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Livin' the Life, Part 1: Middle Archaic Use of Persistent Places in the Uplands of Southwestern Virginia as Seen at 44RN40l

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Data recovery excavations conducted in 2018 in support of a utility project were conducted at two adjacent upland sites; 44RN401 and 44RN400. Spanning the Early Archaic through Late Woodland periods, use of these sites is broadly contemporaneous, yet important differences in the intensity of use and potential function of these is apparent. Most of the occupations appear to be related short-term, logistically organized and narrowly focused resource extraction tasks. Departing from this trend, it is suggested that the Guilford component is more closely related to the reduction of early stage biface as logistically organized groups moved from lithic acquisition areas in the nearby Blue Ridge to larger, longer-term base camps.

(**SLIDE 1)** The role of the mountain tops and other high elevation areas has been of interest in the study of Pre-Contact Native American societal development in the Appalachian Mountains for nearly 50 years. Many of the settlement models that have been developed for the Archaic and Woodland periods in the region emphasize the use of high elevation areas by small hunting parties or as transient camps represented by small lithic scatters with artifact inventories of limited size and variability. More recently, there has been a shift in perspective that emphasizes sites as part of a broader natural and cultural landscape that human populations map themselves onto and interact with. As data have accumulated, temporally-based transhumance models have been augmented by the development of non-temporally based site typologies that more fully capture the variability and structural complexity of sites in upland settings (e.g., Hoffman and Foss 1980). Uplands sites are no longer viewed as ancillary parts of cultural systems more focused on lowland settings (Nash 2014), but rather as an integral part of dynamic cultural systems tied to broader, long-term patterns of land-use. Simple models that emphasize aspects of site size and setting are no longer sufficient, but must be augmented with better understandings of assemblage composition and variability as it relates to the sites and their function that are present at high elevations and their intensity of use through time.

An opportunity to explore some aspects of Pre-Contact mountain top use was afforded when SEARCH conducted data recovery excavations at two closely related sites (**SLIDE 2**), 44RN400 and 44RN401 near Roanoke, Virginia in the spring of 2018. These two sites are at some of the highest elevations in Roanoke County and the surrounding parts of the Blue Ridge Province (**SLIDE 3**). Although the sites are treated separately, they are separated by only a 215 m area that includes steep slope, an unnamed tributary to Mill Creek, and a seasonally wet area (**SLIDE 4**). Site 44RN401 is an extensive lithic scatter encompassing 1.75 hectares of which 0.49 hectares are within the project area. The site (**SLIDE 5**) consists of a U-shaped artifact scatter that wraps around a trough-like swale in rolling upland terrain and features a small knoll at the southeastern end of the site. Elevations at the site range from 2,620 ft at its lowest point to 2,644 ft at the top of the knoll.

The focus of the data recovery investigations was a 139 m^2 main excavation block (**SLIDE 6**) and an associated 165 m^2 area of hand-stripped plowzone placed in the area of highest artifact concentration on the southern portion of the knoll. An additional 26 1 m^2 test units and two 2 m^2 blocks were distributed across the approximate western two-thirds of the site. These outlying TUs verified that the artifact scatter across that portion of the site differed considerably from the main excavation area, consisting of a generally low-density scatter of lithic debris and only a small number of tools and diagnostic artifacts.

The excavations revealed a homogeneous profile (**SLIDE 7**) across the site consisting of a 20 cm thick sandy loam plowzone and an underlying yellowish-brown sandy clay loam subsoil. The site formed in residual soils and nearly 90 percent of the artifacts are contained in the plowzone. No primary deposits occurred in the subsoil, nor were any features identified.

