

THE BEAR POINT PHASE OF THE PENSACOLA VARIANT:
THE PROTOHISTORIC PERIOD IN SOUTHWEST ALABAMA

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For a long time after Gordon Willey defined the Pensacola series it was treated much like an unwanted step-child: either abused or ignored. Although Willey and, subsequently, others recognized the distinctive origins and content of Pensacola, it was often subsumed under the rubric of Fort Walton or Moundville. This has resulted in deformation of the latter concepts to the detriment of what may now be viewed as a distinct variant of Mississippian culture with a traceable developmental history and definable geographic limits.

In the last few years a stronger case has been made for the concept of Pensacola as a discrete culture-historical unit by Sears, Jenkins, Knight, and others, and, more recently, by Stowe, and myself. Read Stowe (this issue) presented our current perception of Pensacola as a regional Mississippian variant and defined its Middle to Late Mississippi manifestation, the Bottle Creek phase. Its protohistoric manifestation is the Bear Point phase.

Prior to 1981 our working concept of Pensacola as an archaeological entity amounted to little more than Willey's Pensacola ceramic series. Based largely on his 1949 typology, which had been modified somewhat by Wimberly in 1960, the series covered a temporal span, roughly A.D. 1100-1700, that was too broad for investigating culture change, population dynamics, settlement patterns, or the various other fundamental aspects of an archaeological culture. Progress toward sub-dividing Pensacola into more discrete and workable units, ideally complexes or phases, was given an unintentional boost three years ago by the misguided shovel of a relic hunter.

This shovel, a double-edged spade if you will, found its way into the Pine Log Creek site (1Ba462), a protohistoric, Pensacola-affiliated cemetery located in the Alabama-Tombigbee confluence basin. Through the concerted efforts of the land-owner, the State of Alabama, and concerned professionals and lay people, the looted artifacts were recovered for analysis and curation before their very imminent and irretrievable dispersal into the collectors market. Thus, intercepted enroute from obscurity in the ground to obscurity in the collector's case, this important collection of aboriginal and sixteenth century European artifacts provided a much needed datum for investigating the Pensacola variant. The aboriginal ceramic fraction, comprising a nearly pure late Pensacola assemblage, formed a nucleus around which the definition of the Bear Point complex and, now, the Bear Point phase has coalesced (Figure 1).

Site 1Ba462 consists of a series of sandy knolls or small mounds resting upon a natural levee bordering Pine Log Creek, a tributary of the extreme lower Alabama River. Ecologically, the site lies just within the northern limits of the Mobile-Tensaw Delta, a complex system of streams, ponds, lakes, levees and swamps with a large and diverse suite of readily available subsistence resources. Archaeological research has shown that the Mobile-Tensaw Delta supported a viable and relatively stable aboriginal population from Late Archaic to Historic times.

Our examination of the site indicated that most or all of the looted materials came from the rise referred to as mound no. 1. Without evidence derived from controlled excavation we are uncertain if we are dealing with true

the Alabama and Coosa River Valleys.

In addition to pottery, various non-ceramic traits, though less common, have been recognized in the Bear Point phase. These includes: plain circular shell gorgets and variety of shell bead types; polished stone discoidals and celts, including the spatulate form; and copper ornaments, including "arrowhead" style emblems. Together these socio-technic artifacts are further evidence of the Mississippian heritage of the Bear Point phase.

New elements which entered the Pensacola variant during the Proto-historic period include European materials, the best documented of which are from Pine Log Creek. Among these are faceted seven-layer chevron beads which are excellent sixteenth century markers. An equally good marker is a brass, capstan-style candlestick which, along with a small brass pail, may have been part of a portable altar set.

Other items are dark blue glass beads and a bead or earspool cut from Columbia Plain glazed earthenware. Also recovered was an assortment of iron artifacts, including sword fragments, a gun barrel, an axe, a bridle cheek plate, a pike head, a knife, a sickle, a mule-or horseshoe, spikes, chisels, and several re-worked items that may have originally been chain links.

The quantity of European artifacts, some 37 in all, indicates either coastal shipwreck salvage by the Indians or possibly prolonged contact with a sixteenth century Spanish expedition. A possible source is the abortive colonizing effort of Tristan De Luna. Some 1500 would-be colonists spent nearly two years, from 1559 to 1561, in and around Mobile Bay, Pensacola Bay and the Lower Alabama River Valley. Toward the end of this period the expedition was literally starving and disheartened, and readily parted with their possessions in exchange for food. Significantly, four silver coins, minted in Mexico during

the period of 1554 to 1570, have been found in extreme southwestern Alabama. Three of these came from sites with strong Bear Point phase components.

We have recently completed a preliminary survey in the Alabama-Tombigbee Confluence Basin that focused upon the location of Late Mississippian, Proto-historic and Early Historic sites in an effort to place Pine Log Creek and the Bear Point phase in a firmer context. The most important result of this survey was the recognition of a cluster of small Bear Point phase burial mounds and habitation sites situated on natural levees of the riverine floodplain. Urn burial appears to be common in these mounds and the overall mortuary pattern is suggestive of Choctaw burial practices during the Historic period. Also, the distribution of habitation sites seems to fit a dispersed riverine settlement pattern deduced from French accounts of the Choctaw-speaking Mobilians and Tomehs who occupied the Forks region in the early eighteenth century.

Typical of the burial mounds is Ginhouse Island, (1Wn86), located within the historic domain of the Tomehs. Test excavations at Ginhouse Island have yielded urn burials and Bear Point phase ceramics. This is just one of a scattered group of at least 10 such burial mounds in the Forks region. We are provisionally referring to this aggregate as the Ginhouse Mortuary Complex which, although part of the Bear Point phase, appears to be somewhat more restricted geographically. Burial in pottery receptacles, which has not been reported from coastal Bear Point phase sites, reflects participation in a more wide-spread Burial Urn horizon. Often referred to as the Burial Urn culture or variant, it seems to have been manifested in a number of distinct phases and variants, including Savannah, Lamar, Alabama River phase, Moundville IV and the Bear Point phase, all on a proto-historic time-line, thus