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CHAPTER 8

Collaborative Archaeology as a Tool for Preserving Sacred Sites in the Cherokee Heartland

Benjamin A. Steere

Introduction

Archaeology has the potential to play an important role in the preservation of sacred sites in North America. In certain cases, locations that are thought to be sacred by Native American communities can be identified using archaeological methods. This is true for many sites considered sacred by the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in western North Carolina. The sacred Cherokee landscape is extremely complex; it includes both natural features (e.g., certain waterfalls and mountains) and cultural features created by the Cherokee and their ancestors (Mooney 1900; Perdue 1998; Duncan and Riggs 2003). Some of the sacred sites that can be identified archaeologically include villages that contain ancestral Cherokee graves, the remains of historic period Cherokee townhouses, prehistoric mounds, and sites associated with petroglyphs and other rock art (Riggs and Shumate 2003; Diaz-Granados 2004; Rodning 2010).

In recent years, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians has collaborated with archaeologists to develop projects aimed at understanding and preserving sacred Cherokee sites and enhancing Cherokee cultural identity (Cooper 2009). This collaboration is representative of a broader movement referred to as indigenous archaeology, which is most concisely defined as archaeology that is by, for, and about indigenous communities (Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. 2010). Working in cooperation with professional and academic archaeologists, the Eastern Band of Cherokee has taken an active role in developing the research design of archaeological studies for cultural resource management projects and academic endeavors. Such projects make broad contributions to archaeological knowledge while

also respecting traditional Cherokee beliefs about the treatment of sacred places, graves, and ceremonial objects.

The Western North Carolina Mounds and Towns Project, a collaborative archaeological research project initiated by the Tribal Historic Preservation Office of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and the Coweeta Long Term Ecological Research Program at the University of Georgia, is one such effort. Western North Carolina once contained many mounds, monumental earthen structures built by Native Americans from approximately AD 200 until the historic period (Dickens 1976; Keel 1976; Ward and Davis 1999; Rodning 2009; Kimball, Whyte, and Crites 2010, 2013). These mounds are sacred places on the Cherokee cultural landscape, but many of these sites have been damaged by looting, development, and modern agriculture, and in some cases their locations have been forgotten.

The primary goal of the Western North Carolina Mounds and Towns Project is to create a map and database documenting all the prehistoric and historic period mound sites in the eleven westernmost counties of North Carolina. This project is ongoing, but it has already produced important new information for preserving sacred Cherokee sites and revitalizing Cherokee culture, new data for generating a broader understanding of Cherokee historical geography, and new opportunities for collaborative archaeological research (see Steere 2015).

This chapter describes the development and initial results of the Western North Carolina Mounds and Towns Project and discusses its contributions to the broader fields of sacred sites preservation, indigenous revival, and indigenous archaeology. Following a brief cultural and historical introduction to the background of western North Carolina, I present the initial results of the project in terms of their potential for protecting sacred sites and contributing to cultural revitalization efforts for the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. In closing I suggest that this project can serve as a model for archaeological research and preservation efforts that are by, for, and about indigenous communities.

Cultural and Historical Background

Western North Carolina is the ancestral homeland of the Cherokee people. Today, about 60 percent of the thirteen thousand enrolled members of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians live on the Qualla Boundary, an approximately 57,000-acre reservation adjacent to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which includes the town of Cherokee, North Carolina. This roughly 100-square-mile area represents a small fraction of the approximately 125,000-square-mile territory the Cherokees may

have controlled in the early eighteenth century, based on archaeological evidence, early written accounts, and Cherokee oral history (Finger 1984; Duncan and Riggs 2003; Gragson and Bolstad 2007). Population estimates for the size of the Cherokee nation in the mid to late eighteenth century fall to around thirty-six thousand people living in approximately sixty towns in South Carolina, Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee (Smith 1979; Duncan and Riggs 2003; Gragson and Bolstad 2007).

The members of today's Eastern Band are descendants of a group of approximately one thousand Cherokees who survived late eighteenth-century wars with European and American forces and multiple smallpox epidemics and then resisted removal in 1838. By the early twentieth century, these survivors had established the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians as a federally recognized tribe and sovereign nation, with their lands held in trust by the federal government (Duncan and Riggs 2003).

