

Public Abstract

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The Spoon Toe Site (11MG179): Middle Woodland Gardening in the Lower Illinois River Valley

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Archaeologists conducting research in the Lower Illinois River valley in western Illinois have identified Middle Woodland period sites. These include Hopewell sites located near the main river valley and smaller Massey phase sites located in the uplands above the main valley. This thesis is an examination of archaeobotanical remains, that is the carbonized plant remains from flotation samples taken from cultural features during archaeological excavation, from the Spoon Toe site, which is a Middle Woodland Massey phase site located in Morgan County in western Illinois. The Spoon Toe site is similar to other Massey phase sites in that Crab Orchard-like pottery, similar in style to ceramics found at contemporaneous southern Illinois sites, dominates the utilitarian ceramic assemblage. Like other Middle Woodland western Illinois sites, the presence of a suite of cultigens called the Eastern Agricultural Complex is evidence of the horticultural activities of the occupants of the sites. Additionally, at no other time in prehistory and almost exclusively in the Lower Illinois River valley, hazelnut is a prominent taxon in the nutshell assemblage.

In this thesis, the botanical remains from the Spoon Toe site are analyzed and compared with other Middle Woodland sites in western Illinois. The botanical assemblages from these sites are then compared with those from southern Illinois Crab Orchard sites and Middle Woodland sites located in the American Bottom to educe regional variation in plant use patterns. This is followed by a discussion of the mobility issues regarding horticultural people. Ethnographic analogy is utilized to formulate a model of what the archaeological sites of residually mobile farmers during the Middle Woodland period might look like including the organization of a site, artifact assemblage, and most relevant to this study, the botanical assemblage. The four Massey phase sites closely resemble the proposed model of residually mobile agriculturalists.

Archaeobotany is a relatively new subfield of archaeology stemming from the innovations of flotation technology that enables us to recover small plant remains from soil samples in the process gaining an understanding of the foodways of prehistoric peoples. This study is important in that it adds to the growing archaeobotanical database that can be used for further comparisons by others in the field. Additionally, the model of residually mobile agriculturalists presented here can be applied to other sites. The model encourages a broader examination of sites, i.e., looking at not only the botanical assemblage in conjunction with site organization, ceramics, and lithics, to understand the lifestyle of early agriculturalists.