

**THE BURKE PHASE:  
A MISSISSIPPIAN FRONTIER IN THE NORTH CAROLINA FOOTHILLS**

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## ABSTRACT

The Burke phase (AD 1400-1600) refers to a regionally distinct distribution of earthen mounds and soapstone-tempered, Burke ceramics along the upper Catawba and Yadkin rivers in the western North Carolina Piedmont. In this paper, the authors document the history of Burke phase archaeology, and using four lines of data--mound construction, mortuary assemblages, settlement patterns, and ethnohistorical sources--suggest that one or more regional polities, or chiefdoms, integrated portions of the study area during Burke phase times. Finally, the authors suggest that two specific factors, an ecotone setting and a location along major trade routes, had particularly important roles in the success of Mississippian strategies along this South Appalachian frontier.

## INTRODUCTION

Burke phase (AD 1400-1600) archaeological sites (see Figure 1) are located in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, along the upper reaches of the Catawba and Yadkin rivers in western North Carolina (Beck 1997a; Moore 1999, 2002:177-180). The earliest archaeological investigations in this region were conducted under the auspices of the Bureau of American Ethnology's mound exploration program during the late nineteenth century, as a result of which Cyrus Thomas (1887, 1891, 1894) and William H. Holmes (1903) reported more than twenty earthen mounds along the upper Catawba and Yadkin rivers. Unfortunately, Thomas's (1887, 1894:333-344) famous reports of the Bureau's work at several Yadkin valley mounds remained the only description of excavated sites in this region for more than 75 years. As a

result, those sites remained anomalies, lacking known associations to other archaeological cultures or phases in western North Carolina. Recent research (Moore 1999, 2002) has defined several new late prehistoric and protohistoric phases for the Catawba and upper Yadkin river valleys. Most significantly, this research links those mound sites along the upper Yadkin River with other Burke phase sites in the upper Catawba valley (Moore 2002:101-144, 179-180).

Our research in the region was stimulated by the work of Charles Hudson, Chester DePratter, and Marvin Smith (DePratter, et al. 1983; Hudson, et al. 1984); they suggested that the sixteenth-century Spanish expeditions of Hernando de Soto and Juan Pardo traveled in the upper Catawba valley, where they visited the important aboriginal town of Joara (Soto's Xuala). When the new Soto and Pardo routes were proposed in the early 1980's, it was not even clear that evidence of a sizable sixteenth-century population such as that documented for Joara existed along the upper Catawba River. Today, not only are we certain that a sixteenth-century population was present, but we now know that this region featured a large population for at least two hundred years prior to European contact. This large, late prehistoric and early protohistoric period population is represented by an abundance of sites exhibiting Burke and Cowans Ford series ceramics. Moore (2002:167) has described each of these ceramic series as Lamar variants that are most similar stylistically to Lamar pottery of the middle Lamar Tugalo phase (Hally 1990, 1994).

Based on the distribution of Burke and Cowans Ford pottery, Moore introduced the term *Catawba Valley Mississippians* in reference "to the people living in the Catawba valley from circa A.D. 1100 to A.D. 1500. Catawba Valley Mississippian is derived from Ferguson's (1971) South Appalachian Mississippian, of which the Lamar phases are a part" (2002:8). Moore used this term "to distinguish the people of this time and region from the better-known North Carolina

Piedmont Siouans and from other Lamar peoples, with the intention of developing a clearer picture of what and who the Catawba valley people were" (2002:8). While we recognize that there is no absolute correlation between cultural groups and ceramics, the distribution of Lamar ceramics has been generally recognized in the southeast to be the primary diagnostic of Lamar culture (Hally 1994:144). Given the overwhelming presence of the Burke and Cowans Ford pottery throughout the Catawba valley, we suggest that this region was the northernmost extent of Lamar culture from the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries. The Burke phase is the best documented example of Lamar Mississippian society (e.g., Hally 1994; Williams and Shapiro 1990) in our study area, and in this paper we describe the Burke phase as a Mississippian frontier. Using four lines of data--mound construction, mortuary assemblages, settlement patterns, and ethnohistorical sources--we also suggest that one or more regional polities, or chiefdoms, integrated portions of the study area during Burke phase times. Finally, we suggest factors that may have contributed to the rise of chiefdoms in this area but not in adjoining Piedmont locales.

## UPPER CATAWBA AND YADKIN VALLEY ARCHAEOLOGY

### Previous Research

The study area is situated along the upper reaches of the Catawba and Yadkin rivers in western North Carolina (See Figure 2 for sites mentioned in text), on the inner boundary of the Piedmont Province at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains (Thornbury 1965:92). The earliest archaeological investigations in this area, although among the best-known archaeological

undertakings reported in western North Carolina, remain poorly understood. These were the mound investigations conducted by John P. Rogan, under the auspices of the Bureau of American Ethnology, and reported by Cyrus Thomas (1887, 1891, 1894). In his *Catalogue of Prehistoric Works*, Thomas (1891:152) recorded 17 mounds in Caldwell County, the largest number for any county in North Carolina; however, only those excavated sites described in the 1887 and 1894 publications have actually been confirmed. Thomas (1887, 1891, 1894) and W. H. Holmes (1903) mention at least eight mounds reported by James Mooney and J. Mason Spainhour in McDowell, Burke, and Catawba counties in the upper Catawba valley. Four of these mounds have been assigned tentative site number designations in the North Carolina State Site Record. Only one, located at the Berry site (31BK22, also reported as 31BK2), has been verified as a human-made earthen mound (Moore 2002:214-222). The remnant of one other earthen mound, possibly one mentioned by Mooney, has been recorded at the McDowell site (31MC41) in McDowell County (Moore 2002:197, 206). Despite the difficulties in relocating many of these reported sites, it is clear that the occurrence of mounds in the upper Catawba and Yadkin valleys is unlike that of any other area in the North Carolina Piedmont.

