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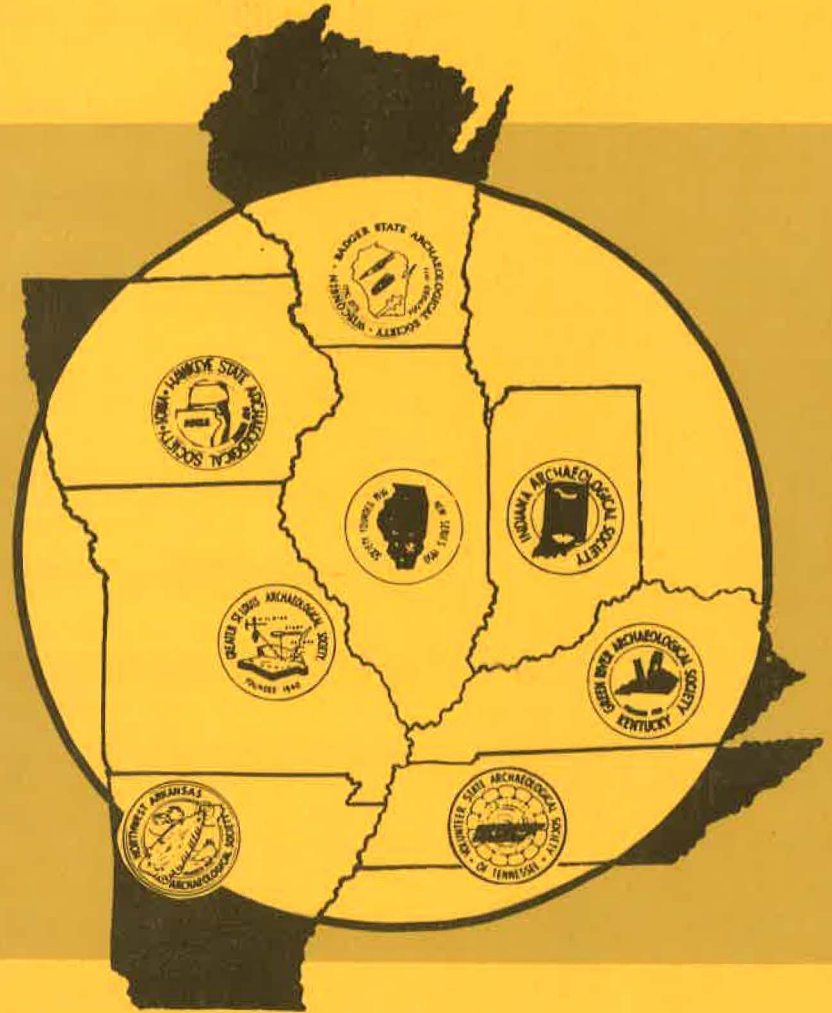
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Central States Archaeological Journal



"PINSON MOUNDS: A MIDDLE WOODLAND MORTUARY CENTER IN WEST TENNESSEE"

BY
JOHN BROSTER AND LEE SCHNEIDER

Ten miles south of the city of Jackson, Madison County, Tennessee, a steep bluff overlooks the floodplains of the South Fork Forked Deer River. Two tributary streams dissect the bluff, flowing southward into the river and form the natural divisions of the three mound groups which comprise the Pinson Mounds Site (40Md1). Although the area has been successively occupied by prehistoric Indian groups since the Paleo-Indian period, the most extensive and impressive archaeological features are the mortuary encampments and associated burial mounds which date to the Middle Woodland cultures.

During the late eighteenth-century, this land was claimed both by Cherokee and Chickasaw Indians as a hunting domain. It was not until 1818, with the acquisition of Chickasaw land rights by the United States federal government, that white settlers began their migration into West Tennessee. As a member of the initial surveying crew, Joel Pinson was the first white man to see and record the palisade wall and mounds; his surname being affixed to the site and the outlying com-

munity of Pinson, Tennessee.

These earthworks first received notoriety throughout the state, however, because of efforts and the interest of J. G. Cisco, a Jackson newspaper editor of the 1880's. Mr. Cisco conducted several test excavations of mounds within the vicinity of Jackson, and made extensive surface collections at the Pinson Mounds Site. The present whereabouts of the Cisco collection, however, is unknown.

Cisco noted that in 1840, Colonel Pickford Jones rode the entire length of the palisade wall on horseback for a distance of some six miles. Within the next forty years, Cisco then observed that the majority of the wall had been destroyed by crop cultivation, leaving only a small remnant which surrounded the Western Mound Group. Unfortunately, this remnant of prehistoric Indian construction has since been removed by modern farming equipment and techniques.

In 1916, William E. Myer, A Smithsonian archaeologist, visited the site to map and record all remaining mounds, the remnants of the palisade wall, and associated village areas. He observed 35



Figure 11

Ozier Mound (Mississippian) looking north; Western Mound Group.



Figure 12

Twin Mounds (Middle Woodland) looking northeast; Western Mound Group.

mounds which, at the time, were standing; four possible village sites; and a small section of palisade wall which had gone unnoticed by J. G. Cisco. In Myer's "Recent Archaeological Discoveries in Tennessee," he renamed the Pinson site — "The City of Cisco" (Myer, 1922).

Some years later the Pinson Mounds Association, a group of local business and professional men and women, was organized to protect and preserve this irreplaceable archaeological monument. Members, over the past twenty years, led by Dr. John Nuckolls and Judge Andrew Taylor, advocated that the State of Tennessee purchase and develop this site as a state archaeological park. In 1961, the State Historical Commission agreed to acquire the Central Mound Group which includes Saul's Mound — 73 feet high — the second highest earth mound in the United States. The National Park Service then provided funds with which the University of Tennessee conducted two preliminary investigations of the mound system at the Pinson site.

