

**Woodland Period Mortuary Variability in the Lower Roanoke River Valley:
Perspectives from the Jordan's Landing, Sans Souci and Dickerson Sites**

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On the North Carolina Coastal Plain, intensive archaeological investigations and salvage actions at dozens of Woodland period sites have resulted in the recovery of numerous Middle Woodland period, Mount Pleasant phase (300 BC—AD 800), and Late Woodland period (AD 800—1650), Cashie I phase, burials. Although the mortuary patterns at several key sites are generally described in both recent and past publications (see Hutchinson 2002; Monahan 1995; Phelps 1980, 1983, 1984a, 1984b; Reichs 1986; Ward and Davis 1999), our present understanding of prehistoric rituals and practices related to the “spaces and places of death” in coastal North Carolina has not been fully explored. To this end, this paper explores a facet of the issue, apparent shifts in Middle and Late Woodland period mortuary patterns in the lower Roanoke River valley, and expands on the earlier summary of regional patterns reported by Phelps in 1983.¹

Although I will briefly entertain possible explanations for aspects of the Late Woodland period mortuary patterns discussed here, my primary intent today is to elucidate the variations in regional burial practices by synthesizing unpublished data from the Sans Souci (31Br5), Jordan’s Landing (31Br7) and Dickerson (31Br91) sites, three multi-component sites located in the lower Roanoke River drainage. Following the descriptive summary, I will address issues related to shifts in regional mortuary practices in conjunction with apparent changes in subsistence regimes and socio-political systems during the Late Woodland period. Despite numerous post-processual critiques, the basic premise of the “Binford-Saxe mortuary program” generally holds true in cross-cultural studies, which demonstrate that mortuary rituals and burial practices are often related, as well as respond, to distinct changes in economic conditions and political organization within prehistoric societies.

Presently, the only reported Cashie I phase burials east of the Fall Line Zone were investigated at the three sites discussed here. Note that Cashie II phase (AD 1650—1715) burial patterns reflect radical socio-economic changes brought about by the development of a fluid “shatterzone” in eastern North Carolina after initial European Contact and are not considered here.² In contrast to reported Cashie I phase burials, Mount Pleasant phase burials have been reported from a dozen sites across the greater Coastal Plain. In the late 1960s, amateurs recovered plow exposed burials at the Sans Souci site on the

Cashie River, and the remains were later transferred to East Carolina University for curation. Phelps and his archaeology field school students investigated 27 burials at the Jordan's Landing site on the Roanoke River, first in the early 1970s and again in the late 1980s. More recently, archaeologists with the Office of State Archaeology salvaged nine badly disturbed burials at the Dickerson site, respectively, in 1983 and 1990. The 45 Middle and Late Woodland period burials from these key regional sites comprise the present study population.

Based on ceramic seriation, Middle Woodland period burials in the lower Roanoke River valley are associated with Mount Pleasant phase occupations. Across the greater Coastal Plain region, radiocarbon dates associated with Mount Pleasant series ceramics range between 400 BC and AD 960 (2-sigma).³ As there are no radiometric dates directly associated with Mount Pleasant features on the three sites considered here, I presume that the 26 Mount Pleasant burials under discussion minimally predate the earliest potential Cashie I occupation date of AD 1210 (2-sigma) at the Jordan's Landing site.⁴ Middle Woodland period mortuary treatments at the Jordan's Landing, Sans Souci and Dickerson sites vary, but the patterns within the range of variation for the period are remarkably similar.

In terms of intra-site spatial patterns, site destruction and the salvage nature of the burial recoveries at the Sans Souci and Dickerson sites shed little light on the relationship between burial and habitation locations. Middle Woodland period features and burials co-occur randomly across the Sans Souci site, which suggests that the burials were located within a habitation area adjacent to the Cashie River. Phelps observed similar patterns at Jordan's Landing, where Middle Woodland burials and pit features are, more-or-less, randomly distributed across the site. At the Dickerson site, however, the burials are all clustered in a discrete area along a terrace edge adjacent to the Roanoke River, a pattern perhaps indicative of a separate "cemetery" area.

