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Rethinking the Uplands: Site 33HA899, A Late Archaic Upland Base Camp in Southwest Ohio

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Abstract

Site 33Ha899 is a Late Archaic site on an upland ridge over the Great Miami River. The results of the archaeological investigation identified several hundred clustered pit features attributed to semi-permanent or repeated seasonal occupation. Sites such as these are poorly represented in southwest Ohio. Decades of development of lowland areas contribute to increased site identification in the lowlands compared to the uplands. The discovery of Site 33Ha899 indicates that upland locations were likely to be more intensely occupied during the Late Archaic period than previously understood and contributes new data towards understanding Late Archaic settlement strategies in southwest Ohio.

Keywords: Archaic, Upland, Southwest Ohio, Great Miami River, base camp.

Site 33Ha899 is in southwest Ohio on an upland ridge, 70 meters (229 feet) above the Great Miami River, near the confluence of Taylors Creek (Figure 1). A review of geophysical survey and archaeological excavation results identified a type of Archaic period base camp whose inhabitants were likely one or several family groups that reoccupied the site seasonally or semi-permanently during the Late Archaic period (Mahoney 2022). Sites such as these are typically expected to occur in the lowlands and are poorly represented in southwest Ohio. Decades of development of lowland areas contributes to increased site identification compared to the uplands. The discovery of Site 33Ha899 indicates that upland locations were more intensely occupied during the Late Archaic period than previously understood and contributes new data towards understanding Late Archaic settlement strategies in southwest Ohio.

The archaeological investigation began with a magnetic gradiometry survey. The survey identified a cluster of over 320 anomalies within a 0.55-hectare (1.35-acre) area (Figure 2). Test units were strategically placed to capture three of the anomalies that were confirmed as refuse pits during excavation and confirmed intensive midden development at the site. The refuse pits measure approximately one meter in diameter or less. The excavated pits extended up to 92 centimeters (36 inches) below the ground surface. The contents of the refuse pits are dominated by burned limestone which was detected by the gradiometer. They also contained a wide array of stone and bone artifacts including polished bone objects, turtle carapace bowls, chipped stone tools, ground stone tools, debitage, a dog burial, and floral and faunal remains from food processing (Mahoney 2022). Upon completion, the excavation recovered about 8,600 artifacts, numerous botanical samples, and hundreds of kilograms of burned limestone and FCR.

