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PREHISTORIC AMERICAN INDIANS IN TENNESSEE

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The state of Tennessee is long and narrow, stretching 432 miles from the high mountains of the Appalachians and the Great Smoky Mountains on the east to the Mississippi River on the west. Moving from east to west, the state is divided into six major physiographic provinces (Figure 1): the Unaka Mountains (Appalachians), the Great Valley, the Cumberland Plateau, the Highland Rim which surrounds the fifth, the Central Basin, and the Gulf Coastal Plain of West Tennessee (Folmsbee, Corlew, and Mitchell 1969). The Tennessee and Cumberland rivers and their tributaries flow through the state and a number of rivers in West Tennessee are tributaries of the Mississippi River. These physiographic provinces and river valleys provide a diversity in natural resources and environments that have affected human settlement and adaptation for millennia. While there are many differences in the prehistoric Indian cultures found in East, Middle, and West Tennessee, there are general characteristics that they shared over time.

Our knowledge of the prehistoric Indians of Tennessee is a result of over 150 years of

archaeological investigations. Archaeology is the scientific discipline responsible for the recovery and interpretation of the remains of past cultures. Modern archaeology has three basic objectives: first, employing excavations and analysis based on scientific principles, archaeologists seek to develop temporal sequences of past cultures; second, archaeologists seek to reconstruct the lifeways of past human societies; and third, archaeologists address the evolution and operation of cultural systems – topics such as the origins of agriculture and changes in political organization. Places where cultural remains are found are called sites, and these may as simple as a location where several arrowheads are found and as complex as a ten acre village and mound complex.

Scanty written information about the Indians of Tennessee and the Southeast come from chronicles of the 16th century Spanish (Hudson 1990), 17th century French (Williams 1928), and 18th century British expeditions (King 2007). As Euro-American settlers moved westward across Tennessee in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the many mounds and earthworks they encountered became a focus of speculative interpretation, often based on scripture or comparison to cultures in other parts of the world. The most pervasive was the theory of the Mound Builders which held that the ancient mounds were the remains of an extinct culture, likely the Canaanites and Lost Tribes of Israel (Silverberg 1968).

By the 1870s, antiquarian collecting and speculation were replaced with more systematic excavations in Middle (Jones 1876, Putnam 1878, Thruston 1890) and East (Thomas 1894) Tennessee and these clearly demonstrated that the prehistoric mounds and villages were constructed by the American Indians and that the occupants may have been ancestors of historic tribes of the Southeast. By the 1920s, excavations made it clear that many sites were occupied over time by successive Indian groups (Harrington 1922).

With the creation of the Tennessee Valley Authority in 1933, there began a massive archaeological recovery program using federal relief workers (CWA, WPA) in valleys to be inundated. Between 1934-1942, surveys and excavations were conducted in the Pickwick, Gunterville, Chickamauga, Kentucky, Watts Bar, Douglas, and Fort Loudoun reservoirs. In addition, limited excavations were conducted at the Obion, Link, Pack, and Mound Bottom sites in Middle and West Tennessee. This period saw the establishment of professional archaeology in the state and increased enormously our understanding of the prehistoric Indian occupations locally.

In the 1940s a technique to date organic material (charcoal, wood, bone, shell) from archaeological sites was developed. Called radiocarbon dating (Libby 1955), archaeologists were now able to determine how long ago sites had been occupied – and suddenly the Indian occupation of Tennessee became very long.

The 1960s and 1970s saw a series of state and federal laws enacted that are designed to protect, preserve, and manage archaeological sites (TCA 11-6-101 *et seq.*, The Reservoir Salvage Act of 1960, National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, The Archaeological and Historic Preservation Act of 1974, and the Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979). Among other things, these laws required that for any project on state or federal land, or that is funded by or permitted by state or federal agencies, the project must identify and mitigate the impact on archaeological sites. Consequently, there has been an enormous amount of archaeological work done in Tennessee over the past 40 years ranging from major reservoir projects such as the Tellico, Normandy, and Columbia, to road, bridge, sewer line, and transmission line projects.

The result of the past 150 years of archaeological work is that we now know a lot about

the prehistoric Indian occupation of Tennessee. Archaeologists divide the time people have been in Tennessee into a series of major periods (Figure 2). These periods are both references to a span of time and to a stage in a continuum of increasing social complexity. Ancient native peoples formed numerous and varied social and political groupings that changed through time during each of the archaeological periods. Although ancestral to native peoples of today, the ethnic and tribal affiliations of these ancient societies are unknown. The prehistoric peoples of Tennessee may well be the ancestors of several southeastern tribes.

