A NEW LOOK AT THE MISSISSIPPIAN LANDSCAPE AT WICKLIFFE MOUNDS
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ABSTRACT

The 1992 excavations at Wickliffe Mounds (15Ba4) revealed two deposits near Mound C that contrast with the surrounding soil profiles, and that appear to be small mounds now hidden by midden and backfill. Ceramic analysis indicates a Middle Wickliffe (A.D. 1200-1250) date for one mound, while the stratigraphic position of the second is identical to that of Mound C. These data indicate that Mound C was part of a complex of mounds, and underscore the Middle Wickliffe period as the most active time for major construction projects.

INTRODUCTION

The 1991 excavations at the Mississippi period Wickliffe Mounds site (15Ba4) concentrated on Mound C, a small, rounded mound in the northeast sector of the site. Mound C is best known for its association with a cemetery, first excavated and placed on public display in 1932. In 1991, Wickliffe Mounds Research Center excavators removed human remains from exhibit, recording as much as possible about their original context. The project demonstrated an unpredicted complexity to Mound C, in which the cemetery was only the last of several stratigraphic events.

The 1992 excavations continued investigation of the cemetery with two goals: to test hypotheses about the contexts of Mound C, and to delineate the perimeter of the cemetery. Test excavations at the northeast and southwest corners of the project area revealed anomalous deposits, now interpreted as additional mounds. The data add to a developing picture of the changing
landscape of the Wickliffe Mounds village, and indicate even more complexity to Mound C and its environs than had been known previously.

The full significance of the 1992 findings must be understood in the perspective of the entire Wickliffe excavation program, and the current model of village development during the period A.D. 1100-1350.

EXCAVATIONS 1984-1991: VILLAGE EXPANSION

The Wickliffe Mounds site was excavated first in the 1930s by an entrepreneur and relic collector, Fain W. King (Wesler 1988). King excavated in six areas of the site, which he designated Mounds A through F. Mounds A and B were platform mounds, D a long, saddled mound that may have been an elite burial mound (Wesler 1990), F a rounded mound of unknown function, and E a village area of uncertain location. Mound C turned out to be a cemetery, which became the most dramatic part of a set of displays which King opened to the public. King's field notes have not been located, and only artifact labels and very sketchy notes from the first months of the project (September-October 1932), curated at Mound State Monument, Alabama, and in the University of Alabama library archives, survive to document his project.

When the site, collections, and tourist facilities were donated to Murray State University in 1983, the Wickliffe Mounds Research Center (WMRC) was formed to improve the exhibits and public education programs and to renew research on the site. Annual excavations since 1984 have been designed to sample the site and to reevaluate the original excavations, with the goal of analyzing as well as possible the extant assemblages from King's work.

Between 1984 and 1990, WMRC investigations studied remnants of Mound A, B, D, and F, and placed a transect across the northwestern sector of the site in search of Mound E (Figure 1; Wesler 1985, 1989, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c; Wesler and Neusius 1987). Stratigraphic, radiocarbon
and ceramic data helped to define a three-period, intra-site chronology: Early Wickliffe, assigned to A.D. 1100-1200; Middle Wickliffe, A.D. 1200-1250; and Late Wickliffe, A.D. 1250-1350. Although the original definition of the Wickliffe periods was based on shifting ratios of red-filmed and incised/punctate pottery (Table 1), typological and formal (handle and plate rim) markers tie the Wickliffe periods into horizons that characterize much of the lower Ohio Valley (Clay et al. 1991).

As test excavations sampled west-to-east transects across the central and northwest sectors of the site, chronological analysis allowed the delineation of a model of village expansion throughout the Wickliffe occupation. No mounds have been identified for the Early Wickliffe period, during which domestic occupation clustered tightly around a central plaza. The subsoil under the (later) platform mounds reveals much less complexity of intersecting wall trenches and other features than subsoil areas elsewhere in the village, suggesting that these locations already served special functions in the Early Wickliffe period.

In the Middle Wickliffe period, the platform mounds A and B were constructed on the west and north sides of the plaza, respectively. Mound A, the larger platform, appears to have been primarily ceremonial in function, while Mound B supported a residence, interpreted as an elite dwelling due to its position on the mound summit, a higher ratio of serving vessels (bowls and plates) to cooking vessels (jars) than documented elsewhere (Wesler 1992), and indications of better cuts of venison (Kreisa and McDowell 1992). The domestic area expanded, especially along the high ground of the ridge, in part displaced by the platform mounds.

