Section I: Prehistoric Southeastern Indians

Paleo-Indian Period (10,000 B.C. to 8,000 B.C.)

The first people entering North America arrived during the geologic time period called the **Pleistocene** (Ice Age). During the Pleistocene, global temperatures warmed and cooled many times and glaciers advanced and retreated across North America (and other continents). At least 12,000 years ago and perhaps as much as 20,000 years ago, people started entering the North and South American continents. In the past, a single theory of a mass migration was widely accepted by anthropologists. This theory contends that during the cool periods, huge amounts of water were locked in glaciers causing sea levels to drop enough to expose a **"land bridge"** as much as 1,300 miles wide, across the Bering Strait, connecting Alaska with Asia. Ice age people crossed this land bridge and migrated into North and South America. They traveled in small, **nomadic** (wandering) **bands** of 25-50 people who were probably related to one another. Archaeologists call the cultural time period of these people the **Paleo-Indian Tradition**. Scientists in a number of fields are now debating when, where and how many different migrations came into North America. Several Bering Strait migrations well spread out over time, coastal migration theories and sea voyages are all being considered as ways that the Americas were first populated.

Paleo-Indians were **hunter-gatherers** meaning they survived by hunting animals and gathering plants. What they found in the New World was a hunter's paradise of big game that had never encountered humans and had not developed instinctive defensive behavior against them. Many were easy prey for the skilled Paleo-Indian hunters. Many of these huge animals that existed in the late Pleistocene are now extinct. These large animals, called **megafauna**, included ground sloths, giant bison, camels, and mastodons.

Paleo-Indians hunted with **spears** tipped with skillfully made **lanceolate** (lance shaped) stone **points**, such as the **Clovis point**. Throughout prehistory, the most commonly used stone for making **projectile points** was **flint**, also called chert, because it could be shaped easily by breaking off flakes using a hammer stone and deer antler. This art of manufacturing stone tools is called **flintknapping**.

These spears with large stone points were ideal for hunting at close range. One way the Paleo-Indians probably hunted was for a hunting party to wait for an animal near a watering hole and surprise it. The hunters thrust their spears in at close range wounding the animal. They then followed the animal at a safe distance until it became weary enough for the hunters to close in and kill it.

Archaeologists believe that Paleo-Indians **hafted** (attached) their spear points to short bone **foreshafts**. The hunters carried one spear and a few of these foreshafts in a pouch. A foreshaft with an attached stone point could be quickly inserted into the end of a wooden spear when ready to thrust into an animal. Once the hunter stuck the foreshaft into the animal's flesh, the spear was pulled free. The spear could then be quickly "reloaded" for another thrust.

Another important hunting technique used by Paleo-Indians was for one or more bands to stampede a herd of these large animals, such as bison, into a steep ravine killing several hundred

at a time. They butchered as many of the animals as possible at the kill site, using their spear points as knives. Meat taken back to camp was either eaten soon or dried and kept for later. A band of Paleo-Indians would probably not have to hunt again for more than a month after a mass killing.

The Paleo-Indian population increased rapidly, spreading across the Americas. These people benefited greatly from the abundant resources of the New World and a scarcity of disease. One theory suggests that as Paleo-Indians crossed through the Arctic, the cold climate filtered out many of the common Old World diseases. While Paleo-Indian life flourished at the close of the Ice Age, the megafauna population dropped dramatically, finally becoming extinct. The large, cold adapted animals might have died off because they could not adjust to the increasingly warm climate, or from over hunting, or from a combination of both.

Archaic Period (8,000 B.C. to 1,000 B.C.)

Following the Pleistocene, the environment of Eastern North America gradually became much like it is today. These environmental changes greatly influenced Native Americans in the Southeast, their culture altering and adapting. Archaeologists label this cultural time period the **Archaic Indian Tradition.** Like their Paleo-Indian ancestors, Archaic Indians were still hunter-gatherers living in bands. However, they became slightly less nomadic, living in smaller and smaller territories, perhaps moving from camp to camp to take advantage of resources in different areas during different seasons. For example, a group might have camped near an abundant source of fish and shellfish during the spring, move to an area plentiful with berries about to ripen in early summer, and then go on to another area rich with nuts ready to harvest in the fall. Nuts, seeds, and acorns were especially important to the Archaic Indian diet. Nuts could be eaten right out of the shell. Seeds, acorns, and nuts were often ground into flour or meal. The bitter taste of acorns, caused by their acidity, could be removed by boiling them in several changes of water. Archaic Indians became extremely efficient in taking advantage of all of the food resources that their environment offered.

Besides relying heavily on plant foods, Archaic Indians skillfully hunted and trapped a great many animals including deer, bear, fox, raccoon, squirrel, opossum, beaver, and turkey. Archaeologists know that deer was their most important source of meat because at Archaic sites, deer bones are found in the greatest abundance. Archaic Indians still used spears, but they hurled them rather than thrusting them directly into the animal. Because the spears were thrown, like javelins, they were probably lighter than in the Paleo-Indian period. Archaic spear points were made in many different shapes and sizes.

Early in the Archaic period, hunters discovered a new way to throw their spears with more power and accuracy by using an invention called a **spear thrower**, or **atlatl**. This device was a wooden shaft about two feet long with a hook on one end often made of bone or deer antler. The end of the spear was hooked onto the end of the atlatl and both were held in the throwing hand. When thrown, the spear released itself from the hook and the hunter was left holding the atlatl. The atlatl gave the hunter much more leverage as if his arm had been extended several feet. Some atlatls had weights, called **bannerstones,** of finely polished stone on their

shafts. Archaeologists are not sure if the bannerstones gave the atlatl more leverage, better balance, or also made the atlatl functional as a war club.