Individual primary inhumations, with tightly flexed or flexed skeletal remains, are most common (n=21) in the study population. Less frequent, but not uncommon, are secondary cremation burials (n=3). Primary burial pits are typically oval in plan, but some are sub-round-to-round. The cardinal orientations of the pits and the skeletal remains vary considerably within and between sites. Nearly all bodies,

however, were originally placed on the left side with the legs either tightly flexed to the abdominal area, or semi-flexed and turned to the left or right. The upper arms were typically positioned close to the sides with the forearms flexed and raised to the upper chest and neck area. In some instances, one arm was extended with the other placed over the abdomen. These patterns are similar to Middle Woodland primary interments investigated by Phelps and others on the outer coast.

Of the 21 primary burials assessed, identifiable mortuary artifacts, with a few notable exceptions, were not present, and the secondary cremation burials contained no obvious mortuary artifacts. At the Jordan's Landing site, two young adult females were interred with several freshwater mussel shells placed about the head or abdominal areas. A badly deteriorated adult (sex unknown) burial included eight triangular projectile points and a hammerstone. Interestingly, the points were arranged in three small clusters about the head, abdominal and leg areas. At the Sans Souci site, one adult female was interred with a canine skull, probably a small domesticated dog, carefully positioned in the otherwise sterile burial fill just above the pelvic area. No other remains from the dog were found in the burial fill. A flexed primary burial at the Dickerson site included a conch columella bead and one *Marginella* bead. Although the presence of *Marginella* is, in the main, regionally associated with Late Woodland period burials, the context of this particular burial, in a rather discrete Middle Woodland "cemetery" area, suggests otherwise. Site disturbances and the salvage nature of the recovery, however, make any conclusive statements necessarily tenuous.

Although two of the three Mount Pleasant cremation burials in the study group were disturbed, osteological assessments indicate that the secondary cremations were usually multiple, rather than individual, interments. While Phelps reported a primary cremation at the Baum site in Currituck County (Colington phase), no primary cremations were encountered at the sites discussed here. The cremation burial at the Sans Souci site included the fragmented remains of two individuals, one of which was a sub-adult. At the Jordan's Landing site, one cremation burial contained elements of four sub-adults, including 5—12 month old and 6—10 year old children. While the limited evidence suggests that Middle

Woodland period cremations were reserved for sub-adults, six other sub-adults at the three sites discussed were interred in primary burials.

During the Late Woodland period, mortuary practices, and by inference mortuary rituals, underwent a radical transformation concomitant with the florescence of the Cashie phase in the lower Roanoke River valley. Based on ceramic seriation, Late Woodland period burials at the study sites are associated with the Cashie I phase. Across the greater Coastal Plain radiocarbon dates associated with Cashie I series ceramics range between AD 895 and AD 1475 (2-sigma).⁵ At the Jordan's Landing site, two radiocarbon assays indicate at least two Cashie I phase occupation episodes, ca. AD 1285 and AD 1415 (calibrated intercepts).⁶ Although secondary ossuary burial was the modal mortuary practice, there are peculiar variations in Late Woodland period mortuary treatments between the Jordan's Landing, Sans Souci and Dickerson sites burials. These variations potentially represent chronologically related shifts in mortuary rituals over a span of time greater than that represented by the radiocarbon dates from the Jordan's Landing site. Alternately, the variations may represent idiosyncratic practices between different loosely associated communities or clans within a larger Cashie phase population. Moreover, the presence of six Late Woodland primary inhumations at the Jordan's Landing site, and possibly one at the Sans Souci site, indicate that differential mortuary rituals were observed for different people within the two communities.

