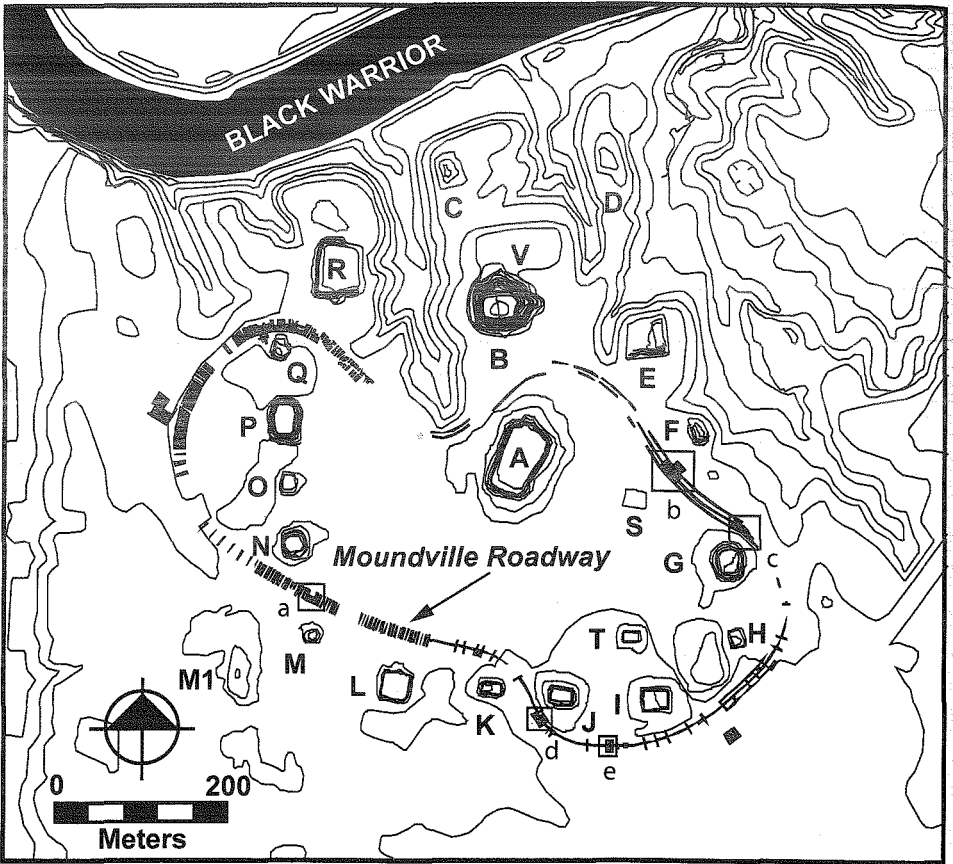


Figure 5.1. The Moundville Site Featuring the 1939 and 1940 Roadway Excavations. Uppercase letters designate the mounds; lowercase letters correspond to the cemeteries illustrated in Figure 5.2.

through mound construction, early Mississippian groups inscribed their sub-clan lineage identities onto the community by creating and maintaining the same small-scale and rigidly organized residential areas throughout Moundville's nucleated early Mississippian occupation (Wilson 2008; Wilson et al. 2006).

Some time in the final decades of the thirteenth century, Moundville ceased to be used as a nucleated residential center and was transformed into a necropolis for the relocated kin groups living in the rural countryside of the Black Warrior River valley (Knight and Steponaitis 1998; Steponaitis 1998). During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the dead were interred in a number of different spatial and social contexts throughout the site. We argue

that important insights into these late Mississippian mortuary activities can be gained by relating them to the use of community space during Moundville's early Mississippian era of nucleated residential occupation.

The Moundville Roadway Mortuary Dataset

The mortuary data set for this investigation consists of the 265 burials uncovered by the Alabama Museum of Natural History's excavation of the Moundville Roadway. The Roadway excavations were conducted in 1939 and 1940 within a winding corridor, 50 feet wide and 1.5 miles long, that was to be disturbed by the construction of a road that now encircles portions of the plaza and areas east, west, and south of the mounds (Figure 5.1; see Peebles 1979). We conduct our analysis of this data set on two scales. First, we examine the general spatial distribution and arrangement of burials within the entire Moundville Roadway. We also consider demographic variability among these burials in relation to the distribution of artifacts. Next we focus on one particular Roadway cemetery for the purpose of providing more detailed observations.

