

The Cumberland River Archaic *of* Middle Tennessee

Edited by Tanya M. Peres
and Aaron Deter-Wolf



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"The Middle Cumberland River Valley has a rich archaeological record that has gone largely unnoticed by the archaeological community. This volume corrects that by presenting information, new and old, on the Archaic shell-bearing sites of the region. It should serve as a source of valuable primary data for decades to come."—**JASON O'DONOUGHUE**, author of *Water from Stone: Archaeology and Conservation at Florida's Springs*

"The cornerstone of the volume rests on joint professional/avocational efforts to salvage priceless information in the face of rampant site destruction, efforts that were little short of heroic and that provide a model for rapid response to similar situations elsewhere."—**EVAN PEACOCK**, coeditor of *Exploring Southeastern Archaeology*

FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS, the inhabitants of the Middle Cumberland River Valley harvested shellfish for food and raw materials and then deposited the remains in dense concentrations along the river. Very little research has been published on the Archaic period shell deposits in this region. Demonstrating that nearly forty such sites exist, this volume presents the results of recent surveys, excavations, and laboratory work as well as fresh examinations of past investigations that have been difficult for scholars to access.

In these essays, contributors describe an emergency riverbank survey of shell-bearing sites that were discovered, reopened, or damaged in the aftermath of recent flooding. Their studies of these sites feature stratigraphic analysis, radiocarbon dating, zooarchaeological data, and other interpretive methods. Other essays in the volume provide the first widely accessible summary of previous work on sites that have long been known. Contributors also address larger topics such as geospatial analysis of settlement patterns, research biases, and current debates about site formation processes related to shell-bearing sites.

This volume provides an enormous amount of valuable data from the abundant material record of a fascinating people, place, and time. It is a landmark synthesis that will improve our understanding of the individual communities and broader cultures that created shell-bearing sites across the southeastern United States.

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Front: Archaic shell-bearing deposits exposed by erosion along the Cumberland River at site 40DV14, June 2009, photo by Jesse W. Tune, courtesy the Tennessee Division of Archaeology; *inset*, freshwater pleurocerids from Archaic shell-bearing deposits on the Cumberland.

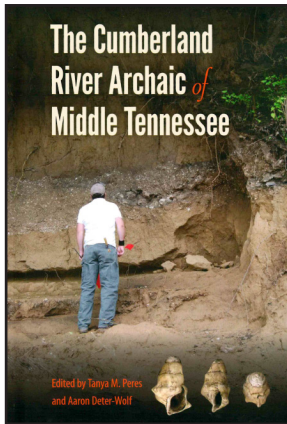
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Reviewed by Brian Butler, Center for Archaeological Investigations, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, retired.

This edited volume is a solid, data-rich contribution on a category of sites that has long needed an infusion of new scholarship—the shell-bearing Archaic sites of the Middle Cumberland River Valley (MCRV). As such, the title is somewhat misleading, but the editors can be forgiven for that. Unlike many edited volumes, this one is very much the product of the editors' own research program, the Middle Cumberland Archaeological Project (MCAP), launched following the disastrous 2010 flood on the Cumberland River. Of the ten contributions in the volume, the editors are single authors of three and co-authors of six of the remaining seven chapters. Some of the volume's major points were previewed in a 2016 article in *Southeastern Archaeology* (Peres and Deter-Wolf 2016), but this book is a greatly expanded compilation with a large body of new data on other sites, much of it rescued from obscure or limited distribution technical reports.

The MCRV, as defined here, extends for some 228 river miles (about one third of the total drainage length) from the Obey River confluence at the upstream end to the mouth of the Harpeth River below Nashville. For the most part the defined drainage area is within the Central Basin of Tennessee which defines a distinctive environmental and cultural area. This volume summarizes the old work, presents new survey and excavation data, and includes all 57 radiocarbon dates now available on shell bearing sites along the middle Cumberland River and major tributaries.

The volume Introduction provides a brief history of shell mound studies in the Southeast and defines the research area. Chapter 2 is a comprehensive history of research on shell-bearing Archaic sites in the Middle Cumberland region as well as a compendium of the currently known sites. Chapter 3 describes the river bank survey and testing program that was undertaken after the 2010 flood, a survey which encompassed roughly the western third of the MCRV. That project greatly expanded and accelerated research on shell-bearing sites.

There are individual chapters on five sites where significant work has been undertaken. The editors' primary field effort has been at 40DV7 near Nashville, but well-dated stratified deposits are also reported for two other sites downstream from Nashville. Current data show that the majority of shell bearing Archaic sites in the region are concentrated in the western portion of Middle Cumberland corridor, essentially from the greater Nashville area downstream.

Unfortunately for the current research, three of the most extensively investigated shell-bearing sites were excavated decades ago with more primitive methods. There is a

useful summary of the Late Archaic Robinson site (40SM4) excavated in 1963 by Dan Morse in the Cordell Hull Reservoir. The site, located far upstream in the MCRV near the Caney Fork confluence, figured prominently in Morse's (1967) PhD dissertation but was never published outside of a limited distribution report. Also welcome was a revisit to the Middle Archaic Anderson site (40WM9) on the Harpeth River, excavated in 1980-81 by avocational archaeologists and published in highly condensed form by John Dowd (1989). Pat Cridlebaugh's 1976 excavation of the Penitentiary Branch site (40JK25), upstream from the Robinson site, is also revisited at several points (Cridlebaugh 2017 (1986)). These three sites lie well outside the cluster of shell midden sites found around and downstream from Nashville.

In their introduction, the editors warn the reader not to expect a comprehensive explanation of shell-bearing sites in the region, citing a lack of comparable data or a lack of data overall. There is some merit to this disclaimer as these earlier projects are the most extensive excavations, but were generally not screened and paid little attention to sampling the shell. Most of the new data comes from river bank sampling and modest CRM and field school excavations. The thirty or more years separating the old and new research underscores a major bifurcation in the data, both in geography and completeness of data.

The focus of this volume is on environmental data, chronology, and the zoology of the shellfish exploitation. There is only limited description of associated artifacts. One of the principal findings, previewed in the editors' 2016 article, is that the shell deposits on most of the Middle Cumberland Archaic sites are dominated by small gastropods rather than the bivalves that typically dominate elsewhere in the Southeast. The only clear exception is the previously noted Robinson site and possibly Penitentiary Branch.

The concluding chapter synthesizes the chronology and character of shellfish exploitation in the region and then moves on to "Historical Issues" in interpretation. The authors deal briefly with the old notion of a Shell Mound Archaic culture and the "midden vs. monument" debate and take a passing swipe at Optimal Foraging models. They finish by proposing that Archaic peoples in the region actively managed the shellfish resource. Given all the prior disclaimers on data quality or completeness, this proposal was surprising and seemed almost an afterthought. The hypothesis is intriguing but it is hard to see how it can be conclusively proved or disproved and no program to do that is outlined here. I admit that I found the editors' concluding chapter a little disappointing. Despite their initial warning, I had hoped for a more detailed and nuanced treatment of interpretive issues.

There is also an issue with some of the graphics. All illustrations and maps are grey scale and the severe reduction of some of the maps renders some of the details and labels so small that they are difficult to read without a magnifying glass.

These complaints aside, I think the volume overall is a very good one, a much-needed contribution to the literature of the Archaic period in the Southeast. The authors should be congratulated for their diligence and perseverance in assembling this important body of work.

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