

The Ingomar Mounds Site (22UN500) Union County, Mississippi

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The Ingomar Mounds site was a Native American mortuary and ceremonial mound center constructed between 2000 and 1700 years ago (1 – 300 A.D.) during what archaeologists often call the Middle Woodland Period. There were once 14 visible mounds scattered all over the site you are standing on, but only a handful, including the large flat-topped mound you can see clearly, have survived to this day. This handout contains information on the site itself, as well as the time-period in which it was constructed. For further reading, please consult the bibliography included at the bottom.

The Middle Woodland Period (200 B.C. – 500 A.D.)

Native Americans have lived in Mississippi for approximately 14,000 years. However, 2,200 years ago (200 B.C.), 1,300 years after the first pottery was made in Mississippi (1500 B.C.) and 800 years before the bow and arrow first arrived here (600 A.D.), a pattern of life emerged that archaeologists now call the Middle Woodland Period (200 B.C. – 500 A.D.). During this time, people here subsisted on the seasonal harvesting of hickory nuts, fruits, game animals, and shellfish, and would extensively store foods for times of hardship. Until the beginning of horticulture and agriculture later in the Late Woodland Period (500-1000 A.D.), all Mississippi Indians practiced this hunting and gathering lifestyle, which is known to archaeologists as “foraging.” Middle Woodland foragers lived in small communities, perhaps two or three very lightly-built huts per settlement and made pottery out of clay that was mixed with sand, or ground-up pieces of older broken pots, called “grog.” They often indented the outside of wet pottery before firing to give them a gripping surface. They did this by rolling on the pots with sticks wrapped with twisted, two-ply cords. This is known as “cordmarking” and their imprints are clearly visible thousands of years after the fact. Unfortunately, we don’t know very much about the huts or houses they lived in at this time, as this evidence often rots away quickly, but it is believed that they were generally a couple of meters wide, roughly circular, and probably made of branches laid or tied onto a bent pole framework. Again, when the Ingomar Mounds were built, the bow and arrow did not yet exist in Mississippi. Instead, hunting was done with spear throwers (or “atl-atls”), netting, and snares, as it had been for at least 12,000 years prior. People in Mississippi during the Middle Woodland Period, including those who built Ingomar, were likely not as mobile as we once thought. Instead, we now know that they probably spent at least one or several years at each settled location before moving. What is also known is that during the Middle Woodland period, these people probably **did not live at the Ingomar site** or at other similar mound sites. Only a little pottery or other artifacts from that time have been found in the field surrounding the mounds, showing that people did not stay for extended periods of time when they did visit. Instead, dozens of little settlements may have dotted the countryside around Ingomar at any given time and came together only to bury people in the burial mounds or to practice their religion on the summit of the big flat-topped mound. What this religion or its beliefs entailed, is unknown. It was only during the Late Woodland Period, after people were no longer buried in the mounds, that very small settlements began to pop up on the site.

Burial Mounds

Burial mounds, or “tumuli,” were a characteristic of the Middle Woodland time-period, and Mississippi has hundreds of them, while the eastern U.S. overall probably had many thousands. Prehistoric Native Americans did not have shovels or livestock to help with earthmoving, and they instead relied on digging sticks, their bare hands, large baskets, and “bucket lines” of people to move earth from where it was dug, to where it was dumped. Building just one mound was an enormously labor-intensive task for even a large-sized group of people. Burial mounds were often relatively small, dome-shaped, and layered earthen heaps that contained human burials, pottery, stone tools, and other grave goods left by the people who built them. Burial mounds probably averaged around 10 feet tall and 50 feet wide, although there are certainly much larger examples scattered across the state, as well as many that are far smaller. They were also usually not built completely at one time, but layer-by-layer, or “accretionally”, over a period of several years. Each layer would contain more burials and artifacts, likely added intermittently as people within these communities died from old age or sickness.