In addition to the atlatl, Archaic Indians invented several other stone tools. **Grooved axes**, made of ground and polished stone, indicate to scientists that Archaic Indians had woodworking technologies. At the very least they probably used them to cut down trees and clear forested areas for campsites. These clearings also aided hunters. Archaic Indians also developed other tools to process foods such as **nutting stones** for cracking nuts and **mortars** (grinding stones) and **pestles** for grinding seeds and nuts into flour or meal.

Another significant invention was the carved stone bowl. Made of a soft soapstone called steatite, these bowls were used for a new type of cooking. Besides roasting foods over open fires as their ancestors did, Archaic Indians learned to **stone boil** their food. A stone bowl, a large animal skin bag, or a hole in the ground lined with animal skin was filled with water. Indians then heated rocks in a fire and dropped them into the water to bring it to a boil. Meat stews, wild greens and other vegetables were boiled this way. Stone boiling was quite useful, but sometime around 2,500 B.C., Archaic Indians discovered an even better technology that profoundly changed their daily life. This life-changing invention was **pottery**. Archaeologists believe that the first Indians to make and use clay pottery in North America lived along the Savannah River basin. Archaic pottery was **fiber-tempered**, meaning plant fibers such as grass and Spanish moss were mixed into the clay to strengthen the vessels for firing.

Pottery enabled these Indians to store large amounts of food products and to more efficiently boil or fry foods directly over a fire. By storing food, they were no longer at the complete mercy of environmental factors which might affect the food supply. Archaeologists believe that developing pottery allowed Late Archaic Indians to become more settled, living in even smaller territories. It would not have been practical for wandering bands to carry too much baggage, like pots full of stored food. These people probably spent more time in larger base camps from which they could travel to smaller secondary camps for hunting and gathering.

The first true gardens, grown towards the end of the Archaic period around 1000 B.C., also kept the Archaic Indians closer to home base. Archaeologists believe that squash, gourds, marsh elder, goosefoot, and sunflowers were the first five plants domesticated in Eastern North America. Squash and gourds were probably the first plants domesticated by Archaic Indians. However, these plants had tough skins and seeds so they were probably grown to use as containers. Marsh elder, goosefoot and sunflowers had wild ancestors. Wild varieties of these three plants spring up in areas cleared by humans. At first, Archaic Indians just collected and ate the largest seeds from the healthiest plants, which normally grew in the **floodplains**. Scientists call this **selective harvesting**. Later, Archaic Indians started growing small garden plots with all of these plants. While none of these plants were dietary mainstays, they were important supplements.

Based on the Archaic burials that have survived, archaeologists have concluded that Archaic Indians had some religious beliefs, although we know very little about them. Proper burial of the dead must have been important, because corpses are usually in a flexed position with the knees and hands drawn up to the chin. Pottery; stone tools; necklaces made of shell, bone, or stone beads; even bodies of their dogs were often buried with the person. These burial items may indicate that Archaic Indians believed in some kind of afterlife.

By the end of the Archaic period, these people were making very efficient use of the available natural resources. Most Archaic Indians could probably identify at least a hundred different plants used for food or medicines. They were skilled hunters and were quickly

becoming capable gardeners. Most dramatically, Southeastern Archaic Indians had invented pottery, a sophisticated technology which slowly spread all over Eastern North America.

Woodland Period (1,000 B.C. to A.D. 800)

More than any other time period in Native American prehistory, the **Woodland Tradition** was a time of transition. Many new technological advancements changed Southeastern Indian culture dramatically. Woodland Indians continued hunting and gathering like their ancestors, gradually gardening more and more. They now extensively used underground storage pits to preserve nuts and seeds, which were probably now gathered in much larger quantities. Logically, gardening and storing food supplies makes people want to travel less, becoming more **sedentary** (settled). Indeed at Woodland period sites, postmold patterns provide archaeologists with their first evidence for relatively permanent houses. Small villages grew up on level areas, near a good water source and were probably occupied again and again over many years. Hunting technologies improved again with the development of the bow and arrow. Much smaller stone projectile points, frequently called "bird points" by amateur collectors, first appear at Woodland sites and were used as arrowheads.

Populations of Woodland Indians increased dramatically because of the less-nomadic lifestyle that resulted from improved food storage and gardening. Archaeologists believe that it was at this time that bands joined together to form **tribes**. As bands stayed more and more in the same, smaller territories, they probably developed links with other bands from marriage and trade that became so strong that they began to think of themselves as one people.

Another result of a more productive and reliable food supply was more time to develop art and religion. Some Woodland Indians began burying their dead in dome-shaped earthen mounds. In addition, some groups constructed impressive mounds of earth or piled rocks to form walls or **effigies** (images of people or animals). Examples of Woodland period effigy mounds are Rock Eagle in Georgia and Serpent Mound in Ohio. These effigy mound sites do not have as many artifacts as Woodland villages, so archaeologists think they may have been used only for very special religious ceremonies.

During the Woodland period, pottery became an art form. Pottery shapes and decorations varied from place to place and changed through the centuries. Woodland pottery in Alabama was decorated in a variety of ways including **pinching** (rows of pinches were made in the wet clay with fingernails), **stamping** (wooden paddles carved with checked or curvy designs were used to stamp designs into the wet clay), or **cord-marked** (sticks were wrapped with cord or fabric and pressed or rolled on the wet clay). Pottery firing technology also improved greatly as Woodland Indians began tempering the clay with sand or crushed stone which worked much better than the old fiber-tempering.

Other beautifully crafted items made by Woodland Indian artists include stone and copper **gorgets** (flat objects designed to be worn on a cord around the neck); stone **platform pipes** for smoking, sometimes with beautifully carved animal effigy bowls; and **ear spools** made

of stone, copper, or wood which were worn in the ear lobe. Many of these objects were made of exotic materials indicating that an extensive trade network developed during the Woodland period.

