a high proportion of novaculite in the lithic collections (Kidder 1991:37), although Tennessee River valley and midwestern sources are not as well represented at the former site. Beyond these formal resemblances, how closely Lake Enterprise was related to this southerly concentration of sites is not known.

We might predict that other small mound sites of Poverty Point age will become known as research is redirected to their discovery. Obviously, as pointed out numerous times in the past, we find what we are looking for. There is a renewed rationale for the suspicions of researchers that Woodland and Mississippian mounds may have Poverty Point (and now possibly earlier) initial stages. Moreover, reports on numerous untested small mounds languish in site files as being Middle Woodland in origin; a serious reconsideration is in order. We are suspicious of several mounds in the Bayou Bartholomew drainage after our individual and collective failure to procure ceramics from them, despite repeated searches in the best of conditions.

The long tradition of Archaic mound building puts the truly magnificent earthworks at Poverty Point in a somewhat more comprehensible developmental context. The site’s enigmatic nature has at least in part been a function of the perception that it sprang from exceedingly humble antecedents. First Middle Woodland (before the chronological placement was secured; Ford and Webb 1956) then Mesoamerican (Webb 1968) origins were deemed necessary to explain its presence. We are now in a position to view the Poverty Point site as a product of more than a millennium of similar activity (albeit a product of significantly greater scale than its precursors). As research proceeds, at least one of us would not be surprised to find on-site evidence of this long earth-moving tradition. As we learn more about how the Archaic mounds may have served their makers, we may gain some new insights regarding the impetus and function of Poverty Point itself.

The less dramatic mounds, of which Lake Enterprise is surely but one example, suggest that there was a role for centrally marked locations of local significance during the Poverty Point period. This role contrasts with the extraregional role of the Poverty Point site, and perhaps Jaketown and Claiborne, which may have served as integrative loci for politically and perhaps ethnically distinct populations (e.g., Jackson 1991a). It does seem clear that the mosaic of social and economic interactions had multiple levels, including a local one. The integrative functions of the Lake Enterprise site were probably not significantly different from those of earlier mound sites, despite its distinction as being occupied by participants in Poverty Point trade. The presence in the region of a deeply rooted tradition of corporate group communal action manifested in earthen markers allows Poverty Point evidence to be considered in local terms. However, how connections to the systems that articulated the Lower Mississippi Valley populations may have redefined those local roles and the interrelationships that formed the fabric of local society remain to be defined (e.g., Jackson and Jeter 1991:49).

Given the “earthshaking” early mound research now being reported, a report on a Poverty Point mound is not very dramatic. The work at the Lake Enterprise Mound is instead another example of an ongoing social process with very deep roots. We now must incorporate into our interpretations of the development of the Poverty Point culture a long tradition of mound construction in the Lower Mississippi Valley. Explanations that intertwine interregional trade, social differentiation, and corporate public works in a neat package ushering in the Neolithic era are no longer feasible. On the other side of this coin, the reports in this volume delineate a long tradition that challenges our preconceptions about the possible cultural functions of mound building and about the cultural milieu that might engender such a practice.

Notes

Acknowledgments. We want to thank Michael Russo for encouraging us to report on the Lake Enterprise Mound despite our limited investigations. Our thanks to the landowners, Mr. and Mrs. William DeYampret for their permission to work at the site and for their long-time interest in local prehistory, and also to Arkansas Archeological Society members Jim Best, Bob Cooper, Ed and Patsy White, and Carolyn Wilson for their assistance in the field. Joe Saunders aided in the testing and provided important substantive and editorial comments on this paper. Finally we appreciate the comments of two other reviewers, Jay Johnson and Charles H. McNutt.

Collections. Artifacts from the Lake Enterprise site are permanently curated at the Arkansas Archeological Survey research station on the campus of the University of Arkansas at Monticello.

Before Their Time? Early Mounds in the Lower Mississippi Valley

JON L. GIBSON

Were mounds built before the Poverty Point period? A growing body of information says yes—maybe. Because the issue is a controversial one, claims for pre-Poverty Point mounds have met with skepticism and calls for proof that tax the limits of the archaeological record itself and of archaeologists too.

The problems with accepting the existence of early mounds are both conceptual and empirical. Until Ford and Webb’s (1956) work at the Poverty Point site in
northeastern Louisiana, the earliest mounds in North America above Mexico were thought to be of Early Woodland origin and to date only a few centuries before the widespread Hopewellian mounds. Pushing mounds back to the time of Poverty Point was not that drastic a conceptual jump because the initial radiocarbon dates obtained from two Poverty Point sites, Jaketown (Ford et al. 1955) and Poverty Point itself (Ford and Webb 1956), seemed to indicate that Poverty Point mounds were not only contemporary with Early Woodland but overlapped the earliest part of the Middle Woodland Hopewellian mound-building period.

And even though Poverty Point culture was taxonomically viewed as Late Archaic (Ford and Webb 1956), archaeologists had no qualms about attributing mounds to such a spectacular manifestation. In fact, it is hard to imagine a more appropriate or timely beginning for mounds than in the then seemingly precocious Poverty Point culture (Ford 1969).

The ease with which Poverty Point mound building was accepted was due in large part to the normative thinking that prevailed in the 1950s and 1960s, thinking which held that mound building, pottery, agriculture, sedentism, and large populations were integral aspects of a Formative way of life and that they were an integrated complex (Willey and Phillips 1958). It was this all-or-nothing association that promoted the assumption of an agricultural base for Poverty Point despite the lack of direct evidence and that made the idea of Mesoamerican genesis for the complex so appealing (Ford 1969; Webb 1968:318–319).

However, pre-Poverty Point mounds were another matter. From the traditional culture-historical point of view, mounds were supposed to be built by settled farming peoples, not wandering hunters and gatherers like those of the Archaic period. Mounds were considered to be products of the elaborate civil and ceremonial institutions found in advanced cultures, such as Poverty Point, Marksville, Coles Creek, and Natchezian. Elaborate institutions were not believed to have existed during the Archaic period; ergo, neither were mounds. It was not that the establishment rebuffed the idea of Archaic mounds; it was that the prevailing intellectual climate normally prevented the idea from even taking shape or, when the notion did occur, kept it from being widely endorsed.

The conceptual problems with Archaic mounds were underscored by empirical ones. Data from the first Archaic mounds investigated—Amite River mounds (Gagliano 1963:114–115), Banana Bayou Mound (Gagliano 1967), Kieffer (Gibson 1968a:14–15), and Monte Sano (Coastal Environments, Inc. [CEI] 1977:243–246)—were suggestive but not conclusive enough to convince everyone (Figure 1). Usually only the investigators making the claim were believers, and nobody else paid much attention to them.

The main problem with the reputed Archaic mounds that have been tested is that they yield few if any diagnostic artifacts or, in most cases, few artifacts at all. Without artifacts, the burden of proof is placed on radiocarbon dating. However, radiocarbon dating is not a panacea, especially when it is unclear what is being dated.

