RECONSTRUCTING THE 1932-1939 KING EXCAVATIONS AT WICKLiffe MOUNDS

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Paper for the Kentucky Heritage Council Archaeology Conference, Richmond KY, February 25, 1995

ABSTRACT

One of the goals of excavations at Wickliffe Mounds since 1984 has been to reconstruct and reevaluate the Fain W. King project of 1932-1939. King dug in six mounds, A through F. Approximately 85,000 artifacts, but little documentation beyond anecdotal publications, now are available to represent the King project. Murray State University and Middle Mississippi Survey studies since 1984 have investigated five of King's mounds (and failed to find the sixth). As the current excavation project enters its final phase, it is time to evaluate whether the goal of reconstructing the King project, and analyzing its results, can be fulfilled.
The Wickliffe Mounds site was excavated by an amateur archaeologist, Fain W. King, from 1932 to 1939, who also operated it as a tourist attraction. He turned the site over to Western Baptist Hospital in 1946, who in turn donated it to Murray State University in 1983.

Since then, the Wickliffe Mounds Research Center has conducted new research on the site. Our primary goal was to reevaluate the King excavation. After 11 seasons of work, we have tested almost all of the major areas of the site, and we are beginning to wrap up the field work, with only a few tests left to finish up in the southern site area. It seems to be a good time, then, to start considering how well we can approach our original goal: to understand better the King project.

King began with Mound A, a double-tiered mound to the west of the presumed plaza. His workers removed approximately 87 cubic meters from the center of the mound, reaching a depth of approximately 2.2 meters.

Published discussions describe two buried mound surfaces, one at five feet below the surface and the second five feet deeper. Both surfaces showed posthole patterns and charred timbers from burned buildings. The upper buried mound surface was described as having three rectangular clay "altars" and a line of postholes interpreted as a prayer rail. King's (1936) article claimed that the mound fill was nearly sterile.

Walter B. Jones consulted with King on the initial testing, bringing a crew of students from the University of Alabama. The involvement of the Alabama workers was very brief, but they made a sketchy record of work in progress at the beginning of the excavation. These notes are filed at the University of Alabama.

The Mound A excavations began with two test units at the crest of the mound. The two units eventually expanded into each other, becoming a single block. The upper strata consisted of a dark-colored plowzone and topsoil over a thicker yellowish mound fill. Both zones contained
charcoal, burnt brick (probably daub), and shell tempered sherds, of which only a few apparently were saved. At the base of the yellow zone was a heavy charcoal stratum, underlain by a surface with posthole line, interpreted as a burned structure on a former mound crest.

There is no indication that the soils were screened. The notes describe only meager artifacts, including shell-tempered ceramics, a large pottery trowel, a hammer stone, two bone awls, and a chipped stone drill. So far, we have located no more than a score of artifacts from the Mound A excavations.

The Mound A excavation was still open in 1983, but was in very poor shape. In 1983, a University of Illinois project under the direction of Barry Lewis obtained charcoal samples from the two major burned strata. The samples yielded radiocarbon dates in the twelfth century A.D.

Our excavations in 1984 placed a 2 x 8 m trench in the eastern side of Mound A. We identified at least six mound construction zones, and also an underlying midden, which King's excavations had not reached. We found no sign of middens associated with earlier mound crests. Artifacts are accidental inclusions in the mound fill, which evidently were too fragmentary for King's crews to be interested in. Our excavations in Mound A, then, resulted in two main additions to King's work: a more thorough understanding of the full stratigraphy of the mound, and a ceramic sequence tied to radiocarbon dates.

Mound B is the only one of the 1930s King excavations of which we have a stratigraphic drawing. It shows a platform mound profile, with several mound zones separated by charcoal zones.

The Kings focussed on the feature pattern at the subsoil, a large, roughly square posthole pattern with a number of internal postholes and several features. At this base level, the 1930s excavators found a bone "turkey caller," some charred maize cobs, two ceramic discs, a cannel coal ring, a
worked piece of fluorspar, and several ceramic vessels, including one that sounds like Bell Plain and others with red-filmed interiors.

King dismissed the mound deposit above the basal zone by saying, "Very few artifacts were found elsewhere," and in another article referred to the mound fill as "almost sterile." The Alabama field notes also concentrate on the floor pattern.

We conducted excavations in Mound B in 1990, on the north side of the mound. We found that the 1932 drawing was accurate, but simplified: the mound is much more complex than the older drawing showed. The general stratigraphy is much like that of Mound A, with an underlying midden capped by successive platform mound stages. There are two major differences from Mound A. First, the midden grows considerably deeper away from the center of the mound. I think this is because we are on the side of Mound B away from the plaza, and village deposits lapped against the slope of the mound each time the mound expanded. In Mound A, we excavated the plaza side, and no additional deposition took place once the mound defined the edge of the plaza.