All Woodland Tradition cultures in the Southeast did not develop in the same way. While all seem to share the development of agriculture, prolific manufacture of pottery, and increased **sedentism**, there are regional differences in art styles, burial practices, mound construction, and house construction. Archaeologists have given different names to various Woodland cultures such as the **Hopewell culture**, spreading from Illinois and Ohio and the **Gulf culture** along the Gulf Coast.

Mississippian Period (A.D. 800 to A.D. 1500)

The Woodland period was a time of transition leading up to the zenith of Native American culture in the Southeast, the **Mississippian Tradition**. This was a period of great accomplishment and prosperity. During the late Woodland period, sometime after A.D. 150, corn and tobacco were introduced into the Southeast. It was over 500 years later, around A.D. 800 that corn agriculture became the most important livelihood of the Mississippian Indians. Mississippian Indians also grew beans and squash, and continued hunting and gathering, but it was corn that advanced this rich and complex culture.

Archaeologists use the name "Mississippian" because this culture probably first developed along the Mississippi River, spreading outward along river systems, mostly into the Southeast. Mississippian Indians lived in permanent settlements near river floodplains, some with several thousand people. Floodplain agriculture was especially important for growing corn because corn plants remove the nitrogen from the soil. Flooding rivers dumped nutrient-rich silt onto the floodplain each year, replenishing the nitrogen removed from the soil.

The largest Mississippian sites are Cahokia in Illinois and Moundville on Alabama's Black Warrior River. Other large Mississippian towns were located at Spiro in Oklahoma and Etowah and Ocmulgee in Georgia. Archaeologists call these large Mississippian sites **ceremonial centers**. Not all Mississippian sites were large. There were many small Mississippian farming villages politically and economically connected to one of the large ceremonial centers.

The stability that accompanied full scale corn agriculture allowed the Mississippian Indians to develop a new type of society called a **chiefdom**. A chiefdom is a type of political structure, much more complex than a band or tribe, in which families are **ranked** (given status) according to how closely related they are to the ruling family and the **paramount chief** (the head

of the primary ruling family). The paramount chief's position was inherited at birth, much like the royal families of Europe. In Mississippian chiefdoms, there were many villages, as far as fifty miles away, under the control of the chief ruling from the ceremonial center. The paramount chief was very powerful and was treated with great respect by his subjects. He was probably both a political and religious leader. Spanish explorers observed that the chiefs were carried wherever they went on a **litter** (a seat mounted atop poles for carrying). Subjects held sun shades on poles over the chief shielding him from the sun's heat.

The hunter-gatherer cultures that had existed prior to the Mississippian period were **egalitarian**, meaning every person in a group was equal. In Mississippian society, however, social status was extremely important. Archaeologists studying burial remains have determined that two types of rank were present among Mississippian Indians at Moundville. The most important type of rank was **ascribed status**, meaning that individuals were born with rank. The degree of ascribed status was determined by how closely related one was to the paramount chief. There is also evidence, however, of **achieved status**, meaning that individuals earned rank based on skills they developed through their lifetime. We can only guess, but achieved status might have been earned based on how skilled someone was at hunting, fishing, storytelling, playing music, flintknapping, warfare, making pottery, tattooing, woodcarving, or copper working. It is important to remember, however, that achieved status was probably inferior to ascribed status.

Scientists speculate that when a paramount chief died the position was inherited by the chief's sister's son. This is because most Southeastern Indian groups had a **matrilineal** kinship system, meaning that individuals traced their familial relationships to each other through women. A male individual, for example, did not consider his own children, or his father, to be "blood relatives." His relatives included his mother and her brothers and sisters, his own brothers and sisters, his sister's male and female children, and his mother's mother and her brothers and sisters. In a matrilineal society, male individuals often have a relationship with their sister's sons similar to the father-son relationship of our own society. The father, on the other hand, played a role more like an uncle to his children.

Probably the best-known characteristic of Mississippian culture was the building of flat-topped, pyramidal earthen **mounds** that served as foundations for structures. Some mounds were **residential**, serving as the sites of houses for chiefs and other nobles. Other mounds were **ceremonial**, supporting religious structures, such as temples or mortuary houses. At the largest ceremonial centers, such as Moundville and Cahokia, dozens of mounds were built around a large open plaza which served as a playing field and common area probably used for large ceremonial gatherings. The sides of these mounds were often so steep that many of them had more gently sloped earthen ramps with log steps built into them.

Building a mound was a huge undertaking requiring a lot of manpower. Dirt was loaded from **borrow pits**, or banks of ravines, and carried one basketful at a time to be dumped atop a mound. Although the mounds were built over a period of years, it is interesting to note that if 100 people worked all day, every day of the year, it would take almost seven years to completely build one of the large temple mounds found at some Mississippian sites.

Mississippian buildings were usually rectangular or square. Wall posts were set into individual holes or long trenches. River cane or saplings (**wattle**) were interwoven between the wall posts and then plastered with mud (**daub**). These **wattle and daub** structures were surprisingly durable. Roofs for these buildings varied from one area to another depending on available resources.

Archaeologists are finding more and more evidence suggesting that Mississippian

nobility did very little manual labor. Mound building, tending crops, hunting, and gathering was mostly done by lower ranking commoners or possibly even captured slaves. Archaeologists believe that surplus processed food was brought from outlying villages to the ceremonial centers and stored in storehouses presumably to pay **tribute** (a payment acknowledging submission and also to insure protection) to the chiefs. Indeed, food processing and agricultural tools are found in greater abundance at the outlying sites than at the ceremonial centers. Archaeologists do not know if this labor was performed voluntarily out of reverence for the chiefs, for religious reasons, in exchange for protection from outside attackers, or if it was the result of forced slavery. A combination of various reasons is quite possible.

