3

Long-Term Trends in the Making and Materialization of Social Groups at Moundville

GREGORY D. WILSON

The Moundville site has a highly structured spatial plan—a point made long ago by Peebles (1971, 1979) and later developed by Knight (1998, 2010, this volume). On a macro-community level, Knight (1998, this volume) has interpreted the rectangular distribution of paired earthen monuments at the site as indicating the presence of a number of ranked, corporate kin groups (figure 3.1). My ongoing research has documented evidence that Moundville community members employed a similar socio-spatial logic to establish their kin-based identities on a subclan or lineage level through the construction of spatially discrete residential groups (Wilson 2008: 87–90). Moreover, I also found that these residential groups were later replaced by small burial clusters that I interpreted as kin-group cemeteries (Wilson 2008: 90–92, 2010).

Collectively, these patterns lend themselves to the conclusion that Moundville consisted of a carefully structured arrangement of clans and subclans. This model of community organization is even more compelling in that it corresponds so closely with the ethnohistorically documented kinship systems and community patterns of American Indian groups who once occupied neighboring portions of the interior Southeast (Knight 1990: 10; Speck 1907; Swan 1855: 262; Swanton 1922, 1928a: 115–16, 1928b: 204–6; Wilson 2008).

On the basis of this highly structured community plan, it may be tempting to conceptualize Moundville in structuralist theoretical terms. Structural-functionalist perspectives emphasize the inherent stability and cohesion of societies. Accordingly, the different segments that constitute a society are viewed as well-integrated building blocks with particular

