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Late Prehistoric Florida

An Introduction

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The archaeological record of late prehistoric Florida is often bypassed or devalued by scholars outside the state, many of whom tend to view Florida natives as somehow cut off from the supposedly more complex and important developments of the interior Southeast. To some extent, Florida occupies a geographically marginal position as North America's southeastern appendage. But it is not an island separated from the mainland by hundreds of miles of ocean waters. Still, Florida societies, particularly those of the peninsula, have been largely ignored or given minor consideration in overviews on the Mississippian Southeast (A.D. 1000–1600). Perhaps the omission is nothing more than the by-product of gross generalizations focused on cultures that fit the "Mississippian" mold. Yet at times there appears to be an underlying sense of indifference, allowing researchers to cast "non-Mississippians" aside as inconsequential. But just how different were Florida societies from those of the Mississippian world? And does being different render Florida societies irrelevant or culturally inferior and justify exclusion from the social landscape of the Mississippi-period Southeast? We think not.

This volume attempts to shine a light on late prehistoric cultures in Florida, from the northwestern panhandle to the southern tip of the peninsula, and to explore the degree to which Florida's inhabitants distilled the ideas and trends of the broader Mississippian world (figure 1.1). As detailed in the following chapters, labeling Florida societies as either Mississippian or non-Mississippian pigeonholes them and distorts the reality of the native world. Agriculture was not needed for political complexity, nor was it a prerequisite for active participation in long-distance exchange. Our aim is not to recast Florida societies as Mississippian wannabes pleading

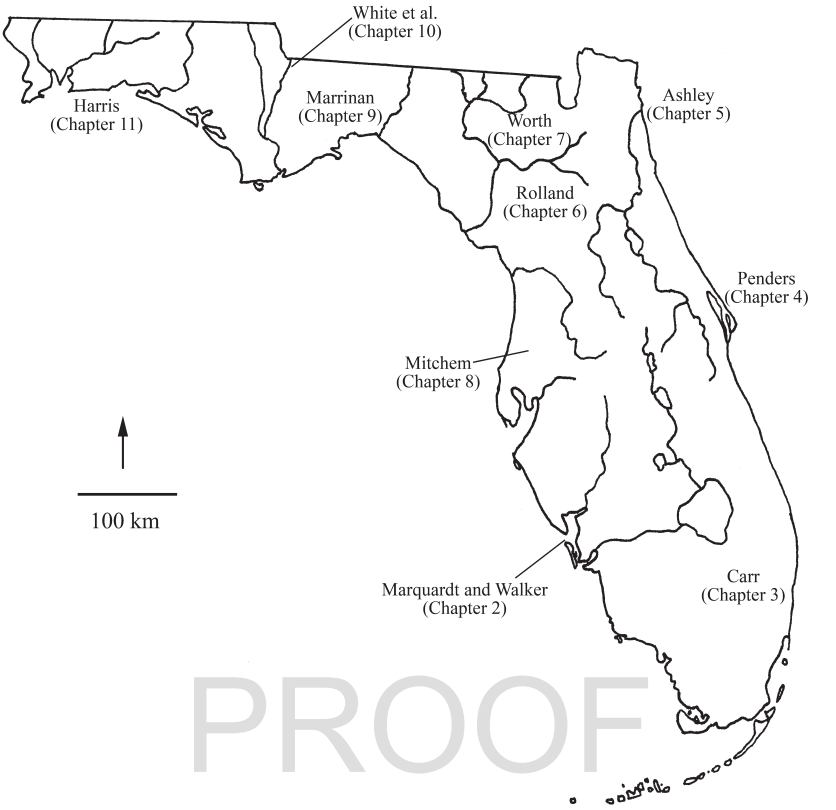

Figure 1.1. Areas covered by volume chapters.

for acceptance into the in-crowd, although arguments can be made that more-northerly Florida groups such as the historically known Timucua, Apalachee, and ethnically uncertain Fort Walton peoples of the Apalachicola River valley and points westward fall easily within the span of variation in Mississippian culture. The importance of Florida's aboriginal peoples lies in their own cultural traditions and histories that often intersected with those outside their territorial boundaries. By lifting the veil of cultural uniformity frequently draped over Florida in Mississippian literature, we expose a diverse and vibrant collection of intensive maize farmers, part-time gardeners, hunter-gatherers, and coastal and riverine fishers and shellfish collectors. In this light, Florida was to a degree a microcosm of the broader Southeast, and its study has a lot to offer those outside the state (Weisman 2003: 210).