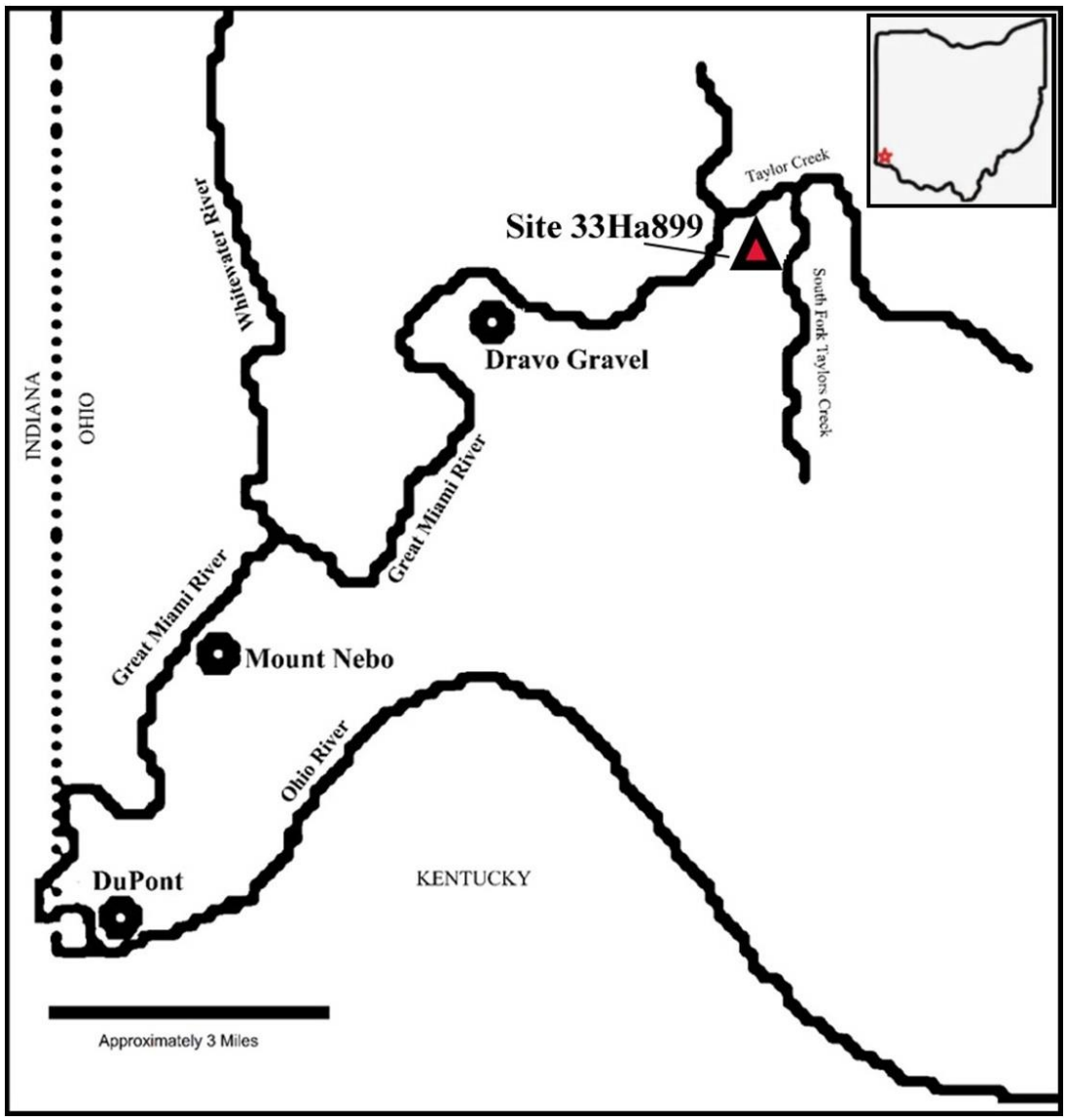

Figure 1. Site 33Ha899 location in association with waterways and nearby major sites.

Diagnostic artifacts that predate and postdate the Late Archaic period were recovered during the excavation. However, radiocarbon dates obtained from nut hulls, wood charcoal, and canine remains from feature contexts represent only the Late Archaic period (4970–4449 ± 30 cal BP; Mahoney 2022). Late Archaic point types, such as the McWhinney Heavy Stemmed (Justice 1987; Vickery 1972), were frequently identified in the plow zone and in feature contexts. McWhinney Heavy Stemmed points were most common, but projectile point types associated with the Early and Middle Archaic periods (circa 10,000–8,000 BP and 8,000–5,000 BP, respectively) in Ohio were also recovered from feature context (Figure 3). Several sherds of precontact ceramics were recovered during the excavation; however, only from the plow zone and likely represent a Woodland period component (ca. 2,800–780 BP).