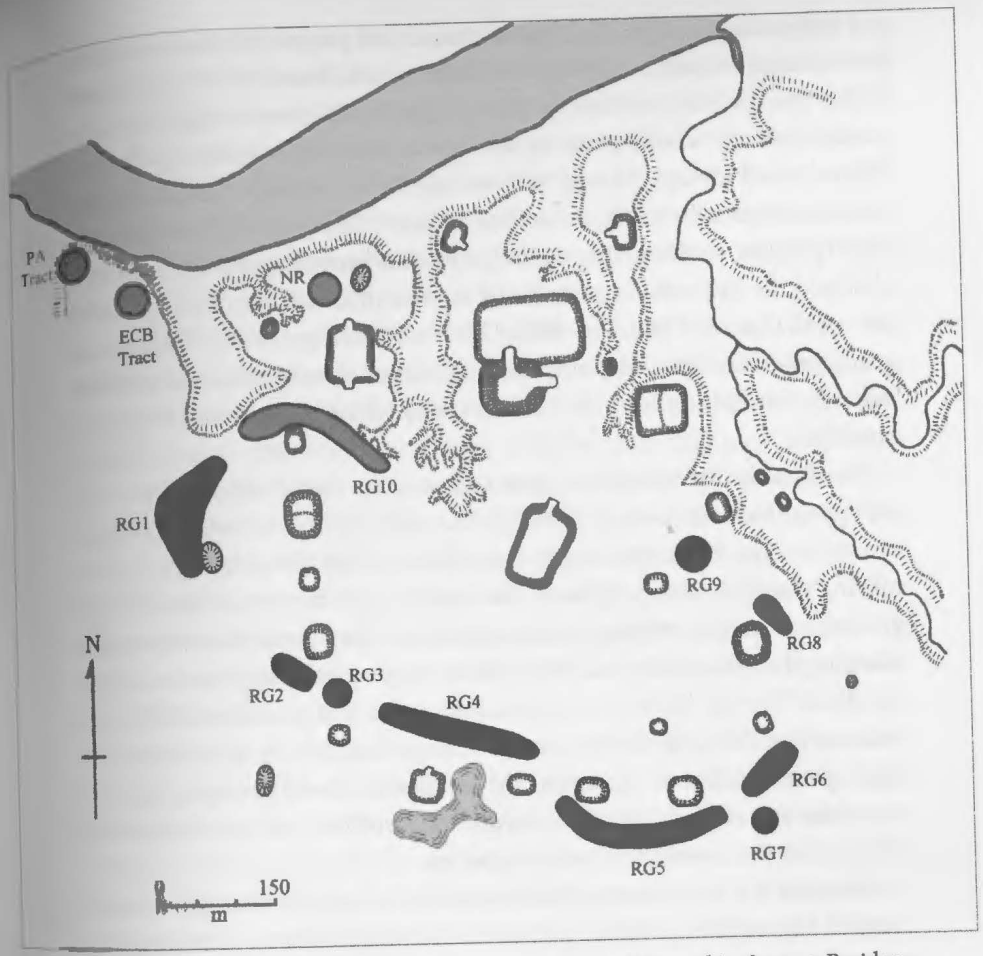


Figure 3.1. The Moundville site, showing excavated areas discussed in the text. Residential groups along the Moundville Roadway are labeled numerically, RG1–RG10. Key to abbreviations for excavation areas: NR, North of Mound R; ECB, East of the Conference Building; PA, Picnic Area.

socioeconomic functions that serve to reproduce the social whole (see Yaeger and Canuto 2000: 2). Moreover, individuals are not viewed as significant in and of themselves but only in terms of their position in patterns of social relations, and their associated behaviors in reproducing those relations. Such a perspective downplays the historical and political importance of social inequalities, conflicts, and hybridity, as well as the role of agency and social practice in generating broader relationships (Brumfiel 1992).

I have adopted a practice-based theoretical perspective as an alternative to the structuralist approach just discussed (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984). From a practice-theory perspective, social structure is not independent of or causally prior to the practices and interests of individuals and small groups. In addition, social relations and social entities are not viewed as inherently stable but as requiring constant maintenance to perpetuate. In theorizing agency, some anthropologists have also emphasized the importance of material culture in stabilizing broader social networks (Latour 1992; Law 1991: 173–76; Whitridge 2004). Thus, social groups manufacture and manipulate buildings, monuments, and portable items in the attempt to make certain social relations and identities more durable.

Small-scale Mississippian social groups in the Black Warrior Valley appear to have been surprisingly durable despite important political economic changes in the region (see Wilson 2008: 130–37, 2010). Determining the relationship between the actions and interests of these social groups and an overarching kinship system is of key importance to understanding their durability and their role in shaping Mississippian society in the Black Warrior Valley. To address this issue I will provide a diachronic summary of Moundville's community organization. In so doing I will highlight the different strategies that small-scale social groups employed to produce and maintain their corporate identities and socioeconomic claims over the course of several centuries.