At the very bottom of Mississippi burial mounds, there are occasionally one of several types of log crypts, clay platforms, and tombs that have been noted in past excavations. Some pits found underneath some mounds appear to have been crematoria, indicated by the piles of burned human bone fragments, charcoal, and fire-baked walls. Many burials are found with pottery and stone tools, and even some shell beads. Occasionally, they will contain non-local minerals like mica sheets and cubes of galena, a silver-colored lead ore that was used for paint by Native Americans. Very, very rarely, copper items such as beads and earspools have been found. Middle Woodland copper has been sourced to the Great Lakes region, but it is possible that some came from the Appalachian Mountains, demonstrating how wide-ranging trade networks were then. Extremely rarely, very roughly-made silver items have been found, and this silver was probably traded in from eastern Canada, but such finds are practically one-in-a-billion. Very little of anything found in burial mounds is well-preserved, and there certainly is no gold, coins, or “treasure” to be found as they were not built historically, but 1500 years before European contact, and U.S. Native Americans did not trade in gold. The special items we do find, like copper, are usually nothing more than green stains in soil after thousands of years underground. Their value is historical, rather than monetary. It must be made clear that digging in mounds without being a licensed or qualified archaeologist, or without permission from state and other archaeological authorities, is immoral, and illegal in every instance that human burials are purposefully uncovered. Trade in artifacts known to have come from burials can also constitute a felony if state lines have been crossed. The penalties for grave robbing in Mississippi are extremely harsh and life-altering for perpetrators, for very good reasons, and they are prosecuted regularly.

The Ingomar Site

There are several large sites in Mississippi with multiple burial mounds, including Bynum Mounds (22CS501) and Pharr Mounds (22PS500) on the Natchez Trace Parkway, and the Batesville Mounds (22PA500) in Panola County. However, Ingomar was one of the largest, if not the largest of these. There were 14 mounds at Ingomar, including 13 burial mounds, most of which have been damaged or plowed away. Eight of the mounds were partially or completely excavated in 1885 as part of a nationwide mound survey by the Smithsonian Institution. Of the eight, two

contained preserved burials (Mounds 1 and 5), four contained only ashes that were possibly burials, pottery, charcoal, and other artifacts (Mounds 2, 3, 7, 8) and two contained nothing at all (Mounds 4 and 6). It is highly probable that all of the mounds contained burials originally, but that they either did not preserve, or were not noticed by excavators. Bones can be little more than dust after only a few decades in Mississippi soil, not to mention 2000 years. Some of the burial mounds are still present and visible as slight rises, including Mound 1, which is a slight elevation in the field to your left as you are walking along the fencerow towards the big mound (Mound 14). Mound 10 was partially excavated in the 1980s, and all that was found were broken pottery pieces, and ashes containing tiny burned bone fragments. It is unknown whether they were human cremation remains, but it is very possible they were.

Mound 1

In 1885, Mound 1 was 14 feet high, but excavating and plowing has brought it down to about 3 feet high today. At the bottom of the mound were traces of ash and charcoal, some postholes, and pits of unknown function. There were also 10 fragments of broken pottery made from clay and grog, no other pottery was found in the rest of the mound. The fill of the mound showed clear intermittent layering of soil that was not always evenly laid down, but in large piles that were then connected with more soil. Scattered throughout were 13 burials, including two that were buried with fragments of galena, and three that were buried with altogether 509 marine conch and snail shell beads from the Gulf Coast. The final layer was a clay cap added to the outside in order to “seal” off the mound. It is important to remember that only about ¼ of the whole volume of the mound (mainly its center) was excavated, meaning that despite the damage from plowing, there were certainly more things to uncover, and this is probably still the case.

Mound 5

Again, this mound was the only other to have preserved burials in it. Unfortunately, it was not well documented when it was excavated, so all that is certain about it is that it contained 13 burials of jumbled and mixed bones (possibly reburied after removal from the original graves), it had three main construction layers, and that there was one artifact found in it, a broken ceramic tobacco pipe. Pipes are occasionally found in Middle Woodland mounds, but they are not exceptionally common. This one was typical of the few others that have ever been found in Mississippi.

