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Time and Place at Smith Creek: A Brief Analysis of Lower Mississippi Valley Pottery

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Abstract:

The Smith Creek Archeological Project offered a perfect opportunity to study prehistoric Native Americans. This particular mound site is located in the Lower Mississippi River Valley, and what is known from preliminary excavations is that the site was primarily occupied during the Coles Creek period, roughly 700-1200 AD. It is also known that this was a time of great transformation in the prehistoric American South. According to scholar Ian Brown (1973), it is important to analyze undecorated sherds as well as decorated because, "the combination of the period and phase marker percentages tells the archeologist what was occurring in the overall period." Because this project endeavors to strengthen and extend current knowledge regarding this period I hope to add what knowledge and assistance I can. As a result, I have spent much time under the guidance of Dr. Meg Kassabaum, along with various finding aids and publications, analyzing the diagnostic or decorated pottery sherds retrieved during Smith Creek Archeological project's most recent field season. After developing a simple analytical model, my preliminary findings support the prediction that cultural occupation was continuous despite its dynamic variation.

Preface and Acknowledgements:

During the summer of 2015 from late May to late June I participated in the Smith Creek Archeological project. Having mainly focused on Historical Native American ethnographic material from the Northeast I found myself particularly out of my depth during the expedition. However, I coveted field school experience, so I jumped at the opportunity to unearth prehistoric materials from the Lower Mississippi Valley. The abbreviated season was completed in 4 weeks, and although quite a bit of washing was done in the field the majority of the lab work was conducted at the Universi-

ty of Pennsylvania under the supervision of Dr. Meg Kassabaum. Due the expert assistance of Sheridan Small, Ashely Terry, Arielle Person, Alex King, Zhenia Bemko and Dr. Kassabaum's Intro to Archeology classes the lab work was completed in short order. Under the dedicated, careful and watchful eye of Dr. Kassabaum much of the ceramic analysis and rim drawing is currently being completed through the assistance of Zhenia Bemko, Alex King and Arielle Person.

Introduction:

Site

The site is located roughly fourteen miles west of Woodville, Mississippi, where route 24 runs right through it. Smith Creek (22Wk526), named for the small river that also runs through the site, is about four miles northeast of the Mississippi River, which acts as one of the borders to Louisiana. The site was chosen because of previous investigations led by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, during the Mississippi Mound Trail and the need for further information.

The site consists of three pre-historic Indian mounds with a large plaza nestled in the center. Mound A is roughly 10 m tall, located to west, and was damaged by construction of route 24 in 1960. Mound B is located to the north, surrounded by a moat and a stand of trees. It was excavated in the 1960s by Mr. J Ashely Sibley and the Junior Archeological Society. Mound C is located to the East, and partially eroded by Smith Creek. The South Plaza located in the South is thought to have the latest occurrence of inhabitation. (Kassabaum 2014)

Excavation and Laboratory Methods

Excavations took place, between May 25th and June 20th 2015, at three separate locations on the site while various surface collections and Oakfield cores (generally mapping out the North Plaza) were used to flesh out our data set. The mounds were excavated in 1 x 2 m units and the Plaza in two adjacent 2 x 2 m units. All digging was conducted by hand using primarily shovels and trowels in arbitrary 20 cm levels, however, due previous test excavations on Mound C stu-

dents were able to follow two mound surfaces. Soils on Mound C and the South Plaza were dry screened through half inch mesh where Mound A was eventually screened with quarter inch mesh. Midden layers, features and surfaces were water screened through sixteen-inch mesh and several 10-liter flotation samples were taken (all consistent with the Mississippi Mound Trail).

Processing and analysis of recovered materials takes place at the University of Pennsylvania. July to November 2015 was devoted to material processing, while material analysis is currently being conducted. Also, an array of materials were recovered, including decorated and non decorated ceramics, bone fragments, fired clay, stone tools and lithics, shells, charcoal and various concretions. However, for the purposes of this document, serving as a preliminary confirmation of site inhabitation, it was prudent to focus primarily on ceramics. Classifications were based on the nomenclature created by Phillips (1970) and elaborated by Williams and Brain (1973) to identify ceramic types and varieties.

Background:

Culture

For contextual information it is beneficial to provide a brief discussion of characteristics of the prehistoric cultures existing during Neo-Indian era. This era can be broken into six periods, five of which are thought to be represented at Smith Creek, seen in Figure 1.1. This knowledge is important because the breakdown of cultural periods informs pottery classification and vice versa. First among them was Poverty Point which was more socio-politically complex than bands of hunter gatherers as represented by their earthworks and extensive trade networks. These people greatly utilized their flora and faunal resources, and relied less on stone tools. During the Poverty point culture bone objects are rare which greatly differs from the Tchefuncte culture.