The data for this investigation come from the Alabama Museum of Natural History's excavation of the Moundville Roadway. The Roadway excavations were conducted in 1939 and 1940 at the Moundville site within a winding corridor, 15 m (50 ft) wide and 2.4 km (1.5 mi) long, that was to be disturbed by the construction of a road that now encircles portions of the plaza and areas east, west, and south of the mounds (see figure 3.1). In conjunction, several large block excavations occurred prior to the construction of an entrance building and site museum. These excavations uncovered the archaeological remains of hundreds of Mississippian buildings and associated architectural features, a total of 289 burials, and over 100,000 artifacts (see Peebles 1971, 1979).

The early Moundville I phase corresponds with the beginning of Mississippian culture in the Black Warrior Valley. Two low earthen mounds were built on the Moundville terrace at this time (Blitz 2007, this volume; Steponaitis 1992). Large-scale excavation and widespread subsurface testing, however, have revealed that this area was only lightly occupied in the early twelfth century AD (Knight and Steponaitis 1998: 13; Scarry 1995, 1998; Steponaitis 1998). The earliest Mississippian domestic structures at the Moundville site are widely scattered and have relatively short occupation spans (Wilson 2008). Thus, despite Moundville's emerging political and ceremonial importance, there is little evidence of the well-structured community order that defined later occupation at the site.

An analysis of over 200 excavated buildings at the Moundville site has revealed a sizable population increase around AD 1200, at the beginning of the late Moundville I phase (Wilson 2008). Moundville's expanded population settled into numerous spatially discontiguous residential groups—most of which consisted of an estimated 10 to 20 structures (figure 3.2; Wilson 2008; Wilson et al. 2006). The spatial distribution of these residential groups roughly corresponds with broader clan-based social divisions at the site as represented in the arrangement and size of earthen monuments. Indeed, based on the spatial proximity of numerous building clusters to discrete mound pairs, each clan unit at Moundville included multiple subclan residential groups.