Florida's Spatial Boundaries and Natural Diversity

The state of Florida, like many other peninsular political entities such as modern Italy, consists of both a slender coastal segment attached to the continent and a thin peninsula that juts into the sea. The current Florida peninsula extends some 800 km south into warm subtropical waters, dividing the Gulf of Mexico from the Atlantic Ocean. It is so narrow (240 km wide) that from Tampa along the Gulf coast you could see the space shuttle take off from Cape Canaveral on the Atlantic coast; nobody is far from the sea. Florida's coastline is dotted with islands of varying sizes, including many barrier islands and the Keys, an archipelago of more than 1,500 islands dangling in a south-southwest arc from the peninsula's southern tip.

Although the state is encircled on three sides by ocean waters, Florida's northern border is arbitrary, formalized by the U.S. government not even two centuries ago. Thus, we should not expect the modern state line to be congruent with native territorial boundaries, which themselves were fluid over the more than 12,000-year history of indigenous occupation. For those late prehistoric societies living in northern peninsular and panhandle Florida, cultural boundaries likely extended up or across rivers and overland into Alabama and Georgia as population sizes waxed and waned through time. For this volume, however, our geographical area of inquiry will be confined to the state of Florida.

Florida emerged from the sea, having surfaced within the past 30 million years as limestone deposits and marine sands gradually accrued atop igneous and metamorphic basement rocks (Schmidt 1997: 2). Guided by global climatic conditions, sea levels have advanced and retreated, alternately covering and exposing land, while at the same time building and reworking the surface contours and shores. Marine processes driven by sea-level fluctuations have played a primary role in forming the Florida we know today, a dynamic landscape that continues to be shaped by ongoing depositional and erosional actions.

Outsiders who travel through Florida often leave with the impression that the state is flat, sandy, and humid. Although they are not wrong, the state is not nearly as uniform as many assume. It is relatively flat with little relief, particularly compared to the continental interior, but deep ravines with high walls and highland features occur throughout the northern half of the panhandle. The horse country that forms the spine of peninsular Florida is marked by rolling hills. Found throughout the state are sand

ridges aligned parallel to the present coast, which represent dunes that once fronted earlier shorelines. Elevations range from sea level to a high of 105 m in the coastal plain uplands of the western panhandle (mean elevation of the state is 30 m). The southern third of the peninsula, however, is less than 15 m in elevation.

Because of Florida's great north–south length (833 km), its climate varies by latitude: temperate in the north, subtropical in the south, and tropical in the Keys (Chen and Gerber 1990). Temperatures, greatly influenced by oceanic conditions, can vary throughout the state, especially along a north–south gradation. Vis-à-vis other areas of the world that share the same latitudinal position, one might expect Florida to be a desert, but its enclosure on three sides by warm ocean waters creates conditions that support lush vegetation (Ewel 1990: 4). In fact, Florida has more biological diversity than any other state in the eastern United States; a recent inventory documented 69 natural upland and wetland biomes across the state (FNAI 1990). Ecosystems in temperate northern Florida contrast sharply with those of subtropical southern Florida.

Upland native ecosystems in Florida during Mississippian times would have included pine flatwoods and dry prairies, xerophytic scrub and high pine lands, temperate woodlands, panhandle ravines and river bottomlands, maritime forests, coastal dunes, and the tropical hardwood hammocks of the southern peninsula. Wetland communities consisted of freshwater marshes and swamps as well as coastal salt marshes and mangroves. Today, Florida has 2,172 km of coastline, more than the entire Atlantic U.S. coast from Florida to Maine (2,092 km) (Humphreys et al. 1993: 1). The shoreline includes dunes fronted by sandy beaches pounded daily by high-energy waves. In areas of low-energy wave and wind action, the coast takes less of a beating. There, mud floors develop, which support sea grass marshes along the panhandle shores, the central Gulf coast area, and the northern two-thirds of the Atlantic coast; dense mangrove swamps thrive along the peninsula's southern tip (Johnson and Barbour 1990: 429).