At the Jordan's Landing site, the eight ossuary and individual bundle burials were essentially clustered and generally restricted to the east side of the palisade circumscribed village, where postmold densities indicate multiple house rebuilding episodes over an unknown span of time. As such, the ossuaries were likely located under house floors or between house structures. Postmold density is comparatively low in the northwest section of the village, the location of four Late Woodland period primary burials. While partial house-wall post patterns are found on the east side of the site, there is no particular evidence of house structures in the western half of the palisade enclosure. In contrast to the distinct clustering's of Late Woodland period burials inside the palisade line, the Middle Woodland period burials are scattered across the greater site area. The four Sans Souci site ossuaries are located in a

linear fashion, perpendicular to the Cashie River along an east-west axis, apparently in-and-among several small pit features. Although the excavators did not record postmolds, the cluster of pit features in-and-around the ossuary pits suggests that the ossuaries were also located within a nucleated village. Given the extreme site destruction at the Dickerson site (sand mining operations), no relationship between the single recorded ossuary and an associated habitation site was evident.

At the Jordan's Landing and Sans Souci sites, the ossuaries contained the bundled skeletal remains of two-to-five individuals, while the Dickerson site ossuary interred nine individuals. All recorded ossuary pits were oval or sub-rounded in plan and tended to be oriented in a northwest-to-southeast cardinal direction. The skeletal remains were found arranged in discrete bundles, with the crania placed immediately adjacent their associated post-crania bone bundles. Twelve of the fourteen secondary and ossuary burials in the study population included mortuary artifacts, primarily perforated *Marginella* shell beads. The frequency of *Marginella* varies from a minimum of two recovered beads, to a maximum of 1289 recovered beads. The Dickerson site ossuary and one smaller ossuary at the Jordan's Landing site apparently contained no *Marginella* beads or other obvious burial goods. At the Jordan's Landing site, a fabric-impressed bowl was found directly associated with an adult female ossuary bundle. Another ossuary pit, with an adult male and a newborn, included a carefully worked split bone pin. Other than these objects, however, the Jordan's Landing site ossuaries contained no surviving mortuary goods other than the ubiquitous *Marginella* shell beads. Alternately, the Sans Souci site ossuaries collectively included significantly lower frequencies of *Marginella* beads, as well as more personal objects: bone pendant, polished bone pins, bone or antler awls and a polished bone needle. These objects are typically associated with all female ossuaries or ossuaries with at least one female where individual sex can be determined.

Jordan's Landing site Burial 9, the only individual secondary burial, is particularly anomalous in relation to the other ossuaries. Burial 9 included the bundled remains of a deformed adult male who suffered from acute kypho-scoliosis, a pathological condition associated with "hunchback" syndrome. Interred with the bundle were 949 recovered *Marginella* shell beads, unmodified deer antlers, cut deer

antler tips, cut and uncut bear femora, turtle carapaces, cut large mammal (bison?) scapula tools and a split bone pin. Phelps originally interpreted the assemblage as a “shaman’s tool kit.” The deformities and unusual assortment of associated mortuary artifacts do suggest the deceased individual was likely a person who served the community in capacities associated in ethnohistoric literature with ritual specialists variously termed: healers, conjurers, priests, seers, sorcerers or shaman.

In terms of the nearly ubiquitous *Marginella* shell beads, Late Woodland ossuaries with *Marginella* beads, with the exception of the presumed “shaman,” include at least one female or one sub-adult—where age and sex estimates can be determined. In some burials, shell beads were recorded *in situ* as strung, but in most cases scatters, clusters or caches of apparently unstrung beads were recorded inside or around the crania, obviously associated within the confined burial space with a specific individual within the ossuary. While there appears to be no direct association between the quantity of shell beads and the ages or sexes of the individuals interred, the *Marginella* bead clusters, are most often associated with female crania or trans-gender males, such as the “shaman.”