Dating of the site's components and their intensity relies on 69 diagnostic projectile points spanning an approximate 9,000-year period. Distribution of the diagnostic projectile points by period shows extended periods of low-level use punctuated by several periods of much higher use **(SLIDE 8)**. Early Archaic period use of the site is represented by 10 projectile points, most of

which are Kirk Cluster points (**SLIDE 9**). Following the Kirk horizon there is a drop-off in site use during Bifurcate Tradition times before a slight increase in site use during the early part of the Middle Archaic period as evidenced by the recovery of seven Morrow Mountain II points. This is followed by a marked increase during the Guilford phase (**SLIDE 10**) which is represented by 23 projectile points and this approximately 1,200-year long period is the most intense period of site use. During the Late Archaic period site use declined markedly (**SLIDE 11**) to a low level that remained fairly consistent until the later parts of the Middle Woodland period. The presence of 13 small notched and expanding stemmed points indicate a brief period of increased site use during the late Middle Woodland to early Late Woodland period (**SLIDE 12**). The small assemblage of 26 Grayson Series ceramic sherds are also associated with this period of site use. The lack of any small Late Woodland triangular points in the assemblage indicates that site use most likely ends around AD 900-1000.

As a palimpsest of numerous overlapping occupations confined in a relatively small area, interpretation of site function over time is challenging due to the inability to isolate specific components. Nonetheless examination of the assemblage composition, tool type frequencies as well as their distribution within the excavation block offers some salient points about the nature of these occupations.

A modest sized artifact assemblage of slightly more than 4700 artifacts including 186 chipped stone tools, 20 groundstone tools, slightly more than 4,500 pieces of debitage along with a small amount of FCR and recent historic artifacts were recovered from the investigations at 44RN401. While a moderately broad range of tools were recovered, the assemblage is dominated by a small number of tool types, which point to only a narrow range of activities taking place at the site. The structure of the tool and debitage assemblages indicate that hunting, tool production, and associated, but lower levels of toolkit maintenance were the dominant activities carried out at the site. Projectile points are the single most frequently occurring artifact type accounting for slightly more than half of the chipped stone tools. Not only do a number of the specimens exhibit impact fractures, but about one-quarter of the projectile points are represented by blade and tip fragments indicative of rehafting tasks.

Bifacial preforms (**SLIDE 13**) are the next most frequently occurring formal tool type with 26 specimens representing about 14 percent of the chipped stone tools. Most of the preforms are in either the middle or early stage of reduction. Although there are only 24 cores from the site the importance of tool production is also indicated by the debitage. About 70 percent of the complete and proximal flake fragments have minimally prepared striking platforms indicative of core and the earlier stages of bifacial reduction. These data along with the near lack of late stage preforms indicate that the reduction of preforms for transport to other locales in anticipation o0f future use rather than immediate use was one of the emphases of lithic reduction at the site.

The only other formal tool to occur in any frequency are finished bifaces which represent 7.5 percent of the chipped stone tools and would have been used for a wide range of processing, manufacturing and fabrication, or refurbishment tasks. This would also be the case for the expedient edge modified flake tools which represent slightly more than 20 percent of the chipped stone tools and are typically used briefly for task-specific purposes. Other tool types represented in the assemblage such as drills, scrapers, and a typical range of groundstone tools such as

hammerstones, anvils, and grinding equipment all occur in only very small numbers. Given the emphasis on hunting and tool production the general lack of plant processing equipment is not surprising, however, the near complete absence of end scrapers, which ae closely tied to hide processing, is surprising.

The investigations at 44RN401 indicated that the area of highest artifact density is concentrated in a relatively small area along the southern edge of the knoll at the eastern end of the site. The distribution of artifacts within the main excavation block only shows a generalized distribution with a high degree of overlap among the different major artifact classes (**SLIDE 14**) with only several general trends evident. This is, in part, not only a reflection of the low level of site use during the Early and Late Archaic and the Early and Middle Woodland periods, but also reflects the short-term nature of the occupation episodes.