Being sure of stratigraphic or architectural context is asking a lot when your view is limited to a two inch-wide solid core, the bottom of a 1 × 1-m test pit, or the fresh track of a dozer blade. With the exception of the Banana Bayou Mound in south Louisiana (Brown and Lambert-Brown 1978; Gagliano 1967), testing of these mounds has been limited to a test pit or two, some solid coring, and machine stripping-trenching. No large-scale hand excavations have been done, and, as a result, the stratigraphic/architectural positions of radiocarbon samples are often not as clear as we would like.

This problem is compounded by the advanced soil growth, which has transpired in the fill of these old structures. This problem is especially acute around the lower edges of mounds, where soil horizonation often obscures the mound-ground contact. Mound flanks are where investigators have tended to put their test units so they would not have to dig very far to reach the mound base, but in so doing they chose the very location where the contact is apt to be most pedogenically altered. And if you cannot tell whether a radiocarbon sample comes from the old underlying ground or from the mound fill, then you cannot really tell how old the mound is. Even if you think you can someone will surely remind you that you cannot.

As if these problems are not enough, there are still others, which hamper secure identification of Archaic mounds and which inhibit conversion of agnostics. Most suspected Archaic mounds have not been tested or radiocarbon dated. Untested mounds generally owe their Archaic attribution to nearby surface artifacts or to their total absence. As long as surface collections represent a single component, they can be a persuasive argument, but if collections represent several components, they are not. The absence of artifacts does not make nearly as convincing a case for Archaic origin because some later mounds also lack surface artifacts dating to the period of mound construction (e.g., Crooks [Ford and Willey 1940] and Coral Snake Mound [McClurkan et al. 1980], both Marksville period structures; Figure 1). When you do not know whether artifacts are really absent or just hidden by alluvium, colluvium, or vegetation, the lack of surface materials carries little weight of argument at all. Besides, there is always the possibility that mounds, no matter when they were constructed, were simply located far from residential areas—the so-called vacant ceremonial sites. In such cases, the absence of artifacts...
Figure 1. Locations of early mounds in the Lower Mississippi Valley.
would tell us nothing about when the mounds were built.

Nonetheless we should not allow limited data, conceptual and technical problems, and scientific caution to suppress the search for or the vision of Archaic perceptual and technical problems, and scientific caution to suppress the search for or the vision of Archaic mounds. Good science requires open minds. By the time you add up all the evidences for early mounds, regardless of how circumstantial or inadequate they may be in any given case, they make a substantial argument for pre-Poverty Point Archaic mounds.

Because mounds are generally accepted as integral elements of Poverty Point culture, it is logical to compare them with their presumed Archaic counterparts to see if that brings insight into their nature and if, in turn, that helps in making an Archaic context for the earliest North American mounds more acceptable taxonomically, conceptually, and historically.

Archaic by any Other Name is Still Archaic

Archaic by any other name is still Archaic, and this holds true for Poverty Point culture. Ford (1969) classified Poverty Point as a Formative culture rather than Archaic, but his definition of Formative and the usual definition of Archaic (Willey and Phillips 1958:107-111) are not mutually exclusive. Poverty Point is also attributed to the Gulf Formational Stage (Jenkins and Krause 1986:31-37; Walthall and Jenkins 1976), but Gulf Formational and Archaic are not exclusive terms either, neither culturally nor chronologically. The only change needed to make the chronological position of Poverty Point fit the cultural stage indicated by its artifacts and subsistence patterns is to classify it as Terminal Archaic instead of Late Archaic. That would give us a time slot for every recognized cultural complex.

With these broad taxonomic considerations aside, the problem becomes how to distinguish Poverty Point from older as well as coeval but alien components (cf. Ramenofsky 1986). Later components (post-Poverty Point) are readily distinguishable by the near-universal presence of abundant pottery. However, the mere occurrence of pottery is not an adequate taxonomic criterion since many Poverty Point components also have a little.

Poverty Point components have long been identified by means of Clarence Webb’s (1968:Table 2) list of primary, secondary, and tertiary traits. The primary traits include: hand-molded baked clay objects, tubular pipes, baked clay human figurines, stone vessels, microlithic tools (primarily Jaketown perforators), rough greenstone pseudo-cells, plummets made of iron minerals, and polished stone lapidary (especially jasper beads).

The basic difficulty with this trait list guide, as with all trait lists, is that we are not told how many traits or how much of each trait is necessary to have a given site qualify as a Poverty Point component. Trait lists work normally on a presence or absence basis, or, in Webb’s case, on a more than-less than basis. However, even Webb’s ordinal list cannot readily distinguish Poverty Point components from earlier Late Archaic or contemporary Terminal Archaic components, which have some of the diagnostic traits. When I complained to Webb about this problem years ago, he was quick to point out:

I grant you that the diagnostic trait lists I defined in 1968 are total culture traits and considerably dependent on the Poverty Point site. But not totally so [and] there would have been a Poverty Point culture (called something else) if Poverty Point site had never culminated. I expected some of you guys to wean away from dependence on my trait list, break it down for the early stage, & define/clarify it considerably. Get going.

Someone . . . will need to formulate the behavioral traits that either replace or expand the material traits to characterize Poverty Point culture. But don’t grouse at or throw away what we have used for 2 decades without sticking your neck out with a substitute or addition to clarify. Have at it—


In spite of Webb’s invitation, I have waited, but my solution for taxonomic placement is really little different than I proposed two decades ago (Gibson 1973:53-57). I would not say that the key for separating Poverty Point from Late and Terminal Archaic components lies in replacing material traits with behavioral ones as much as it has to do with changing the way we look at the relative content and details of collections. This is not an effort to replace one trait list with another. It is something altogether different.

I believe that we can affect a more coherent separation of Poverty Point from other Archaic components by jointly: a) judging concordance on the basis of the most detailed artifact comparisons possible (e.g., cylindrical grooved objects instead of just baked clay objects, Motley points of northern gray flint instead of just projectile points or Motley points of local flint, perforated hematite or magnetite plummets instead of just plummets); b) judging coherence of an artifact collection as an assemblage and not as just a group of traits that are present or absent (in other words, making sure that most of the represented types are diagnostically Poverty Point [see Webb 1968:Table 2] and that most of the artifacts in the collection fall into these types); and c) finding that a substantial percentage of chipped stone artifacts was made of exotic materials and that Crescent Hills chert and northern gray flint were represented among those exotics (Gibson 1992a).

What these taxonomic strictures really do is undo the overly long and broad concept of Poverty Point culture that emerged in wake of Webb’s trait list. The pared down and quantitative criteria recommended here do not really narrow the geographic applicability of the taxon appreciably from what we are used
to (those Lower Mississippi localities within about 300 km of the Poverty Point site itself), but they do restrict its duration to the time when certain Midwestern rocks were being exchanged on a large scale in the Lower Mississippi Valley. My narrowed view of the Poverty Point taxon means that some of the sites we have previously classified as Poverty Point components must now be classified as Archaic; e.g.,
Caney Mounds (Gibson 1991), Stelly Mounds (Fogleman 1992), Lower Jackson Mound, and others. The Archaic age of Stelly Mounds has recently been confirmed by a radiocarbon date, which shows that construction of at least one of the mounds (Mound B) took place more than 4700 years ago (4720 ± 190 B.P. [Beta 55925]; Russo 1992a), more than 1500 years before the earthworks at Poverty Point were built.