Based on archaeology, and written accounts of Hernando de Soto's men, we know that Mississippian towns, including Moundville, were usually fortified. **Palisades** (walls built with large wooden posts) were built around the towns with **bastions** (guard towers) placed at regular intervals. If under attack, archers manned these bastions. It is important to note that large-scale warfare was virtually nonexistent in the egalitarian, hunter-gatherer Paleo-Indian and Archaic cultures. With the development of agriculture, however, protecting the land, stored food, and other possessions from outside attack became very important.

Mississippian Indians developed a very complex religion which reflected in the elaborate art they produced. Symbols such as the **hand and eye**, **cross circle**, **water spider** and mythological beasts such as the **winged serpent** and **bird man** appear time and time again in the masterful art found at Mississippian sites across the Southeast. By comparing the material remains of Mississippian religious motifs to the accounts of Spanish explorers and legends recorded about historic Southeastern Indians such as the Creek, Choctaw, and Cherokee, archaeologists can theorize about Mississippian religion.

An important ceremony practiced by the historic Southeastern Indians and possibly by Mississippian Indians was the **Busk**, or **Green Corn Ceremony**. This ritual, held every summer when the corn was ripening, was an annual time of renewal. The Busk often culminated in the rekindling of the **sacred fire**. Sacred fire represented the Creator and, once lit, this fire was kept burning throughout the year. Southeastern Indians believed that fire absorbed the sins of those around it, gradually becoming impure. Purity and balance were very important to Southeastern Indians, so the relighting of the sacred fire was necessary at least once a year. In preparation for the Busk, the villages were cleaned up and repairs were made to buildings. All wrongdoings were forgiven, except for murder. Male Indians fasted for several days to cleanse their bodies. They extinguished all fires in the village and used specially selected wood or ears of green corn as fuel for the new sacred fire. After the ceremony, people from the village, and probably surrounding villages, would bring home some of the new sacred fire to light new fires in their own hearths.

Another important ritual among Mississippian Indians in their quest for purity was the **Black Drink Ceremony**. This was a cleansing ritual held during the Green Corn Ceremony and at other important times. After fasting, they prepared a tea from the dried leaves of the **Yaupon Holly** (Ilex *vomitoria*). After drinking this tea, they vomited to be sure that their body was free of any food, and therefore cleansed. Black drink was very high in caffeine. After fasting, it might have caused reflexive vomiting. If anyone did not vomit reflexively, they probably would have purged themselves.

Mississippian Indians produced beautiful art, much of which was religiously inspired. Archaeologists have discovered stunning statues, pendants, ceremonial axes, and smoking pipes carved out of polished stone; painted and incised pottery (tempered with crushed shell); effigy

pots; incised shell gorgets; incised stone disks; and embossed copper pendants and gorgets. While prehistoric Native Americans never developed technology for smelting, they became quite adept at hammering copper. Many other types of art did not survive in the archaeological record, but we assume there were masters of woodcarving, basketry, and painting. The level of skill necessary to produce Mississippian art indicates that there was craft **specialization** among individual Indians.

It is believed that Mississippian nobility held their power largely by controlling trade of exotic raw materials and finished works of art. Objects made of copper, mica, galena, and marine shell have been found at Mississippian sites many hundreds of miles from their source. The trade of **prestige goods** helped maintain political ties and provided nobles with symbols of power. Because many of these objects also had religious importance, possession of them may have fostered the allegiance of members of the chiefdom.

Section II: The Moundville Site

Overlooking the Black Warrior River on a high flat bluff, Moundville is the best preserved Mississippian site in North America. Around 1000 people lived at the site between A.D. 1050 and 1300. At least 29 earthen pyramidal mounds were built and used at Moundville. Erected between A.D. 1200 and 1300, a **palisade** surrounded Moundville on three sides. Square **bastions** jutted out from the palisade every 100 feet or so (Figure 1). From a metropolis to a necropolis, Moundville played different roles as it developed and declined.

Recent research has radically changed what scientists think about Moundville. Instead of slowly growing into a large city, archaeologists now believe that Moundville's population was highest while the site was being planned and mounds were built. From earliest to latest, archaeologists divide Moundville's development into five stages: a) intensified local production, b) initial centralization, c) regional consolidation, d) paramountcy entrenched, and e) collapse and reorganization (Figure 2).

Intensified Local Production (A.D. 900 to 1050)

To better understand how and why Moundville developed, scientists look at what was happening to people in the Black Warrior and other nearby river valleys at the end of Woodland times. Evidence suggests widespread warfare broke out during this time. Probably to protect themselves, people clustered in large river valley settlements, leaving other areas almost completely vacant. Although gardening did exist, these Late Woodland people relied almost entirely on wild foods until about A.D. 950. However, when concentrated in compacted communities, these people began using up nearby wild foods and other resources before nature could replenish itself. Possibly to counteract this shortage, Late Woodland Indians in the area increased their corn production after around A.D. 950.

Archaeologists think that overcrowding in these settlements also affected the health of these Late Woodland people. The birthrate increased as corn added more calories to the Late Woodland diet. However, overall health declined. Skeletal remains reveal that more people were suffering from injuries, undernourishment and infectious diseases than before.

Possibly because these closely clustered communities had limited contact with other settlements, evidence for long distance trading drastically decreases during this time. Archaeologists find fewer artifacts and raw materials made of nonlocal resources. In contrast, the local production of shell jewelry increases. Archaeologists suggest that these shell ornaments were symbols of wealth. In the Black Warrior Valley community leaders may have attracted followers by controlling the production, display and exchange of these artifacts.

Archaeologists are not sure whether these Late Woodland people lived at the Moundville site. Although scientists find pottery dating to that time period, none of the characteristic storage pits have been excavated at Moundville.