These newly established residential groups were larger and more formally organized than the dispersed Mississippian households of the early Moundville I phase (Wilson 2008). Methods of architectural construction became more standardized, and buildings were arranged to create pathways and small courtyards (Scarry 1998). The members of some residential groups also built large, special-purpose buildings that may have been used for ceremonial purposes or as the residences of lineage leaders (see figure 3.2; Peebles 1979: 927–28; Wilson 2008; Wilson et al. 2006).

The initial creation of these spatially discrete residential areas and the in situ rebuilding of domestic structures suggest a conscious attempt on the part of Moundville community members to delineate a corporate kingroup identity. These persistent identity claims by small residential groups correspond with the construction of Moundville's mound-and-plaza complex, an act that has been interpreted as an attempt to stabilize the social relations among a number of ranked corporate subclans (Knight 1998). Thus, the late Moundville I founding of the Moundville community entailed considerable coordinated effort and labor expenditure in the form of earthmoving, monument building, and architectural construction. The

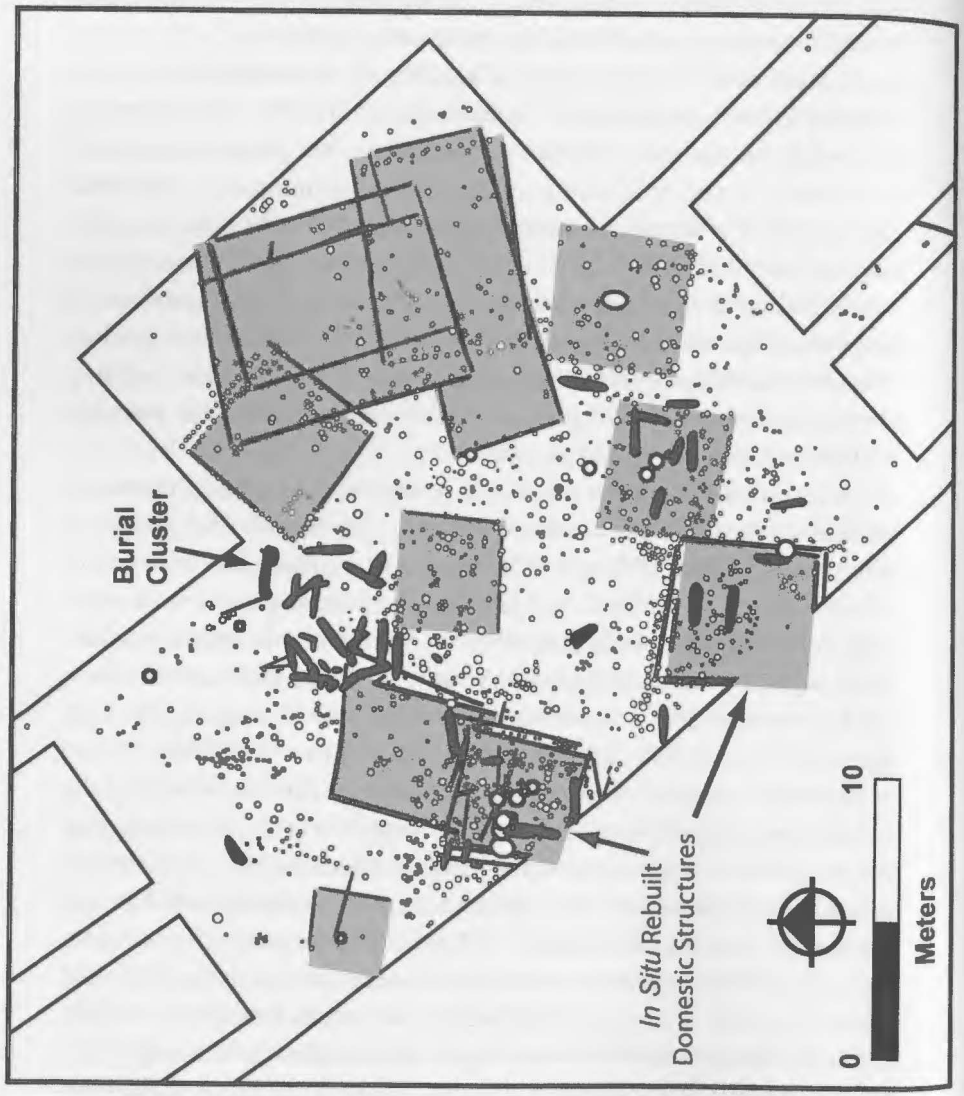


Figure 3.2. Plan of Residential Group 9 featuring the location of Moundville I structures superimposed by a Moundville II–III cemetery.

Moundville sociogram and the segmentary kin-based community order it embodied were literally created by these practices and cannot be separated from these initial acts of construction and persistent rebuilding.

In the last decades of the thirteenth century, most of Moundville's occupants dispersed into the rural countryside of the Black Warrior Valley (Hammerstedt et al., this volume; Knight and Steponaitis 1998; Maxham 2004; Steponaitis 1998). By AD 1300 the site was no longer a nucleated residential center, occupied only by small groups of elites and religious specialists. Over the course of the next two centuries Moundville was used as a vacant ceremonial center and necropolis, where much of the regional populace buried their dead (Knight and Steponaitis 1998; Wilson et al. 2010).

The motivation behind this outmigration is currently a matter of debate. In one scenario this demographic shift is interpreted as a distancing strategy in which the political elite stake an exclusive claim to Moundville's mound-and-plaza ceremonial complex (Beck 2003; Knight and Steponaitis 1998). Alternatively, this population exodus is portrayed as a result of Moundville's political decentralization, during which polity members were drawn away by aspiring elite competitors elsewhere in the Black Warrior Valley (Blitz 2008: 67–68). In either scenario this large-scale settlement shift would have dramatically changed the ways that Mississippian household members negotiated everyday socioeconomic relationships. Indeed, it seems these changing circumstances influenced late Mississippian groups in the region to devise new spatial practices by which to materialize their positions in the social order.

After AD 1300 Moundville was a place strongly defined by mortuary ritualism. Various kinds and sizes of cemeteries were created in both mound and off-mound locations throughout the site (Peebles 1979). Based on the prevalence of elaborate mortuary furniture (e.g., copper artifacts, freshwater pearls, marine-shell beads, etc.), at least some of the cemeteries placed in mounds were associated with Moundville's political elite (Moore 1905, 1907; Peebles 1974; Peebles and Kus 1977). With few exceptions, it appears that off-mound cemeteries were primarily associated with the nonelite, based on the paucity of mortuary accoutrements. Most off-mound cemeteries consist of small rectilinear clusters of burials arranged around a small central open space (figure 3.3). Additional burials are typically scattered around the outer perimeter of these clusters (Wilson et al. 2010). A seriation of mortuary vessels reveals that many of