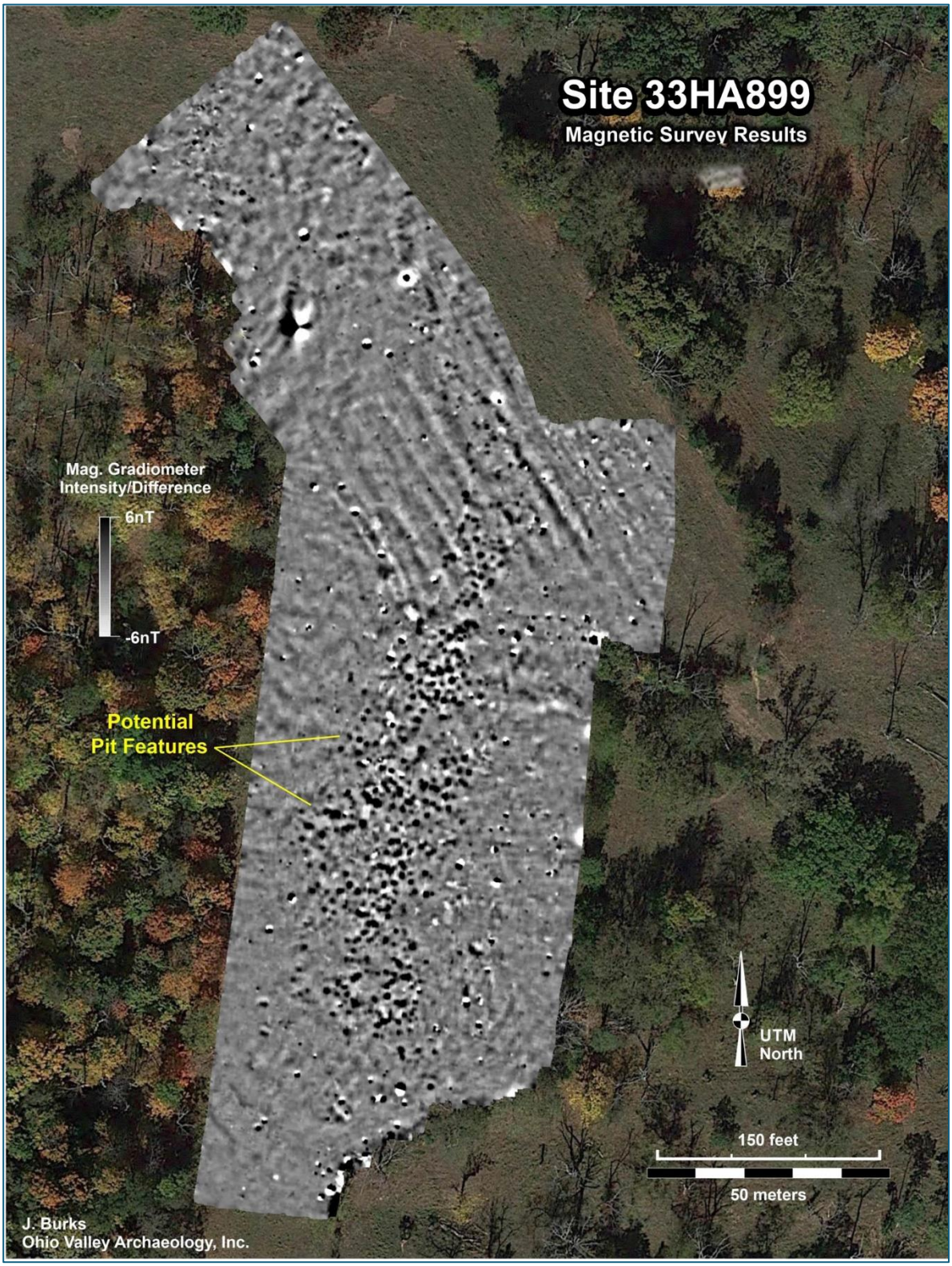

Figure 2. Geophysical survey map showing magnetic gradiometry results.
(Dr. Jarrod Burks of Ohio Valley Archaeology Inc.; used with permission.)