Several of these mound sites were excavated in the nineteenth century. Thomas (1887, 1894) reported on the T. F. Nelson Mound (31CW1) and Triangle, the Davenport Jones Mound, the Lenoir Burial Pit, and the Broyhill-Dillard Mound (31CW8). These sites are all located in the Happy Valley community in the extreme upper Yadkin valley, and little is known of them beyond these brief descriptions of mound excavations and burials. The reports describe complex mortuary facilities with multiple burials, many of which were accompanied by large quantities of artifacts. Significantly, iron implements obtained from trade with Europeans accompanied at least two burials. Additionally, at least one mound was excavated at the Michaux Farm site

(probably 31BK17) in the early 1870s (Spainhour 1873 in Moore 2002:52-56); although the written excavation descriptions are minimal, they reveal the presence of at least three human burials within the mound. The Michaux Farm site is located on Johns River in Burke County, about six kilometers east of the Berry site.

Unfortunately, the early archaeological explorations in this area did not lead to sustained research, and most later projects have been relatively limited in scope; recent fieldwork includes several systematic survey projects, a limited number of CRM surveys, and two major excavation projects. Robert Keeler (1971) provided the earliest site survey data for the upper Catawba. He also defined the Burke ceramic series, describing the soapstone-tempered wares so characteristic of Mississippian sites in this area. Kenneth Robinson (1996) and Robin Beck (1997a) conducted more recent, significant surveys in McDowell County and along Upper Creek in Burke County, respectively. Large scale excavations were conducted at the Tyler-Loughridge site (31MC139: Robinson 1996), the McDowell site (31MC41: Moore 1999, 2002; Ward 1977), and the Berry site (31BK22: Moore 1999, 2002). Similarly, little systematic archaeological investigations were undertaken in the upper Yadkin valley following the Bureau's early mound reports. However, Richard Polhemus (notes on file, Research Laboratories of Archaeology, UNC-Chapel Hill; see also Moore 2002:120-123) excavated 31CW8 in 1964, and archaeologists from Wake Forest University (Idol 1995, 1996; Rogers 1993) and Appalachian State University (Kimball, et al. 1996) have recently conducted surveys in this region and have opened excavations at several sites.

### The Berry Site

The Berry site (Figure 2) is one of the largest sites in the upper Catawba valley, and investigations here provide most of the excavation data for the Burke phase (see Moore 1999:332-395, 2002:213-256 for complete excavation details). The Berry site is located on Upper Creek, a tributary of the Catawba River, about twelve kilometers north of Morganton in Burke County. The site is situated on the extreme northeast margin of a 200-acre alluvial bottomland formed by the confluence of Upper Creek and Irish Creek. The site was first identified in Cyrus Thomas' 1891 report, where it is described as a "Mound on the west Bank of Upper Creek 8 miles north of Morganton (about 15 feet high and unexplored)" (1891:151). Both the earthen mound and its surrounding site were regularly plowed, and in 1964 the mound itself was bulldozed to provide fill for a low-lying area west of the mound that was often subject to flooding. Today, the remaining mound is approximately 70 meters in diameter and is visible as a slight rise about one meter above the level of the surrounding field. The entire site covers at least five hectares (13 acres) based on the extent of surface artifacts (Beck 1997a).

Initial excavations at the Berry site took place in 1986 (Figure 3) as part of research to establish a preliminary regional chronology of the late prehistoric and protohistoric period in the Catawba River valley (Moore 1999, 2002). The project was stimulated by the work of researchers who suggested that sixteenth-century Spaniards Hernando de Soto and Juan Pardo passed through the region (DePratter et al 1983; Hudson et al.1984). Excavations at the Berry site resumed in 2001 and 2002 as part of the Warren Wilson College Catawba Valley Archaeological Project (Hargrove and Beck 2001; Moore and Rodning 2001; Rodning, et al. 2002).

The 1986 excavations focused on the nature of the mound that had previously been referred to as a “refuse” mound or an unintentional accumulation of midden. However, the 1986 excavations made it clear that the mound was intentionally constructed. The excavations in Area A revealed an undisturbed, basket-loaded mound fill beneath the plowed soil. Area B consisted of thirteen 10 by 10 foot units and yielded deeper stratigraphy. Zones 1 through 4 represented a series of plow zones, while Zones 5 through 8, located beneath Zone 4 on the mound slope, represented undisturbed mound deposits (Moore 2002:214-222).

These limited excavations provided abundant artifactual information, but unfortunately, provided little information on site structure. Among the artifacts recovered were several fragments of sixteenth-century Spanish Olive Jar, and subsequent surface collections by Robin Beck identified additional Olive Jar fragments and a small assortment of other sixteenth-century Spanish artifacts that tended to cluster on the north side of the mound (Moore and Beck 1994). In 1997, Beck organized a proton magnetometer and auger survey of this area of the site, the results of which suggested the presence of 3-5 large burned structures (Hargrove and Beck 2001). The 2001 and 2002 excavations (Figure 3; it should be noted that in 2001 the excavation grid was slightly altered from 1986 and changed to a metric grid) shifted to the area north of the mound and confirmed the presence of four burned houses (Structures 1-4). None of these structures have been excavated, but they appear to be square-shaped and are approximately eight meters on a side (Rodning and Moore 2001; Rodning, et al. 2002). The presence of sixteenth-century Spanish artifacts, combined with documentary evidence of the Pardo expedition, has led us to suggest that the Berry site is the native town of Joara, visited by Hernando de Soto in 1540 and site of Juan Pardo’s Fort San Juan, built in 1567 (Beck 1997b; Moore 2002:61; Moore and Beck 1994; Worth 1994a). We believe that these burned buildings may be associated with

Pardo's Fort San Juan (Beck 2002; Moore and Rodning 2001; Rodning et al. 2002), but additional excavation will be required to demonstrate this association.

The ceramic assemblage from the Berry site consists almost exclusively of Burke series pottery. The high frequencies of curvilinear complicated stamping, carinated bowls with Lamar incising, and medium-to-wide thickened and punctated jar rims is most similar to Tugaloo phase (AD 1450-1600) pottery in the upper Savannah River (Anderson, et al. 1986; Hally 1990, 1994). Two radiocarbon dates from Berry provide a fifteenth-century context for the site (Table 1), and specific ceramic attributes and the assemblage of sixteenth-century Spanish artifacts (Moore and Beck 1994) also support a mid- to late sixteenth-century occupation.

