MISSISSIPPIAN WEST KENTUCKY: RETROSPECTIVE AND PROSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Presented in the session “From Memphis to Mumbai: Archaeology Inspired by R. Barry Lewis,” at the Society for American Archaeology, Atlanta, Georgia, April 24, 2009

In 1983, Barry Lewis initiated the Western Kentucky Project to survey and test later prehistoric sites along the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers at the western end of Kentucky. Murray State University accepted the Wickliffe Mounds site, and began excavations. The two projects complemented each other in focus and scope. The Western Kentucky Project contributed data regarding the big mound sites, as well as some smaller sites, providing a regional context for Mississippian developments. This paper reviews West Kentucky Mississippian in light of the work of the 1980s and 1990s. Many of Lewis’s questions about remain unresolved, despite his substantive contributions.

1983 was something of a watershed year for archaeology in western Kentucky. I’m speaking here specifically of the Jackson Purchase region, the area west of the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers, which Barry Lewis once called Baja Kentucky, a phrase I particularly liked. 1983 saw the beginnings of two long-term research projects: the University of Illinois’s Western Kentucky project, which was initiated and directed by Barry, and also the transfer of the Wickliffe Mounds site to Murray State University, which brought the site back into an academic fold after fifty years in tourist-attraction limbo.

When I circulated my research design for excavations at Wickliffe in late 1983 or early 1984, I was repeatedly told by colleagues that I should not be excavating that site. After all, now that Murray State owned it, it would be protected and should be preserved. Instead, I should begin a program of survey and testing in the region.

Well, Barry’s Western Kentucky project was already doing that. I didn’t see any reason to duplicate that effort. I thought my project of test excavations to try to reconstruct the context
of the existing collection of some 80,000 artifacts from Wickliffe would be a useful exercise both for the site and for the region, and that our two projects—mine at Wickliffe, and Barry’s regional approach—would be complementary. I still think that the projects complemented each other nicely.

The Western Kentucky project produced a series of nine solid reports, four dissertations that I know of, and a string of papers in various venues, which individually and together contributed a great deal of new information about Jackson Purchase archaeology. I can’t begin to synthesize all of the data in a 15 minute paper, but I’d like to offer my perspective from 26 years later. (Hard to believe it’s been that long.)

Barry came to western Kentucky from a background in Southeastern Missouri and a couple of monographs on Mississippian sites. At some point during that work, he looked across the Mississippi River and said something like, “Hey, there are mounds over there, and nobody’s doing anything with them.” Thus I imagine the genesis of the Western Kentucky project.

Previous research had been pretty episodic. William S. Webb and W. D. Funkhouser had done projects and publications of varying thoroughness at McLeod’s Bluff and Jonathan Creek, with publication dates of 1933 and 1952, respectively. Fain and Blanche King published bits and pieces of data from the Wickliffe site in the 1930s, but professionals carefully tiptoed around Wickliffe. Other sites had been investigated by 1983, but the data were in manuscript and thesis form. I think it’s fair to say that you had to be pretty well informed to even know about these sites, much less to be familiar with the data.

Barry’s first season included test excavations at Wickliffe and the Adams site, and a surface collection at the Sassafras Ridge site. His object, as he said in the report, was to “begin the collection of basic archaeological data from the western Kentucky border mound groups…”
The ultimate goals of our research are to understand and interpret the role of the Ohio-Mississippi confluence region in the development of Mississippian culture, to trace the late prehistoric culture history of this region from a solid framework of stratigraphy and absolute dates, and to identify and explain the cultural processes and other factors that led to the development, maintenance, and eventual extinction of planned aboriginal towns.”

He developed his questions further a few years later in his contribution to the Kentucky SHPO’s state plan for archaeology. He suggested that the development of finer chronological sequences was a fundamental priority, based on absolute dates. He was an early proponent of calibrating radiocarbon dates. He called for survey data and excavations, and noted quite rightly that a few tests in each site would be of limited effectiveness. He thought that site distribution and density patterns would be needed to address questions about site hierarchy, the diversity of site types, and the nature of the settlement systems. He wanted data and careful thought about the origins of Mississippian culture, also its end, and its relationship with Fort Ancient. He suggested that we needed a more systematic understanding of the extent of looting and other impacts to the sites, and he called for the publication of unpublished and incompletely analyzed and synthesized data.

