



MISSISSIPPIAN MORTUARY PRACTICES

Beyond Hierarchy and the
Representationist Perspective

Edited by
Lynne P. Sullivan and Robert C. Mainfort Jr.

Contents

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15 14 13 12 11 10 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sullivan, Lynne P.

Mississippian mortuary practices: beyond hierarchy and the
representationist perspective/Lynne P. Sullivan and Robert C. Mainfort, Jr.
p. cm.—(Florida Museum of Natural History: Ripley P. Bullen series)
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8130-3426-3 (alk. paper)

1. Mississippian culture—Southern States. 2. Mississippian culture—Middle
West. 3. Claflin-Emerson Expedition—Funeral customs and rites—
Southern States—History. 4. Indians of North America—Funeral customs
and rites—Middle West—History. 5. Social archaeology—Southern States.
6. Social archaeology—Middle West. 7. Indians of North America—
Southern States—Antiquities. 8. Indians of North America—Middle
West—Antiquities. 9. Southern States—Antiquities. 10. Middle West—
Antiquities. I. Mainfort, Robert C., 1948– II. Title.
E99.M681S585 2010

975.019–dc22 2009038763

The University Press of Florida is the scholarly publishing agency for the
State University System of Florida, comprising Florida A&M University,
Florida Atlantic University, Florida Gulf Coast University, Florida Interna-
tional University, Florida State University, New College of Florida, Univer-
sity of Central Florida, University of Florida, University of North Florida,
University of South Florida, and University of West Florida.

University Press of Florida
15 Northwest 15th Street
Gainesville, FL 32611-2079
<http://www.upf.com>



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Azatalan Mortuary Practices Revisited

LYNNE G. GOLDSTEIN

The Azatalan site (47/E1) sits on the banks of the Crawfish River in Jefferson County, Wisconsin, between the modern cities of Milwaukee and Madison (see Figure 6.1). The site has been protected as a state park for more than 50 years. While several occupations have been discovered at this multicomponent site, Azatalan is best known for its Late Woodland and Middle Mississippian components that range from A.D. 800 to A.D. 1200. Grit-tempered collared wares represent the majority of the Late Woodland occupation, and shell-tempered ceramics indicate the Middle Mississippian occupation. Prominent architectural features such as a substantial stockade and platform mounds are believed to date to the Mississippian Period (Barrett 1933; Birmingham and Goldstein 2005; Goldstein and Freeman 1997; Richards 1992).

The first published description of Azatalan appeared in 1837 (Hyer 1837). The first excavations at Azatalan took place in 1838 and were carried out by W. T. Sterling in an attempt to ascertain the nature of the "ruins" of the stockade (Sterling 1920). Sustained investigations began in 1850 with the work of Increase A. Lapham, Wisconsin's prominent antiquarian. His work consisted of some limited exploratory excavations as well as a detailed mapping of the site (Figure 6.2; Lapham 1855). The first modern excavation came early in the twentieth century with the work of Samuel A. Barrett of the Milwaukee Public Museum. This research culminated in the publication of *Ancient Azatalan* (Barrett 1933), a seminal work that is the most complete description of the site and has had a lasting effect on interpretations of the site. In the 1950s and 1960s, a variety of excavations were related to the development of the site as a state park, some of which were done in the context of reconstructing a portion of the stockade and two of the platform mounds. Much of this work was conducted under the auspices of the Wisconsin Archeological Survey in the 1950s and later under the direction of Joan E. Freeman, then state archaeologist. Beginning in 1976, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, under Lynne Goldstein's direction, initiated a sustained research effort directed at the site

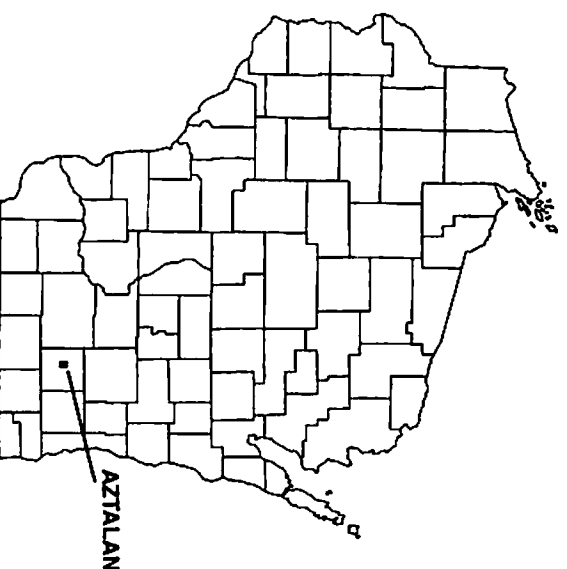


Figure 6.1. Location of the Azatalan Site in the State of Wisconsin

and its regional context (Goldstein and Freeman 1997; Goldstein 1997; Richards 1992), and this research tradition has continued under Goldstein's direction at Michigan State University (Goldstein and Gaff 2002). A number of other researchers have conducted specialized excavations and analyses at the site, but these projects have generally been limited in extent and duration.

This long history of research at Azatalan, while of immense importance, has inadvertently had a deleterious effect on the generation of new knowledge about the site for two primary reasons. Older interpretations often haunt our current understanding and perceptions of the site by permeating the process of knowledge production. Particular views of the site, in part generated and sustained by the prominence of and fascination with the Azatalan site, have long structured research design. The very name of the site itself, Azatalan, encapsulates this notion. Nathaniel Hyer, who reported the site in 1837, named it on the mistaken belief that it was the ancestral home of the Aztecs. Hyer based his assessment on his reading of Alexander von Humboldt's travel narratives about the Aztecs and their ancestral home, Aztlan. Despite Hyer's erroneous judgment, the name, Azatalan (which in itself was incorrect) persists today (cf. Hall 1986).

Another reason that the long history of research at the site has had a deleterious effect on knowledge generation is less obvious. For many years, each new researcher at Azatalan accepted a number of the interpretations of previous re-