The Late Wickliffe period saw the village expand to its greatest area, crowding to the edges of the bluff. The final stages of the platform mounds were added during the Late Wickliffe period, while Mounds D and F were constructed or completed. There is no indication of substantial village
deposits postdating A.D. 1350, suggesting village abandonment at the end of the Late Wickliffe period.

This reconstruction of village founding, expansion and abandonment takes on added significance when interpreted within a model of chiefly cycling. Recent discussions of chiefdom societies have emphasized their inherent instability, due to competition for power among rival elite lineages (Anderson 1990; Scarry 1990; Wright 1984). Chiefdoms often exhibit a cycling pattern, in which one chiefly center rises as another declines.

At Wickliffe, several measures indicate that the time of greatest consolidation was the Middle Wickliffe period. Middle Wickliffe was the most active period for mound construction, in which five of six Mound A stages and three of four Mound B stages were deposited. Only the final stage of each platform was added during the Late Wickliffe period. The remnant margins of Mounds D and F were created in the Late Wickliffe period, but each may have been more complex than present data can show; even if both are Late Wickliffe constructions, Middle Wickliffe was the more active mound-building period.

Other indicators highlight the Middle Wickliffe period: the largest proportions of decorated (red filmed plus incised/punctate) pottery, serving vessel rims, ornaments, and specialized tools. None of these measures appears significant in itself, but the concatenation of all of them in the Middle Wickliffe period suggests a "high point" in the history of the village. The data fit a scenario of village founding ca. A.D. 1100, strongest consolidation during the Middle Wickliffe period, and decline to dissolution during the Late Wickliffe period: a single cycle in the life of a chiefdom (Wesler 1992).

In 1991, the Wickliffe researchers turned to Mound C, the cemetery. A decision to remove the human remains from public display, and to replace them with a new exhibit, prompted the
completion of the cemetery excavation begun in 1932, with the goal of documenting as much as possible of the original cemetery context.

Mound C turned out to be much more complex than expected, and the cemetery was only one of several major depositional events. The central feature of the stratigraphy was the basket-loaded mound, Mound C proper (Figure 2). The zone beneath the basket-loaded mound was a midden, best documented in deep tests in the center of the old excavation floor. Stratigraphically continuous with the basal midden, there was a greyish mound, whose soil and artifactual contents resembled a midden. Lenses and the generally ashy nature of this mound suggest that it was a refuse mound with several burning episodes. The basal midden and the ashy mound both belong to the Middle Wickliffe period, approximately A.D. 1200-1250.

The basket-loaded mound was built on top of the Middle Wickliffe midden and ashy mound. It, in turn, was engulfed and covered by a Late Wickliffe midden, into which the cemetery apparently was intrusive (Wesler and Matternes 1991; this interpretation must be verified by direct dates on the cemetery). The basket-loaded mound, in 1991 samples, did not contain temporally diagnostic materials, but is sandwiched between Middle and Late Wickliffe middens, and so should date to around A.D. 1250.

MOUND C: 1992

Research resumed in the Mound C area in 1992 to pursue some of the interpretations from 1991. The 1992 project had two major goals: to test the stratigraphic reconstruction of the remnant mound, which is to the north of the exhibit building, and to find the edges of the cemetery. Tracing the cemetery perimeter is crucial both for demographic analysis, to allow some estimate of the total population buried here, and for management reasons, to protect the cemetery from further disturbance.
Analysis of the cemetery is in progress. Initial analysis of stratigraphic contexts has focused on the south and west sides of Mound C.

Over most of the area surrounding Mound C, the stratigraphy is visually consistent. A first look at the cultural deposits in this area came in 1989, when a trench toward the cemetery from the west discovered its edge. The primary deposit is a deep, loamy midden, which is the Late Wickliffe midden into which the burials intrude (Figures 3, 4a). In part of this trench, there is a distinguishable transition to a lighter-colored, Middle Wickliffe midden at the base, overlying subsoil.

The westernmost 1992 unit was 46-47N 16-18E, directly south of the 1989 trench, approximately 1 m from the southwest corner of the exhibit building. Except for the absence of burials, the stratigraphy (Figure 4b) is the same: a deep, Late Wickliffe midden over a lighter-colored, Middle Wickliffe midden. The most interesting artifact from this unit was half of a marine shell spider gorget. Spider gorgets are characteristic of the Middle Mississippi Valley, though rare (Esarey 1990). This one was piece-plotted in the Middle Wickliffe midden, and will be one of the best-documented spider gorgets in the region. Although such artifacts are expected to be burial associations, no human remains were encountered in this unit.

