Abstract

The Wickliffe Mounds Research Center conducted excavations at the Rowlandtown Mound (15McN3) in 2001-2003. The excavators documented a sequence that included an underlying midden and eight mound construction zones, and explored a number of features associated with upper mound summits. Ceramics were sparse, but sufficient to suggest a chronology of ca. AD 1000 through 1300. Previous data from the associated village indicate a continued occupation to AD 1400+. Comparable data are available from Wickliffe (15BA4), and have implications for regional patterns of chiefdom organization.

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1. The Jackson Purchase region of western Kentucky is noted for a number of Mississippi period villages that are located about every five to ten miles along the major rivers. A few are located on the minor rivers as well, and I suspect that we don’t know about all of those. The University of Illinois’s Western Kentucky project tested several of these sites in the 1980s and early 1990s, and my own excavations at Wickliffe provided a more thorough sample of one site. A number of questions about them remain, however, not least how all the centers are related to each other. At Wickliffe, I argue that I can characterize the society within the broad pattern of Mississippian chiefdoms, and I assume we can say the same of the other similar villages. But were they all independent centers of simple chiefdoms, or were some, most or all of them subsidiaries to a major, paramount center?

2. Studies of potential catchment areas or territories around each site fail to clarify the picture. The interior sites have larger territories, but the reasons for that may be ecological or lack of survey coverage rather than political. Only one site, Kincaid in the Black Bottoms of southern Illinois, is an order of magnitude larger than the others, but how do we measure its region of dominance?

One model that may be useful is David Hally’s suggestion that we must look at contemporaneity of chiefly centers. His
notion is that the period when the platform mounds are being built is the period when a chief is maintaining a presence on a site. This model works well at Wickliffe, where the platform mounds were built in the middle of the period of occupation, and other data support an inference that the middle period is the strongest and most centralized time in the life of the village.

Under this model, if the mounds at all of these sites were built simultaneously, and completed simultaneously, they probably participated in a single system, like a paramount chiefdom. If not, we should be able to chart shifting centers of authority within the region, by documenting the mound chronologies at the various sites.

3. To test this model, we have two problems. One is to devise a chronology that can discriminate appropriate sub-periods within a regional Mississippian occupation. The Wickliffe project has created a ceramic sequence based on radiocarbon dated contexts, stratigraphic relationships, and horizon markers that compares well with what we know of the Angel Mounds and Lower Tennessee-Cumberland ceramic horizons. Provisionally, I can apply it to Lower Ohio Valley and adjacent-area sites. Also, based on Angel and other sites’ data, I can make some suggestions at to what should characterize the immediately pre- and post-Wickliffe ceramic periods.
4. The second problem is to date mound construction sequences. We had those data for Wickliffe several years ago, but not for other western Kentucky sites. To begin testing the model, I began with the Rowlandtown site, 15McN3.

Rowlandtown is on the west side of Paducah, Kentucky, and is probably the closest Mississippian mound village to Kincaid. Aerial photographs indicate that the village covers several acres. There is one mound on the site, although given the historic disturbances, it would not surprise me if there were not originally others. Paul Kreisa tested the site in the early 1990s, finding it generally contemporaneous with the other Mississippian villages in the region, and interpreted it as a second-order community in a greater Kincaid system.

5. The south side of the mound had been extensively borrowed in the twentieth century, and we started on this side, expecting to get a relatively quick look at the mound stratigraphy. We began a 2 x 2 meter unit on the slope, and this one at the summit. The summit quickly showed evidence of wall features as well as some historic disturbance.

6. A little bit deeper, the wall trenches, a couple of postholes, and the extent of the historic disturbance became clearer.

7. We made it to Level 6, roughly 60 cm, in the 2001 season. We cut through a greyish clayey mound zone into a
basket-loaded zone below. The historic disturbance and also a
segment of a wall trench are visible in the upper left corner.

8. We restricted the next level to half the square, and
went deep, trying to find the base of the basket-loaded zone,
but had to abandon it here.

9. The profiles show a surficial, disturbed zone, then
three zones of basket-loading, the middle of which was dominated
by grey ball clays. There is a shallow midden or topsoil zone
between the grey and underlying brown basket-loading. A deep
wall trench appears to descend from above the grey zone, but its
point of origin is obscured by the disturbances in that corner.

10. This is a view of the south profile. Two shallow wall
trenches penetrate the top of the grey, but historic disturbance
has removed the overlying mound fill here. There is a
distinction between the darker and lighter grey fills, but I
can’t say that they were separate construction episodes.