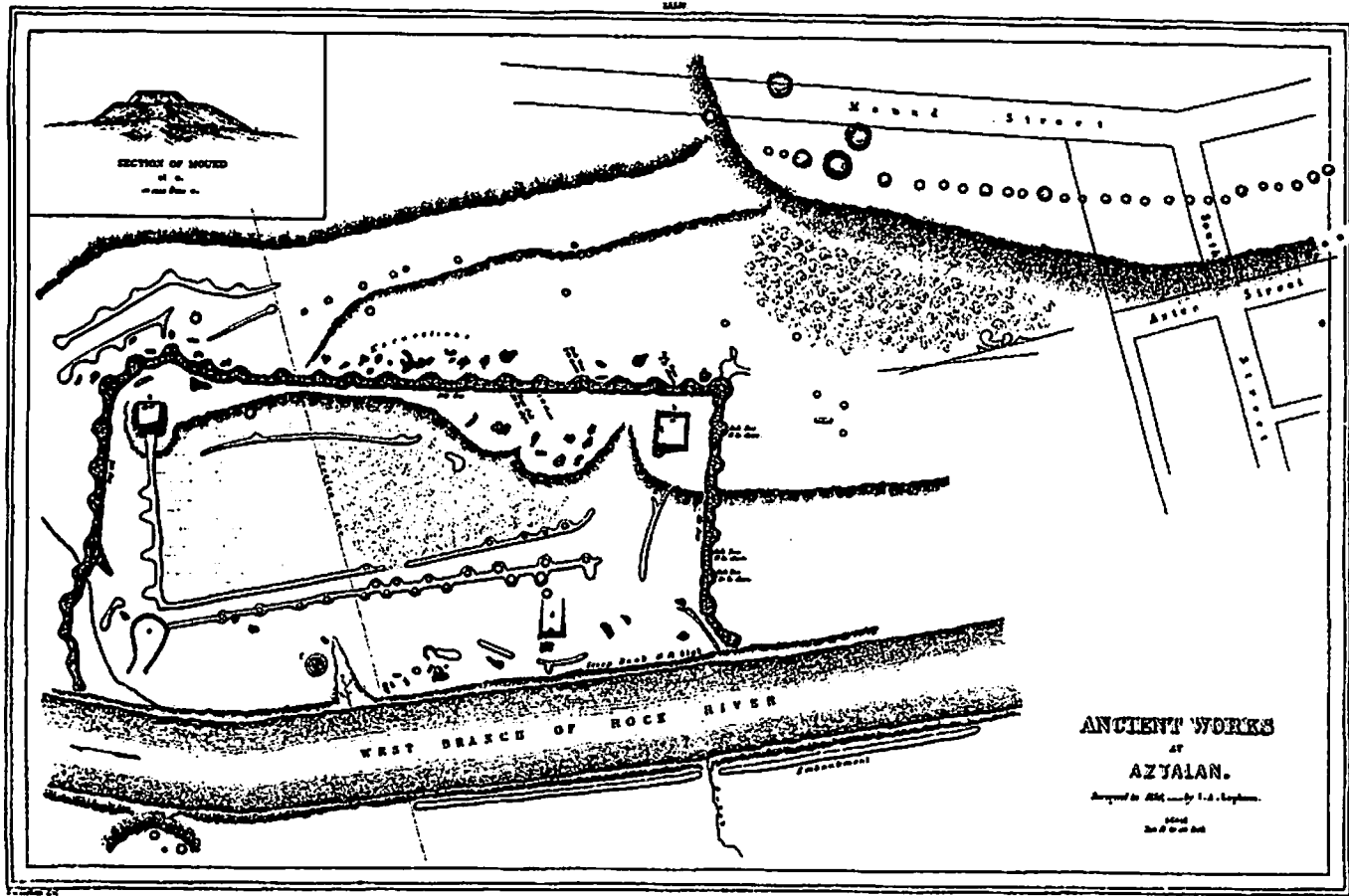


Figure 6.2. Increase A. Lapham's 1855 Detailed Map of the Aztalan Site. From Lapham 1855: Plate 34.

searchers, but individuals rarely examined the artifacts and other information excavated by those archaeologists. Barrett excavated more area of the site than anyone else, and his collections are readily accessible at the Milwaukee Public Museum, yet because those artifacts were excavated in the early 1900s, few archaeologists gave them more than a cursory examination until the 1980s. Researchers focused on their own investigations and findings and did not integrate what they found into a larger picture.

One long-standing interpretation about Aztalan involves the idea that the inhabitants of the site regularly practiced cannibalism. Excavations by Barrett (1933) in the early twentieth century produced quantities of scattered human bone in unusual contexts such as hearths and pits, suggesting the bones were treated as trash or food waste. Despite the relatively low quantity of remains given the large volume of excavation, Barrett (1933) concluded that these bones recovered in a domestic context constituted evidence for cannibalism. He was convinced of these findings because of the context and because the bones were often broken. Given what little was known about Mississippian societies at the time and what little was known about the range of mortuary practices in particular, Barrett's conclusion was logical. Since that time, however, we have learned much about the range of Late Woodland and Mississippian mortuary practices, including the importance in some contexts of extensive processing and placement of remains. However, although we have learned much since 1933, few have reexamined this material, questioned Barrett's conclusions, or suggested that there might be alternative interpretations. Indeed, until 1991, the Wisconsin Historical Marker at Aztalan included the phrase "and their cannibalism made them unsatisfactory neighbors."

In 1986, Goldstein and Sullivan presented a paper at the Society for American Archaeology Annual Meetings that systematically examined Barrett's conclusions. They proposed that the remains might also be the signature of a set of mortuary practices. The paper did not necessarily discount the possibility of cannibalism, but it suggested an alternate scenario rooted in archaeological data from other sites and ethnohistoric analogies (Goldstein and Sullivan 1986). While the debate about cannibalism remains unresolved to the satisfaction of some archaeologists, the phenomena of scattered human remains is no longer conceptualized as necessarily representing a people's subsistence base; now it is seen as likely or more likely the residue of mortuary ritual. Anderson (1994) conducted a more detailed analysis of the human bone, but the question of the process that resulted in the fragmented remains is still unresolved. The issue is not whether or not Barrett was correct but rather that all interpretations must be reexamined and reanalyzed given new data at Aztalan and new work at other sites.

Among its other qualities, Aztalan is unusual in terms of its apparent mortuary ritual. No cemetery has been documented at Aztalan, although human remains have been found in one of three sets of contexts on the site proper:

1. Eleven adult individuals were recovered from what was originally described as a "crematorium" on the second stage of the northwest pyramidal mound (Rowe 1958b). The word "crematorium" is misleading, however. The feature consisted of a wooden structure with plastered walls and a covered floor into which the remains of the 11 individuals and associated offerings were placed. This structure subsequently burned. Ten of the individuals were extended and may or may not have been placed in the structure as primary interments. The eleventh individual was a bundle reburial, clearly the result of secondary treatment. Because of the nature of the structure, the terms "charnel house" or "mortuary house" seem more appropriate than "crematorium." Although the burning may have been deliberate, the fact that a separate mortuary house existed must be stressed. This was much more than a crematory. Because the structure burned, the bones were very fragile; Anderson (1994) was able to identify three males and three females but was unable to identify the sex of five individuals.
2. Primary inhumations are limited in number and usually consist of a flexed or partially flexed individual placed in a burial pit with few or no grave goods. These primary burials are often located at or near major structural features such as stockade walls or platform mounds. Occasionally primary inhumations include one or more bones (often long bones) of a second individual.
3. The third mortuary context includes scattered pieces of human bone recovered from refuse pits, storage pits, so-called firepits, or general habitation debris. Some of these bones exhibit cutmarks, but these bones are almost never burned.