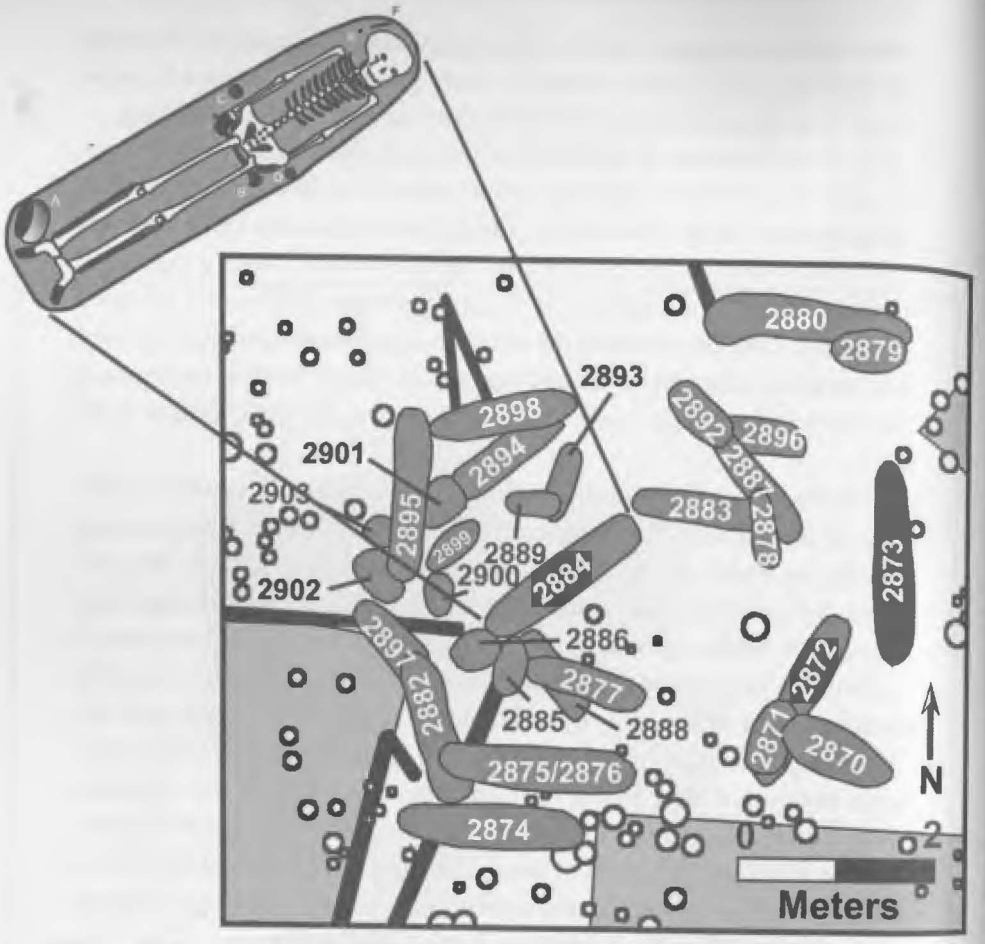


Figure 3.3. Detailed plan of the cemetery from Residential Group 9, highlighting the burial of male aged 50+ years, with associated burial furniture. Artifacts in Burial 2884: (*a*) Carthage Incised, *var. Summerville* jar; (*b*) greenstone spatulate celt; (*c–d*) stone discoidals (gaming stones); (*e*) marine shell bead; (*f*) bone hair pin.

these off-mound cemeteries were used for as long as two centuries (Steponaitis 1983a). The presence of numerous superimposed burials in the central portions of these cemeteries provides further evidence that they had a long history of use (Wilson et al. 2010).

Perhaps the most notable feature of off-mound cemeteries is their placement in community space. The vast majority of these mortuaries were placed directly on the midden-covered architectural remains of earlier residential groups (Wilson 2008). Very few burials in the Moundville Roadway are located outside the spatial limits of these residential groups.

I have interpreted this careful and consistent positioning of cemeteries as an attempt by late Mississippian kin groups to establish social continuity with ancestral kin space at Moundville (Wilson 2008, 2010; Wilson et al. 2010).

A closer examination of a particular residential and cemetery group located along the northwest portion of the Moundville Roadway provides a more detailed understanding of how late Mississippian groups created social and spatial connections with the past. This residential-cemetery palimpsest is composed of a group of ten early Mississippian structures that was subsequently superimposed by 57 Mississippian burials (see figure 3.2). Thirty-six of the 57 burials are arranged in a small rectilinear cluster. The remaining 21 burials are dispersed immediately to the south.

A seriation of mortuary vessels and a careful examination of feature superimposition reveal that this cemetery had a long history of use (Steponaitis 1983a, 1998; Wilson et al. 2010). It appears that the cemetery was initiated with the burial of an adult male immediately after the early Mississippian residential occupation of the location ended (see figure 3.3). This individual was over 50 years of age at time of death and was buried with artifacts of social and ceremonial importance, including a long-stemmed greenstone spatulate celt and two discoidals (gaming stones). Over the next two centuries, a small rectangular cemetery was literally built around this individual, likely an ancestral kin member of some political importance.

