

Archaeological Investigation of a Mississippian Fall-Line
Chiefdom on the Middle Flint River.

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Southeastern archaeologists have long recognized the attractiveness of the Fall Line zone to Mississippian societies of the South Appalachian Slope. Although explicit statements in published literature are comparatively uncommon, an informal acceptance of this feature seems widespread. This recognition is fundamentally based on the known distribution of Mississippian mound centers, in particular the observed presence of mound clusters at the Fall Line of virtually every major river in this region. Examples include Mulberry and Adamson on the Wateree River in South Carolina, Hollywood on the Savannah River, Shinholser on the Oconee, Macon Plateau, Lamar, and Stubbs on the Ocmulgee, Neisler and Hartley-Posey on the Flint, and Bull Creek, Abercrombie, Cooper, and Engineer's Landing on the Chattahoochee. While many of these mound sites have been the subject of at least limited archaeological testing, regional survey aimed at discerning the spatial distribution of contemporaneous non-mound sites associated with the mound centers is virtually nonexistent. Our knowledge of these Fall-Line societies is therefore largely restricted to the mounds themselves, with almost no regard for the populations which presumably provided the labor to construct them. It seems clear that any understanding of the origin and nature of these Fall Line chiefdoms must emerge from a more regional perspective, incorporating data on the geographical dimensions and internal settlement distribution of Mississippian occupation associated with the political and ceremonial centers of each society.

This study represents an attempt in this regard.¹ The Middle Flint River in central Georgia was chosen as the study area, partly due to the almost total lack of any previous archeological research in the region. Test excavations and regional survey were carried out between 1986 and 1988 with the aim of delineating the chronological extent and geographical distribution of Mississippian occupation associated with two known platform mounds at the Fall Line of the Flint River.

The Flint River is a major waterway which originates deep within the Piedmont of northern Georgia and flows generally southward, crossing the Fall Line into the Coastal Plain. It ultimately joins with the Chattahoochee River to form the Apalachicola, which empties into the Gulf of Mexico. The Flint River drains a watershed 212 miles long and encompassing 8,460 square miles, covering a significant portion of the state of Georgia.

The study area includes a major part of what is termed here the Middle Flint River, extending south of the Fall Line to the northern margin of the limestone Dougherty Plain and comprising 46 miles of the 278 mile length of the entire river valley. Immediately below the Fall Line, the Flint emerges from the steep, rolling topography of the lower Piedmont onto the gently inclining strata of the upper Coastal Plain. It is here that the floodplain expands from a narrow valley less than half a mile

¹ This paper summarizes research presented in John E. Worth, Mississippian Occupation on the Middle Flint River. M.A. Thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Georgia, Athens, 1988.

wide to a large alluvial bottom three miles in width. This sub-Fall Line floodplain expansion, extending some seventeen miles below the Fall Line, marks the largest development of floodplain habitat on the entire Flint River valley. This rich environment, bounded to the east and west by the barren, sandy uplands of the Fall Line Hills district, was the setting for a Mississippian chiefdom with at least two mounded centers.

In order to establish a chronological framework for regional Mississippian occupation, 2 by 2 meter testpits were placed in the basal slope of both known platform mounds, in the area of the "Northeast Dump" common at similar Lamar mounds. Test excavations at Neisler Mound, approximately 7 meters in height and 28 meters in diameter at the summit, penetrated at least two chronologically distinct mound construction stages, as well as four pre-mound strata, including the remains of a burned structure. Excavations at the nearby Hartley-Posey Mound, over 4 meters in height and 17 meters in summit diameter, penetrated at least four mound stages containing three probable burial pits, and revealed the presence of another pre-mound structure containing a possible fourth burial pit. The recovery and analysis of over 5100 potsherds at Neisler Mound, along with over 2700 sherds from Hartley-Posey Mound, permitted the construction of a Mississippian period ceramic chronology for the Middle Flint River. Three new archaeological phases, briefly defined here, provide a local chronological framework for the late prehistoric period.

The Brunson Phase, dating to between A.D. 1150 and 1225, represents the earliest Mississippian occupation of the Middle Flint River, and may be considered a regional manifestation of the Late Etowah culture. Ceramic assemblages include Etowah Complicated Stamped, Savannah Complicated Stamped, Etowah Red Filmed, and a predominance of plain ware.