Excavations south of Mound C documented similar cultural deposits. In 38-40N 30-31E, south of the center of the exhibit building, there is much the same stratigraphy, Late Wickliffe over Middle Wickliffe midden (Figure 4c). This unit has two significant attributes. First, the upper levels are historically disturbed to greater depth than expected. There is a thin plowzone over most of the Wickliffe site. In this unit, a disturbed zone lies above the plowzone, which apparently represents backdirt from the King excavation in the cemetery. The King backdirt could be identified through much of the 1992 excavation area by the random teeth scattered through it.
The other interesting feature was a well-preserved wooden post. The base of the post was flat, and had a metal tag. It is almost certainly one of the stakes used to secure King's circus tent, which covered the cemetery excavation before the exhibit building was constructed.

In the next test unit west, 36-38N 35-36E, the undisturbed stratigraphy (Figure 4d) is consistent with the units already discussed, a deep Late Wickliffe midden over a shallow Middle Wickliffe zone. In this case, a gravel road protected the midden from the backdirt overburden. A 1932 photograph shows the road newly cut, without gravel, and given the lack of backdirt, we can probably date the road to 1932 or early 1933.

In the perspective of this very predictable midden stratigraphy, the units south of the southwest corner of the exhibit building are a puzzle. In 40-42N 20-21E, the plowzone and Late Wickliffe midden reach only two levels deep, about 20 cm (Figure 5a). Under that, there is a lighter-colored soil with noticeably fewer artifacts. This is not, however, the top of subsoil, which was encountered another seven levels (65 cm) deeper. The profile is clearly at odds with those discussed above, which are considered "normal" for this area of the site.

The next unit was 4 m directly east, at 40-42N 24-25E. Again, the profile is anomalous (Figure 5b). The dark zone at the top is deeper than the last one, reflecting more King backdirt; a fragment of a glazed brick occurred in Level 3, confirming disturbance to that depth. Directly under the backdirt, however, is the lighter soil. The next unit west from this one was the unit with the tent stake, in which the Late Wickliffe midden reached a depth of approximately 50 cm (Figure 4c).

At this point in the project, the primary concern was that there was no evidence of the cemetery, despite proximity to the exhibit building. Excavators placed a new test between those last two, closer to the building, at 42-44N 22-23E (Figure 5c). This unit exposed a burial, or part of
one—the only burial recorded to the south or east of the exhibit building. A set of postholes at the base of the deposit appeared to delineate the south side of the burial (Figure 6). A ceramic pipe was noted at the north side of the unit, but after a further extension north to the wall of the exhibit building, the pipe could not be associated with a burial. An eastward extension created an inset that exposed more of Burial 258 to allow more thorough study. Fortunately, the excavators were able to define a burial pit, and in the inset, they excavated only the upper disturbed/Late Wickliffe zone and the burial pit fill.

Defining the burial pit established several points of interpretation. First, it confirmed that burials occur in intrusive pits, some—like this one—quite deep. Second, it dashed hopes of using the posthole line to identify a cemetery perimeter, since the postholes' point of origin is at the subsoil, much deeper than the origin of the burial pit. The alignment is accidental. Third, the visibility of the burial pit highlights the fact that the deep deposit here is not the dark, Late Wickliffe midden, but the lighter, anomalous deposit of the flanking two test units. What, then, is it?

Several recent observations about Mississippian earth moving have indicated strongly that such activities were not confined to mound construction. Electromagnetic surveys, followed by test excavations, in Cahokia have demonstrated extensive landscaping in the central palisaded area. The natural topography there is a ridge-and-swale floodplain, which was cut and filled to create a large level plaza area (Dalan 1991:1284). "Massive earthmoving, in addition to mound construction, was initiated during the Lohman phase, creating a `ritual landscape'" (Holley et al. 1989:345). R. Barry Lewis (personal communication) has informally noted that the Adams site, in Fulton County, Kentucky, almost seems to be a constructed island, with deep middens rising above surrounding swamp, which formed a natural moat. In this, the Adams site resembles the Parkin site, in northeast Arkansas, which also has deep middens and rises like a shallow mesa above the
surrounding area. At Etowah, the plaza rises above a surrounding moat. It is reasonable to suspect that these are not accidents or coincidences, but that Mississippian landscaping beyond mound-building is widespread, and was conducted on a scale not yet recognized.

Given the compact, bluff-top situation at Wickliffe, large-scale earth moving to fill low areas or to create a raised plaza seems unlikely. The most that might be expected would be some scraping to level the small plaza, which would be difficult to document since the plaza is now covered by a paved parking lot. However, in considering the deposit to the southwest of Mound C, the question must be considered: is this a Mississippian fill episode, to create a smoother landscape or to fill a gully?

