

Second Edition, with Revision

**Jon L. Gibson**, University of Southwestern Louisiana

Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism  
Louisiana Archaeological Survey and Antiquities Commission  
Anthropological Study No. 7



# POVERTY POINT

*A Terminal Archaic Culture  
of the Lower Mississippi Valley*

Second Edition, with Revision  
1999

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In Memory of Carl Alexander

# Acknowledgments

In the first edition of this study, I acknowledged the help and stimulation I received from Dr. Clarence Webb and Mitchell Hillman. I enjoyed three decades of collaboration on Poverty Point and related matters with Dr. Webb and nearly that long with Mitchell. They are both gone now but my debt to them remains. Much of my view of Poverty Point grew out of our mutual searches and musings.



Dr. Webb and I planned to co-author the original study, but when other commitments caused him to withdraw, he charged me with full responsibility. Having his unwavering confidence and support was a major source of satisfaction then and still is. Dr. Webb critiqued and copy edited the final draft of the first edition, and although he would not let me include him as co-author strictly on that basis, I think the published version says what we would have said if we had written the piece together, not exactly in the same words but with the same spirit.

The revised edition of *Poverty Point* has not benefitted from his direct scrutiny, but it was written as if he had reviewed it. This is still very much of a collaborative study.

*Yakoke sa kana.*

# Editor's Note

Louisiana's cultural heritage dates back to approximately 10,000 B.C. when people first entered this region. Since that time, many other Native American groups have settled here. All of these groups, as well as the more recent Europeans, Africans, and Asians, have left evidence of their presence in the archaeological record. The Anthropological Study Series published by the Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, Office of Cultural Development provides a readable account of various activities of these cultural groups.

Jon L. Gibson, an archaeologist with a long-standing interest in the Poverty Point culture, is the author of *Poverty Point: A Terminal Archaic Culture of the Lower Mississippi Valley*, the seventh in the series. In this volume, Jon Gibson describes the Poverty Point culture—one of the most spectacular episodes in Louisiana's past. Few people realize that the Poverty Point site, at 1500 B.C., was the commercial and governmental center of its day. In its time, the Poverty Point site had the largest, most elaborate earthworks anywhere in the western hemisphere. No other Louisiana earthen constructions approached the size of the Poverty Point site until the nineteenth century. Poverty Point is recognized by the United Nations as one of three World Heritage sites in the continental United States.

This volume tries to reconstruct the life of these bygone people from the archaeological remains. It discusses where these people lived, what they ate, and how they made their tools. It also attempts to reconstruct their social organization and government. New understanding of the Poverty Point culture is based in part on recently received radiocarbon dates, which are included in this volume in calibrated, calendar dates.

Thousands of years after Native Americans built the earthworks, a historic plantation encompassed much of the site. The nineteenth century owners gave their property the name Poverty Point. Archaeologists continued using that name when they recorded the prehistoric site.

Today, the Poverty Point site is owned by the state of Louisiana and is managed by the Office of State Parks as the Poverty Point State Commemorative Area. It is open to the public seven days a week, 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. A visitor center, museum, and an archaeological research laboratory are located on the grounds. Readers are encouraged to visit the site to learn more about Poverty Point.

We, in the Division of Archaeology, are confident that your understanding of the significance of Poverty Point will be enhanced by this second edition of *Poverty Point: A Terminal Archaic Culture of the Lower Mississippi Valley*.

**Thomas Hales Eubanks**  
*State Archaeologist*

# Introduction

Poverty Point is a major archaeological mystery. The mystery centers on the ruins of a large prehistoric Indian settlement, the Poverty Point site. There on a bluff top overlooking Mississippi River swamplands in northeastern Louisiana is a group of artificial mounds and embankments. It is not the earthworks themselves that are so mysterious. Eastern North America is, after all, the land of the “Mound Builders.” These people once were thought to be a highly advanced, extinct race, but now are known to be ancestors of Native Americans, such as the Creek, Choctaw, Shawnee, and Natchez. The real mystery lies in the size and age of the earthworks. They are among the largest native constructions known in eastern North America, yet they are old, older than any other earthworks of this size in the western hemisphere.

Radiocarbon dates indicate that the earthworks were built between fourteen and eighteen centuries before the birth of Christ. This was an eventful time throughout the world. In Egypt, Amenhotep IV, his queen, Nefertiti, and the boy pharaoh, Tutankhamen, were ruling, and the Canaanites were being enslaved. In Turkey and Syria, the Hittite Empire was expanding. In Iraq, Babylon and its lawgiver king, Hammurabi, were in power. In Crete and surrounding Mediterranean islands, Minoan civilization was reaching its peak. In Britain, Stonehenge was being completed, and in Pakistan, the great planned city of Moenjo-Daro was succumbing to flooding. In China, the Shang dynasty was flourishing, and in Mexico, the Olmec chiefdom was ascending.

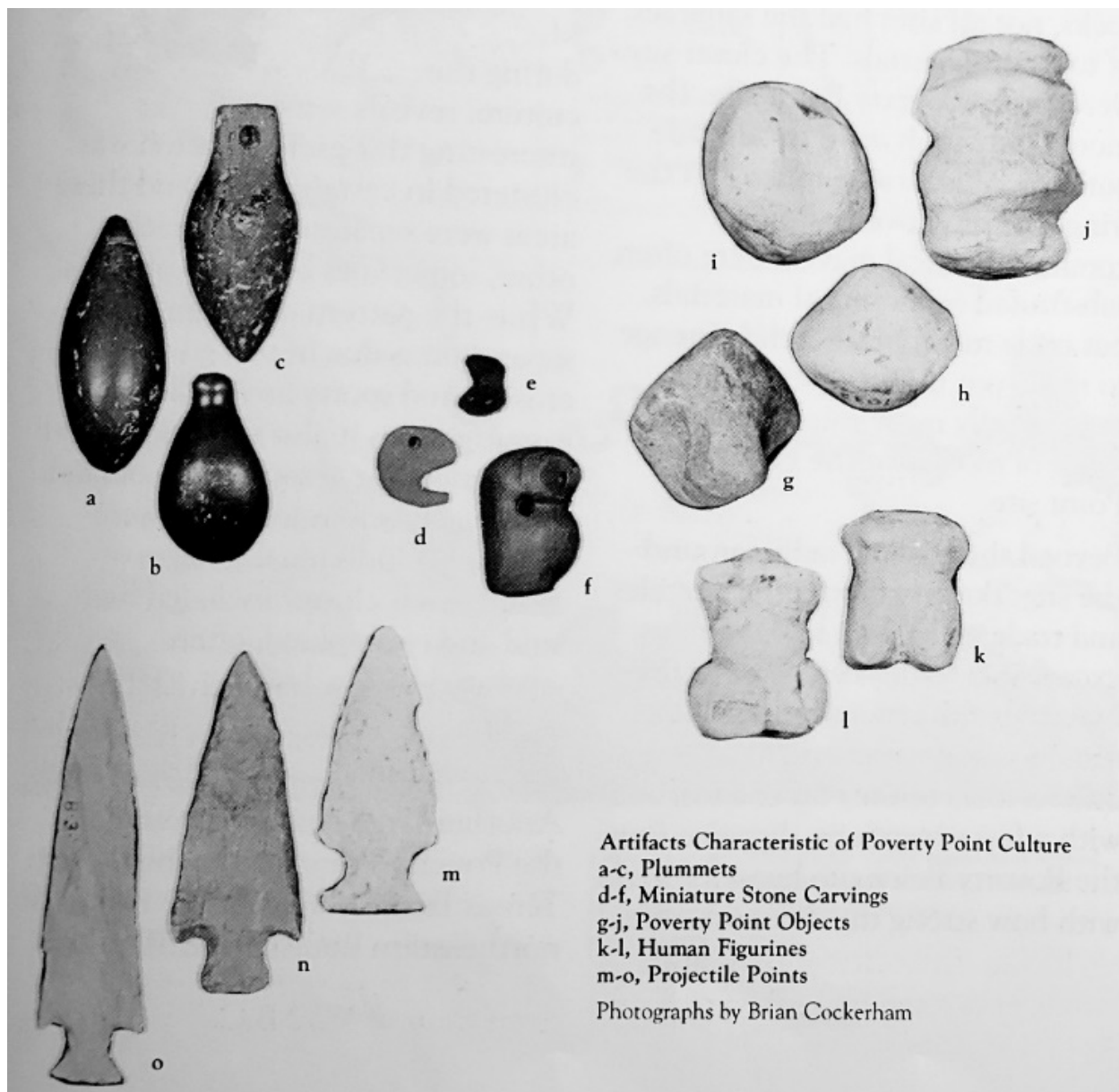
At that time, almost all Indians living north of Mexico were small bands of migratory hunter-gatherers. Such societies do not ordinarily build huge earthworks like those at Poverty Point. Large-scale construction is possible when large numbers of people settle down in villages and after political forces grow strong enough to shift some labor from the hunt and harvest to the civic and ceremonial. In most of the world, these conditions—large, permanent villages and political power—are found among agricultural societies.

How did the conditions necessary for large-scale construction appear at Poverty Point while everyone else in America north of Mexico was still following a simpler way of life? Was Poverty Point one of the first communities to rise above its contemporaries to start the long journey toward becoming a truly complex society? If Poverty Point did represent the awakening of complex society in the United States, how and why did it develop? Was it created by immigrants bearing maize and a new religion from somewhere in Mexico? Was it developed by local peoples who had been stimulated by ideas from Mexico? Did it arise by itself without any foreign influences? Did it come about without agriculture? Could hunting and gathering have sustained the society and its impressive works?

These sorts of questions perplexed archaeologists. Limited data and disagreement over these issues made Poverty Point a real archaeological puzzle. New research has begun to clarify some of these things. We no longer regard Poverty Point as a geographic or developmental irregularity, but it remains one of the most unusual archaeological cultures in eastern North America.

# Poverty Point Culture: A Definition

Poverty Point culture is an archaeological picture of how certain Lower Mississippi Valley peoples lived between around 1730 and 1350 B.C. Archaeologists have identified aspects of this way of life over a large area of the Lower Mississippi Valley from a northerly point near the present junction of the Mississippi and Arkansas rivers (above the present-day town of Greenville, Mississippi) to the Gulf coast. This area includes parts of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Arkansas. In addition, tools and ornaments resembling Poverty Point types have been found as far up the river as Tennessee and Missouri and along the Gulf coast as far east as Tampa, Florida, and the Atlantic coast of Georgia.





Archaeologists identify Poverty Point culture by its characteristic artifacts and the nonlocal rocks used to make them. Imported rocks and minerals include various cherts and flints, soapstone, hematite, magnetite, slate, galena, copper, and many others. Radiocarbon dates indicate that some raw materials were being traded to the Poverty Point site and other sections of the Poverty Point culture area by 1730 B.C. The arrival of substantial amounts of these trade materials is a convenient point to define the onset of Poverty Point culture, and their disappearance, a good point to mark its end.

Some characteristic Poverty Point-style artifacts were being made more than 5,000 years ago, but most came into existence over the next 1,500 years. They include hand-molded baked clay cooking objects, simple thick-walled pottery, and stone vessels. Other representative artifacts are chipped stone tools, like spear points, adzes, hoes, drills, perforators, edge-retouched flakes, and blades. Polished stone tools, like celts, plummets, and gorgets, as well as polished stone ornaments, like beads, pendants, and animal figures, are also characteristic. Typical artifacts and trade materials existed for about three or four centuries or until around 1350 B.C.

Much of what we know about Poverty Point artifacts and trade materials is based on the Poverty Point site. This is partly because Poverty Point is larger and has been more extensively investigated than other sites, but it is also because the site was so important in overall trade relations in the Lower Mississippi Valley. When the Poverty Point site flourished, trade flourished; when the Poverty Point site was abandoned, trade ceased, and so did the flow of information that accompanied trade. If the Poverty Point site had not existed, there would be little reason to set off Poverty Point culture from the general culture that existed at the time.

Because Poverty Point culture is defined in terms of stone tools and trade rocks, it really represents a technological and economic pattern more than a social and political one. The technology and economy were not confined to one large body of kinfolks or to a single tribe, nation, or ethnic group. They were not confined to people who spoke the same language. Many groups of people bore Poverty Point culture, and most of them were unrelated and politically independent.

Even though Poverty Point culture does not correspond to a single social or political group, it was made up of them, many of them. One of these groups was Poverty Point society itself, the people living within 20 to 25 miles of the Poverty Point site, a community that interacted on a regular face-to-face basis. Archaeologists depend on unique tools and other details to recognize villages and camps belonging to the Poverty Point community. Although tools throughout the Poverty Point community were made in the same styles and of the same variety of rocks, not all sites had the same set of tools or materials. The closer sites were to the Poverty Point site, the more likely tools were to be made out of nonlocal trade rocks. On the fringes of the Poverty Point community, local gravels were often substituted for nonlocal materials, but trade materials that did manage to reach out into the peripheries were usually made into the same kinds of tools as at the Poverty Point site.

Beyond the 25-mile radius around the site, Poverty Point artifact styles and trade rocks were less common, except in a few places, some of them hundreds of miles away. Outside of the 25-mile



core area, artifact styles differ a little or they differ a lot, and, with a few exceptions, distance from the Poverty Point site has a lot to do with how strong the differences are.