As noted above, Barrett's original interpretation of the scattered human bone at the site has formed the basis of all subsequent interpretations of the Aztalan mortuary ritual:

Revolutionary as this idea may seem, we are forced to suggest that the evidence points to the probability that human flesh was here used as a regular article of diet. . . . In no instance was evidence found that these human remnants of the feast or of the daily meal. . . . were treated in any degree differently from those of any other part of the aboriginal menu. (Barrett 1933: 361)

After Barrett's interpretations were published, the idea of cannibalism at Aztalan was not seriously questioned and research was oriented toward determining details of the interpretation. However, Barrett was not the first to suggest cannibalism at Aztalan. The Rev. A. N. Somers conducted excavations at Aztalan in 1888 with his church Sunday school class. They excavated what he termed a "communal refuse-heap" (Somers 1892). Somers claimed that 40 percent of the almost 2,000 bones he recovered were human and had cutmarks around the joints. These bones had been "mixed" with those of animals. The location of the materials Somers excavated is unknown.

A good example of the prevalent attitude toward the interpretation and analysis of cannibalism at Aztalan is found in an introduction to an M.A. thesis on the Aztalan human bone:

The argument of whether or not it (cannibalism) existed or whether or not it was of a ceremonial nature is not dealt with since this has been treated at length by Barrett. . . . [Instead, the question is] who was eaten by the Aztalan inhabitants? Did they generally eat only members of the surrounding tribes whom they had captured in warfare, or did they 'pre-fer' members of their own community? . . . What was the sex of the victims? . . . A supplementary problem would be to determine what parts of the human body were generally eaten. (Holcomb 1952: 2)

In her more recent reanalysis of the human bone at Aztalan, Anderson (1994) found that the scattered human bone had an average minimum number of individuals (MNI) of 56 (depending how one calculated it) and that males were more numerous when sex could be determined (69 percent). However, sex cannot be determined for a majority of these scattered remains. The majority of the scattered bones are from adults (92 percent).

Anderson's analysis of the cutmarks on the scattered bone demonstrated that most of the marks are located on the ends of long bones. She found no significance in the distribution of postmortem cutmarks on the cranium.

Anderson also examined 17 inhumations that are likely contemporary with the scattered human bone. Most ($n = 15$) are adults, including the so-called Princess Burial from a conical mound at the very northern end of the site (outside the palisade walls) and the individuals from the northwest pyramidal mound charnel house. Nine of the 17 were not affected by burning (this is interesting, since there were 11 in the burned charnel structure). Seven are young adult females. No cutmarks were found on any of these individuals, but many of the bones in the charnel house were severely burned.

Anderson counted a total of 73 individuals, including the scattered fragments and primary inhumations. This is far fewer than one would expect for

any projected population size for Aztalan. Richards (1992: 118) estimates a population of 150 to 538, guessing 350 to be a reasonable number. Whatever the number, this population of 73 is too small and too skewed to be representative of the whole. Clearly a number of people and segments of the population are missing. Since Anderson's analysis, some additional human bone has been discovered. It is discussed below, but it does not significantly change this biased distribution.

The spatial patterning of human bone at Aztalan is not random. The few primary interments are located in small clusters within the habitation precinct or along palisade walls. The scattered human bone is almost exclusively located within the inner palisade—that is, within the habitation precinct—but tends to be clustered along the inner palisade walls. Barrett notes two kinds of contexts for human bones found in features: standard refuse pits or firepits—refuse pits with quantities of ash and “Aztalan brick.” These firepit features with bone are rare, however, and tend to be located at the corners of the habitation precinct.

Reconsidering Landscape and Structures

Archaeologists increasingly view landscapes as dynamic entities that are constantly being constructed, deconstructed, negotiated, and rebuilt. The landscape is “always artificial, always synthetic, always subject to sudden or unpredictable change” (Jackson 1984: 8). People regularly alter the landscape to accommodate changes in the political and social order (Alcock 1993: 7). Human behavior does not simply happen in vacuous space. Behavior has its own spatial forms, and these spatial forms “imprint upon the landscape in a variety of ways including architecture” (Hillier 1996: 29). However, the structure of space is not merely determined by the social processes that occur there. Spatial forms act as active participants in affecting cultural change, and the arrangement of space can likewise structure and control human activity (Alcock 1993: 7). Landscapes act to structure social action, and at the same time they are structured by social action.

For Mississippian societies, perhaps the most obvious of such forms are the mound and the palisade. A variety of authors have discussed the reasons people built mounds, much of them related to power, the maintenance of power, and who decides what is built where and how. Recently, Brown (2003, 2006a) has questioned these approaches, using Cahokia's Mound 72 beaded burial to demonstrate that instead of interpreting this individual as a member of the high-status elite, it can, using Wolf's (1999) notion of structural power, be viewed as part of a collective undertaking of a dramatic performance of an

important myth. In other words, it may not *always* be about power and control or it may not be about *only* power and control.

The landscape is an ordered assemblage of objects through which complex messages are communicated, reproduced, and experienced within a cultural system, and we need to consider how landscapes signify meanings across a site. An important aspect of landscapes is their experiential nature. Landscapes are perceived and imbued with meaning based on how people experience the world around them. In a notable example, Bradley (1998) emphasizes that neolithic monuments developed out of the daily routines of people who were living in an environment that was familiar and steeped in symbolism.

Gourgeon (2006: 189–90) notes a particularly interesting pattern for the Coosa area. House form itself did not vary between elites and commoners, but the size of the houses and items within the houses did. In other words, differences were masked in household contexts. The group was likewise enforced through the terms of ritual spaces and symbols. A corporate strategy seemed to be highlighted within the village, suggesting an integrated society and perhaps a network strategy that operated at a regional level.

Similarly, landscapes can be regarded as the materialization of memory by providing a place for social and individual histories (Knapp and Ashmore 1999: 13). The sensual experience of landscapes is an important element of how they act as memory. All five senses can serve as mnemonic devices to trigger memories (Tuan 1977). Even a smell or particular sounds can activate people's memories. In the field of urban planning and design, Dolores Hayden has shown how memory and place are intrinsically tied together (Hayden 1995). The elements of a social history of space connect people's lives and livelihoods to the landscape as it changes over time. Space is culturally constructed to provoke certain responses from people and tie their actions to the past (Hayden 1995).

It therefore makes sense that myth plays an important and active role in the power of landscape as memory (Cosgrove 1993: 282) and that myths give a power to the surrounding landscape in which people live their everyday lives. Landscape myths and memories have been tied to the “ferocious enchantment” of national identities through modern territorial feuds (Schama 1995: 15). Brown's (2006a) analysis is again an example of the role of myth in the power of landscape as memory.

Sullivan's (2006) analysis of Dallas phase sites makes a critical point about memory, social histories, and the past. Archaeologists have made the assumption that women had little political power because they were not well represented in mounds but did not consider the potential meaning of the house burials of the women in the Dallas phase. Sullivan's (2006) careful analysis

has demonstrated a kind of spatial complementarity operating within the sites she examined, going beyond the simple limits of the mounds themselves. The houses were indeed part of the burial accompaniment.

