Ocmulgee

A Mississippian Outpost on the Macon Plateau

Ocmulgee is a memorial to the antiquity of man in this corner of the North American continent. From Ice-Age hunters to the Creeks of historic times, there is evidence here of 10,000 years of human habitation. One period stands out. Between AD 900 and 1100 a skillful farming people lived on this site. Known to us as Mississippian, they were part of a distinctive culture which crystallized about AD 750 in the middle Mississippi Valley and over the next seven centuries spread along riverways throughout much of the central and eastern United States. The Mississippian pottery reveals much about their aesthetics, basic domestic habits. Mississippian pottery (the two vessels at left) was strikingly different from that of the Woodland people who preceded them. Woodland Indians developed their pottery with complex designs pressed into the wet surface of the clay before firing. Mississippian potters made a more complex way of life to the region. Though far removed from such Mississippian centers as Cahokia in Illinois and Moundville in Alabama, the people here were the heirs of an ascendant culture and enjoyed a life as rich an any north of Mexico.

Another structure central to life here was the earthlodge. There were several at Ocmulgee. The one best preserved has been reconstructed. It is 42-feet in diameter. Opposite the entrance is a clay platform shaped like a large bird. There are three seats on the platform and 47 on the bench around the wall. In the center of the lodge is a firepit. This building may have been either a winter temple or a year-round council house. The 50 or so persons who met here were probably the group's leaders. The mound on the town's west side was apparently a burial place. Like the temple mounds, the Funeral Mound was flat-topped and equipped with steps leading up the side to some kind of mortuary building. More than 100 burials have been found here. Some had elaborate shell and copper ornaments, suggesting high status, but most had no offerings.

The Mississippian at Ocmulgee were intruders of a sort. They apparently displaced the native woodland Indians, though there is no evidence of conflict. The newcomers were a sedentary people who lived mainly by farming bottomlands for crops of corn, beans, squash, pumpkins, and tobacco. They built a compact town of thatched huts on the bluff overlooking the river. More than a thousand persons lived here at one time. For their public ceremonies, they leveled an area near the river and began constructing a series of earth mounds—places important in their religion and politics. They did not build the mounds to full height all at once but raised them at intervals over the years. Perhaps as new leaders came to power or in response to cycles about which we can only speculate.

Generations after Mississippian culture waned at Ocmulgee, another culture called Lamar sprang up here. Lamar people were farmers, skilled hunters, and mound-builders whose distinctive pottery employed designs peculiar to both their Woodland and Mississippian predecessors. They also made some use of the site, then fallen into ruins. One of their major centers was the Lamar site, several miles away in the swamps along the Ocmulgee River. This village contained two temple mounds and was surrounded by a stockade. It was the Lamar people that happened to the inhabitants—whether they died out, migrated elsewhere, or were assimilated. Whatever their fate, by 1100 Ocmulgee was no longer a thriving outpost of Mississippian culture.

Over the next two centuries, the native Indians, their style of life irrevocably altered, made occasional use of the old townsite. Then in the 1300s a new culture arose and spread widely through the Southeast. Known as the Lamar culture, it appears to have been a blending of Mississippian and Woodland elements. The Lamar people were farmers, skilled hunters, and mound-builders whose distinctive pottery employed designs peculiar to both their Woodland and Mississippian predecessors. They also made some use of the site, then fallen into ruins. One of their major centers was the Lamar site, several miles away in the swamps along the Ocmulgee River. This village contained two temple mounds and was surrounded by a stockade. It was the Lamar people that happened to the inhabitants—whether they died out, migrated elsewhere, or were assimilated. Whatever their fate, by 1100 Ocmulgee was no longer a thriving outpost of Mississippian culture.

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Great Temple Mound (center) rises some 45 feet from a base about 300 feet by 270. Lesser Temple Mound (left) is similar in form but far smaller. Little is known about the relationship between the two.

The visitor center houses a major archaeological museum. Exhibits describe the human habitation of the area from 10,000 BC to the early 1700s. Emphasis is on the Mississippian town that flourished here from AD 900 to 1100. A short film, "People of the Macon Plateau," is shown every 30 minutes.