Poverty Point culture and Poverty Point society are not the same thing. Poverty Point culture is an archaeological concept used to describe a wide area of general artifact similarities within the Lower Mississippi Valley. Poverty Point society was the once-thriving community, which conducted its daily activities in and around the Poverty Point site for three or four centuries before quitting the trade business that set it apart from earlier and later societies.

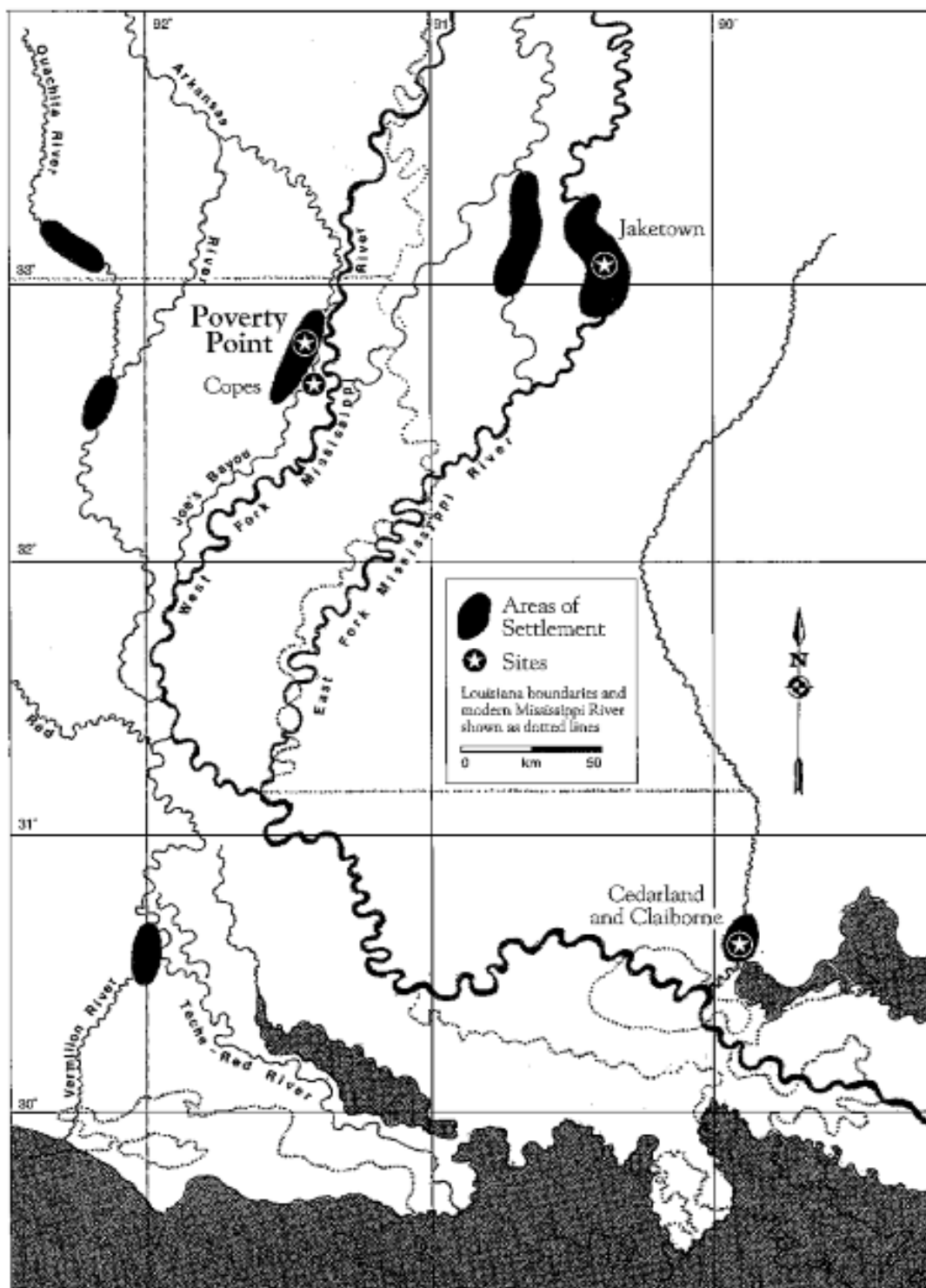
## Settlement

A map showing the Lower Mississippi Valley in 1500 B.C., during the zenith of Poverty Point culture, reveals some very interesting things. Population was clustered in certain areas, and these areas were separated from each other, sometimes by scores of miles. While the pattern of geographic separation is due in part to river erosion and spotty archaeological investigation, it also reflects cultural preferences for certain kinds of land. Although various locations were chosen for individual villages or camps, each cluster included high land and swampland, often separated by low bluffs.

The Largest cluster was in the Yazoo Basin of western Mississippi. Another large cluster surrounded the Poverty Point sites in the Upper Tensas Basin-Maçon Ridge region of northeastern Louisiana. Still others were located on the Ouachita River in southern Arkansas, in the Vermillion Basin-Coteau Ridge region of south central Louisiana and the Lower Pearl River-Hancock Terrace region of coastal Mississippi.

Lying between these clusters were areas of uninhabited or lightly occupied land. In possibly one or two places, there were pockets of concentrated populations, which, for various reasons, did not participate regularly or intensively in Poverty Point trade.

The map shows another interesting feature. The scattered population clusters were all linked by the Mississippi River. Although the river itself did not run through every cluster, streams connecting with the Mississippi did. Some of these streams actually occupied old channels of the Mississippi and Arkansas rivers. These interconnected streams were highways that carried people, trade goods, and ideas to the various corners of the Poverty Point cultural network. We have very little evidence suggesting that overland trails were as important as they had been earlier when people lived out in the hills and made only seasonal use of river valleys.



**How the Lower Mississippi Valley might have looked in 1500 B.C., showing courses of major rivers and locations of Poverty Point territories.**

Drawing by Jon Gibson

Most Poverty Point peoples lived in small permanent villages and seasonal camps along streams and cutoff lakes in old abandoned river channels. These living areas ranged in size from less than an acre to more than 100 acres. Small settlements housed only a few families, while larger ones had dozens. Some archaeologists believe several thousand people lived at the Poverty Point site, but others think it was a campground occupied temporarily during ceremonies and trade fairs. Poverty Point people also had small, temporary campsites, where hunting and gathering parties spent the night while away from home.

Village sites differed from one another in more ways than size. One, and sometimes more, large sites in each Poverty Point cluster had artificial mounds and sometimes C-shaped embankments. There was usually only one mound, but as many as eight mounds were built in some cases. They were made of dirt and were usually dome-shaped, but two large mounds at the Poverty Point site were shaped like flying birds. Generally, the larger the site, the larger the mounds. Large sites also tended to have more mounds than small ones.

Excavations have not determined how the mounds were used. Domed mounds look like those used as tombs by later cultures, but, with one exception, no burials have been found in them. James Ford and Stuart Neitzel did find a burned fragment of human thighbone in a bed of ashes beneath the large domed mound at the Poverty Point site, but no bones were found in the mound itself. Postmolds from a circular house were buried underneath a low domed mound at the Jaketown site in the Yazoo Basin, but whether the house had anything to do with the mound being built at the spot is unknown.

When archaeologists excavated part of the tail of the largest bird mound at Poverty Point, they found nothing that indicated the purpose of the mound. However, a mound shaped like a bird was probably a memorial or shrine, rather than a tomb or temple base. Earth embankments were occasionally built at the bigger settlement. Sometimes, they had domestic trash, postmolds, and fire pits in or on them and seem to have served as foundations for houses or portable shelters. C-shaped layouts were the most common patterns, as illustrated by the six concentric ridges at Poverty Point. Another pattern was two half rings, like those at the Claiborne and Cedarland sites on the Mississippi Gulf coast, which resembled a figure eight cut in half lengthwise. Besides house foundations, embankments have been claimed to be astronomical figures and military breastworks.

The Maçon Ridge-Upper Tensas Basin stands out from the rest of the localities. Not only is the Poverty Point site located here, but dozens of sites are located within a 25-mile radius of Poverty Point. These have larger proportions of typical Poverty Point artifacts than sites in other clusters, and they usually have more trade materials, too. These conditions resulted from being under Poverty Point's direct influence.

The importance of the Poverty Point site to its own community, as well as to distant communities scattered throughout the Lower Mississippi Valley, requires that we take a closer look at this significant place. It was first reported by archaeologist Samuel Lockett in 1873, and it was visited by many archaeologists afterwards. It was excavated by James Ford and

Stuart Neitzel of the American Museum of Natural History in the early 1950s that really disclosed its unusual nature. Routine inspection of an aerial photograph led Ford to the startling discovery—Poverty Point was an earth enclosure, built on such a large scale that it defied recognition from ground level.

The geometric layout suggested that the earthworks had been built according to a master plan in a massive all-out building program. Their size, coupled with millions of artifacts scattered on and in them, gave an impression that Poverty Point was home for a large population and a magnet for visitors. Although new information has caused us to rethink some of the ideas, we are still awed by the massiveness of the engineering feat and appreciative of the collective spirit of those ancient people whose vision and toil are represented there.

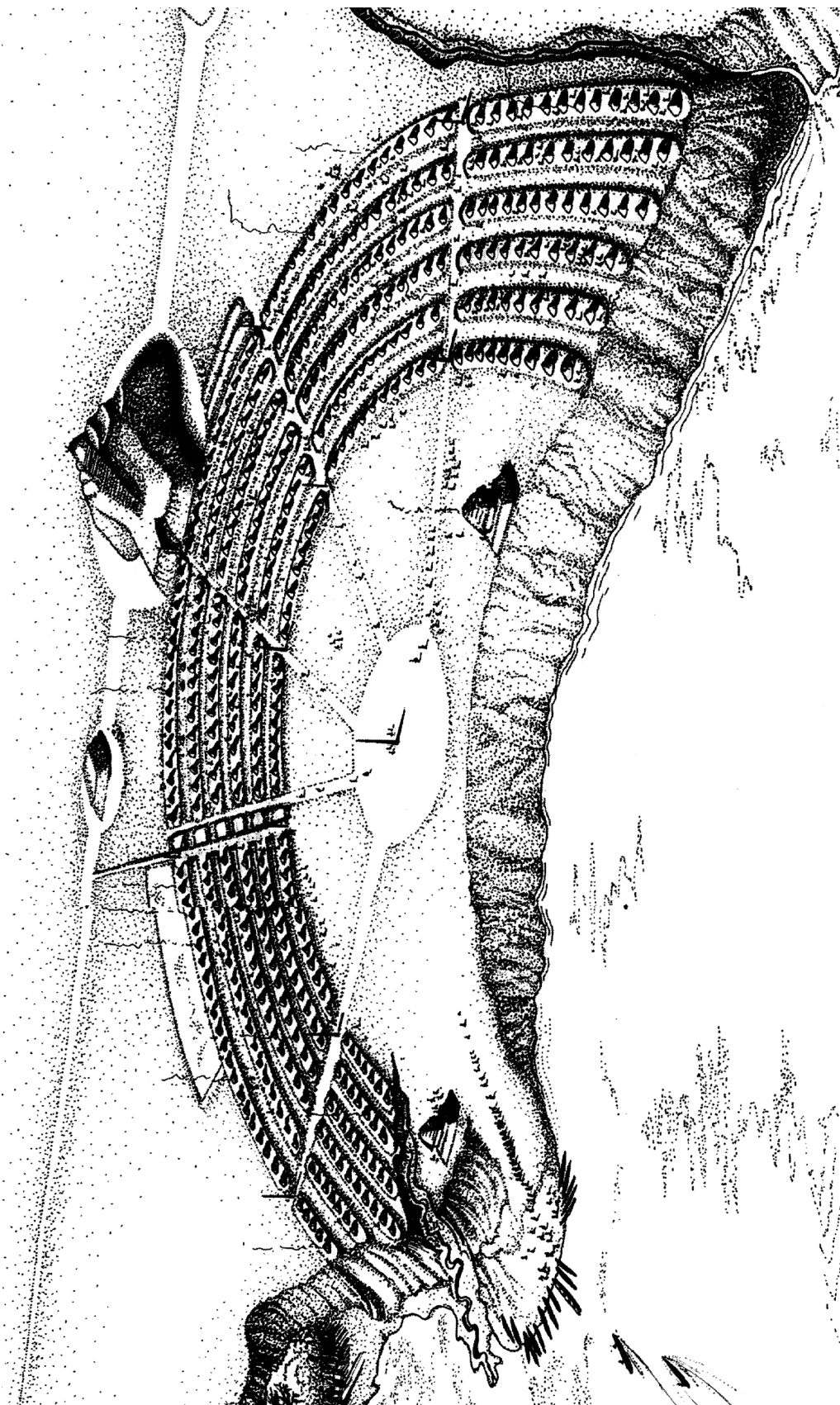
A C-shaped figure dominates the center of the site. The figure is formed by six concentric artificial earth embankments, which now stand 4 to 6 feet (1 to 2 m) high and 140 to 200 feet (34 to 60 m) apart. They are separated by ditches, or swales, where dirt was removed to build the ridges. The ends of the outermost ridge are 3,950 feet (1.2 km) apart, nearly three-quarters of a mile, while the ends of the interior embankment are 1,950 feet (594 m) apart. The embankments end along a 25-foot-high bluff, which marks the wall of the Mississippi River floodplain. A small sluggish stream, Bayou Maçon, hugs the foot of the bluff beneath the earthworks.

