Between the start of the second millennium AD to the onset of European colonization, the American South was home to a set of Indian cultures that are now called Mississippian. These people inhabited the South’s many river valleys and organized themselves into polities that the early Spanish explorers described as *provincias*, or provinces, and which were headed by *caciques*, or chiefs (Clayton et al. 1993). Such polities appear to us nowadays as geographical clusters of archaeological sites, which are separated from other, contemporary clusters by uninhabited areas (Hally 1993). The most important sites within these clusters are also marked by large pyramidal mounds, built of earth, which were platforms for such buildings as chiefly residences, temples, and lodges that served political and religious ends. Hundreds of these mound sites were built and used across the South during Mississippian times, but only a few stood out in the number of earthworks and the scale of their monumental construction. One of these was Moundville, the second-largest Mississippian center ever built, whose regional history is the subject of this book.

Located in the Black Warrior Valley of west central Alabama, Moundville was marked by at least 29 pyramidal mounds arranged around a plaza (figure 1.1). This site was clearly a major political and religious center, not only for the people living in its region but also for the wider Mississippian world. Its chronology and history are reasonably well understood, at least in broad outline (Knight and Steponaitis 1998). Moundville began around AD 1100 as a dispersed settlement with two small mounds. Not long after AD 1200, it experienced a burst of construction that transformed it into a major center. Most of the mounds were built at this time, as was a large, bastioned fortification wall, made of thousands of logs,
which protected the site on the sides away from the river. Initially the site had a substantial resident population, which presumably provided the labor for this construction. At about AD 1300, however, the character of the site changed dramatically. Much of the resident population dispersed into the countryside, the fortifications were dismantled, and Moundville became a “necropolis,” a place of ritual where the dead were brought from outlying settlements for burial. Indeed, many of Moundville’s residential neighborhoods were turned into cemeteries, which were used by the same
social units that had once lived there (Wilson 2010). During this time the site was inhabited mainly by the social elite—chiefs, priests, and their retainers. Literally thousands of people were buried at Moundville during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. After AD 1450 the level of activity began to decline, and by AD 1650 the site was abandoned.

At its peak Moundville was far and away the largest site in the region, but there were also many contemporary settlements scattered along a 50-km stretch of the Black Warrior Valley just below the Fall Line at Tuscaloosa (figure 1.2). These other settlements, which constituted Moundville’s immediate hinterland, were of two kinds. Some were small, local centers marked by a single pyramidal mound; at least 14 such sites are currently known (Welch 1998). The second category comprised hundreds of small sites without mounds, which are generally called “farmsteads” or “hamlets.” These smaller residential sites tend to occur in geographical clusters, each associated with a local center (Myer 2002a, 2002b). Many people lived in these outlying settlements, particularly when Moundville itself was a necropolis. The subsistence economy was based on farming, with maize as the principal crop. Craft production of various items, including ritual paraphernalia, took place not only at Moundville, but also in the hinterland (e.g., Marcoux 2007; Sherard 1999; Wilson 2001).

The classic, long-standing interpretation of this evidence is that Moundville was the center of a chiefdom—a polity that was politically centralized but lacked the elaborate bureaucracy that is typical of states (Peebles and Kus 1977; Wright 1977). Beginning in the 1970s, Peebles’ pioneering analysis of funerary evidence showed that Moundville’s social organization was hierarchical, with marked social distinctions that were visibly expressed in mortuary rituals (Peebles 1974; Peebles and Kus 1977). Settlement studies published soon thereafter argued that the distinction between Moundville and the local centers was a political hierarchy, and that the spatial distribution of these centers was well suited for the movement of tribute from the hinterland to the paramount center (Peebles 1978; Steponaitis 1978). Later studies found direct evidence of such tribute or “provisioning” of foodstuffs at Moundville (Scarry and Steponaitis 1997), examined the circulation of craft items within the polity (Welch 1991), and refined the conclusions of earlier burial and settlement studies in myriad ways. Much of this work culminated in a 1998 volume called Archaeology of the Moundville Chiefdom, which presented a new synthesis of Moundville and its region (Knight and Steponaitis, eds. 1998).
Figure 1.2. The Black Warrior Valley, encompassing Moundville and its immediate hinterland.
Our purpose in this book is to draw together some strands in the enormous amount of research that has taken place at Moundville since that 1998 synthesis was published. Despite the criticism that the term chiefdom has endured in recent years (e.g., Pauketat 2007), we still find it useful in describing the kind of “middle-range” societies that Moundville represents. We accept many of the criticisms that have been made—particularly that chiefdoms have sometimes been “essentialized” into a rather rigid, idealized category, based on Polynesian examples, which can prevent one from recognizing the variability in social forms that appear in the archaeological record. The answer to this criticism, in our view, is not to throw away the term, as some would have us do, but to recognize that it encompasses a great deal of variability, which can become an object of study in itself. In other words, the concept of a chiefdom still retains value as a descriptive and comparative tool, so long as one does not define the category too rigidly or assume too much about the range of social features it entails. Ultimately, the variability in chiefdoms is a matter that must be explored empirically with archaeological evidence, not assumed a priori.

This is the spirit, we believe, that has animated much of the recent research at Moundville, and that the chapters in this book exemplify. Indeed, one can see a clear trend in the way Moundville studies have evolved over the past four decades. The initial reconstructions of Moundville as a chiefdom were based on the simplified, neo-evolutionary taxonomies of Service (1962) and Fried (1967) and relied heavily on ethnographic analogies with Polynesia (Peebles and Kus 1977; Steponaitis 1978). Since then, the trend has been toward increasingly nuanced interpretations that rely on better archaeological data and more directly on analogies with historical Indian cultures in the American South—societies not far removed, in either time or space, from the archaeological case at hand. The resulting interpretations have not been unduly constrained by neo-evolutionary assumptions and have given us a much richer, more detailed understanding of Moundville and the people who lived there.

In the remainder of this chapter, we discuss several lines of research on Moundville that have played out over the past two decades, not only to review what has been done since the 1998 synthesis, but also to lay the groundwork for the subsequent chapters herein. We see four major themes in this recent work. Described in the briefest of terms, these are (1) chronology, (2) mounds and social memory, (3) iconography and religious practice, and (4) Moundville’s hinterland. Let us now consider each