The second difference is that the dark zones on the mound crests in Mound B are actually middens, which spread down the mound slopes. Mound B was a residential mound. As a working hypothesis, I am treating Mound B as an elite residence, an idea I could not glean from the King project.

King designated the area that turned out to be the cemetery as Mound C. T. M. N. Lewis described the mound as "not a prominent one." He described extended, bundle, and cremation burials among the 153 exposed. Lewis discussed several burial associations, and more generally noted a high frequency of effigy vessels, mica, hematite, fluorite, lead, copper, cannel coal, marine
shells, and bone and stone tools. Most of these materials cannot be identified among the collections.

Lewis also commented that burial pits could not be defined. He thought that that meant the bodies were placed on the ground and dirt heaped over them, which would have created the mound. "Layers of charcoal are to be seen under the burials," he wrote.

Fain King, also in 1934, referred to more than 140 burials, and added that "This mound is about one-tenth excavated... Tests made elsewhere indicate there should be a total of eight hundred to one thousand burials in this mound."

Our excavations in 1991 through 1994 focussed on the cemetery and Mound C. The basal zone was a midden. Mound C proper is one in a complex of three small mounds. The mounds are covered by a late midden. The burials are contained for the most part in the late midden, occasionally penetrating deeper. Like Lewis and King, we could not trace burial pits in the midden soil, but did find a couple that penetrated lower deposits. Because there are pits, and because this is a well-defined, very densely occupied cemetery, I think the cemetery is intrusive, post-dating the abandonment of the Wickliffe village, although I will have to obtain direct dates to verify my interpretation.

We cannot confirm the grave goods that King and Lewis reported. One burial, peripheral to the main group, contained fully half the ceramics we found in situ.

We did confirm extended and bundle burials, and also one cremation, although we are not sure whether the cremation belongs to the cemetery or to the underlying mound. We confirmed the charcoal lenses associated with some burials, which we think are charred boxes. We now have a fair idea of the full extent of the cemetery. Oddly enough, Hugh Matternes's most recent estimate of a burial population of 8 to 900 fits well with King's estimate.
We also found something completely new, an area of conglomerate slabs on the northwest side of the mound. It resembles robbed limestone-slab graves of the surrounding Mississippian regions, expressed in locally available material. We do not see any indication that the disturbance was historic.

Blanche King's published accounts describe Mound D as rectangular in shape, measuring 105 by 55 ft, with a maximum height of 6 ft (B. King 1937:83, 1939:47). King tested Mound D in 1932, with a single square unit placed arbitrarily at the north end of the mound. This test was recorded only with a sketch of its general location, and was apparently backfilled with the same unscreened soil removed from it. The excavation in Mound D was resumed in 1935, this time on a grid.

The Kings reported 63 infant burials and 6 structure patterns at the base of the mound. Most of the structures were rectangular, but one was circular, 22 ft in diameter. The Kings described the mound fill as a "great accumulation of kitchen midden," rich in artifacts, yielding several fire pits, a charred fabric bag containing corn, and a large fluorspar pendant. Numerous infant burials, artifacts, and features are still locatable in the Mound D excavation.

More intriguing is their report of adult burials apparently within the mound. King first mentioned only that there were four adults "at higher levels." Blanche King added this description: "In the middle of the structural outlines, three feet from the base of the mound, two adult extended burials were found completely covered with cypress and other bark. We also found a burial pit, the bottom covered by stones and six bundle burials."

Our 1987 field school studied Mound D. The northern remnant is a later mound over a thin early village midden and features. The south end of the trench penetrated disturbed deposits, which I think are the backfill of the 1932 test.
Our tests at the south end of the building found backfilled deposits down to subsoil, with truncated features remaining in the subsoil. Evidently King's excavation reached south of both the building and our own trench, to an unknown distance.

To the east of the exhibit building, there is a large depression, bounded by a low ridge at the east edge of the site. The ridge was tested by Barry Lewis's crew in 1983 (Lewis 1986). The ridge is a remnant midden, while the low area is old excavation, not backfilled.

We have about 20,000 grid-provenienced sherds from Mound D, not all of which have been analyzed. I also studied the collection at the University of Michigan, where King sent some 11,000 sherds in the 1930s. I hope that, with three-dimensional plotting of the artifacts, we can make a tentative reconstruction of the structure of the original mound.

