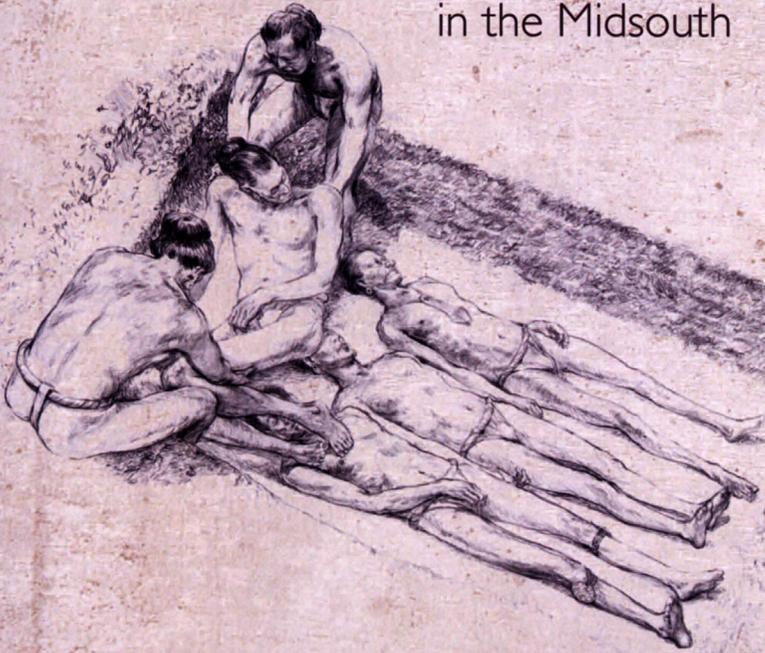


# PINSON MOUNDS

Middle Woodland  
Ceremonialism  
in the Midsouth



ROBERT C.  
MAINFORT JR.

## ARCHAEOLOGY

"Sauls, Ozier, the Eastern Citadel, and the Twin Mounds—all well known names in Eastern Woodland archaeology. Together they constitute the Pinson Mounds, that magnificent complex of earthworks that tower above the landscape of west Tennessee. Pinson is one of the few sites that I know of where the individual mounds that comprise it are almost as readily recognizable as the principal site designation. The construction of Pinson ranks near the top of anyone's list of the great engineering achievements of North American Indians. Robert Mainfort has devoted a major portion of his life to bringing this site out of the shadows. Though there is much that remains to be known of what went on at Pinson in the past, Mainfort and the other contributors have helped fill in many of the gaps in our knowledge. This book is truly a masterpiece and it most certainly belongs in every Southeastern archaeologist's library."

—IAN BROWN, University of Alabama

"*Pinson Mounds* is a comprehensive and much needed synthesis of research and thinking on one of the largest and most enigmatic prehistoric archaeological sites in eastern North America. This volume is the magnum opus of a scholar who has spent decades documenting what happened at the site and who, with a team of talented colleagues, has produced a volume that will serve as a benchmark for many years to come."

—DAVID G. ANDERSON, University of Tennessee

*Pinson Mounds: Middle Woodland Ceremonialism in the Midsouth* is a comprehensive overview and reinterpretation of the largest Middle Woodland mound complex in the Southeast. Located in west Tennessee about ten miles south of Jackson, the Pinson Mounds complex includes at least thirteen mounds, a geometric earthen embankment, and contemporary short-term occupation areas within an area of about four hundred acres. A unique feature of Pinson Mounds is the presence of five large, rectangular platform mounds from eight to seventy-two feet in height.

Around A.D. 100, Pinson Mounds was a pilgrimage center that drew visitors from well beyond the local population and accommodated many distinct cultural groups and people of varied social stations. Stylistically nonlocal ceramics have been found in virtually every excavated locality, all together representing a large portion of the Southeast.

Along with an overview of this important and unique mound complex, *Pinson Mounds* also provides a reassessment of roughly contemporary centers in the greater Midsouth and Lower Mississippi Valley and challenges past interpretations of the Hopewell phenomenon in the region.

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COVER IMAGE: Interment of four men in Twin Mounds, Feature 49.  
Original artwork by Doug Henry. Reproduced courtesy of Tennessee State Parks.