Mound 14

Mound 14 is a large rectangular platform-shaped mound, approximately 25-30 feet tall, 100 feet wide, and 150 feet long, and is the largest mound ever built at Ingomar. As far as archaeologists have been able to figure out, it is **not** a burial mound. The mound contains hundreds of thousands of cubic feet of earth - perhaps thousands of dump truck loads of soil. The purpose of this mound, as I suggested earlier, was likely ceremonial or communal in some way. On the northeast side lies a ramp, or an elongated incline-shaped walkway that allowed its builders to reach the summit. This ramp is on the opposite side to the one with the modern wooden staircase you used to climb the mound. A handful of MSU excavations that took place on the summit and the ramp during the 1980s found only a sparse amount of pottery and stone flakes. A radiocarbon date from the summit showed that it was built around 200 A.D., or 1,800 years ago.

Conclusion

Ingomar Mounds is a large burial and ceremonial mound site that was built around 2000 years ago by non-agricultural Native Americans of the Middle Woodland period. The people who built Ingomar did so to bury the dead and perhaps practice ceremonies on the summit of the biggest mound, Mound 14. Middle Woodland people only visited Ingomar periodically and did not live on the site. Late Woodland peoples, who used the bow and arrow, built small settlements near the mounds sometime between 500 - 1000 A.D., although but they did not bury their dead in the mounds. The Middle Woodland people did not yet have the bow and arrow, the wheel, or livestock, but were able to accomplish earthmoving and mound building at a scale that can be difficult to do even with modern machinery. The mounds were an elaborate graveyard that grew over a span of 200-300 years, existed largely unaltered for 1600 more, only to be greatly damaged and reduced in the last 100. Ingomar is both a testament to the incredible skill and determination of prehistoric Native Americans, as well as the outcome of previously poor stewardship of historical treasures. Today, these mounds are owned and protected for years to come by the Archaeological Conservancy, which manages endangered sites across Mississippi, and the rest of the U.S. Ponder and respect the monumental nature of what you see here, and always be curious about the past, and of those who lived here before you.



Figure 1. Some well-preserved burial mounds at the Pharr Site in Mississippi, much like the ones that were once found at Ingomar.

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/23/Pharr_Mounds.jpg

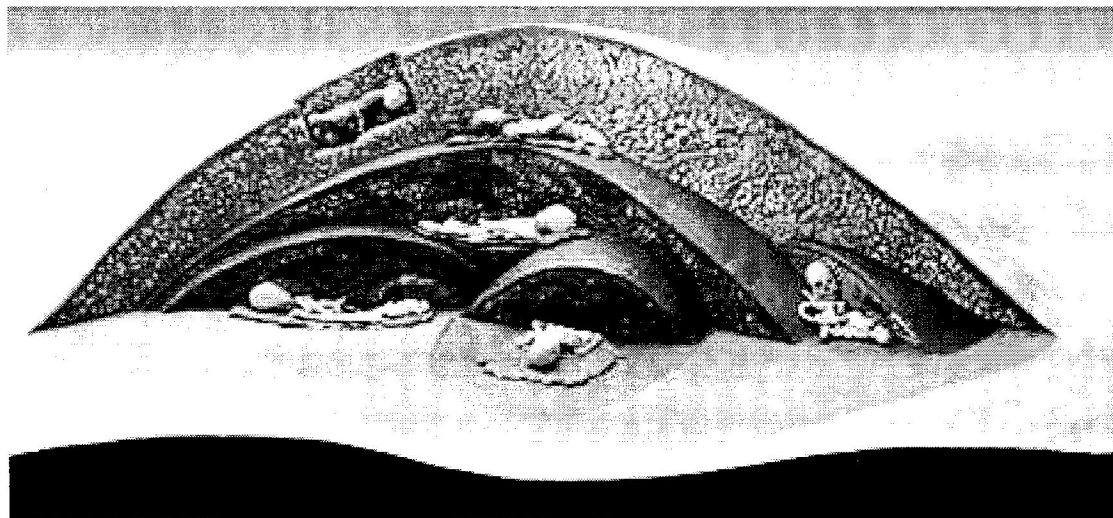


Figure 2. Cross-section of an accretional burial mound showing how they were built and how burials were included in the soil. There were 13 of these mounds at Ingomar, and is the most common type of Indian mound in Mississippi, and perhaps the most common across the whole Eastern U.S. Furthermore, most of these mounds are around 2000 years in age. Despite legend, gold or other treasure is not found in these mounds. Instead, they only contain scattered pottery, stone tools, occasionally shell, and very rarely, decorative copper fragments that were left with the dead.

