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Name(s): Emmanuel Breitburg and John B. Broster
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Paleoindian Site, Lithic, and Mastodon Distributions in Tennessee

Emanuel Breitburg and John Broster

The Tennessee Division of Archaeology maintains 106 Paleoindian site and 2239 point, and 62 mastodon records for eight physiographic regions defined by Miller (1974). As shown in Figure 1, while the majority of the sites (46%, 49) and points (65%, 1454) are concentrated in the Western Valley, only one mastodon record is known for the region. About an equal number of point and site, and half of the mastodon records are from the Central Basin and Western Highland Rim. While the mastodon records are not rare, site and point records are less common for the Mississippi River Valley, a pattern that is duplicated in the Valley and Ridge. Finally, site, point, and mastodon records are rare for the Eastern Highland Rim, Cumberland Plateau, and Coastal Plain, and there are no known records of any of the latter in the Unaka Mountains.

Site and point densities reveal Clovis and Cumberland populations intensely

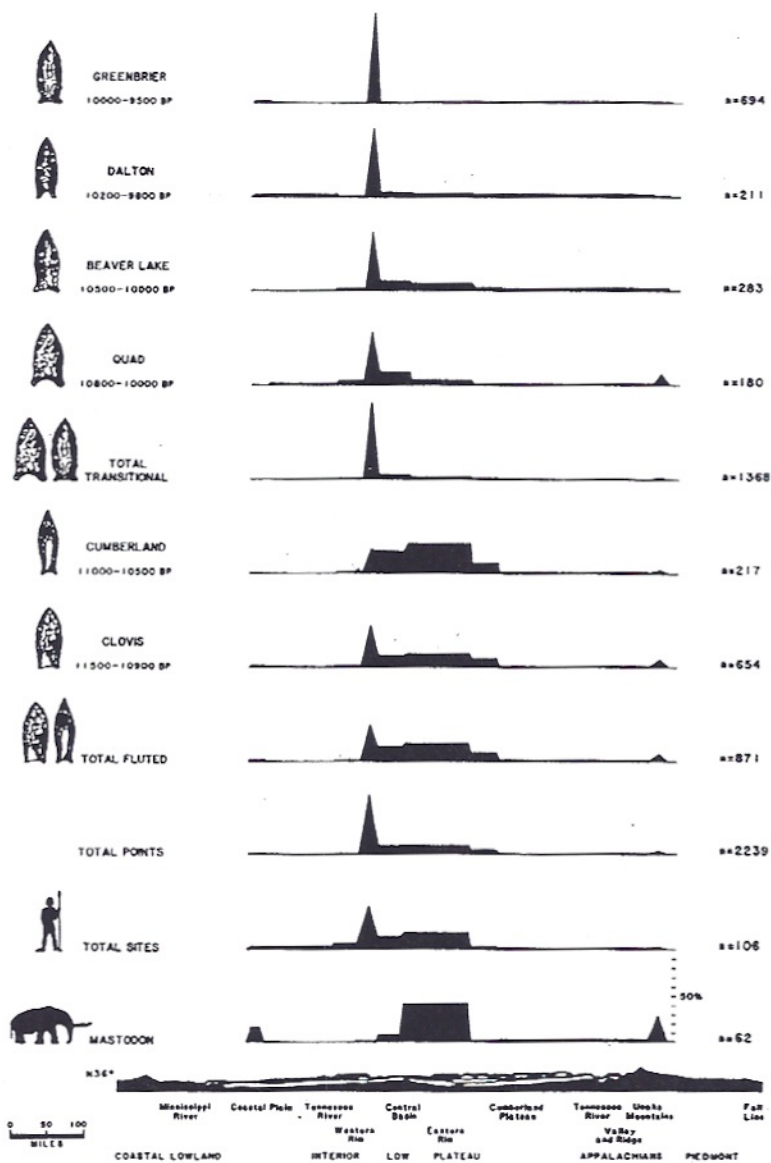


Figure 1. Percentage distributions of Paleoindian site projectile point and mastodon fossil localities.

occupied the Western Valley and Central Basin. Through late and transitional Quad, Beaver Lake, and Dalton times, the intensity of activity gradually declined in the Central Basin until Greenbriar times, when Paleoindian activity was almost completely confined to the Western Valley. The intensity and

narrow nature of physical occupation are underscored by the fact that 94% of the 694 Greenbriar points occur in the Western Valley.

While the narrow Western Valley appears to be the primary habitat of early human settlement and movement, it was poor habitat for mastodons. The Central Basin and its western rim were the principal arenas of activity for both early Amerind and mastodon populations. Low site and point densities imply that the Valley and Ridge and Mississippi River Valley were minor regions of human and mastodon activity. Even lower densities reveal the Coastal Plain, Cumberland Plateau, and the Unaka Mountains were of little or no significance to either.

The importance of the Western Valley lies in the excellence of its chert resources. The Lower Devonian bedrock of the region yields high-quality nodules of Harriman, Camden and Dover chert (Russell et al. 1975:13). The majority (93%) of the 49 early, transitional, and late base camps appear around Camden, Tennessee. These sites often have quarries and are aligned with the mouths of streams where chert nodules and soil from the surrounding landscape form alluvial fans.

To conclude, the need for and the location of superior-quality chert to make hunting armament are two of the primary factors leading to Paleoindian florescence and intense occupation of the Western Valley. Further florescence was abetted by the proximity of the mineral-rich soils, springs, and licks of the Central Basin, where migratory ungulates such as the mastodon congregated.

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