COVER DESIGN: Liz Lester

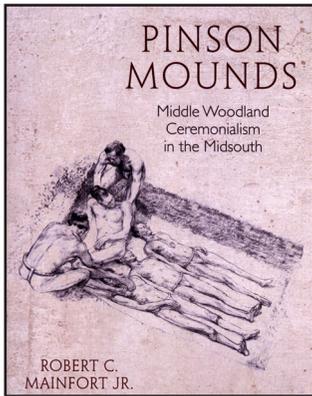
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# *Contents*

List of Figures	vii
List of Tables	x
Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xv
Chapter 1: Pinson Mounds and Its Setting (Robert C. Mainfort Jr.)	3
Chapter 2: Antiquarians' Perspectives on Pinson Mounds 2.0 (Mary L. Kwas)	19
Chapter 3: Mapping Never-Never Land: An Examination of Pinson Mounds Cartography (Robert C. Mainfort Jr., Mary L. Kwas, and Andrew M. Mickelson)	67
Chapter 4: Western Ritual Precinct (Robert C. Mainfort Jr.)	85
Chapter 5: Central Ritual Precinct (Robert C. Mainfort Jr.)	143
Chapter 6: Eastern Ritual Precinct (The "Eastern Citadel") (Robert C. Mainfort Jr., Andrew M. Mickelson, and Robert Thunen)	173
Chapter 7: Calibrated Radiocarbon Chronology for Pinson Mounds and Related Sites (Robert C. Mainfort Jr. and Charles H. McNutt)	191
Chapter 8: Pinson Mounds and the Middle Woodland Period in the Midsouth and Lower Mississippi Valley (Robert C. Mainfort Jr.)	203
Appendix 1: Ceramics from Pinson Mounds	235
Appendix 2: Politics and Prehistory: The Making of Pinson Mounds State Archaeological Area (Mary L. Kwas)	237
References	251
Index	269



## Pinson Mounds: Middle Woodland Ceremonialism in the Midsouth

Robert C. Mainfort, Jr. 2013. The University of Arkansas Press, Fayetteville. 8 1/2 x 11 inches, xvi+234 pp., 190 figures, 9 tables, 2 appendices, references, index. \$59.95 (Paper, e-book).

*Reviewed by Bret J. Ruby, Hopewell Culture National Historical Park, National Park Service, Chillicothe, Ohio.*

Between about 100 BC and AD 350, Native American people transformed a short 10-mile stretch of the South Fork Forked Deer River in West Tennessee into one of the most powerful ceremonial landscapes in the Eastern Woodlands. The Pinson Mounds complex stands at the heart of this remarkable landscape, dominated by the largest Middle Woodland mound ever constructed—a flat-topped pyramid 72 feet tall. At least a dozen more mounds, an earthen enclosure encompassing more than 16 acres, and several ritual-activity areas are arrayed over an area of about 400 acres surrounding the great central mound.

Robert Mainfort presents a comprehensive synthesis of research on this remarkable complex based on his career-long association with the site, bolstered by contributions by colleagues Mary L. Kwas, Charles H. McNutt, Andrew Mickelson, and Robert Thunen. Much of the material has appeared previously and Mainfort has done great service by bringing this scattered material together. But this volume is more than mere compilation. Mainfort turns a critical eye on his own earlier work and that of others, presents new data and wider context, and reinterprets the Pinson Mounds complex in light of more recent substantive and theoretical understandings of Middle Woodland ceremonialism.

Mainfort argues Pinson Mounds represents more than just a ceremonial center serving a local community. Rather, he reveals Pinson Mounds as a center of pilgrimage renowned for more than twenty generations, attracting visitors from all across the South and perhaps a few seekers from points beyond. There are signals that indicate some level of participation in pan-regional Hopewellian ceremonialism. But Mainfort notes these signals are weak, largely limited to a single mica mirror and a few fragments of copper, galena, quartz crystal, and some exotic flints. Importantly, where others have looked north to Illinois and Ohio to explain Middle Woodland ceremonialism in the Midsouth, Mainfort seeks instead to understand the ceremonialism expressed at Pinson Mounds on its own more local and regional terms. His initial fieldwork at the site provided the first conclusive evidence that large rectangular flat-topped mounds were a prominent focus of a distinctive regional non-mortuary ceremonialism. Similarly, while there are superficial similarities between some mortuary facilities at Pinson Mounds and well-known examples from the Illinois River valley, Mainfort uses this volume to clearly show the folly in viewing these and other ceremonial expressions in the Midsouth as merely derivative of Havana Hopewell and Ohio Hopewell practices.