The study area for this project includes the eleven westernmost counties of North Carolina, which were home to the Valley, Middle, and Out Towns of the Cherokee in the eighteenth century (Smith 1979; Boulware 2011). The eleven counties fall within the Southern Blue Ridge Province of the Appalachian Mountains (Fenneman 1938), and the terrain is dominated by steep mountains, sharp ridge tops, and narrow valleys. The major river drainages in the study area, from east to west, are the French

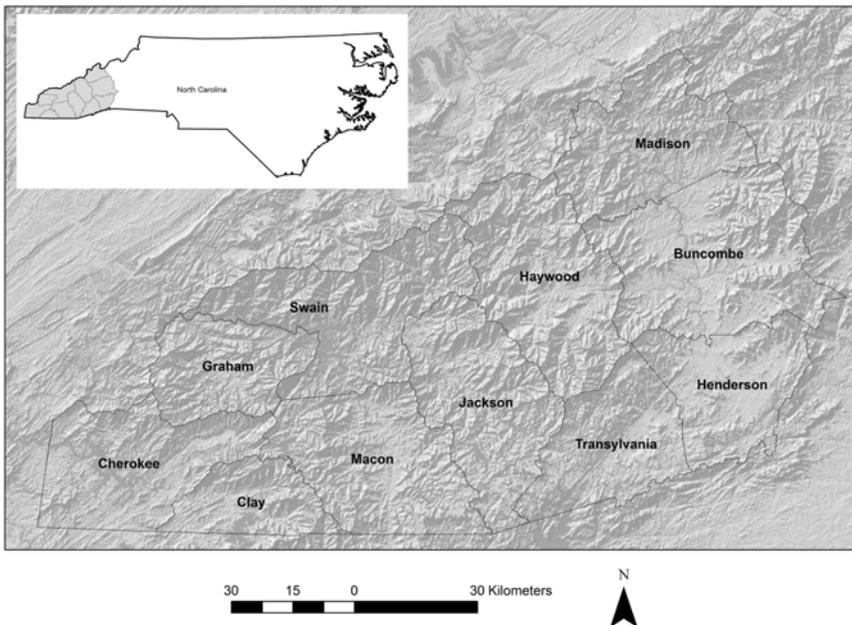


Figure 8.1. Map of the Study Area in Western North Carolina

Broad, Pigeon, Tuckasegee, Little Tennessee, and Hiwassee. This area is generally considered to be the Cherokee “heartland” (see Gragson and Bolstad 2007), and it includes the mother town of Kituwah, which, according to oral tradition, is the Cherokee place of origin (Mooney 1900).

In western North Carolina and the surrounding Southern Appalachian region, Native American communities began building mounds during the Middle Woodland period, around AD 200 (Keel 1976; Kimball, Whyte, and Crites 2010, 2013). The best documented Woodland period mound sites in the Cherokee heartland include the Connestee phase Mound No. 2 at the Garden Creek site (Keel 1976; Wright 2013, 2014) and the Biltmore Mound, located on the grounds of the Biltmore estate (Kimball and Shumate 2003; Kimball, Whyte, and Crites 2010, 2013). Both of these mounds apparently served as low platforms for ceremonial activities and contain artifacts typically associated with Middle Woodland period ceremonial and exchange systems (Keel 1976; Kimball, Whyte, and Crites 2010, 2013; Wright 2013).

During the Mississippian period (AD 1000–1500), indigenous people in western North Carolina, following broader cultural and demographic trends in the Southeast, began practicing intensive maize agriculture and living year-round in permanent, nucleated villages (Dickens 1976; Muller 1997; Smith 1992). As seen in adjacent regions in the Southeast, such as northern Georgia and eastern Tennessee, the transition from the Woodland to the Mississippian period in western North Carolina is marked by a change in the style and function of mounds (Hally and Mainfort 2004).

Across the Southeast, mounds constructed during the Mississippian period served as platforms for elite residences and temple buildings containing sacred objects (Lindauer and Blitz 1997; Milner 2004). Mississippian period platform mounds range in size from modest structures less than one meter in height to the remarkable Monk’s Mound at Cahokia, which stands thirty meters tall (Anderson 1994; Lindauer and Blitz 1997). Villages with mounds were the social and political centers of native polities, and they would have been the locus for important political and ceremonial activities (Beck 2003; Hally 2006).

In western North Carolina, Mississippian period platform mounds appear to have served similar functions. However, it is important to note that mound sites in the Cherokee heartland were generally not as large or elaborate as mound sites in neighboring regions (Hudson 1997). Large Mississippian period communities like Etowah, Moundville, and Cahokia contained multiple platform mounds and appear to have been the administrative centers of settlement systems with two or more hierarchical levels of political organization (Beck 2003; Hally 2006; King 2003; Knight 2010).

In contrast, Mississippian period central places in western North Carolina contained single platform mounds. Based on the available archae-

ological data, there is no clear evidence for multiple levels of political organization within settlement systems in the region. Instead, western North Carolina may have been marked by settlement systems in which a single mound site served as the political center for several surrounding communities. Similar Mississippian polities are well documented in nearby northern Georgia (Anderson 1994; Hally 1996, 2006).