Although cultural classification in and of itself explains little, the measures proposed herein do help us tidy up taxonomy. With them we are less likely to misclassify manifestations dating between 3500-6500 years ago as Poverty Point components. We will not be as apt to classify sites lacking Midwestern exchange materials as Poverty Point sites. We will be more inclined to view Poverty Point sites from functional and organizational viewpoints rather than the perspective of trait lists and historical taxonomy, and we will be more disposed to focus on the role of the Poverty Point site and interregional exchange in cultural articulation and transformation.

Sites with Mounds and Poverty Point Components

The Poverty Point Site. The Poverty Point site is located on the eastern front of Maçon Ridge overlooking Mississippi River swamplands in northeastern Louisiana (Figure 2). Six mounds—A, B, Motley, Dunbar, Sarah’s, and Ballcourt—and an elliptical ridged enclosure dominate the site (Ford and Webb 1956:14-19; Gibson 1986:207-232; Moore 1913:64-76; Webb 1982:15-18). The enclosure is composed of six concentric raised earthen rings, which are divided into six compartments by transecting aisles (Figure 2). In addition to the above-ground earthworks, a large amount of dirt was used to level the uneven construction area (Gibson 1986:230-231). The scale of construction here is many times greater than at other sites.

Other Poverty Point Components. In addition to the Poverty Point site, mounds are reported at 15 sites that have Poverty Point components. Most of these sites are located in northeast Louisiana near the Poverty Point site (Figure 3). On Maçon Ridge north of Poverty Point lie Galloway, Head, and Neeley and south of Poverty Point are Marsden, Insley, and Mott (Webb 1982:11). Just west of Maçon Ridge on Bayou Bartholomew is Neimeyer-Dare (Figure 1; Webb 1982:67-74; Moore 1913:66-66); Hillman’s Mound(s) on the edge of a relict Mississippi River meanderbelt near Tensas Bayou (Saunders et al. 1994); Watson Brake (Jones 1982:121-124, Figure 3) and Frenchman’s Bend (Saunders and Allen 1991; Saunders et al. 1994) on the edges of old elevated landforms along the Ouachita River; Hedgepeth (Saunders and Allen 1991; Saunders et al. 1994) on Bayou Darbonne out in the hills west of the Mississippi Valley wall; and Kieffer (Gibson 1968a:14-15) on Saline Bayou along the Red River Valley wall (Figure 1). Other reputed Archaic mound sites include Caney Mounds (Gibson 1979:75-77, 1991:71-74, Figure 3; Hunter 1970:83-86), Pickett Island (Ford 1936:217; Gibson 1968b:88-89, 1973:368-370; Moore 1909:102-103), Cad Mound (Gibson 1968a), and Middle Bayou Mound on the edges of an old terrace in the Mississippi River swampland lying between Catahoula and Larto lakes in east-central Louisiana (Figure 1). Near the western edge of the Mississippi Valley in south-central Louisiana are the Stelly Mounds on a low loess-covered terrace bordering Bayou Petite Prairie (Fogleman 1992; Jones and Shuman 1991:22-39, Figures 6-9); Bayou Courtableau Mounds on Teche Ridge (Gagliano et al. 1978:56-57; Gibson 1990a:117, Table 30; Jones and Shuman 1991:102-108, Figures 32-33); and Banana Bayou Mound on Avery Island, a salt dome in the coastal marshes (Brown and Lambert-Brown 1978; Gagliano 1967:16-19; Figure 1).

Along the eastern Mississippi Valley wall in south Louisiana are the Monte Sano Mounds (CEI 1977:243-247; Gibson and Shenkel 1989; Haag 1992; Saunders 1994) and the LSU Campus Mounds (Homburg 1991, 1992; Neuman 1985, 1992; Saunders 1994), and further out in the piney woods hills are a number of mound-bearing sites on the Amite River and nearby streams, which have been referred to as the Amite River phase (Gagliano 1963, 1967); the Hornsby Mounds site is included in the Amite River phase (Manuel 1979; Saunders 1994).

Assigning Ages to the Mounds

Poverty Point Mounds. Nearly every one of the possible Poverty Point mound sites has several compo-
Figure 3. Archaic and Poverty Point mounds near the Poverty Point site.
nents, making it impossible to assign the mounds to the Poverty Point component strictly by artifact association.

Only a few of these mounds have been tested: Mound G at Jaketown (Ford et al. 1955:36–37); mounds B, C, and D at Marsden (Bitgood 1989:Figure 7); mounds 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 12 (Beyer 1900:28–33) and J at Mott (Gibson 1990b:Figure 4); mounds A and B at Insley (Moore 1913:60–61); Marksville Mound 10 (Fowke 1928; Setzler 1933:Plate 6a–c); Meche-Wilkes Mound (Gibson 1990a:117–118, Tables 26–27); Lake Enterprise Mound (Jackson and Jeter 1994); and mounds A, B, Sarah’s, Dunbar, Ballcourt, and Lower Jackson at the Poverty Point site (Ford and Webb 1956:14–19, Figure 2; Gibson 1984:122–153, 1987a:51–66, 1989:12–17, 67–74; Haag 1986:30–31; Moore 1913:67–69).

Of these, only some of the mounds at Poverty Point and Jaketown and Marksville Mound 10, Meche-Wilkes Mound, and Lake Enterprise Mound can be attributed to the Poverty Point period with less than the usual amount of apprehension.

The mounds at Marsden almost certainly do not date from the Poverty Point period but from later Late Marksville and Baytown periods (Bitgood 1989:74). Based on limited testing and collection inventory by Harvard crews beginning in the 1950s, Kidder (1991:30–35) suggests that the mounds at Head, Neely, and Mott date well after the Poverty Point period and that some of the Insley mounds are probably of Poverty Point origin. Actually Harvard crews did not test the mounds at Insley, Moore did. Harvard crews dug pits in the Insley midden. I suspect Kidder is right is attributing some of the mounds to the Poverty Point component, but, like most of the other sites in question, we need radiocarbon dates from good contexts to prove it. My limited testing of the Lower Jackson Mound located near the massive earthworks at the Poverty Point site (Gibson 1989:67–74) now leads me to favor an Archaic origin for that structure instead of the Poverty Point origin many of us had presumed from the few surrounding artifacts and its seeming north-south alignment with other mounds up at the site center, some 2.8 km to the north (Gibson 1987b:20–21; Webb 1970:9). The artifact association from around the mound, which includes cuboidal baked clay objects, Evans points, a whole soapstone vessel, and a zoomorphic bead but not some of the notable diagnostics, is now believed to predate the Poverty Point period. A small exposure of Poverty Point artifacts occurs a short distance northwest of the mound. I suspect that artifacts from around the mound and the northern exposure had been mixed in private collections and were responsible for assigning the Lower Jackson Mound to Poverty Point culture.

