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PREHISTORIC SUBSISTENCE AND SETTLEMENT
ON THE UPPER SAVANNAH RIVER

by

E. Thomas Hemmings

RMS # 8

38AB 10-14, 17-20, 22-37

38AN 5-8

No map

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INTRODUCTION

During recent archeological surveys in the Trotters Shoals Reservoir basin on the upper Savannah River, 70 prehistoric sites were recorded (Hemmings 1970; Hutto 1970). Prior surveys of the Hartwell and Clark Hill basins, above and below Trotters Shoals, as well as a few excavations, provide some basis for inferring a sequence of subsistence and settlement patterns in the upper valley (Claflin 1931; Miller 1948, 1949; Caldwell 1953a, 1953b; Kelly and Neitzel 1961; Wauchope 1966). Specifically, relatively large numbers of sites in this area are assignable to a Middle Archaic period, dating approximately 6500-1800 B.C., and to a late prehistoric-early protohistoric period, ca. A.D. 1300-1600. The former group of sites is dominated by small lithic campsites with Old Quartz-Morrow Mountain stone tool assemblages, and the latter by larger mound and village sites with Savannah-Lamar ceramic assemblages. In addition, there is the group of transitional Stallings Island sites in the immediate vicinity of Augusta. Although there is some evidence for 10,000 years of occupation in the upper Savannah valley, other periods are not well represented.

In this analysis I shall rely primarily on results obtained from survey of the South Carolina portion of the Trotters Shoals Reservoir area, where 32 prehistoric sites were recorded, and secondarily on the Georgia survey results (Hutto 1970). The reservoir pool will extend about 26 miles up the Savannah River from the head of Clark Hill Reservoir to Hartwell Dam, with major branches 12 miles long on the

Rocky River and nine miles long on Beaverdam Creek. This area includes portions of Hart and Elbert counties in northeast Georgia and Abbeville and Anderson counties in western South Carolina (U. S. Army Corps of Engineers 1968).

The survey technique employed in the South Carolina survey was intended to provide preliminary subsistence and settlement data. Since Piedmont landforms are old and stable with respect to human occupation, we would expect modern site location characteristics to directly reflect past site selection and use. The types and frequencies of tools in sample surface collections should further reflect the nature of site use. It will be shown later that particular kinds of tool assemblages recurred on particular kinds of site locations within the survey area. These observations suggest hypothetical patterns of subsistence and settlement, which can be tested by a program of excavation and detailed analyses of larger site collections.

ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

The Savannah River is one of the major drainages of the Atlantic Slope. Below the fall line at Augusta, the river flows over unconsolidated coastal plain sediments; meandering slowly over a broad, swampy floodplain, it falls 130 feet in the 125 mile lower valley. In contrast, the river is fast-moving in its straight, narrow, upper valley, falling 370 feet in 85 miles from the Seneca-Tugaloo confluence (flooded by Hartwell Reservoir) to Augusta. The upper Savannah River flows entirely within the Piedmont Upland province (Fenneman 1938). The Piedmont Upland surface, extending from the Blue Ridge Mountains to the inner edge of the coastal plain, has a characteristic level skyline, although the rivers and their larger tributaries are deeply entrenched. In the Trotters Shoals Reservoir area the Savannah River has cut about 200 feet from the upland surface, through a deep residual clay mantle, to underlying crystalline rocks (Overstreet and Bell 1965).

Another salient character of the upper Savannah River, and of other Piedmont rivers, is the occurrence of hard rock outcrops and rough water at intervals along its course. These shoals exerted some influence on the prehistoric use of the river since they provided excellent conditions for shallow-water fishing and facilitated crossings on foot. However, shoals were not suitable habitat for molluscs, such as occur near Stallings Island, and they may have impeded boat travel to some extent. An engineering survey of the upper Savannah early in this century shows that about half the length and three quarters of the fall of the river within the reservoir basin is accounted for by five

major shoals (Hall and Hoyt 1905). The Georgia and South Carolina survey results suggest that prehistoric occupation was somewhat concentrated at these points, especially at Gregg, Cherokee and Trotters Shoals.

For the purpose of analysis of site locations, four distinct geomorphic and microenvironmental zones can be identified in the upper Savannah Valley. The first is the river channel itself, where abundant, highly seasonal, food resources, including runs of shad, migrating waterfowl, and so on, were available. The second is alluvial floodplain, which was definitely restricted in occurrence on the river and its tributaries, but provided some suitable terrain for grazing and browsing mammals, game birds, and predators, and for agricultural land. The third zone is the valley slopes, extensive, highly dissected bands of terrain bordering the river and larger tributaries, where small drainages have cut a series of deep gullies and high interfluves at right angles to the entrenched main streams. Travel by men and animals on the valley slopes parallel to the river is hardly possible. Today the zone is heavily forested. The last microenvironmental zone is the upland surface, a rolling plain meeting the valley slopes along an irregular rim. Here was extensive dryer habitat for a variety of mammals and birds, and relatively easy conditions for travel.