The First Tennesseans: The PaleoIndian Period

One of the big issues in American archaeology is the peopling of the New World. The traditional explanation has been that during the last Ice Age, the sea levels were as much as 300 feet lower than today thus exposing a dry land bridge across the Bering Strait from Siberia to Alaska. Around 13,000 years ago, bands of hunters with their families crossed into North America and radiated across the continent, their presence recorded by Clovis points (Figure 3) – a distinctive lanceolate stone spear point with flutes or grooves on each face and named for the Clovis site in New Mexico where they were found in association with extinct mammoths.

In the last two decades evidence has mounted that suggest an earlier, pre-Clovis arrival of people into the New World (Malakoff 2008). Monte Verde, a site in Chile, is dated 14,500YBP (Dillehay 1989, 1997). Human feces from Paisley Caves, Oregon, have been dated 14,300YBP (Curry 2008); and genetic studies comparing modern Native American genes to native Siberians show that the populations diverged 15-20,000 years ago (Goebel et al. 2008). These and other data indicate a date of 15,000+ YBP for the beginning of the PaleoIndian period.

Evidence for PaleoIndians in Tennessee comes primarily from finds of fluted spear points

and other distinctive cutting and scraping stone tools. Over 1000 fluted points have been found across the state and over 100 sites identified. Concentrations of these artifacts may indicate the location of base camps where a number of activities would have occurred. A particularly good example is the Carson-Conn-Short site in Benton County (Broster and Norton 1993) which contains over 40 hearths. The greatest concentration of evidence for PaleoIndian occupation is the western valley of the Tennessee River and the Central Basin particularly along the Cumberland River. This may be due to the high-quality chert resources in the western valley and the availability of mineral-rich soils, springs, and licks in the Central Basin where animals such as the mastodon, an extinct Ice Age elephant, likely congregated (Breitburg and Broster 1994).

Two sites show the direct association of humans with mastodons, At the Coats-Hines site in Williams County, 34 stone artifacts were found with the remains of a juvenile male mastodon (Figure 4); stone tool cut marks were present on a vertebra (Breitburg et al. 1996). At the Trull site in Perry County (Norton, Broster, and Breitburg 1998), a modified section of a mastodon tusk was found.

PaleoIndians have been often referred to as big game hunters, focusing on the now-extinct large animals of the last Ice Age (Figure 5). A more accurate description would be to call them generalized foragers who supplemented their diet of plant foods and small game with an occasional opportunistic killing of a mastodon. To understand the cultural organization of the PaleoIndians, archaeologists look at studies of living groups of foragers and construct theoretical models. Thus we believe that PaleoIndians were organized into bands in which several related families occupied and exploited a certain territory. A typical band may have numbered 20-25 persons and been comprised of a mother and father, their unmarried children, their married sons with their families, a few uncles and aunts, and a grandparent or two (this assumes that the

society was organized along male lines; later societies were organized along female lines).

This social group had little political organization except for a nominal leader chosen perhaps for his hunting prowess. The band moved occasionally to take advantage of the seasonal availability of certain plants and animals, but probably also had a base camp where a greater portion of their time was spent. Bands would join with other bands from time to time to hunt game, to exchange items, or for marriage between groups. Religious beliefs probably focused heavily on a respect for and an explanation of various natural forces. Of particular importance would be ceremonies designed to assure success in the hunt and continued abundance of game. In times of sickness or stress, the band looked to a shaman who was thought to have received power from supernatural forces.

Clothing can be assumed to have been sufficient for the environment in which the group lived. Similarly housing would range from simple lean-tos to more elaborate enclosures as the weather and mobility warranted. One must realize that these bands did not wander aimlessly. Their culture was an adaptation to whatever situation they encountered, and although band level society seems “primitive” when compared to later more complex groups, it provided all the physical and spiritual needs of the group.

The PaleoIndian period saw climatic fluctuations that brought changes in the environment of Tennessee and the extinction of the remaining Ice Age fauna such as mastodons. By 10,000 years ago the climate and vegetation had reached essentially modern conditions producing changes in the ways the native peoples lived and sought food. Archaeologists recognize this as the start of the Archaic period.

