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The Problem of Site Definition in Cultural Resource Management

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ABSTRACT

The strategies employed by the Cache River Archeological Project, the Little Black Watershed Project, and the 1976 Village Creek Archeological Project with regard to site definition are compared and assessed. It is argued that both the Cache and Little Black Projects used unnecessarily restrictive definitions of cultural resources. The more liberal approach of the Village Creek Project enables both the archeological community and governmental agencies to interpret and assess better the significance and general extent of the archeological context of the cultural resource base.

INTRODUCTION

Several researchers involved in cultural resource management (Price et al. 1975, Raab 1975, Raab and Klinger 1976, Schiffer and House 1975) have argued recently that problems of interpretation and assessment of significance of archeological resources are related directly to the theoretical and methodological framework within which these resources are viewed (i.e., research design). Site interpretability and significance, in other words, are variables construed in the eyes of the beholder.

A comparison is made of a basic methodological aspect of three major research programs involving regional assessments of cultural resources in separate areas of northeast Arkansas and southeast Missouri (Fig. 1). The focus of this discussion is on the problem of site definition and how this affects subsequent interpretations and evaluations of resource significance. The research programs reviewed include (1) the Cache River Archeological Project, an Arkansas Archeological Survey program sponsored by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers during 1973 and 1974 (Schiffer and House 1975); (2) the Little Black Watershed Project, conducted by the Southeast Missouri Archaeological Research Facility of the University of Missouri during 1975 and sponsored by the U.S. Soil Conservation Service (Price et al. 1975); and (3) the 1976 Village Creek Archeological Project also conducted by the Survey and sponsored by the U.S. Soil Conservation Service (Klinger 1976).

THE PROBLEM OF SITE DEFINITION

It seems curious that archeologists should hold as widely varied concepts of such a basic analytical unit as the site as are illustrated in the examples outlined in Table I. The crucial question at this juncture is what configuration of variables must be present for a cultural resource to be recognized.

In the Cache Project, for example, the definition of an archeological site was "any area with observable evidence of past cultural behavior" (House and Schiffer 1975:47). When this notion was operationalized in the case of prehistoric sites, however, areas were recorded and found eligible for possible future analysis only if they yielded "a double hand-full of cultural material" (House and Schiffer 1975:48). In addition, historic sites were mapped only if they produced clear evidence of an occupation predating 1860 (House and Schiffer 1975:47). The relationship between a double hand-full of artifacts and past human behavior was not the subject of one of House and Schiffer's more explicit discussions in the Cache volume.

In the Little Black Watershed investigations, the minimal criterion for assigning a site number to an area was that it contain at least "3 or more specimens of prehistoric cultural material such as potsherds, or chert and quartzite flakes" (Price et al. 1975: 79). In contrast to the Cache practice, historic sites within the Little Black basin were recorded if they predated 1900, although post-1900 sites representing important or poorly documented activities (e.g., mining, moonshining) also were noted when identified.

The definition of cultural resources in the Cache and Little Black

projects, then, rested on seemingly tenuous criteria involving a double hand-full of artifacts and sites predating 1860, or areas containing the "magic number" of three pieces of cultural material and, in most cases, predating 1900.

The 1976 Village Creek Project took a more expansive approach to defining cultural resources than either of the other two projects. The

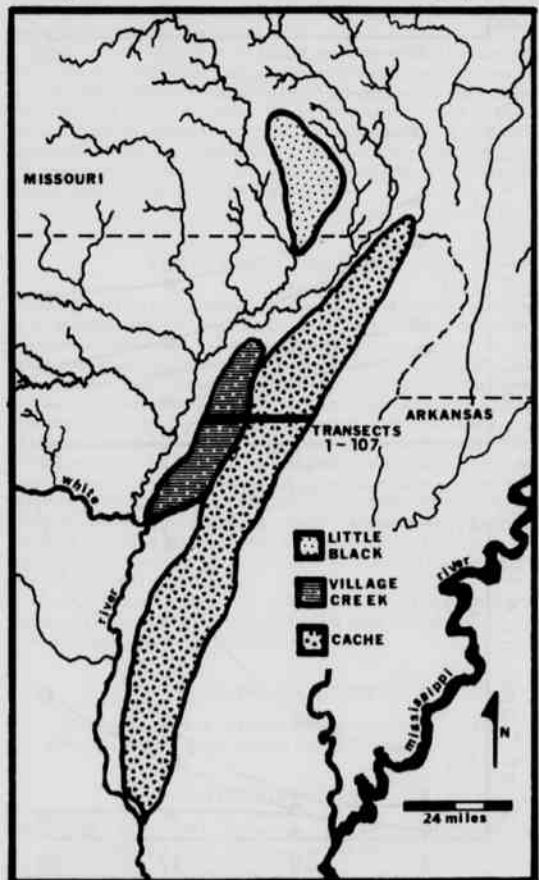


Figure 1. General map of southeast Missouri and northeast Arkansas showing location of Little Black, Village Creek, and Cache River Project areas. Transects 1 and 107 also are noted.

