The Wickliffe Mounds occupation can be divided into three periods: Early Wickliffe, A.D. 1100-1175; Middle Wickliffe, A.D. 1175-1250; and Late Wickliffe, A.D. 1250-1350. The periods are based on consistent concordances of radiocarbon dates, oxidizable carbon ratio dates, stratigraphic sequences, ceramic assemblages, rim and handle forms, and assemblage groups. Investigations have indicated a pattern of village expansion from a compact, moundless settlement circa A.D. 1100, through successive construction of a number of mounds and extension of domestic areas along the crest of the ridge, to a final, intensely occupied town that crowded the edges of the bluff by about A.D. 1350.

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The Wickliffe site is located on the bluffs of the Mississippi River in Ballard County, Kentucky. It was excavated in the 1930s by a relic collector and entrepreneur, Fain White King. He created a tourist attraction on the site, which operated under several managers until the 1980s. Murray State University accepted the site as a donation in 1983.

Since then, the Wickliffe Mounds Research Center has conducted fourteen field schools on the site. Our original goal was to try to re-evaluate the King excavations, to put the remaining artifact collections into some kind of context. Along the way we conducted testing on all major areas of the site, giving us a view of variability within the village.

Our first research priority was to establish a chronology and internal sequence. The 1984 excavations in Mound A set useful patterns. We could distinguish three ceramic periods. The Early Wickliffe period, represented by the underlying midden, had a higher percentage of red-filmed sherds than of incised types. The Middle Wickliffe period had nearly equal proportions of red-filmed and incised sherds. In the Late Wickliffe period, in the final cap of the mound, incised sherds outnumbered red-filmed sherds by about 3 to 1.

These differences were small, and based largely on mound fill, so they needed to be verified. In excavation after excavation throughout the site, ceramic analysis corroborated
the sequence, indicating that the incised/red-filmed relationship was consistent with stratigraphic relationships. Only in cases of historic disturbance was the ceramic sequence inconcordant with depth and stratigraphy.

We have an analyzed sample of more than 170,000 sherds. There are patterns among the other ceramic groups. Bell Plain has a slight tendency to increase in the Late period, as does Wickliffe Thick. Kimmswick Fabric Impressed, on the other hand, decreases in the Late period. Cord-marking is rare in any period, and negative-painted sherds do not appear in the Early Wickliffe period.

Among the decorative types, Matthews Incised vars. Beckwith and Manly, Barton Incised, and Mound Place Incised are found throughout the sequence. The Early Wickliffe sherds of Barton and Mound Place tend to fit in the broadest definitions of the types. O'Byam Incised var. Adams appears in Middle Wickliffe. O'Byam Incised var. O'Byam, Owens Incised, Winterville Incised, Leland Incised, and untyped punctate sherds mark the Late period. Carson Red-on-Buff is represented by a single sherd in the Late Wickliffe period.

When I use terms like Winterville, Wallace, and Leland Incised, I am using them under the loosest definitions of the types. I do not see, for instance, Leland Incised at Wickliffe as evidence of trade with the historic Natchez. However, I use
these designations rather than a catch-all category of untyped incised, because they do have chronological implications.

There are also patterns in vessel forms. The primary Early Wickliffe assemblage consists of jars, bowls and pans. In the Middle Wickliffe period, all of the same forms occur, and there is a new form, the flare-rimmed bowl. O'Byam Incised var. Adams occurs on this type of bowl. The form occurs only as a trace in the Late Wickliffe period. The flare-rimmed bowl, whether decorated or plain, is a marker for the Middle Wickliffe period.

The Late Wickliffe assemblage includes straight-necked, short-necked, and hooded bottles, jars, pans, funnels, and plates, defined as shallow vessels with flaring rims measuring between 25 and 67 mm. Plates include both plain and incised specimens, the latter being typed as O'Byam Incised var. O'Byam. Most plates have a fine, Bell Plain paste, but Mississippi Plain plates occur with and without incising.