Good research goals all. So where are we? Given time constraints, I’ll just mention excavations of the later prehistoric periods. Unless otherwise specified, the projects and reporting personnel I’ll mention were part of the Western Kentucky project.

Paul Kreisa’s test excavation at the Rice site is still the only good data set we have for a Late Woodland component. Kreisa compared the time frame to the Patrick phase in the American Bottom. He excavated two 1 x 2 meter units. No one has been back to the site for more information.
The Western Kentucky project did indicate that other Late Woodland deposits exist in the region: for example, a test excavation identified a 30 cm-thick Baytown midden at the largely Mississippian Adams site in Fulton County. Two test units at Indian Camp Lake found middens below the plowzone. A later, brief Murray State University controlled surface collection at Indian Camp Lake (not yet published) documented clusters of Baytown ceramics that suggested separate houses or house compounds, but explored no intact and datable deposits. Tom Sussenbach and Barry Lewis also identified a Baytown component at the White site. Kreisa reported Baytown ceramics from the Twin Mounds site. Other small tests at the Burcham and Crawford Lake sites found Baytown sherds in middens, also. For the most part, the analyses had trouble separating the shell-tempered from grog-tempered components in the limited tests.

The Late Woodland to Early Mississippian transition is a fuzzy period. Sussenbach tested the Marshall site, and found ceramics that appear to reflect the transition from grog to shell temper. Kreisa excavated two units at the Rowlandtown site. He noted some traces of Late Woodland there. I followed up with excavations in the Rowlandtown Mound in 2001–2003. I found a midden at the base of the mound, with ceramics very similar to Sussenbach’s description of Marshall site sherds. I think we need to look back at Roger Allen’s work at Dedmon, where Baytown series ceramics were by far the majority, with a significant number of shell-tempered Mississippian types in only one of the trenches. He described ceramics much like mine at Rowlandtown and Sussenbach’s at Marshall. Kreisa found two sherds of stumpware at Twin Mounds, and I’ve seen stumpware from the same area in a private collection. These data suggest that there are isolatable transitional or Early Mississippian components in the region, but we need a great deal more work to understand the period.

The Mississippian sites tested by the Western Kentucky project form a long list:
Wickliffe, Adams, Turk, White, Twin Mounds, Burcham, Crawford Lake. We can add two surface collections at Sassafras Ridge and Tolu, the latter outside the Jackson Purchase. For most of these sites, the Western Kentucky project provided our only systematic data.

Some further work has been done. There is, of course, my own work at Wickliffe. Sissel Schroeder has tackled an analysis of the Webb data from Jonathan Creek. David Pollack and Jimmy Railey reported excavations at the Chambers site. And, as I mentioned a minute ago, I went back to Rowlandtown. Chuck Stout also did a small project at the Canton site, which again is outside the Purchase, but close enough that we can adopt it.

As we expected, the Mississippian sites are broadly contemporary. Together they give us a good picture of faunal, floral and stone exploitation, pottery styles, and large village layouts. They prove that non-mound Mississippian sites are out there. The amount of information we have is far and away greater than we had in 1982.

But there are still a lot of questions, including many of those raised by Barry in the beginning of the Western Kentucky project. We still know too little about the detailed intra-site sequences of most of the sites, how they developed through time, or when each was abandoned—because it is too simple to give a blanket date for the dissolution of all these towns.

I’d like to consider briefly a couple of the remaining problems that I’m thinking about. One is a problem that Barry noted at least 20 years ago: that all of the Mississippian sites have small but consistent assemblages of grog-tempered sherds throughout their sequences. This raises questions about the standard Late Woodland/grog and Mississippian/shell tempered dichotomy that we’re used to accepting—quite aside from the Marshall, Rowlandtown and Dedmon ceramics that seem transitional. Some sites, like Adams and Twin Mounds, have both Late Woodland and Mississippian components, so that having a few grog-tempered sherds
kicked up into Mississippian deposits doesn’t present a problem. At Wickliffe, though, I have yet to find a Late Woodland deposit. Was the Late Woodland occupation destroyed during the Mississippi period, and churned into the general midden? Or is there something more interesting going on?