The Archaic Period

The Archaic period spans 8,000 years (11,000 - 3,000 YBP), a long period of time which archaeologists divide into Early, Middle, and Late. Archaeological sites are numerous in the state indicating a population growth and exploitation of a wide range of resources and locales. Many of the Early Archaic sites have been found deeply buried in the alluvial floodplains of the major river valleys (Figure 6), camps preserved as the river bottoms built up by successive flood deposits over the millennia.

The Early Archaic (10,000 - 8,000 YBP) was a time during which bands of hunters and gatherers adapted to the post glacial environment. The shape of stone projectile points shift from lanceolate to basally side or corner notched (Figure 7), perhaps indicating the advent of the spear thrower – a short shaft with a hook at one end which was inserted in the butt end of the spear thus serving as a lever to increase distance and thrust (Figure 8). Social organization continued to be bands occupying base camps and ranging out to exploit various natural resources (Figure 9). As populations increased, bands established territories within river valleys.

The material culture of the Archaic people becomes more diverse over time with an array of stone and bone tools for a myriad of tasks. One must realize that for all the culture periods, we are missing a significant portion of the record; except in rare instances, gone are the perishable materials – wood, fiber, feathers, hides, furs, and basketry. Housing evidence is restricted to a few postholes; many hearths and storage pits remain as mute evidence of residential sites. Analysis of human burials from the Middle and Late Archaic periods reveal an average life expectancy of 25 years. Apparently violence occurred perhaps related to groups vying to retain control over territory, as indicated by inflicted projectile points found embedded in bodies and trauma preserved in the skeletal evidence including evidence for scalping.

Throughout the Archaic period and the rest of prehistory the major source of animal

protein for Tennessee Indians was the white-tailed deer. This staple was supplemented by black bear and a wide array of other mammals. The most commonly hunted birds were turkeys and passenger pigeons, and where abundant along the flyways in the western part of the state, migratory waterfowl like ducks and geese. Fish such as suckers, drumfish, and catfish were also eaten. Beginning in the Middle Archaic, freshwater mussels and gastropods were collected in enormous numbers, especially in the western Tennessee River valley. Massive heaps or middens of shell are found along some of the major rivers of the state and signal residential sites and , sometimes, where people were buried.

Gathering wild plant foods was as important as hunting, and of primary importance were nuts, especially nuts and acorns. These first line plant food staples remained important through all subsequent culture periods. Hickory nuts are high in fats and crude protein and require no special processing to render them edible. Acorns are high in fats and carbohydrates and complemented hickory nuts as a food source although the bitter tannic acid in them must be leached out to make them edible. A wide range of other plants were collected by the Indians and through continued human selection became domesticated: a variety of squash/gourd (*Cucurbita pepo* ssp. *ovifera*) (Figure 10) is native to eastern North America and was utilized by Middle Archaic peoples around 7,000 years ago. There is considerable debate about when these cucurbits were actually domesticated, but there is consensus that cultivation of squash/gourd was occurring by 4,000 years ago. Carbonized seeds of domesticated sunflower (*Helianthus annua*) (Figure 11) were found at the Hayes site on the Duck River and dated to 4,315 YBP. Sumpweed (*Iva annua*) (Figure 12), another cultigen important for its oily seeds, was domesticated about the same time as sunflower. Chenopod or lambsquarters (*Chenopodium* sp.) (Figure 13), a small grain, was domesticated by 3500 years ago and it is clear that some form of gardening was taking

place by at least Late Archaic times.

Beginning around 6,000 years ago human population in the Central Basin and western Tennessee River valley began to increase partly due to improved adaptive strategies for extracting food from the local environments. In some areas, society became less egalitarian and a degree of social stratification emerged. Certain kinship groups were accorded more power and prestige than others. The best archaeological evidence for this comes from the increased burial ceremonialism and marked differences between the way some individuals were treated. Closely related to social stratification was an increase in the interregional exchange of certain objects. Gulf and Atlantic marine shells (Figure 14) and Lake Superior copper, apparently sought for their prestige value have been found with burials of assumed high ranking individuals. In the Late Archaic, soapstone bowls derived from outcrops in the Appalachians and Georgia piedmont, occur in sites as far west as the Western Valley.