Distribution patterns in other artifact classes have already proven interesting. A few clusters of artifacts were confined to single levels within squares. Without detailed context notes, I cannot be sure whether these were features, but provisionally, I am interpreting the clusters as caches. Three projectile point caches, one cache of bone tools, and one of gaming pieces, are unique in any deposit investigated so far on the site. Also, three-fourths of the provenienced conch shell effigy fragments identified so far came from Mound D. Coupled with the adult burials in the mound, I suggest that, if there was an elite burial mound at Wickliffe, it was Mound D. Given the nature of the data, that's probably as strongly as I'll be able to make that statement. Still, distributional data plus our own excavations should give us a clearer picture of Mound D than we would have had otherwise.

Mound E is the least documented of all King's mound excavations. Only two of Blanche King's publications even mention Mound E. In her book, she mentions a large cache of corn and cobs in Mound E, "which really was a village site."
The Alabama field notes provide a few more hints. A sketch places three Mound E tests in the northwest corner of the site.

From provenience labels on the ceramic collection, the Kings dug a large block when they returned to Mound E. On the grid north side, the excavation went three levels deep, implying a three-foot profile. Since no such profile is visible on the site today, I assume that the excavation area was backfilled, and that the backfill area should be identifiable.

In 1988 and 1989, we placed a line of tests across the northwest sector of the site, with a couple of perpendicular tangents. I think that we did intersect King's test E3 in one unit, and the soil profiles in the tests farthest west match the description of E2 in the Alabama notes. But we did not find the Mound E block excavation.

Returning to the Alabama notes, we find that both the artifact inventory and the narrative notes mention a test E5. (There is no discussion anywhere of a test E4, yet another puzzle.) The notes mention "E5--north of camp... In digging a trench to drain depression north of camp..." they ran into burials. The narrative goes on to describe the excavation of two burials, but has nothing more to say about the location. However, in a letter to Fay-Cooper Cole in 1938, King also refers to "Mound E, across road."

Photographs show that the camp was to the east or slightly southeast of Mound C. They cut a road in 1932, later gravelled. These hints, coupled with the finds of burials, place test E5 near the cemetery. We did find a large historic disturbance in this area, but it is not nearly big enough to be the gridded Mound E block.

We still don't know here Mound E was. King's final note, "across road," written in 1938 and thus apparently after the excavation, may mean across the highway, but conditions there make locating it extremely unlikely.
Mound F was King's final excavation. Blanche King described Mound F as 80 by 40 feet, with a "small, cone-shaped emplacement on an elongated mound." Artifacts and features are merely mentioned, including house patterns, hearths, infant burials, a charred basket, fish bones, and a fluorspar pendant, with no useful information about context (King 1939:57-58, 81).

Mound F at one time had a frame exhibit building covering it, but this building burned in the 1940's or 1950's.

We cleared much of the floor of the Mound F excavation in 1985 and 1986, and also tested just north. The excavation floor was at subsoil, with remnant truncated features which gave us a few data on feature patterning and a small artifact sample. We also identified a remnant mound fill and underlying midden in the northwest corner. We cannot confirm anything about the reported layers of charcoal, but we can place the deposits in the late period.

We have some 10,000 grid-provenienced sherds from King's Mound F. We also have two sets of sherds marked MF-38 4L and MF-39 4L. I think that these are from the last two years of King's excavation, when he abandoned the grid and finished Mound F in two blocks. His letter to Cole in 1938 has an artifact inventory for "Season 1938, Mound F... Area excavated 30' x 40' to subsoil," with no indication of any grid used.

Again, I hope that eventually some three-dimensional mapping of the artifacts, especially the ceramics, coupled with the chronology and contexts visible from our own excavations, will tell us something about the structure of this mound.

In sum, I think that our excavations since 1983 have illuminated considerably the King project, and have put us in a much better position to analyze the artifacts he left us. He excavated two platform mounds, one ceremonial, one residential; he exposed perhaps 15% of a cemetery, which we see as a far more complex structure than he was able to recognize; he
conducted gridded excavations on three mounds, one of which we can't find, but two of which we can assess much better now than we would have without the new data.

When King opened the two platform mounds and the first forty burials in the first month of the project in 1932, he was working with a University of Alabama crew, doing to the Wickliffe Mounds what they had done to other mounds up to that point. When he conducted gridded excavations in cooperation with the University of Chicago, his methodology was pretty close to 1930s standard, and the collections were systematic. It may or may not be his fault that we don't have field notes to go with them. King's last two years, when he abandoned the grid in Mound F, and his failure to cooperate with professionals towards analysis and systematic curation, are, I think, his greatest failings. We will continue to analyze his work along with our own as we wrap up the Wickliffe excavations for this generation. I hope we will bequeath to the next generation a much more systematically documented set of data.