

OF MACOPIN PITS AND BISON

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT THE ERNAT SITE (11LS267) IN THE BIG BEND AREA, LASALLE COUNTY, ILLINOIS

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In the spring of 1987, archaeological excavations were conducted at the Ernat site (11LS267), a multicomponent occupation located in the Illinois River floodplain immediately east of Starved Rock State Park along State Route 71. Excavations yielded several pit and rock concentration features, including two possible basin structures, and rich lithic, ceramic, faunal and botanical assemblages, including evidence of bison exploitation and possible aquatic tuber roasting pits. Although artifacts and features indicate Early Archaic through Upper Mississippian/Late Prehistoric and possibly Contact-era occupations at the site, the majority of remains pertain to the Middle and Late Woodland periods. Of these, materials classified as Late Woodland Swanson and Starved Rock Collared predominate.

Introduction

In the spring of 1987, archaeological excavations were conducted within a portion of the Ernat site (11LS267), a multicomponent habitation located in the floodplain on the south side of the Illinois River immediately east of Starved Rock State Park (Figure 1). As a result, several pit and rock concentrations and two possible basin structures were identified within the general midden deposits distributed across the site. Although preliminary field and laboratory identifications suggested Early Archaic through Upper Mississippian occupations, the majority of remains appear to pertain to the Middle and Late Woodland periods. Specifically, these include subsurface pits relating to the Havana tradition and subsequent Swanson phase and Des Plaines (Starved Rock Collared) complex. A later Late Woodland radiocarbon assay of cal A.D. 1019–1186

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(wood charcoal; 1- σ range) was obtained from Feature 10. Based on this date and the presence of features yielding diagnostic material, the investigated portion of the Late Woodland component is considered the primary occupation represented at the Ernat site. As discussed below, this site provides important information on the Late Woodland occupation of the upper Illinois River valley.

Natural Setting and Site Description

The site is located in LaSalle County, within the Grand Prairie Section of the Grand Prairie Natural Division (Schwegman 1973). More specifically, Ernat occupies a floodplain setting in the upper Illinois River valley, a deep trench that cuts through the