Florida holds more than 17,700 km of interior and near-shore rivers, streams, and waterways, 7,700 lakes larger than 4 ha, and 600 springs (Miller 1997). Figure 1.2 displays the location of some of the larger rivers in Florida, most of which are oriented north–south. With the exception of the lower Chattahoochee-Apalachicola system, Florida rivers lack extensive alluvial floodplains, locales that provided interior Mississippian

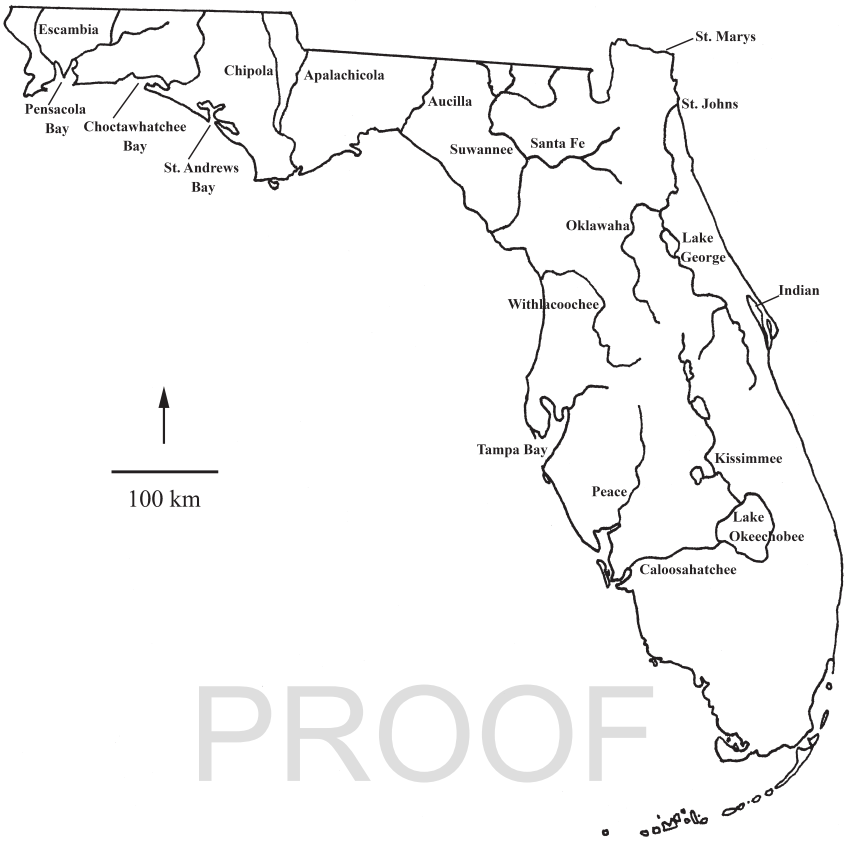

Figure 1.2. Location of major Florida rivers, lakes, and bays.

agriculturalists with nutrient-rich and seasonally replenished farmland. By modern agricultural standards, most Florida sands are often considered porous and infertile, although the red clay and loamy soils in the northern part of the state are more conducive to agricultural pursuits (Ewel 1990: 3). Precipitation provides the source of all fresh water in Florida, although much of the rainwater is lost to runoff and evaporation (Miller 1997: 69). Both interior and coastal wetland habitats significantly shaped precolumbian settlement and subsistence patterns, particularly in areas lacking fertile soils favorable for farming (Milanich 1994: 415). The archaeological cultures of Florida were as diverse as the natural environments in which they existed. Even during the Mississippi period it is not possible to paint all Florida societies with the same brush.