Certain places in the landscape help create and express social identity. Bradley (1993: 26) suggests that these places on the landscape may act as markers to draw attention to socially significant features, such as visually prominent landmarks, locations of important ecological niches, or places where important (possibly mythic) past events transpired. These places are often given form through some material manifestation such as rock painting or mound building. No matter what form these manifestations take, they signify identity by literally marking the landscape.

Landscapes can be active participants in the ordering of cultural relations. As discussed above, landscapes are not merely determined by the social actions that take place across them; they also can shape and determine social relations by allowing or restricting access to certain areas, by making things visible or hiding them from view, or by directing the flow of people and/or ideas. Relationships of power and influence come to the forefront when one views the landscape as an ideologically manipulated arena. This approach emphasizes the social contradictions and conflicts played out in the known landscape, which may emerge in power relationships. Alcock shows how the Roman landscape in Greece continued to be vital and dynamic, responding in a variety of ways to imperial Roman control (Alcock 1993). On a more intimate scale, Leone studied the landscaped garden of a colonial house in Annapolis, Maryland, where the garden acted to naturalize arbitrary relations of power (Leone 1984). Landscape as an arena for power relationships requires that the actors in a landscape have a political awareness of their environment.

Kelly (2006) uses ethnographic, oral history, and archaeological data of different types and from multiple scales to demonstrate how the production of craft items associated with the elite in Mississippian society was organized. Most relevant here is the spatial separation of this production and the way that production was the result of cooperation by different groups operating through different rituals on different scales, all of which was in some way controlled by the religious elite.

In her analysis of Mississippian in northwestern Florida, Payne (2006) employs ethnographic analogy and analysis of the landscape to outline how space and other items are used to map position and relationships, noting that at smaller sites, some kinds of relationships are absent. For example, she argues (2006: 105) that divine support for authority comes with increasing chiefdom or site size. She suggests that deliberate and explicit use of space, large mounds,

wealthy burials, and Southeastern Ceremonial Complex artifacts emphasize kinship and divine support to legitimate power.

Landscapes are also arenas of transformation, necessarily embodying multiple time periods, and as such have the potential to demonstrate both continuity and transformation (Knapp and Ashmore 1999: 18). Even after monuments have passed out of active use, they are still part of an active landscape, and their meaning is transformed as those places are encountered and reused by new people (Bradley 1993, 1998). Landscapes can be transformed by numerous factors and can take many different forms. Monuments can be destroyed, effectively destroying the symbolic markings of the landscape, after a conquest by neighboring people. Or the neglect of monuments can signify as profound a cultural change as conquest by signaling a fundamental change in the perception of the landscape (Knapp and Ashmore 1999: 19).

Schroeder's (2006) work on the Jonathan Creek site and her examination of Mississippian palisades is an excellent example of the study of landscapes as arenas of continuity and transformation. One of the most notable features of many large Mississippian settlements is a substantial bastioned stockade. While it is convenient to talk about such walls as being for defense and controlling external relationships, such a view ignores those who lived within that setting. As Schroeder (2006: 117) notes: "Walls served additional social, political, ideological, and symbolic agendas, which at certain times may have overshadowed the defensive functions of these structures." She further comments that there are often changes over time to these walls and that these changes have implications for the chiefly authority and the responses by the community. Using modifications in the palisade, she outlines a series of changes in orientation and perspective for the people of Jonathan Creek over time.

Aztalan's Landscape and Structures

One of the main aspects of my most recent research at Aztalan was the development of a coordinated database for understanding site structure that took Aztalan's landscape into account. We also examined areas outside the palisaded portion of the site (Figure 6.3). Since Aztalan was first explored by early antiquarians, research at the site has focused on the area within the palisaded village (Barrett 1933; Richards 1992; Goldstein 1999). Nearly all excavations took place inside the walls, and a great deal of the excavation work focused on revealing the nature of the stockade. The few excavations outside the palisade that were not related to mounds were conducted because new construction of parking lots and other park features were going to disturb these areas.