## *Book Review*

A short preface sets the background for Mainfort's own association with Pinson Mounds and lays out the goals and organization of the present volume. *An introductory chapter* describes the site, its environmental and cultural setting, and a brief history of investigations. Not being a regional specialist in the Midsouth, I would have benefited from a more detailed outline of the basic culture history of the area. This is remedied in part with the overview of the Middle Woodland period in the Midsouth and Lower Mississippi Valley presented in Chapter 8, and by the extensive set of references presented at the close of the volume. Mainfort rejects any simple ecological explanation for the particular location of Pinson Mounds. Another notable aspect of the introduction is Mainfort's deconstruction of the complex into three distinct ritual precincts based on the local topography and certain spatial dependencies between individual mounds and earthworks.

Mary Kwas contributes an in-depth review of antiquarian accounts of Pinson Mounds in *Chapter 2*. This is a revised version of an earlier publication. Presentation of this revised version is warranted owing to controversy over the "reality" of certain earthwork features that are described and mapped in confused and contradictory ways in the early literature. Kwas uses this opportunity to provide additional historical context and critical analysis, ultimately exposing "garbled transmissions, foggy memories, wishful thinking, and descendant folklore" in many of the early accounts (p. 65). *Chapter 3* is a reprint of earlier publication by Mainfort, Kwas, and Mickelson that continues the critical dissection of early representations of Pinson Mounds, this time focused more narrowly on the first published map of the complex, William E. Myer's 1922 "City of Cisco" map. Together, Chapters 2 and 3 present a sobering cautionary tale. Researchers using early sources like these to investigate astronomical alignments or to estimate labor investments and the like should listen closely. The authors provide a few methodological guideposts useful for navigating through these often treacherous sources.

The core of the volume is represented by three chapters, each devoted to a description and interpretation of one of the three ritual precincts defined in Mainfort's introduction. *Chapter 4* describes excavations in three mounds and two non-mound ritual activity areas in the "Western Ritual Precinct." These are among a relatively few Middle Woodland period mounds excavated in the last forty years. Mainfort's detailed description of the materials selected for mound-building, and his careful reconstruction of sequences of mound construction and use are appreciated. Particularly notable here are his excavations in the large rectangular flat-topped Ozier Mound. He documented a complex series of seven sand-covered summits; the uppermost was clearly a stage for non-domestic activities during the Middle Woodland period. The stratigraphy of the nearby Twin Mounds—a pair of conjoined conical mounds—was even more complex, but in this case associated with a set of sub-mound mortuary facilities. Mainfort notes that the careful selection and placement of soils of contrasting colors and textures is widespread in the Middle Woodland world. He invokes the Earth Diver myth and world renewal rites for interpretive context. At the same time he explores structuralist approaches to interpret these patterns, symbolically linking construction materials to the cosmic order through binary oppositions (e.g., Upland

## *Book Review*

Sands vs. Floodplain Clays = Heavens vs. Underworld). These explorations add a little more light to the circle of illumination cast in earlier publications by Robert L. Hall.

Mainfort does further service by calling attention to two remarkable subfloor tombs beneath the Twin Mounds. One contained eight young women in their twenties attired in ostentatious regalia, all apparently laid in the tomb during a single event. Just a few feet away, four older men in their forties and fifties were laid in a second tomb during a single event, each buried with distinctive and symbolically charged artifacts suggesting roles as shamans and leaders (the book's cover image is an arresting depiction of this event, an original artwork by Doug Henry). Mainfort retreats from his earlier suggestion that the young women represent an instance of retainer burial. Instead, he interprets the submound interments together with the construction of the overlying mound within a broader context of a "single, continuous sequence of carefully orchestrated events" (p. 131), likely attended by both locals and foreigners. In this broader context the men and women interred below the mound are linked to the process of mound construction itself as characters in a larger ritual drama expressing core beliefs about world renewal and the cosmic and social order. This interpretive turn away from a representationist perspective on mortuary practice reflects a trend lately gaining mainstream traction in American archaeology. Here Mainfort demonstrates the potential of this approach to generate new insights into Middle Woodland and Hopewellian ceremonialism. It is hoped other researchers will follow his lead and revisit the old data sets looking for more than status and hierarchy in the Hopewell world.