Complicating matters further is the absence of radiocarbon dates. Only Mound B at the Poverty Point site has been dated, and those dates obtained in the 1950s (Ford and Webb 1956) are objectional because they were based on samples from an extensive ash bed at the mound base—an apparently single conflagration, which four radiocarbon assays indicate burned for 811 years (Gibson 1987b:25–27, Table 2). I know southeastern groups maintained perpetual fires, but I think this is a little too long.

Despite the initial radiocarbon dates from the Poverty Point and Jaketown sites (Ford and Webb 1956:117–124, Table 9), which suggested that Poverty Point and Hopewell cultures might have been partly contemporaneous, the latest series of dates from Poverty Point contexts clearly shows that the Poverty Point site predated the primary Hopewellian centers by well over a millennium. Although none of the dates pertain to mound contexts, it is not unreasonable to link the mounds at the Poverty Point site to the time when the rings were being built and the site was experiencing its greatest activity.

The most recently acquired dates from the Poverty Point site can be divided into two groups: one group of 10 ages pertaining to the old occupied ground surface where buried by the artificial rings and the second group of six ages pertaining to ring construction fill itself. The subring dates come from the aisle-separated sectors of the rings. The uncalibrated averages (Stuiver and Reimer 1986) are: North, 3288 ± 44 B.P. (3400 ± 100 B.P. [Tx4968], 3340 ± 60 B.P. [Tx4983], 3130 ± 210 B.P. [Tx4984]; all derived from wood charcoal); Northwest, 3110 ± 70 B.P. (Beta 47965; wood charcoal; Glen S. Greene, personal communication 1991); West, 3229 ± 53 B.P. (3220 ± 80 B.P. [Tx 5544], 3760 ± 720 [Tx 5325], 3230 ± 70 B.P. [Tx 5442]; all based on wood charcoal); Southwest, 2641 ± 485 B.P. (2690 ± 650 B.P. [Tx 5326], 2580 ± 730 B.P. [Tx 5327]; all based on wood charcoal); and South, 2860 ± 220 B.P. (Tx 5328; based on wood charcoal; Gibson 1992c). The second group of dates applies to the fill in the West Sector of the rings. This uncalibrated group averages 3047 ± 33 B.P. (2850 ± 80 B.P. [Beta 62845], 3050 ± 60 B.P. [Beta 62847], 2900 ± 140 B.P. [Beta 62848], 3080 ± 240 B.P. [Tx 5543], 3270 ± 80 B.P. [Tx 5545], 2970 ± 130 B.P. [Tx 5324], 3080 ± 70 B.P. [Tx 5546]; all based on wood charcoal; Gibson 1992c).

A casual glance might lead us to conclude: a) that occupation lasted for about 1200 years (3332–2156 B.P.) or, alternatively, for less than two centuries (3244–3080 B.P.), depending on your preference for a long chronology or a short one—support for both positions can be found in the absolute one-sigma ranges of the radiocarbon averages; b) that occupation sprawled roughly counterclockwise around the area, which was later covered by the rings; and c) that construction of the western rings (the only dated section of the earthworks) followed occupation in the
same area by perhaps more than two-and-a-half centuries or less than a century (3282-3014 B.P. or 3176-3080 B.P.), the western sector of rings being the only section of the site where we have radiocarbon dates for both pre-ring occupation and for ring construction.

None of these conclusions can be confidently asserted because we cannot discount the possibility that all radiocarbon dates derive from the same population (read same time). In other words, we cannot say how long it took to build the Poverty Point earthworks because the current radiocarbon series is statistically indistinguishable (Gibson 1992c). This, of course, does not necessarily mean that Poverty Point was built and occupied for only a short while, but it lets me make that claim with less uncertainty than those who claim that it took a more leisurely 10 to 12 centuries. This conclusion is based on a statistical analysis of radiocarbon dates by means of maximum likelihood ratios/chi-square statistics, which takes into account the unusual circumstance of having known but unequal measurement standard errors (Gibson 1992c).

I must reiterate that none of the recently acquired dates derive from mound contexts, and so we cannot really say how old any of the mounds on the Poverty Point site really are or whether they even belong to the Poverty Point period component for sure. Nevertheless, all of the mounds have been tested, and there is no compelling evidence that they date to any time other than the Poverty Point period. In light of the statistically indistinguishable radiocarbon series, my best guess presently is that they were built during a brief span around 3150 B.P., a time that coincides with the construction of the western rings.

Despite previous claims, radiocarbon dates from other Poverty Point sites (reclassified under present canons) do not extend the Poverty Point period beyond the occupational span of the Poverty Point site itself (Jackson 1986:17-21; Webb 1982:Table 1), with any statistically significant degree of assurance. Furthermore, none of the mounds at other Poverty Point components have been radiocarbon dated, so we cannot tell if the mounds themselves date to the time of the Poverty Point occupation anyway.

In sum then, mounds from only six of the 16 sites with Poverty Point components can be reasonably assigned to the Poverty Point period. These include: Poverty Point, Jaketown, Marksville Mound 10, Lake Enterprise, and Meche-Wilkes. All of the assignments are based on artifact association and not radiocarbon dates. Although I feel safe in concluding that mound building took place during the Poverty Point period, I do not think we can say just yet how widespread or important it was compared to Middle and Late Archaic periods. If it were not for the extraordinary Poverty Point site, there really would be little to distinguish earlier Archaic mounds from Poverty Point mounds in terms of shape, number, size, arrangement, and construction details.

Archaic Mounds. The rigorous efforts to document claims of Archaic mounds have actually produced a fairly decent radiocarbon chronology, far more substantial than for the Poverty Point period, when mound building is unquestioned. Uncalibrated radiocarbon dates suggest that mounds were being built from the Middle Archaic through the Late Archaic, or from around 6220 to possibly around 2930 B.P. (Gibson and Shenkel 1989:Table 1.1; Russo 1994a).

The Hedgepeth Mounds are the oldest known so far (Saunders et al. 1994) and Hornsby, the latest (Manuel 1979), and we have dates for several other sites (Russo 1994a:Table 1). None of the other presumed Archaic mounds have been absolutely dated, and their suspected Archaic affiliation is based on surface artifacts or the lack thereof (although sometimes we do not know whether artifacts are really absent or merely buried).

Shape and Number of Mounds

Mound Sites with Poverty Point Components. Besides the Poverty Point site, only the solitary conical mounds at Lake Enterprise, Marksville Mound 10, and Meche-Wilkes can be attributed to the Poverty Point period without experiencing taxonomic discomfort. At the Poverty Point site, two of the six mounds are thought to be shaped like birds (Figure 4; Ford 1955:471), another is conical (Ford and Webb 1956:33-34), two others are flat-topped platforms (Figure 4; Gibson 1986:213, 215-217), and one is a flat-topped platform possibly capped by a low dome (Figure 4; Gibson 1986:217-219).

