

### 13. Evolution of Tribal Social Organization in the Southeastern United States

may occasionally fragment, but more typically they fluctuate between periods of greater or lesser integration and hence complexity. The nature and scale of mechanisms integrating groups together are what change, and what make tribal societies geographically diffuse and organizationally flexible entities (see Parkinson 1999, and this volume, Chapter 18; Fowles, this volume, Chapter 2).

That is, it is unlikely that tribal organization, once widely established, ever completely disappeared from a given region (unless the local societies transformed into or were absorbed by chiefdoms or states), just as it is improbable that chiefdoms, once widely established, ever completely disappeared from a given region (unless they transformed into or were absorbed by states). The adaptive advantages of these organizational forms was likely such that, once they appeared widely, they would never completely disappear. The critical phrase here is "appeared widely." In the Southeast, it is increasingly evident that a number of experiments in the formation of complex social organization occurred, both of tribal societies and later in time of chiefdoms, which achieved only localized and comparatively short-term success.

The regional archaeological record has numerous examples of what for their time are seemingly anomalously large centers, suggesting equally complex and unusual organizational forms, as exemplified by sites such as Watson Brake, Poverty Point, Pinson, or Kolomoki (Fig. 1). Explaining these seeming exceptions, as well as understanding what kinds of sites and organizational forms were perhaps more typical, is a major challenge.

Complex tribal level societies are traditionally assumed to have been present in many parts of the Southeast during the Woodland period, from about 3500 to 1000 cal. B.P., and particularly toward the latter end of the period (e.g., Bense 1994:141; B. Smith 1986:45). During the Paleoindian and earlier part of the Archaic period, until about 6000 or so years ago, populations are assumed to have lived in small bands of from 25 to 50 people. These groups met from time to time and interacted with other bands over large areas, but each is assumed to have been essentially autonomous in subsistence production, with no formal leadership positions beyond those individuals could achieve through their own abilities. Tribes are not thought to have been present, although interaction over large ar-

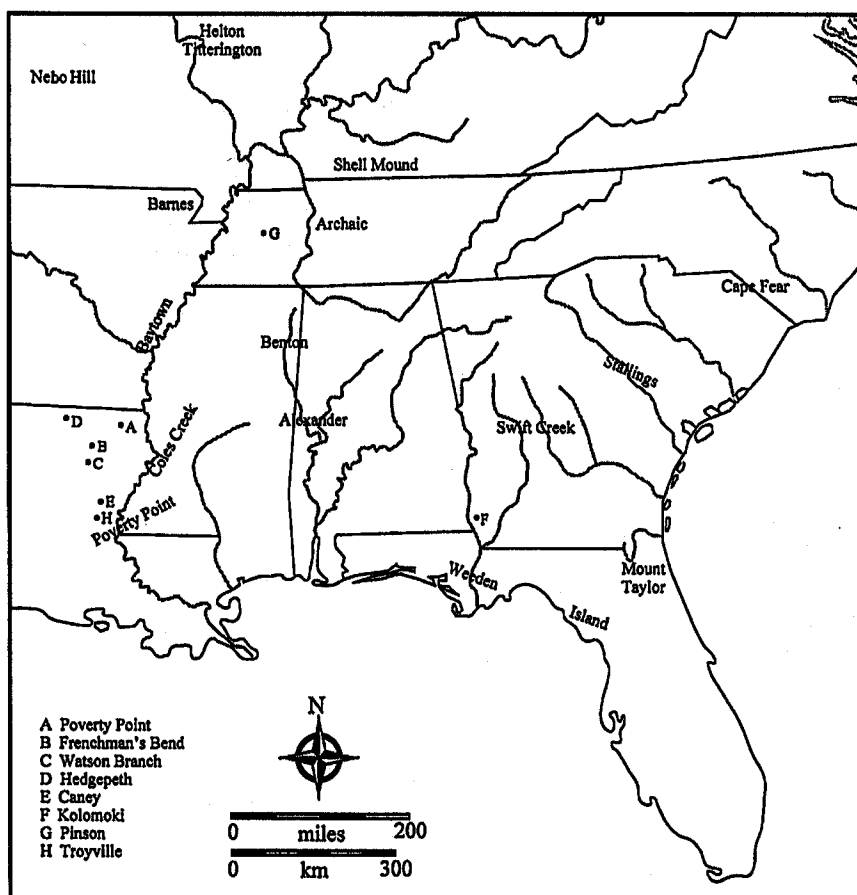


Fig. 1. Location of Archaeological Sites and Cultures Mentioned in the Text.