Next the Tchefuncte culture, although regarded as less complex than Poverty Point, is recognizable by its proliferation and use of pottery. It's interesting that most sources state that cultural transitions occur due to a degeneration, decline

or collapse of the previous culture, however, they acknowledge influences from regional expression of subsequent cultures. (Jones 1989, Brown 1973, Ford 1936, Neuman 1984, Toth 1988) For example, the Poverty Point culture is said to have degenerated and collapsed yet the introduction of influences from both the Tchefuncte and Hopewellian cultures imply a level of continuity (Brown 1973).

However, as a result of Hopewellian interactions, which were known for a great deal of mobility and trade, artifacts were transported widely. The Marksville culture is simply a southern regional expression of the Hopewell culture, represented in very distinctive decorative motifs on pottery. The Marksville culture is known for its complex type of sites and characteristic conical mounds.

But, interactions decreased as agriculture and self reliance increased leading to innovation ushering in what is known to be a transitional period called Troyville or Baytown. Platform mounds are common during this period. In spite of distinctive ceramic motifs Baytown leads to the Coles Creek florescence.

Although, it is thought that the Coles Creek culture was agricultural there is no evidence of such at Smith Creek. This period is seen through the widespread use of pyramidal mounds. Whose blending with the Plaquemine culture gave way to the Plaquemine culture. Coles Creek culture eventually gives way to Plaquemine culture.

The framework used for ceramic chronology of the Natchez Bluffs Region, shown in Figure 1.1 was established by Brown (1998) in concert with many other scholars. The basic foundation suggests that:

[c]lassification that uses the type-variety concept involves a taxonomic approach, wherein classes of whole artifacts are hierarchically arranged and define ...[t]he fundamental criterion in the formation of types is the "decorative idea" (technique and style) ... This hedging is a matter of practicality, in order to establish parameters for the rather limited range of decorative ideas and the reutilization of certain basic ones through time and space. The underlying consideration, then, in

the establishment of types is a certain decorative identity that may also be presumed to demonstrate a reasonable degree of spatial-temporal continuity and thus the dimensions of the same idea.... (Williams 88)

This method also relies heavily on Philips' (1970) work.

Date	Natchez Bluffs	Lower Yazoo	Culture
	Phase	Phase	
AD 1730	Natchez	Russell	Plaquemine / Mississippian
AD 1682	Emerald	Wasp Lake	
AD 1500	Foster	Lake George	
AD 1350	Anna	Winterville	
AD 1200	Gordon	Crippen Point	Coles Creek
AD 1100	Balmoral	Kings Crossing	
AD 1000	Ballina	Aden	
AD 850	Sundown	Bayland	
AD 750	Hamilton Ridge	Deasonville	Baytown
AD 400	Issaquena	Issaquena	Marksville
AD 200	Grand Gulf	Anderson Landing	
AD 1	Panther Lake	Tuscola	Tchefuncte
500 BC			

Figure 1.1 *Chronology*

Data:

The chart below depicts the number of decorated sherds classified into their respective type-varieties based on the location of their recovery. Also, the totals have been placed with respect to which phase the type-variety is prevalent in. Using Figure 1.1 allows the reader to better understand the cultures associated with each type-variety and phase.

Note: because many type-varieties span two or more phases the author has proportioned the sherds accordingly. For example, Coles Creek, Incised var. Philips exists in the Hamilton Ridge, Sundown and Ballina phases, so one sherd is divided and a third of a sherd is listed in each of the phases.

Phase/Type-Variety	Mound A	Mound C	South Plaza
Panther Lake			3
Alexander Incised, var. Green Point			2
Alexander Pinched, var. Castine Bayou			1
Issaquena			4
Alligator Incised, var. Alligator			2
Evansville Punctated, var. Evansville			4
Marksville Stamped, var. Mabin		1	
Marksville Stamped, var. Manny		2	
Marksville Stamped, var. Troyville		1	
Hamilton Ridge	38.331	29.082	51.249
Coles Creek Incised, var. Chase	5	2.25	4.75
Coles Creek Incised, var. Hunt	2	1.5	2
Coles Creek Incised, var. Judd Bayou	3	2	2
Coles Creek Incised, var. Phillips	17.331	7.332	22.999
French Fork Incised, var. Wilzone	1.5		
Landon Red on Buff, var. unspecified (Landon)	2	2	
Larto Red Slipped, var. Larto	1.5	4	4.5
Mulberry Creek Cordmarked, var. Edwards	3	1	5
Mulberry Creek Cordmarked, var. unspecified	3	3	10
Woodville Zoned Red, var. Woodville		6	
Sundown	80.831	38.332	107.249
Chevalier Stamped, var. Chevalier	3.5		3.5
Coles Creek Incised, var. Campbellville	2	0.5	1.5
Coles Creek Incised, var. Chase	15	6.75	14.25
Coles Creek Incised, var. Coles Creek	3	0.5	7.75
Coles Creek Incised, var. Hunt	2	1.5	2
Coles Creek Incised, var. Judd Bayou	3	2	2
Coles Creek Incised, var. Phillips	17.331	7.332	22.999
Coles Creek Incised, var. Stoner	5.5	1.5	8
French Fork Incised, var. French Fork	0.5	0.5	1
French Fork Incised, var. Laborde	1	0.25	0.75
French Fork Incised, var. Larkin	2.5	0.5	6
French Fork Incised, var. unspecified	1	2	6
French Fork Incised, var. Wilzone	0.5		
Larto Red Slipped, var. Larto	1.5	4	4.5

