Specific events can be obscured in the murkiness of the archaeological record. Time is imprecise in the unrecorded past, which can rarely be described in increments much finer than a century. But occasionally we can discern particular moments when things changed abruptly. Such a moment is the subject of an ongoing research project conducted by archaeologists at Dickson Mounds Museum and Michigan State University, with the cooperation of The Nature Conservancy.

Morton Village

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SOMETIMES AROUND A.D. 1300, a group of people, part of a broad cultural tradition called Oneota, migrated into the Dickson Mounds region from somewhere in the upper Midwest (Oneota groups are mostly found in Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, and parts of Missouri). Here they encountered people of the Mississippian tradition who had inhabited the area for several centuries. Evidence of the Oneota group is found at only a few sites in the region. One of these is the Morton Village site, located on the Illinois River bluff about 3 kilometers northeast of Dickson Mounds on The Nature Conservancy’s Emiquon Preserve.

We are trying to better understand the Oneota migration and the relationship between Oneota and Mississippian people through excavations at Morton Village. Two seasons of field work in the summers of 2008 and 2009 by the Michigan State University Archaeological Field School have demonstrated that the site was an important settlement inhabited by both Oneota and Mississippian people, though the question remains whether they lived there at the same time.

Morton Village is adjacent to the most thoroughly investigated Oneota site in the region, the Norris Farms #36 cemetery. It was discovered by Dickson Mounds’ archaeologists in the 1980s when the Illinois Department of Transportation developed plans to terrace the slopes along Highway 78/97, which runs through the east side of the site, to prevent slumping that often closed the road.

The cemetery contained 264 Oneota burials. Most of the artifacts with the burials were Oneota (much Oneota pottery is distinctly different from Mississippian), but there were a few Mississippian ones as well. Also surprising was the level of violent death in the cemetery. Although violence is evident in the archaeological record of this area after about A.D. 1000, the rate at Norris Farms #36 was extraordinarily high. About 46% of the adults exhibited arrow wounds, head wounds, scalping, and other indicators of violence.

A key question is, who they were fighting? The Oneota people may have been in conflict with some local Mississippian groups but trading and allied with others. Or they may have been subject to raids from their migration area.
...the amazing things that can be found beneath a seemingly empty grassy field.
I n the 1980s, some excavations were conducted north of the cemetery in the Morton Village site, presumably where people buried in the cemetery lived. Both Oneota and Mississippian houses were found. Our goal is to better understand the village. We are interested in how the people lived, how they used the local resources, and the nature of the interactions between Oneota and Mississippian people at the site and in the region.

We have mostly conducted small-scale excavations spread over a large area to help determine the extent and layout of the site. Combined with data from the 1980s, we know the site is potentially 10-15 acres in size. We also know that pits and building remains are well preserved over much of the site.

Both Oneota and Mississippian houses were set into the ground rather than built on top of it. They were placed within large basins about 50 centimeters deep; the bottom of the basin was the house floor. Wall posts were placed around the edges of the floor and extended upward above ground to the roof. Eventually the upper structure would collapse, sometimes after it burned, and the basin would fill with soil, leaving the floor—and any artifacts on it—preserved below ground.

The main difference between Oneota and Mississippian houses is each wall post in an Oneota house was placed in a separate hole whereas in the typical Mississippian structure the wall posts were placed together in long trenches. So far we have found ten Oneota structures and four Mississippian; the affiliation of two others is uncertain.

Whether or not we ultimately find evidence of cohabitation at the site, there are signs of interactions between the two groups. Oneota pottery vessels often have distinctive decorations: thick incised lines and punctuations formed by pressing sticks or other implements into the wet clay. At Morton Village, such decorations have been found on several ceramic plates, a form of vessel not typically used by Oneota people but one commonly made by Mississippian potters.

One of the most interesting artifacts recovered so far is a small ceramic figurine (at left, actual size). It has a round face with large ears and a beak that suggest an owl representation. Similar owl depictions have been found on several Mississippian artifacts in the area. However, the figurine was found amongst the broken pieces of an Oneota jar.

The jar and figurine were associated with Structure 16, which is fascinating in its own right and illustrates the amazing things that can be found beneath a seemingly empty grassy field. Although Oneota houses in some regions were often large enough to hold several families, they did not typically build public structures, ones used for functions other than everyday living. Public structures are common at Mississippian sites, such as the cross-shaped building at the Eveland site adjacent to Dickson Mounds.
Both Oneota and Mississippian people used small, triangular arrow points. Shown at approximately 100% of original size.

Plates with typical Oneota decorations have thick incised lines and punctations (above). A Mississippian plate with thin, angular incised lines is shown to the left. All shown at approximately 50% of original size.

Some Mississippian bowls were adorned with effigies of birds and other animals. The effigy on the left is an ivory billed or pileated woodpecker, to the right is some type of duck. The woodpecker is unusual in the region, but it is similar to depictions of woodpeckers found on engraved shells in the Southeast. Shown at approximately 50% of original size.

Portion of an Oneota jar with typical incised and punctated decorations. Shown at approximately 50% of original size.
Structure 16 was in a unique two-level basin that sloped down from the ground surface, leveled out to form a flat area about 50 centimeters wide, then dropped nearly vertically 10-15 centimeters deeper to the structure floor. Only two corners of the inner, deeper basin have been excavated so far. At both were areas of hardened clay on the higher flat part of the basin that continued vertically onto the side of the inner basin. The function of these clay areas is unknown. One possibility is that they were prepared seats; the higher section of the basin may have been a bench where people sat while facing the interior of the structure.

The broken pot and owl effigy figurine were found in one corner of Structure 16. In another corner was a pit with some rocks, pottery sherds, and a section of turtle carapace in the upper part. At the bottom was a pile of broken deer bones. The meaning of these items is unknown, but it appears the pit was deliberately dug in the corner of the structure and carefully sealed over.

The available evidence indicates that Structure 16 was something more than a normal domestic dwelling. Perhaps it was a public meeting house and/or a place to conduct ceremonies.

This image of structure 16 shows the higher bench, the inner basin, and prepared clay at the corner (top). This close-up shows the prepared clay area on the bench and the wall of the inner basin. Also note the charred timber running from the bench into the inner basin (above).
IN THE COMING YEARS we will finish the excavation of Structure 16 and uncover more of its secrets. We will also investigate other buildings and learn more about the overall layout of the site, both through excavation and the use of techniques such as ground-penetrating radar. Analyses of artifacts, animal bones, and carbonized plant remains will contribute to a more complete understanding of life at the site. It will take time, but in the end the Morton Village site should provide a fascinating glimpse of a moment in time when Oneota people took up residence in the central Illinois Valley.

If you want to see the excavations for yourself, the site will be open to the public on Saturdays from May 29 to June 26, 2010. Check the museum Web site or call Dickson Mounds at 309-547-3721 to verify this information before coming.

A Mississippian stone hoe Shown at approximately 40% of original size.