A visual inspection of the Moundville Roadway reveals that most burials in the Moundville Roadway are arranged in small rectilinear cemeteries that overlap spatially with small groups of early Mississippian houses (Figure 5.2). Very few burials are located outside the spatial boundaries of these residential groups. The houses in these groups date to the Moundville I phase. Most of the Roadway burials, however, postdate these houses. Only one of the 34 Roadway burials analyzed by Steponaitis (1983, 1998) in his seriation of Moundville mortuary vessels positively dates to the late Moundville I or early Moundville II phase. Moreover, Wilson's (2005, 2008) recent architectural analysis has revealed that burials commonly superimpose the single-post or wall-trench foundations of early Mississippian buildings in the Moundville Roadway. These findings correspond with the sitewide pattern Steponaitis (1998: 37) identified: "Only about 7 percent of the burials were interred during Moundville I [A.D. 1120–1260], 38 percent during Moundville II [A.D. 1260–1400], 53 percent during Moundville III [A.D. 1400–1520], and less than 2 percent during Moundville IV [A.D. 1520–1650]" (Figure 5.3).

It is important to note that after A.D. 1300, when the majority of these burials were interred, most people in the Black Warrior River valley were no longer living at the Moundville site (Steponaitis 1998). Thus, when family members died it would have been necessary to properly prepare and transport their corpses to Moundville from the countryside. Family members and extended kin would also have had to have been notified and subsequently

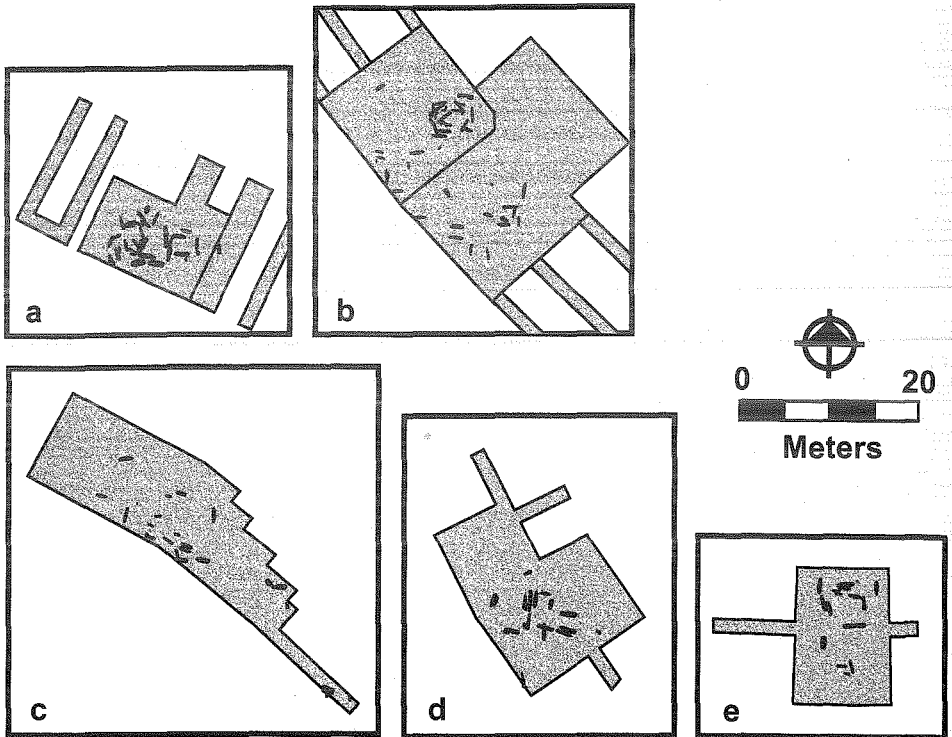


Figure 5.2. Selected Mississippian Cemeteries from the Moundville Roadway Excavations. Roadway blocks 15+00 to 15+50 (a); Roadway blocks 48+00 to 48+50 (b); Roadway blocks 43+50 to 44+50 (c); Roadway blocks 26+50 to 27+00 (d); Roadway blocks 30+00 to 30+50 (e).

would have had to have made the journey to Moundville to attend the funerary events. There may have been situations where ceremonial or logistical obstacles prevented the immediate interment of deceased relatives at Moundville. If someone died at a great distance from the site or during a season that hindered travel, family members may have opted to temporarily inter the deceased nearby with plans to eventually move the remains to Moundville for final burial.

Such considerations may explain the diversity of mortuary treatments represented among the Roadway burials. The vast majority of burials in the Roadway are extended and were probably interred shortly after the time of death. Also present in each cemetery, however, are a small number of bundle burials and individual skull burials. These secondary burials may represent individuals who were initially interred elsewhere in the valley or beyond and were later moved to Moundville for final burial (cf. Hutchinson and Aragon 2002).