#### The Burke Ceramic Series and Upper Yadkin and Catawba Valley Ceramics

For the purposes of this paper, we are especially concerned with pottery in the upper Catawba and Yadkin river valleys, where Burke pottery predominates. William H. Holmes (1903:143-144) first described this pottery (subsequently named "Burke series") in *Aboriginal Pottery of the Eastern United States*. Holmes described several ceramic vessels excavated by the BAE from mounds in the upper Yadkin valley, suggesting that different vessels related to the same occupation reflected distinct ceramic traits from the north, west, and south. Significantly, he provided two examples of "southern" vessels in Plate CXXIX (Holmes 1903: 145). These southern traits recorded by Holmes would today be considered characteristic of Lamar ceramics, and the illustrated vessels are excellent examples of Burke vessels (Moore 1999:178-179). Robert Keeler (1971) formally defined the Burke ceramic series, and he also recognized this Lamar influence.

Moore (2002:74) has further described Burke pottery as a regional variant of the Lamar pottery tradition (Hally 1994; Williams and Shapiro 1990). Burke pottery is tempered with soapstone and consists primarily of plain or complicated stamped jars (Figure 4) and incised and burnished cazuela bowls (Figure 5). This set of ceramic traits is largely restricted to the upper Catawba and Yadkin valleys, and we see the distribution of Burke pottery as a unifying element of Catawba Valley Mississippian in this region.

While potsherds of the Burke ceramic series predominate on sites in the upper Catawba and the extreme upper Yadkin valleys, it is important to note that other ceramics are present in the study area. These include Cowans Ford (Moore 2002:132-151, 265-267), Pisgah (Dickens 1976:171-201), McDowell (Moore 2002:73), and Dan River (Coe and Lewis 1952) ceramics in decreasing order of frequency. However, it is clear that all late prehistoric period (A.D. 1400-1600) Catawba valley phases are characterized by the overwhelming presence of Burke and/or Cowans Ford ceramics, another regional Lamar variant (Moore 1987, 1999, 2002). Burke pottery is generally found in the upper valley while Cowans Ford pottery is generally found in the middle and lower Catawba valley in North Carolina. Aside from the Pee Dee pottery (Reid 1967) found in the southern Piedmont, Lamar pottery is relatively infrequent elsewhere in the North Carolina Piedmont where the Siouan pottery tradition is represented. However, Lamar ceramic attributes (smoothed and burnished vessels, curvilinear complicated stamping, cazuela bowl forms, and added fillet strips on jar rims) are also found on some Caraway (Coe 1964:34; 1995:160-166; Ward and Davis 1999:137) and Oldtown (Wilson 1983:425-454) ceramics in the central North Carolina Piedmont.

It is now clear that the Lamar pottery tradition in the form of Cowans Ford and Burke ceramics extended north throughout the Catawba valley in the late prehistoric period. The

Catawba valley thus constitutes a continuous Mississippian frontier on the western edge of the Piedmont Siouans. In the upper valley, the distribution of late prehistoric sites on Upper Creek and Johns River forms the core of the Burke phase.

The Burke phase is one of eight late prehistoric and protohistoric phases defined for the Catawba and upper Yadkin river valleys (Moore 1999:276; 2002:174-180). Only one of these, the Pitts phase, has been dated to the period ca. A.D. 1200-1400. Four phases are defined for the period AD 1400-1600: the Burke phase; the Pleasant Gardens phase, located west of the Burke phase along the upper Catawba River; the Elkin phase, situated along the upper Yadkin; and the Low phase, located on the middle Catawba River. Three phases are present in the protohistoric period (A.D. 1600-1725): the Happy Valley phase, the Iredell phase, and the Belk Farm phase (Moore 2002:180-182). Limited testing has been conducted on sites representing each of these phases; however, little information is available regarding site structure, settlement patterns, or mortuary behavior, and these other phases are defined primarily on the distribution and relative frequencies of Burke, Cowans Ford, Pisgah, McDowell, and Dan River ceramics.

## THE BURKE PHASE

Moore (1999; 2002:179-181) defined the Burke phase to describe a regionally and temporally distinctive distribution of pottery and earthen mounds. The phase is named after the Burke ceramic series, and the core phase area is located along Upper Creek-Warrior Fork and John's River in Burke County and in the vicinity of the Nelson Mound and Triangle sites in the extreme upper Yadkin valley in Caldwell County (Moore 1999: 280-281). Based on survey data (Beck 1997a; Keeler 1971; Robinson 1996), we estimate that at least 50 Burke phase sites are

located in this area. The best-known Burke phase sites are Berry (31BK22), the Michaux Farm site (probably 31BK17), 31BK18, 31BK1, the T. F. Nelson Mound (31CW1) and Triangle, the Davenport Jones Mound, the Lenoir Burial Pit, and the Broyhill-Dillard Mound (31CW8).

The distance from the Berry site on Upper Creek-Warrior Fork and the Michaux Farm site on Johns River to the Nelson Mound and Triangle on the upper Yadkin is less than 25 kilometers; until recently, however, there was no basis for archaeologists to associate the sites in the two areas. A reanalysis of much of the excavated materials from the Yadkin valley mound sites found that nearly one hundred percent of the potsherds and whole vessels were Burke ceramics (Moore 2002:100-124). Similarly, the ceramic assemblages from nearly all of the sites along Upper Creek-Warrior Fork and Johns River consist overwhelmingly of Burke sherds (Beck 1997a; Moore 1999; 2002:74-89). The distribution of sites with extremely high frequencies (usually greater than 90 per cent) of Burke pottery corresponds almost exactly with the distribution of earthen mounds and mortuary facilities described earlier. It is also important to note that earthen mounds are not generally found in the North Carolina Piedmont, the only exceptions outside of the study area being Town Creek (Reid 1967; Coe 1995) and a purported mound at 31DV1 (Ferguson 1971:229), located on the middle Yadkin River. Also, the mounds associated with the Pisgah and Qualla phases in the Appalachian summit are located at least 125 kilometers southwest of the study area (Dickens 1976; Keel 1976).