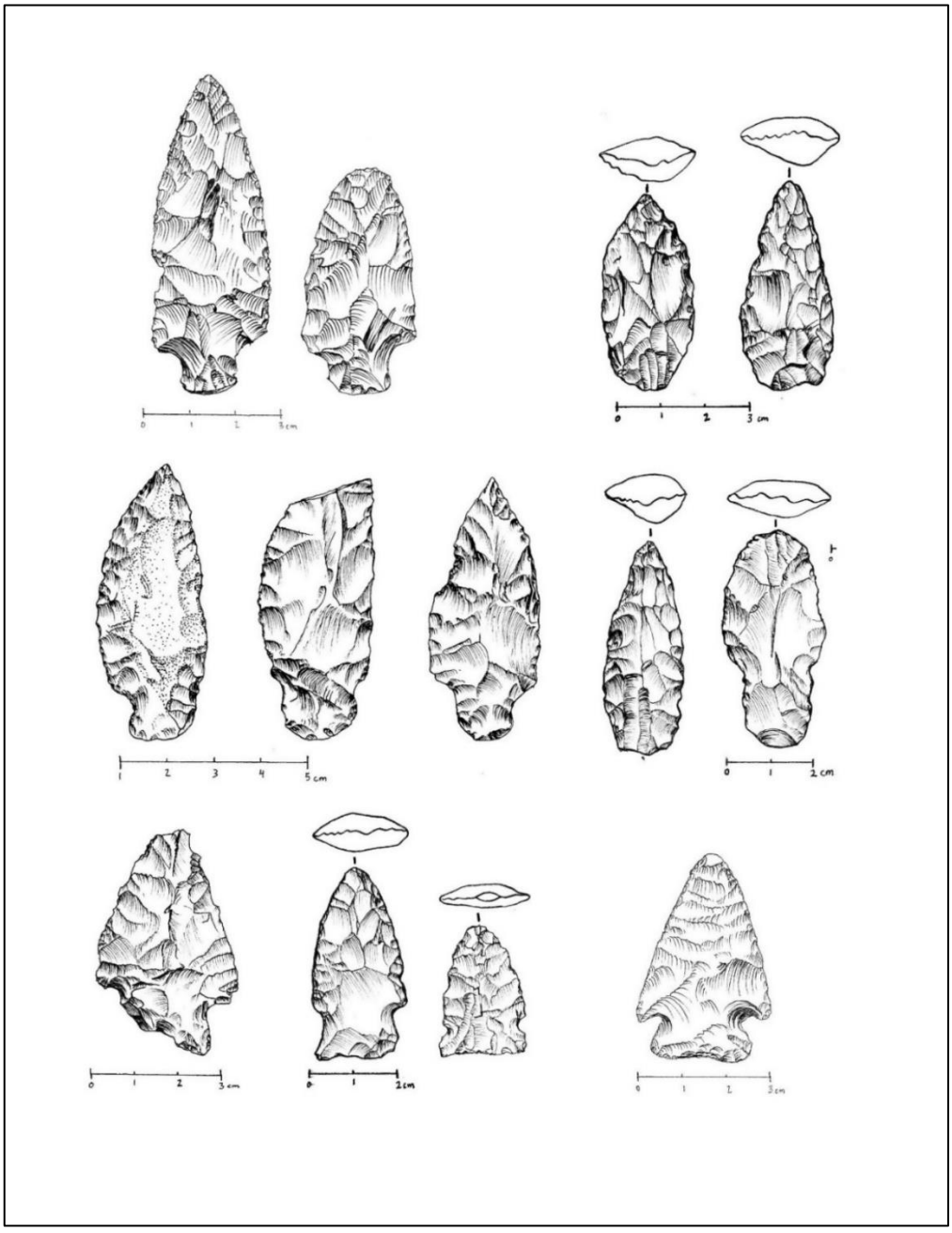

Figure 3. Representation of common projectile point types recovered at Site 33Ha899.
(Illustrations by Leeanne Mahoney.)

Discussion

The results of the archaeological investigation of site 33Ha899 contributes new data towards the understanding of Late Archaic settlement strategies in southwest Ohio. The generally accepted model for Late Archaic settlement patterns is that the lowlands along major waterways, especially at the junction of a major waterway and main tributary, are more likely locations for

Archaic base camps (Bader 2021; Purtill 2009). Base camps are sites that would have semiannual or year-round occupations where groups of people would converge to exchange goods and materials and share traditions (Purtill 2009; Vickery 1980, 2008). A wide range of activities occurred at base camps and they would typically exhibit midden development, burials, feature clusters, and house structures (Purtill 2009). The currently accepted Late Archaic settlement model for southwest Ohio speculates that the Late Archaic settlement strategy consisted of two types of base camps (regional and local) and various smaller sites such as temporary camps (stations) and seasonal settlements (Binford 1980; Vickery 1980, 2008). Smaller, ancillary sites that support the base camps are typically predicted for upland locations. Temporary camps and seasonal settlements in upland locations would not be expected to have intense midden development, if any. Site 33Ha899 exhibits intensive midden development on an upland ridge, the density of which is comparable to known base camps in the lowlands, and, as such, does not fit well into the currently accepted Late Archaic settlement model.

There are several Late Archaic sites that are recognized to have repeated or sustained occupations in lowland areas along the Great Miami River near 33Ha899 and downstream (Figure 1). These sites include Mount Nebo (33HA152), Dravo Gravel (33HA377), and DuPont (33HA045) (Dalbey 1977; Pape and Cowan 1987; Vickery 1977, 2008). Radiocarbon results and diagnostic materials from some of these sites indicate that site 33Ha899 is coeval with them. The most recognized Late Archaic base camps in extreme southwest Ohio are largely, if not completely, destroyed. Site 33Ha899 is a well-preserved example of a documented Late Archaic base camp-type site within the region.

Conclusions

The identification of Site 33Ha899 suggests that some upland sites served as base camps, are more common than previously recognized, and served a significant role in settlement and subsistence strategies during the Late Archaic period. Unlike known local and regional base camps in the lowlands along the Great Miami River that are recognized to have repeated or sustained occupations by large groups of people, Site 33Ha899 is smaller. Site 33Ha899 could be characterized as a "residential" type of base camp (Binford 1980; Mahoney 2022). A residential base camp is a site that was used by smaller groups or even family units repeatedly for a span of time (at least seasonally), contains midden development, and evidence of a wide range of activities (Mahoney 2022).

There are no other sites like 33Ha899 identified in extreme southwest Ohio, but there are also far fewer archaeological studies conducted in the uplands as compared to the lowlands. Decades of residential and commercial development and the gravel-mining industry have led to the identification and subsequent destruction of many Late Archaic period sites in the lowlands along the Great Miami River. In contrast, upland areas are not as frequently developed, and Section 106 surveys occur more often in the lowlands. This situation contributes to an archaeological bias toward lowland sites. Discovering new sites on upland landforms will continue to build upon our understanding of Late Archaic settlement strategy and site distribution theory.

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