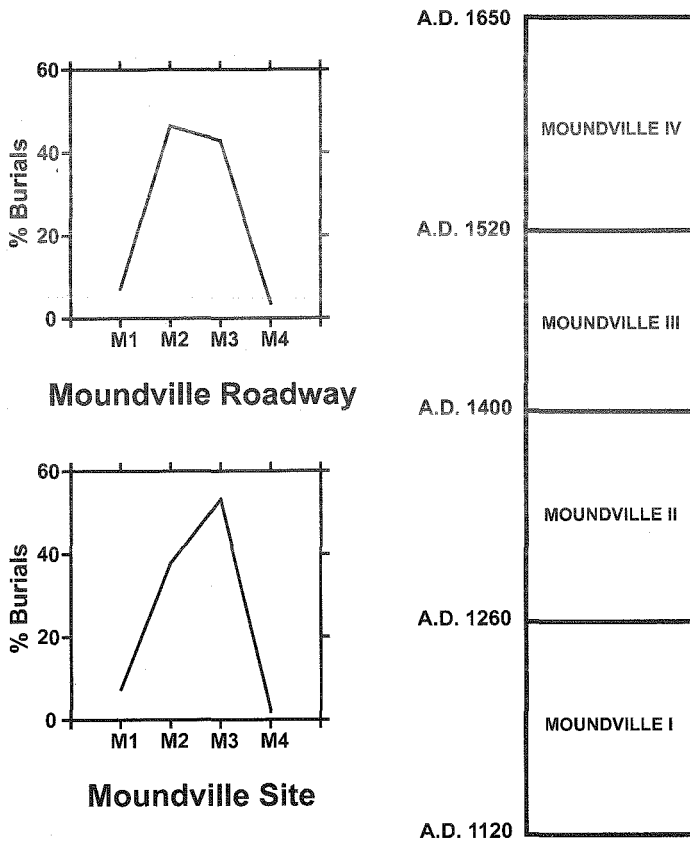


Figure 5.3. Phase-Based Chronology for the Black Warrior Valley Featuring Diachronic Changes in the Frequency of Burials for the Moundville Roadway Excavations and the Entire Moundville Site

We gathered basic data from five Roadway burial clusters to provide a general overview of their size, arrangement, and composition. These cemeteries, marked a through e in Figure 5.2, are located in widely separated portions of the Moundville Roadway (Table 5.1). Each of the five cemeteries includes a tightly arranged rectilinear cluster of burials that forms the core of the mortuary. These clusters range in size from 23 to 59 m². In each cemetery, burials are arranged in clusters around central open spaces. Around the perimeter of these tightly arranged burial clusters is a more dispersed and amorphous scattering of associated burials. The number of individuals within each cemetery varies between 25 and 57. This variation is difficult to evaluate as it is strongly influenced by the size of the area excavated around the central portions of each

Table 5.1. Inventory of Age and Sex Data for the Moundville Roadway Burials

Burial ID	Age	Sex	Phase	Roadway Excavation Block
2648	20-24	F	—	70+15
2651	3-6	—	—	70+65
2652	16-20	—	—	70+65
2653	30-35	—	—	70+65
2657	35-39	F	—	71+11
2658	1-4	—	—	70+75
2660	35-39	F	—	71+65
2661	35-39	F	—	71+65
2662	16-18	M	—	71+65
2663	25-29	F	—	71+65
2664	1-4	—	MIII	71+70
2665	1-4	—	MIII	71+70
2666	1-4	—	—	71+80
2667	30-34	F	—	71+65
2668	15-19	M	—	71+90
2671	1-4	—	—	71+75
2672	25-29	—	—	1+00
2673	1-4	—	MII-III	1+00
2677	5-9	—	—	0+95
2679	15-19	—	—	0+95
2680	15-19	—	—	71+75
2681	30-34	M	—	71+75
2683	5-9	—	—	70+15
2685	20-24	—	—	70+05
2686	20-24	—	—	71+85
2687	35-39	M	MII	3+40
2688	10-14	—	—	3+40
2690	10-14	—	—	3+40
2691	25-34	—	—	3+40
2695	25-34	—	—	4+10
2698	45-54	F	—	4+25
2700	30-34	—	—	5+00
2703	40-44	F	—	5+10
2726	25-29	M	MII-III	15+30
2730	30-35	—	—	15+25
2735	40-44	M	—	15+20
2802	30-34	M	—	30+45
2804	30-34	M	—	30+45
2807	20-24	—	—	30+45
2825	30-34	F	—	43+60
2826	40-44	F	—	44+00
2827	30-32	F	—	44+00
2828	40-44	F	—	43+90
2829	30-34	F	—	44+25
2833	25-34	—	—	44+35
2834	30-34	F	—	44+35