The character of Piedmont vegetation in prehistoric times is poorly known (Whitehead 1965). Botanist William Bartram, crossing the Savannah River at Trotters Shoals in May, 1776, described vegetation much like that occurring today in the area, but omitting short-leaf pines which have come into dominance through historic activities (Luginbill 1926; Van Doren 1928: 266).

LITHIC SITES

Sites whose surface collections included only stone materials were most numerous throughout the reservoir basin. Sixteen were recorded in South Carolina and 21 in Georgia (Hutto 1970). Nearly all the lithic site collections included Morrow Mountain, Guilford, or Savannah River projectile points (Coe 1964), Old Quartz bifaces and unifacial flake tools (Caldwell 1954), and quartz chipping debris. Among the South Carolina lithic sites all were located on elevated terrain within the dissected valley slopes. Furthermore, the site situations were of recurrent types, the most common being promontories, or convergent ends of interfluves nearest major streams, and ridge crests located on interfluves more distant from streams. Lithic sites generally shared these characteristics: (1) an occupation area of one to six acres, as measured by artifact scatter, (2) a commanding view of extensive lower terrain, at least if modern forests were thinned or removed, and (3) tabular masses of white quartz outcropping locally in residual clay, and evidence of quartz knapping (Table 1).

These lithic site location characteristics and artifact assemblages suggest a dependence on hunting, and perhaps a forest nomadism pattern as postulated by Caldwell (1958). The promontory sites of limited size and tool inventory may be vantage points, occupied by single hunters or small hunting parties, who were knapping quartz on a limited scale. Larger promontory and ridge crest sites with diverse tool inventories probably represent campsites, occupied by small groups of men, women, and children who performed a variety of domestic tasks.

Three of these sites produced handstones and grinding slabs, presumably for processing plant foods, as well as the common flaked tool types.

Morrow Mountain projectile points and Old Quartz bifaces and unifacial flake tools were frequently associated on lithic sites in the reservoir basin. On the basis of technology, as well as association in surface collections, these tool types may represent a single complex. I seriously doubt that small site collections of Old Quartz tools are evidence of non-projectile point or pre-projectile point complexes, but analyses of larger excavated collections are needed.

In addition to Old Quartz-Morrow Mountain sites, a number of lithic site collections from the reservoir basin were characterized by Savannah River projectile points and a preference for chert, argillite, and other non-quartz knapping materials. These sites are few for initially formulating a subsistence-settlement system, but at least some are located particularly favorably for fishing. It is possible that the subsistence base was significantly broadened during this preceramic phase of the Savannah River Archaic, or approximately 3000-1800 B.C., by new emphasis on the resources of the river channel microenvironment, perhaps including aquatic mammals and birds as well as fish.

CERAMIC SITES

Seven ceramic sites without significant evidence of preceramic components were recorded in the South Carolina survey and 10 in the Georgia portion of the reservoir basin (Hutto 1970). Among the South Carolina ceramic sites, three were small camps in the valley slopes zone, probably representing hunting, fishing, and collecting stations, while four were villages on alluvial floodplain, 4 to 8 or more acres in extent, reflecting primary dependence on farming (Table 2). In Georgia two mound and village sites of less imposing size than the Rembert Mound Group downstream (flooded by Clark Hill Reservoir) were located on Beaverdam Creek (Caldwell 1953b; Hutto 1970). Most ceramic sites in the Trotters Shoals Reservoir area produced stamped Savannah and Lamar pottery types, and presumably were occupied in the Mississippian and Protohistoric periods, or between about A.D. 1300 and 1600. Earlier Woodland pottery types were uncommon among surface collections, and Woodland occupation seems to have consisted of small hunting, fishing, and collecting camps in the Archaic tradition.

Fiber-tempered pottery was introduced about 1800 B.C. at Stallings Island, and is found in several freshwater shellfish midden sites nearby, but apparently was never utilized farther upstream. No fiber-tempered sherds were present in Trotters Shoals survey collections.

Perhaps because of the dearth of floodplain farmlands, late prehistoric full dependence on agriculture and the spread of complex ceremonialism, so characteristic of other Southeastern regions, largely bypassed the upper Savannah Valley. Continuing this trend in early

historic times, the Cherokee Lower Settlements were located above the upper valley, which served as hunting territory and a buffer zone against the Creeks (Mooney 1900).

MULTICOMPONENT SITES

Six sites in the South Carolina portion of the reservoir basin and seven in Georgia produced evidence of both preceramic and ceramic components in the form of identifiable Archaic projectile point types and pottery sherds. The South Carolina sites are small camps on the dissected valley slopes, which were probably concerned with hunting, fishing, and collecting (Table 3). Generally, no tillable land was available in the immediate vicinity. These sites were characterized by preceramic and ceramic components common elsewhere in the basin, i.e., Morrow Mountain, Savannah River, and Savannah-Lamar, while the Georgia sites produced some evidence of Woodland occupation (Hutto 1970). The nature of multicomponent sites strengthens the supposition that exploitation of natural food resources was basic to subsistence, even after floodplain farming was practiced in the upper valley.