There is no evidence, either in mound excavations or in regional survey, for Mississippian occupation of any kind during the classic Savannah period. While it is possible that ceramics dating to this period have yet to be recognized within existing collections, this seems highly unlikely. At present, therefore, this period of time will remain a gap in the ceramic sequence.

The Thornton Phase, dating to between A.D. 1325 and 1450, represents a regional manifestation of the Early Lamar culture. The ceramic assemblage which characterizes this phase is markedly distinct from the earlier Brunson Phase, and includes the types Lamar Complicated Stamped and Lamar Plain, both marked by Lamar rim modification, as well as the shell-tempered Dallas Incised, Dallas Filleted, and Dallas Plain wares.

The Lockett Phase, dating to between A.D. 1450 and ca. 1550, represents the final Mississippian occupation of the Middle Flint River. In addition to the presence of the ceramics noted for the Thornton Phase, the Lockett Phase marks the appearance of the type Lamar Incised, as well as the shell-tempered Abercrombie Incised. In addition to these new ceramic types, Lamar rimfolds evidence wider folds and the introduction of cane or reed

punctation. In general, based on the treatment of Lamar pinched rims, as well as the execution of incising on Lamar Incised, it is clear that the Lockett Phase terminates in the middle of the sixteenth century. There is no evidence for Mississippian occupation subsequent to this time.

Regional survey constituted the second dimension of this study. Due to the size of the study area, covering over 35 miles of the Flint River valley, systematic full-coverage was impossible within the time allotted for the project. An informant survey strategy was adopted which utilized a wide network of local contacts and informants able to provide information regarding the location of archaeological sites. Surface collection, occasionally augmented by posthole tests, provided artifactual collections used in dating each site. Survey coverage was admittedly limited, with areas along the margins of the river valley receiving the greatest coverage, and areas within the modern floodplain swamps and beyond the river valley the least. As a result of this study, 113 archaeological sites previously unknown to the archaeological community were located. While this figure undoubtedly underrates the true extent of occupation in the study area, a significant portion of the largest and most intensive sites are assumed to have been located, since interviews with new informants now almost invariably results in the re-identification of the large sites already on the maps.

Including the two mounds, of the 115 known sites in the study area, only 29 display evidence of Mississippian occupation.

It is clear that most sites occupied before the Mississippian period were never reoccupied. This concentration of occupation in specific locales seems to represent a shift in the settlement strategy of aboriginal populations during the Mississippian period, particularly considering the spatial distribution of these sites with regard to specific features of the landscape.

Mississippian occupation does concentrate along the river valley. Of the 29 known sites, 26 are either within or directly adjacent to the modern floodplain of the Middle Flint River, and all remaining sites are no more than 1800 feet from the floodplain. No sites located within the sandy uplands of the Fall Line Hills away from the river valley were found to possess Mississippian components. It may be suggested from this data that Mississippian occupation was largely restricted to those locales with easy access to the rich floodplain habitat of the Flint. Furthermore, Mississippian occupation appears to concentrate on the widest expanse of floodplain on the Middle Flint. Twenty-four of the 29 Mississippian sites are in or adjacent to the major sub-Fall Line floodplain expanse which extends 17 miles below the Fall Line. Four of the remaining five sites are within two miles of the southern end of this expanse. This evidence suggests that this Fall Line floodplain was a preferred habitat for Mississippian populations, since virtually all occupation is restricted to this portion of the river.

Within this floodplain, Mississippian occupation exhibits further patterning which is quite instructive. Upon visual inspection, it is clear that sites are not distributed randomly across this three mile wide floodplain. With only a single exception, all sites are located within one mile of the modern river channel, with half of these at a distance of 2000 feet or less. There is evidence that this modern channel largely parallels that of the late prehistoric period. An examination of a detailed map of the Middle Flint River constructed for the 1827 Georgia Land Lottery shows that the modern river channel is extremely similar to that of a century and a half ago. Most large meanders have persisted, and the few oxbow lakes which have been cut off from the 1827 channel are visible today, having yet to be filled in or erased by lateral channel movement. It seems likely, then, that the modern river channel has changed relatively little over the last seven centuries, lending significance to the present correlation between site location and river distance. Proximity to the main river channel thus may have been a determinant of site location, although the reasons for this are not clear. While transportation of people and goods may have played a role, soil quality may also have been higher near active levee systems adjacent to the river.

