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Title: Recent Radiocarbon Determinations for the Pinson Mounds Site
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RECENT RADIOCARBON DETERMINATIONS FOR THE PINSON MOUNDS SITE

Robert C. Mainfort, Jr., John B. Broster, and Karen M. Johnson

ABSTRACT

The Pinson Mounds site in Madison and Chester counties, Tennessee is a large mound complex occupying an area of approximately 600 acres. Limited test excavations conducted at the site in the early 1960s have led to some inaccurate interpretations of the site's temporal placement. A series of 10 radiocarbon dates from samples obtained during fieldwork in 1975 and 1981 is presented. These dates clearly establish the site as a major Middle Woodland center.

The Pinson Mounds site (40MD1) is located approximately 10 miles south of Jackson, Tennessee in Madison and Chester counties (FIGURE 1). Extending along the north bank of the South Fork of the Forked Deer River for a distance of about 2 miles, the site consists of approximately 20 mounds, a large, circular earthwork, and associated village areas (FIGURE 2). Among the mounds are a 72 foot high flat-topped mound, a ramped mound measuring 32 feet in height, a pair of "twin" conical mounds, several smaller flat-topped mounds, and a number of small conoidal mounds. Although excavations at the site had been proposed as early as 1875 (Randle 1875; see also Goodspeed 1887:801-802), the first systematic study of Pinson Mounds was not undertaken until 1916, when William E. Myer of the Smithsonian Institution mapped the site (Myer 1922). Some of the features mapped by Myer have subsequently proven to be natural landforms. No further investigations were conducted until the early 1960s, at which time the entire site was being considered for purchase by the State of Tennessee (Fischer and McNutt 1962; Morse and Polhemus n.d.). These limited surveys and test excavations established that most of the occupation at the site dated to the Middle Woodland period, although also providing some evidence of a Mississippian component.

In anticipation of the development of the site as a state park, John Broster of the Tennessee Department of Conservation, Division of Archaeology conducted excavations at the site during the summers of 1974 and 1975 (Broster, Adair, and Mainfort 1980). Broster's departure from Tennessee shortly after the 1975 field season precluded submission of the charcoal samples obtained for radiocarbon dating. However, funds for the analysis of several of these samples were recently made available by Mr. Joseph Benthall, former State Archaeologist, and the results of the analyses are presented here.

Dates obtained from samples recovered during the 1974 field season have been discussed by Broster, Adair, and Mainfort (1980) and will simply be summarized. In chronological order, the dates are: A.D. 60±380 (UGa-979), A.D. 125±65 (UGa-980), A.D. 270±70 (UGa-977), A.D. 290±70 (UGa-976), and A.D.

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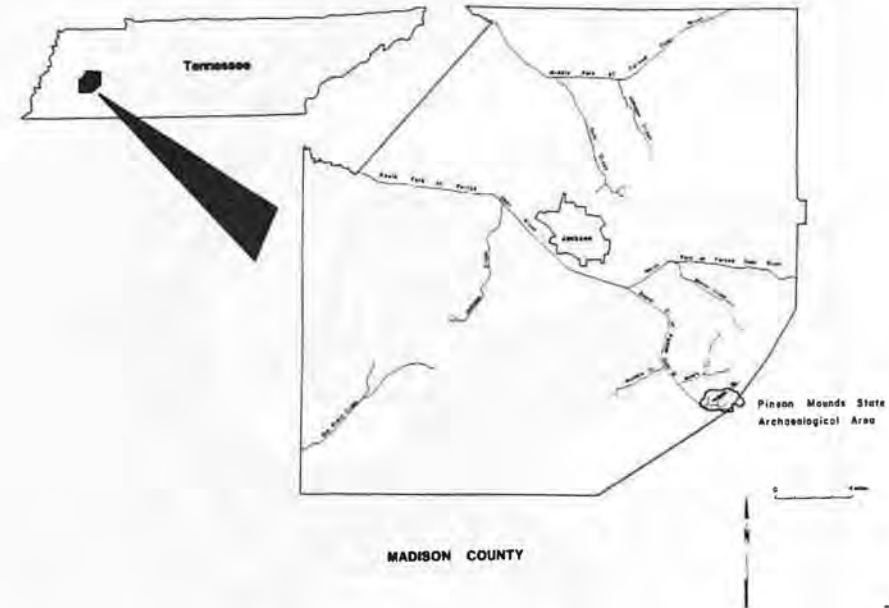


FIGURE 1. Location of Pinson Mounds, Madison County, Tennessee.

