WICKLIFFE’S MOUND D REVISITED (YET AGAIN)

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ABSTRACT

Previous analyses of Mound D at Wickliffe (15BA4) suggested that it was an elite burial mound. In this provisional interpretation, when the mound was constructed and whether it contained multiple stages are key questions. Unfortunately excavations in the 1930s almost completely removed the mound, leaving little contextual evidence. Tests in 1987 found that only a small remnant of the north end of the mound remained, which probably did not reflect a full construction sequence. Excavations in 2004 identified basket-loaded zones in pedestals that are the last remnants of the interior of the mound, providing data towards identifying a mound sequence.

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Note: this is the script version, For references, please contact the author.
In the summer of 2004, the Murray State University archaeology field school returned to the Wickliffe Mounds site with a deceptively simple question: whether Mound D had a stratigraphy, and if so, whether we could date a construction sequence. To explain why answering this question was not so simple, I have to give a rather involved background.

The Wickliffe site, in Ballard County, Kentucky, is located on the bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River a few miles below the confluence with the Ohio. It was first reported by a Kentucky geographer named Loughridge in 1888, and visited by C. B. Moore in the 19-teens. In 1930, road crews cut through the southern tip of the site, leading Paducah businessman Fain W. King to purchase the site with the goal of opening excavations and creating a tourist attraction. Beginning in the fall of 1932, King dug six areas, covered five of them with frame shelters, and made some extravagant claims about what he found. After a change of ownership and several changes of management which are not worth detailing here, Murray State University accepted the site and collections as a donation, and created the Wickliffe Mounds Research Center.

We then began a program of revising the public education program and investigating the site to put the artifact collection into context. We conducted field schools annually from 1984 through 1996 and again in 2000, eventually testing all major areas of the site and re-evaluating, to the extent possible, the King excavations. In 2004, the site became the Wickliffe Mounds State Historic Site, but I am still involved in analysis of the artifact collections.

My analysis broke the site’s chronology into three internal periods, creatively called Early, Middle and Late Wickliffe. The primary criterion for identifying the deposits is a ceramic chronology, and especially the relationship between incising and red-filming. Red-filmed sherds outnumbered incised sherds by about 3 to 1 in the Early period, and very slightly in the Middle period, while incising roughly reverses the 3:1 ratio to red filming in the Late period. These relationships are found consistently in stratigraphic relationship throughout the site, and radiocarbon and Oxidizable Carbon Ratio dates also are in good agreement. A number of specific markers, particularly certain incised types and vessel and handle forms, also support the sequence. The dates place Early Wickliffe about AD 1100-1175, Middle Wickliffe about AD 1175-1250, and Late Wickliffe about AD 1250-1350, after which the site evidently was abandoned.

I have also suggested that the Middle Wickliffe period was the time of strongest sociopolitical organization within the sequence. This is based on several lines of evidence. The two platform mounds, Mounds A and B, were built primarily in the Middle Wickliffe period, with final caps in the Late Wickliffe period. Mound A appears primarily ceremonial, without middens, but Mound B has middens on buried summits and is likely to be an elite residence.

The villagers also created a three-mound complex around Mound C. The purpose of the Mound C complex is unknown, but it became the site for a cemetery. The villagers brought the cemetery inside the village during the Middle Wickliffe period.

The village expanded along the higher and better-drained areas of the ridge. 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 led by the Mound B residents.
The Mound B residents were also distinguished by relatively choosy consumption of deer, or at least by discard of better quality cuts of deer. A couple of Ramey Incised sherds in the platform mounds show influence or trade from Cahokia. A peak in the import of Burlington chert also implies more interaction with the American Bottom area. The distribution of large flakes centers on Mound B, perhaps indicating some concentration of the knapping of lithics or of imported raw materials. The relative numbers of tools, flake tools, craft items, and personal items were greatest in the Middle Wickliffe period, and higher-quality or higher-status textiles appeared.

All of these Middle Wickliffe developments correlate with the main building of the platform mounds, and support David Hally’s model that a period of platform construction accompanies residence by a chief. Whether Wickliffe was the seat of an independent simple chiefdom or a component in a more complex chiefdom is a question yet to be resolved.

The burial pattern at Wickliffe includes the cemetery, primarily a Middle Wickliffe phenomenon, and also burials of infants and young children in the village. It appears also that Mound D contained burials.

Mound D was excavated in the 1930s under Fain King’s ownership but with the help of University of Chicago graduate students, who brought some system to the operation. They excavated on a 5 x 5 ft grid, in 1 ft arbitrary levels. The pedestals seen in the foreground in this photo are still standing in the exhibit building at Wickliffe.

King described the mound as a long, low mound with a saddle, and 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. There were numerous infant burials at the base and subsoil. King also described adult burials, at first saying that there were four adults "at higher levels." Blanche King extended the description: "... 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."

The Mound D artifact collection has other unusual attributes. Gail Wagner told me that she found red cedar in Mound D, but not elsewhere in King’s samples. There are several clusters of stone projectile points in Mound D. They are Archaic period types, and may have been caches. There is also an apparent cache of bone tools, and another of discs and discoids. Astragalus dice are scattered all around the site except in Mound D. Finally, two-thirds of the conch effigy fragments from Wickliffe come from the north part of Mound D.

I have suggested that, if there was an elite burial mound at Wickliffe, it was Mound D, which resembles an attenuated version of the ridge mounds at Cahokia, interpreting the bundles as retainer burials. I hope that I stated that conclusion with proper restraint—but then of course I’ve gone ahead and pretended that I’ve made the case.