The ceramic assemblages from the anomalous deposit argue against such an interpretation. The contrast between the two zones is clear. Ceramics from the dark upper zone fit the Late Wickliffe pattern (Table 2). The assemblage of the lower zone, however, is a bit ambiguous. The relative proportion of red-filmed to incised sherds is slightly high for a Middle Wickliffe deposit, but slightly low for an Early Wickliffe deposit. If seriation works, it is a late Early to early Middle Wickliffe deposit.

In fact, it is likely that seriation does work here. There are two flared bowl rims in the deposit, which are Middle Wickliffe markers. Two sherds of Nashville Negative Painted var. Kincaid are also present in the assemblage, and there is no good evidence for the introduction of negative painting before A.D. 1200, that is, before Middle Wickliffe. The anomalous zone therefore can be considered a Middle Wickliffe deposit.

On the other hand, something is missing in this profile. As noted above, under the basket-loaded Mound C proper, there is a distinct Middle Wickliffe midden. No such zone is visible under the anomalous deposit to the southwest. This suggests that the deposit in question was created
before much Middle Wickliffe midden developed in this area, thus, early in the Middle Wickliffe period.

The idea that a gully through Late Wickliffe midden was filled in the Middle Wickliffe period, then, is not supportable. The anomalous deposit is not a landscaping infill, but an early Middle Wickliffe mound, which was engulfed by midden and King backdirt so deep that there is no longer any surface indication of it. This mound is currently designated Mound C₁.

A test unit at the opposite (northeast) corner of the exhibit building, in 54-55N 38-40W, encountered a surprisingly similar set of deposits (Figure 7). In each descending floor of the arbitrary levels, the excavators noted a shifting boundary between dark, Late Wickliffe-like midden at the west side, and tan, relatively artifact-free, subsoil-like soil on the east side. The transition shifted westward as the test unit deepened. At the base of the unit, under the tan soil, a pair of wall trenches forming the corner of a rectangular structure appeared. Study of the profile reveals that the shifting boundary between dark and light soils in fact followed the slope of a mound. Like Mound C₁, the northeast mound (designated Mound C₂) was overburdened by Late Wickliffe midden and, with the additional complicating factors of post-1932 construction activities in the immediate vicinity, is not visible on the surface.

Based on preliminary assessment, the structure beneath Mound C₂ belongs to the Middle Wickliffe period. Sandwiched between a Middle Wickliffe structure and a Late Wickliffe midden, Mound C₂ occurs in the same stratigraphic position as Mound C, and should be roughly contemporaneous.

CONCLUSIONS

The Mound C/cemetery excavations of 1992 have provided a new look at the northeast sector of the Wickliffe village, and both supplement and modify previous ideas about the village landscape.
The new data fit the village expansion model well. The basal deposits in the vicinity of Mound C are Middle Wickliffe middens, representing an extension of the village away from the plaza center and along the highest ground of the ridge.

Mound C, on the other hand, provided some surprises. Mound C was not an isolated mound, but part of a complex of mounds. Mound C1, southwest of Mound C, may predate Mound C proper, but the shallowness of the Middle Wickliffe midden in the area suggests that C1 may have been visible when C was constructed. Mound C2 occurs in the same stratigraphic position as Mound C. Thus, all three mounds probably were visible, and are likely to have been in use contemporaneously. The function of this mound complex is still under investigation.

As noted earlier, most of the mound construction at Wickliffe occurred during the Middle Wickliffe period. These mound episodes include five of six stages in Mound A, the larger platform mound; three of four stages in Mound B, the smaller platform; the middeny and basket-loaded Mound C; and now, Mounds C1 and C2. Mounds C and C2 contain too little artifactual evidence to date them securely to the Middle Wickliffe period; however, capped by deep Late Wickliffe middens, they surely date no later than the early Late Wickliffe period.

Thus, only the last stage of each platform mound was constructed in the Late Wickliffe period, and even if Mounds D and F belong entirely to Late Wickliffe, mound construction was more active in the Middle than in the Late period. Middle Wickliffe seems to have been the strongest stage of cohesion in a boom-and-bust cycle in the development of a small chiefdom.

In sum, analysis of anomalous deposits southwest and northeast of Mound C has documented what appear to be small mounds, no longer visible on the surface. In the absence of clear evidence for the social function of this mound complex, this is perhaps not an exciting discovery. It does, however, provide a new perspective on the dynamics of change in the landscape of a small Mississippian town.

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