Archaeologists first believed the six ridges formed a complete octagonal enclosure and that the Arkansas River ate away the eastern section. Recent information show this was never the case. The bluff was cut thousands of years before the Indians built the rings. In fact, it posed a building and maintenance problem from the outset, and efforts to repair and stabilize it can be seen in the layers of red and yellow dirt used to fill old gullies underneath the northern ridges.

The ridges are divided into six sectors by five crosscutting aisles, or corridors. These aisles are from 35 to 260 feet (10 to 49 m) wide. They do not converge at a single point inside the enclosure nor do they divide embankments into equal-size sectors. The long straight aisles have been identified as astronomical sighting lines and as boundary lines between social and functional zones. Another idea is that the aisles were formed when the ridge builders used geometry and simple equipment to lay out the arc segments to form the half-oval shape.

In addition to the aisles, the southwestern section of the enclosure is bisected by an extra ridge, which parallels the south-western aisle. The bisector ridge starts at the innermost ridge encircling the plaza, runs across the outer concentric ridges, and then extends an additional 300 feet (91 m) beyond the enclosure. The extension, or Causeway as it is called, crosses a large depression which may be a natural depression or a borrow pit for ridge soil. It ends near Ballcourt Mound.

In the center of the ridged enclosure is the plaza, a flat, open area covering about 37 acres. Along its eastern edge is a platform mound (called Bluff, or Dunbar Mound), which appears to have had two levels—a low flat-top base topped by a smaller dome-shaped addition. The mound was built in stages, and wooden buildings were erected on some stage summits. The south-



Artist's reconstruction of the central ridged enclosure at the Poverty Point site as it may have appeared in 1350 B.C.

Drawing by Jon Gibson

easternmost edge of the plaza was built up with dirt, and nearby another low platform mound (Sarah's Mount) was built on the southern end of the inner embankment of the main enclosure.

On the western side of the plaza at the Poverty Point site, archaeologist William Haag excavated some unusually large and deep pits. If these held posts, they had to be the size of grown trees! Too big to have been used for ordinary residences or even ceremonial buildings, these huge posts are imagined to be calendar markers for important days like equinoxes and solstices, an American Stonehenge made of wood.

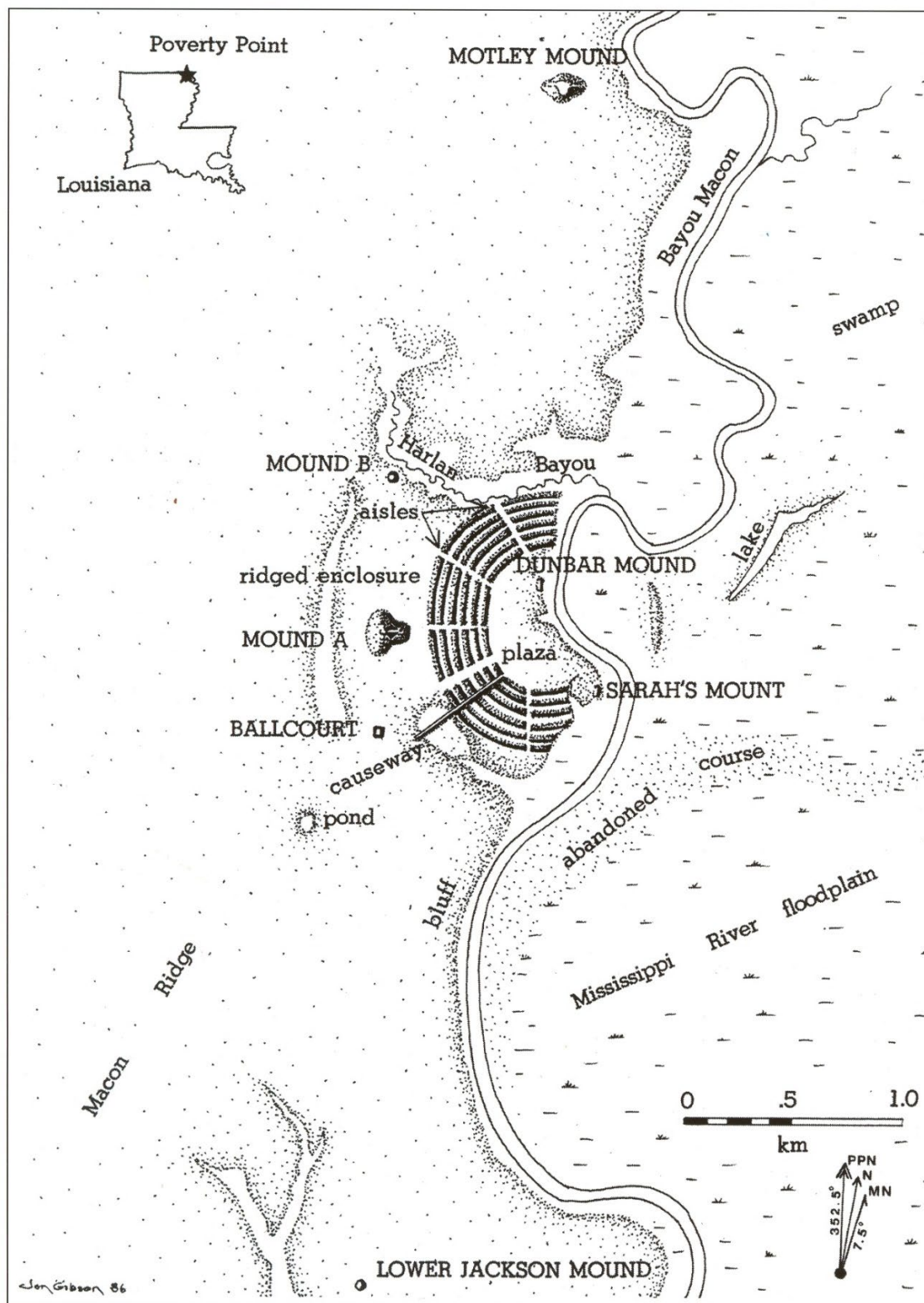
Outside the ridged enclosure are other mounds and embankments. The largest and most unusual is Mound A, located just beyond the outer ridge in the western part of the enclosure. This mound, thought to represent a flying bird, stands more than 70 feet (21 m) high and measures 640 feet (195 m) along the wing and 710 feet (216 m) from head to tail. The flattened, or tail, section of the huge structure was built in a depression some 12 or more feet (3.7 m) deep. A similar but slightly smaller mound, the Motley Mound, lies 1.5 miles (2.4 km) north of the central enclosure. Because it had only a slight bulge where the bird's tail should have been, it is believed to be unfinished.

Three more mounds are positioned along a north-south line that passes through the main bird mound. About 0.4 miles (.6 km) north of the big mound is a domed mound, Mound B, which is about 180 feet (55 m) in diameter and 20 feet (6 m) high. Some 600 feet (183 m) south of the bird mound is Ballcourt Mound, a flat-topped structure about 100 feet (30 m) square. Although it is called Ballcourt Mound, there is no indication that it ever really served as a ballcourt. For years, it was thought to be a natural knoll that had been sculpted into shape, but recent investigations have shown it to be artificial, just like the other mounds.

About 1.6 miles (2.6 km) south of Ballcourt Mound and along the same axis is a second domed mound, Lower Jackson Mound. At one time, this mound was thought to be the southernmost Poverty Point mound. Now, we think it is much older than the other mounds, perhaps dating a thousand years or more earlier. The fact that it lines up so precisely with three mounds at the earthwork center may be coincidental, but it probably is intentional and meant to tie the old mound and whatever it stood for into the grand Poverty Point plan.

Other nearby earthworks—a C-shaped embankment with mounds incorporated in the middle and each end and at least one other mound on the Jackson Place immediately south of the ridged enclosure—may have been part of the overall Poverty Point layout. That is difficult to prove because they have been flattened by modern cultivation.

The majority of Poverty Point's inhabitants lived on the embankments in the central enclosure, but some people lived and worked outside the enclosure. Important living and working areas were scattered along the bluff between the ridges and Motley Mound and between the ridges intermittently to Lower Jackson Mound, more than a mile and a half (2.4 km) to the south. In



The Poverty Point Earthworks

Drawing by Jon Gibson



addition, people lived west of Motley Mound and a quarter mile (.4 km) southwest and from a quarter mile to two miles (.4 to 3.2 km) west of Mound A.

Very little is known about Poverty Point houses and furnishings. The outline of a house was found at the Jaketown site in Mississippi. The Jaketown house pattern was small and circular, around 13 to 15 feet (4 to 4.6 m) in diameter. No definite house patterns have been reported at the Poverty Point site. Does the lack of evidence for substantial houses mean that Poverty Point was a temporary encampment and that flimsy or portable shelters were used? No, it does not. It is likely that modern plowing destroyed the remains of permanent houses that might have stood on top of the ridges.

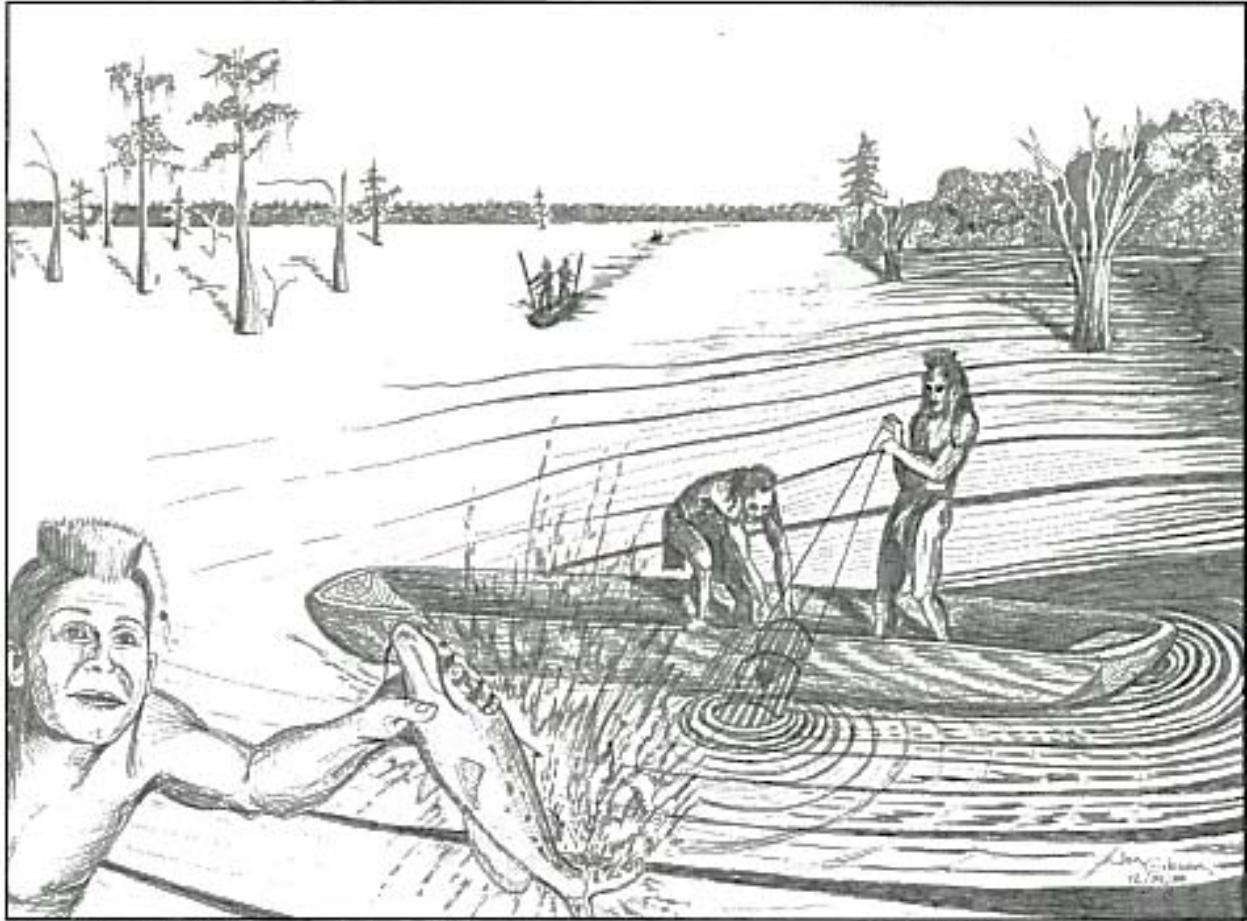
## Foods

In the 1950s and 1960s, when archaeologists were starting to realize just how large and imposing the Poverty Point site really was, they assumed that a large, permanently settled, and complex society was responsible for it. Prevailing theory held that large complex societies were agricultural. So, despite its early age and simple tools, Poverty Point people were assumed to have been farmers. Because other peoples of the same age depended on hunting and gathering, Poverty Point society was assumed to be transitional one of the first groups in eastern North America to take up farming, corn farming.