An examination of the physical setting of Mississippian sites is informative. Eighteen of the 29 are situated on Pleistocene alluvial terraces bordering the active floodplain. These terraces represent broad, level plateaus which typically

drop abruptly to the modern floodplain below. They offer immediate access to the floodplain habitat, safety from seasonal flooding, and may also display unique or desirable soil characteristics. Interestingly, nearly two-thirds of these terrace sites are located on remnants of the 50-foot terrace, making this particular landform the most utilized of all settings where Mississippian sites occur. While an explanation is unclear, this may represent an optimal elevation above the floodplain. These Pleistocene terraces, and their apparent attractiveness to Mississippian populations, should be examined further.

One further feature of Mississippian settlement distribution noted here is the concentration of the largest and most intensive Mississippian occupations toward the northern end of this sub-Fall Line floodplain expanse, immediately south of the point where the Flint River emerges from the Piedmont. Neisler Mound appears immediately below the Fall Line itself, and Hartley-Posey Mound is only three miles to the south. Four comparatively large Mississippian sites appear along the middle stretch of this 17-mile floodplain, while the lower end displays only minor occupations. Although Mississippian occupation appears across the entire floodplain expanse, the political and ceremonial centers, as well as the largest non-mound sites, are situated at the head of this floodplain, and as such do not appear to be centrally placed with respect to the apparent overall distribution of population. Whether this represents an

adaptation to variation in soil quality or other resources with distance from the Piedmont, or whether the placement of administrative centers at the Fall Line may relate to some element of the redistributive function of a chiefly center, such as transportation and trade routes over land and by river, cannot be determined at the present time. It is suggested that the placement of mound centers and other large sites at the northern end of these Fall Line floodplains, a pattern which seems to recur on other river drainages, may be integral to any understanding of the nature of these Fall Line chiefdoms.

The preceding discussion synthesizes data concerning the Mississippian period in general. It is evident, however, that there is temporal variation in settlement distribution. Perhaps most significantly, since no evidence of a classic Savannah period occupation has been found, it is suggested that the Middle Flint River was abandoned between A.D. 1225 and 1325. Whether this proposed abandonment reflects external or internal stresses, either political or environmental, remains to be explored. In addition, the earlier Brunson Phase shows no direct evidence of mound construction, and is marked by a comparatively dispersed distribution of sites, with 23 sites occupied across the study area, while the Thornton and Lockett Phases show occupation at only 9 or 10 sites. These latter phases show evidence of large and intensive occupation at each center, with mound construction occurring at both Neisler and Hartley-Posey. The final manifestation of this chiefdom may in fact be the Province of Toa

visited by Hernando DeSoto in March of 1540. The recovery in secure moundfill context at Hartley-Posey of a single fragment of a crystalline quartz bead with a parrallel sided hole, possibly European in origin, may be evidence of direct contact with the expedition. The distribution of Lockett Phase sites makes it possible that DeSoto's route, as reconstructed by Hudson, Smith, and DePratter, may have crossed the southern tip of this chiefdom, making the Lockett Phase equivalent to the Province of Toa. Indeed the total abandonment of this region during the mid-sixteenth century may be testimony to the passage of the Spaniards and their diseases.

In general, however, despite these temporal variations in both the number of sites and the degree of centralized administration as reflected in mounded architecture, settlement distribution throughout the Mississippian period conforms to the overall pattern described above. Mississippian occupation at the Fall Line of the Flint River may be characterized as concentrating almost exclusively on the sub-Fall Line floodplain expanse. Occupation is in general restricted to a narrow band within a mile of the main river channel, and sites tend to be situated on Pleistocene alluvial terraces bordering the floodplain. Mound centers appear at the northern end of this Fall Line floodplain, and occupational density appears to decrease in the southern portion. While these patterns cannot yet be compared with other Fall Line chiefdoms, it is suggested that they may reflect the specific Mississippian adaptation to

the particular structural and environmental conditions of the Fall Line zone in general, and as such may represent a class of Mississippian chiefdoms little described in the literature.