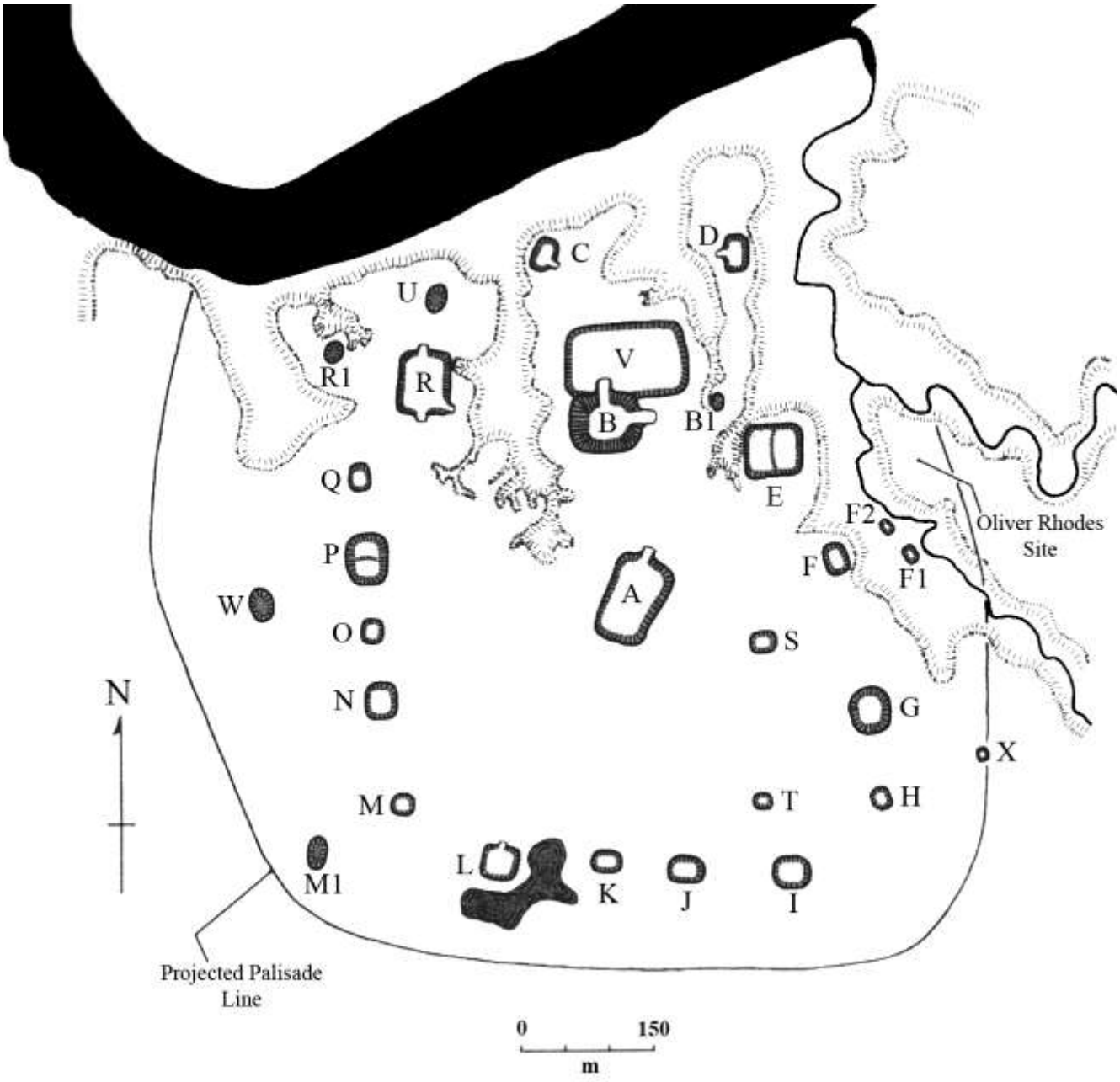

Figure 1. Schematic Map of the Moundville Site (Vernon James Knight, Jr. and Vincas P. Steponaitis, editors. *Archaeology of the Moundville Chiefdom*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press. 1998).