After about AD 1600 and into the late eighteenth century, townhouses, large public structures measuring roughly ten to twenty meters in diameter, replaced mounds as the central public architecture of native villages (Rodning 2009, 2010). In some cases, Cherokee communities constructed townhouses on top of existing platform mounds built centuries earlier. Townhouses were rebuilt in place over time, and gradually a low mound would be formed, creating an elevated base for new townhouses. The Kituwah Mound, shown here in a photograph from 1937, is an example of such a mound (Figure 8.2). A noninvasive geophysical survey conducted in 2001 revealed that the mound at Kituwah contains multiple stages of townhouse construction (Riggs and Shumate 2003). These superimposed stages now appear as a low mound, flattened and spread out by decades of plowing by local landowners.

During the midsixteenth century, Europeans began to explore the edges of the Cherokee world. Juan Pardo and a group of Spanish soldiers established the short-lived Fort San Juan at the ancestral Catawba town of Jo-



Figure 8.2. The Kituwah Mound in 1937 (photo credit: National Parks Service)

ara, east of the Cherokee towns, and accounts by Pardo's soldiers indicate that Cherokee from Kituwah and Nikwasi visited the community (Booker, Hudson, and Rankin 1992). Cherokee had sustained contact with Europeans by the late 1600s, and townhouses served as important meeting places with traders, soldiers, and other delegates from Europe and the newly formed American colonies. The eighteenth-century accounts of William Bartram (1928 [1775]) and Timberlake (King 2007) are particularly descriptive and, when combined with insights from Cherokee oral history, have helped archaeologists interpret the archaeological remains of townhouses (Rodning 2009: 631–634).

The Cherokee townhouse at the Coweeta Creek site is one of the best preserved and archaeologically understood examples of these structures (Rodning 2002, 2010, 2015). This large public building had at least six successive stages and was used from the 1600s to the late 1700s (Rodning 2010). In contrast to platform mounds, which physically and symbolically elevated the chief above other community members, townhouses were public structures that likely functioned as an architectural symbol of the Cherokee town, emphasizing the importance of community identity over individual leadership (Rodning 2010).

During the historic period, a sacred fire was kept burning in Cherokee townhouses, and once a year, all the hearths in the village were extinguished and then ceremonially rekindled from this sacred fire. This practice may date to the Mississippian period. Based on traditional Cherokee beliefs, sacred fires continue to burn at places like Kituwah (Mooney 1900; Duncan and Riggs 2003). Cherokee myths also suggest that mounds were the home of the *Nunnehi*, immortal spirit people, and that mounds and townhouses are symbolically associated with mountains (Mooney 1900; Rodning 2009, 2010). Thus, in addition to serving as hubs for social and political activities, townhouses created a link between the built environment and sacred aspects of the natural landscape.

For nearly two thousand years, mounds have been important places on the physical and cultural landscape of western North Carolina (Mooney 1900; Duncan and Riggs 2003; Rodning 2009, 2010). Based on traditional Cherokee beliefs, sacred fires still burn today at places like the Kituwah Mound (Mooney 1900; Duncan and Riggs 2003; Riggs and Shumate 2003). Today, the Kituwah Mound is still used by Cherokee as a meeting place for certain cultural events, and the site has been carefully protected from encroaching development (Duncan and Riggs 2003). The nature and function of mound building changed significantly from the Woodland to the historic period, but the long tradition of building mounds at important central places in western North Carolina speaks to the lasting cultural importance of this architectural practice.

Previous Archaeological Research in Western North Carolina

Despite the obvious importance of these sites, and despite a rich history of archaeological research in the area, we still know relatively little about many of the mounds in the region. As in other parts of the Southeast, this is primarily the result of antiquarian excavations and other processes of site destruction. Additionally, some traditional Cherokee knowledge about mound locations has been lost, a result of the forced removal westward on the Trail of Tears in 1838 and the forced acculturation of children in American boarding schools in the early twentieth century (Perdue and Green 2001).

As in much of the eastern United States, the earliest archaeological studies in western North Carolina were sponsored by museums. From the 1870s through the early 1930s, archaeological fieldwork was carried out primarily by museum personnel and local hired laborers, with the goal of obtaining artifacts for display (Ward and Davis 1999). The first early excavations in western North Carolina were sponsored by the Valentine Museum of Richmond, Virginia. In the late 1870s and early 1880s, Mann S. Valentine and his sons, E.E. and B.B. Valentine, directed expeditions in Haywood, Jackson, Cherokee, and Swain counties, sometimes with the help of local residents, including A.J. Osborne of Haywood County and R.D. McCombs of Cherokee County (Valentine, Valentine, and Valentine 1889; Ward and Davis 1999).

The Valentines and their associates “opened” the Peachtree Mound, the Garden Creek Mound No. 2, the Wells Mound (one of a group of mounds on the West Fork Pigeon River, west of Waynesville), the Jasper Allen Mound (located on Scotts Creek, east of Sylva), the Kituwah Mound, the Nununyi Mound, the Birdtown Mound, and the Cullowhee Mound (Valentine, Valentine, and Valentine 1889; Ward and Davis 1999). These investigations were not carried out to modern standards and were highly destructive.