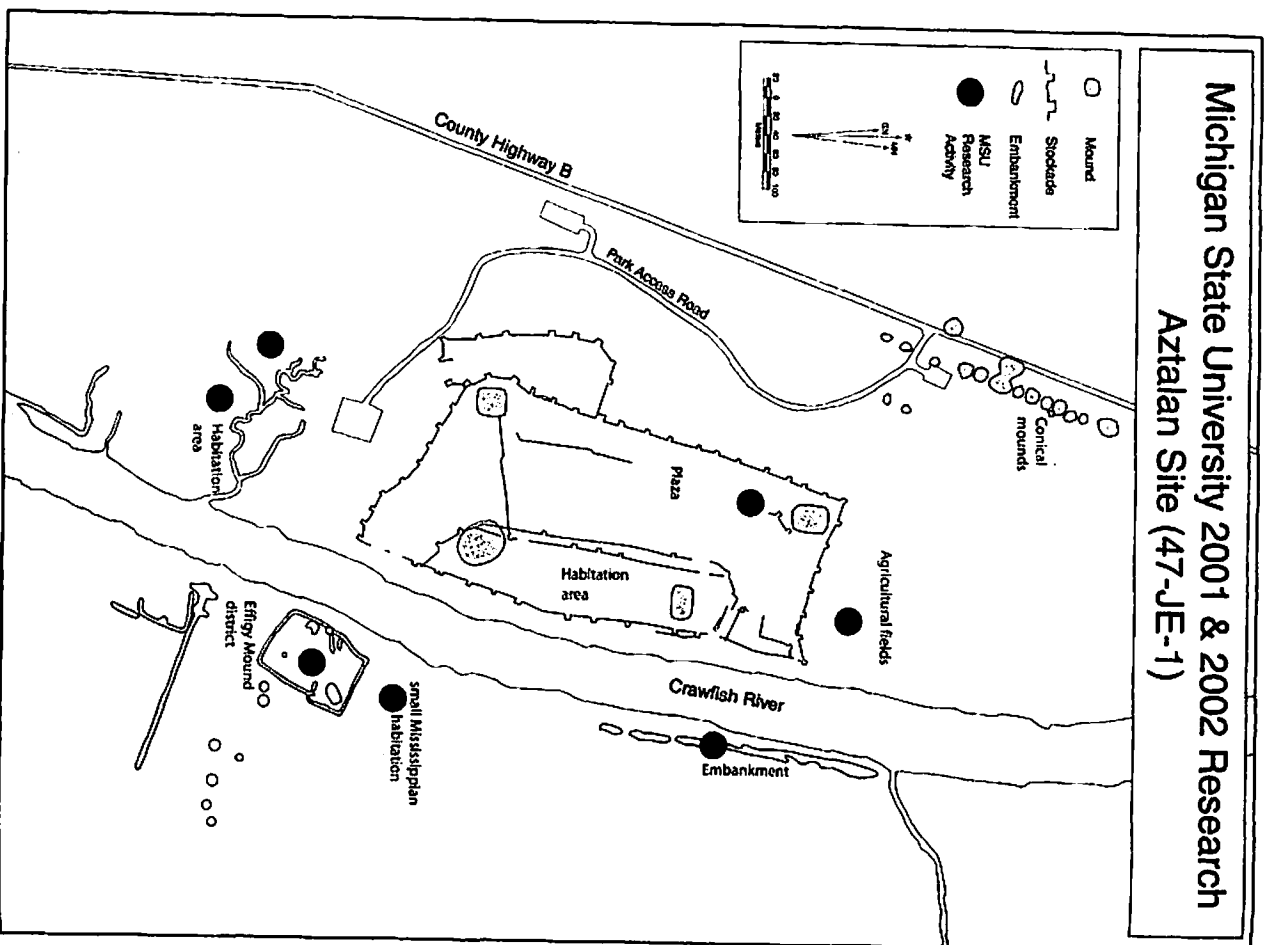


Figure 6.3. An Outline Map of General Activity Areas at Aztlalan Indicating Michigan State University's 2000 and 2001 Research Activity Locations

Excavations and coring north of the stockade (see Figure 6.3) were intended to provide evidence of agricultural fields noted on an early map of the site (Goldstein and Freeman 1997). To the contrary, these widely spaced excavations contained several features and general refuse, including a portion of a human mandible. In addition to extending our knowledge of the distribution of scattered human bone, these excavations also suggest that modern agriculture has not destroyed everything in this area. Most interestingly, however, there was evidence of prehistoric removal of a significant portion of the A Horizon soil, presumably for building the nearby platform mounds. Further investigation may result in the discovery of remnants of the agricultural fields seen by early European visitors to the site, but to date we have not been able to identify evidence of these fields.

Excavations also took place on the eastern bank of the Crawfish River, opposite the main village (Figure 6.3). Barrett (1933) reported finding evidence of occupations related to Aztlalan across the river, including the remnants of a rectangular enclosure. In the late 1970s, work by Goldstein (1979) documented that most of the materials found on the east bank were Effigy Mound in association, including one large effigy mound that Barrett had noted earlier. Recent coring and limited excavations suggest that it is possible that what Barrett identified as an enclosure may actually be a set of effigy mounds that had eroded, but our 2001 excavations also demonstrated that there was a small confined Mississippian occupation on the east bank of the river as well, to the north of Barrett's enclosure.

We also excavated in the plaza area of the site just south of the northwest platform mound to explore oval-shaped features that became visible only after this area was mowed following a drought. A total of 70 ovals were observed in what appeared to be a series of rows. This locale has shown up as notably distinct in many different contexts, such as aerial photographs and even on Lapham's 1855 map (see Figure 6.1), which indicates pits and disturbances in the same vicinity. Excavation of a trench to cross-section a set of these pits revealed 14 large deep storage pits that were prehistorically excavated into a sand and gravel surface (Figure 6.4).

As surprising as the size and depth and regularity of the pits was the fact that they were excavated into bedded gravels. Because gravel does not have a great deal of strength or structure to hold vertical walls, the storage pits probably had to be lined with a fine-grained material. There is evidence of fine sediment lining the pits (see Figure 6.4); clays would have been practical liners due to their ability to prevent moisture seepage.

Of interest are the facts that the A Horizon is missing from the general area of the oval features and the landform was greatly altered. In fact, it ap-



Figure 6.5. The Sculptuary as Seen from the Ground. Each person is standing on a rise in elevation or tier, and the person on the right is on the highest point of the sculpted feature. Photo taken looking south.

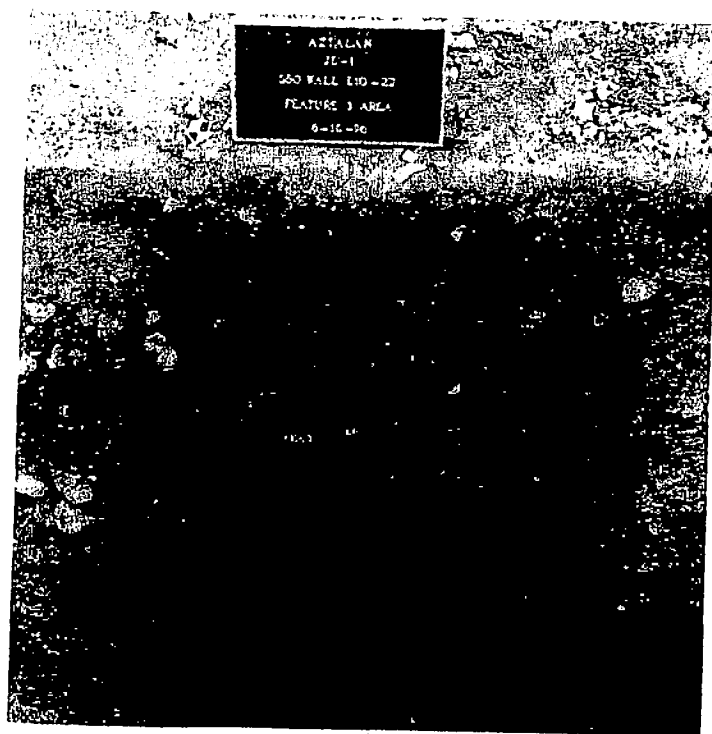


Figure 6.4.
Cross-Sections
of Two of the
Large Pits in
the Sculptuary
Area

pears that the landform was deliberately sculpted into a tiered mound-like structure that was incorporated into the side of the hill. The sculpted tiers or terraces face east toward the Crawfish River. To the west, the sculpted tiers merge with the landform. There are at least three distinct tiers to the feature, each one separated by an elevation of approximately 1.5 meters (Figure 6.5). These horizons were removed some time in prehistory—probably during the construction and sculpting of the feature within which the pits are found and possibly also during the construction of the northwest platform mound.

Each of the three tiers of the sculpted surface served a slightly different function:

1. The westernmost or highest tier or terrace had pits with the most structure and included the largest quantity of scattered human remains. These features were generally filled with fine-grained sediments, did not appear to have been left open for long periods, and had few artifacts or debris. The debris recovered included a pipestone earspool (sourced to what is now Pipestone National Monument in Minnesota), shell beads, a few projectile points, and several Mississippian rimsherds.
2. Pits in the middle terrace or tier appear to be more stratified and may have been left open for periods of time. There are very few artifacts or

debris in these pits, and they may have been used for community food storage, processing, or dumping. Some have evidence of corn and wild rice.

3. The topographically lowest tier had the most variability in feature shape but also includes large features with few artifacts and debris. Exceptions to this pattern were located at the edge of or just off the edge of the sculpted surface. A burial of a partially disarticulated individual was found in a pit at the eastern end of the surface. The articulated bones include a femur, a fibula, a tibia, a metatarsal, the pelvis, the sacrum, and some vertebrae. The disarticulated bones were a rib, some additional metatarsals, one vertebra, pelvis fragments, and some tarsal bones. What was unusual about the burial was that a femur from a much larger individual had been placed on top of the remains of the smaller individual; the femur of the larger individual had been deliberately cut.