There are other, less conspicuous trends. Jars and pans diminish in the Late Wickliffe period. Bowls decrease in percentage in the Middle period, perhaps displaced by the new style of flaring the rim, then resurge in the Late period even as plates gain in popularity. Hooded bottles are present throughout the sequence. Straight-neck bottles, however, increase in proportion, and if the dubious single Early Wickliffe bottle rim is rejected, bottles appear in Middle
Wickliffe and increase into the Late Wickliffe period. Funnels increase through time, by no coincidence mirroring the increase in the Wickliffe Thick type. The relationship between the pan and the Kimmswick Fabric Impressed sequences is less direct, since pans include Mississippi Plain sherds.

If jars are broadly assumed to be cooking vessels, and plates and bowls taken to be serving vessels, the ratio of serving to cooking vessels rises with time: from .38 in Early Wickliffe, to .45 in Middle Wickliffe, to .80 in Late Wickliffe collections. There is one significant highlight. The Mound B Middle Wickliffe midden serving ratio is high, higher even than the Late Wickliffe ratios. I argue that Mound B supported an elite residence, and that the elite led the trend towards increased use of serving vessels.

Pans, like jars, decrease proportionally through the sequence. I think pans are general-purpose cooking vessels, boiling pans and griddles, rather than special-purpose vessels as the common term "salt pan" would imply. So, the decline in pans, paralleling that in jars, reinforces the increase in the ratio of serving to cooking vessels.

There is also a sequence in handle form. Following Sherry Hilgeman, I use a thickness to width ratio of the cross section of handles. In the Early Wickliffe period, the average ratio is .69, a loop handle. The average Middle Wickliffe ratio is .58,
and the average Late Wickliffe ratio is .49, progressing towards strap handle forms.

Despite the small percentages distinguishing the original red-filmed to incised sequence, the facts that the stratigraphic relationships were consistent in undisturbed deposits, and that we can see other patterns in typology, handle and vessel form that correlate with the sequence, support the integrity of the ceramic periods at the Wickliffe site.

We have several sets of chronometric dates, including both radiocarbon and Oxidizable Carbon Ratio dates. Three of the 14C dates were reported by the University of Illinois’ Western Kentucky project. My attribution of period contexts for dates depends on the ceramic sequence and stratigraphy.

We have three 14C dates on Early Wickliffe deposits. Stratigraphically, only one makes sense. Its calibration intercepts span the range of the three OCR dates, AD 1100s.

Three Middle Wickliffe 14C dates on charcoal t-test as the same date at the 95% confidence level, and average to a 1-sigma range of calibrated AD 1158-1259. This range matches well with three Middle Wickliffe OCR dates. However, the two earlier OCR dates were defined as Middle Wickliffe on the basis of stratigraphic relationships, and could be from Early Wickliffe deposits. The one ceramically-defined Middle Wickliffe context gave an OCR date of AD 1211.
Recently, Hugh Matternes reported 14 carbon-14 dates on samples of human bone from the Mound C cemetery. Twelve of the dates average to 1-sigma range of cal A.D. 1191-1264, indicating a cemetery that belongs mainly to the Middle Wickliffe period.

We have 11 14C dates on charcoal from Late Wickliffe contexts. Three of the dates are from one feature, and are wildly variant due to problems in identifying but not adjusting for corn in the sample, and I disregard them. The others t-test to the same date at the 95% confidence level, and give an average 1-sigma range of calibrated 1280-1293. Matternes’s two faunal dates from samples in the Mound C Late Wickliffe midden average to cal A.D. 1268-1389, matching the previous Late Wickliffe dates very well. Eleven OCR dates from Late Wickliffe middens range from A.D. 1223 to 1348.

Overall, the dates, ceramic associations, and stratigraphic sequences match up quite well. I am particularly impressed with the fact that the OCR dates picked up inversions in mound sequences and in a soil horizon displaced from a house basin, and that in other instances, they made me rethink some rather facile assumptions about stratigraphic relationships. In sum, I offer this chronology for the Wickliffe sequence:

Armed with a ceramic sequence and a chronology, I’ve been searching for other patterns. I have, for instance, looked at
ceramic patterning on an artifact group level, inspired by Stanley South’s patterning approach in historical archaeology.

I defined categories appropriate to Wickliffe as the Ceramics, Arms, Personal, Activities, and Debitage groups. The Arms group includes stone, antler, and bone projectile points.