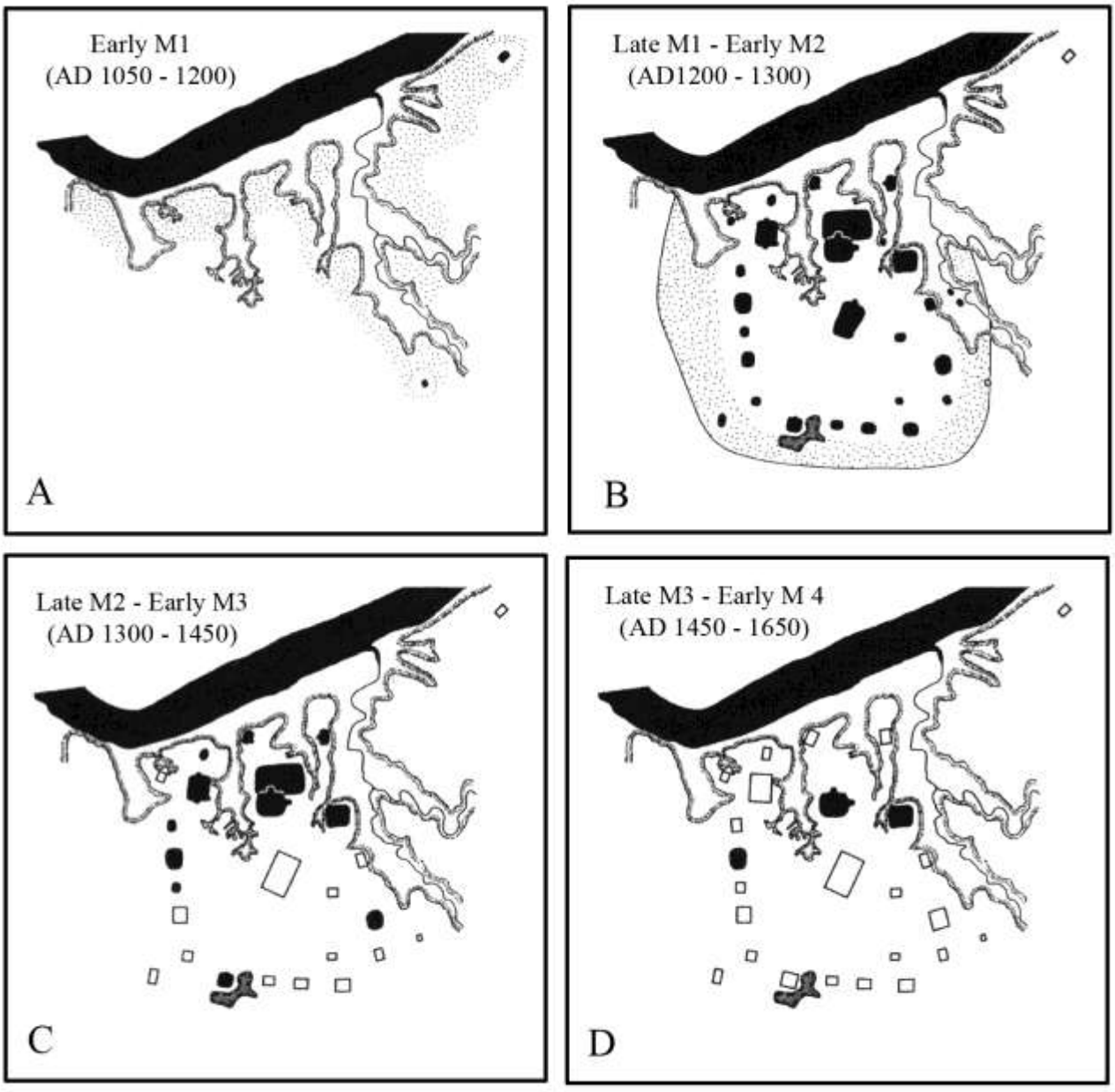

Figure 2. Settlement Changes at Moundville (Vernon James Knight, Jr. and Vincas P. Steponaitis, editors. *Archaeology of the Moundville Chiefdom*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press. 1998).

Initial Centralization (A.D. 1050 to 1200)

Initial centralization describes how people began moving into the Moundville area prior to the large scale construction of the mounds. The first signs of Mississippian culture, platform mounds, shell tempered pottery and a new form of architecture, first appear at Moundville during this time. Important changes in the way people were organizing themselves also occurred.

The large, clustered river valley settlements of the Late Woodland give way to smaller, scattered farming settlements. Indians were now growing corn, beans, squash and sunflowers in large quantities along the floodplains of the Black Warrior River. Although these early Mississippians still hunted, fished and gathered wild foods, corn now made up forty percent of their diet. They also used fewer nut foods than their ancestors.

Small settlements were springing up throughout the Black Warrior Valley. In comparison, however, scientists believe the population at Moundville was unusually high. Most dwellings were probably built close to the flat bluff along the edge of the river and nearby ravines.

A new kind of architecture, wall trench construction, shows up in the archaeological record alongside older types of houses. Instead of digging individual post holes, Indians dug long narrow trenches and wedged in the wall posts.

It is important to note that Mound X, the easternmost mound within the site and another mound, located northeast of the site near the riverbank, are the only platform mounds that archaeologists know of being erected in the Black Warrior Valley during this time. This suggests that a new political system was emerging with Moundville as its focus.

Regional Consolidation (A.D. 1200 to 1300)

During this time, the Moundville chiefdom came into being, politically uniting as many as 10,000 people for a 60 mile stretch along the floodplain of the Black Warrior River valley. Arranged in a rectangular shape around a central plaza, the mounds were built around A.D. 1200 to 1250. The Moundville Indians also erected the palisade around this time, repairing and using it until about A.D. 1300. Interestingly, Mound X was leveled to make way for the palisade. Archaeologists estimate that about 1000 people lived inside the walled city, building their houses outside the rectangle formed by the mounds and enclosing the plaza.

The ruling class was divided into different family groups, each family group controlling a pair of mounds. An elite residence occupied the top of one mound in the pair; the other served as a family mortuary mound. The northernmost mounds were used by the highest ranking families. Moving southward down the eastern and western sides of the mound arrangement, the ranking order decreased by degrees. The elite families with the lowest status occupied the southern end of the site (Figures 3 and 4).

Archaeologists believe Mound A may have been used ceremonially. The four directions were important to historic Southeastern Indian religion. Located in the middle of Moundville's great plaza at the intersection of these directions, Mound A may have symbolized the center of the universe. A large council house or other structure used for religious purposes may have been built on the summit of Mound A. However, until fairly recently, archaeologists have performed very little research on this mound to confirm these notions.

The fact that the mounds were built, and most especially in a relatively short period of time, suggests that Moundville rulers were able to harness an enormous amount of manpower.