This portion of the site was carefully planned. The spatial arrangement of the pits is significant and is tied to both the terracing and the northwest platform mound (Figure 6.6). Given that the tiered feature was sculpted and also was a place for processing human remains, we have termed it a "sculptuary."

Barrett (1933) assumed that because human bone was found cracked and in refuse pits, the only possible explanation was cannibalism. He then focused his attentions on determining the particular variety of cannibalism practiced. His conclusion was based on the fact that the bone was widely scattered. He also assumed that because there was a considerable amount of bone, the cannibalism could not be considered part of a ritual practice.

Barrett's interpretation of the presence of cannibalism was done at a time when our understandings of the variability of mortuary ritual were limited; this was especially true of our knowledge at the time of Late Woodland/Mississippian mortuary ritual. Also, at the time Barrett was writing, descriptions and reports of cannibalism in the ethnographic literature were limited and not well understood. Barrett's argument that the evidence at Aztalan could not be evidence of ritual cannibalism did not consider temporal depth. The dispersal of a large number of bones could actually be evidence of an aspect of ritual cannibalism—that is, everyone participates. Anderson (1994) finds that the scattered bone at Aztalan compares well with Turner's and White's criteria for cannibalism on some measures but not on others. In particular, all of the cutmarks are on the ends of long bones and few of the scattered bones are burned.

Given the context of the times, it is not surprising that Barrett ignored the complex interrelationships between disposal and death; like many others, he

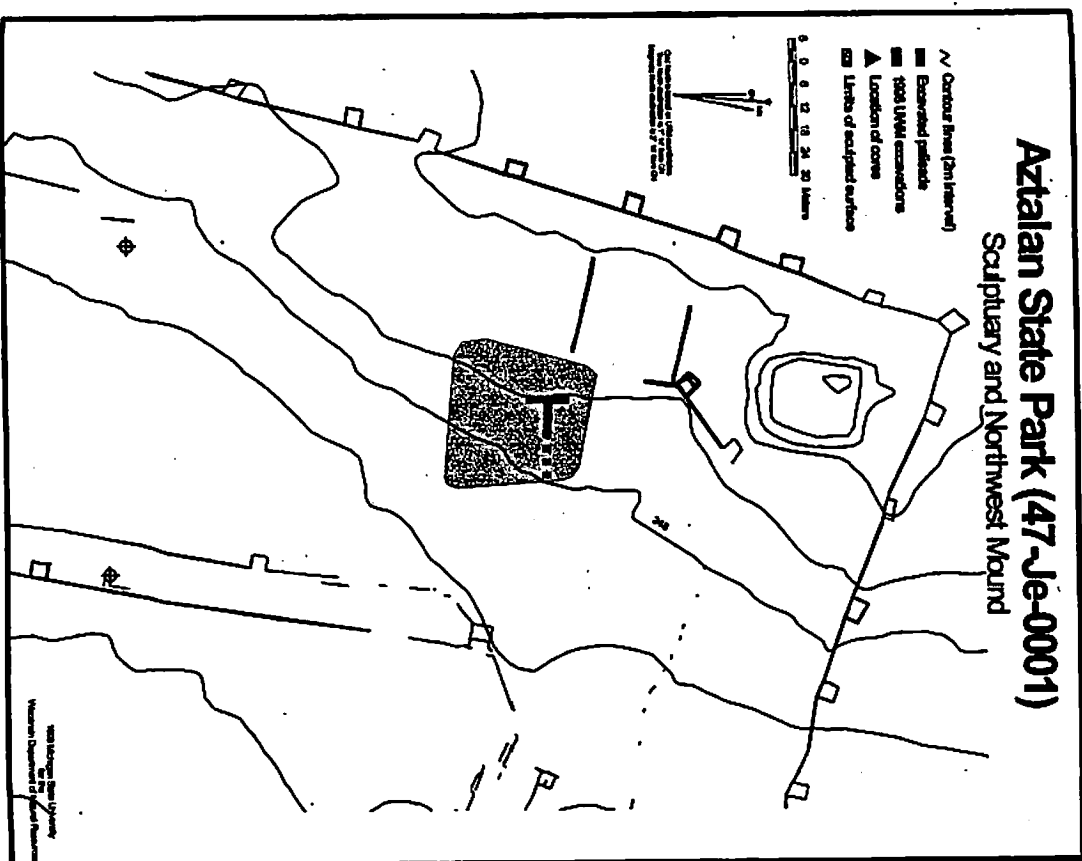


Figure 6.6. Map of the Sculptuary Location, Outline of the Feature, and Michigan State University Excavations in Relation to the Northwest Platform Mound.

assumed that disposal is a direct consequence of death, specifically death in the immediate vicinity. Archaeologists who followed Barrett never reexamined Barrett's conclusions with respect to his assumptions—they accepted Barrett's original conclusions and moved forward from there. Given this overall context and the discussion of leadership, symbols, and space earlier, it is appropriate to reexamine the mortuary ritual as represented at Aztalan.

First, the scattered bone is represented almost exclusively by long bones. Where are the bones of the torso and other bones? This differential pattern of bone distribution does not seem to be the result of collecting bias because there are many other items of varying sizes and shapes. Differential preservation cannot explain the selective distribution of bones. Therefore, we infer that these bones (pelvis, vertebrae, ribs, etc.) must be somewhere else. Unfortunately, there is no evidence (from any of the Aztalan excavations) to suggest that they are elsewhere at the site. Although the negative inference is proper here, we cannot say that the torso bones were never at the site or that the bones were at the site but were removed. We simply don't know.

At least three methods of disposal are represented at Aztalan: 1) primary interments; 2) disposal in the charnel house that is likely a combination of primary and secondary interment; and 3) bone scattering, which represents secondary disposal or extensive mortuary processing. The differential spatial patterning of these disposal methods provides additional evidence of the distinctive nature of each method (Figure 6.7):

1. The charnel house (or "crematorium" à la Rowe 1958b) location at the summit of the Northwest platform mound is the only such structure documented for the site.
2. The primary interments so far discovered tend to occur in small clusters and are confined to either the habitation precinct and/or the palisade structure.
3. In sharp contrast, the scattered bone is not everywhere—it is limited to the area within the inner stockade or is specifically associated with major structures such as sculpted features. The class of scattered bone may have an additional or secondary patterning within it: some bones are associated with firepits, which are clustered at the edges and corners of the inner stockade structure. Firepits are relatively rare at this site; the three sets associated with scattered human remains are located just east of the gravel knoll that may have been used as a southeast mound; just north and slightly east of the northeast platform mound; and at the northwest corner of the inner palisade and east of the sculptuary. At each of these locations, at least one articulated individual is in the immediate vicinity (see Figure 6.7).