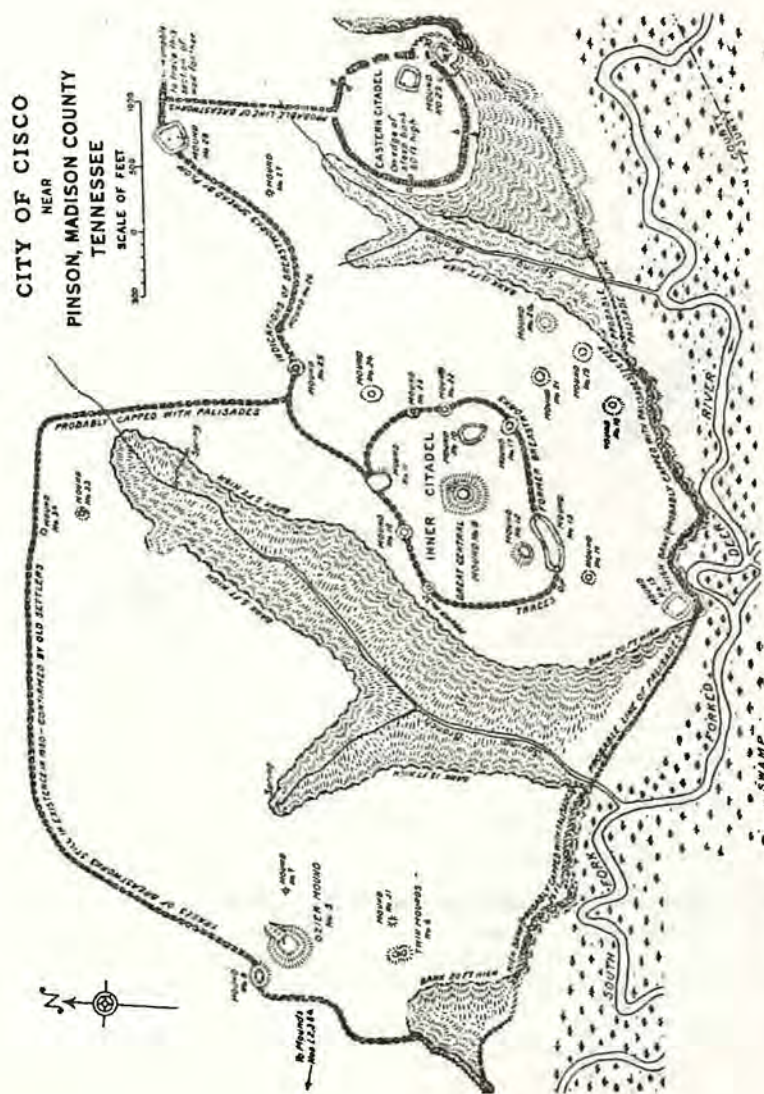


FIGURE 2. William Myer's map of Pinson Mounds.

775±135 (UGa-978). These dates and all others presented in this paper are uncorrected. It should also be noted that two dates on samples obtained from the wall trench house that was excavated by Fischer and McNutt (1962) and Morse and Polhemus (n.d.) have been published. These are A.D. 850±120 (M1362-B) and A.D. 1130±110 (M1362-A) (Crane and Griffin 1966:270, cited in Faulkner 1967:22-23). Recent test excavations suggest that this house represents an isolated farmstead.

The primary objective of the 1975 field season was to test Mound 12, an elliptical earthwork measuring approximately 24 by 17 meters at the base and rising about 2 meters above the surrounding ground surface. Feature 55, the central crematory facility of this mound, yielded the following dates: A.D. 455±60 (UGa-3601) and A.D. 475±60 (UGa-3600). Artifacts associated with this feature included 4 Furrs Cordmarked sherds, 1 Saltillo Fabric Impressed sherd, 1 Baldwin Plain sherd, 2 Tishomingo Plain sherds, and 3 Withers Fabric Marked sherds. The dates indicate that the construction of Mound 12 was contemporary with the Miller II occupation of the Gainesville Reservoir (Jenkins 1979:262-263).