Burke phase mortuary data are limited to the Berry site, where two burials were excavated (Moore 1999, 2002), and the mortuary facilities reported by Thomas (1887, 1891, 1894) in the upper Yadkin valley. Burke phase mortuary data are discussed below in the context of Burke phase chiefdoms.

Finally, sixteenth-century European artifacts have been recovered from the Berry site and from the Nelson Mound and Triangle. The assemblage of Spanish artifacts at the Berry site includes fragments of Olive Jar, majolica, nails, and lead shot and is thought to represent the Spanish occupation of Fort San Juan (Moore and Beck 1994). It is extremely likely that the iron implements recovered at the Nelson Mound and Triangle represent items traded from the Spanish at Fort San Juan. Historic period European artifacts have not been recovered from other upper Catawba or Yadkin valley sites.

The temporal placement of the Burke phase is based largely on radiocarbon dates and the distribution of soapstone-tempered Burke and sand-tempered Cowans Ford ceramics. As described above, Burke and Cowans Ford pottery are most similar to Tugalo phase pottery from the upper Savannah River valley. The Tugalo phase is dated to ca. A.D. 1450-1600 (Hally 1990, 1994) and radiocarbon dates support a corresponding temporal range for Burke and Cowans Ford pottery. Sixteen radiocarbon dates (Table 1) are associated with Burke or Cowans Ford pottery at six sites in the Catawba and upper Yadkin valleys, and three additional dates are associated with Burke-related, soapstone-tempered pottery in western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee (Moore 1999:273; 2002:174-177). Most of the Catawba valley dates, at one sigma, range from the fourteenth to the fifteenth centuries AD. However, radiocarbon dates from the Broyhill Mound, located in the Yadkin valley, and from 40JN89 and the Ward site in the Watauga valley, range into the seventeenth century at the one-sigma range. These radiometric data alone suggest that Burke and Cowans Ford pottery were used for more than three centuries, from at least as early as the fourteenth century to perhaps as late as the seventeenth century. Spanish artifacts associated with Burke pottery from the Berry site also support mid- to late-sixteenth century dates for Burke ceramics. Radiocarbon dates support a similar range for Cowans Ford pottery in

the middle and lower Catawba valley, though it may extend into the seventeenth century at some sites.

Unfortunately, we are not yet able to establish 50-year or even 100-year phases for the area; the terminal limits of the Burke phase are designed to incorporate the period of this region's most intense Mississippian occupation. Undoubtedly, the regional chronology will be refined by future research. It is also difficult to describe the Woodland antecedents to the Burke phase at this time. Several Woodland period Connestee sites are recorded in the extreme upper valley (Robinson 1996), while the Late Woodland Lewis site (31MC157) is the only site in the upper Catawba region that features Napier ceramics (Moore 2002:283-286). Within the core Burke phase area, small numbers of Woodland period sherds are found at Berry and at most other sites in the Upper Creek-Warrior Fork drainage and in the upper Yadkin valley (Beck 1997b; Keeler 1971:36-37; Moore 2002:280-287). However, the Woodland period occupation in general seems ephemeral, and we are unable to identify specific Woodland components.

Along with the dearth of Woodland components, there are no clear Early Mississippian or early Lamar sites in the area. However, one possible exception to this pattern is the Pitts site (31BK209), located about 2 kilometers upstream from the Berry site (Moore 2002:63). The Pitts site ceramic assemblage consists of 65 percent Burke pottery and 35 percent Pisgah pottery (Moore 2002:80). Pisgah sherds date to A.D. 1000-1450 in the Appalachian Summit region (Dickens 1976:195-198), and they are rarely found at other Burke phase sites. It is possible that the high frequency of Pisgah pottery at Pitts reflects a thirteenth- to fourteenth-century occupation (Moore 2002:178) predating the intense Burke phase occupation at Berry and throughout the core Burke area.

Hally has pointed out that Lamar ceramics change slowly over time and that these changes in ceramic characteristics "...occur in the same relative order and are roughly contemporaneous throughout the Lamar area" (1994:147). To this point in our research, we are unable to document the presence of early Lamar components in the upper Catawba or Yadkin river valleys. Thus, within the Burke phase area we see little evidence for a significant Late Woodland or Early Mississippian period occupation. However, large numbers of middle Lamar Burke phase sites seem to appear abruptly within the region. We feel, in sum, that the distribution of Burke pottery represents a movement of Lamar-related people into the upper Catawba valley around the fourteenth century AD. We are unable to describe the early development of the Burke phase at this time, and we are uncertain about the size of this area's population immediately prior to the fourteenth century. There appears to be a significant occupation during the Burke phase represented by at least fifty recorded sites. Based on the absence of post-sixteenth century European artifacts on sites in the upper Catawba region and the lack of late seventeenth- or eighteenth-century ethnohistoric references to the region, we believe that populations in the upper Catawba and Yadkin valleys were considerably reduced after AD 1650.

#### BURKE PHASE CHIEFDOMS

We use the term chiefdom in reference to hierarchical, multicommodity polities lacking internal administrative specialization at any level in the regional hierarchy (Carneiro 1981; Earle 1978; Wright 1977). A survey of recent literature suggests that a multicommodity hierarchy has

generally supplanted other features at the heart of the chiefdom concept (Anderson 1994, 1996; Blitz 1999; Drennan 1991; Earle 1987, 1991, 1997; Hally 1996; Johnson and Earle 1987; Junker 1999; Milner and Schroeder 1999; Redmond 1998; Spencer 1987, 1990, 1994; Sturtevant 1998). Let us emphasize that we do not equate chiefdom political organization with evidence of Mississippian lifeways or with the presence of Lamar ceramics; not all Mississippian or Lamar ceramic-producing communities, that is, were necessarily integrated into regional polities. Four distinct lines of evidence suggest that Burke phase populations were organized into one or more chiefdoms: earthen mound construction, mortuary practices, settlement patterns, and sixteenth-century documents from the Juan Pardo expeditions. Each of these will be discussed in greater detail below.