Thus, like many others, this late Mississippian group returned to Moundville long after they ceased living at the site, to bury their dead. In doing so they intentionally chose to establish their cemetery in the exact location of a spatially circumscribed early Mississippian residential area. This late Mississippian group also referenced their past through the careful placement of graves around the remains of a prominent ancestor. It is particularly noteworthy that this individual is old enough to have been alive during the early part of the eleventh century and perhaps even lived in the residential group area in which he was later buried. The strategic placement of graves around such an individual could have greatly contributed to social and spatial continuity with the past.

Cross-cultural studies of mortuary ceremonialism have revealed that agricultural groups that exercise hereditary control over land often affirm their corporate status and lineal property claims through the creation and strategic placement of corporate kin-group cemeteries (Goldstein 1980;

McAnany 1995; Saxe 1970). The political and economic logic of this kind of spatial practice may explain aspects of Moundville's community organization, which appears to have been formally laid out in a way to embody social-group membership on several different scales.

Thus, like the construction of paired mounds and the in situ rebuilding of domestic architecture, the use of spatially discrete cemeteries may have strategically assisted kin groups in establishing connections to corporate space at Moundville and to the socioeconomic claims that followed from such corporate ties. This is not to imply that there was always direct continuity among the kin groups occupying residential groups and those that later claimed these places to bury their dead. The regional settlement changes following Moundville's population outmigration no doubt entailed political and economic changes that impacted regional inhabitants on the household level. Some kin groups may have fragmented, while others ceased to exist entirely. There may have also been instances where the ancestral spaces and heredity claims of one group were contested or coopted by others. Such outcomes would be consistent with anthropological understandings of kin-based political dynamics in middle-range societies around the world (Comaroff 1978; Ogilvie 1971: 12–13; Sahlins 1958: 146; Turner 1957: 86). The important point here is that late Mississippian social groups in the Black Warrior Valley used Moundville's early Mississippian history of kin-based spatial occupation to define their social identities and interests long after they relocated to Moundville's rural countryside.