There are clear trends in the major artifact groups. Ceramics increase in proportion through time, and debitage decreases. The Personal and Activity groups are best represented in the Middle Wickliffe period. Arms, however, are most numerous in the Late Wickliffe period. The Mound B Middle Wickliffe midden, the likely elite deposit, is notably lacking in distinguishing characteristics in any category.

The striking note is the consistency of the patterns within periods. The Late village is represented by the most samples, the biggest samples, and the most spatially varied samples; yet the percentages of pottery types and artifact groups are extremely consistent. The Late Wickliffe village is very homogeneous, and there is no indication of any differentiation in residential sectors.

Pottery trowels, astragalus dice, and most ornaments are missing from the Early Wickliffe period. However, the Early assemblages are very small.

The proportion of chipped stone artifacts is highest in the Middle Wickliffe period, but still much higher in Late Wickliffe
than in Early Wickliffe—contrary to the generally diminishing proportion of debitage. The proportion of bifaces is highest in the Middle period, which is reflected in the minor peak of the Activities group. The proportion of chipped stone projectile points, however, rises sharply from Early to Middle, and then rises again in the Late Wickliffe period. Antler points in particular, and bone tools in general, fit the biface pattern, best represented in the Middle period.

Fishhooks are common in the Early and Middle periods. They disappear from Late Wickliffe deposits.

I don’t have time to detail for you various analyses contributed by colleagues, so I’ll summarize.

Mississippian people arrived at the Wickliffe site around A.D. 1100, and built a small settlement. Most of their ceramics were jars (some with loop handles) and bowls, but they also made a few hooded bottles, pans and funnels. More pots were red-slipped than incised, and incised patterns included Matthews Incised vars. Beckwith and Manly, Barton Incised, and Mound Place Incised. The residents buried infants and at least two older children within the village, but the location of the cemetery for older persons is unknown.

The Early village was a compact settlement, clustered around the plaza. Some activities sprawled away from the town center both north and south, but either they did not cause much
midden to accumulate, or the middens were disturbed by later occupation. Small flakes, more likely associated with resharpening than manufacture of stone tools, cluster, with an overall distribution that centers on Mound A.

At the end of the Early period or at the beginning of the Middle period, the villagers began Mound B, which became the residence of an elite family—the only elite residence that can be identified. Raising the elite residence apparently took precedence over raising the ceremonial mound, Mound A, which may indicate something of the consolidation of a chief’s power, the priority of chiefly importance over the ceremonial sphere, the investment of both political and ceremonial power in the chief, or some combination of social, political, and spiritual power than cannot even be dissected into categories.

The Middle Wickliffe period saw the expansion of the village along the higher and better-drained areas of the ridge. The villagers put much more effort into raising mounds, adding several stages to both platform mounds and creating a three-mound complex around Mound C. The purpose of the Mound C complex is unknown, but it became the site for a cemetery.

Flare-rimmed bowls mark the Middle Wickliffe period. Incising increased, although the only new incised type is O’Byam Incised var. Adams. Negative painted specimens are rare enough that they may have been traded from elsewhere. Red-slipped pots
were still common. The villagers were using more funnels for whatever they used funnels for, and in general, they were using more bowls in proportion to cooking vessels, a trend in which the Mound B residents led the way.

The Mound B residents were also distinguished by relatively choosy consumption of deer, or at least by discard of better quality cuts of deer. They are not, however, distinguished by other markers, such as ornaments or exotic raw materials. A couple of Ramey Incised sherds in the platform mounds show influence or trade from Cahokia. Daub clusters, with a distribution centering on Mound B, suggesting substantial architecture. Large flakes show a similar pattern, perhaps indicating some concentration of the knapping of lithics.

The Middle Wickliffe villagers grew much the same crops as before. They depended less on fish, however, and more on terrestrial birds and mammals. They brought the cemetery within the village. The relative numbers of tools, flake tools, craft items, and personal items were greatest in the Middle period, and higher-quality or higher-status textiles appeared. A peak in the import of Burlington chert implies more interaction with the American Bottom.