**Chapter 5** discusses excavations in two low mounds, a small circular embankment, and three off-mound activity areas in the "Central Ritual Precinct." Mainfort uses the unusual ceramic assemblage excavated from one of the off-mound activity areas, the "Duck's Nest sector," as an opportunity to develop his thesis that Pinson Mounds served as a center drawing pilgrims from far and wide. The Duck's Nest sector assemblage includes at least thirteen nonlocal vessels. Ceramic traditions from the Tennessee Valley, southern Appalachians, southern Georgia, the lower Tombigbee, and the lower Mississippi Valley are all represented. Mainfort summarizes chemical (instrumental neutron-activation analysis), petrographic, and stylistic analyses, and comes to the surprising conclusion that almost all of the Duck's Nest sector vessels were produced locally, using local clays—even those vessels with stylistically nonlocal surface treatments and/or exotic tempers. (The Pinson Mounds assemblage figured in one of the early volleys in the ongoing debate between proponents of chemical vs. mineralogical approaches to ceramic sourcing, but Mainfort makes little of the controversy here). Most intriguing is Mainfort's suggestion that the Duck's Nest sector deposit represents a single staged event or performance intended to forge a collective identity among disparate peoples: "The deposition and mixing of stylistically diverse vessels...calls to mind the blurring of individual group identities in favor of overarching unity shown by participants in the Feast of the Dead...and similar rituals throughout the Eastern Woodlands" (p. 172).

**Chapter 6** is coauthored by Mainfort, Mickelson, and Thunen, and describes the "Eastern Ritual Precinct" with its geometric enclosure (the "Eastern Citadel") and

## *Book Review*

two associated mounds. A structuralist interpretation of the Eastern Citadel is offered, reading the earthwork as an upper-world feature holding back underworld forces, based largely on its construction using surface-scraped soils as opposed to soils mined from deeper strata. The argument would be stronger if similar symbolic relations could be shown to bear between other classes of material remains associated with the Eastern Citadel. Another intriguing argument is offered to suggest that the Eastern Citadel is a smaller version—a copy or recreation—of the Milford embankment complex in southwest Ohio. I am personally less impressed by the supposed points of congruence and instead see more compelling similarities between the Eastern Citadel and the Yazoo Basin enclosures Mainfort reviews in Chapter 8.

In **Chapter 7** Mainfort and McNutt present a review and reassessment of the radiocarbon chronology for Pinson Mounds and related sites based on an earlier publication. This is one of the better-dated Middle Woodland earthwork complexes in the Eastern Woodlands. The data presented here are useful to help anchor events at Pinson Mounds in historical time and in relation to events and processes playing out elsewhere. Even so, Mainfort and McNutt note that radiocarbon chronology is presently incapable of teasing out the historical relationships between events occurring within a span of just a century or two. Wisely, they place emphasis on the use of stratigraphy, seriation, and artifactual cross-ties to further refine the chronology.

Mainfort uses the final chapter to place Pinson Mounds in the context of other Middle Woodland period sites in the Midsouth and lower Mississippi Valley. Mainfort's experience as an archaeologist mediating between "northern Hopewell" and "southern Hopewell" has positioned him well to point out instances of consonance and dissonance. This brief and accessible review will be useful to many readers seeking an introduction to the range of ceremonial expressions throughout the Middle Woodland in this region. Mainfort points out some old and as yet unresolved issues that demand our attention: e.g., the supposed temporal priority of Hopewell in the north as expressed in bird motifs on ritual vessels and in the construction of large earthen enclosures. A few concluding remarks summarize the exceptional nature of the Pinson Mounds complex in terms of its size and apparent renown among Middle Woodland populations far and wide. A short appendix summarizes the Pinson Mounds ceramic assemblage, and another contributed by Kwas presents an administrative history of the site and its development as a state-owned archaeological park.

There is much to recommend in Mainfort's excellent work. A significant body of data concerning one of the most powerful Hopewellian places in the ancient Eastern Woodlands is drawn together into a comprehensive volume that will be of interest to professionals and accessible to laymen. Updates in substance, theory, and interpretation improve on earlier presentations. A final measure of Mainfort's success in conveying the power of this place is this: the volume inspired my own first pilgrimage to Pinson Mounds from the Ohio Hopewell heartland at the Scioto-Paint Creek confluence. I heartily recommend both the book and the journey.