

Quick Study

Mississippian Period (AD 1000 to AD 1650)

Archaeologist David Hurst Thomas says one of the neat things about being an archaeologist is you get to name things. Find a new kind of pottery, you name it; find a new archaeological site, you name it. Find a bunch of similar-styled artifacts geographically spread in similarly dated soil levels, you name it. And this is big-time naming because what you call it becomes the umbrella for a cultural period.

Archaeologists don't quibble much about what to call periods from Paleoindian through Woodland times. But faced with what was going on in North Carolina and the Southeast after AD 1000, they get stuck. North Carolina then was in a crossroads. Influences traveled to it from places like Virginia, Georgia, and Tennessee.

These influences affected North Carolina people variably. Where they filtered in, they helped mold life. How to shape and decorate pottery; how to organize politically and socially; how to bury and honor the dead; how to feed, clothe, house, and protect.

What gets sticky is that in some North Carolina places, like the Coastal Plain and the northern Piedmont, changes from previous ways of life were gradual; in these places, drawing a line separating the Woodland period from anything after AD 1000 seems like an arbitrary exercise. In other places, like the Mountains and southern Piedmont, the changes were more dramatic, as new customs associated with the Mississippian tradition were adopted; here, AD 1000 coincides with a major cultural transition.

So the sometimes testily debated issue is: What to call the period in North Carolina after AD 1000 and before European contact? Archaeologists use various names, depending on where they work in the state and the cultures that they find. Some archaeologists prefer the term Late Woodland, thereby emphasizing continuity with the preceding Woodland cultures. Others use Mississippian—the name given a cultural tradition found across most of the South and noted for its social structure, architecture, and art. Here we have decided to follow the broader regional trend and to use the name *Mississippian period* for the span between AD 1000 and 1650. This term recognizes the presence of the Mississippian cultural tradition (in the Mountains and southern Piedmont), but it should not be taken to mean that all cultures in North Carolina belonged to this tradition.

Key Characteristics

- Corn agriculture, along with beans and squash, provides the bulk of food. Hunting and gathering now supplement food from crops. The white-tailed deer is still the most important source of meat. Some archaeologists call AD 1000 “The Great Divide” between horticulture and intensive agriculture.
- Population increases.
- Permanent villages exist. They tend to be larger than Woodland villages. Some are hamlets, with houses strung out along river banks. Others are what archaeologists call compact, nucleated villages, where houses cluster together and surround a central, open

area. Some compact villages have wooden stockades surrounding them, while others don't.

- House shapes vary across the regions. In the Mountain and Coastal regions, people usually build square or rectangular houses. Piedmont dwellings tend to be round or oval.
- Also, distinctively made structures besides houses exist in villages, such as large council houses and sweat lodges. Many people also construct corn cribs.
- Platform mounds are built in the southern Piedmont, the Mountains, and adjacent portions of the western Piedmont; these are earthen mounds sometimes constructed on top of the burned or destroyed remains of a ceremonial earth lodge. A new structure is placed on top of the earthen mound, which people use for religious or political purposes.
- Conflict is documented; some burials show people died from arrow or trauma wounds. Archaeologists think population growth and the need for good agricultural land increased intertribal friction.
- Pottery styles become more complex and varied. People decorate pots with elaborate stamped and incised designs. Besides using vessels for cooking, people apparently use the clay pots to store large amounts of food. Some groups use large, capped pots as burial urns for infants or to hold the cremated remains of adults.
- Some tribes develop social and political hierarchies, particularly in the southern Piedmont and the Mountains. Other groups remain egalitarian.
- A distinctive cultural tradition called Mississippian cuts swaths of influence through western and southern North Carolina. Evidence includes ceremonial complexes with temple mounds, designs, and symbols—like a cross in a circle—carved into shell gorgets (pendants), and ways to make and decorate pottery.
- Burial practices continue to evolve among certain groups; ossuaries are used more along the Coast. Temple-capped earthen mounds in the Mountains have some people buried in them. Graves offerings are common.