continued

2835	15-19	M	—	43+60
2836	30-34	M	—	44+40
2838	35-39	M	—	44+50
2845	20-24	—	—	44+75
2847	25-35	M	—	48+15
2848	30-34	M	—	48+25
2851	50 plus	F	—	48+15
2856	30-34	M	—	48+25
2857	10-14	—	MII-III	48+30
2858	50 plus	F	—	48+25
2859	30-34	M	MII	48+25
2860	45-49	M	—	48+40
2862	50 plus	M	—	off Roadway
2863	30-34	F	—	off Roadway
2864	45-49	F	—	48+50
2865	45-49	F	—	48+60
2866	40-44	M	—	48+60
2868	40-44	—	—	48+60
2869	1-4	—	—	48+55
2870	40-44	M	—	48+55
2872	30-34	F	—	48+55
2873	35-39	F	—	48+55
2874	30-34	M	—	48+60
2875	25-29	F	—	48+60
2876	< 1	—	—	48+60
2877	5-9	—	—	48+60
2882	30-34	M	MII	48+60
2883	35-39	F	—	48+60
2884	50 plus	M	MI	48+65
2887	25-29	M	—	48+60
2889	< 1	—	—	48+65
2892	10-11	—	—	48+65
2893	1-4	—	—	48+65
2894	40-44	F	—	48+70
2895	30-34	M	—	48+70
2896	24-30	—	—	48+65
2898	35-39	F	—	48+70

cemetery. Nevertheless, it is worth drawing the obvious comparison between these Roadway cemeteries and Mississippian cemeteries such as those at the Kellogg and 1GR2 sites in the Tombigbee River valley. Blitz (1993: 62-68) has interpreted these Tombigbee valley cemeteries as representing small social groups. They are similar in size to the Moundville Roadway cemeteries and include comparable numbers of individuals.

Figure 5.4 illustrates the composition of these Moundville Roadway cemeteries. The age and sex data displayed in this figure and in Table 5.1 are based