These excavations produced information concerning the Middle Woodland and Mississippian occupations within the newly acquired area. The first testing operation, completed by Fischer and McNutt in 1962, uncovered a square wall-trenched house near Mound 14 within the Central Mound Group which dates from a Carbon-14 sample to 850 A.D. This structure, with Saul's and Ozier Mounds, appears to be representative of the Early Mississippian culture in the Pinson vicinity. All other archaeological features — mounds and village areas — were hypothesized to date to a Middle Woodland time period (Fischer and McNutt, 1962).

A second test, conducted in 1963, provided further information on the construction of Middle Woodland burial mounds and palisade. Morse and Polhemus, the principal investigators, placed a test pit in Mound 31 in which a segment of a log tomb was uncovered; an adult male skull was found outside the tomb, possibly representing a trophy burial. These researchers also excavated a portion of an oval house, located south of the Twin Mounds, with a projected diameter of 16 feet (Morse and Polhemus, n.d.).

These two testing operations, substantiating those claims made by members of the Pinson Mounds Association, demonstrated to state officials the need to purchase and preserve the entire archaeological resource. In 1965, the Tennessee Department of Conservation, acting under a 1937 statute which enables them to purchase historical sites, declared that the Pinson Mounds Site would soon become a state park.

Over the ensuing years, additional properties to augment the park were purchased from various landowners which contained the remaining Middle Woodland burial mounds and associated village areas. The total acreage of this undeveloped parkland, to date, now exceeds some 1,200 acres.

It was in order to understand our prehistoric heritage that the general assembly of the State of Tennessee passed on February 19, 1970, legislation which established the Division of Archaeology — that part of the Department of Conservation with which is entrusted the development and interpretation of all archaeological parks. In June of 1974, staff members of the Division, in conjunction with Memphis State University, conducted the first major



Figure 13

Excavating south of the Twin Mounds; work conducted by Memphis State University students and local amateur archaeologists.



Figure 14

Expanded stemmed projectile point located in the wall-trench of Feature 14; Twin Mounds.

field season for the exploration of archaeological remains at the Pinson Mounds State Park.

Extensive excavations were undertaken in those 'village areas' which are located in the Western and Central Mound Groups. The first test pits, south of the Twin Mounds in the Western Group, produced the most abundant collection of artifacts and features of the entire 1974 field season.

A small crematory structure, measuring slightly more than two meters in diameter, contained layers of fired clay and human bones. This structure appears to be roughly circular with posts set in an irregular wall-trench. Directly north of this structure, were found three large basin-shaped crematory pits, in which the majority of bone material appears to have been removed. Within this immediate area, several oval-shaped hearths were excavated, yielding copious amounts of fire-cracked sandstone.

Excavations, of a more extensive nature than those conducted by Fischer and McNutt in the Central Mound Group, revealed two oval post-mold structures. One contained a very large crematory basin which produced large amounts of cord-marked ceramics and fire-spalled chert. The second structure yielded Carbon-14 dates of 290 A.D. \pm 70 (UGa-976) and 270 A.D. \pm 70 (UGa-977). The dates position these two structures within the realm of the Middle Woodland period.

A large bell-shaped storage pit was excavated to the west of Mound 14, within the Central Mound Group, and produced the most material uncovered within a single feature. The pit contained worked rock crystal, and pieces of two Marksville stamped sub-conical

burial jars. One design appears to represent a stylized bird effigy, as found at the Marksville Complex of Louisiana and the Hopewellian cultures of the Ohio and Illinois Valleys.

All lithic and ceramic items, which were recovered during the 1974 field season, would appear to correlate with the Twin Lakes phase of the Marksville Complex in the Lower Mississippi Valley and that of the Miller II phase at the Bynum Mounds near Houston, Mississippi.

Those 'village areas,' which were excavated at this time, most likely are temporary mortuary camps rather than permanent village settlements (Broster, 1975). The semi-permanent habitation areas of these Middle Woodland peoples seem to be located in areas beyond that of the mound system — on the terraces and bluffs overlooking the South Fork Forked Deer River and along those tributary streams which feed into this river.

As we begin the 1975 field season within the park boundaries, interest has been primarily focused upon one of these large Middle Woodland base camps. To date, part of an oval structure — 20 feet in diameter — has been excavated, revealing large fragments of mica, a carved sandstone tablet, a projectile point which is similar to the Copena triangular, and numerous microlithic blades. This material seems to be the residue of manufacture of exotic grave goods for placement within the burial mounds. We are hopeful that further excavations at this site will delineate the settlement pattern of this large base camp.

All excavations have been oriented towards the larger goal of park development. The Department of Conservation intends to build such



Figure 15

Feature 14, wall-trenched crematory structure; south of the Twin Mounds.



Figure 16

Feature 17, hearth containing cord-marked sub-conical jar; south of the Twin Mounds.

facilities as a museum and research laboratory, roads and camping areas so that the Pinson Mounds State Park will become an operational archaeological exhibit. Excavations, conducted during both field seasons, were organized in order to minimize damage which might result from the construction of these park facilities.

A century has passed since interest was first expressed in the preservation of the Pinson Mounds. We are now very close to the completion of that goal once envisioned by J. G. Cicso, and those persons who have maintained their interest and concern during this long time span. ■

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