At the time, no plant remains had been found at Poverty Point. Consequently, it was impossible to tell if Poverty Point people had farmed, or if they had made a living some other way, such as by intensively gathering native wild plants or by hunting and gathering along the especially bountiful narrow environmental seams where uplands joined the Mississippi floodplain. We still do not have much information about foods eaten by Poverty Point peoples, but we have enough to be sure about one thing. Poverty Point peoples were not corn farmers. They were hunter-gatherers. We are only beginning to find out what they ate. We have more information about meats than plants, because bones are more resistant to decay through time and are more easily recovered by standard excavation methods.

From the Claiborne site on the Gulf to inland sites up the valley, like Poverty Point and Copes, major meat sources included fish, reptiles, small and large mammals, and birds. Freshwater fish were the main source of meat everywhere. They included gar, bowfin, catfish, gaspergou, bass, sunfish, and other species. Brackish water clams were collected at Claiborne and nearby coastal sites, but inland groups did not utilize river mussels at all. Oysters were eaten at the Cedarland site, near Claiborne, but apparently nowhere else. Turtles were caught, especially snapping, mud-musk, red-eared, and soft-shelled species. Water snakes, rat/king snakes, and racers were eaten; so were alligators and frogs.

Next to fish, venison was the most important meat, but small mammals, such as cottontail and swamp rabbits, gray and fox squirrels, raccoons, opossums, and a few others also contributed. Waterfowl and a few upland birds made up a minor part of the diet; they included ducks and geese, coots, herons, egrets, pelicans, Sandhill cranes, turkeys, crows, and others.



Fish, a staple food for Poverty Point people

Drawing by Jon Gibson

Plants undoubtedly provided the main part of Poverty Point food, but because remains are rarely preserved, we have a limited view of their contribution. Nuts predominate and include hickory nuts, pecans, acorns, and walnuts. Their relative importance may be inflated because they have hard shells, which were often burned in campfires. Charred nut shells are more readily preserved than uncharred plant remains, but even if exaggerated, the importance of nuts to Poverty Point peoples is undeniable. Other identified plant remains include persimmons, wild grapes, wild beans, hackberries and seeds from honey locust, goosefoot, knotweed, and doveweed.

Squash seeds, rinds, and stems have been found in small quantities at the Copes site, but this plant may have provided containers rather than food. There is no certainty that this variety was even cultivated, but even if it was and had been used for food, it was not very important.

These remains do not form a complete list of Poverty Point table fare. Food remains have only been recovered from a handful of sites. Differences in archaeological techniques and natural preservation conditions from site to site complicate direct comparisons and make it difficult to say which foods were preferred and how much they contributed to diets. One thing is certain—Poverty Point peoples throughout the Lower Mississippi Valley did not eat the same kinds of foods in the same proportions.



The most difficult problem with subsistence is figuring out just how the large Poverty Point site population, which may have numbered in the hundreds or possibly thousands, existed by simple hunting and gathering. This problem lessens when one begins to add up the incredible food richness of the land around Poverty Point. The Poverty Point site was located in an environment where naturally abundant plants and animals were even more bountiful and varied.

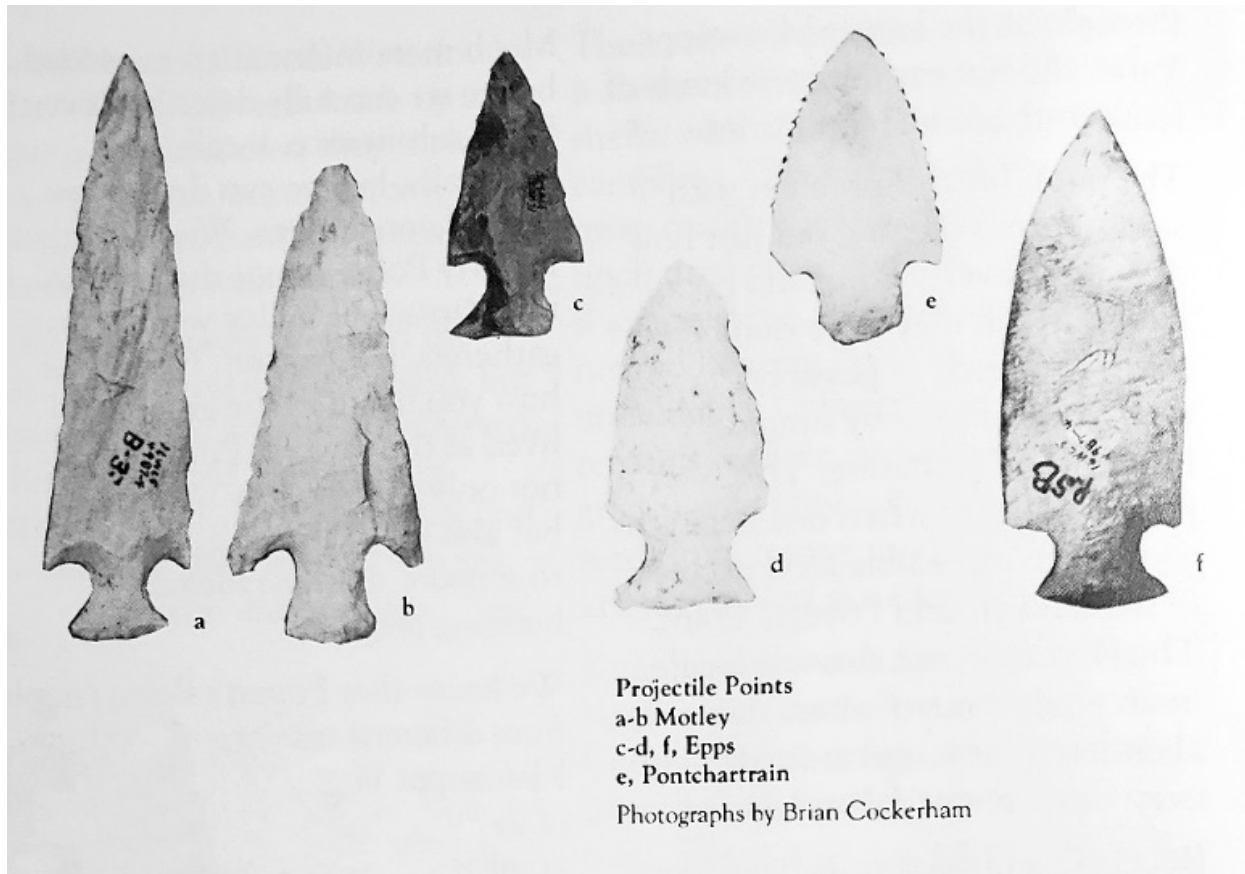
Recently archaeologists have found that the site's inhabitants were primarily eating acorns, hickory nuts, fish, and turtle, in that order. The great use of aquatic species and acorns at the Poverty Point site suggests that most of Poverty Point's foods came from an environment that included slow-moving or motionless water. Archaeologists have recently found evidence that a large permanent or seasonal lake lay alongside the Poverty Point site. No lake is there today, only woods and farmland. Such overflow lakes, located near the Mississippi River and high ground, are the most productive natural

food sources in the generally productive Mississippi "delta" environment.

Much more information is needed before we can fully describe Poverty Point subsistence, locally and regionally, but we can draw a few general conclusions. We know that Poverty Point groups throughout the Mississippi Valley were hunter-gatherers, not farmers. No matter how you figure it, the group who lived at the Poverty Point site not only met its daily food needs but also supplied enough extra to support an unparalleled building program.

We know that Poverty Point peoples from different sections of the Lower Mississippi Valley ate different kinds of foods or similar foods in different combinations. Sometimes people living only a few miles apart did, too. These differences are probably due to differences in available foods, and that, in turn, was partly dependent on nature and partly on human factors, such as food preferences and what season of the year that exploitation took place.

Finally, we know that Poverty Point subsistence generally emphasized aquatic resources, especially fish, which is logical considering the location of sites on streams and lakes down in the Mississippi swampland and along the bluffs bordering the swampland. Without the steady and superabundant supply of fish, none of the remarkable accomplishments at the Poverty Point site would have been possible.