In the 1880s, the Smithsonian Institution carried out a large-scale survey of mounds in eastern North America and identified approximately forty mounds in western North Carolina (Thomas 1891, 1894). The results of this work were published in the annual reports of the Bureau of American Ethnology (Thomas 1891, 1894) and are also mentioned in at least one Peabody Museum report (Putnam 1884). These reports were adequate for their time but generally provide little more than an approximate location for each recorded mound and a brief description of the stratigraphy and contents of excavated mounds.

In May of 1913, Robert Dewar Wainwright, a retired captain of the U.S. Marine Corps and an amateur archaeologist, carried out surface collec-

tions and excavations at several mound and village sites in western North Carolina, including the Donnaha site, the Cullowhee Mound, the Andrews Mound, and the Kituwah Mound (Wainwright 1913, 1914a, 1914b). Wainwright spent his summers “hunting for camp sites, exploring mounds and looking for specimens of stone art” (Wainwright 1913: 111). Wainwright published a written account of his travels, “A Summer’s Archaeological Research,” in an obscure journal, *The Archaeological Bulletin*, which has only recently received scholarly attention (see Steere, Webb, and Idol 2012).

The next excavations in western North Carolina were carried out in Haywood County by the Museum of the American Indian/Heye Foundation (Heye 1919). In 1915, George Heye directed excavations at the Garden Creek sites near Canton, North Carolina, and excavated a mound on the Singleton property near Bethel, North Carolina (Heye 1919). Heye’s 1919 report of his work in Haywood County contains more detail than most early reports but still falls short of the standards for archaeological reporting established during the 1930s.

In 1926, Charles O. Turbyfill, a Waynesville native who assisted George Heye with logistics in western North Carolina, completely excavated the Notley Mound in Cherokee County (Turbyfill 1927). Turbyfill devotes a single paragraph to the excavation of the Notley Mound in a short paper on file at the National Museum of the American Indian (Turbyfill 1927).

In 1933 and 1934, the Smithsonian Institution, in conjunction with the Civil Works Administration, carried out extensive excavations at the Peachtree Mound near Murphy, North Carolina. The mound site was selected for its research potential but also because the area was in need of economic relief and had a temperate climate (Seltzer and Jennings 1941: 1). The Peachtree Mound was completely excavated, and Seltzer and Jennings (1941: 57) concluded that the site “is a component in which both Woodland and Mississippi traits occur simultaneously.” Their report indicates that artifacts dating from approximately nine thousand years before the present to the eighteenth century were recovered at the site, but the chronology of the village and mound are still not very well understood.

The outbreak of World War II brought archaeological research to a halt, but beginning in the early 1960s the University of North Carolina began extensive surveys in western North Carolina in conjunction with the Cherokee Project, which was funded by the National Science Foundation in 1965. The goal of the Cherokee Project was to understand the development of Cherokee culture through a study of the archaeological record in western North Carolina (Dickens 1976; Keel 1976).

By the 1970s, these surveys and other fieldwork resulted in the documentation of over fifteen hundred archaeological sites in western North Carolina (Keel 1976; Ward and Davis 1999). These surveys provided a

regional context for small-scale excavations (Keel 1976). The results of the Cherokee Project were published in theses, dissertations, books, and articles that became standard reference texts and created the framework for our current understanding of the archaeology of North Carolina (see Holden 1966; Egloff 1967; Dickens 1976; Keel 1976). These were important gains, but, ironically, there was very little formal involvement with Cherokee during the course of the Cherokee Project.

More recent research on mounds in western North Carolina has yielded new insight into individual sites and improved our understanding of the archaeology of the region. Archaeological survey and testing at the Nununyi, Birdtown, and Kituwah mounds on the Qualla Boundary indicate that the mound sites were occupied during the Mississippian period and the historic Cherokee period (Greene 1996, 1998; Riggs and Shumate 2003). These findings speak to the long-term indigenous occupation of the land that makes up the modern-day Cherokee reservation. Rodning's analyses of materials and records from the Coweeta Creek site have improved our understanding of Cherokee townhouses and domestic architecture (2009, 2010), and his analyses of pottery from Coweeta Creek have refined our definition of the Qualla ceramic series (2008).

Western Carolina University's ongoing research at the Spikebuck Mound and town site promises to shed new light on the ceramic chronology in the Hiwassee River drainage (Stout 2011). Research programs at the Biltmore Mound in Asheville (Kimball and Shumate 2003; Kimball, Whyte, and Crites 2010, 2013) and the Garden Creek site near Canton, North Carolina (Wright 2013) are generating new data for understanding western North Carolina's place in complex regional trade and exchange networks during the Middle Woodland period.