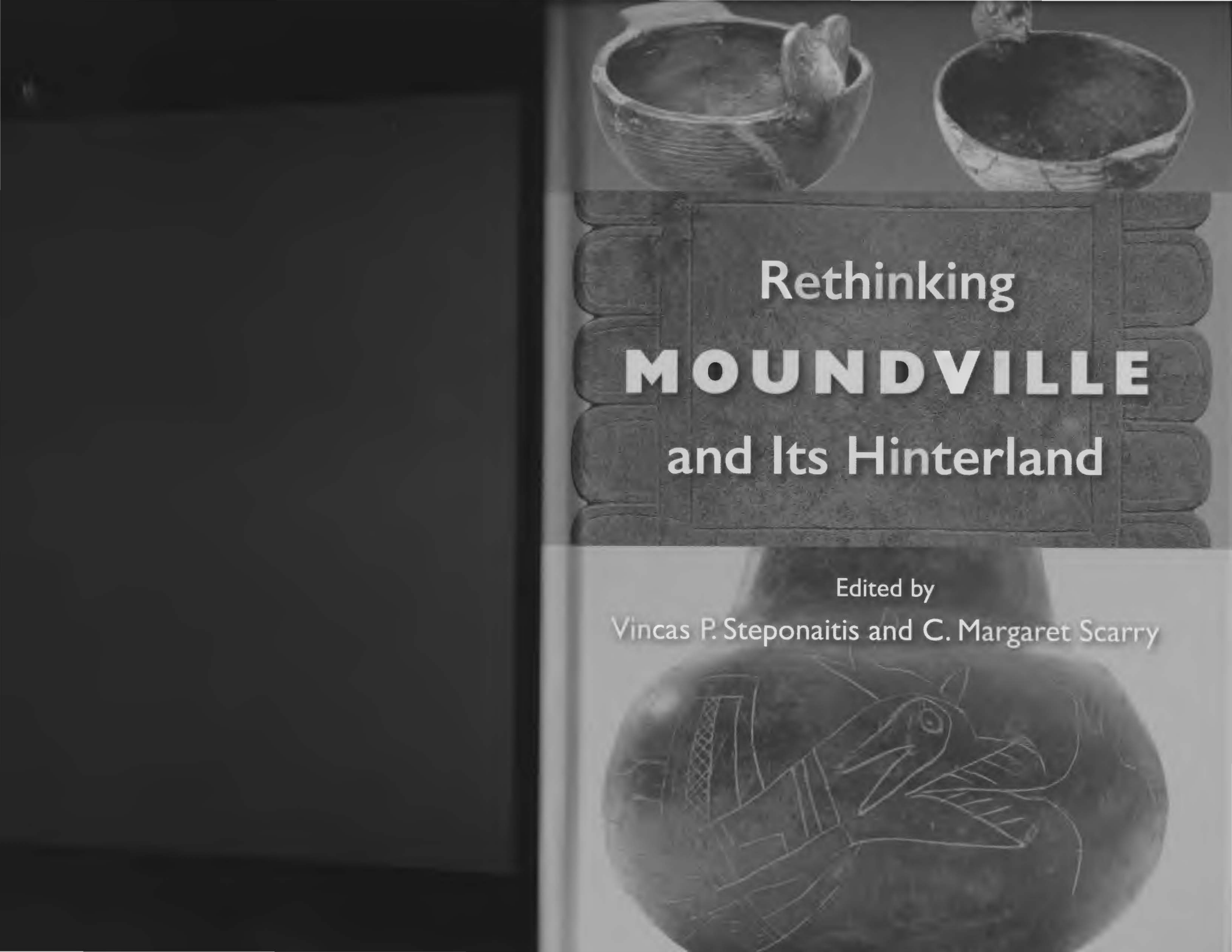
An important implication of these mortuary practices is that small-scale kin groups played a prominent role in defining Moundville's community organization long after the site ceased to be used as a residential center (Wilson 2010). These patterns provide evidence that politically charged decisions and relationships regarding community, religion, and ceremonialism were broadly negotiated among different Mississippian kin groups at a time when we have the best archaeological evidence for the entrenchment of an elite ruling class in the form of elaborate mortuary ceremonialism and the production of iconographically decorated objects thought to reference a legitimizing elite ideology.

The organizational changes at Moundville highlight the different ways in which kin groups defined and redefined their corporate status and identities over the long term. Moundville wasn't always a sociogram. A segmentary, kin-based community order on the scale of Moundville's wasn't always in place in prehistoric west central Alabama. Toward the

end of the twelfth century, Mississippian groups began changing their everyday routines and periodic ritual practices in ways that produced the social and spatial order embodied by the late Moundville I community at the Moundville site. These new practices can be viewed as the negotiation of social identities, rights, and resources that heralded a new regional political order. From a practice-theory perspective, the spatially delimited nature of mound construction, house building and rebuilding, and mortuary ritual were not passive expressions of a shared Mississippian political culture and kinship system, but the ongoing attempts of different groups to produce and stabilize particular social relations—sometimes in the face of sweeping regional changes. The actions and interests of these Mississippian groups assured that Moundville remained an important place on the southeastern landscape over the course of several centuries.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful for the research support provided to me by faculty members in the Department of Anthropology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Specifically, I would like to thank Vincas Steponaitis, C. Margaret Scarry, John Scarry, R. P. Stephen Davis, and Brian Billman. Also, thanks to Vernon Knight who has been an important mentor throughout the years. A special thanks to my graduate school peers (Tony Boudreaux, Kandace Hollenbach, Jon Marcoux, Mintcy Maxham, Chris Rodning, Tiffiny Tung, and Amber VanDerwarker), now all gainfully employed elsewhere. This research was greatly facilitated by the support of the Office of Archaeological Services at Moundville. Finally, I acknowledge Christopher Peebles for his many contributions to Moundville archaeology, particularly his earlier research on the Moundville Roadway excavation maps, notes, and artifacts.



Rethinking MOUNDVILLE and Its Hinterland

Edited by

Vincas P. Steponaitis and C. Margaret Scarry