

## Moundville Linked to Chickasaw Past

**H**istory's first glimpse of the Chickasaws occurred when Hernando de Soto's Spanish expedition settled in December 1540 into a village the Indians had abandoned. Although the Spaniards stayed into March and had frequent contact with the Chickasaws, "glimpse," unfortunately, is the word that best characterizes the written accounts of the Spanish chroniclers.

Apparently these Spanish were too single-minded to be curious about or interested in the people they had encountered. Of course, as is evident from the chroniclers' accounts of the expedition's four-year trek across the Southeast, they recorded few details about the culture of any of the tribes they met.

Thus, a golden opportunity was lost to note their observations of Chickasaw culture at the earliest point in the tribe's recorded history. This is particularly unfortunate because it is likely that less than a century before—and maybe only a few years before—the Chickasaws who encountered de Soto had been living in very different circumstances. In fact, it is possible that within that relatively short time-span the people had come together from various settlements to form what would first be recognized at Chicaca as the Chickasaw tribe.

Trying to work back into tribal history prior to December 1540 in a step-wise fashion may be an impossible task. We don't know where precisely the Chickasaws were living then, let alone prior to that time. But archaeologists who have studied Southeastern prehistoric human remains and artifacts believe that the ancestors of the Chickasaws and most other Southeastern tribes were the highly centralized, mound-building Indians of the

so-called Mississippian Period (roughly 900 to 1600 A.D.).

De Soto came along when this 700-year period was collapsing, and, as a result, many of the groups of Indians were moving permanently away from the period's characteristic centralized chiefdoms to more decentralized and democratic tribes. Descriptions in the de Soto chronicles suggest that the Chickasaws were going through this period of transition.

During the collapse, it is possible that migrating Indians from different locations in the Southeast had come together to form upland settlements overlooking rivers and streams. That this convergence may have happened is one reason why Governor Bill Anoatubby initiated Chickasaw Nation claims with the federal government involving Mississippian Period human remains and artifacts recently unearthed in construction projects in the Nashville area. The claims were initiated not to take possession of the material, but in keeping with tribal policy, to expedite the reburial of the remains and artifacts as near the original sites as possible. No one can say that none of the thousands of Indians who lived in the Nashville area during the Mississippian Period were or were not ancestral Chickasaws. But it is well-known that between 1400 and 1500 A.D., most of the Mississippian Indians abandoned

the area. Why they left and where they went has been the subject of years of speculation and debate.

Similar upheavals were taking place at approximately the same time in other Southeastern locations. One of the best documented by archaeologists occurred at Moundville. Because it is only sixty to seventy miles southeast of where some experts on de Soto's expedition believe that the Spaniards wintered over near the Chickasaws, Moundville may have been a prime site for ancestral Chickasaws. This does not suggest that Moundvillians wound up settling in Chicaca. Artifacts do suggest, however, that the Moundvillians dispersed throughout the Black Warrior River Valley of western Alabama. But Moundville pottery that dates from 1100 to almost 1500 has been found west of the Tombigbee River in Mississippi. This means that not only Moundvillians but also descendants of prior generations of Moundvillians could be ancestral Chickasaws. More specifically, some of the Moundville artifacts have been unearthed just northeast of Starkville, Mississippi, at Lyon's Bluff, which archaeologist Marvin Smith, among others, thinks could have been the location of Chicaca.

The evidence linking Moundville to the Chickasaw is circumstantial, and archaeologists don't like to go out on limbs. But, Moundville is a window to the tribe's distant

past, at the very least as a symbol of an epoch through which Southeastern Indians passed.

**A**rchaeologists have been digging at the Moundville site on and off for nearly a century, and each excavation yields new information that increases understanding or is fodder for new thinking about Moundville culture. So the fruits of any article are temporary. The purpose of this brief article on Moundville is to provide basic information and a bibliography for those wanting to learn more or expand and update their knowledge.

The earliest pottery on the site dated to about 1050 A.D. Shortly thereafter, the Indians built the first mound, presumably as a burial mound for high-status people. Such earthen mounds had been built over hundreds of years. What made Moundville different than other older and contemporary mound sites was that the Moundvillians

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**Facing Page:** This is the largest (68 feet high) of the Moundville chiefdom's 28 mounds, which were encompassed within 300 acres in west central Alabama. The recreated structure on top may have been a council house, the site of the chief's centralized power. (Courtesy Moundville Archaeological Park)