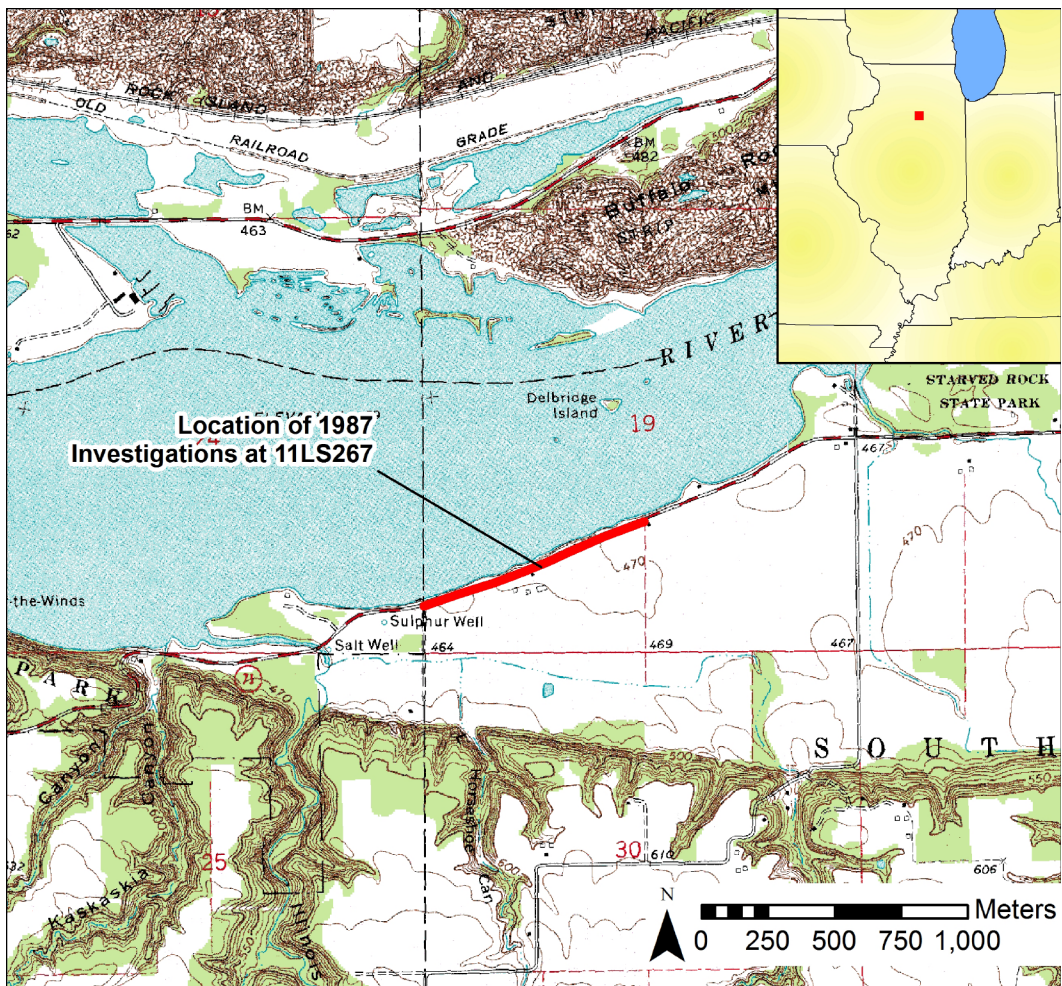


Figure 1. Location of the Ernat site (11LS267).

glacial-till plains of northern Illinois created by the massive deglacial flooding event referred to as the Kankakee Torrent that occurred circa 16,000 years ago (Hajic 2000). The site is located approximately 400 m north of the bluff line and approximately 600 m northeast of the mouth of Illinois Canyon (see Figure 1), a deeply incised ravine connecting the Illinois River valley with the uplands to the south. The habitation complex lies on a “strath terrace,” an erosional surface within the floor of the inner flood channel that developed in bedrock and till (Hajic 2000).

The 1828 General Land Office (GLO) map depicted the site area as grassland, with a roughly 1.5-mile-wide band of timber along the bluff to the south, beyond which was upland prairie (USGLO 1828). Soils at the site are classified as Faxon Series, which formed under a wet association of the tall-grass prairie (Natural Resources Conservation Service 2013a, 2013b). These and other data indicate that the aboriginal occupants likely lived in a resource-rich floodplain prairie, with an oak dominated deciduous forest to the south (Brown 1965; McNerney et al. 1985; Transeau 1935).

Results of Investigations

This site was initially located by the Resource Investigation Program (RIP; now the Illinois State Archaeological Survey [ISAS]) in connection with the IDOT-sponsored FAP 627 (Illinois State Route 71) highway-widening project. During the initial survey and identification of 11LS267 in 1985, the site was within a cultivated field with 70 to 100 percent surface visibility. At that time, the surface scatter, which yielded 9 nondiagnostic prehistoric artifacts, was described as measuring 200 m east to west and minimally 30 m north to south. The site sketch map depicts the eastern boundary terminating at the Louis Ernat farm, but it along with the southern boundary is indefinite and labeled with question marks; the western boundary terminates at a dirt road.

In April 2012, David Keene recorded the standing structures at the Ernat farmstead as a separate site (11LS1104) as part of a proposed sand-mine project. Site 11LS1104 is located at the east edge of 11LS267 as originally described in 1985. Structures had existed at this location since at least 1870 (Thompson and Everts 1870) and continued to be depicted into the first half of the twentieth century (Alden, Ogle and Company 1892; Globe Map & Atlas Publishers 1937; Ogle and Company 1906; Ottawa Printing Company 1921; Warner and Beers 1876). The Ernat family acquired the property in the early 1940s (Keene 2012).

The 1987 investigations examined an area extending approximately 1,020 m northeast to southwest. This includes an area later reinvestigated by Kullen (2012a, 2012b) northeast of the Ernat farmstead that was subsequently combined with 11LS1104 as described by Keene (2012). For the purposes of the present paper, both 11LS267 and 11LS1104 are combined and discussed as a single site, and the Euro-American component is not discussed further. Based on Kullen’s (2012a, 2012b) subsequent investigations, the site’s boundary was extended a maximum of approximately 70 m southeast of Illinois State Route 71. The 1987 investigations examined about 10.2 percent (7,300 m²

[1.8 acres]) of the entire site area. No prehistoric features were identified by subsurface testing in 2012 (Kullen 2012b).