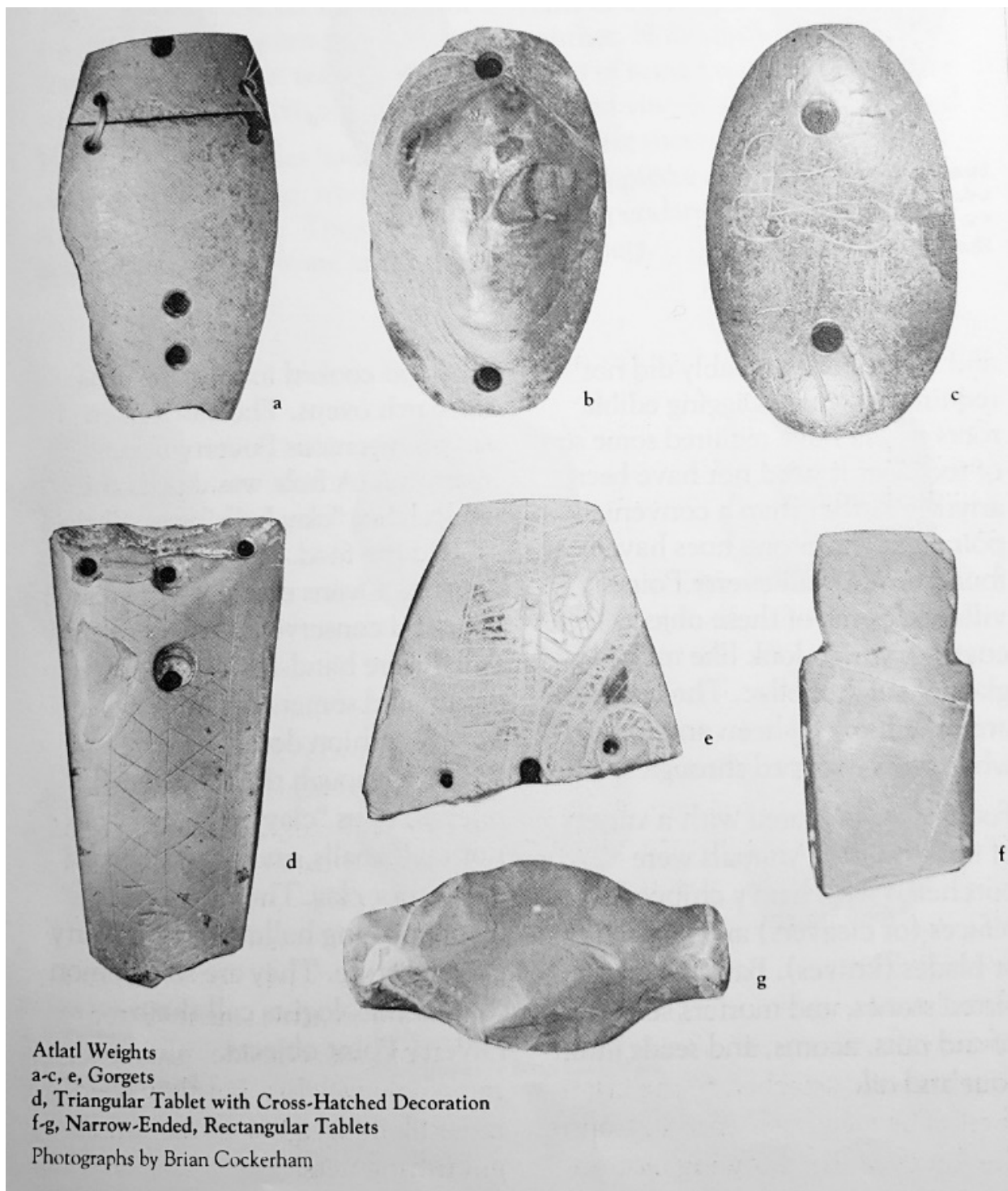
## Everyday Tools

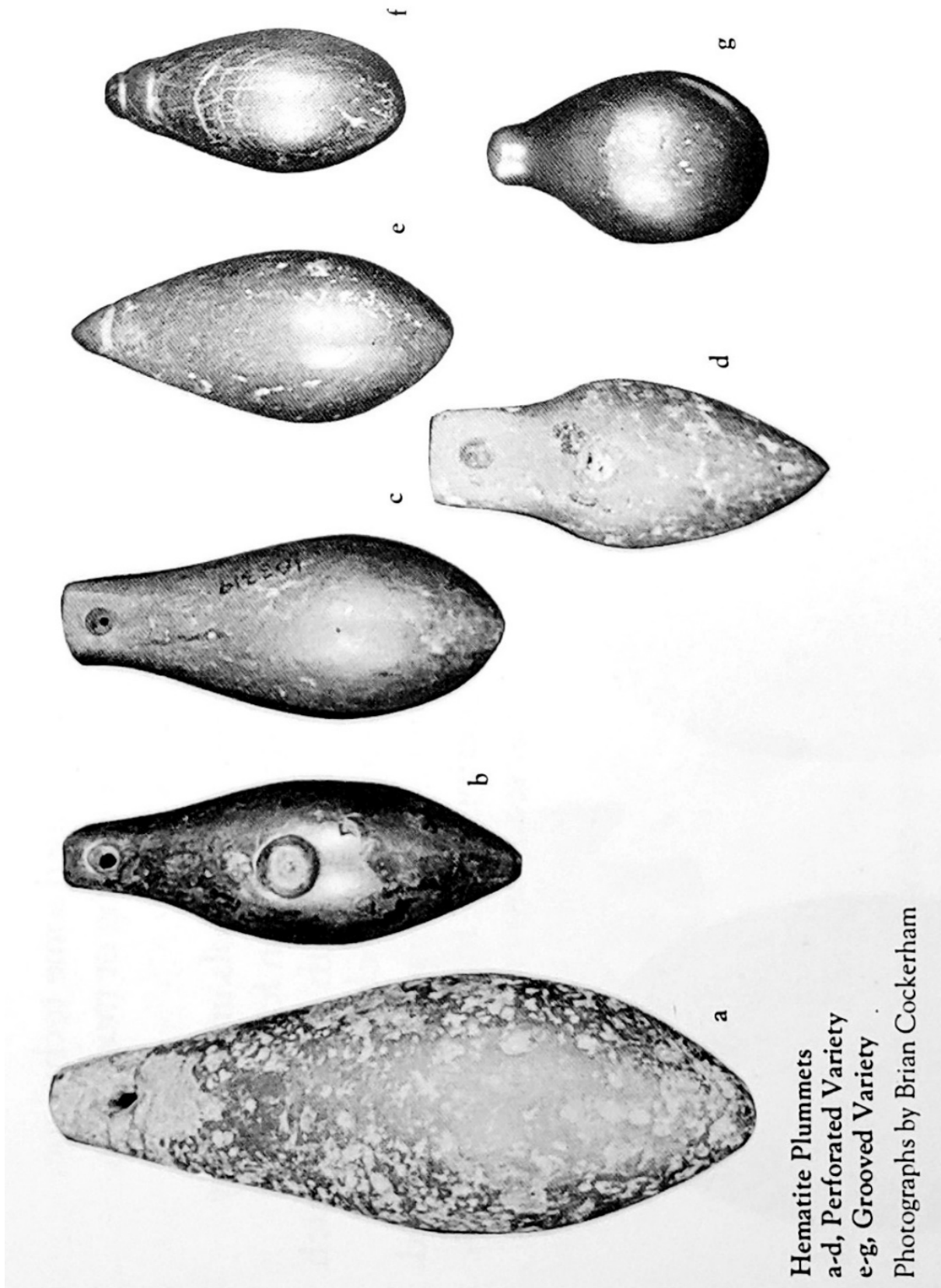
Hunters used spears; bows and arrows were unknown. Spears were tipped with a variety of stone points. Some points, like the ones illustrated above, were exclusive Poverty Point styles, but many were forms which had been made for hundreds and even thousands of years before.

Spears were thrown with atlatls, or spear-throwers, which gave added distance and power. Shaped like oversized crochet needles, atlatls were held in the throwing hand with the hooked end inserted into a shallow socket in the butt of the spear. Hurlled with a smooth, gliding motion, the spear was cast toward the target while the atlatl remained in the hand.

Atlatl hooks were sometimes made of carved antler, and polished stone weights were attached to the atlatl shaft. The weights helped to transfer the forces of the throwing motion to the spear in flight. Atlatl weights were made in a variety of sizes and shapes, including rectangular, diamond, oval, boat-shaped bars, and a host of unusual forms. Some were quite elaborate with shiny finishes and engraved decorations. Many broken weights have repair holes along the edges.

The hunters and fishermen also used plummets. These objects were ground from heavy lumps of magnetite, hematite, limonite, and occasionally other stones. Shaped like plumb bobs or big



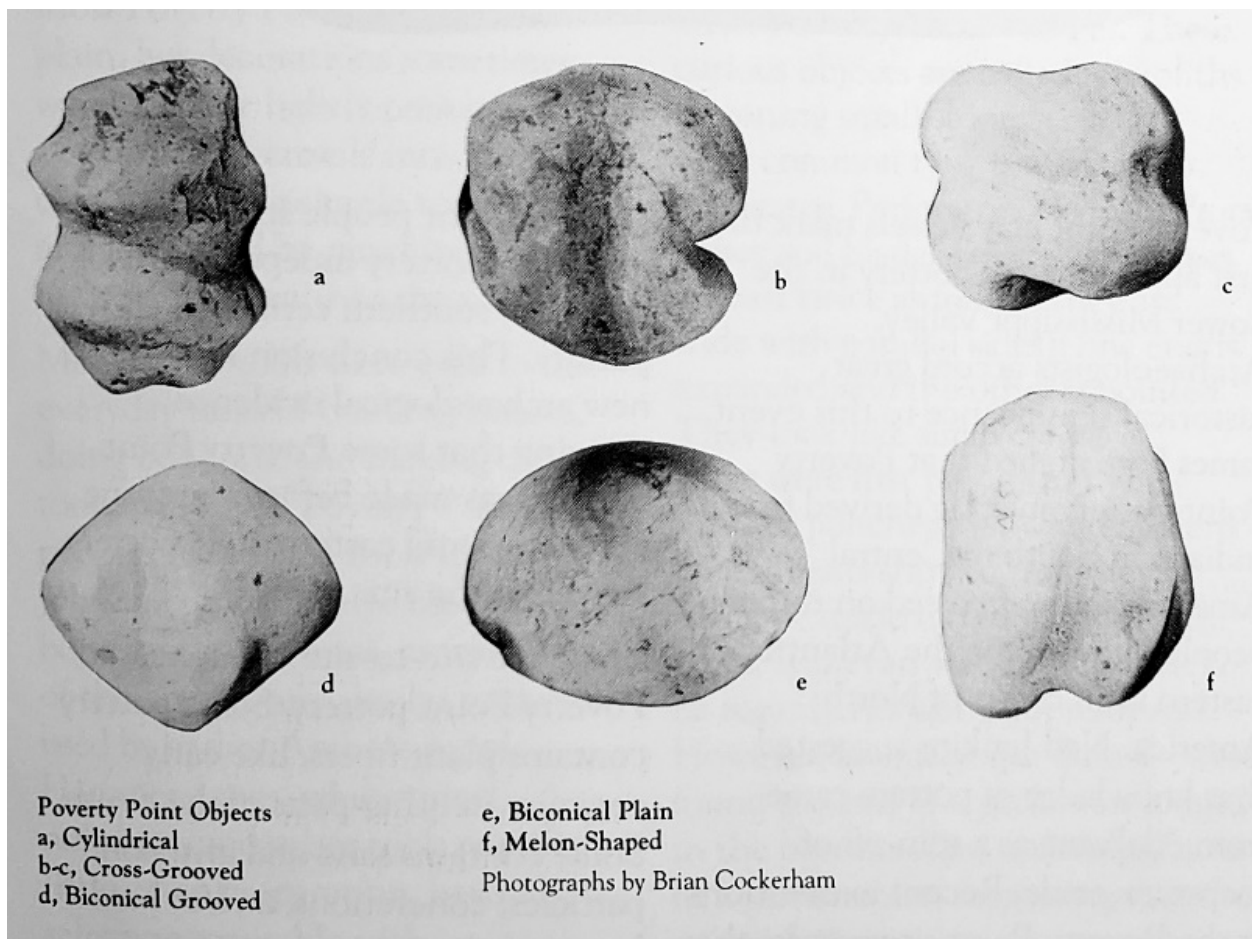




teardrops, plummets often had encircling grooves or holes drilled in the small end to aid in attachment. Some archaeologists consider plummets to be bola weights, but they were more likely weights for cast and gill fishing nets.

Other kinds of hunting devices, such as deadfalls, snares, and traps, were probably used by Poverty Point hunters, but because they were made of perishable wood, their use can only be inferred from the presence of bones of nocturnal animals among food remains. The presence of fishbones, ranging from tiny minnows to giant gar, suggests that fishermen used some technique, such as poisoning or muddying, for mass catches.

Other kinds of tools undoubtedly were used to obtain food, but we cannot identify with certainty which of the many other chipped and ground artifacts may have been used. Gathering plant foods, such as nuts, acorns, seeds, fruits, berries, greens, and vegetables, probably did not require any tools. Digging edible roots would have required some sort of tool, but it need not have been anything other than a convenient pointed stick. Stone hoes have been found at several Poverty Point villages. Some of these objects have coatings which look like melted glass or thick shellac. The coatings are called sickle-sheen and formed when hoes chopped through sod.





Foods were prepared with a variety of implements. Animals were butchered with heavy chipped stone bifaces (or cleavers) and sharp flakes or blades (knives). Battered rocks, pitted stones, and mortars served to pound nuts, acorns, and seeds into flour and oil.

Food was cooked in open hearths and earth ovens. The earth oven was an ingenious Poverty Point invention. A hole was dug in the ground, hot “clay balls” were packed around the food, and the pit was covered. Ovens efficiently regulated heat and conserved energy. “Clay balls” were hand-molded; fingers, palms, and sometimes tools were used to fashion dozens of different styles. Although they are often referred to as “clay balls,” they are not really balls, and they are made of silt, not clay. These objects are distinguishing hallmarks of Poverty Point culture. They are so common that archaeologists call them Poverty Point objects.

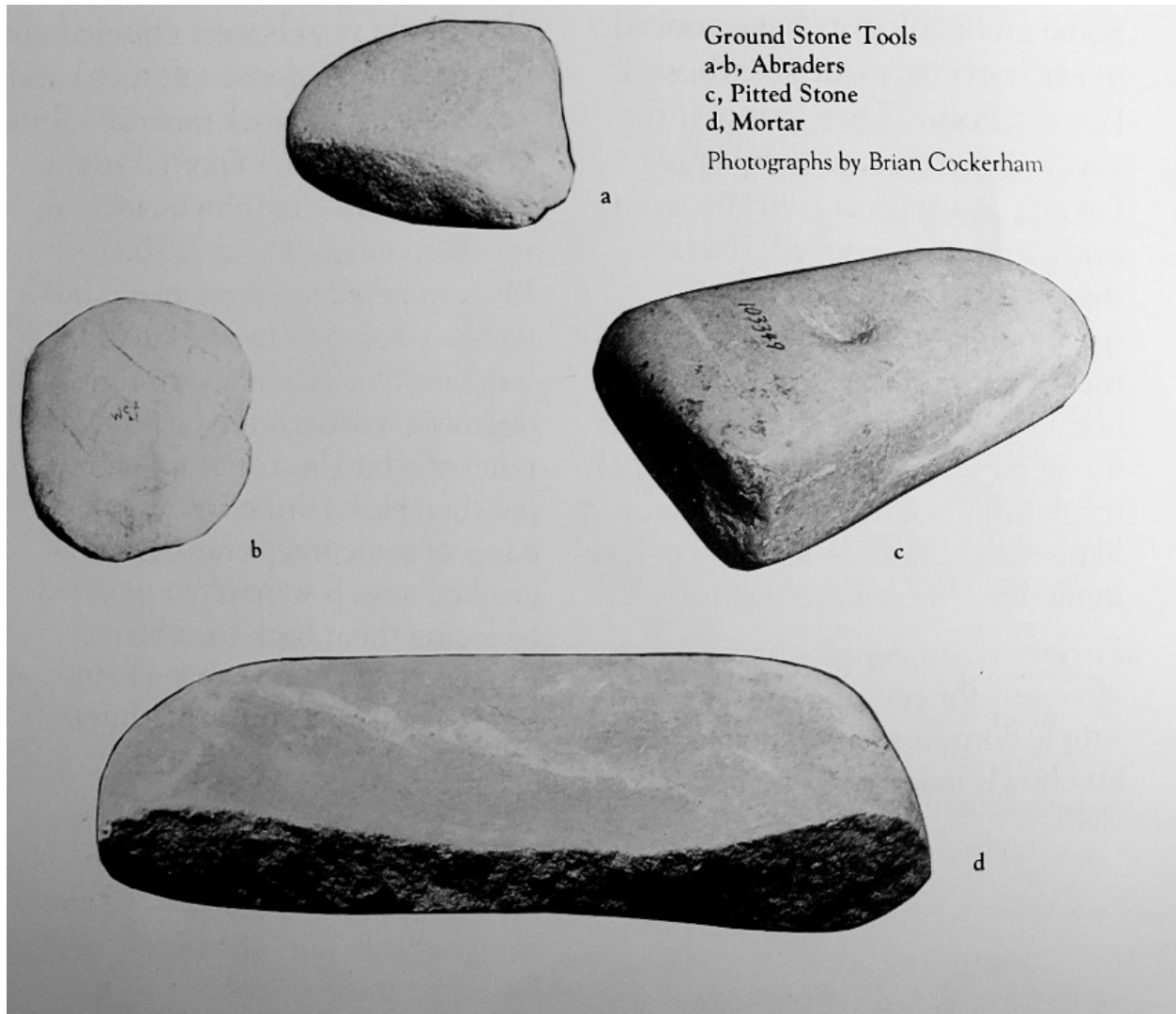
Some archaeologists have cooked in earth ovens, made like those at Poverty Point. They found, if they always put the same number of Poverty Point objects in the oven every time they cooked, that the shapes (cylindrical, biconical, spheriodial, etc.) controlled how hot the pit got and how long it stayed hot. Using different shaped objects was apparently the cooks' means of regulating cooking temperature, just like setting the time and power level in modern microwave ovens.