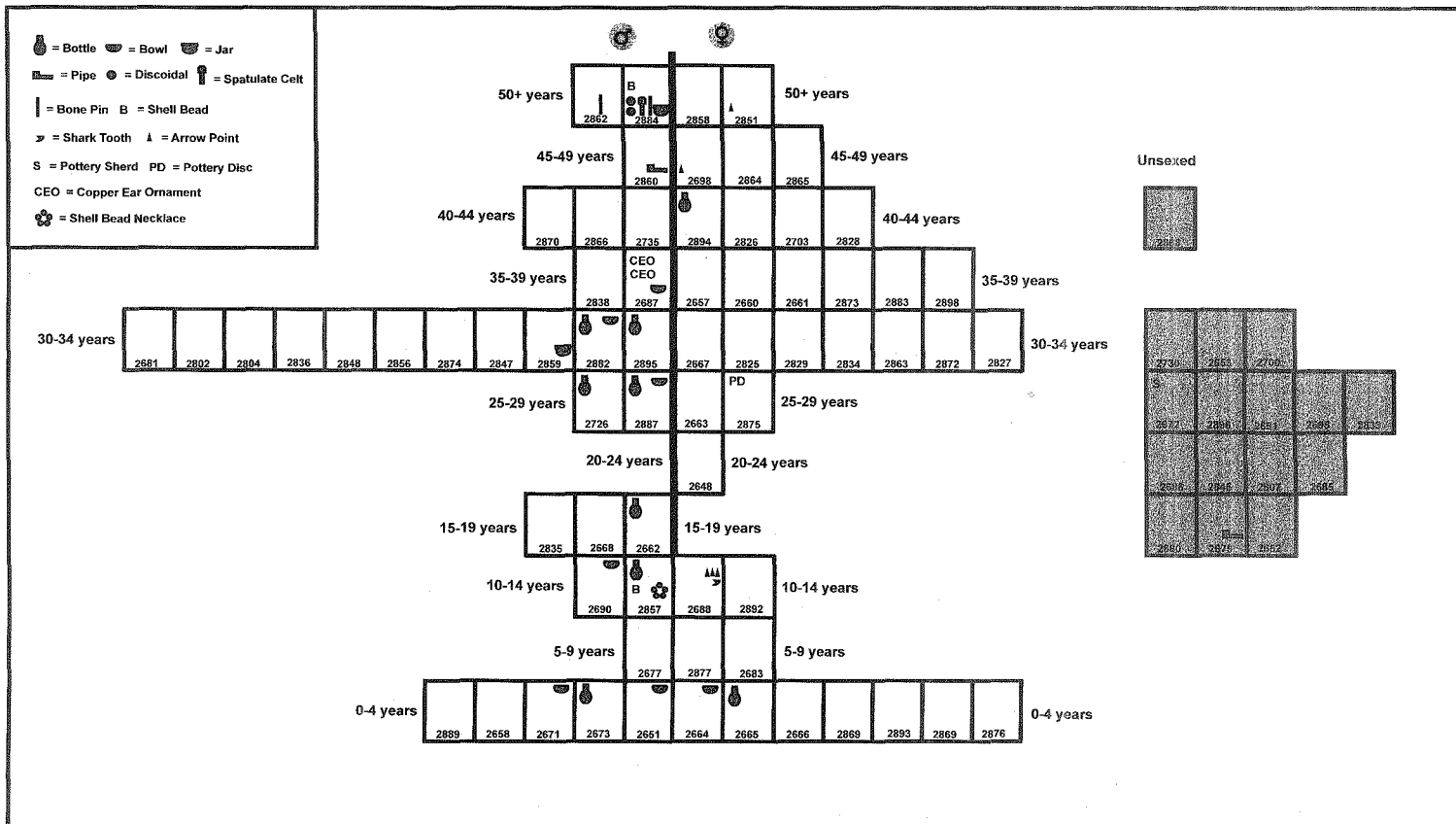


Figure 5.4. Sheratt Diagram for the Roadway Excavations at the Moundville Site. Each block represents an individual burial, with males on the left of the central axis, females on the right, and age categories arranged vertically. Artifacts associated with each burial are indicated by symbols.

on analyses previously conducted by Powell (1988) and more recently by Jacobi. Age and sex information are available for 83 of the Roadway burials (Table 5.1). An examination of these data reveals several important patterns. First, there is a high infant mortality rate (15 percent for the 0 to 5 age group) with an ensuing decline in childhood mortality. Second, the percentages of male and female mortality in other age categories are roughly comparable. Finally, both males and female exhibit a peak in mortality between 30 and 35 years of age. These demographic data indicate a mortality profile that is comparable to that of other Mississippian populations (Bridges et al. 2000; Goldstein 1980; Sullivan 2006). Moreover, this demographic profile, with all age and sex groups represented, is consistent with the use of these cemeteries by discrete kin groups (see Howell and Kintigh 1996).

Burial Goods and Status

Examination of burial goods provides insight into status differences among the individuals uncovered in the Moundville Roadway excavations (Figure 5.4). Our approach to the issue of status is based on several expectations. First, we assume that individuals interred with more artifacts were of higher status than individuals interred with fewer artifacts (see Bennett 1984: 39; Champion 1982: 70). We presume that a system of achieved status can be discerned on the basis of a mortuary program characterized by a greater number and combination of artifacts interred with older individuals than with younger individuals, particularly adolescents or young adults (Binford 1971; Braun 1979). A system of achieved status may also be represented in sex-based differences in burial goods. A system of ascribed status, in contrast, is represented in a mortuary program in which grave goods cut-across categories of age and sex (Peebles 1974).

Our analysis revealed that most individuals ($n = 196$) in the Moundville Roadway were buried with nothing. Moreover, an inverse relationship exists between the "richness" of a grave (i.e., the number of artifacts it contains) and the number of graves that exhibit this richness (Figure 5.5). This pattern is consistent with what might be expected if there were hierarchical differences among the individuals buried in the Moundville Roadway. Even so, based on the differential distribution of mortuary artifacts by age and sex, it appears that social status was achieved rather than ascribed among the social groups that comprised the Roadway cemeteries (Figure 5.4). Only four females were interred with artifacts, and these four were interred with a single artifact each. Burial Rw 2875 was associated with a pottery disc, burial Rw 2894 was associated with a ceramic water bottle, and burials Rw 2698 and Rw 2851 were

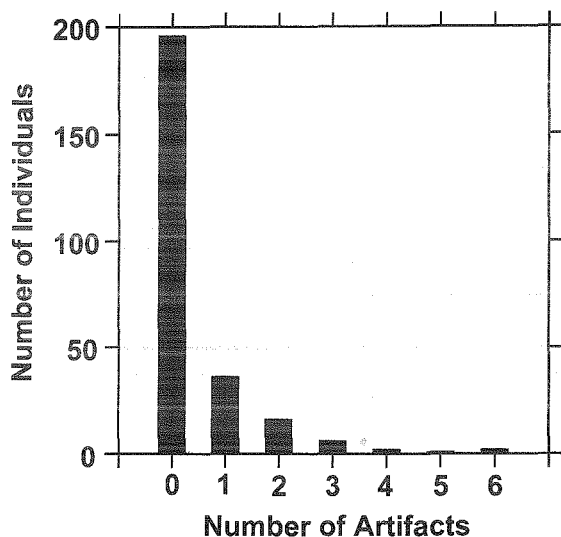


Figure 5.5. Number of Artifacts per Individual Burial for the Roadway Excavations at the Moundville Site