Bob Lafferty’s results from the Hillhouse site in Southeast Missouri raise a serious issue. The Late Woodland deposits, dated to before AD 1000, yielded grog-tempered ceramics. By the thirteenth-century, shell temper had increased only to about 10% of the ceramics. By traditional temper-based chronologies, the dates were too late. Vessel forms, site layout and lithic data, however, argue for a Mississippian context in agreement with the dates.

Lafferty pointed out that two previous projects had encountered a similar apparent discrepancy. At both the Pettit site in Southern Illinois and the Oliver site in western Tennessee, deposits characterized mainly by grog-tempered ceramics produced dates that would be expected of Mississippian sites, that is, sites characterized by shell-tempered ceramics. In all cases the analysts and the archaeological community rejected the 14C dates in favor of the prevailing temper-based model.

Lafferty offered an interpretation that challenges the prevailing model: that the 14C dates are correct. In this view, there is a regional co-tradition, in which grog-tempering persists in at least some non-mound villages. In this case, the grog-tempered sherds in Mississippian deposits are contemporary with the Mississippian occupation and are evidence of contact between the Wickliffe villagers and some grog-temper-maintaining non-mound villagers in the region.

If the grog-tempered sherds are contemporary with the Mississippian occupation, then the assumptions about regional consistency in the rates of artifact change are challenged. Either we must account for a few holdout potters in each village refusing to give up an earlier pottery
tradition for hundreds of years, or we must accept previously-rejected 14C dates from the
Hillhouse, Pettit, Oliver and Dedmon sites. In this case, there is unsuspected ethnic diversity in
the region. Sites previously dated to the Late Woodland period on the basis of grog-tempered
sherds will have to be reassessed, potentially changing models of settlement pattern and culture
change throughout the region. New models will have to be developed to account for ceramic
technologies as ethnic or political markers. It is possible that Mississippian culture was to some
extent imposed or intruded. In this scenario, colonial administrators and settlers, or founding
splinter groups, established the mound centers as enclaves of mound culture, while surrounding
peoples absorbed the new influences only slowly. Shell temper could be something of an ethnic
marker, or a badge of identity for those who embraced the mound culture, and the landscape of
ceramic tempers would resemble a mosaic or a colonization model rather than an encompassing
wave of diffusion (grog temper as an ideology of resistance?). Mississippianist archaeologists
have yet to explore ideas of internal frontiers that our colleagues in regions such as West Africa
are finding useful, but the co-tradition model suggested by the late persistence of grog temper at
Hillhouse, Pettit, Oliver, Dedmon, and even in unambiguously Mississippian sites like Wickliffe,
Adams, Turk, Twin etc. point to complexities and dynamics yet to be considered.

There’s also the pesky question of the end of the regional Mississippian tradition: that is,
the Vacant Quarter hypothesis. Was a large portion of the central Mississippi Valley, including
western Kentucky, abandoned in the 1400s? We need much finer-grained chronologies for each
site, not just a general chronology for all the sites, to tackle the question of whether there was a
cultural collapse, a gradual emigration, or a dispersal across the landscape. Barry’s contention in
the heat of an unnecessarily acrimonious argument then is still true today: we do not have the
survey data, especially in the uplands, to say that people weren’t there. We need more data.
Of course, new questions have arisen since the 1980s, and new techniques. Geophysical survey methods and even basic instruments like total stations are much more available than they were. Geographic Information Systems and computer databases and analytical techniques have improved markedly. There has been a shift to emphasize ideas of iconography, ritual, and ethnogenesis, and to challenge such archaeological delusions as chiefdoms, to borrow Tim Pauketat’s phrase.

We know that some of the Mississippian sites of western Kentucky are intact enough that new research can tackle these questions. We know this because of the western Kentucky project. These data give us a base to build on, and will be Barry Lewis’s ongoing legacy to western Kentucky archaeology. Thanks, Barry, and best wishes in retirement.

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