Mazique Incised, var. Mazique	4.5	1	4
Mulberry Creek Cordmarked, var. Smith Creek	15	7	13
Mulberry Creek Cordmarked, var. unspecified	3	3	10
Ballina	49.831	16.582	80.499
Chevalier Stamped, var. Chevalier	3.5		3.5
Coles Creek Incised, var. Campbellsville	2	0.5	1.5
Coles Creek Incised, var. Coles Creek	9	1.5	23.25
Coles Creek Incised, var. Phillips	17.331	7.332	22.999
Coles Creek Incised, var. Stoner	5.5	1.5	8
French Fork Incised, var. French Fork	1.5	1.5	3
French Fork Incised, var. Laborde	3	0.75	2.25
French Fork Incised, var. Larkin	2.5	0.5	6
French Fork Incised, var. unspecified	1	2	6
Mazique Incised, var. Mazique	4.5	1	4
Balmoral	12	1	94.5
Avoyelles Punctated, var. Kearney			2
Carter Engraved, var. Shell Bluff			7
Coles Creek Incised, var. Blakely			16
Coles Creek Incised, var. Greenhouse	7	1	8
Coles Creek Incised, var. Mott	2		41
Evansville Punctated, var. Rhinehart			8
French Fork Incised, var. McNutt	2		2
Mazique Incised, var. Kings Point			2
Pontchartrain Checked Stamped, var. Pontchartrain	1		8.5
Gordon	9.5	6.5	111.25
Avoyelles Punctated, var. Dupree		1	1
Avoyelles Punctated, var. Tatum			2
Chevalier Stamped, var. Perry	1	1	1
Coleman Incised, var. Coleman	1	1	4
Coles Creek Incised, var. Hardy	3		21
Evansville Punctated, var. Sharkey			6
Harrison Bayou Incised, var. Harrison Bayou			4
Mazique Incised, var. Manchac	1.5	1.5	5.25
Plaquemine Brushed, var. Plaquemine	0.25	0.5	45
Plaquemine Brushed, var. unspecified	1.75	1.5	13.5
Pontchartrain Checked Stamped, var. Pontchartrain	1		8.5
Anna	6.5	6.5	237.25
Anna Incised, var. Anna			26
Anna Incised, var. Australia			7
Anna Incised, var. Evangeline			3
Anna Incised, var. unspecified			9
Carter Engraved, var. Carter			9
Carter Engraved, var. unspecified			2
L'eau Noire Incised, var. Bayou Bourde			3
L'eau Noire Incised, var. L'eau Noire			3

Mazique Incised, var. Manchac	0.5	0.5	1.75
Old Town Red, var. unspecified			1
Plaquemine Brushed, var. Plaquemine	0.75	1.5	132
Plaquemine Brushed, var. unspecified	5.25	4.5	40.5

Figure 1.2

Analysis: As a result of an exercise conducted during an independent study of the material, the author created an excel database for data regarding decorated pottery. Figure 1.3 is a linear graph that expresses the frequency of sherds found at each location based on the phase or phases that they are attributable to. The exact number of sherds corresponds to the totals found in Figure 1.2.