associated with a chert arrow point each. A greater number of adult men ($n = 11$) were buried with artifacts than adult women ($n = 4$). Adult men were also buried with a greater number and variety of artifacts than adult women. One male (Rw 2884) buried with six items deserves special attention. This man, over 50 years of age, was interred with a Carthage Incised, *var. Summerville* jar next to his right foot, a bone hairpin and shell bead behind his head, two stone discoidals on either side of his pelvis, and a long-stemmed, greenstone spatulate celt underneath his thighs (Figure 5.6). Spatulate celts and other forms of ceremonial weaponry have been interpreted as markers of elevated status in Mississippian societies (Dye 2004; Wilson 2001). In addition, the presence of ceremonial items such as the two chunky gaming stones suggest that this man held a position of elevated status relative to other men and women in the Moundville Roadway cemeteries (cf. DeBoer 1993). As will be elaborated below, it is also noteworthy that this is the only Roadway burial that positively dates to the early Mississippian late Moundville I or early Moundville II phase.

While a comprehensive discussion of the different kinds of Moundville cemeteries is beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth noting that these small off-mound cemeteries differ considerably from mound cemeteries in the number and variety of artifacts associated with individual burials. As Peebles (1974) noted, the majority of burials Moore (1905, 1907) uncovered in

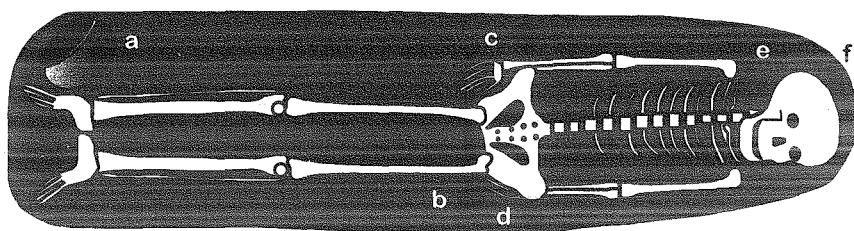


Figure 5.6. Burial RW 2884, Man over 50 years Old Located in the Center of a Cemetery in Moundville Roadway Block 48+65. Carthage Incised *var. Summerville* jar (a); greenstone spatulate celt (b); stone discoidal (c); stone discoidal (d); marine shell bead (e); bone hairpin (f).

his excavations at Mound C were interred with multiple artifacts such as copper ornaments, shell beads, and freshwater pearls. Thus, it appears that both achieved and ascribed dimensions of social status were expressed through mortuary practices at Moundville. It is likely, however, that both ascribed and achieved statuses were intertwined rather than separate domains of authority and ranking in late prehistoric west-central Alabama.

A Closer Look at a Moundville Cemetery

We now turn our attention to Roadway excavation blocks 48+00 to 48+50 to provide a more detailed analysis of an individual cemetery. This portion of the Moundville Roadway consists of a tight cluster of early Mississippian domestic structures superimposed by a cemetery that primarily dates to the Moundville II and III phases (Figure 5.7). This cemetery consists of 57 burials, 36 of which are located in a small rectilinear cluster. The other 21 burials are dispersed immediately to the south. Like the Roadway population as a whole, the demographics of this small cemetery are characterized by a roughly equal number of men and women and a wide range of ages, a pattern that is consistent with its use by an individual kin group (Table 5.1; Howell and Kintigh 1996).

Six of the 57 burials in this cemetery could be dated based on Steponaitis's (1983) seriation of mortuary vessels. Of these, one positively dates to the late Moundville I to early Moundville II phase, three to the Moundville II phase, and two to the Moundville III phase. Thirteen additional burials postdate the late Moundville I phase based on their superimposition of late Moundville I features. Thus, this cemetery has a long history of use. At least one individual (Rw 2884) was buried in this location during or perhaps immediately after Moundville's early Mississippian occupation, a male over 50 years of age