Source: http://touringohio.com/history/art/mound-illus_0330.jpg

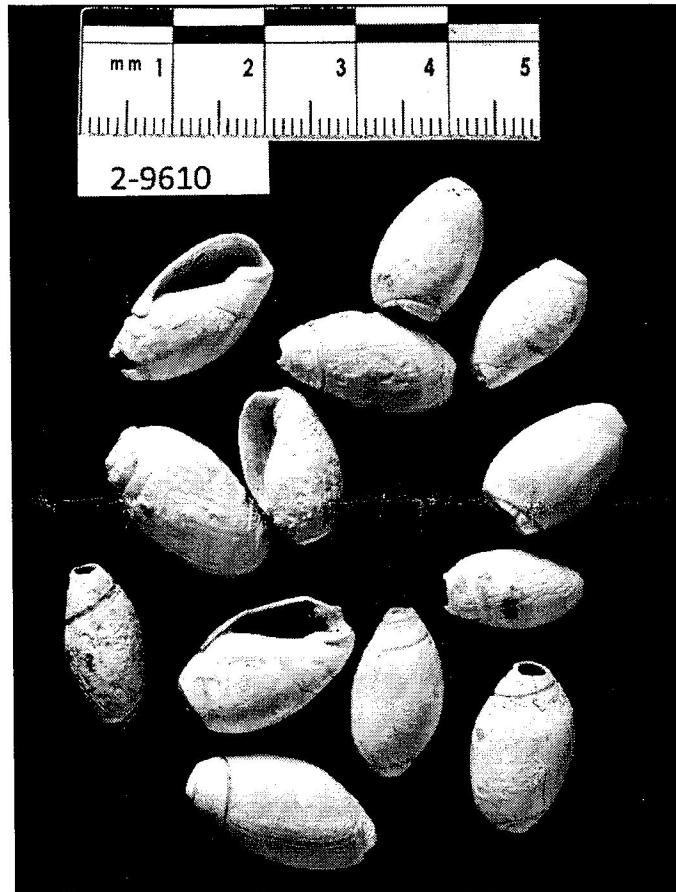


Figure 3. *Olivella* snail shell beads similar to those found in Mound 1 at the Ingomar Site.
Source: https://mnch.uoregon.edu/sites/mnch1.uoregon.edu/files/2-9610_4-edit_web.jpg

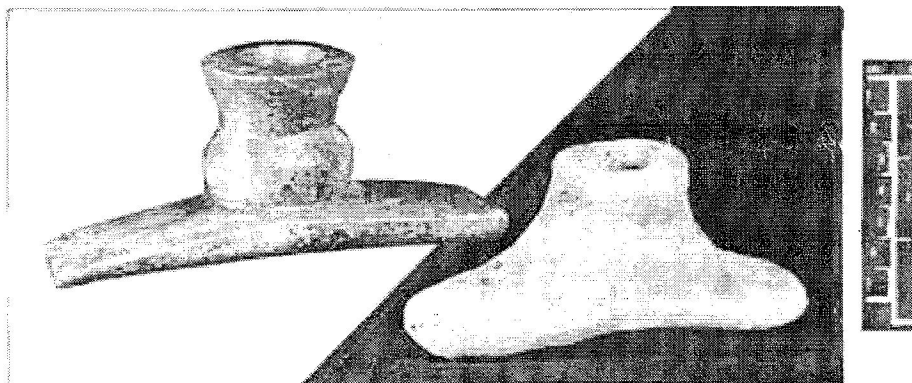


Figure 4. "Monitor" pipes made of clay and ground soapstone from the Pharr Mounds in Northern Mississippi approx. 40 miles east of Ingomar. A pipe similar to the one on the right was found in Mound 5 at Ingomar.
Source: https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/natr/pharr_mounds-bear_creek/images/fig22-1.jpg

Further Reading

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