#### Mound Building and Mortuary Practices

Although mound construction itself is not necessarily indicative of chiefdoms, it is significant that the Mississippian populations in this region regularly participated in large-scale, corporate labor projects, in contrast to contemporary Piedmont populations living to the north, south, and east. Likewise, mortuary data alone are rarely used to identify chiefdoms in the archaeological record. We believe, however, that Mississippian mortuary practices in this region provide evidence of status differentiation during the Burke phase, and that these practices, in combination with settlement pattern and mound construction data, can be used as another line of archaeological evidence to infer the existence of Burke phase chiefdoms.

It appears that there are two forms of human-made earthen structures that have been previously termed “mounds” in the upper Catawba and Yadkin valleys. The first, which includes the mounds at the Berry and Michaux Farm sites, appears to be some type of substructure

mound. Unfortunately both of these mounds were much reduced in size prior to being documented; the Berry mound was reportedly four meters tall before being bulldozed and the Michaux Farm mound was described as being of considerable height. At least three burials were recovered from the Michaux Mound but little other structural information is available. Limited excavation of the Berry mound has yielded little structural information besides the presence of basket-loaded earth fill (Moore 2002:214-222). It is impossible to determine whether structures stood upon the summits of these mounds. Examples of the second “mound” form include the T. F. Nelson Mound and Triangle, W. Davenport Jones Mound, and the Lenior Burial Pit. The published summaries of the investigations of these sites (Thomas 1887, 1894) describe large geometric-shaped pits with various numbers of individuals interred within the pits. At the time of their excavation, there was little to no earth mounded over the pits above the natural ground level, nor is there any suggestion that a larger mound had previously existed on these locations. However, it is possible that plowing had already reduced some existing mounding, as minimal as it might have been. Though it is likely that each of these forms represented a distinct set of cultural beliefs and behaviors, we are quite limited in our ability to discern those distinctions with the evidence available to us. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, we consider both forms to be examples of corporate labor projects and refer to them generally as mounds.

The Caldwell County mounds on the upper Yadkin River provide the most evidence for Burke phase mortuary practices. Each of these sites consisted of multiple interments often accompanied by large numbers of artifacts, including shell gorgets, ceramic vessels, copper beads, perforated spatulates, and in one case, metal objects. The descriptions of these mounds bear little resemblance to descriptions of platform or substructure mounds excavated in the nearby Appalachian Summit region at the Garden Creek site (Dickens 1970, 1976; Keel 1972,

1976), the Peachtree site (Setzler and Jennings 1941), and the Coweeta Creek site (Egloff 1971). In contrast, the Caldwell County sites appear to represent formalized interment facilities, similar perhaps to the mortuary mound excavated at the Irene site in Georgia (Caldwell and McCann 1941). In addition, the number of exotic artifacts--in the form of European metal implements, shell masks and gorgets, spatulate axes, shell beads, copper, and mica plates--suggests high status burials.

The lack of excavation documentation makes it difficult to fully understand the character of the Caldwell County "mounds," but it is important to consider them in more detail because of the light they cast on mortuary practices during the Burke phase. The Nelson Mound and Triangle complex provides the typical example of this Burke phase mortuary ceremonialism.

Thomas described the T. F. Nelson Mound as:

so insignificant in appearance as scarcely to attract any notice ...almost a true circle in outline, 38 feet in diameter, but not exceeding at any point 18 inches in height... the builders of the mound had first dug a circular pit, with perpendicular margin, to the depth of 3 feet, and 38 feet in diameter, then deposited their dead ... some in stone cists and others unenclosed, and afterwards covered them over, raising a slight mound above the pit (1887:61-63).

Sixteen burials, 10 of which were found within stone vaults, were located within the pit. The burials are distributed relatively evenly across the pit, while Burial 1, placed perpendicularly on its feet within a stone vault, appears to hold a central position within the pit (Thomas 1887:61-62). The excavation details suggest that use of space within the pit was orderly and planned, and may represent a single episode of multiple interments; however, a more long-term use of the interment complex could also have been orderly and planned. Thomas (1894:335) also described evidence for burning associated with many of the burials and these descriptions convey an impression of repetitive interments with ritual fires. It is possible that interment within this

mortuary facility may have involved defleshing, application of paint or pigment, arrangement of cairns, and ritual firing after completion of the cairns.

The T. F. Nelson Triangle, located seventy-five yards south of the earthen mound, is described as being constructed in a similar manner to the mound with burials placed within a triangular shaped pit with two sides each 48 feet and a base of 32 feet (Thomas 1887:63). Burials 1-9 were single extended burials, while burials 10-15 were placed in stone vaults similar to those located in the adjacent mound. Burials 11 and 14 contained two individuals each. The only artifacts associated with burials 1-15 were a broken pipe and two polished celts.

In contrast to the individual and dual burials was a mass interment at location "A" where investigators found the remains of ten or more skeletons, all of which were believed by the excavators to have been buried at the same time. One individual, identified by Thomas (1887:64) as the "principal personage of the group," was surrounded by the other nine individuals and was accompanied by a large inventory of artifacts that included an engraved shell gorget; a shell bead necklace; five elongate copper beads, copper and shell bead bracelets, and an engraved shell filled with beads (probably shell) of all sizes. In addition, four iron implements (two probable celts, a blade, and an awl-like tool) were located at his right hand. Scattered among the surrounding nine individuals were polished celts, discoidal stones, copper arrow-points, and plates of mica (Thomas 1887:65-66).

The W. Davenport Jones Mound and the R. T. Lenoir Burial Pit are described as being constructed in the same manner as the Nelson Mound. The Jones mound included 26 burials at least two of which included multiple individuals. Artifacts associated with most of the burials included Burke ceramic vessels, spatulate celts, shell masks and gorgets, and shell and copper beads (Thomas 1894:338-342). The Lenoir Burial Pit contained the skeletal remains of at least

55 individuals, many of which were interred in large groups. Included among the burials were polished celts, stone disks, shell beads, shell masks and gorgets, and Burke ceramic vessels (Thomas 1887:68-70).