FISH TRAPS

One group of sites is entirely confined to the river channel. These consist of boulder alignments placed across the current at strategic locations. Similar structures have been reported on many of the larger rivers of the eastern United States (Strandberg and Tomlinson 1969). The common type consists of one or more V-shaped rock structures; the apex of the V pointed downstream and terminated in an open chute where fish were collected in basketry traps. The use of these traps by historic Indians is well described by Adair (1775: 432) and other early traders and travelers.

Three fish traps were located on the Savannah River within the reservoir basin, but others may be undetected because of high water and poor preservation. One trap, consisting of a 300 foot alignment and two V's, extends from the South Carolina bank to the north end of Carter Island at Cherokee Shoals. This structure has the interesting possibility of being datable by radiocarbon; two logs, incorporated in the alignment during construction or repair, should give some idea of its age. A second, more irregular, 200 foot alignment is located just downstream. No artifacts were associated with these traps, but a ceramic site, believed to be a fishing camp, was recorded one quarter mile upstream, and may be associated with their use. The third trap, only observed on air photos, contains two V's and extends about 400 feet from the Georgia bank to Goat Island at Trotters Shoals. It appears to be well preserved. All of these structures should be studied, mapped, and photographed in detail before inundation by Trotters Shoals Reservoir.

TABLE 1. Summary of lithic site types and characteristics.

SITE DESIGNATION	DISTANCE TO RIVER (miles)*	AREA OF OCCUPATION (acres)	TOPOGRAPHIC LOCATION	SITE TYPE**	PROJECTILE POINT TYPES
38AB11	.05	1+	bluff near shoal	fishing camp	—
38AB17	.25	2	ridge crest	vantage point	—
38AB18	.19	2	promontory	vantage point	—
38AB19	.33	6	ridge crest	camp/vantage point	Morrow Mountain I
38AB25	.28	2	promontory	vantage point	—
38AB27	.13	1	ridge crest (saddle)	quarry?	Palmer
38AB28	.02	1	promontory	vantage point	Morrow Mountain I
38AB29	.01	5+	ridge crest	camp	Guilford
38AB30	.08	1	promontory	camp/vantage point	—
38AB31	.28	1+	ridge crest	camp	Morrow Mountain I
38AB32	.09	2	promontory	camp	Palmer, Morrow Mountain I
38AB33	1.25	1	hillslope	camp/workshop?	Morrow Mountain I
38AB35	1.25	1	knoll	camp/workshop?	Guilford
38AB37	.15	2	promontory	camp/vantage point	Guilford, Savannah River
38AN5	.06	—	hillslope near shoal	fishing camp	Savannah River
(16) 38AN6	.10	3	promontory	camp/vantage point	Guilford

* Represents approximate map distance; actual walking distance is somewhat greater.

** Inferred from site size, location, artifact content, and other characteristics.

TABLE 2. Summary of ceramic site types and characteristics.

SITE DESIGNATION	DISTANCE TO RIVER (miles)*	AREA OF OCCUPATION (acres)	TOPOGRAPHIC LOCATION	SITE TYPE**	POTTERY TYPES
38AB12	.02	1+	bluff	farming/fishing camp	—
38AB13	.02	—	floodplain	agricultural village	—
38AB14	.06	1	bluff near shoal	fishing camp	—
38AB22	.00	—	floodplain	agricultural village	—
38AB26	.02	4+	floodplain	farming/fishing camp	—
38AB34	1.00	4+	hill crest	seasonal hunting/ collecting village?	Lamar
(7) 38AN8	.08	8+	floodplain	agricultural village	Lamar?

* Represents approximate map distance; actual walking distance is somewhat greater.

** Inferred from site size, location, artifact content, and other characteristics.

TABLE 3. Summary of multicomponent site types and characteristics.

SITE DESIGNATION	DISTANCE TO RIVER (miles)*	AREA OF OCCUPATION (acres)	TOPOGRAPHIC LOCATION	SITE TYPE**	PROJECTILE POINT TYPES
38AB10	.04	2+	bluff near shoal	fishing camp	—
38AB20	.50	4+	ridge crest	hunting/collecting camp	Savannah River
38AB23	2.00	1	hillslope	hunting/collecting and farming (?) camp	Morrow Mountain I
38AB24	2.00	1	hillslope	hunting/collecting and farming (?) camp	Yadkin, Morrow Mountain I
38AB36	.75	1	knoll	hunting/fishing camp	Caraway, Yadkin, Savannah River
(6) 38AN7	.04	2+	bluff	fishing camp	—

* Represents approximate map distance; actual walking distance is somewhat greater.

** Inferred from site size, location, artifact content, and other characteristics.

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