Archaeological investigations in 1987 involved screened posthole testing, machine-aided block excavation, test unit excavation, test trenching, and feature excavation. Initial investigations by posthole testing indicated an approximately 25 cm thick dark grayish-brown silt loam (10YR 4/2) plow zone overlying a roughly 15–25 cm thick very dark grayish-brown (10YR 3/2) silt loam midden deposit. Underlying the midden was a brown (10YR 5/3) sandy-loam subsoil. With one exception, all posthole tests were positive, producing a total of 620 artifacts. Of these, 273 (44 percent) were found within the plow zone and 347 (56 percent) were recovered from below the plow zone, indicating a potential for some degree of depositional integrity. Following plow zone removal by heavy machinery, the subsurface deposits were excavated in 5 cm levels. All soil was shovel skimmed and 10-liter flotation samples were collected from every 5 cm increment.

With the exception of Upper Mississippian ceramics, the distribution of diagnostic materials across the site area did not reveal any obvious temporal patterning (Figure 2). Archaic lithic materials and Middle/Late Woodland artifacts and features generally overlap within the investigated areas, although the density of material and features drops toward the east and west ends. The area west of the Ernat farmstead exhibits a somewhat higher density of materials from all periods, and it was here that Middle and Late Woodland features interpreted as structures were identified. Two Upper Mississippian sherds were also recovered in this area. A second, less dense, cluster of materials, again from all periods, is located immediately east of the Ernat farmstead. It was here that 14 (87 percent) of the 16 shell-tempered Upper Mississippian ceramic sherds were recovered. Of these, ten (71 percent) were found between approximately 100 m and 150 m east of the Ernat farmstead. The two artifact-cluster areas are correlated with slight topographic rises.

Features

Thirty-seven features were identified during archaeological investigations at 11LS267 (see Figure 2). Two of these consist of a historic Euro-American post mold (Feature 32) and pit feature (Feature 20) that are not considered further herein. The remaining 35 features relate to aboriginal occupations and include pits, rock and artifact concentrations, cooking facilities, and structures. These features were mapped in plan view, excavated by halves, and shovel skimmed. All profiles were drawn and photographed and 10-liter flotation samples were collected from each feature. Comprehensive sediment screening was not employed during excavation. Most features ($n = 23$; 62 percent) were found west of the Ernat farmstead; the remaining 14 features occur to the east. Of the aboriginal features, 15 have been assigned to specific cultural or temporal periods (Table 1). Twenty features could not be assigned to specific cultural or temporal affiliations and are not discussed in detail here. Various attributes of all features are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

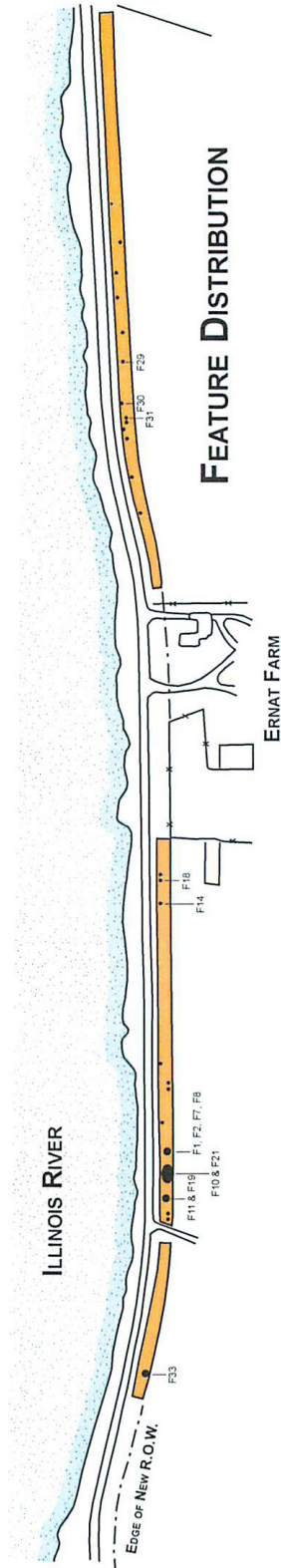


Figure 2. Feature distribution, 11LS267.

