A Mississippian Outpost on the Macon Plateau

From Ice Age hunters to Creek Indians of historic time, Oc Mulgee testifies to 10,000 years of people living in this corner of North America. One period stands out. Between 900 and 1100 CE (Common Era) a skilled farming people lived here. Known as Mississippian they were part of a distinctive culture that crystallized about 750 in the middle Mississippi Valley, spreading over the next 700 years along riverways throughout the central and eastern United States. The Mississipians brought a more complex way of life to the region. Although far removed from such Mississippian centers as Cahokia in Illinois and Moundville in Alabama, the people here were heirs of an important culture and enjoyed a life as successful as any north of Mexico.

Mississipians at Oc Mulgee were intruders of a sort. They apparently displaced Woodland Indians, although there is no evidence of conflict. The newcomers were sedentary and lived 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. At one time more than a thousand persons lived here. For public ceremonies they leveled an area near the river and built 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 over the years, perhaps as new leaders came to power or in response to cycles about which we can only speculate.

Earth lodges were also central to life, and there were several at Oc Mulgee. The best preserved earthlodge 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 is a burial site. Like the temple mounds the Funerary Mound was flat-topped, with steps leading up the side to some kind of mortuary building. More than 100 burials have been found here. Some contained elaborate shell and copper ornaments suggesting high status, but most burials had no offerings.

Mississipians seem to have influenced the surrounding population (mound-building, rudimentary farming), but we don’t yet know how they interacted. Nor do we know why the town declined or what happened to the inhabitants—whether they died out, migrated elsewhere, or were assimilated. Whatever their fate, by 1100 Oc Mulgee was no longer a thriving outpost of Mississippian culture. Over the next two centuries other Indians occasionally used the old townsite. In the 1300s a new culture arose and spread widely through the Southeast. Known as the Lamar culture they appear to have been a blend of Mississippian and Woodland elements. The Lamar were farmers, skilled hunters, and mound-builders. Their distinctive pottery employed designs characteristic of their Woodland and Mississippian predecessors. They also used the old town site, then fallen into ruins. One of their major centers was the Lamar site, several miles away in the swamps along the Oc Mulgee River. This village contained two temple mounds and was surrounded by a stockade. It was the Lamar people that Herndon de Soto encountered in 1540 on his first European expedition into this region.

For natives the arrival of Europeans was catastrophic. Disease caused staggering losses. Indians were drawn into the newcomers’ trading world and political disputes, which changed forever their traditional way of life. The English set up a trading post at Oc Mulgee around 1690, and many Creeks settled here. Within a century there were few vestiges of Mississippian life anywhere and virtually no understanding of the culture. When naturalist William Bartram saw Oc Mulgee in the 1770s, he wrote with respect mingled with incomprehension of “the wonderful remains of the power and grandeur of the ancients in this part of America.”
Touring the Park

Great Temple Mound (above center) is 55 feet from a base about 330 by 370 feet. Great Temple Mound (above left) is similar in form but smaller. Little is known about the relationship between the two mounds.

The visitor center houses a major archaeological museum (shown). Exhibits describe the human habitation of the area from 10,000 BCE to the early 1700s. Emphasis is on the Mississippian town that flourished here from 900 to 1100.

The visitor center and museum are accessible for visitors in wheelchairs. The film, Mysteri-ouf of the Mound, is captioned. A braille brochure is available.

About Your Visit

Ocmulgee National Monument is on the eastern edge of Macon, Ga., on U.S. 80 about 1 mile from I-75 exit at I-16 East. Take either the first or second exit from I-16 and follow U.S. 80 East one mile to the park. The Lamar Unit is in the swamps three miles south of Macon. It is open on a limited basis. For information ask at the visitor center or visit our website.

The interior of the original earthlodge would have looked something like this, about 1,000 years ago. A fire preserved evidence of many features, giving archaeologists a firm basis for this reconstruction.

Earthlodge This 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 original clay floor is about 1,000 years old.

Village Site During Mississippian times (900–1100) many other structures stood here along with the earthlodge. Among them were several flat-topped mounds, a burial mound, and homes.

Cornfield Mound This mound was originally about eight feet high. Beneath it archaeologists found signs of a cultivated field, which is something of 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 vary 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 borrowed—sources of fill for constructing mounds.

Trading Post Site English traders from Charleston, S.C., eager to do business with the Creek Indians, built the first trading post on this site about 1670. They traded firearms, cloth, and trinkets for deerskins and furs. Excavations have turned up many goods, including axes, clay pipes, beads, knives, bullets, flints, pins, and muskets.

Great and Lesser Temple Mounds Relatively little is known about these mounds except that they were topped by rectangular wooden structures probably used for important religious ceremonies. Great Temple Mound is the largest Mississippian mound on the Macon Plateau. Lesser Temple Mound was partly destroyed by railroad construction in the 1830s.

Funeral Mound Village leaders were buried in this mound. More than 100 burials have been uncovered, many with shell and copper ornaments. Like the temple mounds, this mound was built in successive stages. The structures that stood on top at each stage may have been used in preparing the dead for burial. The present height corresponds to the third stage. Much of the mound was destroyed by a railroad cut in the 1870s.

Sequence of Cultures on the Macon Plateau

Paleo-Indians Pre-9000 BCE (Before Common Era)
The first to live in this region were nomadic Indians who hunted large mammals. These peoples were one of the earliest stages of human culture in North America. A distinctive spear point called Chris is evidence of this culture.

Archaic 9000–1000 BCE Indians of this period were hunters and gatherers who exploited food sources such as small game, shellfish, and seasonal plants. They lived in small groups, sometimes called bands. The Chris spear point is still found in this period.

Woodland 1000 BCE–900 CE Cultivating squashes, beans, and corn, Woodland Indians began to live in villages at least part of the year. Tools and pottery became more varied. They decorated pottery by stamping the unfired surface with wooden paddles orGrooved designs. These people were displaced by the Mississip-panns but continued to live in the area.

Early Mississippian 900–1100 These people originated in the Mississippi Valley. They planted extensive crops and lived in large villages with intricate social relationships as suggested by their earthlodge and flat-topped mounds. Their pottery was plain but of varied forms.

Late Mississippian Post-1300 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 the site at which it was first described by archaeologists. Now a set of Otten-berd this palleis town had two temple mounds, one with a unique spiral ramp to the top. The pottery was decorated with petroglyphs and incised designs. It was vil-lage of this type that Hernando de Soto encoun-tered in 1541.

Fur Sale Mounds This site had trade with the Mississippians and participated in the fur trade.

Fur Trade 1670–1800 Creek Indians built a large town here to take advantage of commercial trade. The village was abandoned after the Indians were defeated by colonial forces in the Yamasee war.

Stewardship Ocmulgee National Monument is one of more than 400 parks in the National Park Service. The National Park Service cares for these special places owned by the American people so that all may experience our heritage.