In the Late Wickliffe period, the townspeople continued to build mounds, but their effort shifted away from the platforms. They added only the final mantle to each of the platform mounds.
The area of the village expanded yet again, to the edges of the bluff, and some deep middens imply a concentrated population. Utilized flakes cluster, with a distribution that centers in the northwest, indicating a different organization of some activities from previous periods.

Plates appeared in the Late period, as did new forms of decoration, mainly more complex patterns of incising such as O’Byam Incised var. O’Byam and Owens Punctate. Incising was the dominant decorative technique. There was a trace of Carson Red-on-Buff, while red-slipped pots diminished in frequency. The trend towards an increased proportion of serving vessels to jars continued. Pans, and Kimmswick Fabric-Impressed sherds, were a lesser proportion of the assemblages, while Wickliffe funnels increased. There was a proportional increase of potsherds in the assemblages, and complementary decrease in lithic debitage.

Fish and aquatic birds made up still less of the menu, terrestrial birds and animals more. Fishhooks dropped out of the assemblage, and projectile points increased in number. The proportions of tools, crafts and personal items in the assemblage declined from Middle Wickliffe levels. Burlington chert appeared least often in the Late period, perhaps reflecting the dissolution of Cahokia, although the northern focus of trade in lithics continued with Southern Illinois cherts. Cemetery activity moved off-site.
At the end of the Late Wickliffe period, about A.D. 1350, the village was abandoned.

I’d like to touch on two more general matters, western Kentucky chiefdoms and regional phase sequences. I like David Hally’s model for northern Georgia, that the period of platform mound construction indicates the time when a chief was resident in the village. The platform mounds at Wickliffe were built primarily in the Middle period, and completed with final caps in the Late period—probably early in the Late period, and possibly without buildings on top. This is the period of strongest interaction with Cahokia, highest proportions of various tools and ornaments, consolidation of the cemetery within the village, and several other distinctions. I argue, then, that a chief was in residence in the Middle Wickliffe period.

Hally’s model suggests that we look at the platform mound sequences in other western Kentucky sites to see how their chronologies match Wickliffe’s. I propose that if the neighboring platform mounds were built simultaneously with Wickliffe’s, we have a regional, complex chiefdom. Or, we might find that some are earlier, some later, and we will begin to infer shifting patterns of authority within the area.

We do not have the data from other sites with which to do this. The University of Illinois’s Western Kentucky project provided valuable test data on a number of these sites, but did
not investigate mound sequences. This will be the next step in the study of western Kentucky chiefdom organization.

To take this step will require more excavation. It will also require a phase sequence that is appropriate to the problem. Following Willey and Phillips, a phase is based on material culture: recurrent assemblages of artifact types. We then explore the dimensions of the assemblage pattern in time and space to define a phase. Phases, then, are driven by content, and time and space follow.

The Wickliffe sequence, built from artifact complexes in consistent stratigraphic sequence, then chronometrically dated and assigned to units of 100 years or less, is an appropriate model for investigating the relative chronologies of mounds in far western Kentucky. Where I have data to compare directly—level by level sherd counts from the Turk site in Richard Edging’s dissertation, and handle and plate measurements from the Chambers site, reported by David Pollack and Jimmy Railey—the Wickliffe sequence works well. The Wickliffe chronology correlates well with other chronologies of the Lower Ohio Valley, and also with the calibrated American Bottom chronology. I suspect that the Angelly phase of the Black Bottom and Lower Tennessee-Cumberland can be subdivided much like my Middle to Late Wickliffe, as Sherry Hilgeman suspected that her Angel sequence would also reflect the distinction with more data.
Given time, and space and assemblage content, we may yet make sense of western Kentucky’s regional organization in the Mississippi period.

Early Wickliffe
14C (1 date) 1026 (1071, 1080, 1128, 1136, 1154) 1211
OCR range 1104-1168

Middle Wickliffe
14C average 1158 (1212) 1259
OCR range 1153-1211
cemetery 14C average 1191 (1222) 1264

Late Wickliffe
14C average 1280 (1286) 1293
OCR range (middens) 1223-1348
Mound C midden average 1268 (1293) 1389

Late Wickliffe, A.D. 1250-1350
Middle Wickliffe, A.D. 1175-1250
Early Wickliffe A.D. 1100-1175