Some Notes on Aboriginal Ceramics

David Morgan
Mississippi Department of Archives and History

Ceramics and lithics are the two artifact classes most frequently recovered by the prehistoric archaeologist, a fact that attests to the importance and utility of these two materials in the lives of native peoples.

The ceramics category includes objects made of clay that have subsequently been heated in a process known as firing in order to make the items stronger and more moisture resistant. While the ceramics category includes artifacts ranging from clay pipes, beads, figurines, and cooking balls to the remains of fire hearths and house walls (daub), pottery is the most common type of ceramic.

Entire ceramic vessels (bowls, jars, plates, etc.) are sometimes uncovered, often from graves. More frequently, however, pottery is recovered in fragmentary form. These pieces of vessels, referred to as sherds (pronounced shurds), occur when a vessel breaks. Generally the resulting sherds are either discarded, pushed aside, or simply left to be trampled under foot.

Despite their apparent lowly status, much information can be gathered from these items. The very presence of sherds on or below the ground surface can indicate the location of a previous habitation (living) site. Examination of sherds can indicate what types of vessels were being used and thus what they were being used for: cooking, eating, and storage for example.

Various characteristics of pottery including decoration, vessel shape, and tempering inclusions can give indications of the time period that a site was used. (Temper is that material mixed with the wet clay to make it more resistant to cracking during drying and firing. Sand, crushed stone, plant fiber, shell, and even crushed pottery may be used as temper).

Cultural affiliation may also be inferred from pottery. At historic period sites archaeologists can often make direct associations between pottery types and specific tribes such as the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Natchez. At prehistoric sites, where tribal affiliations are not known, archaeologists make general associations between pottery types and their own self-determined time, place, and cultural categories such as Middle Woodland, Mississippian, Marksville, Plaquemine (pronounced Plack-uh-mun), etc.