Woodland Period

The Woodland period has been broadly characterized by the manufacture of pottery, the beginnings of intensive agriculture, and the construction of burial mounds and ceremonial earthworks (Figure 15). The shift from an Archaic period way of life to that of Woodland culture did not occur everywhere at the same time. Changes that had begun in the Archaic culminated in the Woodland and increasing population necessitated changes in political and social organization. As with the Archaic, the Woodland period is divided by archaeologists into Early (3000 - 2200 YBP), Middle (2200 - 1600 YBP), and Late 1600 - 1100 YBP).

The invention and use of pottery was an important event in human history. The oldest documented pottery is in the Jomon culture of Japan over 12,000 years ago. In the New World,

pottery is at least 5,000 years old appearing first in Ecuador. In Tennessee, pottery is introduced from two sources. The earliest is a fiber-tempered and sand tempered ware associated with Late Archaic/Early Woodland cultures to the south and appearing first in southwestern Tennessee about 3000 YBP. The second source of pottery manufacture may be the northeast U.S. and is identified by large conical containers with cord and fabric marked exteriors (Figure 16); this style of pottery appears in upper East Tennessee by 2900 YBP. During the Woodland period, pottery manufacturing and container styles changed reflecting regional differences among Woodland cultures. The appearance of pottery in the archaeological record implies a degree of sedentarism, since being bulky and fragile, such vessels were difficult to transport.

Some form of gardening was taking place at least by Late Archaic times and was an important part of the subsistence strategy by the Early Woodland period. Paleoethnobotanist Richard Yarnell analyzed the contents of Early Woodland human feces found in Salts and Mammoth caves in Kentucky and concluded: “the relative proportions of plant foods in the diet during the period of about 650-250 B.C. was 40% oil-seed crops (sunflower, sumpweed, cucurbits), 36% small grains (chenopod, maygrass, amaranth), 2% weedy greens (probably at least eight species), 2% fleshy fruits (at least ten species), and 20% nuts (hickory, acorn, and hazlenut). Thus it appears that at least 75% of the plant foods (and perhaps two-thirds of all foods) were from garden produce.” (Yarnell 1993:17) Hunting, gardening, and foraging for wild plant foods continued to be important through the rest of prehistory. Corn, the mainstay of the American Indian throughout most of North America, was first domesticated in Mexico some 5000 years ago. The first evidence for corn in the eastern U.S. is around 2300 YBP; in Tennessee, the earliest corn comes from eastern Tennessee and dates to 1825 YBP, but it apparently did not become a major part of the diet until the Mississippian period.

Early in the Woodland period, if not earlier in the later part of the Archaic, bands began to group together to form sociopolitical units called tribes. The tribe was made up of several localized communities each of which were organized through a kinship group called a lineage. These lineages would come together from time to time for the purpose of warfare or ceremony. The social organization was essentially egalitarian and community leadership rested with individuals who exhibited prowess in hunting or warfare. By the Middle Woodland period there is some evidence that some people were born with more rights and privileges than others.

The construction of ceremonial earthworks and burial mounds began in the Late Archaic in the Southeast with the most impressive being Poverty Point in Louisiana (Figure 17). To the north of Tennessee, the Early Woodland Adena culture included burial mounds that contained tombs of probable lineage founders and burials of other kin. Although no Early Woodland burial mounds have been found in Tennessee, there are burials that have been found that show Adena influence in artifacts and the inclusion of body parts from multiple individuals, presumably kin.

Two sites in the Middle Woodland period stand out in Tennessee. One, the Pinson site in Jackson County, is a 395 acre complex consisting of at least 12 mounds (the largest is 72 feet high - Figure 18), a large geometric embankment, and habitation areas. Most were built between 2000 - 1800 YBP. The burial mounds contain tombs of apparent high status individuals that may indicate an emerging chiefdom. The second site is Old Stone Fort in Coffee County which is a 50 acre plateau enclosed by 4,600 feet of stone and earthen embankments (Figure 19). Excavations suggest the enclosure functioned as a sacred space and the orientation of the entrance walls toward the summer solstice may indicate a celestial function.

Middle Woodland cultures in Tennessee were engaged in some interaction with the Hopewell culture to the north. Excavations at Pinson in West Tennessee and at Icehouse Bottom

in East Tennessee yielded pottery and stone tools of Ohio Hopewell origin. These sites were part of a broader exchange system among Middle Woodland peoples that reached as far south as Crystal River, Florida.