In addition to the Jordan’s Landing site ossuaries, there were six Cashie phase primary inhumations at the site. Spatially, the primary burials were all located at least 50-meters from the ossuary cluster and presumed primary habitation area, four primary burials within the palisade line and two outside the palisade line. Like the ossuary pits at the site, the primary inhumation pits tended to be oval in plan, and with one exception, oriented along a northwest-to-southeast cardinal axis. Skeletal remains in the primary burial pits were generally extended and oriented with the crania to the northwest, but infant orientations slightly vary. The individuals were typically placed, unlike the Middle Woodland period norm, in supine positions with legs and arms extended. Two adult primary burials, however, had loosely flexed legs turned to one side. The primary burials included two adult females, one adult male and three sub-adults: a newborn, an infant and a toddler. Mortuary goods were not interred with the newborn, the mature male or the elderly female. The elderly female, however, was buried on a fiber mat—residues noted on the recovered cranium—below the palisade ditch bottom.

The second female primary burial included a minimum of 29 columella beads, 75 small disc beads and a cut shell pendant, but no *Marginella* beads. Although direct contextual association is uncertain, the burial fill further contained two bone awls/pins, one triangular projectile point, one lithic drill, two lithic scrapers and one abrader stone. The 18-month old (+/-) toddler burial included four shell disc beads, and the 6—9 month old (+/-) infant burial included a single shell disc bead. Since the beads were recorded as recovered from the neck area of both deceased children, the beads were probably strung on necklaces, perhaps as age group indicators. Interestingly, all primary burials found inside the former palisade perimeter included some frequency of mortuary goods.

Perhaps the most interesting Late Woodland period primary burial at the Sans Souci site is a young adult female, interred in a carefully prepared circular pit with a flat bottom, covered with a thin lens of ash or light colored sand. Although the burial shaft cut through a Late Woodland period shell midden lens, the excavators reported that the burial fill was black in color and essentially sterile of artifacts and other natural debris. Three turtle carapaces were positioned near the left shoulder and 15 freshwater mussel shells were placed in a ring around a fiber mat. Beyond these preparations, four unmodified deer antlers were arrayed above the head in the manner of a headdress. This burial is anomalous in relation to all other primary burials discussed. Mussel shells were only found at other sites purposefully interred with Middle Woodland period, Mount Pleasant phase burials, but the skeletal orientation and inclusion of turtle shells and deer antlers are more closely associated with the Cashie phase primary and secondary burials. In the absence of associated radiocarbon dates, the burial patterns and limited stratigraphic evidence suggest the unusual burial from the Sans Souci site burial is probably a Late Woodland period interment.

Cashie I phase, primary inhumations potentially represent “defleshing stage” burials intended for later cleaning and secondary ossuary interment rituals, but the presence of burial goods in three of the reported primary burials may signal the intent of a final interment. A nearly sterile pit feature, similar in shape, orientation and size of the Cashie primary burial pits discussed here was found between two primary burials inside the northwest section of the Jordan’s Landing site palisade line. Such features

possibly represent first-stage mortuary processing pits, where the skeletal remains were later removed for final cleaning, wrapping and ossuary reburial. Alternately, the adult male primary burial—the only individual positioned on the chest—and the newborn buried outside the village palisade without grave goods, may represent individuals temporarily interred for de-fleshing, but never exhumed for planned secondary rituals. If some Cashie I phase primary burials do not represent temporary inhumations, then there is some support for the notion that individual rank status within the community determined who was interred in ossuaries. In the case of the sub-adults and the older female interred with cut shell beads, or the young female with the antler headdress, the pattern may represent distinctive treatments for special persons, such as clan mothers, within a ranked society.