Despite these advances in mound research in western North Carolina, many basic research questions remain unanswered, especially at a regional scale. Prior to 2012, only sixteen mound sites were officially recorded with the state archaeological site file. By the 1980s, archaeologists working in western North Carolina had identified many of the better preserved mounds but had only carried out intensive research at a few sites and had made few systematic attempts to relocate damaged or destroyed mounds. Until the late 1990s, there were few attempts to involve the Cherokee community in archaeological research (Riggs 2002).

Fortunately, in recent years this picture has started to change. Starting in the late 1990s, and especially since the creation of the Tribal Historic Preservation Office of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in 1999, there has been increased cooperation between archaeologists and the Cherokee community, particularly in the context of cultural resource management projects on the Qualla Boundary (Riggs 2002; Cooper 2009). Recent proj-

ects such as the archaeological survey of the Qualla Boundary (Greene 1996, 1998) and the survey and geophysical study of the Kituwah Mound (Riggs and Shumate 2003) are good examples.

The Eastern Band also funded and helped develop the research design for the Ravensford project, a large-scale data recovery project completed in advance of the construction of the new Cherokee K–12 school complex (Cooper 2009). In 1996 the Eastern Band purchased the Kituwah Mound, and in 2007 they acquired the Cowee Mound in partnership with the Little Tennessee Land Trust (Middleton 2011). In recent years, the University of Tennessee conducted a field school with Cherokee high school students at a multicomponent site in Great Smoky Mountains National Park (Angst 2012).

Not only have these successful collaborative efforts benefited the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, but they have also made a broader contribution to indigenous archaeology. A primary goal of indigenous archaeology is to encourage productive collaboration between archaeologists and indigenous communities (Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. 2010; Croes 2010; Silliman 2010; Wilcox 2010). In practice these partnerships can take many forms. Indigenous and nonindigenous archaeologists and indigenous communities have worked together to develop research designs for archaeology projects (Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. 2010; Curtis 2010; Townsend 2011). Indigenous craft experts have assisted nonindigenous archaeologists with artifact analysis (Thompson 2008; Croes 2010), generating more nuanced, accurate, and relevant interpretations of material culture. Collaboration and partnerships like these are resulting in archaeology that addresses the goals and needs and respects the traditional belief of indigenous communities while also producing more informed interpretations of the archaeological record.

Another important goal is to counter the “terminal narratives” (see Wilcox 2009) that depict Native Americans as vanished or conquered peoples. As the Native American archaeologist Michael Wilcox (2010: 224) writes:

It is widely accepted that we either succumbed to massive epidemics, had been eliminated through warfare, or had “lost our culture” through missionization, acculturation, or forcible assimilation (Clifford 1990: 1–28). All change (referred to as “progress” in enlightened societies) is depicted as reductive or destructive in Indigenous societies. Any number of general textbooks on North American archaeology will list this tragic litany as the catastrophic fates of a marginalized people (Diamond 1996, 2005). The partition of prehistory and history as separate domains of study has only contributed to this imaginary rupture.

By relocating mounds and towns, which were important central places, and reconstructing indigenous settlement history in western North Car-

olina, we have the opportunity to empirically test the validity of the terminal narrative, rather than take it as given. We can reconstruct a clearer picture of when, how, and why people settled the Southern Appalachian landscape over the last two thousand years. Following the example of indigenous scholars like Wilcox (2010), as well as ethnohistorians and archaeologists who reconstructed Hernando de Soto's route through the southeastern interior (Hudson et al. 1985; Hudson 1997), this project helps break down the divide between history and prehistory in the Southern Appalachians. This will lead to a better understanding of Southern Appalachian settlement and counter unfounded a priori depictions of Cherokee as a conquered or marginalized people.

Initial Results

In addition to the historical problems of site destruction discussed above, a major barrier to understanding the prehistoric cultural landscape of western North Carolina is the lack of a concerted effort to compile all existing information about mound sites in a single location. This is a general problem in archaeological research and is hardly particular to western North Carolina. While the state site file contains an excellent database of archaeological sites and current site reports for the state, older records and finer scale data are harder to come by. Archival data and archaeological records and collections are scattered across universities, state offices, and museums, and possible mounds identified decades ago have not been revisited. Many historical references to Cherokee townhouses have not been cross-checked and confirmed with archaeological evidence. The fragmented nature of this information puts these important cultural resources at risk in the face of encroaching development.

The first step in this project was to examine all available archival sources for information about mounds and town sites in western North Carolina and compile this information into a single database containing accurate location data, archaeological and historical documentation, and preservation status for all the prehistoric and historic Cherokee mound and town sites in western North Carolina. This was completed in the summer of 2011, with the aid of archaeologists and historians from across the state.¹ The complete database and a summary report of these findings were filed with the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians Tribal Historic Preservation Office and are now available to their staff as tools for their preservation, research, and outreach efforts.

