

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

NORTH AMERICAN HISTORY – Post-Classical Period

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Overview In North America, post-Classical civilizations built vast earth works, mounds, and platforms for ceremonial as well as governmental or administrative purposes. They practiced horticulture, and their crops centered around corn, beans, squash, and in some cases, peppers. They established vast trade networks, and their cities were built in a well-organized geometrical patterns. And yet, for all their accomplishments, by the time the Europeans arrived, they were already in decline. We are just now uncovering the puzzle pieces to the mystery of how they lived, what they believed, and why they began to decline.

POLITICAL HISTORY

GOVERNMENT

Mississippian (800 – 1500 AD): The governance was structured around a religious elite, who governed in conjunction with chiefs and chiefdoms. The highest rank was that of the “Paramount Chief,” who was able to demand tribute from the people. The lower-ranking elites were often related by blood to the Paramount Chief. Because the chiefdoms relied on authoritarian rule, they tended to dissolve or fragment when there were any threats to the Paramount Chief.

Discussion/Questions

The early societies in North America flourished when they had responsive systems of organization that allowed them to be flexible. For example, the clans and tribal groups in the northeast were able to establish confederacies that allowed them to trade with each other and also provide defense against common enemies. Discuss how and why having religious leaders made sense in their agriculturally-based economies.

Readings

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MILITARY

Mississippian (800 – 1500 AD): The Mississippian culture was very sophisticated, and had mastered the construction of extremely complex engineered earthworks, pyramids, drainage systems, and waterworks. Their economy was reliant upon trade, and both the trade routes and the territories were coveted, not just for access to supply of goods, but also as markets. So, there were warriors and a standing military that functioned to protect the trade routes. Similar activities occurred in contemporaneous cultures such as the Toltecs and Maya, to the south. The Mississippian Period people produced artifacts that demonstrate their involvement in warfare with other groups or clans. They manufactured objects of stone, shell, and copper. In Tennessee, the Dover chert was used for creating knives, swords, and discs that could have been used in both war and in rituals. Their mortuary behavior suggests that warriors were respected, since that is where representations of weapons, war costumes, and falcons can be found.

Discussion/Questions

The first need for military forces had to do with protection. The protection had to do with communities, but also with the lifelines, which is to say trade routes. Describe how the early North American civilizations

protected their communities and their trade routes.

Readings

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SOCIAL HISTORY

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Mississippian (800 – 1500 AD):

In many ways, the Mississippian Culture was similar to that of the Maya and the Aztec. There were kings, princes, and princesses who were part of a royal family. They participated in religious rites and had important roles. However, the role of High Priest was an important one, and it was independent of the royal family. The priests were a very high ranking. In addition, there were individual citizens, warriors, and craftsmen.

Discussion/Questions

Religious leaders were an important part of North American civilizations, and they often occupied the top rungs of society. The Mississippian mound builders constructed elaborate cities with massive platforms and centers reserved for ceremonies and public spectacles. Discuss how the mounds and the urban layouts reinforced the power and prestige of a religious elite.

Readings

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GENDER

Mississippian (800 – 1500 AD):

We know that gender roles existed for men, as they assumed roles of warriors and also of spiritual guides. The artifacts encountered in the mounds, such as ceramics, demonstrate an interest in fertility, and clearly the role of the woman was that of a mother.

Discussion/Questions

In early traditions, women and men were assigned gender based on their ability to give birth. Lineage and family relations were considered to be most logically traced to the mother, since paternity could always be called into question. One would think that tracing family lineage through the mother would necessitate parallel power structures, but that was not necessarily the case. Discuss the role of gender and cultural power in early societies.

Readings

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ECONOMIC HISTORY

INNOVATION

Mississippian (800 – 1500 AD): The Mississippian peoples whose largest settlement was in Cahokia (modern-day Saint Louis area), lived along the Mississippi River and its tributaries. Its governmental center was in Spiro, Oklahoma, where there were complexes of large “mounds” (complexly engineered earthen pyramids), along with a water system. Their civil engineering innovations were impressive, with pyramids, large earthworks, drainage systems, irrigation, and retaining walls. They also developed boats capable of transporting cargo in extensive trade voyages along rivers.

Discussion/Questions

When Columbus and the other Europeans arrived in the Americas, they did not find a barren wasteland devoid of organization or civilization, although at times it was convenient to depict American indigenous peoples in a negative light. Instead, they found elaborate cities with complex engineering, and systems of agriculture that allowed stable communities to emerge. Describe some of the agricultural and engineering innovations of the peoples in America before the Europeans.