The Fish Lake site is characterized by numerous examples of ritual, gaming, and symbolic behavior (Fortier 2014a), a pattern noted at other LW sites in the American Bottom (Fortier 2014b). The location of the three features containing ABGs at Fish Lake provides further insight on ritual activity and social behavior within the community. Features 201, 245, and 253 are all bell-shaped pits but vary in their contents and spatial positioning. Feature 201 contained the passenger pigeon wing elements. It is situated at the south edge of a community yard that includes a cluster of six features that contained pipe and effigy figurine fragments, ceramic disks, a limestone discoidal, tobacco, and rubbed hematite (Fortier 2014a). Feature 245 is located in the center of a small courtyard in front of a group of keyhole structures. Five m to the east of this household yard is a cluster of six pits containing a plethora of ritual and exotic items (Fortier 2014a). This feature cluster is positioned at the southern edge of an open area separating two household yards; the open area likely represents a social or ritual precinct set aside for communal events. Feature 253 is situated in a small yard to the rear of a household group on the north side of the aforementioned communal precinct. Based on the contents and positioning of Features 245 and 253, it can be argued that different ritual activities were relegated to specific areas within the community. Certain dog sacrifices, such as that represented in Feature 245, occurred in a more public area, perhaps suggesting involvement by the larger community. Small-scale household feasting, including dog feasting as reflected in the Feature 253 deposit, in this instance appears to have been a more private event, perhaps restricted to closely related kin or family members. Similarly, the recovery of passenger pigeon wing feathers from Feature 201, a pit at the edge of a communal yard, may demonstrate regulated disposal of exhausted ritual paraphernalia in a prescribed location.

Discussions of Mississippian religion, ritual, and cosmology are widespread in the archaeological literature (e.g., Emerson 1989, 1997a, 2003; Hall 1997; Reilly and Garber 2007). Manifestations of power and ideology in Mississippian societies are remarkably demonstrative, as evident in the monumental architecture and landscaping, artifacts of power and symbolism, tribute and prestige goods, feasting refuse, and similar agents identified in the archaeological record (e.g., Baires 2014; Baltus 2014; Baltus and Baires 2012; Blitz 1993; Emerson 1997b; Emerson and Pauketat 2002, 2008; Lewis and Stout 1998; Pauketat 1994, 2013). Such outward displays of ceremony and ritual are, in general, not readily observed among earlier LW and TLW groups, but that does not mean that no such activities took place. Archaeological expressions of belief, agency, and ritual tend to be more subdued and subtle during the LW period (e.g., Fortier 2014a, 2015a; Kuehn 2014d). They occur at the individual and household/community-yard level at this time and are manifest in the modified faunal remains, human and animal effigy figurines, discoidals, pipes, and other ritual items recovered at Fish Lake, Reilley, Husted, Range, John H. Faust #2, and other American Bottom sites (e.g., Fortier 2014b, 2015b; Holley et al. 2001; Kelly et al. 1987). Between the LW and Mississippian periods, there is a strong shift in ritual behavior from the individual or household level to communal displays of power, ceremony, and agency. This pattern can be viewed as a reflection of the importance of religious-political symbolism and power for the Cahokian hierarchical elite.

Zooarchaeological analysis has moved beyond the central focus on diet and resource procurement. Faunal material, in both modified and unmodified forms, contained ritual meaning, power, symbolism, and agency within prehistoric Native American cosmology. Animals were a significant, substantial aspect of daily life, existing within the natural and extranatural worlds. By extension, animal parts similarly manifested ritual and symbolic power. Although it may be difficult to discern the potential ritual importance of zooarchaeological material, conceptual awareness is a necessary initial step, followed by detailed study, analysis, and interpretation. The results can ultimately provide significant insight into past patterns of ritual and ceremonial behavior.

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