The archival research suggested that while there were only sixteen known archaeological sites containing mounds or townhouses on file with

the state, there may have been as many as sixty-eight mound and town-house sites in the study area (Steere 2011, 2013). This finding contrasted with the prevailing notion that there were relatively few mound sites in the region and that fewer still could be identified archaeologically.

Following this archival research, archaeological fieldwork was carried out in the winter of 2011 and spring of 2012. Initial reconnaissance surveys were completed at thirty-seven locations to determine which of the newly identified possible mound sites were genuine (the remaining sites were inaccessible; most were on private property, and a few were inundated by lakes). The next stage of the project involved mapping and shovel test surveys to locate and describe unrecorded and poorly understood sites. In accordance with the research design developed with the Cherokee Tribal Historic Preservation Office, no invasive subsurface testing took place directly on known or possible mounds. Teams of archaeologists excavated shovel tests in the habitation areas around possible mounds to determine if sites were occupied by Cherokee and ancestral Cherokee people and to recover artifacts that could be used to assign dates of occupation to the sites. Existing ceramic collections and the new, systematic artifact collections were analyzed to assign approximate dates of occupation to sites.

During the reconnaissance survey, the principal investigator visited all of the possible mound sites, looking for evidence of mounds and villages, usually accompanied by local residents, archaeologists, and historians. It was determined that in addition to the sixteen previously recorded mound sites, thirty-four additional sites either contained mounds or were likely to have contained mounds that have been leveled.

From this group of sites, ten locations with known or possible Woodland, Mississippian, and/or Cherokee mounds were selected for intensive mapping and shovel testing with the goal of defining unknown or poorly understood site boundaries and generating ceramic samples for dating. This phase of the project resulted in the first modern mapping of several important mound sites. This includes the Notley or Notla Mound near Murphy, North Carolina, which was once over ten meters tall and may have been a major Early Mississippian period mound site (Turbyfill 1927), and the Whatoga or Watauga Mound, the remains of a Cherokee town-house visited by the naturalist William Bartram in 1776 (Bartram 1928 [1775]). Our team also identified the location of the Jasper Allen Mound, a twelfth- or thirteenth-century mound site located near the modern town of Sylva, North Carolina, which was completely leveled by nineteenth-century excavations (Steere 2011, 2013, 2015).

The archaeological survey completed for this project revealed that eighteen of the sixty-eight archaeological sites identified through archival research lacked reliable archaeological or historical evidence for Woodland

or Mississippian period mounds or Cherokee townhouses. Of the remaining fifty sites, twenty-five can be conclusively identified as containing Woodland or Mississippian period mounds or Cherokee townhouses. An additional twenty-five sites represent possible mound and/or townhouse locations, but further archival and archaeological research will be necessary to verify their status.

Discussion

The results of this project are best illustrated by the new maps of mound sites we have created (see Figure 8.3; for a more complete discussion of the results of this project, see Steere 2013 and 2015)

Given the preliminary nature of this research and the lack of fine-scale chronological information for the mound sites, few archaeological interpretations will be offered here, as they would be highly speculative. Rough dates of occupation have been assigned to only the twenty-five confirmed mounds, and in some cases these designations are tentative and, admittedly, based on limited data (e.g., reports from antiquarian excavations). However, a few key points merit discussion, even at this early stage of the project.

Our current understanding of Woodland period mound use in western North Carolina comes primarily from the long-term research at the Garden Creek site (Keel 1976; Wright 2013) and the Biltmore Mound (Kimball, Whyte, and Crites 2010, 2013). These studies revealed important information about Woodland period ceremonialism. However, western North Carolina's role in broader Woodland period social systems is still poorly understood.

Middle Woodland period mounds (ca. AD 200–800) are thought to be relatively uncommon in the Southern Appalachians, but this study suggests that there may have been more than ten Woodland period mounds or mound groups centered on the French Broad and Pigeon River drainages (see Figure 8.3). This spatial distribution of mound sites is similar to clusters of Woodland period ceremonial mounds and earthworks in the Midwest (Carr and Case 2006) and near the Leake site in northwest Georgia (Keith 2010). It is striking that there is only one possible Woodland period mound recorded west of the Pigeon River drainage (site 31GH35), and even this site lacks definitive archaeological evidence for a mound.