In the Late Woodland period, there appears to be a collapse of the Middle Woodland interregional exchange systems and the abandonment of centers such as Pinson and Old Stone Fort. Woodland communities, however, continued to thrive across Tennessee and the construction of burial mounds continues in eastern Tennessee (Figure 20). Although the technology may have appeared earlier, the bow and arrow definitely came into widespread use facilitating both hunting and warfare. Towards the end of the Late Woodland, use of corn as an agricultural crop increases dramatically. By 1100 YBP a shift from Woodland to Mississippian lifestyles was occurring through either migration of new peoples or the diffusion of ideas from the Mississippian heartland in the middle Mississippi River valley. The dynamics of the change remain a topic of study.

Mississippian Period

At its peak, the Mississippian tradition is characterized by the following: (1) the construction of earthen platform mounds on which were erected temples, elite residences, and council buildings (Figure 21); (2) the arrangement of mounds and individual household structures around open plazas (Figure 22); (3) increased population and more stable settlements than in the preceding Woodland period; (4) the emergence of organized chiefdoms; (5) increased warfare; (6) elaborate and well developed religious ceremonialism and symbolism; (7) a dependence upon new and improved strains of corn and the introduction of beans; and (8) morphological changes in ceramics and a fluorescence in ceramic styles.

As with the earlier culture periods, the Mississippian period is divided into Early (1100-900 YBP), Middle (900-650 YBP), and Late (AD 650-400 YBP) subperiods. Throughout the state mound centers/towns appeared, some quite large extending over several to several tens of acres, each with associated outlying hamlets and farmsteads. Many of these large sites span the Early, Middle and even Late periods as village sizes grew and contracted and successive mound layers were added. Today many of the Mississippian sites are inundated by TVA reservoirs, but sites such as Chucalissa, Obion, and Shiloh in west Tennessee; Mound Bottom and Sellers in Middle Tennessee, and Hiwassee Island in eastern Tennessee still remain. A situation that is still not understood saw much of West Tennessee and parts of the Cumberland/West Tennessee River valley abandoned by during the Late Mississippian period. In eastern Tennessee, the Mississippian occupation continued into the early 1600s.

Increasing social complexity and population density had resulted in a sociopolitical level called a chiefdom. In such a system, social organization was clearly stratified with one's position defined by hereditary ranking. The chief and his lineage and related lineages were set off from the rest of the people, forming in a sense a hereditary nobility. Certain sites became centers from which the chief would coordinate social, economic, and religious activities. These centers were connected through a web of alliances and were also ranked, with lesser centers subject to a principal chief at a primary town.

In the Mississippian period warfare and alliances for war were a way of life. Need for protection from raids is apparent in the construction of palisades and bastions around villages. While competition for limited prime agricultural land may have been a reason for warfare, the more likely motive is that warfare provided warriors a means for upward mobility within a ranked society. Revenge and retaliation generated by alliances and kinship ties maintained

frequent hostilities.

In Mississippian villages the year would be accented with many ceremonies and activities in which music, dance, and ritual would be combined. These activities would be focused on the plaza and mound and would bring clan members from the surrounding hamlets to the mound centers. Social rank would be most apparent at this time and religious/political paraphernalia would be exhibited (Figure 23). By 1100 a complex iconography had emerged that symbolically depicted deities, events, and religious concepts and these are manifest in an array of stone (Figure 24), shell (Figure 25), textile, copper (Figure 26), and ceramic (Figures 27, 28) objects, and recent research has identified a whole realm of cave art using iconographic designs (Figure 29) (Simek and Cressler 2008). An example of iconography can be seen in the circle and cross motif in Figure 6 which is thought to represent the four cardinal directions and the world (which was conceived as a circular island). At the same time, the circle symbolized the sun, one of the principal deities, and the cross symbolized the sacred fire.

The Mississippian period was the final chapter in the long human prehistory of Tennessee. Throughout the Southeast it was the pinnacle of religio-socio-political complexity of the Native American societies. Beginning in the 16th century, European incursions into the interior by the Spanish, the French, and the English brought massive change to the Indian cultures. Physical brutality and the introduction of European diseases decimated the populations and these disruptions broke down the traditional alliances and undermined the social and political order. By the late 1600s we have left prehistory and entered recorded history. The story becomes one of the Cherokee, Yuchi, Shawnee, Creek, Chickasaw, and others and their relationships with Euro-Americans and a new nation.

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