Unfortunately, it is difficult to completely document all of the artifacts that were reported from these mound excavations. In an examination of the excavated materials curated at the National Museum of Natural History, David Moore (2002:107) learned that the artifacts from the Nelson Mound and Nelson Triangle were all labeled “Nelson Mound.” However, he was able to confirm that the published artifact lists appear to be basically accurate. The best-known artifacts from these sites are, of course, the metal implements. Moore (2002:107-108) was unable to confirm each of the four items but he observed a small axe, an iron celt and a portion of an iron blade. The celt is nearly identical to the one illustrated in Figure 30 (Thomas 1887:65) and Figure 211 (Thomas 1894:337). It is, undoubtedly, the second of the two iron celts described as being at the right hand of the central skeleton of Group A in the Nelson Triangle. The iron blade is likely a portion of the blade shown in Figure 212 (Thomas 1894: 337) and Figure 31 (Thomas 1887:65). We think it likely that these objects were obtained in trade from Juan Pardo at Fort San Juan.

An additional feature of Burke phase mortuary practice is the occurrence of Citico-style shell gorgets. These gorgets are known from Alabama to Virginia and are generally accepted as sixteenth- to early seventeenth-century markers (Smith 1987:108-112). Several Citico gorgets were recovered at the Nelson Mound and at the nearby Lenior Burial Pit sites (Moore 2002:107, 114). Although none have been found at the Berry site, one was recovered from a disturbed burial at 31BK56 (Ward 1980a; 1980b), located a few miles away from the Berry site.

Although the Yadkin valley mounds yielded a large quantity of mortuary data, the best-documented Burke phase mortuary data comes from the Berry site, though only two burials were excavated there. Each was a shaft and chamber type grave, characteristic of Pisgah phase burials in the North Carolina mountains (Dickens 1976:102-132) and common along the Dan and Eno rivers from fifteenth century to the early eighteenth century (e.g., Eastman 1999; Hogue 1988; Navey 1982; Ward and Davis 1993:407-432; Wilson 1983). Burial 1 (Moore 2002: 234-237) was a fully extended adult male placed in a rectangular pit with a full-length side chamber. A burial bundle consisting of a turtle shell container, a clay elbow pipe, projectile points, and stone abraders accompanied the individual. Similar bundle assemblages have been found in sixteenth-century burials at the King site in northwestern Georgia (Hally 1975) and at the Toqua site in eastern Tennessee (Polhemus 1987). An iron knife, possibly a trade good associated with the Soto or Pardo expeditions, was placed across the individual's upper chest. No artifacts were associated with Burial 2 where two individuals were interred within the single chamber (Moore 2002:237-239); multiple interments are not common practice either during the Pisgah phase or among historic era Piedmont Siouans but as described above, they are very common in the upper Yadkin mound sites.

In sum, data on mound construction and mortuary patterns suggest: 1) that people in the upper Catawba and Yadkin valleys engaged in large scale corporate labor projects, manifested in the construction of earthen mounds and mass-burial facilities; and 2) that there is evidence of status differentiation in Burke phase mortuary assemblages. Both of these patterns are commonly associated with, but are not restricted to, the regional polities that archaeologists often refer to as chiefdoms. Additional, and we believe compelling, evidence for regional integration

of the upper Catawba Valley during the Burke phase comes from settlement pattern data and ethnohistoric sources.

### Burke Phase Settlement Patterns

Due to a lack of systematic survey and testing data, we are generally limited in our ability to discuss Burke phase settlement patterns within the Catawba valley. However, Beck's (1997a) survey of Upper Creek-Warrior Fork in the vicinity of the Berry site recorded a pattern that may have been more widespread during the Burke phase. Beck recorded and systematically collected 22 of the 26 known Burke phase sites in this watershed; all known Burke phase sites in the Upper Creek-Warrior Fork basin are located on Piedmont floodplains, and furthermore, all are restricted to two specific types of floodplain soil. Significantly, these sites appear to cluster into four distinct size classes, or modes. Of the 21 sites for which adequate size data exist, 11 are less than 0.5 ha, seven are from 0.8 to 2.0 ha, two are from 2.5 to 3.0 ha, and one, the Berry site, measures 4.9 ha. Beck refers to these size classes as Fourth Order, Third Order, Second Order, and First Order, respectively (Figure 6).

Berry, the only recorded First Order site, is the largest Burke phase site within the Upper Creek-Warrior Fork basin, and is the only site in the basin with an earthen mound. The Second and Third Order sites are distributed at very regular intervals (1.44 km, with a standard deviation of 200 m) upstream and downstream from the Berry site. Six of the seven identified Third Order sites occur in pairs, while both of the Second Order sites are unpaired. There appears to be little patterning to the distribution of Fourth Order sites, which are distributed around and between the settlements of the larger three size classes (Figure 7).

Beck suggests that this patterning represents a chiefdom settlement system characterized by three levels of integration: the household level, the community level, and the multicommunity level. The foci of *household level* integration were domestic structures or compounds located in dispersed farmsteads (Fourth Order sites) and within nucleated villages (First, Second, and Third Order sites). The foci of the *community level* were the nucleated villages themselves; nucleated villages, that is, probably acted as local, community-level central places. Each First and Second Order site, with its associated farmsteads, and each pair of Third Order sites, with its associated farmsteads, probably represents a single community. The focus of the *multicommunity level* was Berry, the only First Order site identified within the study area and the only site in this basin with an earthen mound. Berry probably acted both as a local center for its associated community and as a regional center for all of the communities in the Upper Creek-Warrior Fork basin.