It is possible that Woodland period mounds, many of which do not exceed one or two meters in height and are easily destroyed by plowing and looting, may have existed in the western part of the study area and were destroyed before they could be recorded. However, it is also possi-

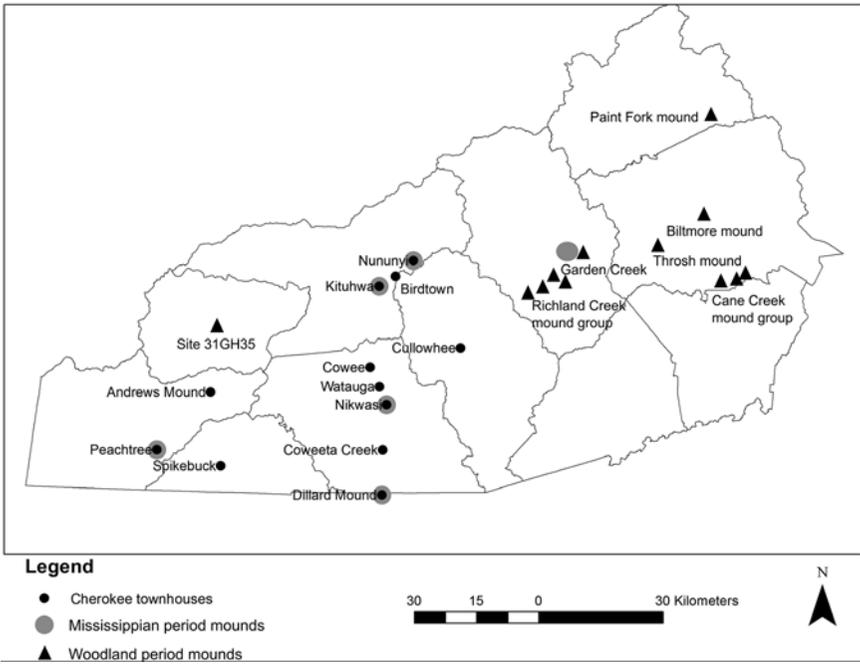


Figure 8.3. Map of Archaeologically Confirmed Woodland and Mississippian Mound Sites and Cherokee Townhouse Sites

ble that this distribution represents a genuine cultural pattern. If this is so, why was there significant Woodland period mound building activity in the Pigeon River and French Broad river valleys and apparently none in the Tuckasegee, Little Tennessee, and Valley River drainages? These sites may have been important nodes in the broad Hopewell Interaction Sphere (Keel 1976; Anderson and Mainfort 2002; Carr and Case 2006) and should be included in broader considerations of Woodland period life in the Southern Appalachian Mountains.

As Figure 8.3 shows, Mississippian period platform mounds were much more evenly distributed across the study area, with one or two mound sites each in the Pigeon, Tuckasegee, Little Tennessee, and Valley River drainages. This distribution of Mississippian period mounds is consistent with very general expectations for Mississippian period settlement patterns, especially David Hally’s model for the territorial size of Mississippian polities (see B.D. Smith 1978, 1992; Anderson 1994; Hally 1996, 2006).

Hally (2006) used ceramic dating and mound stratigraphy to reconstruct the geography and timing of mound construction and occupation in northern Georgia during the Mississippian period. Based on the assump-

tion that Mississippian platform mounds serve as proxies for the capitals of polities, Hally found that the minimum distance spacing separating neighboring, competing centers was thirty-five to fifty-five kilometers, that towns making up a chiefdom were generally situated along a river floodplain over a distance of ten to twenty kilometers, and that polities were separated by an unpopulated buffer zone measuring ten to thirty kilometers across (Hally 2006).

Following Hally's model (see Hally 1996, 2006), this would suggest that there may have been four Mississippian period polities in western North Carolina: one represented by the Pisgah phase mound at Garden Creek, a second by the Nununyi and Jasper Allen mounds in the Oconuftee and Tuckasegee drainages, a third by the Nikwasi Mound and the mound in Dillard, Georgia (see Elliot 2012) on the Little Tennessee River, and a fourth by the Peachtree and Notley mounds, located on tributaries of the Valley River.

The four clusters of mounds do not exceed forty kilometers in length, and they are separated by buffer zones of unoccupied territory, which in each case includes steep mountain ranges. At the moment, our understanding of the timing of the construction and use of these mounds is quite broad, but as the chronological associations for the known and possible mound sites are refined, it will be possible to test current models of Mississippian settlement patterns with new data from the region (see Steere 2015).

Figure 8.3 also shows the distribution of archaeologically identified Cherokee townhouses. In many cases, these locations were already known through previous historical and archaeological research (Smith 1979; Duncan and Riggs 2003; Gragson and Bolstad 2007; Boulware 2011). However, an important pattern emerges when the location of Mississippian period platform mounds and Cherokee townhouses are compared. Three of the four groups of Mississippian period platform mounds—the Peachtree and Notley mounds, the Nikwasi and Dillard mound, and the Nununyi and Jasper Allen bounds—appear to define the territories that would become the Valley, Middle, and Out Towns, respectively.

From a regional, long-term perspective, it appears that the eighteenth-century Cherokee towns are built “on top” of former Mississippian period polities, much in the same way that Cherokee townhouses are known to have been built on the summits of Mississippian period platform mounds at the Peachtree, Nikwasi, Dillard, and Nununyi mounds. The patterns observed here may provide regional scale archaeological support for the construction of Cherokee identity as a process of “emplacement,” by which “a community attaches itself to a particular place through formal settlement plans, architecture, burials, and other material

additions to the landscape” (Rodning 2009: 629). It seems likely that for historic period Cherokee communities, locations marked by Mississippian platform mounds were an especially important part of the cultural landscape and may have served as anchors for groups of towns.