Several factors likely contributed to the emergence of more complex regional mortuary rituals and burial practices during the Late Woodland period. The shift from primary inhumation patterns to secondary inhumation patterns in the lower Roanoke River valley during the Late Woodland period, be they *in situ* developments or imported rituals, likely reflect fundamental changes in socio-political organization over time. As many ethnographic studies conclude, with an increase in the number and complexity of mortuary rituals in a society, staged secondary burial practices often emerge. Increased mortuary complexity, meaning the differential treatment of, and the communal energy expenditure on the dead, often indicates that more social persona dimensions are recognized by the bereaved and incorporated into mortuary rituals. Indeed, the differential mix of ossuary, individual bundle and primary burial treatments at the Late Woodland period sites described here likely reflect the reality of an equally complex system of social differentiation in life. Moreover, the discrete bundle arrangements within the ossuaries and the close associations of particular mortuary goods with specific individuals within the ossuary pits suggest that individual identities and statuses were significant enough for perpetual maintenance after death, while kin group or communal allegiances were simultaneously maintained through collective rituals.

Given the qualitative, and perhaps quantitative, differences in mortuary goods associated with the Late Woodland period, Cashie I phase burials, chronological aspects associated with regional socio-

political changes might be important to consider. The Dickerson site ossuary, with its larger population and apparent lack of burial goods, may represent more egalitarian mortuary practices associated with the earliest years of the Cashie phase. Following this line of hypothetical reasoning, the Sans Souci site ossuaries, with the more ‘personal’ burial goods, represent a transition or middle period in the phase. Finally, the Jordan’s Landing ossuaries and primary burials, with the presence or absence of more symbolically loaded artifacts (i.e., cut shell beads, *Marginella* beads, marine and/or freshwater bivalve shells), and differential grave locations within the community, may represent the opposite end of a continuum, and the development of a more complex society with competing ascribed and achieved status groups. This said, however, *Marginella* beads in particular are most often associated with specific female bundle burials and their presence may relate to matrilineal station within a clan, or perhaps marital and reproductive status. On the other hand, if the sites discussed are approximately contemporaneous, differential inter-site patterns may relate to community size, perhaps indicative of a nascent settlement hierarchy in the region.

What forces might account for the apparent rise in social complexity inferred from these mortuary patterns? Several factors likely contributed to the emergence of more complex regional mortuary rituals and burial practices in the lower Roanoke River valley during the Late Woodland period. Hypotheses to explore variously relate to agricultural intensification, socio-political complexity and possibly ethnicity. Recent stable isotope studies indicate a dramatic increase in dependence on C₄ plants, essentially maize, by Inner Coastal Plain peoples during the Late Woodland period. This observation suggests that farming activities associated with domesticated maize and other crops intensified in the region during the Cashie I phase. Given the apparent year-round habitation and the reliance on anadromous fishing and farming at the Jordan’s Landing site, Cashie I phase peoples were likely much more sedentary than their Middle Woodland period counterparts. Although there are exceptions to the generality, increased subsistence emphasis on farming and the concomitant development of agriculturally based, sedentary social systems and rapid population growth have combined to spawn increased socio-political complexity in many cultural contexts.

As for ethnicity, regional archaeological evidence strongly suggests that Cashie II phase (AD 1650—1715) material manifestations are directly associated with the Iroquoian affiliated Tuscaroras. Moreover, these manifestations are similar to those of the earlier Cashie I phase, and associated with ancestral Tuscaroran peoples who migrated into northeastern North Carolina, perhaps out of northern Appalachia, sometime after AD 800—900. With the florescence of the Cashie phase came palisaded villages, longhouse habitation structures, ossuary burials, settlement pattern changes, shifts in subsistence regimes and distinctive changes in ceramic technology. While some material changes may relate to *in situ* development, including ossuary burials, other changes, such as the importation of a well-developed horticultural system, may directly relate to the influx of peoples ethnically and culturally related to early northern Iroquoian societies. Given the ethnohistoric and archaeological relationship between the “Feast of the Dead” rituals and certain northern Iroquoian societies, ancestral Tuscaroran peoples may have continued similar practices in eastern North Carolina. Alternately, since there is some indication that ossuary burial traditions occurred slightly earlier in the Southeast, the practice may represent the adoption and modification of secondary burial rituals associated with Colington phase peoples in the adjacent Tidewater region—Colington phase mortuary practices are well-documented, both archaeologically and ethnohistorically. These thorny issues are probably interrelated and difficult to tease out, but perhaps future excavations, fine-grained chronological data and further mortuary pattern studies will help us to better understand the presently ephemeral transformation process.