Poverty Point peoples had a variety of vessels for cooking, storage, and simple containment. They used pots and bowls made of stone and baked clay. Stone vessels were chiseled out of soapstone (a dense soft rock) and sandstone at the rock quarries. Tons of soapstone were imported to the Poverty Point site from quarries in northern Georgia and Alabama. Most stone vessels were plain, but a few had decorations and small handles. One notable soapstone fragment was decorated with a bas-relief of a bird and another with a panther. Holes drilled along the edges of some fragments show that cracked vessels were often repaired by lacing them back together. Broken pieces also were made into beads, pendants, and, sometimes, plummets. Poverty Point clay vessels mark the first appearance of pottery in the Lower Mississippi Valley. Archaeologists accord great historical significance to this event. James Ford argued that Poverty Point pottery making derived from Indians in South or Central America and was passed on through people living along the Atlantic and eastern Gulf coasts of North America. Ned Jenkins suggested that knowledge of pottery came from Alabama as a spin-off of soapstone trade. Recent excavations at the Poverty Point site suggest that Poverty Point people started designing pottery independently of the other southern centers of early pottery. This conclusion is based on new archaeological evidence showing that some Poverty Point pottery was made before soapstone containers and eastern-style pottery arrived at the site.

There are site-to-site differences in Poverty Point pottery. Some pottery contains plant fibers, like early ceramics in other parts of the South. Some contains sand and grit, bone particles, concretions, and/or hard lumps of clay; some contains no additions or impurities. It is just pure clay or löess (a fine, silty, wind-deposited sediment). Some archaeologists think sand, bone, and other things were intentionally added to the wet clay as temper, additives designed to prevent breaking when pots were fired. Other archaeologists suspect the included particles are natural and just happened to be in the dirt selected to make the pottery. If the inclusions were natural, it suggests that potters were merely using the handiest supply of suitable material, no matter what it

contained. Such a practice seems to be in keeping with the first groping efforts of a new technology.

Most Poverty Point pottery was plain, but decorations sometimes were made by lightly pressing objects or fingernails into the damp clay, by rocking simple tools back and forth, and by pinching or incising patterns into the surface.



Many other tools were used in the everyday tasks of building houses, doing odd jobs, and making other tools. We know Poverty Point peoples used stone tools for these jobs and probably also used wood, bone and antler ones, as well. Most of these were very similar to those used by earlier archaic people. Hammerstones, whetstones, polishers, and other tools required little or no preparation, beyond selecting a suitable rock. Fabricated tools include gouges, adzes, axes, and drills. These objects were chipped from large pieces of gravel or big flakes. The working edges of these tools often bear polish or tiny scratches, which confirm they were used for chopping,

carving, digging, and drilling. Some of these items, especially celts and adzes (cutting tools with the blades set at right angles to the handles), have counterparts made of ground and polished stone. These ground tools were made by chipping, battering, grinding, and polishing in combination or singly.

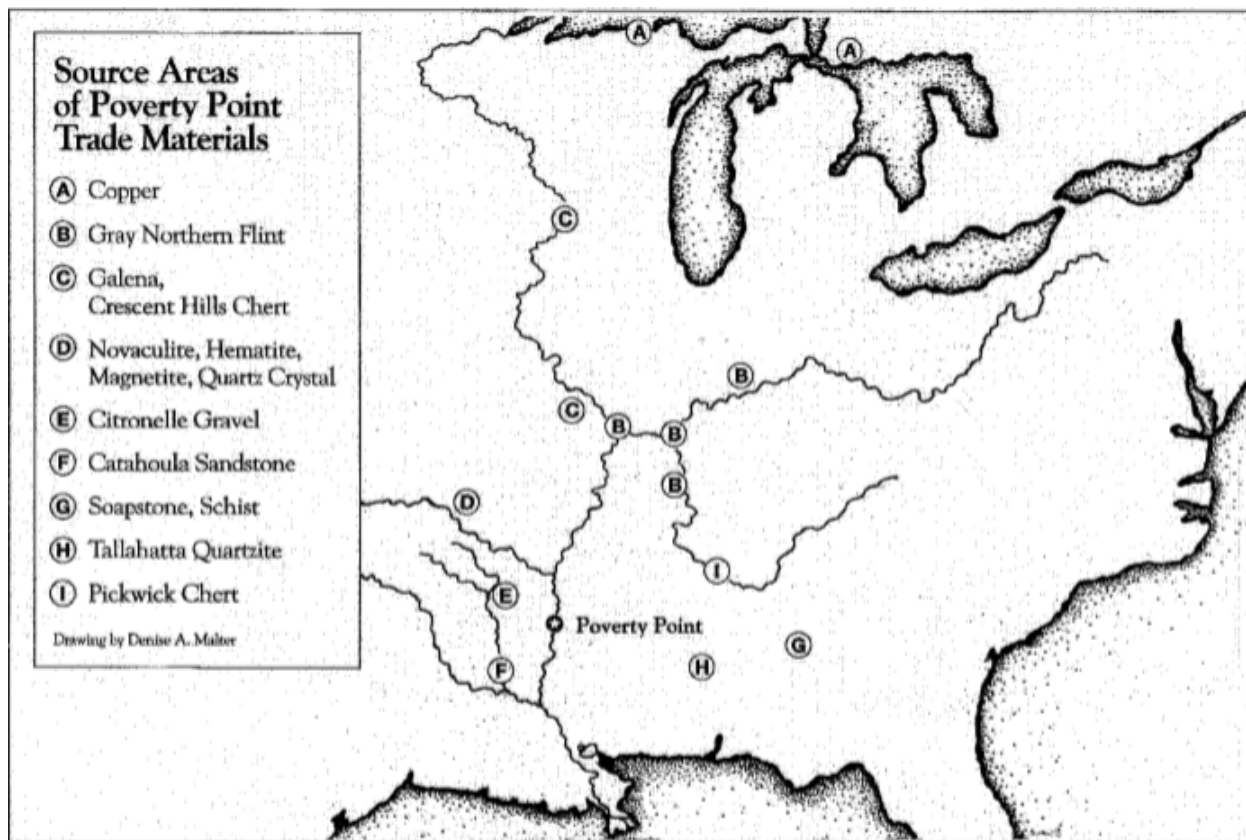
Another group of chipped stone artifacts is quite abundant at the Poverty Point and Jaketown sites and occurs in respectable numbers at other Poverty Point villages. These curious objects are called microliths (meaning small stones), and the most common type is a Jaketown perforator. Perforators are made from flakes and blades (specialized flakes at least twice as long as they are wide with parallel sides); one end is expanded and the other is pointed. They look like small car keys. They were first presumed to be drills or punches, but when modern experiments showed that they could be made by whittling antler, bone, and even wood, they came to be regarded as worn-out scrapers. However, archaeologist Sam Brookes found the end of a perforator lodged in the bottom of an unfinished hole in a stone tablet, suggesting that the original assumption was correct.

## Trade

Long-distance trade was a hallmark of Poverty Point culture. Stones were moved over long distances, some up to 1,400 miles (2,250 km). Many kinds of materials were traded, including flint, sandstone, quartzite, slate, shale, granite and other coarse igneous rocks, limonite, hematite, magnetite, soapstone, greenstone, crystal quartz, copper, galena, and dozens of others. They came from many areas of the mid-continent, including the Ouachita, Ozark, and Appalachian Mountains and the Upper Mississippi Valley and Great Lakes. Even gravels were probably traded, since they were not always available within easy reach of every Poverty Point site.

The Poverty Point trade network reached throughout the Lower Mississippi Valley. Sites, like Claiborne near the Gulf coast, participated. So did sites, like Jaketown, in the northern sections. Many other sites were also involved, especially those close to the larger sites, where trade seems to have been more intensive. However, trade was by no means uniform nor did every site or community in the Lower Mississippi Valley participate. The trade that took place at the Poverty Point site was the most intensive of all.

Rocks were the major trade goods. Some were traded in a natural unaltered condition, but many were circulated as finished or partly finished artifacts. There is very little evidence that other kinds of materials were traded in large quantities. Trade in rocks does make good sense, because rocks furnished the raw material for many tools. Poverty Point people did not make metal tools, and wood, bone, and other perishable substances used to make tools were locally available. Some rocks occur naturally in the heartland of Poverty Point culture, but they are limited to deposits of chert gravels and outcrops of crumbly sandstones, quartzites, and ironstones. Although local resources could have furnished (and did furnish for many time periods) all the raw materials people needed, most rocks imported by Poverty Point peoples were of better quality and prettier than local ones. They were obviously highly desired, and the large quantities that were circulated show that demand was high and supply and exchange systems efficient.

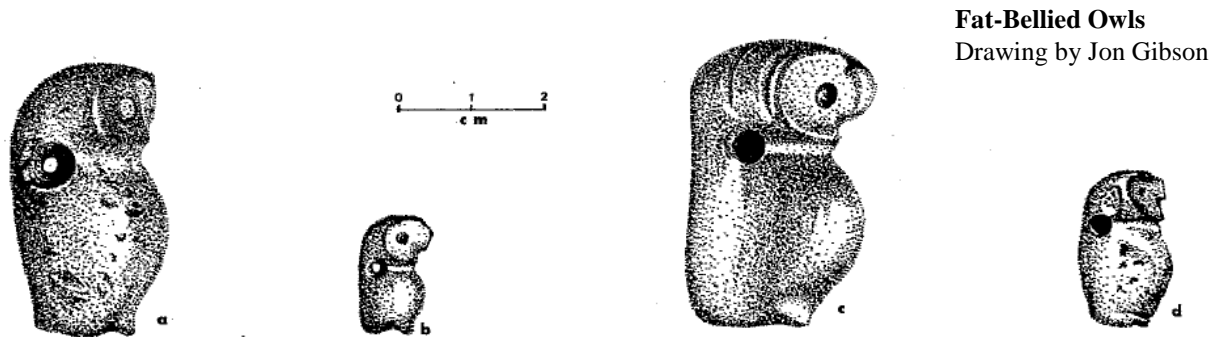


Most trade rocks came from outside the land of Poverty Point culture, sometimes from a long way away. It is hard to explain how they got into Poverty Point country, because we have not identified anything of Poverty Point origin in the areas where the rocks originated that might have been traded for them. This lack seems to eliminate simple barter, or at least, barter involving hard, durable items. Perhaps, if peoples living in the lands of the rocks had traded rocks for food, hides, feathers, or other organic materials, then we should expect to find little or no evidence. It is hard to imagine perishable goods being exchanged in the quantities that would surely have been necessary to secure the tons of rocks that wound up in the lower reaches of the Mississippi Valley. Besides, northern groups had their own food, hides, feathers, and the like.

It is doubtful that they would have wanted the same kinds of goods, just because they were from the South. It is also doubtful that Louisiana cooking had the same appeal then as now. With rare exceptions, Poverty Point cooking balls do not occur in rock country.

Were Poverty Point people trading ideas or an ideology (religion) for rocks? Ideas would have left no direct trace either, but we should expect some symbolic artifact, some religious image, perhaps a potbellied jasper owl pendant, to have accompanied idea exchange, and so far, none have shown up in the land of the rocks.

We can rule out down-the-line, or neighbor-to-neighbor, trade because the number of imported rocks would have decreased as distance from sources increased, and that is not the case. In fact, there is little imported material at all along the long stretch of river valley lying between the rock sources and the Poverty Point heartland. The largest volume of rocks accumulated at the far end of the line, opposite the sources.



Perhaps, James Ford and Clarence Webb were not too far off base when they suggested that gathering expeditions were sent out from the big Poverty Point site itself. Maybe one or two big ventures were all that were needed to obtain most nonlocal flints and other materials that outcropped along the Mississippi, Ohio, and Tennessee rivers and their tributaries. Other sources could have been visited more often. It is hard to imagine such long-distance collecting trips being sustained for very long, and maybe, they were not. People may have lived at the Poverty Point site for only a couple of generations. Direct gathering could, however, explain why southern trade goods seem to be lacking in the rock country of the Midwest and why there was such a big gap between rock sources and Poverty Point territory.

But direct gathering does not explain how materials were circulated once they reached the Lower Mississippi Valley. Here, we are certainly talking about some kind of delivery network, some kind of organized trade system. It is not reasonable to assume that each and every site with nonlocal rocks got them independently by sending out gathering expeditions to the rock sources. If every site had gotten its own rocks directly, we would expect each site to have different kinds of rocks, and that is not the case. Although each site does not always have the full array of nonlocal materials, those that are present are always the same kinds that appear everywhere else.

How Poverty Point trade was carried out in the confines of the Lower Mississippi Valley remains as obscure as how it was conducted on its broadest scale. In the last 10 years, considerable research has been done, and while we still do not have definite answers, we have been able to sharpen our views about some aspects of the topic.