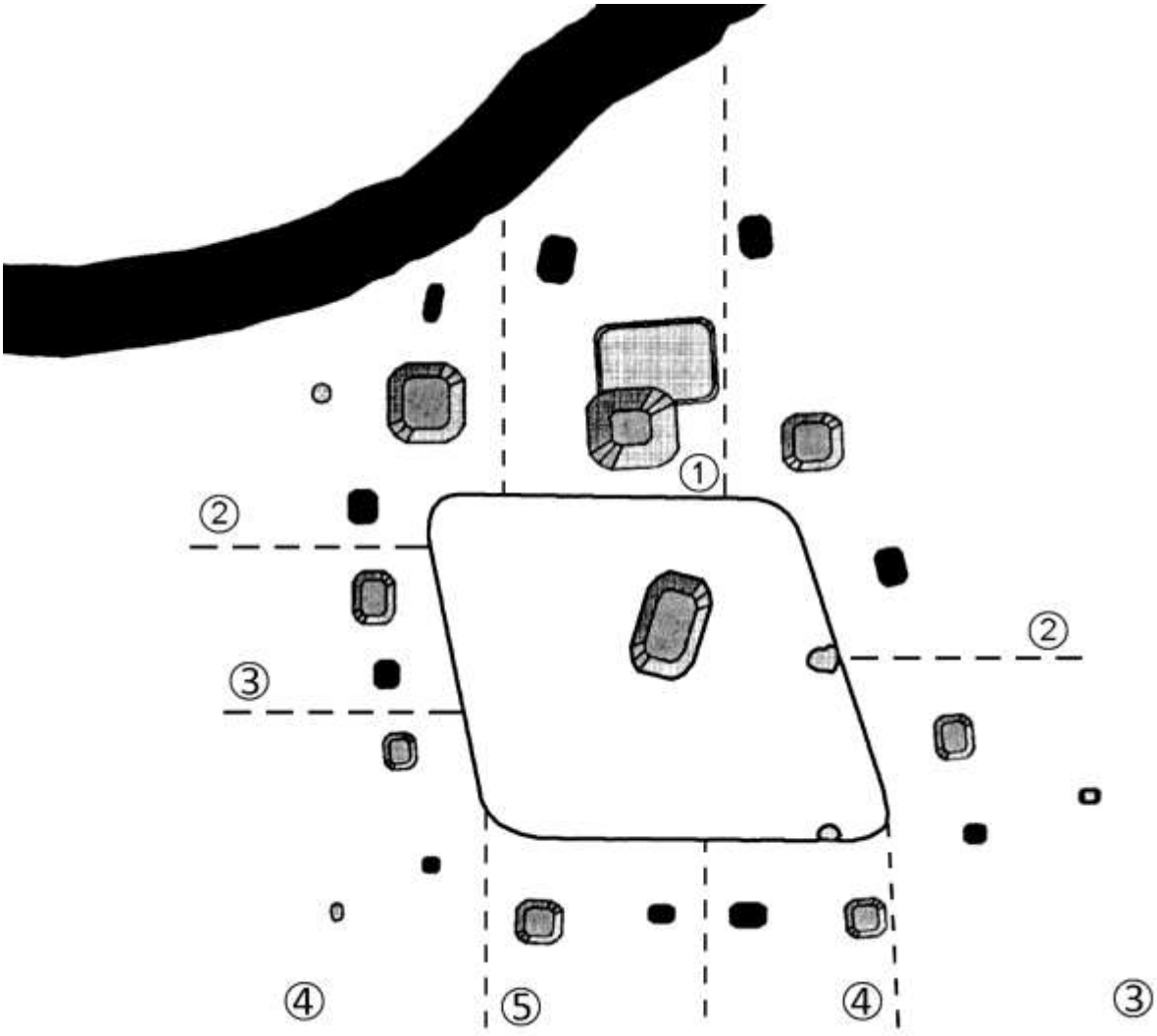

Figure 3. A hypothetical segmentation of social and architectural space. The numbers represent the rank ordering with respect to Mound B (from Vernon James Knight, Jr. and Vincas P. Steponaitis, editors. *Archaeology of the Moundville Chiefdom*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press. 1998).

Minor mound centers, located up and down the Black Warrior Valley provide another example of the controlling influence of the Moundville paramounts. These smaller sites contained only one mound. Archaeologists believe that lesser ranking chiefs, matrilineally related to the Moundville nobility, lived on top of these mounds. These chiefs probably acted as middlemen, obtaining tribute foods from several small farming villages under their control and delivering it to the chiefs at Moundville.