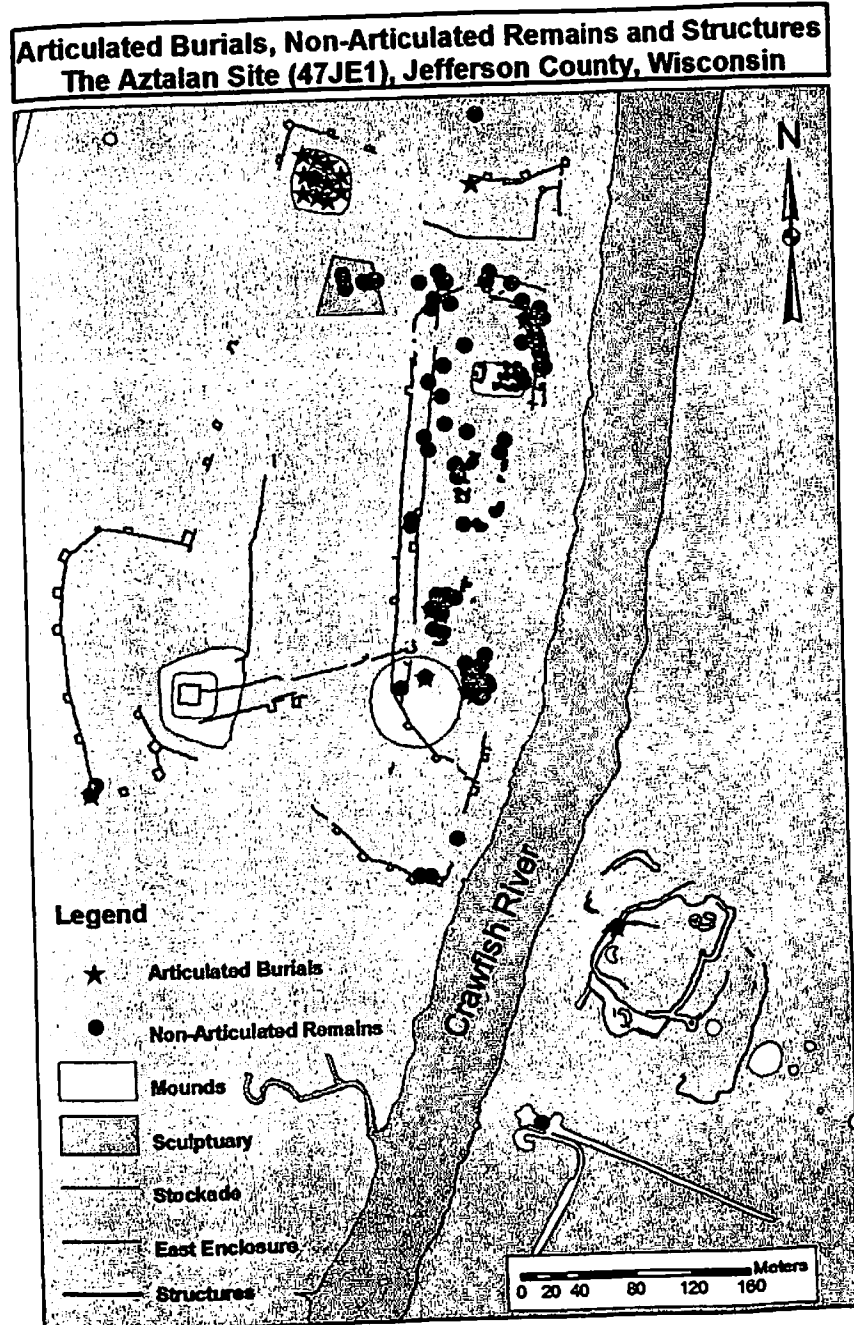


Figure 6.7. Location of Articulated Burials, Nonarticulated Human Remains, and Structures at the Aztalan Site.

Secondary disposal of the dead is common within Mississippian societies, and at Aztalan there is evidence for such treatment—the bundle burial in the channel house and the scattered bone. However, although both are secondary, they clearly demonstrate the problem of drawing inferences from the “presence” of secondary disposal *per se*. The bundle burial in the charnel house may well represent social differentiation or even status distinctions, and one might argue that the scattered bone represents an “opposite” status. However, more significant for understanding the organization of Aztalan is the point that neither disposal was the direct result of death. Death occurred earlier, bones were processed later. In both cases, some other cultural component or components triggered the observed disposal activity. Whatever explanatory hypothesis one espouses concerning status, cannibalism, and the like, the observed distinction in the patterning must be recognized and interpreted within the broader cultural context. Further, although the two disposal methods cannot be treated independently, it is well to remember that similar cultural processes may find different expression and different cultural processes may have identical recoverable material correlates (cf. Goldstein 2000).

The spatial patterning of the distribution of the human bone is not random (Figure 6.7). The few primary interments are located in small clusters within the habitation precinct or at the edges near mounds and palisade walls. The scattered human bone is almost exclusively located within the inner palisade—that is, within the habitation precinct—but tends to be clustered along the inner palisade walls. They are not located on mounds or in houses. General debris is scattered throughout the habitation area, but human remains are deliberately kept out of houses, in contrast to many other cultures and some other Mississippian sites (e.g., Moundville, Dallas Phase sites).

Barrett and, in the 1950s, Moreau Maxwell (1952) each found pits similar to the sculptuary pits in the area of the gravel knoll (or possible southeast mound); it is possible that the gravel knoll is analogous to the sculptuary and may also be sculpted. It may have an A Horizon removed; it certainly has groupings of burials that are similar to the sculptuary pits with artifacts, and so on. Maxwell found clay earpools, corn, shell beads, copper, and several human long bones in the pit he excavated. The pit is in location in the site that is a somewhat complementary to the location of the sculptuary (see Figure 6.7). Barrett illustrates a comparable pit as his Figure 34.

Mortuary variability and patterning in a site encompass more than social statuses or economic elements. Our present-day views about cannibalism have dramatically colored our interpretations about Aztalan in the past. For a variety of reasons, past interpretations have largely ignored the use and con-

struction of space and ideas and the importance of collective memory and site planning.

As Hendon has noted, “Places, like people and objects, also incarnate, fix, and reiterate social memory. By creating and modifying a landscape of natural and built forms, groups construct a setting that gives concrete, permanent expression to relationships and identities” (2000, 50). At Aztalan, it is time to tell a more complete, a more complex, and perhaps a more compelling story.

Aztalan Mortuary Rituals

Coordinating the mortuary data for Aztalan remains somewhat of a problem since only a portion of the ritual and the population are represented at the site; we do not know what happened to most people at death. Further, due to the variability in preservation, it is difficult to say much about gender relationships and contexts. Nonetheless, we have significantly more and better integrated information than existed previously.

