

Archaeologist unearths history in Mississippi River Valley

August 29 2019, by Amy Robinson



The [Yazoo River](#) in [Vicksburg, Mississippi](#) ([United States](#)). Michael Barera
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In the farmlands of the Mississippi River Valley, earth is continuously cleared and leveled—a result of the region's booming agriculture

industry. But beneath the soil lies an important piece of American history, one a Florida State University anthropology professor is working to piece together.

In 2007, a planned farming operation at what's known as the Carson site uncovered evidence of a once large Native American village and monumental center located in the Yazoo Basin of northwestern Mississippi. FSU Assistant Professor of Anthropology Jayur Madhussudan Mehta has spent years investigating the site and teasing out details of Native American life in the 13th century.

In a new paper published in *North American Archaeologist*, Mehta, who worked for the State of Mississippi when the site was first discovered, lays out how large earthen mounds found in old villages like the one at the Carson site played a central role in Native American societies in what is now the southeastern United States.

"I propose that people came together as communities to build mounds and monuments, and that was a way of making a community," Mehta said. "When that collective work becomes appropriated, or taken over by someone or a small, elite group of people, this monument no longer represents community, or an egalitarian ethos. Rather, it represents a hierarchal relationship between elites and commoners, between people who have control over this monument and live on top of it, and those who live below it."

The Carson site is about one mile long and was first occupied by Native Americans from the St. Louis region who migrated downriver and established a settlement. Over the following centuries, the site's occupants built earthen mounds, constructed a village and began harvesting corn. Today, the surrounding region is largely used for agricultural purposes. A farming endeavor initially planned for the Carson site ultimately prompted the research excavation.



Jayur Mehta is an assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology. Credit: Florida State University

"The farming operation, through the course of moving 3 to 4 feet of soil off the surface, uncovered a village with houses and burials," Mehta said. "I became involved as a representative of the state of Mississippi to consult with Native American groups, remove disturbed burials, and to work with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the University of Mississippi, the University of Alabama and other universities to study the site."

Mehta's research offers insight into the purpose of Mound D, the Carson site's largest [mound](#) by volume. The building of Mound D by non-elites

may have provided social and ideological benefits, as well as protection from raiding, warfare, and subsistence buffers through organized food storage. The elevation of the landform also protected the site from flooding.

He believes the actual construction process of the large earthen mounds and their role in social and political relationships explain a lot about societal hierarchies and communities formed in early settlements.

In the 1800s, for example, it was common for people—especially the wealthy—to build homes atop the mounds. The landscape in the area was otherwise flat and people were aware of what they were building on. However, settlers at the time widely ignored the historical significance of Native American artifacts.

"Early settlers in the Mississippi River Valley did not think of Native American villages as a part of their collective history," Mehta said. "They were thinking about colonization, owning their own land by displacing indigenous people and building their own empires and states."

As part of the Carson Mounds Archaeological Project, excavations were conducted from 2012 to 2015, and researchers used ground-penetrating radar and a gradiometer to look for remains of ancient buildings. At "Mound D," where Mehta's research was focused, the use of this technology was met with little success. A subsequent decision to remove large amounts of poison ivy from the mound site ultimately led to discovery of the first artifacts.

Further excavations uncovered several buildings, some superimposed on each other. Teams took more than 80 sediment cores across the Carson landscape, excavated several trenches and used radiocarbon dating to analyze the approximate age of the samples.

Mehta hopes research such as this helps shift people's mindset when they hear the term American history and understand the need to preserve Native American heritage sites and artifacts that are part of the nation's collective cultural past.

"American history begins 15,000 years ago when the first Native Americans crossed over from Siberia into the New World," Mehta said. "These places deserve our attention, our efforts and preservation, just as much as we would strive to preserve colonial Williamsburg or Jamestown."

Provided by Florida State University

Citation: Archaeologist unearths history in Mississippi River Valley (2019, August 29) retrieved 13 March 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2019-08-archaeologist-unearths-history-mississippi-river.html>

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