Other possible Poverty Point mounds are reported from Galloway, Head, Neeley, Coles Crossroads, Garcia, and Claiborne (Webb 1982:11-12). They are all conical mounds. Twin conical mounds are reported at Neimeyer-Dare (Webb 1982:11); four at Baker, eight each at Savory (Webb 1982:12) and Jaketown (Ford et al. 1955:25), and 10 each at Mott (Beyer 1900) and Insley (Bitgood 1989:Figure 14; Moore 1913:60-66).

Thus, although multiple mounds may have been built at some sites during Poverty Point times, we just cannot prove it at the moment.

Archaic Sites. Single conical mounds are reported at Middle Bayou, Cad, and Banana Bayou; two each at Hedgepeth, Monte Sano, LSU Campus, and Hornsby; three each at Kieffer, Stelly, and Bayou Courtbureau; five conical and/or oval mounds at Frenchman's Bend and Pickett Island; six conical mounds at Caney; and 10 conical and oval mounds incorporated in a closed elliptical earthen embankment at Watson Brake.

I am reasonably confident that the mounds at Banana Bayou, Hedgepeth, Monte Sano, LSU Campus, Hornsby, Kieffer, Frenchman's Bend, and Watson
Brake were built during the Archaic period. I strongly suspect that those at Middle Bayou, Cad, Bayou Courtableau, Pickett Island, and Caney are Archaic structures, but investigations and radiocarbon dates are needed to prove it. The definite Archaic sites have both single and multiple mounds (two to five), and one, Watson Brake, has ten mounds linked by an artificial embankment (Figure 5).
Sizes of Mounds

Poverty Point Sites. Except at the Poverty Point site, the Poverty Point mounds at Jaketown, Lake Enterprise, Marksville Mound 10, and Meche-Wilkes are generally small, ranging from 1 m high and a little over 20 m in diameter to about 2 m high and around 30 m in diameter. The mounds at Poverty Point are larger, much larger. The conical mound (Mound B) is 7.5 m high and 55 m in diameter, but the towering bird mounds measure $23.5 \times 194 \times 216$ m (Mound A) and $15.5 \times 121 \times 170$ m (Motley Mound). Other suspected but unconfirmed Poverty Point mounds fall in the same size range.

Archaic Sites. On the whole, Archaic mounds are larger than Poverty Point mounds. The smallest structures, such as Mound B at Hedgepeth and Mound D at Frenchman’s Bend, are only about a meter or so high and 20–25 m in diameter, whereas the largest, such as Mound A at Watson Brake, Hedgepeth Mound A, Hillman’s Mound, Monte Sano Mound A, and the LSU Campus mounds, range 5–7 m high and 37–45 m in diameter.

Arrangement of Mounds

Poverty Point. Brecher and Haag (1983) claim that the ridged earthwork layout at the Poverty Point site incorporated various solar and stellar sight lines, although the mounds themselves were not included in their projected alignments. Although only one of the mounds in the Jaketown group has been confirmed as a Poverty Point mound, the other low mounds are probably so, and they fall in an irregular line along the crest of a ridge.

Because none of the other sites with Poverty Point components have more than one definite Poverty Point mound, we cannot certainly identify any of the mound arrangements as Poverty Point period artifices. However, if they are, then we could have elliptical arrangements at Savory (Webb 1982:Figure 7g), Insley (Bitgood 1989:Figure 14), and Mott (Beyer 1900)—closed ellipses at Insley and Mott and an open-sided one at Savory. This arrangement tends to follow midden arcs. The Baker Mounds were leveled some years ago, and we have not yet determined their original pattern.

Archaic. The layouts of Archaic sites having more than three mounds include arcuate alignments—full elliptical enclosures as at Watson Brake (Figure 5) and ragged lines following escarpments as at Frenchman’s Bend. The mound groups at Caney (Figure 6) and Pickett Island also form elliptical (partial) enclosures, but these groups are not certainly Poverty Point. Some of the Caney Mounds are aligned with sunrise positions on the horizon during equinoxes and winter solstices but others do not.

Cultural Contexts, Transformations, and History

What about the cultural contexts of these early mounds? Do they manifest emerging sedentism? Emerging social complexity? Emerging public cere-
A monialism and the appearance of burial cults? All of these contexts have been envisioned for presumed Archaic mound and rock cairn construction in the Midwest, particularly in Missouri and Illinois (Brown 1983; Brown and Vierra 1983; Charles and Buikstra 1983; Kay 1983; Reid 1983). But was sedentism, complexity, group ceremonialism, and burial cult ritual, singly or collectively, really essential for mound building? Do the cultural contexts of the earliest Archaic mounds in the Lower Mississippi Valley differ from those in the Midwest or from those of Terminal Archaic mounds in the Lower Mississippi Valley, those of the Poverty Point period? How? Why? Are these cultural contexts peculiar to each time and place or are these factors and transformations historically interconnected—perhaps spinoffs of the information transmission network that drove long-distance exchange systems of the time?

Sedentism. Are the early mounds located at strategic places, where most of the food and other resources could have been gathered year-round? In other words, are they located in places that could have enabled or promoted hunter-gatherer sedentism (Brown and Vierra 1983:170)? In the Lower Mississippi Valley,
exceptional biotic diversity and abundance are usually associated with the walls of the Mississippi Valley and edges of the marsh, or, in other words, along strong ecological seams. Other places in the floodplain or hills also offer bountiful food resources—overflow lakes, for example—which could have supported hunter-gatherer sedentism, but these places are scattered and not as uniformly accessible as valley walls. Living on the edge does not necessarily imply that a population was sedentary, but I am convinced that sedentism was more generally achieved or achieved more frequently by hunter-gatherers who were able to exploit the varied resources along strong ecological edges, especially when those edges incorporated overflow lakes and streams.

A further point about sedentism is that it is a relative condition at best, even among populations that did settle down and adopt logistical foraging. There were probably seasons and perhaps spans of years when residential shifting was the rule. In addition, it is really meaningless and even misleading to generalize from one place to another, even short distances apart, without hard evidence. Poverty Point culture was not a sedentary way of life, but some Poverty Point populations probably were. Late Archaic culture was not uniformly sedentary, but some Archaic populations probably were.

Sites do not have to be located precisely on the seam itself to qualify as candidates for a sedentary pattern; they only need to be nearby, close enough for their economic catchment areas to be draped across the seam. Poverty Point components along Joes Bayou out in the Mississippi floodplain, for example, can be considered as part of a sedentary pattern, even though they are from 2-10 km east of Maçon Ridge bluff.