Conclusions

These preliminary findings have already shed new light on the nature of sacred Cherokee sites in western North Carolina. At the most basic level, the new location data for mounds once considered lost in the archaeological record allow us to relocate these important sites, places that contain the burials of ancestral Cherokee and objects such as sacred central hearths. More specifically, the new findings paint a portrait of a more complex and expansive built environment in the Cherokee heartland than those depicted in earlier archaeological reconstructions for the region. Additional research that builds on this initial study will no doubt improve our understanding of change and continuity in the nature of the sacred landscape in the Cherokee heartland over nearly two millennia.

Beyond generating new information for archaeological research and preservation, this project can serve as a model for positive collaborative research between archaeologists and indigenous communities in the service of native interests (see Riggs 2002). A major critique of archaeological research, and one that still applies today even after the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, is that archaeology is something done to, not with, or for, indigenous groups (Watkins 2000). This project is designed to use the tools of archaeology to give something back to the Cherokee community.

First, the database from this project will serve as a monitoring tool for the Tribal Historic Preservation Office of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. Mound and town sites, even those that have been badly disturbed, have a high probability of containing graves. With updated status and location information for these sites, many of which are currently lost, the staff of the Tribal Historic Preservation Office will be better equipped to carry out their stewardship responsibility.

Second, this project will help prioritize sites for preservation and land acquisition and will build on the success of projects like the acquisition of the Kituwah and Cowee mounds. Sacred sites in western North Carolina will continue to be threatened by development and other destructive processes in the coming years. Knowing the location and current preservation status of mound and town sites will enable the Eastern Band to make more informed decisions about which sites to purchase and preserve.

Finally, the results of this project will be used to expand our understanding of the historical geography of the Cherokee landscape. This new knowledge can be used to protect and enhance Cherokee cultural identity, and it makes a significant contribution to the development of indigenous archaeology for the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. Most members of the Cherokee community are intimately familiar with the location and meaning of important sites on or near the Qualla Boundary, such as the Kituwah Mound. However, members of the Eastern Band are probably not as familiar with the names, locations, and stories of important mound and town sites outside the Qualla Boundary, such as the mounds along the Little Tennessee or Valley rivers that were leveled by late nineteenth-century antiquarian expeditions. This narrower view of Cherokee historical geography is at once the result of the violence and land cessions of centuries past and the more recent destruction of important places.

We have already begun to use the information generated by this project for public outreach efforts in the Cherokee community and beyond. The staff of the Tribal Historic Preservation Office and I have presented the results of our work at community club meetings in Cherokee and other public venues such as libraries and community centers in neighboring counties. In addition to presenting the findings of this project in scholarly journals and professional conferences, we shared the initial results of our work with members of the Eastern Band at the second and third annual Cherokee Archaeology Day symposia in 2012 and 2013. These public archaeology events, organized by the Tribal Historic Preservation Office and held annually on the Qualla Boundary, provide an opportunity for archaeologists working in western North Carolina to share their work with members of the Cherokee community.

By relocating and studying these places archaeologically, we can create a broader reconstruction of the Cherokee world before contact and removal. Mounds are a physical connection to Cherokee cultural identity, material reminders of past and present Cherokee lifeways and traditions. Some mounds and townhouses that were damaged by plowing, development, and antiquarian explorations may still be partially intact and are still important, living places on the landscape. Putting these places back on the map is an important step for revitalizing Cherokee culture.

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Notes

1. Between 21 June and 31 August 2011, the project director traveled to the following locations to carry out archival research and interviews: the Tribal Historic Preservation Office in Cherokee; the North Carolina Office of State Archaeology (OSA) in Raleigh and the western branch of the OSA in Asheville; the North Carolina State Archives in Raleigh; the Research Laboratories of Archaeology at University of North Carolina Chapel Hill (UNC RLA); Western Carolina University in Cullowhee; the archives of the National Park Service at the Great Smoky Mountains National Park visitor center in Gatlinburg, Tennessee; the Franklin Press in Franklin; the North Carolina Rooms of the Buncombe, Henderson and Haywood County libraries; the office of the register of deeds in Buncombe, Henderson, and Jackson County and the Main Library; and the Map Library at the University of Georgia. The results from the archival research for this project are discussed in detail in reports of pre-

liminary research for the Western North Carolina Mound and Towns Project (Steere 2011, 2013).

Background research was also conducted using geographic information systems (GIS) available publically through county land record websites and other sources, such as the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) website and the North Carolina State University GIS clearinghouse. LIDAR data available through the NCDOT website was especially useful for identifying and assessing possible mound locations.

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