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same definition of a site as used in the Cache project was employed in the Village Creek investigations. The "double hand-full" criterion, however, was not involved in the latter study. Thus, any discrete spatial loci exhibiting evidence of past cultural behavior, whether it be a single sherd or flake, was deemed a site. In the case of historic resources, any set of cultural remains that could be considered to be in archeological context (Schiffer 1972) was, by definition, mapped and processed as an archeological site regardless of age.

DISCUSSION

The disparity in strategies of site definition exhibited in Table I is not unique to the Western Lowlands of Arkansas and Missouri or to the Lower Mississippi Valley. The problem of site definition has confronted many researchers in a variety of cultural and ecological settings. Site definition as such is not unlike any other variable, in that it is derived from and intimately associated with the overall theoretical and methodological framework or research design. In cultural resource management, however, no matter what the research design may entail, one must be capable of assessing the total resource base, not just a portion of it. (This not to suggest that *all* archeological sites can be recorded, for there is surely a portion of the archeological record which falls below the current threshold of visibility; however, one must be in a position to make an adequate assessment of those resources which *are* visible.)

Thomas (1975:62) adopted a strategy involving analytical units that are even more basic than the traditional site for use in his Great Basin Reese River Ecological Project. This approach is characterized by use of "the cultural item (the artifact, feature, manuport, individual flake, or whatever) as the minimal unit" of analysis rather than the site (1975:62).

This *nonsite* archeology (a poor choice of label by Thomas for it implies that a single cultural item cannot, by itself, fulfill a more traditional site definition) is essentially the strategy used in the 1976 Village Creek Project. Allowing the criteria for a resource to expand beyond traditional limits has literally exposed a vast portion of archeological record that previously was ignored or labeled insignificant and/or uninterpretable.

A particularly telling point in this regard is the Cache Project's operational definition of archeological sites in comparison with that used in Village Creek. Both projects involved an intensive and well-designed sample survey of analogous areas of the Western Lowlands in northeast Arkansas (Fig. 1). To complement the efforts of the Cache investigators, it was decided to continue to the west the already completed Cache Transect I with the Village Creek Transect 107. Both of the cross-basin strips were ¼ mile wide and were in the central part of Township 15N. House (1975:153) reported an overall site density of 11.3 sites/mi² for the Cache Transect (Table I). This density contrasts sharply with the 30.7 sites/mi² found in the transect extension across the Village Creek Basin.

Differential use of the two basins both prehistorically and historically may account for some of the observed variability. Differences in approach to site definition, however, probably account for most of it.

Although there are no strictly analogous data for the Little Black investigations, a review of the site descriptions (Price et al. 1975:98-111), confirms that small scatters were recorded and designated as cultural resources. Overall site densities for this area also would exceed significantly those projected for the Cache.

A conservative view of cultural resources such as that used in the Cache Project not only tends to mislead government agencies as to the nature and extent of the archeological record but also severely limits the resultant data base with regard to its potential to inform about total cultural systems as they operated in the past.

The question remains as to what effect conservative or liberal approaches to the archeological record have on the ability to assess and interpret cultural resources. Although this is difficult to answer, one readily apparent ramification of the conservative view is that at least 50% of the resource base must immediately be disregarded, half of the total settlement system (63% in the case of the Cache/Village Creek dichotomy). By recording the small sites and isolated items, in contrast, one builds a valuable body of regionally derived data from which potentially significant patterns may emerge. This far-reaching problem affects both the archeological community and those governmental agencies responsible for the protection of cultural resources.

CONCLUSION

An unnecessarily restrictive view of the archeological record can be detrimental in several respects. Three major research projects were evaluated in terms of their approach to defining cultural resources. The most conservative of these, the Cache Project, employed what now can be judged as a totally unacceptable strategy of resource definition. Although the Little Black criteria were much more liberal, the 1900 restriction on historic sites and the three-artifact qualification on prehistoric sites are still thought to be much too repressive. The liberal approach used in the Village Creek Project should serve as a model for future investigations charged with assessing cultural resources from a regional perspective. The notion of cultural resource management implies responsibility for the *total* resource base, not an arbitrarily defined portion of it.

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Table I. Methodological Comparison of Three Recent Archeological Research Programs Conducted in Northeast Arkansas and Southeast Missouri

Project	Site Definition		Comparative Site Densities
	Prehistoric	Historic	
Cache River Archeological Project (Schiffer and House 1975)	double hand-full of artifacts	pre-1860	11.3 sites/mi ²
Little Black Watershed Project (Price and Price et al. 1975)	at least 3 artifacts	pre-1900	not reported
Village Creek Archeological Project (Klinger 1976, in preparation)	single artifacts	archeological context historic sites regardless of period	30.7 sites/mi ²

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