For the earliest Archaic mounds, location along these seams is not the case consistently. Monte Sano, LSU Campus, Lower Jackson, and Kieffer are located on strong ecological edges—Monte Sano and LSU Campus on the eastern wall of the Mississippi alluvial valley; Lower Jackson on the Maçon Ridge, a high narrow vestige of Pleistocene floodplain surrounded by the modern Mississippi floodplain; and Kieffer, at the margin of the hills and the Red River floodplain. So too is Banana Bayou Mound, which is located in the coastal zone just west of the Mississippi Valley at the interface between brackish marsh and a hardwood-forested salt dome. On the other hand, the Amite River mounds, Hornsby, and Hedgespeth are located on the rims of small stream valleys out in the piney woods hills. Although these upland situations are ecologically sharp, they are narrow and less potentially productive than the edges of major river valleys. This is not to say that they could not have supported relatively permanent settlement for hunter-gatherers. They might have, but I do not think that they could have supported the numbers of people that the large river or marsh edges would have been able to. Other Archaic mound sites, such as Frenchman's Bend, Watson Break, and Stelly Mounds are located on the edges of old but low terraces down in the floodplain, usually short distances from the Mississippi Valley wall and from the then active Mississippi River. So too are the suspected Archaic mound sites: Caney Mounds, Middle Bayou Mound, and Cad Mound. The probably Archaic Hillman's Mound(s) and Courttableau Mounds lie down in the modern floodplain but are on old relict meanderbelt ridges.

Poverty Point, or Terminal Archaic, mounds, are similarly concentrated along ecological edges, and, like earlier Archaic mounds, they occur on edges of varying strength (Gibson 1973; Webb 1970). The eastern front of the Maçon Ridge bears many of the definite and suspected Poverty Point mound sites (Galloway, Head, Neeley, Poverty Point, Marsden, Insley, and Mott; Figure 3), whereas some occur on the edges of other old high land surfaces fronting the Mississippi Valley (Marksville Mound 10, Claiborne, and Meche-Wilkes Mound), as well as on abandoned meanderbelt ridges of the Arkansas, Ouachita, Sunflower, Yazoo, Mississippi, and other rivers down in the Mississippi floodplain itself (Neimeyer-Dare, Lake Enterprise Mound, Jaketown, Coles Crossroads, Savory, and Baker).

Generally, the less pronounced the edge, the less capable it was of providing the diversity and abundance of critical resources needed to sustain permanent occupations. Many Archaic mounds, especially those out in the hills, like the Amite River mounds and Hedgespeth, do not fall along the strongest ecotones in the Lower Mississippi region. But then some of the Poverty Point mound sites do not occur along the strongest edges either. I question the capability of these weaker edges for supplying the year-round resources needed to sustain sedentary populations, especially sizeable ones. But then, there is no need to assume that sedentism, if really achieved, was uniform across the entire Lower Mississippi region. One group might have been relatively stable, while its neighbors were not. Or a group might have been stable during bountiful periods and transitory during less productive times.

However, if we were to use strength of ecological edge as a measure of possible sedentism, then Poverty Point culture as a whole would seem to have had a somewhat greater potential for sedentism than its Archaic predecessor, strictly because its components were apparently concentrated along the strongest of all ecological edges in the region—the walls of the Mississippi Valley. This does not imply that Poverty Point sites on the valley wall had any greater potential for sedentism than Archaic sites on the wall. What is meant is that Poverty Point sites on the wall had greater potential than Archaic sites off the wall. Pov-
Archaic Mounds in the Southeast

Poverty Point culture is a Mississippi Valley development, pure and simple. The Archaic is not. It extends from the valley into the hills and from the marsh into the interior.

I have had to examine the case for sedentism in ecological terms because we just do not have data that bear directly on the condition. No mound, Archaic or Poverty Point, has produced sufficient biological residues to enable subsistence to be reconstructed, and thus even our basic assumption that hunting and gathering was the primary means of food provisioning is based on general identification of limited food remains from only a handful of sites and on only one solid analytical study of the Copes site, a nonmound Poverty Point component (Jackson 1986, 1991b). Copes did produce some squash remains, but these are the only cultigens known from Middle, Late, or Terminal Archaic (Poverty Point) contexts in the Lower Mississippi region. Not even the indigenous starchy seed plants thought to have been cultivated in the midwestern Archaic seem to have been important in the Lower Mississippi Valley.

Without these absolutely crucial data, we cannot talk confidently about subsistence strategies, intensification, and other economic factors involved in sedentism. We do not even have data relevant to examining some of the predicted consequences of sedentism—such as the building of substantial houses, the fabrication of greater numbers of other immovable facilities, the planned disposal of trash, and others (Brown and Vierra 1983:170).

There was a 6-m square postmold pattern beneath the largest Monte Sano mound (CEI 1977:243; Gibson and Shenkel 1989:Table 1.1; Haag 1992). Otherwise, we have no evidence for substantial houses on any other Middle or Late Archaic mound component or nonmound component for that matter. However, no houses have been identified on Poverty Point mound component either, except for the Poverty Point site itself. There, excavations in Dunbar Mound disclosed an arc of postmolds, perhaps a section of the wall of a circular building, on the floor of one of the several mound stages (Figure 7; Gibson 1984:130–133). Dunbar Mound has not been conclusively dated to the Poverty Point period, but there are no data to the contrary. Postmolds have also been reported on the rings (Gibson 1987a:148, 1990c:42–49; Goad 1980) and in the central plaza (Gibson 1989:58–61; Haag 1986:16–19), and some of these are very large (Gibson 1987a: Figure 19; Haag 1986:16–19, Figure 6). Unfortunately, no patterns have been recognized or reported. Clay lenses, often encountered in the artificial rings and sometimes described as house floors (Greene 1992), are probably just fill increments designed to seal the piles of silt loam used as building material (Gibson 1990c:47).

The earthen rings at the Poverty Point site have been assumed to be elevated foundations for houses belonging to a large permanent population (Ford and Webb 1956:128; Gibson 1973:127–139). This assumption was made before extensive excavations in many parts of the rings failed to turn up the nearly continuous house patterns everyone was expecting. The fairly low incidence of postmolds uncovered by modern excavation does not, however, mean that the ridge crests lacked substantial housing. It does suggest they did not support substantial closely spaced houses while the rings were under construction. Whether they were covered with houses after construction was finished is another matter, one that cannot be certainly resolved because the uppermost levels of the rings have been largely obliterated by more than a century of modern plowing, which would have removed the evidence of ridge-top structures.

Another predicted consequence of sedentism is a large investment in other immovable facilities. Other than at the Poverty Point and Claiborne sites, we have very few comparative data. A number of cache pits from these two sites contain everything from hundreds of kilograms of soapstone sherds (Webb 1944) or several whole vessels (Gagliano and Webb 1970) and stone bead-making materials (R. King Harris, personal communication 1968) to plummets (Robert Pickering, personal communication 1988) and large hafted bifacial foliates (Clarence H. Webb, personal communication 1970). Prepared hearths and earth ovens are also prevalent at Poverty Point and are occasionally reported at other Poverty Point and Archaic mound components, as well as nonmound components. Showing that stationary facilities occur at nonmound sites carries little weight of evidence when trying to demonstrate that mound sites were part of a sedentary pattern. Unless we can figure out what relationships, if any, specific mound sites had with specific nonmound sites, it is not appropriate to use data from one class of sites to characterize the other.