The substantial stockade structure at Aztalan may have originally been built for defensive purposes, but it was modified over the course of its existence and internal palisades were added at least once and possibly more than once. It seems less certain that the internal palisades, which were less massive than the external palisade but did include bastions, were strictly for defensive purposes. The internal walls may well have had a social, ideological, or political purpose or they may have divided activities for other reasons. From a mortuary perspective, what is most interesting is the fact that a majority of the individual articulated burials recovered were placed along palisade walls or at or near a corner of an internal or external palisade wall. Locating the articulated burials in this deliberate pattern may have reinforced memory within the community or within a particular segment or group. This mortuary treatment was not available to all.

The inner palisade walled off a habitation area, but it was also an ideologically manipulated arena. When a person died, their remains were processed in one of several places, depending on who they were and what group they were affiliated with. Some were processed through a channel structure like the one on the northwest platform mound. Others were processed through a series of pits on the sculpted surface (the sculptuary); movement of the bones through those pits was related to the distribution and storage of certain foodstuffs, the movement of specialized craft items, and other rituals. It is likely that an analogous and complementary process took place at the opposite end of the site where there is a gravel knoll today.

When the bones of an individual had been processed, they were placed in a refuse pit or otherwise discarded, but they were never placed inside a house where people lived. The rules for proper disposal of human bones were strict. In addition no human bone was found in the plaza area of the site, except within the sculptuary. To date, the only location where human bones have been found outside the palisade walls is north of the palisade, where we found another A Horizon removed (this is where we found the single mandible); in the northernmost conical mound at a significant distance from the rest of the site (the so-called Princess Burial, Barrett 1933); and on the east side of the river in association with the possibly earlier rectangular structure (Barrett 1933).

The association of the rare firepits with unarticulated human bone and articulated burials that appear in the corners of the interior palisade may represent an opening or closing offering of some kind. A similar sort of distinctive feature closed the Schild mortuary sequence (Goldstein 1980). It is not clear that these features opened or closed the sequence at Aztalan, but their location, consistency, and symbolism are evidence of their importance.

Conclusions and Comparisons

It is beyond the scope of this essay to provide a detailed comparison of Aztalan mortuary ritual with all other Mississippian mortuary sites or features. That could be an important and useful project, but in addition to the time involved in such a project, at Aztalan, as at many other Mississippian sites, only a portion of the total range of mortuary practices have been discovered. Nonetheless, some general trends and patterns are apparent as well as key Mississippian elements that appear at many sites.

In his 2003 overview of Mississippian chiefdoms, Cobb notes that "elaborate burials associated with many Mississippian sites, in conjunction with earthworks, have served as some of our richest sources of inspiration about the structure of complexity" (2003: 72). Focusing primarily on artifacts, Cobb discusses status distinctions and prestige-goods economies, noting that these models have been critiqued in recent years (2003: 73). While few question the role of power at some level in Mississippian societies, mortuary research today is far more multidimensional in scope and looks beyond mounds and elites. It is in this context that we can place the mortuary ritual that is represented at Aztalan.

As I noted in my analysis of the Moss and Schild sites in the lower Illinois River valley (Goldstein 1980), organizational principles are apparent at a number of Mississippian sites of varying size and complexity. This does not neces-

sarily mean that exactly the same things were happening in each place but rather that the same kind of organization seems to be operating. This insight relates to group structure and the importance of the group over the individual at times. The elements outlined (ordered from least to most complex) include (Goldstein 1980: 137):

1. *Row structure only*, found in small cemeteries, with the rows representing families or extended kin.
2. *Charnel-row structure*, a combination of rows with a charnel area that emphasizes the charnel area. The idea here is that this kind of cemetery or burial area represents either a large community or more than one community.
3. *Charnel-row structure/accretional mound*, which may represent one or more community or group in control over several generations.
4. *All of the above* can occur at centers or large sites, reflecting more people and more distinctions between people.

The other point Goldstein made about these categories was that taken in order, there was "an increase in the amount of handling or processing of the body (with more secondary and bundle burials represented at each stage)" (Goldstein 1980: 137). Various researchers since 1980 have elaborated on this theme, demonstrating more complexity than I originally outlined in Mississippian mortuary practices. In particular, work such as Sullivan's (2006) reminds us that gender may cut across some of the spatial differences that are apparent and that our excavation biases may lead us to faulty interpretations. Spatial symmetry is often a part of Mississippian mortuary practices. The mortuary site was planned and ritual was played out carefully in space. As noted earlier, ritual fixes memory, especially when it occurs in a special place. The placement of human bone across a Mississippian site is not random, and archaeologists should examine both the distribution of human bone across the site and the distribution of human bone vis-à-vis the human-created features on the site. The placement of the sculptuary at one corner of the site and the "gravel knoll," which is similar in structure to the sculptuary and contains similar remains (and which may well also be a sculpted surface), at the opposite corner is unlikely to be a coincidence.

Aztalan fits well as a Mississippian mortuary site. It features the use of the row structure, both in the charnel house at the top of the northwest platform mound and in the sculptuary area and in the area where a few primary burials are found together. The charnel-row structure is evident in the northwest mound, within which the individuals are laid out in a row. This is not always the case in a charnel structure, but it was important here. While there is no

evidence of accretional mounds, there is evidence of sculpted surfaces. I am not necessarily arguing that sculpted surfaces are the equivalent of accretional mounds, but both contain structured and patterned evidence of human remains and mortuary behavior over time.

What we do not have at Aztalan is knowledge of where most people are buried; we do not know what happened when most people died. We have evidence of some leaders of the group and evidence of individuals whose death or burial served as markers in some way. The placement of their graves marked spots in the stockade or inner stockade. Other individuals were part of a ritual in which their bodies went through several stages of processing. None of these acts were unusual for Mississippian sites, but the particular ways that the people at Aztalan conducted the rituals may have differed from some other sites. At some other Mississippian sites individuals are buried in houses, but not here. At some other Mississippian sites there are clear burial areas, but we have not found such areas here, and so on. The basic structure of the mortuary ritual, however, is the same.

One feature found at Aztalan and not noted elsewhere (to our knowledge) is the sculptuary, or sculpted surface. This does not mean that such features do not exist elsewhere. These surfaces are difficult to detect and analyze. Most large Mississippian sites were plowed extensively and deeply long before major archaeological research was conducted because these sites are on located on prime agricultural land. It is possible that evidence of such surfaces has been destroyed. We were able to determine the existence of the surface at Aztalan because of the unique setting in which it exists and a happy series of accidents, but note that it too had been ignored by archaeologists for well over 100 years.

This exercise in the analysis of Aztalan mortuary practices has demonstrated the importance of reexamining both past assumptions and the physical data. It has also provided a potentially different framework for the interpretation of mortuary remains. Providing a theoretical framework for the spatial organization of the site and for the concept of secondary disposal independent of a particular death shifts the focus of possible explanation to include a much wider and better-defined sphere. It also allows us to place Aztalan more solidly into Mississippian mortuary practices instead of simply considering it an outlier.