So the next question is about the chronology of Mound D. Is the (possible) elite burial a Middle Wickliffe feature, which would support my contention about Middle Wickliffe being the
peak of chiefly activity? The problem, of course, is that King wiped out most of the mound in the 1930s.

We did an excavation in the remnant north end of the mound in 1987, finding a Late Wickliffe mound fill over an Early Wickliffe village occupation. There was no sign of a Middle Wickliffe mound, but this is only the toe of the mound, which probably does not reflect a full construction sequence.

So in 2004, during the transition from Murray State University to the state parks system, we returned to Mound D to look at the remaining pedestals to see if there was any evidence for a stratigraphy in Mound D.

We started by trying to reconstruct the King grid. A King letter includes a sketch of the mound, locating a benchmark pin in relation to the grid baseline. The benchmark is also marked on a topographic map prepared by James DeJarnette in 1932, and appears to be in the same horizontal location as a large iron pin now in the floor of the Mound D excavation exhibit. Grid north is actually nearly west, because they set the east-west baseline along the long axis of the mound.

We had hoped that the grid would match the pattern of the 5 x 5 ft pedestals, but life is never that easy at Wickliffe. Either the benchmark did not migrate vertically as the mound was excavated, or… well, who knows what else.

There is a large block pedestal at the south end of the exhibit building (that is, grid west), which King evidently thought was a house floor (although I don’t agree). The smaller pedestals are to the north and east. We designated the small pedestals by the nearest grid node or the grid node on top of it, and we excavated the large block within the 5 x 5 units. We excavated in 10 cm levels, after cleaning and recording the profiles. For the most part the soils were extremely dry, having been sheltered for 70 years. I’ll stipulate here that the samples from any one level or pedestal are fairly small, but no smaller than other comparable excavation units elsewhere in the site, so I think the overall pattern will become clear.

One question we had always had was how accurately this display represented what was excavated here. The intrusive features match unexcavated features we found both inside the building and surrounding it, so I think the wall trench, posthole and hearth features are fairly accurate. The distribution of infant burials also resembles what we’ve seen elsewhere, and I can account for most if not all of King’s reported 64 infants.

However, we had never trusted that the artifacts on display were actually in situ. We mapped and collected all of the artifacts on the pedestal surfaces before beginning to excavate. There were artifacts labeled with King’s Mound D excavations, but from a variety of units, and even Mound E sherds in the same concentrations. So the artifact concentrations might most charitably be called representative and definitely cannot be trusted to be in their original locations. This is a bit of a disappointment, but not at all a surprise.
There was a pedestal at the northeast corner of the large block, designated Pedestal 20N55W. I don’t see any sign of basket loading here. We reduced it in two levels to the level of the block. Three incised to one red-filmed sherds indicate a Late Wickliffe deposit, although a flared bowl and a handle could indicate some Middle Wickliffe mixing.

We removed one 10 cm level from the entire block pedestal. The results here were rather mixed. Some squares could be interpreted as Middle Wickliffe deposits, others are Late Wickliffe. It is possible that we have sliced through a stratigraphic succession, but on the whole I think it’s safer to interpret this level as a Late Wickliffe deposit.

Pedestal 15N40W is fairly low and had sustained some erosion damage from groundwater leakage. We removed three levels, without finding diagnostic sherds except for a handle indicating a Late Wickliffe deposit. There was a feature at the base, which produced a Middle Wickliffe assemblage, but I would identify this with an underlying Middle Wickliffe occupation rather than a mound zone.

We removed three levels from pedestal 15N25W, also damaged by groundwater. Plates and incised sherds indicate a Late Wickliffe deposit.

We also reduced Pedestal 25N35W by three levels. With a 7:1 incised to red-filmed ratio, a strap handle, and an O’Byam var. O’Byam plate sherd, this is definitely a Late Wickliffe deposit. None of the pedestals at the south side seemed to show any basket-loading in their profiles.

However, the two pedestals at the north end were different. Pedestal 30N10E was tall and narrow, and originally had human remains on top—possibly representing bundle burials. There is definite basket-loading in the profile, and also a thick lense of charcoal. We removed three levels from this feature. The top level yielded no diagnostics. The second and third levels produced one incised to two red-filmed sherds and a flared bowl, which are Middle Wickliffe characteristics.

The northernmost pedestal, 25N25E, was lower, but also had basket-loading in the profile. The top level had an incised sherd and a plate rim, suggesting a Late Wickliffe deposit. The second level had no diagnostics, but the third had a red-filmed sherd and a loop handle—suggesting a Middle or even Early Wickliffe deposit.

In sum, only the two northernmost pedestals contained basket fill, and only those two can reasonably be interpreted as Middle Wickliffe deposits. However, these data do lend credence to the possibility that the northern part of Mound D had a Middle Wickliffe core.

So, my conclusions:

It is possible that Mound D was an elite burial mound.

It is possible that Mound D had a Middle Wickliffe construction stage, capped by a Late Wickliffe stage.
Therefore it is possibly possible that there is a Middle Wickliffe elite burial in Mound D. That may be as firmly as I can state the conclusion, given the nature of the data. Nonetheless, it would fit the overall picture of an intensification of elite activity at Wickliffe during the Middle Wickliffe period, roughly AD 1175-1250.

I thank Kentucky State Parks and the Wickliffe Mounds State Historic Site for allowing this excavation even while the site was in the throes of reorganization and transition, and for their patience in waiting for the analysis and return of the artifacts.

Thank you.