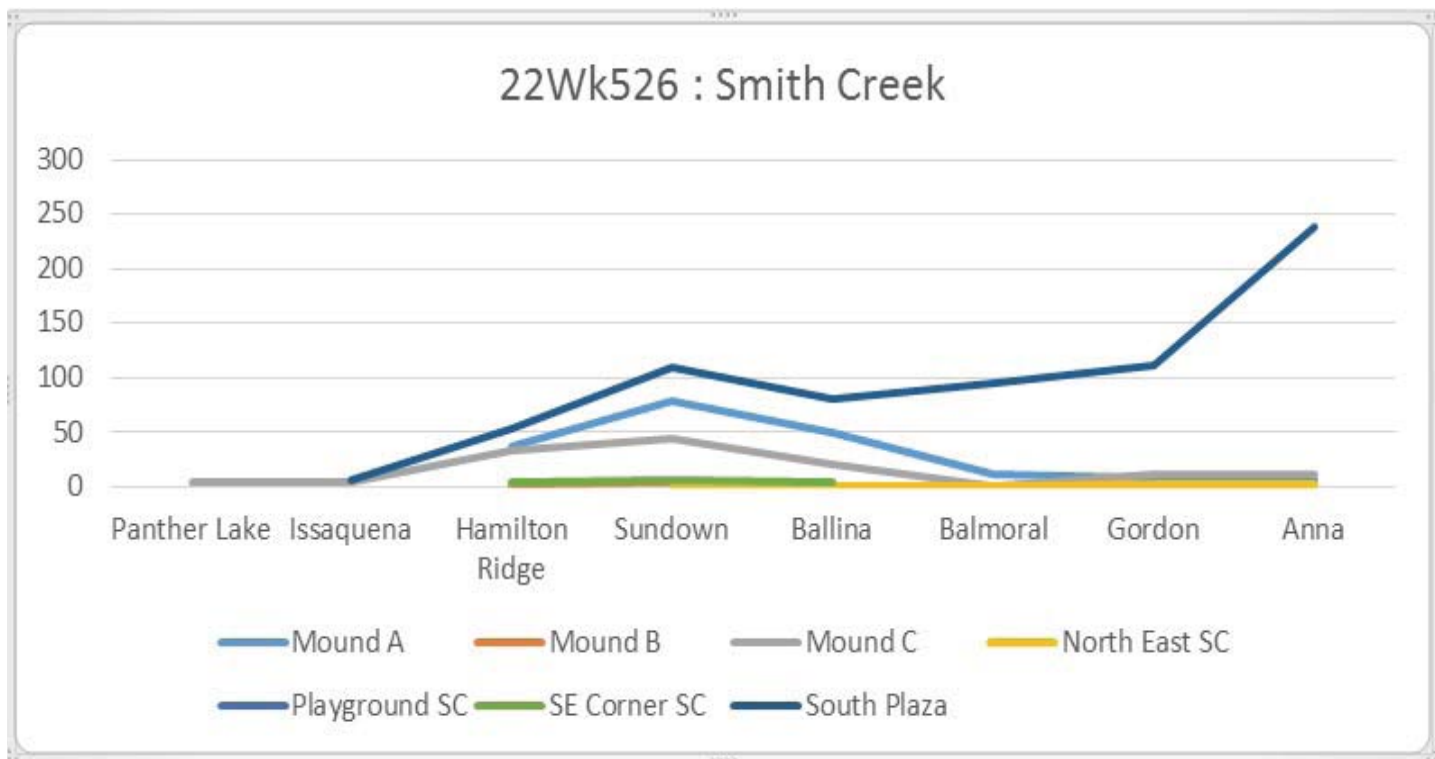


Figure 1.3

Interpretation:

The data conveyed in Figure 1.3 supports the initial interpretations drawn during The Mound Trail. (Kassabaum 2014) The site was used heavily both on and off the mounds. We were unable to ascertain any distinct “construction episode” from the Anna Phase on Mound A. This might be due to the location of our unit on that mound. We placed the unit in a step created by the construction of route 24; therefore, digging did not begin from the top of the mound. There seems to be a peak of construction during the Sundown phase. Also, our field school did not reach the bottom of Mound A, so initial construction may have occurred during the Issaquena phase or perhaps

earlier. As in the Mound Trail, Mound B was not targeted for this season. Although, surface collections were retrieved from various locales on the site, including Mound B. I acknowledge that there are many problems with the reliability of surface collection being accurately representative, so those results maintain a periphery role. The field school managed to hit the bottom of Mound C which suggests mound construction began during the Panther Lake phase. However, due to the small number of examples found there could be any number of reasons for their existence at the site. For instance, they may be from an heirloom pot. As with Mound A and the South Plaza there seems to be a construction peak occurring throughout the Sundown phase. Yet, like Mound A as well, the unit location may have

effected the occurrence of later type-varieties. The field school also hit the bottom of the South Plaza. Although, accumulation has occurred over a long period of time there appears to be two distinct episodes of "high traffic" inhabitation, once during the Sundown phase and another during the Anna phase. The author acknowledges that more data needs to be collected in order to confidently draw these conclusions. So, after plain sherds are thoroughly analyzed and drawn the next eventual step is to combine stratigraphic location with type-varieties and phase thereby determining a possible time frame for when each layer of the mounds and plaza was in construction and/ or in use.

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