In the Lower Roanoke River valley, Middle and Late Woodland period mortuary patterns vary within each given time period, but there is a distinctive trend toward manifestations of increasingly complex mortuary rituals over time. Middle Woodland period mortuary patterns likely reflect individualistic or immediate household focused rituals, while Late Woodland period mortuary patterns apparently reflect extended kin-group or community-focused rituals. Although the Cashie I phase ossuaries were found located in the “residential area” at the Jordan’s Landing site, no ossuaries were significantly disturbed by other Cashie phase features or postholes, despite evidence for multiple rebuilding episodes around the burial pits. The intra-site patterns at the Jordan’s Landing and Sans Souci

sites suggest that Cashie I phase ossuaries were carefully preserved and were, themselves, a material manifestation of communal social memory.

Since the ossuaries were spatially associated with household living areas, the perpetual presence of ancestral remains and burials was a daily facet of life for the people who lived there. The close association between living areas and mortuary areas effectively integrated the places and spaces of death with those of the living community. As such, the communities of the living and the dead were perpetually intertwined in a manner rather alien to our own post-modern society, where we typically impose sharp spatial boundaries between the living and the dead. The ossuary burials in Cashie I phase villages may represent the blending of familial and communal desires to maintain both personal and abstract knowledge of the dead. The spatial placement of the dead inside or adjacent to a house likely served the function of family level social memory maintenance for the immediate kin group, while community rituals associated with secondary burial, served the function of abstract social memory maintenance for the greater community.

Although we do not have the time to explore all possible facets of meaning behind the mortuary patterns discussed, other equally important issues related to protracted grief, especially with the death of young children, the manner of individual death (natural or unnatural causes), or philosophical and religious beliefs, often influence or determine burial practices—mortuary practices quite often reflect much more than the social status of an individual or community social organization. Consider John Lawson's (1709) account of the burial of a Tuscarora man who died from a lightning strike in the early 18th century. This individual was interred in a primary burial, away from the village, after special burial rituals were observed, apparently in a manner quite different from the societal norm. Among the northern Hurons, raid casualties, or drowning and lightning strike victims, did not receive secondary burial treatment and were buried well away from formal village ossuaries. Dead infants were buried in the daily activity areas of Huron villages so that the souls of the deceased children might more easily enter another fertile womb as women passed over the graves. Cross-culturally, belief systems and notions of the soul often guide orientation (cardinal direction) and body position of the deceased, the spatial arrangement of

burial goods, as well as acts associated with secondary burial rituals. Unfortunately, such important cultural aspects are difficult to materially address in the absence of culturally appropriate ethnographic or ethnohistoric inferences.

Given the geographically and analytically circumscribed sample considered here, we cannot readily assess the range of potential geo-spatial variations in mortuary practices for the entirety of the Mount Pleasant (300 BC—AD 800) and Cashie I (AD 800—1650) phases across the Coastal Plain of eastern North Carolina. This summary study is further limited for lack of associated radiocarbon dates for two sites (Sans Souci and Dickerson) and all individual burials considered here. Unfortunately, burial objects suitable for radiocarbon or thermo-luminescent dating are not available, or not presently assayed, and the absence of radiometric dates necessarily constrain all chronologically related interpretations considered here. Despite these problematic issues, the synthesized data from the Jordan's Landing, Sans Souci and Dickerson sites provide a significant foundation for future studies of Middle and Late Woodland period mortuary practices in northeastern North Carolina.

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Endnotes

¹ This paper represents a generalized and revised summary taken from Heath (2003:1-98).

² See Byrd (1999) and Millis (2003) for discussion of Cashie II phase mortuary patterns.

³ Herbert (2003:Table 5.3).

⁴ Herbert (2003:Table 5.4).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.