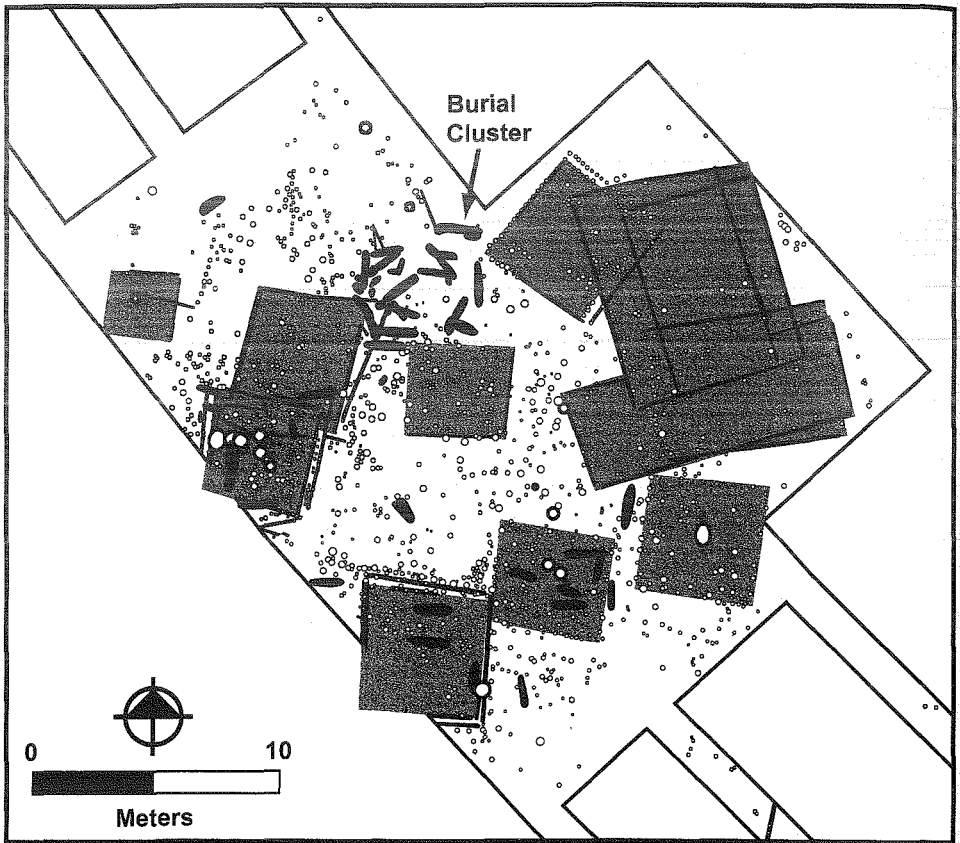


Figure 5.7. Moundville II-III cemetery superimposing Moundville I residential group (Roadway blocks 48+00 to 40+00). Moundville II-III Cemetery Superimposing Moundville I Residential Group (Roadway blocks 48+00 to 49+00)

(mentioned previously) who was interred with artifacts of ritual and political importance (Figure 5.6). He was buried in a location that later became the center of this tightly organized cemetery. If we are correct in interpreting these cemeteries as representing small kin groups, then for close to two centuries a Mississippian kin group literally built and expanded this cemetery around the grave of a prominent ancestor. Moreover, they did so in an area that had been previously used and carefully maintained as the corporate residential space by their early Mississippian ancestors.

The frequency with which burials were superpositioned in the central portion of this cemetery also points to its long history of use (Figure 5.8). In several cases it appears that when an older burial was encountered while digging a new grave, the older bones were pushed to the side to make room for the

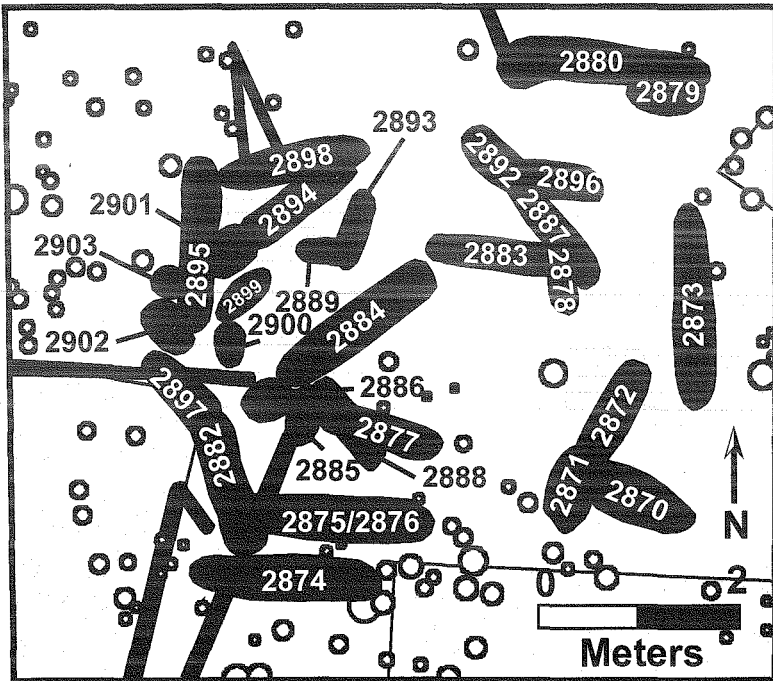


Figure 5.8. Detail of the Moundville II-III cemetery shown in Figure 5.7 (Roadway blocks 48+00 to 48+50).