The best evidence for immovable facilities is provided by the mounds themselves. All of the mounds tested to date indicate incremental construction and hence, periodic building (and/or use of different building materials). Some of the interim mound surfaces supported debris-producing activity, which included the raising of wooden structures (Dunbar Mound at the Poverty Point site), the digging of hearths (Frenchman’s Bend) and other pits (Jaketown, Kieffer), and the scattering of baked clay fragments (Meche-Wilkes Mound).

The key element here is elapsed time. All of the tested mounds seem to have been built in stages, and those bearing signs of occupational (or ceremonial) activity atop those interim stages clearly indicate that mound facilities were used for a period of time, longer than that normally associated with a once-used
camp site. This is especially true for those sites with more than one mound, and as a general rule, the more numerous the mounds, the longer the span of occupation indicated. This connotes no absolute meaning, because we cannot control for other important factors, such as population size, industriousness, how often and how long builders worked, and other considerations. The presence of two mounds, for example, does not mean that a site was utilized twice as long as a site with a single mound. Length of time can be measured continuously or it can be seen as the sum of repeated episodes over a prolonged span, but whichever the case, we can confidently assume that both Archaic and Poverty Point mounds were places of assembly over relatively considerable periods, longer than if they had been single-stage constructions and single-use events.

Another predicted consequence of sedentary occupation—planned trash disposal—is evident only on the ringed enclosure at Poverty Point, where organically enriched soils line the lower flanks of the rings, sometimes reaching thicknesses of one-half meter. These are the only known locations where organic refuse was purposely discarded, and in this sense, they are unlike the areas of more generalized waste disposal observed on some of the other mound sites.

At best, we have a mixed representation of immovable facilities and other indirect indicators of sedentism at both pre-Poverty Point and Poverty Point mound sites. And generally speaking, the larger mound sites seem to have more indicators than the smaller sites, which may suggest that population size and the involved organizational consequences of larger groups may have contributed as much as or more than length of continuous inhabitation (sedentism) to these conditions. The best case for sedentism, in my opinion, is still the Poverty Point site. Without intensive excavation, the case for sedentism everywhere else is equivocal.

Function. The main problem I have with Archaic and Poverty Point mounds in the Lower Mississippi Valley is trying to figure out what they were used for. It would help, of course, if we had some relevant data, like artifacts, burials, or features from mound contexts. However, this kind of information, which we have come to expect from studying later Woodland and Mississippian mounds, is not readily forthcoming. Although most mounds have not been tested, those that have been are notable for not yielding anything that fits our expectations. We have paradigms for interpreting mounds with things in them, but we lack any for those that do not. So our problem at the moment is not that we lack data; our problem is that we just do not know what to make of empty mounds, mounds which not only lack diagnostic artifacts but which contain virtually no artifacts at all.

An underpinning of southeastern archaeology is that mounds, especially conical ones, were used for burial. Charles and Buikstra (1983) see the midwestern Archaic practice of interment on highly visible bluff tops and natural knolls as a means of linking people with their ancestors and the land they occupied. Reidhead (1992) expands Charles and Buikstra’s interpretation, suggesting a further symbolic role for earthen mounds as places where rituals were publicly enacted in order to proclaim a group’s continued rights and claims to the land for all to see, kith and kin and potential contestant alike. In Reidhead’s view, public demonstration of these claims was needed to clarify and validate inheritance among emerging lineages, whose ambilineal or patrilineal structure left such matters open. The main problem with viewing early Lower Mississippi mounds in this context is that some, perhaps most, and possibly all of them just do not seem to have been used as burial places.

Of the eight Poverty Point and 10 earlier Archaic mounds that have been tested in some fashion—hand-dug test units, machine excavation, or solid cores—only three have produced possible human remains. An extensive ash bed at the base of Mound B at the Poverty Point site yielded a few, small, burned, and unidentified bones scattered about and a fragment of charred human femur (Ford and Webb 1956:35). Haag (1992) reports “the deposit of some cremation remains on successive episodes on two small earth domes built on a truncated pyramidal mound,” in the largest of the Monte Sano mounds, but further details are lacking. After one of the three Kieffer Mounds was skimmed with a bulldozer in 1964, I found tiny pieces of calcined bone, assumed to be human, in several small, oval, and thick-walled basin-shaped pits, dug into the mound surface (Gibson 1968a:14–15). The thick brick-red pit walls suggested intense and prolonged burning had taken place in them, but the lack of ash and charcoal indicated that they had been cleaned out before the bone fragments had been (re)placed in them. Several apparently unburned stone beads were incorporated in the pit fill, and these circumstances led me to suspect that these were human cremations and that the mound was of Archaic age (Gibson 1968a:14). None of the tiny bone fragments have, however, been definitely identified as human.

When only three of 18 tested mounds have pro-

Figure 7. Postmolds on tops of various building stages, Dunbar Mound, Poverty Point site (Gibson 1984)

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duced what may be human remains, the case for a burial function cannot be considered very strong. Of course, it is conceivable that the wholly inadequate amount of testing just missed the burials or that burials or bones simply were not preserved. However, if cremation or corpse interment had been standard practice in the Lower Mississippi Archaic and if the remains of many people had been interred, then neither lack of preservation nor observation limitations can be held totally accountable for the failure to find remains. Bone fragments can be identified even in a two-inch solid core. I suspect a single core would have been sufficient to detect the burials in every Marksville burial mound that has been excavated in the Lower Mississippi Valley. Not so with these Archaic mounds. Until proved otherwise, I think we are simply going to have to accept the lack of human bones as an indication that Archaic mounds in the Lower Mississippi Valley were not primarily used as tombs, although a few contain cremated remains.

What then did the mounds cover, cover up, or symbolically uncover? As I have already noted, Mound B at Poverty Point covered the remains of a fire, a bonfire (Ford and Webb 1956:35). Beneath the largest Monte Sano Mound was the remains of a razed wooden building. Saunders et al. (1994) believe one of the mounds at Frenchman’s Bend was built atop a succession of three artificial clay floors, but floors of what is still a question. Mounds at Lower Jackson, Heggepeth, Caney, LSU Campus, Hornsby, Jaketown G, and Poverty Point (Sarah’s, Dunbar, and A and B) were erected over natural or occupational surfaces, or old anthropic epipedons. We have not ascertained what the surfaces were like beneath mounds at Hillman, Insley, Kieffer, Stelly, and Banana Bayou, nor below Marksville Mound 10, Lake Enterprise, or Motley mounds. In spite of data unevenness, we can see that there was little consistency in or preparation of actual building sites themselves. In some cases, the old ground had been occupied, in others, it had not. In some cases, large fires or wood frame buildings preceded the mounds, in others, there was only grass or bare ground. However, in most cases, we are simply unable to tell what the old surface was like.