In the area within 25 miles of the Poverty Point site, certain kinds of tools were consistently made from certain kinds of nonlocal rock, and very few unworked trade rocks occur. So, the types of tools present at a given site determine the types of trade rocks at the site. For example, plummets were made of hematite, and hoes and Motley points were made of gray northern flint,

usually of the Dover variety. So, if a site had a lot of plummets, it had a lot of hematite; if it had a lot of hoes or Motley points, it had a lot of gray northern flint.

How long people lived on a place also must have affected amounts and kinds of trade materials; sites with long occupations probably obtained larger quantities and a wider variety, too. If these were the only influential factors, then we could assume that trade was a simple affair with a simple motive—putting stone resources into the hands of workers and putting the workers to work.

But this view may be too simplistic. To date, only the most abundant trade rocks have been studied, and these were all made into common work tools. We should not be surprised to find them mainly where people worked. Other trade materials, destined to become ornaments, fetishes, or other symbolic objects, may have been traded through different channels or through the same channels in different hands. These materials may be distributed differently from the trade rock used for tools, but they are so uncommon that we really cannot tell. Certainly, the large number of ornaments and symbolic artifacts at the Poverty Point site is in keeping with its great size and cultural significance, but what about symbolic objects from small outlying sites? What do they mean? Do they make that site or its head man or shaman more important than other small sites without such objects? We do not know, and until we find out, the full nature of Poverty Point trade will remain unclear. Only one conclusion is certain: The Poverty Point site was the most important trade center.

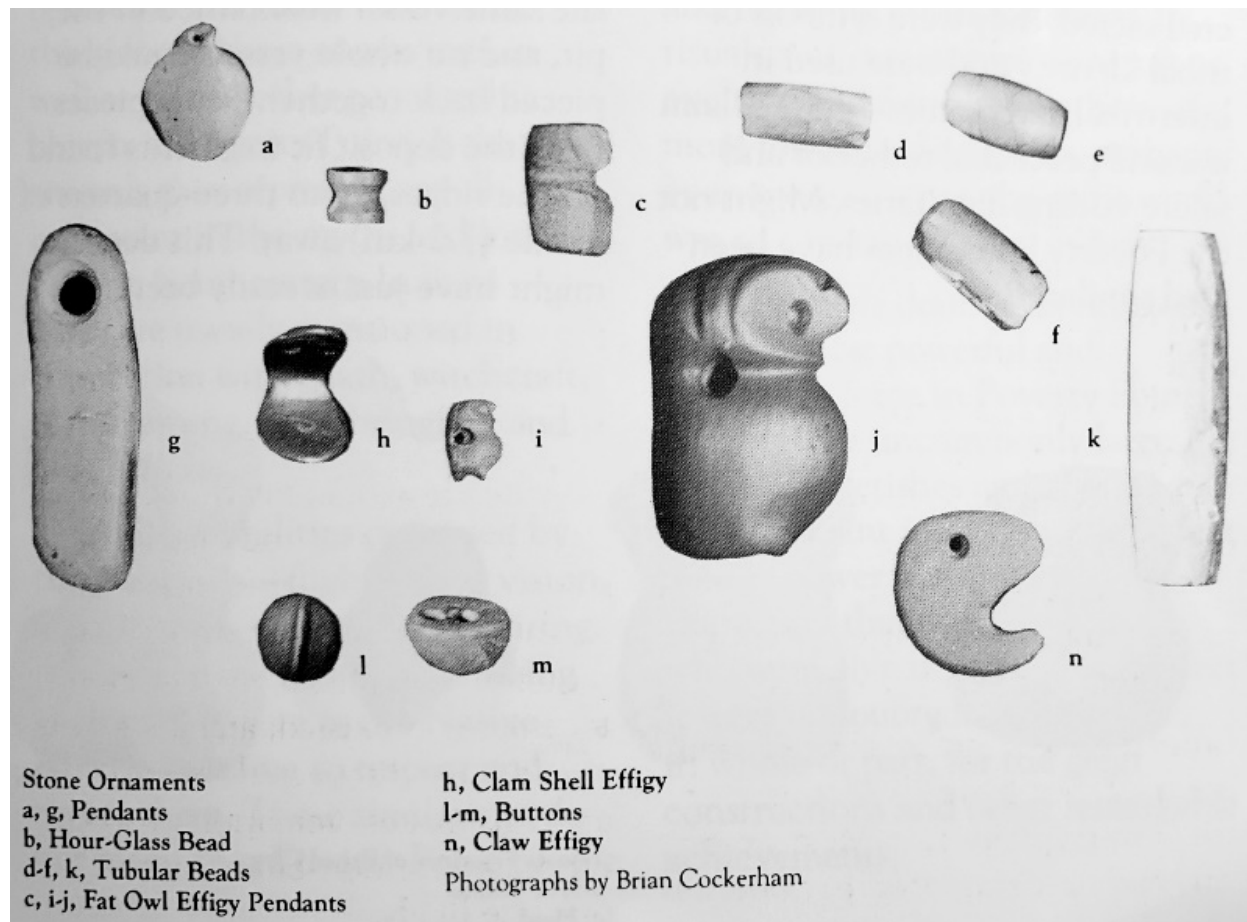
## **Symbolic Objects, Ritual, and Religion**

Death and burial are solemn and powerful rituals in every society, ancient and modern, but there is very little information about Poverty Point burial practices. This may simply be a sampling problem, since archaeologists have sampled less than one percent of the area of the Poverty Point site. However, so far, no burials have turned up at the Poverty Point site, nor have burials been found at other excavated Poverty Point sites. A suspected cemetery at the Cowpen Slough site near Larto Lake in central Louisiana proved to be much earlier, after it was finally radiocarbon dated.

Burned bone fragments were found in an ash bed beneath Mound B at the Poverty Point Site. Most were tiny and unidentifiable, but one was the upper end of a burned human femur (thighbone), proving that at least one person had been cremated and covered by the earthen mound. Two human milk teeth were found in another area of the site, called the “Dock,” and a cut out section of jaw and other teeth, drilled for suspension, were discovered in the muck dredge out of Bayou Maçon, the small stream that lies at the foot of the bluff beneath the Poverty Point site. The drilled molars and jaw section were not from burials; they were ornaments, made from the remains of revered ancestors or brave enemies to serve as amulets, charms, medals, or religious objects.

How did Poverty Point people dispose of their dead? Through cremation that left little or no remains? By putting bodies in trees or on scaffolds for the scavengers? By simply abandoning corpses in the woods or throwing them in streams? By burying people in individual graves scattered across villages and camping areas or perhaps away from living areas entirely? Or by putting corpses in traditional cemeteries, which simply have not been discovered yet? We just do not know.

This much we can say though. If a lot of people lived and died at the Poverty Point site, then burial of their physical remains would have required a sizeable area. It seems that if cemeteries existed, archaeologists would have discovered them by now, and this makes cremation or some other kind of non-burial disposal practice likely.



Poverty Point people made many unusual objects, but none were more unusual than those having symbolic meaning. No other preceding or contemporary culture in North America had as many ornaments and symbolic objects. Cylindrical, tubular, and disc-shaped stone beads, made mostly of red jasper, predominated, but many of their special objects were crafted. Ground stone pendants were made in a variety of geometric and zoomorphic shapes: mainly silhouettes of birds and bird heads, animal claws or talons, feet or paws, and turtle shells. There were even

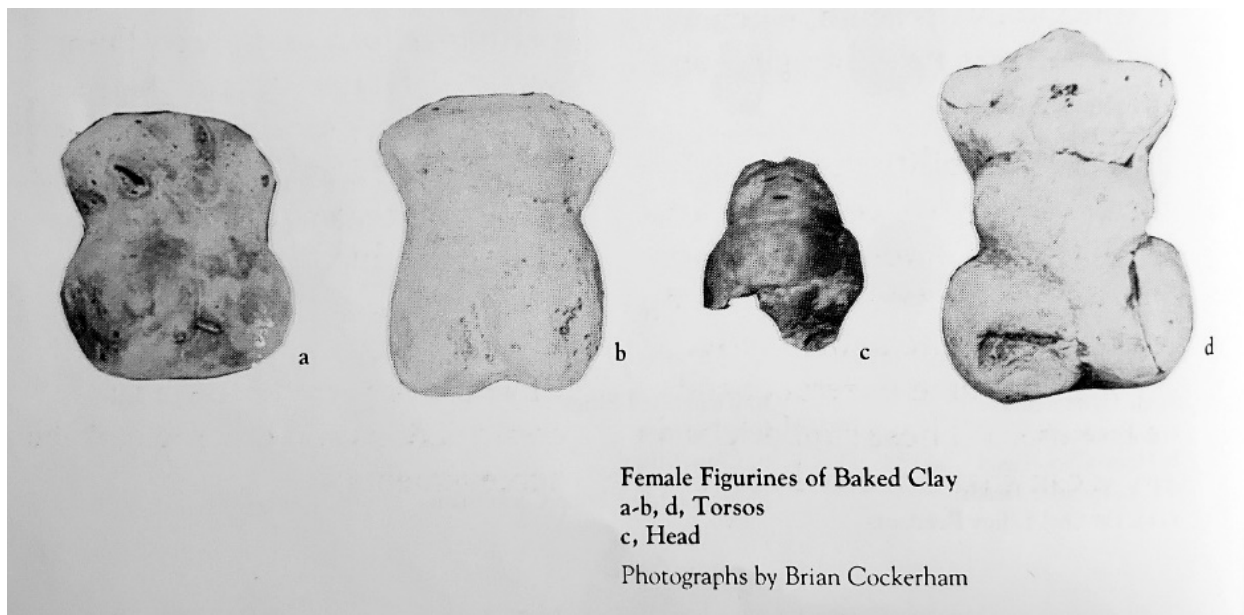


small stone replicas of open clam shells. In-the-round pendants shaped like fat-bellied owls were made and circulated across the Gulf area from western Louisiana to central Florida. A polished tablet from Jaketown bore a carved human face. Copper and galena beads and bangles were worn at Poverty Point and Claiborne sites. Perforated human and animal teeth, cut out sections of human jaws, bone tubes, and bird bills, dredged from the bottom muck of the bayou below the Poverty Point site, suggest that much more ornamentation of perishable materials has disappeared.

It would hardly be appropriate to describe the folks at Poverty Point as gaudily adorned, but compared with their country neighbors in the small villages, they must have appeared quite ornate and “fancy.” Because there were so many ornaments at the Poverty Point site, it is conceivable that personal status and social standing were more formalized there than anywhere else. Hundreds of solid stone objects, such as cones, cylinders, spheres, cubes, trapezoids, buttons, and others, were also made at the Poverty Point site. Because utilitarian functions for these small objects are hard to imagine, they too may have had ornamental or symbolic significance.

Religious and other symbolic purposes may have also been served by stone pipes. Most were shaped like slender ice-cream cones or fat cigars. Other smoking tubes, made of baked clay, have also been found at Poverty Point and other places far from Poverty Point. Among historic Indian peoples of the southeastern United States, smoking was a religious ritual and was not done for pleasure. Pipes and their elaborately decorated pipe stems were considered sacred; they were symbols of tribal identity and were used in intertribal ceremonies—to proclaim war and peace and to honor and salute visiting dignitaries. Might not the Poverty Point pipes have been used similarly?

Other possible sacred objects may have included the small, hand-molded, clay figurines



Female Figurines of Baked Clay  
a-b, d, Torsos  
c, Head

Photographs by Brian Cockerham

depicting seated or kneeling women, many of whom appear to be pregnant. Heads were nearly always missing, although whether or not they were snapped off deliberately during ceremonies is unknown. Smaller decorated versions of Poverty Point objects may have had special symbolic value as well.