11. This is the south 2 x 2, cutting into the face of the
historic cut, showing the mirror image of the last stratigraphy.

12. Here we are at the bottom of Level 5, about 50 cm below
the summit, well into the basket-loaded zone where we stopped in
the upper unit. The lensing in the southwest--upper right--is
curious, but it was a while before we figured it out.
13. As with the upper unit, as we ran out of time in 2001, we went deep in one half of the square. We penetrated several more mound zones, but did not find the base of the mound.

14. The stratigraphy explained part of the lensing. There is a deep feature that cuts diagonally across our excavation unit, which is filled and then mounded over with basket-loaded fill.

15. There are two sets of those lensed soils, both outside and probably intruded by the big feature. There may have been a couple of other large, flat-bottomed pits in summits of this mound.

16. There are precedents in the lower Ohio Valley. Glen Black reported an apparent pithouse feature in the primary mound surface of Angel’s Mound F. Black, however, reported burned debris at the base of the Angel feature, and with the probable exception of one sherd that was likely an accidental inclusion, the base of our feature at Rowlandtown is clean—at least in the area we excavated.

17. In 2002, we returned to Rowlandtown, removed the backfill from the south unit, and headed for subsoil or China, whichever came first. We had to cut a trench to the south for access to the deep unit.

18. At every level, I was sure we were almost at the base. Some levels we cut deep, looking for stratigraphic transitions.
Eventually, we had a 3-meter profile to subsoil. There are a few postholes in the subsoil.

19. Because of the depth and the tree cover, I found it difficult to get a good stratigraphic photo. The access trench, stepped through basket-loaded soils, is on the right. There is a mass of charred corncobs on the pedestal in front of the access trench.

20. The access trench stretched three meters south of the main unit. We were still in basket-loading under the overburden, which gives us an indication that this mound had a much bigger footprint than it seems to today.

21. I identified eleven stratigraphic zones in the profiles, including a midden, Zone 11, at the base. Zone 1 is topsoil and overburden from historic disturbances. The top of Zone 1, by the way, is not the highest point of the mound, which I’ll get back to in a couple of minutes.

Zone 4 is a thin midden or topsoil at the base of the grey clay episode, Zone 3, and the summit of the deep Zone 5. The other zones are all various mixes of basket-loading. So we have a good idea of the construction stratigraphy. We have a couple of good charcoal samples from deep in the mound, which will be suitable for radiocarbon dating when I can find the funding.

22. Ceramics, however, were sparse, and since I did not have good charcoal samples from the upper zones, we went back
for a third season this last summer. We removed the backfill from the upper unit dug in 2001, and expanded to a 4 x 3 meter block.

23. We removed Zone 1, the disturbed overburden, and also the fill from a historic feature. Then we removed 10 cm from the top of Zone 2, the uppermost mound fill that we had identified so far. Several wall trenches began to show up.

24. We continued to removed Zone 2 in arbitrary levels. We excavated features as we defined them, then took another level over the entire unit.

25. At each level the feature stains became clearer and new features appeared as we cleared up various disturbances.

26. We got to the top of Zone 3, the grey clay zone. Many of the features originating at the top of Zone 2 had penetrated shallowly into Zone 3. This matches the situation we had with two segments of wall trench in 2001. The top of Zone 2 had several overlapping structure patterns, implying use of the final mound summit through several rebuildings of whatever structures they were. Unfortunately we found no corners, just this checkerboard of intersecting wall trenches, and no structure floor with associated artifacts or midden that might tells us what those structures were.
27. We approached Zone 3 the same way, taking 10 cm arbitrary levels to see if feature patterns emerged from the background.

28. One of the wall trenches appeared to go incredibly deep. This caused some confusion in nomenclature, because it turned out this is a second wall trench on almost--but not quite--the same line and orientation as one above it.

29. Here we are at the base of Zone 3, which is the top of Zone 4, the thin midden/topsoil. That wall trench clearly penetrates through, and here the fill of the wall trench shows its derivation from the grey mound zone.

30. Then we removed Zone 4, exposing the basket-loaded Zone 5. Aside from the wall trench we had followed down from far above, we saw no features intruding this former summit.

31. Remembering that Zone 5 was the zone that filled the big hole in the previous summit, we took down a deep level to try to expose another side of that feature. We did not find any sign of Zone 6, and 3/4 inch core samples taken at each corner to a depth of about 50 cm also failed to find any soil transition. That was one big hole in the Zone 6 summit, whatever it was.