During the Middle Archaic Guilford phase use of the site there appears to be a relationship with the use of quartzite and tool production, specifically the reduction of bifacial preforms (**SLIDE 15**). Although the Guilford point are broadly distributed across the excavation block and do not show any clear concentration suggestive of discrete activity areas, the fact that it represents one of the periods of heaviest site use it is reasonable to presume that these occupations also contributed a significant amount of the other artifacts including bifacial preforms and debitage. In particular, there appears to be a relationship between the Guilford component and a preference for the use of quartzite. Slightly more than half of the 23 Guilford points are made from quartzite with another approximate one-quarter occurring on quartz. It is not coincidental that quartzite is the second most common raw material represented among the debitage and at 36.6 percent is only slightly less abundant than quartz, which accounts for 40.7 percent of the debitage. The distribution of Guilford points in general and in particular those made from quartzite tends to occur either within in adjacent to areas of peak quartzite debitage densities (**SLIDE 16**). A similar pattern is also seen among the bifacial preforms, which also tend to occur in areas adjacent to the occurrence of Guilford points.

Although the picture is hazy due to the numerous overlapping occupations, it appears that at least during the Middle Archaic that the reduction of quartzite preforms and cores was a task carried out in conjunction with hunting forays into the uplands. The relatively low frequency of finished bifaces coupled with high levels of quartzite debitage suggests that this activity represents a middle ground where tool preforms roughed out at other locals such as the source areas are further reduced into more easily transportable forms in anticipation of future needs and that the acquisition of lithic raw material is an activity that is embedded with other resource procurement activities. It may also be suggested that the acquisition of quartzite and the initial preparation of early stage bifacial preforms prior to visits to Site 44RN401 and that this activity was embedded within broader resource acquisition activities such as hunting by small, logistically organized, male-oriented tasks groups making use of the uplands (**SLIDE 17**).

Unlike the Middle Archaic where there appears to be a link with the use of quartzite, the extent to which this activity is repeated during later components, particularly during the second period of increased site use during the late Middle Woodland to early Late Woodland period is difficult to assess. If the preference for quartz among the projectile points associated with that component can be used as a guide it would suggest that some level of bifacial preform reduction also was a part of the activities carried during that time since quartz was used for about three-quarters of the

preforms. This must be viewed with caution since quartz is represented to varying degrees among the projectile points of nearly all of the components represented at the site.

In conclusion, these are some of the salient points about Site 44RN401 identified by the data recovery excavations. The site is an extensive scatter of predominately lithic debris representing use of a mountain top locale over a period of approximately 9,000 years. Internally, the site is composed of two parts that may reflect different aspects of site use; 1) a small area of an estimated 400-500 square meters on the southern edge of a knoll at the southeastern end of the site where the bulk of the occupation debris is concentrated and, 2) the remainder of the site area which features a large, diffuse, low density scatter of debris composed primarily of debitage. The structure of the debris scatter across this latter area mostly consistent with transient camps that represent a single event such as an overnight stop or a very brief, task specific stop at the site. The brief nature of these episodes was such that aspects of site topography were not part of the decision-making process.

In contrast, the knoll as a topographic high overlooking the immediate area and the Mill Creek valley may have played a role in concentrating the occupations in one part of the site. The occupations in this part of the site are unified by the centrality of hunting as an activity conducted throughout the history of site use and this appears to be the primary factor in the creation of the site as a persistent place on the regional landscape. Use of this area begins with low level use during the Early Archaic Kirk phase and into the early parts of the Middle Archaic before peaking during the Middle Archaic Guilford phase followed by an extended period of low-level use before increasing one final time during the late Middle Woodland to early Late Woodland period. Throughout this long time of site use there was a unity to its use by small groups of logistically organized task groups focused on hunting and limited processing and toolkit maintenance tasks on an as-needed basis. The reduction of bifacial preforms in anticipation of future needs, possibly in connection with visits to quarry sites was an added features of site use during the main Middle Archaic component and a departure from the structure of the other components. The variable frequency of site use is most likely a reflection of broad scale shifts from residentially mobile foragers of the Early and Middle Archaic to more logistically organized collectors exploiting a wider variety of habitats during the Late Archaic and Early Woodland periods and finally to more sedentary communities using logistical forays to supplement and increased reliance on horticultural products as their economic foundation.