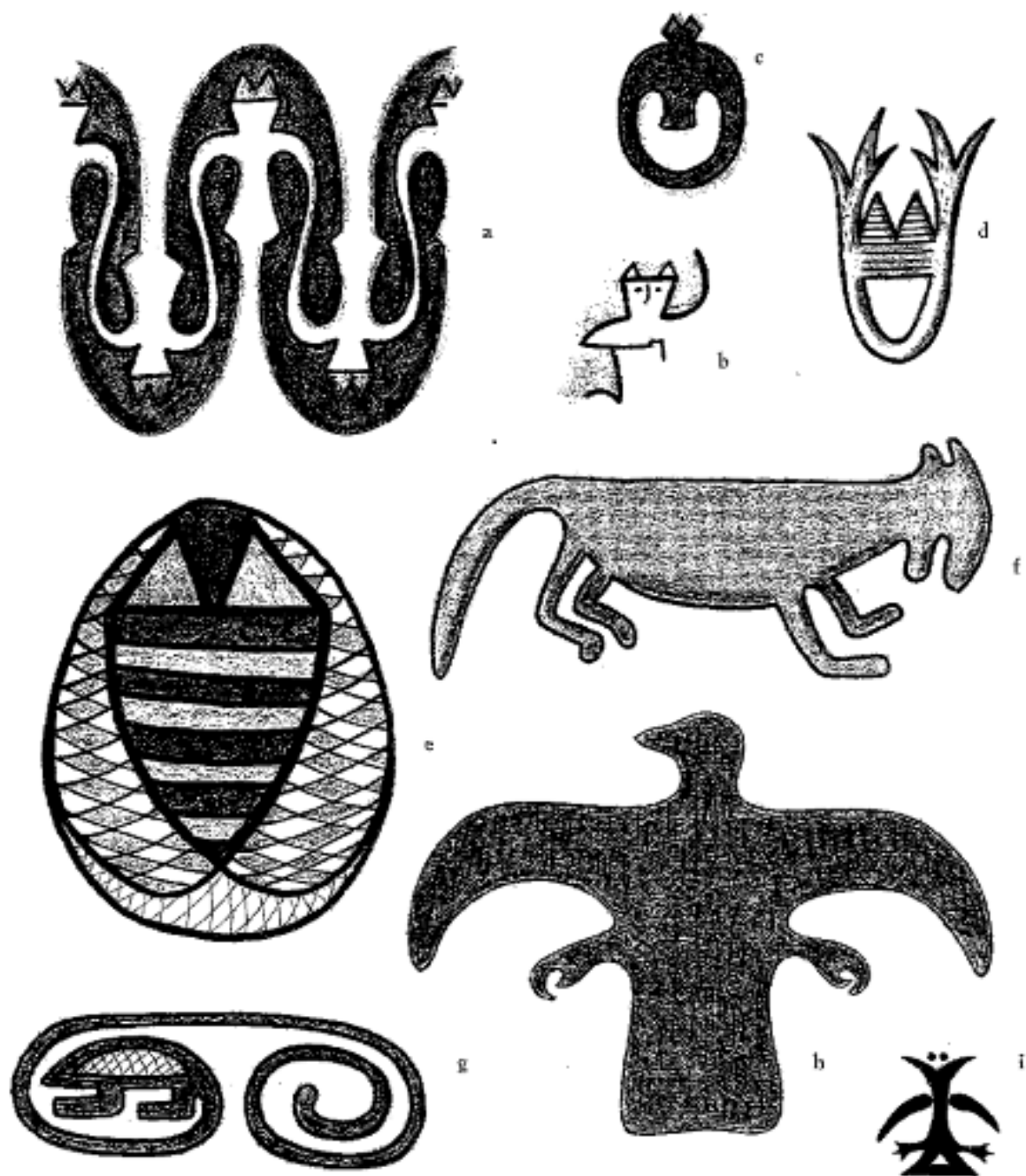
Everyday artifacts may have been turned into sacred ones under special circumstances. This could explain the deposit of thousands of soapstone vessel fragments buried in an oval pit a little southwest of the big mound at the Poverty Point site. These were not from vessels that had been intentionally broken on the spot and then buried. Only a few pieces from the same vessel were buried in the pit, and no whole vessels could be pieced back together. Some pieces from the deposit fit fragments found on the ridges, up to three-quarters of a mile (1.2 km) away. This deposit might have just as easily been interpreted as an artisan's cache of recyclable material if it had not been for the four small fires that had burned in the corners of the pit. The fires suggest ritual, and the deposit probably represents some kind of offering. Other deposits of soapstone vessels, both whole and broken, were found at the Claiborne site on the Gulf coast.

Other ordinary objects that may have been given special religious significance include plummets and bannerstones bearing engravings of various animals. The engravings include the so-called "Fox-Man" and "Long-Tail" designs, as well as duck foot and bird figures. The "Fox-Man" design is probably a stylized horned owl, rather than a man with fox head or headdress, and the "Long-Tail" may represent an opossum. The really interesting thing about these engravings, as well as all the other zoomorphic objects at Poverty Point, is that the animals they represent are all important in the myths and lore of historic Southeastern Indians. They are usually mentioned in connection with death, witchcraft, early warning, news bringing, and origin stories.

The unique abilities possessed by these animals—flight, night vision, and alertness—were awe-inspiring. It is easy to see how people living as close to nature as did Native Americans came to respect and revere them. These similarities do not mean that Poverty Point people and historic tribes had the same religion, but it does make me wonder if they might have shared similar world views, world views carried on by oral tradition for thousands of years.

If these images really are religious symbols, then we ought to think of Poverty Point religion as animistic. Animism is a belief system that sees the world as being full of spirits and power. Such a world can be manipulated by shamans (or medicine men or women) and witches and altered by prayers, fetishes, amulets, and charms. Although animism lacks the formal organization of religions historically associated with other monument building societies, it was not any less capable of explaining the great mysteries or of providing direction and meaning for its followers. Its rituals and ceremonies were just as exciting and fearsome as those of more formalized religions, perhaps even more so since the spirit world was so constantly close at hand.

There is little doubt that religion was the most powerful and persuasive force in Poverty Point society. The uncommonly large number of fetishes and charms at Poverty Point indicates that a great deal of power was concentrated there, and that power and those who were able to control and direct it were undoubtedly responsible, in whole or part, for the great constructions and other remarkable achievements.



**Stone Engravings with Symbolic Significance**  
**a-e, “Fox Man” Design**  
**f, Panther Design**  
**g, “Long Tail” Design**  
**h-i, Bird Design**  
 Drawing by Jon Gibson

# Socio-Political Organization

Prehistoric social and political organization is difficult for archaeologists to reconstruct, because it consisted of rules and customs and not artifacts. Still, we have to use artifacts, or rather, artifact patterns, in order to reconstruct organization. Patterns are not only indirect indicators of organization, they are often hard to recognize because they have been disturbed by the passage of time. Nevertheless, socio-political organization is an important archaeological consideration because it gave structure to society and shaped people's lives and actions. Just as religion explained people's relations with the great mysteries, sociopolitical organization defined and explained people's relations with each other—kith and kin, leader and led, and friend and foe.

Attempts to reconstruct social and political organization have been mainly limited to the Poverty Point site and the Yazoo Basin around the Jaketown site. The large earthworks and huge quantities of trade materials at the Poverty Point site led archaeologists to assume that it was a sophisticated place and that the society that operated there was a complex one. Its age and technology created minor problems, which were resolved by assuming that Poverty Point represented a transitional stage between earlier simple cultures and later more advanced ones.

These ideas had their roots in evolutionary thinking. Evolutionary thinking held that culture progressed slowly, steadily, and surely; from simpler to more complex forms. Also important was the presumption that prehistoric peoples had the same kinds of socio-political organization as certain groups alive today. Nobody seriously considered the possibility that some kinds of prehistoric groups and their organizational bases might have disappeared without leaving counterparts in the twentieth century. Archaeologists now recognize that the community at and around the Poverty Point site was more sophisticated than most modern hunter-gatherer societies, which make poor comparisons anyway, because they have all been changed by exposure to the industrialized world. We cannot point to a single modern-day hunter-gatherer society and say that is what Poverty Point society was like. The precise kind of socio-political organization that existed at Poverty Point may have happened only once and only there. There is no necessary reason why something like it would have reappeared once the particular circumstances and personalities responsible for it disappeared.

Poverty Point organization does not seem so out-of-time and out-of-place now that we realize that mound building with all its organizational dimensions had been around for two or three thousand years before the earthworks at Poverty Point were ever built. None of these earlier Archaic mound-building societies seems as large or as complex as Poverty Point society, although I believe that if there had not been a Poverty Point site, we would be hard pressed to detect much difference between other Archaic and Poverty Point societies.

There are two important things to remember. One, Poverty Point did not just spring from emptiness. It had precedents. Two, it is the Poverty Point site that makes Poverty Point culture so unusual. The Jaketown community, for instance, was not as socially and politically elaborate as the one at Poverty Point. There was just no other place like Poverty Point.

What then can we say about Poverty Point socio-political organization? We can be reasonably certain that kinship was the dominant factor that held people together. Poverty Point communities were basically groups of kinfolks joined by blood and marriage ties. Social relationships were based on familiarity, and status was determined by personal abilities, character, and birthright.

It is at the Poverty Point site where we detect a level of organization that seems to exceed that which is possible through simple kinship. It has become increasingly apparent that Poverty Point's earthworks were built quickly, and this suggests strong leadership. Whether construction had been carried out by permanent residents or temporary visitors drawn to Poverty Point to trade, there were still building plans to draw up, labor to organize and supervise, food to provide while the work was going on, and a large camp to run.

Overarching all this was the motivation for, and overall direction of, construction. Building the Poverty Point mounds and ridges was a huge undertaking. Millions of hours of labor were invested. The earthworks were not haphazard piles of dirt but carefully laid-out features, constructed according to a master design no matter how rough the terrain along their path. The point is that somebody decided to build the earthworks. Somebody planned them. Somebody convinced people to work on them. It was this somebody (leadership) and the circumstances that spawned such leadership that made Poverty Point different from usual kinship-based societies. The cause must have been just and good and the leadership kind and generous, because there was nothing other than strength of personality and weight of public opinion to compel people to work on a massive project that went so far beyond their individual needs. Perhaps, this is what Poverty Point is all about anyway, a monument to a beloved leader and a bold testament to a belief system.

## **A Final Appraisal**

The preceding view of Poverty Point culture is a patchwork of facts, hypotheses, guesses, and speculations. Many equally sound interpretations can be drawn from the same data. This is the nature of archaeology. Trying to describe an extinct culture, especially its social and political organization and its religion by means of artifacts is not an exact science, but it is a rewarding and meaningful one.

This little study is not about agreements or disagreements over interpretations. It is about responsibility, a responsibility incumbent on each of us to understand as much as we possibly can about humanity, past and present. The quality of our lives is owed directly to the people who walked the land before us. The people responsible for Poverty Point culture are gone, but their magnificent achievements and contributions to the saga of human development stand proudly before us today. Theirs is a legacy worth understanding and protecting.

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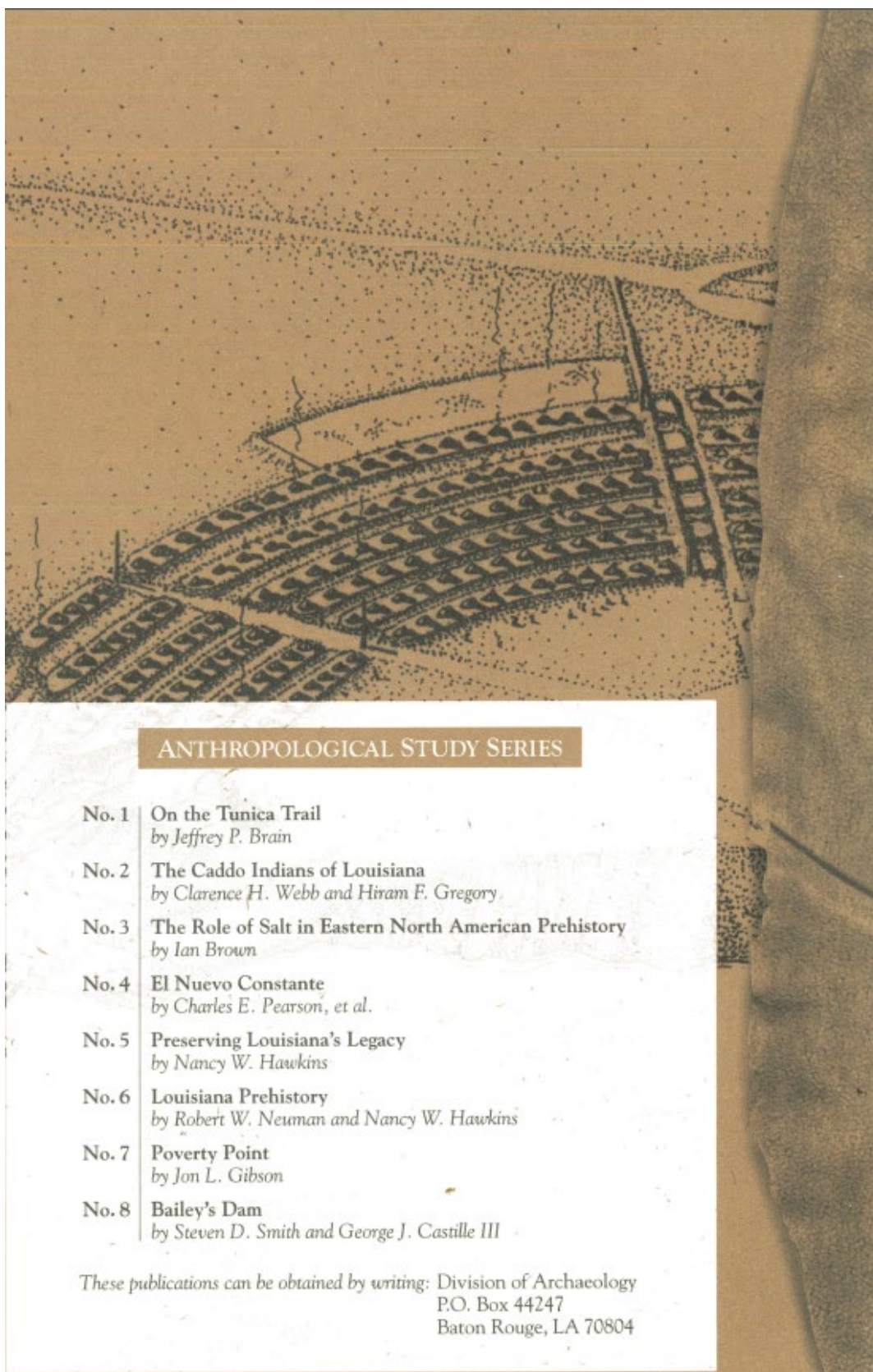
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