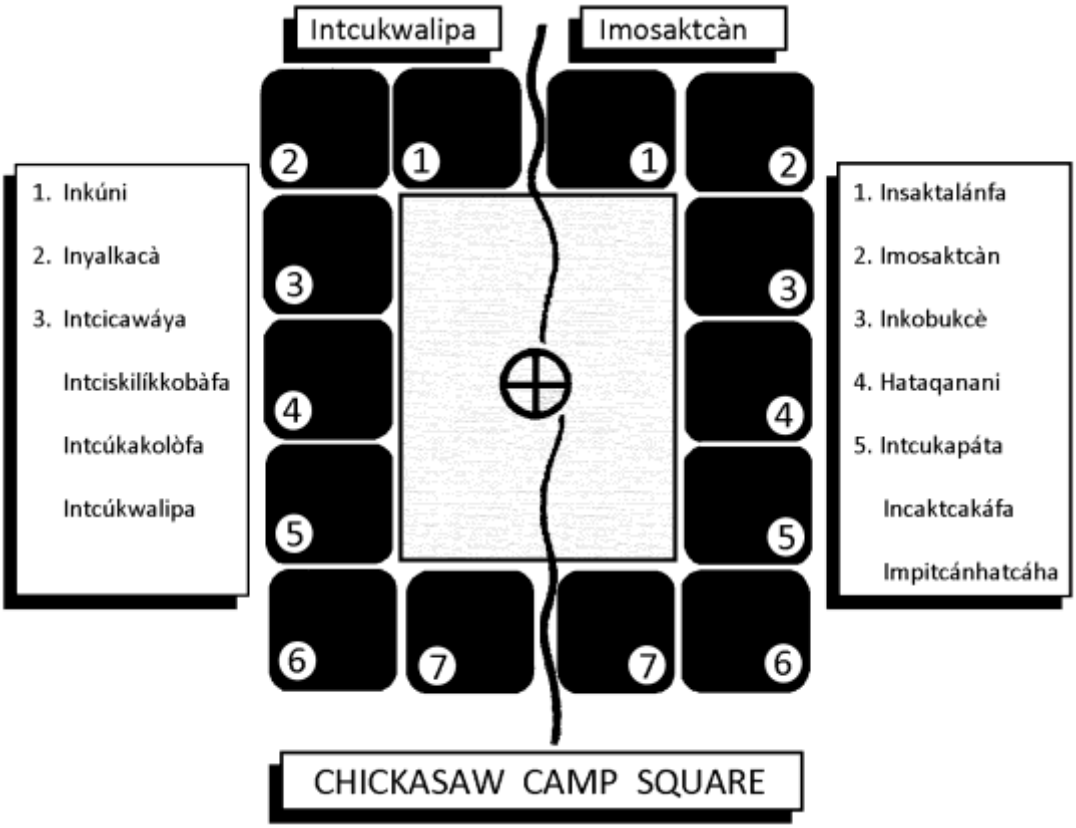

Figure 4. Diagram of a Chickasaw camp square, according to an informant of Frank Speck (Frank G. Speck. Chickasaw Ethnology and Folk-Lore. *Journal of American Folk-Lore 20 (76):50-58.*). The ranking of house groups (subclans) is shown in the margin. The relative rank of the house groups without a number is not known (from Vernon James Knight, Jr. and Vincas P. Steponaitis, editors. *Archaeology of the Moundville Chiefdom*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press. 1998).

Food remains from Moundville reinforce this idea. Processed corn (already husked and shelled) or partially processed corn remains are more frequently excavated from the site than unprocessed corn. Additionally, bones from venison hindquarters are found more frequently than the bones of less choice cuts of deer. This suggestion, that the nobles were not processing their own food, is also supported by the fact that fewer cooking pots are found at Moundville during this time than at other comparable sites in the area.

Another clue to the political power of the Moundville elites is an increase in the amount of imported goods and raw materials. Studies show that more mica, greenstone and nonlocal chert were excavated from household remains along the riverbank during this time than earlier in the site's history. Also, elite grave goods made from copper and marine shell are found most frequently. Being able to get, use, and dispose of (in burials) these rare items and materials implies that the nobility had far reaching authority. Trade networks in which the elite Mississippians end up being the sole possessors of these prestigious goods stretched from the Gulf Coast to the Lake Superior region.

The Paramountcy Entrenched (A.D. 1300 to 1450)

These prestige goods evolved into symbols of power. These emblems of authority were certainly political, but they were probably religious symbols too. Moundville's rulers were distancing themselves from commoners, politically, religiously, and physically.

Almost as quickly as Moundville was built, fortified, and occupied, it was virtually emptied of its residents. The palisade fell into disrepair and disuse and the ruling class was now using only about one half of the mounds, specifically those located on the northern end of the site. At the same time, elite burials, many of them in mortuary mounds, were becoming increasingly luxurious. Their symbolic power was reflected in what the dead were wearing and having buried with them.

The nobility may have deliberately decided to remove everyone but themselves and their retainers to further distinguish themselves and Moundville from those of lower standing. Or, the resident population might have been forced to leave because of the stress such a concentration of people places on the soil and other natural resources. A third suggestion is that the threat of warfare had lessened as indicated by abandoning the upkeep of the palisade. People were no longer afraid to live outside of a fortified city. Moundville's residents may have moved out for a combination of the above reasons or for other reasons we do not know.

Supporting this migration out of Moundville, new minor mound centers were established about the same time as Moundville's resident population left. Since we do not find evidence of another large settlement in the area archaeologists suggest that the majority of people continued living in small farmsteads.

Although the population of living people at Moundville declined, the number of graves within the site boundaries dramatically increased. Moundville turned into a **necropolis** (a center for mortuary ritual). Most of those now buried at Moundville had never lived there. Archaeologists believe this for two reasons: 1) the amount of domestic garbage found for that time period is very small compared to the number of burials at the site, and 2) very few burials are found at outlying Mississippian sites.

It is important to note that the southern half of the site was abandoned by the lesser ranking nobility. Those that had the least to gain left as the higher ranking families consolidated their power, who continued to enlarge the northernmost mounds. Although the tribute system was in full force, the trade network seemed to be slackening somewhat.

Collapse and Reorganization (A.D. 1450 to 1650)

By the latter part of the 1400s only three mounds at Moundville show signs of continued construction or occupation. Moundville was still used for funerary purposes, but to a much smaller extent. Elites were no longer being buried in mounds. Additionally, elites continued to occupy smaller mound centers. Mounds there were being added to, the nobles were being provided for, and new cemeteries were being established away from Moundville. With the exception of Moundville, the first large, densely populated villages since the Late Woodland period began appearing the Black Warrior Valley, some near mounds; others separated from them.

However, by 1550 these lesser mound sites were abandoned. Scientists detect some small scale activity on mounds P, B, and E at Moundville, but this ceases completely by the end of the 1500s. Dependence on corn, which made up 65 percent of the average Indian diet during the height of the Mississippian period, decreased in favor of wild foods. This might be due to over farming which depleted the soil of nutrients.

Archaeologists are still debating the fall of the Moundville chiefdom. How and why did these rulers lose their authority? Were the Moundville nobles completely without power when Hernando de Soto's army passed through the area in 1540? Or, were they now just figureheads like the English monarchy today? The chronicles of the De Soto expedition do not no mention a mound site so impressive that it would certainly have been noticed it if it was still a central power. For a number of reasons, still murky to the scientific community, this once powerful political system was reorganizing into the historic Indian groups we know today as the civilized tribes of the Southeast.