The Sequence of Cultures on the Macon Plateau

Paleo-Indian
Pre-9000 BC
The first inhabitants of this region were nomadic hunters of large mammals, one of the earliest stages of human culture in North America. A distinctive spear point of the type called Clovis is evidence of this people here.

Archaic
9000-1000 BC
The Indians of this period were hunters and gatherers who exploited such new food sources as small game, shellfish, and seasonal plants. The adit, a device for propelling spears, came into wide use. Red ochre in burials suggests the beginnings of ritualism.

Woodland
1000 BC-AD 900
Crops of squash and gourds and later corn and beans were cultivated. People began to live in villages at least part of the year. Tools and pottery became more varied. The pottery was decorated by stamping the unfired surface with wooden paddles carved with complex designs. Some mound building. This people was displaced by the Mississippian but continued to live in the area.

Early Mississippian
AD 900-1100
The early Mississippian were farmers. They farmed with plows and oxcarts, built palisaded villages, and grew rice, beans, and corn. They lived in large villages with intricate social relationships as suggested by their earthworks and huge, flat-topped mounds. Their pottery was plain but of varied size and shape.

Spring and fall are the best seasons to tour the park on foot. A trail connects most features, of which seven are described below. If the weather is hot or rainy, you may want to take Temple Mound Drive around to the large mounds. Another interesting walk is along the Opelofa Nature Trail, which takes off from the main walking trail and winds through the lowlands of Walnut Creek.

The earthlodge is a reconstruction of a ceremonial building that stood on the north side of the Mississippian village. It was probably a meeting place for the town's political and religious leaders. The clay floor is about a thousand years old.

Village site During Mississippian times (AD 900-1100) many other buildings stood here besides the earthlodge, among them several flat-topped mounds, a burial mound, and numerous huts.

Cornfield Mound was originally about 8 feet high. Under it archaeologists found signs of a cultivated field, which is something like a puzzle because Mississippian agricultural fields usually lay in bottomlands. The mound itself was probably a platform for a ceremonial building.

Prehistoric trenches. Two lines of ditches varying in width and depth have been traced around the east side of the village. Some sections are parallel and lined with clay. The ditches may have been defensive or they may have been borrow pits—sources of fill for constructing mounds.

Trading post English traders from Charleston, eager to do business with the Creeks, built the first trading post on this site about 1800. They swapped firearms, cloth, and trinkets for deerskins and furs. Excavations have turned up all sorts of goods, including axes, clay pipes, beads, knives, swords, bullets, flints, and pistols and muskets.

Great and Lesser Temple Mounds. The Great Temple Mound is the largest Mississippian mound on the Macon Plateau. Lesser Temple Mound was partly destroyed by railroad construction in the 1870s.

Funeral Mound was the burial place for village leaders. Over 100 burials have been uncovered, many with shell and copper ornaments. Like the temple mounds, this mound was built in successive stages—at least seven. The structures that stood on top at each stage may have been in use for the dead burial. The present height corresponds to the third stage. Much of the mound was destroyed by a railroad cut in the 1870s.

About Your Visit
Ocmulgee National Monument is on the eastern edge of Macon, Ga., on U.S. 80 East. Travelers on I-75 should exit on I-16 East. Take either the first or second exit from I-16 and follow U.S. 80 East a mile to the park. The Lamar Unit, a detached area, is located in the swamps 3 miles below Macon. It is not open to the public.

The park is open every day except Christmas and New Year's Day. The park building is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., with extended hours in summer. There is a picnic area for visitors. The closest camping area is 8 miles away, west of Macon.

Ocmulgee National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is 1207 Emery Highway, Macon, GA 31201, is in charge.

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Late Mississippian Post 1350
After the waning of the Mississippian, a new way of life sprang up that combined elements of the two previous cultures. This culture is called Lamar after a site at which it was first described by archaeologists. It was villages of this type that Hernando de Soto encountered in 1540.

Historic c. 1690-1715
Creeks Indians built a large town here to take advantage of commerce with the British. After the Indians were defeated in the Yamasee War, the village was abandoned.