Two dates were obtained for Stratum V, a pre-mound occupation level of Mound 12. This culturally mixed stratum was excavated in two arbitrary 4 cm. levels. A date of A.D. 255±80 (UGa-7315) was obtained from a charcoal sample from Level 1, the upper level. Of the ceramics recovered from this level, Furrs Cordmarked (40%) and Saltillo Fabric Impressed (22%) were the most numerous types represented. The lower level (Level 2) yielded a date of 205 B.C.±115 (UGa-3716). Saltillo Fabric Impressed comprised over half the ceramic sample from this level. Stratum V overlaid an undisturbed occupation zone (Stratum VI) in which Saltillo Fabric Impressed was the dominant ceramic type, accounting for over 70% of the sherds. Several fabric impressed baked clay objects were also present. Stratum VI represents an occupation contemporary with or slightly earlier than Miller I (cf. Jenkins 1979:256-258).

Dates were also obtained for two sub-mound features. Feature 61, a surface hearth or cremation that contained 16 Furrs Cordmarked sherds, 12 Saltillo Fabric Impressed sherds, and a portion of a Marksville Incised var. Marksville bowl, produced a date of A.D. 0±200 (UCLA-2341A). Charcoal recovered from Feature 66, a burial containing a Withers Fabric Marked jar as a grave offering, was dated to A.D. 80±250 (UCLA-2341C).

During the 1975 field season, limited test excavations were conducted at the Cochran site (40MD23), a Middle Woodland occupation area located west of the mound complex proper. Feature 10, a roof support or sleeping platform post that is associated with an ovaloid structure, was dated to A.D. 300±70 (UGa-3602). Artifacts associated with the structure include quartz crystals, sheet mica, microlithic blades, and a Copena Triangular point. The presence of these artifacts suggests that the Cochran site functioned as a mortuary camp (Broster, Adair, and Mainfort 1980:30-31; Broster and Schneider 1977:64).

Under the direction of Robert Mainfort, the Tennessee Department of Conservation has begun a multi-year excavation program at the site. In conjunction with the Department of Anthropology, Memphis State University, the Ozier Mound (Mound 5) and Mound 31 were tested during the summer of 1981. The Ozier Mound is approximately 32 feet tall and resembles a "typical Mississippi (sic) temple mound" (Morse and Polhemus n.d.:7). Our objective was to test the uppermost strata for the presence of a burned structure. The test

excavations, which will be reported in detail elsewhere, suggest that no structure is present, although several cultural features were encountered. One of these, Feature 2, was a prepared hearth which contained a large Furrs Cordmarked sherd, several fragments of sandstone, and sufficient charcoal to date the feature. The sample produced a date of A.D. 190±160 (UGa-4174).

Mound 31 is a small burial mound that had previously been tested by Morse and Polhemus (n.d.:29-32). Our excavations revealed a central, sub-floor grave shaft which contained the remains of an adult male. Surrounding the grave shaft (and resting on the mound floor) was a U-shaped ring of redeposited cremations that was capped over with a layer of orange clay. Artifacts were not numerous in this feature, consisting primarily of sand-tempered potsherds. A date of A.D. 380±125 was obtained from a charcoal sample that was recovered from within the cremation ring.

Conclusions

The extant dates for the Pinson Mounds site suggest intermittent, short-term occupation of the site over a period of about 700 years. The site appears to have functioned primarily as a ceremonial center, rather than as a habitation area. Contrary to a number of statements (Morse and Polhemus n.d.; Faulkner 1971; Walthall 1980:197-198), the site does not appear to have a significant Mississippian component, the early date for Ozier Mound being but one several pieces of evidence that argue against this.

The radiocarbon dates presented in this paper, as well as the artifact assemblages recovered to date, indicate that the Pinson Mounds site was used primarily between about 200 B.C. and 500 A.D. This falls within the range suggested by Jenkins (1979:257-260) for Miller I and Early Miller II. Despite the obvious relationship between the ceramics from Pinson Mounds and those present in Miller I and Miller II, it would be incorrect to view Pinson Mounds simply as a northern extension of Miller. The site is quite unlike any Miller sites. Application of type-variety nomenclature to the Pinson Mounds ceramics, however, should clarify the relationship between Pinson and the Miller sites to the south.

To say that the Pinson Mounds site is large and complex is something of an understatement. Several additional years of work at the site are clearly needed and these are being planned. The site promises to shed much light on Middle Woodland ceremonialism and, perhaps, the roots of Mississippian cultures.

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