What about the internal structure of the mounds? Does that give any clues as to mound function? Some of the mounds are comprised of several layers, suggesting to most investigators that building took place accretionally (e.g., Mound G at Jaketown, Dunbar Mound at Poverty Point, Banana Bayou Mound, Monte Sano), but others were apparently built in a single effort. I would caution, however, that continuous building (single stage) using fill from different sources (such as the different soil horizons in a single borrow pit) might be mistaken for separately added mound layers, or stages. Unless a sizeable cross-section of a mound has been exposed and actual internal structural components (modules) identified, variegated fill should not be taken as proof positive of stage by stage construction.

In addition, just because the top of a mound component bears signs of occupation does not automatically mean that the component represented an interim mound exposed for prolonged periods. If the recognizable activity only involved building fires and discarding a few artifacts or greasy bones, then we might only be looking at an overnight or other short duration activity (Gibson 1992b). On the other hand, if we find that walled buildings were erected on top of the components, we can be more confident that substantial construction lapeses occurred. Only Dunbar Mound at the Poverty Point site with its several mound-top buildings indicates lengthy hiatuses between mound-building episodes (Figure 7).

Even sheer size of a mound is not an absolute indicator of lengthy mound-building spans. Lots of people could build a mound much quicker than a few (Gibson 1987b:17-19, Table 1), and because we can not reliably guess about the sizes of mound-building labor crews, we may only confidently view the massiveness of the earth construction at the Poverty Point site as exceeding the normal limits of what might have been accomplished by relatively small groups working for a relatively short time. In other words, all Archaic mounds and mound complexes could conceivably have been built by small groups of sedentary or semisedentary hunter-gatherers working for relatively short total labor times. The earthworks at the Poverty Point site could not. They either took a lot of people or a lot of time, and my view of the radiocarbon chronology is that they took a lot of people (Gibson 1987a:Table 2).

Do the artifacts found within mounds tell us anything more about their nature? The ash, charcoal, fire-cracked rock, baked clay fragments, red ochre, burned animal bone, and chert flakes, which are rarely recovered from the mounds, may only be habitation refuse incidentally incorporated in the fill dirt and may have absolutely nothing to do with mound function. On the other hand, the abundant baked clay objects in the Meche-Wilkes Mound, which actually make up the main part of the mound fill, together with the untempered and fiber-tempered pottery and projectile points, are indicative of some kind of intense mound-top activity (Gibson 1990a:109–111), because baked clay objects are rare or nonexistent in the surrounding midden. The cuboid baked clay object and bone needle in Mound A at Frenchman’s Bend (Saunders et al. 1994) may have been intentional placements, and the tubular and barrel-shaped beads of red Jasper and other stones at Kieffer Mounds (Gibson 1968a) are almost certainly burial deposits. The zoomorphic bead and large bifacial foliate of exotic gray chert from the largest Monte Sano Mound (Haag
1992) may come from the razed house beneath the mound, but they too could be caches or offerings. Still, with only two or possibly three exceptions, Archaic mounds do not contain specialized mortuary assemblages; they contain regular domestic residue and not even much of that. Most do not contain either.

The inescapable conclusion is that Archaic and Poverty Point mounds in the Lower Mississippi Valley are so different, content- and structure-wise, that no single function seems likely to apply to all of them. On the other hand, they are all above-ground structures and whatever purposes they might have fulfilled for their builders, I suspect they all emerged out of a worldview and symbolism common to many Middle Archaic groups living in the Lower Mississippi Valley and other parts of the Southeast.

Discussion and Conclusions

The essence of this commonality is transmuted and transmitted by the physical nature and location of mounds. Mounds are conspicuous permanent reminders of a group's labor and existence. Whatever rituals might have been enacted on or around them, whatever purposes they may have served, and whatever their raison d'etre, mounds can be understood as symbols of a community's identity and capacity for common action. That they were above-the-ground, or elevated, features may suggest that they were practical manifestations of the historically widespread cosmological separation of the Upper and Lower Worlds, raising ritual principals above the pollution of the Lower World and the world of ordinary humans (Hudson 1976:121; Lankford 1992:69). By being elevated, mound-top ritual—whether associated with death, birth, marriage, or other rites of passage, or any other ceremonial occasion for that matter—was set apart from the ordinary plane of existence. Having a mound to stand on may have been the simplest and most conspicuous way to make people respect the ritual and its leaders.

It is tempting to link Archaic mounds with the general Muskogean account of creation, which holds that humans and grasshoppers issued forth together from underground through a passage (navel) that opened in top of a mound, whereupon they lay about in the sun until the wet clay of which they were made had dried (Swanton 1931:5-37). Mounds:creation is a logical association (Gibson 1993), especially when one considers that a persistent lapidary object of Middle Archaic through Poverty Point times was a zoomorphic bead, which Webb (1971) likens to adult locusts and their larvae. Locust larvae live underground for 13 years before emerging into the world above, where they spend the next week furiously mating and singing shrilly before dying. John Connaway has been studying these bug beads for years (Connaway 1977, 1981), and I think he would quickly tell us that the objects do not all represent insects and furthermore that most of them are not found at sites having early mounds (Connaway 1991).

In fact, bird representations seem to have been the principal iconographic stone artifact, especially later during Poverty Point times (Webb 1982:58). Owls are the only definite group of birds recognized (Figure 8) but a variety of species is probably indicated (Figure 9; Gibson 1993). Birds in historic Muskogean mythology are symbols of death and news bringing (Swanton 1931:198-199, 204, 212, 1946:776, 781).

I suspect these zoomorphic artifacts do have relevance to early mounds contexts, although not to early mound contents, since no zoomorphs have ever been found in them. The pendant recovered during excavations at Monte Sano came from beneath the mound. Some and perhaps even most Middle and Late Archaic mounds, including the ones far from the Mississippi Valley, as well as Poverty Point mounds, are situated near major waterway confluences, on ma-
Figure 9. Bird head pendants and bird figure etchings, Poverty Point site (drawn by Jon Gibson).
major historic (long-used) trails, and often at the conjunction of both. They were, in effect, located at crossroads, places where news could have traveled far and fast, as if spread by birds, even if those birds were made of stone. There is, of course, no necessary reason why such symbols should have been left around the mounds or buried in them, as they were during Middle Woodland times when entombment may have increased their value by taking the objects out of circulation and raised the statuses of their owners who were able to replace them (Brose 1979). It makes more sense to me for such icons to have freely circulated when social groups were just beginning to close or when intergroup relations were at stake. Buried symbols would probably not work in such circumstances, because they were only important to those who buried them and not to outsiders, who needed to see them to believe.

I can see the seeds of social differentiation and raw economic materialism sprout from the mound tops, regardless of the manner of ritual that sowed them. One of the things that grew out these Middle and Late Archaic mound-building contexts in the Lower Mississippi region was a far-reaching exchange system, which is often accorded culture status—Poverty Point culture. The conduct of exchange was intimately bound to the emergence of a very special and strategic place where much of the exotic material was destined and to the elaboration of social organizational strategies for accommodating large-scale resource distribution, large groups, massive building campaigns, and ritual activities. The place was the Poverty Point site. It can be seen as the consequence of several converging lines of technological, economic, and organizational development, of strategic location, and of human spirit. And mound building, old Archaic mound building, was a salient factor.

Notes

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