new interment. Indeed, Jacobi's recent analysis of the Roadway burials identified a number of incomplete skeletons mixed in with complete skeletons. The presence of many of these fragmentary individuals may be the result of this mortuary practice.

Discussion and Conclusion

It is not surprising that specific Mississippian kin groups at Moundville used spatially discrete cemeteries to bury their dead. Drawing on global ethnographic data, Goldstein (1980) and Saxe (1970) have demonstrated that agricultural societies with lineal corporate rights over the use and inheritance of land often have cemeteries that are exclusively used by specific kin groups (see also Howell and Kintigh 1996; Meggitt 1965: 131; Morris 1991). Both scholars argue that these exclusive mortuary arrangements are part of broader strategies by which individuals seek to affirm their membership in a descent group and the land-inheritance rights that come with it. The heritability of social and economic resources no doubt helped inspire the initial construction of

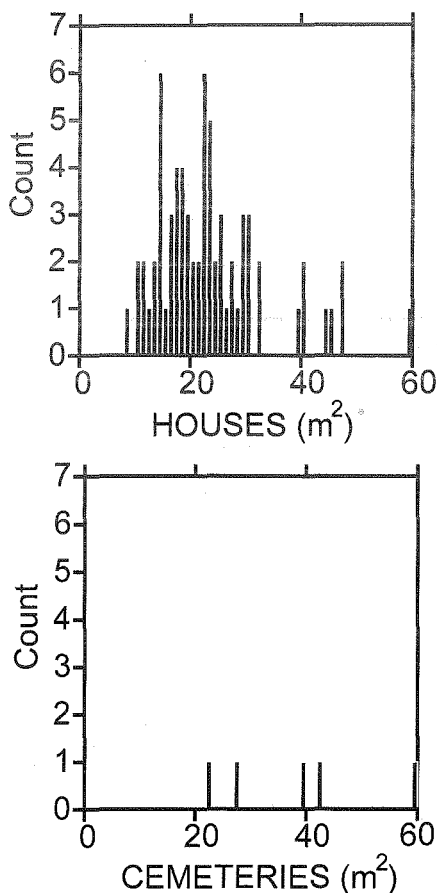


Figure 5.9. Spatial Comparison of Mississippian Structure Floor Areas to Burial Clusters in the Moundville Roadway

Moundville's mound and plaza complex and the clan-based political and ceremonial order it embodied. It is also important to note that the decades bracketing the construction of this mound and plaza complex correspond with Moundville's political consolidation of the region and the intensification of agricultural production (Knight and Steponaitis 1998; Scarry 1986, 1995).

The length of time these kin groups used their cemeteries, thereby inscribing their corporate identities onto the Moundville sociogram, is intriguing. Our analysis of the cemetery in roadway blocks 48+00 to 48+50 revealed a small mortuary complex that spanned some two centuries. Moreover, it is quite clear that these spatially discrete cemeteries were intentionally placed in the exact areas previously occupied by equally discrete residential groups (Wilson 2008). It follows that part of the broader meaning and purpose of

these small cemeteries was to establish social and spatial continuity with ancestral residential space. Indeed, some clues in the organization of these cemeteries indicate that their spatial arrangements intentionally referenced this early Mississippian residential past. For example, the rectilinear arrangement of most burials in these cemeteries corresponds to the dimensions of early Mississippian houses at Moundville (Figure 5.9; Wilson 2005). Thus, it is not unreasonable to speculate that these cemeteries served as a metaphor for a house that embodied kin-group identity while maintaining continuity with the residential origin and history of kin groups at Moundville.

Mississippian clan and subclan groups maintained their coherence throughout much of Moundville's occupation; this is demonstrated in how they spatially delimited their corporate kin identities at Moundville. As a regional Mississippian polity, Moundville went through considerable political and economic change during this lengthy period. Creating and recreating the Moundville sociogram—in different ways and on different scales—provided kin groups a means of asserting their corporate identities and the rights, privileges, and social histories that came with them.

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Beyond Hierarchy and the Representationist Perspective

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