32. This is the west profile of the completed excavation. The deep wall trench that originated at the top of Zone 3, the grey, and penetrated into Zone 5, is clearly visible.
33. I mentioned earlier that our excavation did not begin at the highest point on the mound. It was possible that our Zone 2 was not the uppermost surviving mound zone. We moved over a few meters to the higher point, which was pitted by a historic disturbance, probably a looter’s attempt. We put in a 1 x 2 meter unit to check the topmost stratigraphy. The stain of the looter’s pit is visible in the southwest, the lower left.

34. The east profile shows that the higher level is due to additional overburden, lying on top of Zone 2. A little farther east of this unit, there is a huge hole that was carved out of this mound, roofed and used as a garage in the twentieth century. The top soils here probably are backdirt from that excavation. Thus, Zone 2 is the last known construction episode of the mound.

35. I hope to find funds for carbon dating samples from both early and late contexts, but the ceramics do give us a sense of chronology when compared to the Wickliffe sequence. The ceramics from the top of the mound compare well with Late Wickliffe markers, ca. AD 1250-1350. In the middle levels of the mound, three red-filmed sherds versus two incised sherds and one loop handle match Early Wickliffe patterns, roughly AD 1100-1175.

But the lowest three or four zones of the mound and the underlying midden have a different assemblage, dominated by
cordmarked and plain sherds. There is a lot of grog and much less shell in the temper. Because there is shell and they are more highly fired than typical grog-tempered sherds from the region, I refer them to the Mississippian types Mississippi Plain and Crosno Cordmarked, but I thought a long time before I chose not to call them Baytown and Mulberry Creek, the regional Late Woodland types. Both Woodland types persist in very small numbers through the Wickliffe occupation, but even the shell-tempered cord-marked ware becomes only a trace in the Wickliffe period.

Two red-filmed sherds are very much like Varney red-filmed specimens from Zebree, a hallmark Emergent Mississippian site in Northeastern Arkansas. The general assemblage is very similar to the one from the Marshall site, south of Wickliffe, including a dash of Yankeetown Filleted in both. Radiocarbon dates from Marshall place it pre- to Early Wickliffe.

Based on the ceramics, and pending radiocarbon confirmation, I think that the early levels of the Rowlandtown mound pre-date the Wickliffe site, reaching perhaps to AD 1000.

36. So how does this fit into the regional picture? It appears that the Rowlandtown mound was begun well before the mounds at Wickliffe. There’s a midden at the base, which means that there was occupation before the mound was begun. The ceramics at the top of the mound are equivalent to the
assemblage in the final mound caps at Wickliffe, suggesting that the mounds were completed at about the same time. Paul Kreisa’s date from a house basin at Rowlandtown may mean that the Rowlandtown village was occupied later than the Wickliffe village was, but the overall pattern—village occupation before and after mound construction—is similar.

So we have Rowlandtown likely occupied before Wickliffe, and its mound begun before Wickliffe. By the Hally platforms as chiefs model, a chief established a presence at Rowlandtown before one did the same at Wickliffe. However, both platform building programs stopped about the same time.

It is tempting to see a slow spread of chiefly power spreading out from Kincaid, reaching Rowlandtown first, eventually spreading to Wickliffe and perhaps beyond. Then the regional system collapsed around AD 1300. Both villages continued to be occupied for a while, but as independent entities, perhaps the centers of simple chiefdoms, perhaps operating without chiefs in the full fuss-and-feathers ceremonial sense.

I also can’t help toying with the possibility of a peripatetic chiefdom, the idea that a paramount chief maintained numerous manor houses and traveled among them with retinues and henchmen, eating up the local surpluses and making sure the local leaders kept in mind who had the real power. This is a
medieval English model, but Charles Hudson and his colleagues have suggested something similar for Coosa, I think. This scenario would be consistent with the so-called feasting deposits some colleagues have identified, and also with periodic renewals of the mound, getting ready for the arrival of the lord high muckamuck.

Neither of these scenarios can be supported by my current data, but neither can be dismissed, either. I only have two mound sites with documented platform construction sequences, and I don’t know that Kincaid preceded either one as a mound center, however likely it may appear. Right now, I think I can say that Rowlandtown and Wickliffe do not support the idea that a regional system was imposed at one time. They may support a scenario of a regional chiefdom collapse.

Perhaps when we get a few more mound sequences documented, we can really begin to approach the question of how the regional Mississippian system may actually have worked. Thank you.