#### Documentary Evidence of Burke Phase Chiefdoms

In a series of articles published during the early to mid 1980's, Charles Hudson, Chester DePratter, and Marvin Smith proposed new routes of exploration for sixteenth century Spaniards Hernando de Soto (1539-1544) and Juan Pardo (1566-1568) through the interior Southeast (e.g., DePratter et al. 1983; Hudson et al. 1984). Though considerable debate followed the publication of these articles, recent research supports what is now known as the Hudson route. John Worth's discovery and translation of the 1584 Domingo de Leon account (Worth 1994b), together with the identification of sixteenth-century Spanish ceramics and hardware from the Berry site (Beck 1997b; Moore 1999; Moore and Beck 1994), strongly suggests that the general course of the Hudson route through the North Carolina Piedmont is accurate. Furthermore, on the basis of documentary evidence and the utilitarian nature of the Berry site assemblage, Worth (1994a) has

tentatively identified the Berry site as Joara (Soto's Xuala), a large town visited by both the Soto and Pardo expeditions, and the site of Pardo's Fort San Juan. Given that archaeological evidence supports this identification, accounts from the Pardo expedition describing this region's political structure are highly pertinent to our reconstruction of Burke phase chiefdoms.

First, notary and interpreter Domingo de Leon recorded that multiple local communities were associated with the "province" of Joara. According to Leon, this province was "populated with many towns, although small. Since they are very warlike, they are scattered" (Worth 1994b:18). Although Leon does not specify the number of towns existing at the time of his description, his record of the expedition does suggest that the Burke phase polity encountered by Juan Pardo at Joara consisted of multiple local communities.

Second, of two reports by Juan de la Bandera, Pardo's notary and scribe, the second and more extensive suggests that there were at least two administrative offices in the upper Catawba valley's aboriginal political system: mico, or great lord (un gran señor), and orata, or minor lord (un menor señor) (Hudson 1990:63). Bandera records that while Pardo encountered at least 120 orata over the course of the second expedition, he dealt with only three mico (Hudson 1990:63), one of whom resided at the town of Joara (i.e., the Berry site) and was referred to as Joara Mico. Although Bandera often refers to mico and orata as caciques, or chiefs (Hudson 1990:61), mico clearly had greater political authority than orata (Anderson 1994:96-97). On one occasion, for example, Pardo met 19 caciques at Joara, each of whom, with the exception of Joara Mico, was an orata; of the 19 chiefs, Bandera describes Joara Mico as "the most important one," and refers to five of the orata as "caciques of" Joara Mico (Bandera II 1990:278, italics added).

We believe that most of the 19 orata who met Pardo at Joara probably traveled to Joara from other Burke phase communities along the upper Catawba and Yadkin rivers, and that Joara

was the most important mid-sixteenth century political center in this region. Although we do suggest that there is a correlation between the geographic extent of Burke phase pottery and the homes of the 19 orata, we do not equate the scale of Joara Mico's administrative hierarchy with that of the entire Burke phase area. Rather, it is likely that Joara Mico's political authority extended over a much smaller region, probably represented by the five local-level orata who Bandera notes were *his* caciques; these five orata, that is, may have represented those Burke phase villages located much closer to the Berry site along Upper Creek-Warrior Fork and John's River. Documentary and archaeological evidence suggest that the Burke phase polity centered at the Berry site was marked by two levels of hierarchy: the archaeologically-identified community level correlates with the documented political office of orata, and the archaeologically-identified multicommunity level correlates with the documented office of mico.

#### DISCUSSION: THE RISE OF BURKE PHASE CHIEFDOMS

Archaeological and documentary evidence from the upper Catawba valley suggests that chiefdoms had emerged in this frontier/periphery area by at least the mid-sixteenth century and perhaps by as early as A.D. 1400. Furthermore, evidence of mound construction and mortuary complexity suggests that multicommunity polities may also have emerged on the upper Yadkin River during this time. The rise of Mississippian chiefdoms along the upper courses of these valleys, situated in the foothills of the Appalachians, contrasts sharply with the apparent absence of Mississippian chiefdoms in other Piedmont locales north of the Fall Line. The Mississippian chiefdoms along this frontier/periphery, that is, developed either near the Fall Line [e.g., the

polities centered at the Town Creek Mound (31MG2) and along the Catawba-Wateree River in South Carolina] or in the shadow of the Appalachians. What factors contributed to the rise of Mississippian chiefdoms in these two areas, but not in adjoining locales?

We suggest that two specific factors, an ecotone setting and a location along major trade routes, had particularly important roles in the success of Mississippian strategies along this South Appalachian frontier. Hally (1994:159-161) has suggested that river-deposited soils located just below the Fall Line are higher in nutrients than sediments located immediately upstream or farther downstream, and that these soils are deposited in greater quantities at the Fall Line due to a rapid decrease in stream gradient. He also notes that the juxtaposition of two physiographic provinces, the Piedmont and the Coastal Plain, produced a wide range of plant and animal resources at Fall Line locales. Hally (1994:162-163) extends this model to Mississippian settlement patterns on the Great Smoky Fault in northwest Georgia, suggesting that sediments along the Fault are more nutrient rich than soils just upstream or downstream, and that the juxtaposition of the Blue Ridge and the Valley and Ridge provinces would have produced an ecotone environment similar to that located at the Fall Line.

Meyers (1995) systematically tested soil fertility along the Great Smoky Fault to address the role of this variable in the clustering of large Mississippian sites immediately west of the Fault in the Valley and Ridge Province. After analyzing floodplain sediment samples collected above, below, and at the Fault along both the Etowah and Coosawatee rivers, she found that there was no significant difference in the fertility of these samples. This suggests that fertility played a less important role in the faultline clustering of large Mississippian sites--including Etowah and Little Egypt--than the resource variability offered by this ecotone locale (Meyers 1995:95).

We suggest that the emergence of Burke phase chiefdoms along the upper Catawba and Yadkin rivers is at least partially due to the existence of an ecotone at the interface between the mountainous Blue Ridge Province and the Carolina Piedmont. As with the Fall Line and Great Smoky Fault ecotones, this “foothills ecotone” would have provided access to natural resources located in two physiographic provinces. Without favoring environmental determinism, we offer that this ecotone locale provided would-be leaders a favorable arena in which to pursue some of those strategies that we refer to as Mississippian.