Readings

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TRADE

Mississippian (800 – 1500 AD): As the architects of large population centers and earthworks (mounds / pyramids) all along the Mississippi River and its tributaries, the Mississippian established complex and far-reaching trade networks. At mounds in Cahokia (East St. Louis, IL), Spiro (Oklahoma), and Moundville (Tuscaloosa, AL), artifacts using raw material from far away have been found, including copper from the Great Lakes, quartz from Hot Springs, Arkansas, and shells from the Gulf of Mexico.

Discussion/Questions

There were four different pulses in the Mound Builders' historical development, and it is believed that the Mississippian, with its communities positioned along the Mississippi River and its tributaries was the most extensive and dependent on trade. Describe the different artifacts that contained materials obtained from many miles away, and explain why they might have been useful to the Mississippian mound building communities of Cahokia, Spiro, and Tuscaloosa.

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CULTURAL HISTORY

SCIENCE

Mississippian (800 – 1500 AD): The great Mound Builders of the Mississippi Valley of North America were masters of construction science as they build ceremonial platforms, irrigation ditches, and also earthworks in the shape of sine waves (the famous "Serpent Mounds." In addition, they were students of astronomy and had rituals that coincided with positions of the sun, moon, and stars. They also needed to understand geology and civil engineering to be able to construct ceremonial mounds.

Question

Early cultures used science and technology in conjunction with their social, religious, and commercial lives. Describe how astronomy figured into the religious lives of early civilizations in North America. Then, explain how a knowledge of geology and construction science were necessary in the construction of cliff dwellings, ceremonial mounds, and more.

Readings

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RELIGION

Mississippian (800 – 1500 AD): Throughout the Mississippi River embayment and Mississippi, Ohio River, Red River, and Arkansas River watersheds, there are ruins referred to for years as “mounds.” They are the ruins of temples / ceremonial courts / ball courts. There were clear connections between the spiritual beliefs of the trading partners, with shared knowledge of the stars, moon, sun and calendars. There was potential sacrifice of human beings, but it does not seem to have been as widespread as to the south.

Discussion/Questions

The little we know about the religious beliefs of the early Clovis-era culture often has to do with the petroglyphs found in caves. Consider the types of petroglyphs and carvings that have been found. What are some of the possible religious beliefs represented by hunting scenes and diagrams of constellations, the sun, moon, and geometrical shapes?

Readings

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PHILOSOPHY

Mississippian (800 – 1500 AD): The Mississippian cultures possessed ideas about reality that were very similar to those in the MesoAmerican cultures of the Maya and the Olmec. For example, they believed in an animistic dimension of power and origins life, resulting in a belief that woodpeckers, rattlesnakes, spiders, and other animals possessed supernatural powers.

Discussion/Questions

The philosophical beliefs of the people in the Americas before the arrival of the Europeans were closely aligned with their religious and social beliefs. For example, ideas about reality and the relationship between humans and Nature were often reflected by the overall cosmology that explained the origin of humans, animals, and the earth vis a vis the gods or the Great Spirit. What are some of the main ideas of the Southwest Pueblo Indians and those of the Eastern Woodland Indians? How do they reflect a relationship between human beings and the world at large?

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ART

Mississippian (800 – 1500 AD): The Mound dwellers of the Mississippian painted the inner rooms of their dwellings, and also the walls of caves. Very little is known about these architects of the Mississippi River Valley because by the time that the Europeans visited their lands, there was little left except their

abandoned structures. Their pottery was painted, generally with geometric shapes, but also in the shape of animals.

Discussion/Questions

The people of the Mississippian cultures were expressive and artistic. They created highly decorated implements such as ceramic vessels and figurines, as well as stones carved into the shape of insects. When we consider that their religion was shamanistic, and it often involved assuming the attributes of an animal. Given the convergence of art and religious beliefs, what are some of the possible ways that art was used in the early civilizations before the arrival of the Spaniards, English, Dutch, and French?

Readings

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LITERATURE

Mississippian (800 – 1500 AD): Throughout the Mississippi River embayment and Mississippi, Ohio River, Red River, and Arkansas River watersheds, there are ruins referred to for years as “mounds.” They are the ruins of temples / ceremonial courts / ball courts. There were clear connections between the spiritual beliefs of the trading partners, with shared knowledge of the stars, moon, sun and calendars. There was potential sacrifice of human beings, but it does not seem to have been as widespread as to the south.

Discussion/Questions

The Mississippian cultures did not have a written language, but they did leave behind their stories in the form of glyphs, shapes, petroglyphs, and earthworks. For example, the long, undulating mound in the shape of a sine wave (which has been considered a serpent), clearly ties to beliefs and stories about supernatural powers and also ideas about the constellations. Describe how you might go about finding the “literature” of the Mississippian cultures.

Readings

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