

Studying the Remains of the Past

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Imagine looking at layers of past events through a special set of lenses called a timescope. You might focus the timescope on the American Revolution or on a time when dinosaurs roamed across North America. Through it, you could see messages that people accidentally left behind. What can the messages tell you about the people who lived in the past, about the way the land and sea looked, or about long-ago animals and plants? Such a timescope exists. It is called archaeology, and it is a branch of anthropology. Anthropology is the study of humans, including their physical character, environment, social relationships, and culture.

By excavating objects—such as tools or parts of dwellings—that have been left behind in the earth, and studying these artifacts’ shapes, sizes, arrangements, and geographic placement, archaeologists can even learn about prehistoric people who left no written records. They use careful methods as well as skills from other disciplines such as geography, zoology, chemistry, botany, and math to help them explore the environments and cultures surrounding our ancestors and their behaviors. Archaeologists are limited in what they can explain, because of variations in object preservation, modern destruction of sites, and the simple fact that many parts of culture leave no direct traces behind. But their skills and curiosity often offer our best window into the early past, and our best chance at recovering glimpses of Indian culture displaced in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries.

About 100 million years ago, scientists believe, dinosaurs lived on the earth along with other animals. Dinosaurs became extinct by 65 million years ago, and by 10 million years ago, many mammals known today (such as elephants, horses, cattle, bison, and monkeys) lived. Humans’ ancestors probably did not appear until about 3 million years ago, likely first in Africa. Sometime around 13,000 BC, people (and animals) moved from Asia into the Americas during the Ice Age, when sea levels were lower and land bridges were in places that water now covers.

A little more than 400 years ago, English colonists began to meet many Native inhabitants along the coast of what would become the state of North Carolina. Even earlier, Spanish explorers “discovered” Indians in the Mountain and interior regions. Within a short time after those first contacts, a few decades, early European explorers had met, interacted with, and begun the process of cultural displacement of all major Native groups in the state.

We possess surprisingly little knowledge about the earliest American Indians. Tantalizing bits of information can be drawn from early exploration accounts, but when the actual diversity and complexities of “Indian” culture are considered, we must conclude that explorers thought more about geography, treasure hunts, or their own daily problems. The later colonial period of North Carolina history, despite its official documents,

likewise exhibits an unfortunate lack of interest on the part of white settlers to learn details of Indian life. We read little about Indians except in the writings of a few men. None of the state's earliest Native cultures had written language. People relied on oral traditions for their origins, myths, and histories.

Archaeologists trace the chronicle of American Indians to at least 12,000 years ago. The earliest aboriginal groups reached North Carolina not long after people first crossed into the New World. Distinctive projectile points used by early Indians show many similarities across the American continents. The places they are found suggest rapid population growth and movement of bands of people through Canada and the Great Plains, and into the Eastern Woodlands, including North Carolina. Archaeologists studying the prehistory of the Eastern United States consider four general cultural periods:

Paleo-Indian (roughly 10,000–8,000 BC, or earlier; all dates vary slightly by location), or “old Indians.” The vegetation and animals were very different from today's, and the climate was wetter and cooler. Paleo-Indians preyed on animals, using their meat, skins, and other parts for food and other uses. They may, in large groups, have forced animals into swamps or ravines by use of fire or spears. They gathered wild plant foods and likely fished and gathered shellfish in coastal and river areas.

Archaic (roughly 8,000–1,000 BC). These Indians improved ways of hunting and gathering food. The climate and forests became more like today's. Archaic people developed a larger variety of stone and wood tools, basketry, and items such as soapstone bowls. Archaic camps and villages, which were probably used by season, occur as archaeological sites throughout the state.

Woodland (roughly 1,000 BC–AD 1600). Gradually and in piecemeal fashion, Indians adopted bows and arrows (which allowed a single hunter to harvest animals like the white-tailed deer), pottery making, and settled agriculture. Hunting and gathering during times of seasonal abundance of resources such as deer, turkeys, shad, and acorns continued, but some clearing of fields, planting, and harvesting of crops including squash, gourds, beans, and maize took place using tools like hoes and digging sticks. These Indians settled in larger, semi-permanent villages along stream valleys, sometimes with defensive walls or palisades. Woodland cultures dominated most of the state well into the Contact period.

Mississippian (roughly AD 1000–1600). This culture prevalent in the Southeast influenced a few areas of North Carolina—including the Pee Dee and some Mountain groups. It featured more organized and powerful political chiefdoms, more elaborate pottery and religious practices, and the building of town centers that usually included flat-topped, earthen “temple” mounds, public areas, council houses used for religious and political assemblies, and defensive structures. Mississippians became agriculturally oriented. The oldest archaeological evidence of corn agriculture (ca. AD 1000) in the state has been identified with the Pee Dee in Anson County.

This material has been adapted from an article written by Stephen R. Claggett, state archaeologist, and from information provided by the N.C. Office of State Archaeology Research Center. The latter includes portions of Timescope: The North Carolina Archaeology Discovery Kit, which the office developed in conjunction with the Coe Foundation for Archaeological Research Inc.