Pursuing the foothills ecotone as a framing factor in the rise of Mississippian polities in this headwaters region, we may ask how this ecological factor influenced the ability of emergent leaders to harness the organizational and administrative opportunities provided by Mississippian ideology. Mississippian chiefdoms and their associated institutions were supported through the production of an agricultural surplus. Due to a lack of agricultural intensification, the leaders of Mississippian chiefdoms could only increase their access to surplus by increasing their access to human labor; much of Mississippian ideology therefore emphasized *group-building* strategies, in which would-be leaders competed with one another to persuasively attract new followers. For such persuasive strategies to be effectively pursued, these emergent leaders required locales with the potential to sustain additional followers, particularly through periods of agricultural shortfall. That is, Mississippian polities tended to emerge in areas where people had access to a variety of potential food resources (Smith 1978); resource variation served both to supplement agricultural production during times of bounty and to counter the need for fissioning in times of agricultural stress. By dispersing human labor, stress-induced fissioning undermined the political economies of persuasively-organized chiefdoms (e.g., Anderson 1994), and we suggest, after Smith (1978), that Mississippian strategies were most successfully pursued in areas that offered a higher degree

of population permanency, whether the classic meander belts and oxbow lakes of the Mississippi River valley or the South Appalachian ecotones we have discussed in this paper.

Current archaeological evidence suggests that the upper Catawba and Yadkin valleys had higher population densities during late prehistory than adjoining areas in the North Carolina Piedmont, and we believe that this density was due in part to the greater resource variability of the foothills ecotone. Adjacent Piedmont locales, apart from the Fall Line, were probably unable to maintain comparable population densities through periodic episodes of agricultural stress, and we suggest that these zones were therefore less capable of sustaining Mississippian chiefdoms.

Mississippian polities along the upper Catawba and Yadkin valleys were also located near the crossroads of an important network of trails (see Figure 1) that joined this region to Mississippian polities in northwest Georgia, east Tennessee, southwest Virginia, and the South Carolina Piedmont (Beck 1997b). Documentary and archaeological evidence suggests that these polities were all engaged in the exchange of exotic raw materials. The Chisca in southwest Virginia were exchanging salt and copper to Indians further south, and were joined by an important north-south footpath to the Berry site along the upper Catawba River. Berry (i.e., Joara) was likewise connected to polities in central South Carolina along the same network of trails that Soto and Pardo used to approach the Appalachians. Indians encountered on the South Carolina coast as late as 1605 knew of Joara (referred to as Hoadá), which they located deep in the interior at the base of the mountains (Hann 1986:10-11). The proto-Cherokee populations of the Appalachian Summit also had exchange relations with the Joara chiefdom, by way of an important trail that ran directly from the Summit area, through Swannanoa Gap, to the upper Catawba valley; James Mooney (1900:532) notes that the word “Swannanoa” is derived from the Cherokee term sualinunnahi, meaning “the Suwali (i.e., Xuala or Joara) trail” (Hudson

1997:188). Finally, an important trail also connected the upper Catawba and Yadkin valleys to Mississippian polities in northwest Georgia (e.g., Myer 1928:748), and the presence of Napier and Etowah-style complicated stamped ceramics at the Lewis site (Moore 2002:283-286) suggests that these inter-regional relations predate the Burke phase.

This pattern of long-distance communication and exchange may have provided emergent leaders in the upper Catawba and Yadkin valleys with knowledge of the Mississippian ideas and strategies being successfully pursued by distant people, and may also have contributed to a local political economy based upon both the production of a staple surplus *and* access to exotic goods such as shell, copper, and salt (e.g., Earle 1997). Many of these Mississippian ideas, particularly mound-building, emphasize the forging of group identity through corporate activities, and it may be significant that this is a Mississippian strategy we see successfully pursued in this headwaters region. Also, access to exotic, non-local goods may have been much less restricted in our study area than in highly stratified Mississippian chiefdoms such as Moundville and Cahokia. Even at Moundville, however, Knight and Steponaitis (1998:16) note that the per capita frequency of material such as copper and marine shell in mortuary contexts reached a peak early in the settlement's history, when leaders there were still persuasively attracting local followers. Only after their foundation of social power was secured, and all local competitors overcome, were Moundville's elites able to implement an ideology that physically and symbolically distanced themselves from their followers and restricted access to exotic goods (Knight and Steponaitis 1998:20).

While leaders of mature and highly stratified Mississippian chiefdoms such as Moundville and Cahokia may have had the social power necessary to implement exclusive, group-distancing strategies of political and economic integration, we suggest that leaders in this

frontier/periphery area of the upper Catawba and Yadkin valleys stood upon much less secure foundations of social power and thus chose to emphasize group-building facets of Mississippian ideology, particularly mound building, to achieve persuasively organized, regional chiefdoms. Mississippian ideology consisted of many strategies of power and cooperation that we, as archaeologists, combine under the label of Mississippian. Some of these are consistent with Blanton, et al's (1996) criteria for network, or group-distancing strategies, while others are more consistent with the criteria for corporate, or group-building strategies. By studying the emergence of Mississippian chiefdoms at the edge of the Mississippian world, we may acquire a better understanding of how different societies shuffled and reconfigured these strategies in distinct ways, depending upon their own particular historical and ecological circumstances, circumstances that were often different than those experienced by "core" Mississippian societies such as Moundville and Cahokia.

#### FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1. The Burke phase, regional trails, and related phases.

Figure 2. Burke phase archaeological sites (From Moore 2002:101).

Figure 3. Plan map of Berry site excavations, 1986-2002.

Figure 4. Burke curvilinear complicated stamped sherd with folded rim from the Berry site (From Moore 2002:85)..

Figure 5. Burke Incised cazuela bowl from 31BK1 (From Moore 2002:62).

Figure 6. Histogram of Burke phase site sizes on Upper Creek/Warrior Fork (From Beck 1997a).

Figure 7. Burke Phase sites on Upper Creek/Warrior Fork.

Table 1. Calibrated radiocarbon dates associated with Burke and Cowans Ford pottery (From Moore 2002:175).

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