

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# NORTH AMERICAN CULTURE – Post-Classical Period

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**Overview** From about 800 AD to as late as 1500 AD (just after the arrival of the Europeans), there was a mysterious collapse of what were once very well-developed cities, with massive earthworks, ceremonial centers, exquisite carvings and pottery, and a well-established trade route. No one knew why the civilizations collapsed – not even the Indian tribes that were living in and around the abandoned cities. Current theories suggest that the collapse of civilization was due to environmental crises brought on by drought, floods, and mismanagement of the resources (destroyed croplands, overfished and overharvested the wild game). We do not know. However, we do know that the Mississippian societies were dominated by engineers and builders who left behind very impressive earthen structures.



## VERBAL ARTS

### Literature

**Mississippian (800 – 1500 AD):** There were no written books, scrolls, or codices. However, there was a tradition of creating patterns in pottery and also in carved artifacts. They were not developed enough to be considered hieroglyphs, but they did have meaning, and they connected to the larger earthworks that appeared in the shape of animals.

### Discussion / Questions

Literature: While written literature did not exist, per se, it is clear that the mound-building people of the Mississippi embayment did share stories, connections, and ways of expressing themselves. Please discuss the role of stories and literature with the early people.

### Readings

Blaisdell, Bob. (2014). The Dover Anthology of American Literature. NY: Dover.

Nelson, Dana D., Joseph Csicsila, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, James S. Leonard, David Bradley, George McMichael (2010). Anthology of American Literature. Longman Publishers

## Language

**Mississippian (800 – 1500 AD):** Although there is no clear linguistic trace that connects the Mississippian with the Maya, we know because of their artifacts that they had extensive trade relationships. Thus it is probable that they shared a common language and also that their beliefs were also built into the grammar; for example, the way that words indicated the belief that all words could cast spells and cause inanimate things to become animate beings.

### Discussion / Questions

Among the earliest civilizations in North America, there were a number of different groups that had a great deal in common, and yet split off from each other. Discuss the role of migration, branching out of groups, and trade routes (commerce) in the development of individual languages.

### References:

#### Language:

Algeo, John (2001) The Cambridge History of the English Language, Vol. 6: English in North America (Volume 6)Cambridge University Press; 1st Edition edition (November 12, 2001)

Gray, Edward. (2014) New World Babel: Languages and Nations in Early America. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP.

Van der Sijs. (2009) Cookies, Coleslaw, and Stoops: The Influence of Dutch on the North American Languages. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

<http://www.doabooks.org/doab?func=fulltext&rid=12627>

Mithun, Marian. (2001) The Languages of Native North America. Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP.

## Script

**Mississippian (800 – 1500 AD):** The Cahokia region near present-day St. Louis is, in essence, an extensive large city consisting of earthworks, ceremonial mounds, and sculpted drainage ditches in the form of sine waves, curves, spirals, circles, and lines. The shapes have often been attributed to snakes, tornadoes, and ripples. However, they could just as easily be geometrical shapes corresponding to mathematical relations and connections. We really do not know. Likewise, we do not know precisely why the Mississippian earthworks at Poverty Point, located in modern-day Louisiana, is in the shape of half of a spoked wheel. There is also the famous “Bird Mound” which has the appearance of a bird (from the sky).



Mississippian earthworks at Poverty Point, Mississippi

#### Discussion / Questions

#### Script / Writing:

If we consider the earthworks of the Mississippian cultures at Cahokia and Poverty Point to be a form of meaningful written discourse, we can say that they wrote in order to communicate. But, what were they communicating? What were people trying to communicate? Who were they communicating to? . Describe the earthworks and propose meanings and human interactions with them.

#### References:

#### Script / Writings:

Ancient Origins: Reconstructing the Story of Humanity's Past (2015) Blythe Intaglios: The Impressive Anthropomorphic Geoglyphs of the Colorado Desert. <http://www.ancient-origins.net/ancient-places-america/blythe-intaglios-impressive-anthropomorphic-geoglyphs-colorado-desert-003003?nopaging=1>

Ancient Origins: Reconstructing the Story of Humanity's Past (2018) Did Humans Speak Through Cave Art? Ancient Drawings and Language's Origins <http://www.ancient-origins.net/news-evolution-human-origins/did-humans-speak-through-cave-art-ancient-drawings-and-languages-021844>

## VISUAL ARTS

### Painting

**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

#### Painting:

The earliest inhabitants of North America created artifacts that were highly utilitarian such as finely crafted awls, blades, and spearpoints, and they used their tools to carve glyphs in the walls of caves and on rocks. 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?

## References:

Painting:

Berlo, Janet Catherine. (2014) *Native North American Art. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*. Oxford: Oxford UP.

Craven, Wayne. (2002) *American Art: History and Culture*. Saddle River, NJ: McGraw-Hill.

## **Architecture**

**Mississippian (800 – 1500 AD):** The builders of vase mounds, low pyramids, and platforms were masters of large-scale structures along with elaborate drainage systems. For the most part, the designs incorporated straight lines and clear geometrical shapes such as in the structures known as Cohokia near St. Louis, Missouri. However, a dramatic exception occurs at the Serpent Mound in Ohio which takes the form of what appear to be sine waves, or, as is commonly believed, the shape of a snake.

## Discussion / Questions

Architecture:

Early architecture integrated itself with the landscape and the climate. The functions of the architecture tended to revolve around society-building ritual as well as providing shelter for families and the community. Describe how the early civilizations of the Americas developed designs that took advantage of local materials and explain how they decorated them in ways that reinforced the rituals and ceremonies held there.

## References:

Architecture:

Blumenson, John J.G. *Identifying American Architecture, A Pictorial Guide to Styles and Terms, 1600-1945*. Nashville, TN: American Association for State & Local History, 1977.

Bomberger, Bruce D. *The Preservation and Repair of Historic Log Buildings, Preservation Briefs #26*. Washington, DC: Technical Preservation Services, National Park Service, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, Washington, DC, 1991. <http://www.nps.gov/history/tps/briefs/brief26.htm>

Lanier, Gabrielle M. and Bernard L. Herman. *Everyday Architecture of the Mid-Atlantic, Looking at Buildings and Landscapes*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

Mako, Brandon. *History of American Architecture – a timeline*.

<https://www.preceden.com/timelines/19454-history-of-american-architecture>

## **PERFORMING ARTS**

### **Dance**

**Mississippian (800 – 1500 AD):** Artifacts found in the mounds and burial sites of Cohokia, Spiro (OK), and Tuscaloosa (AL) reveal musical instruments, masks, and rattles that were presumed to be a part of religious ceremonies. They practiced shamanistic types of dances, and the masks that have been found have the following animal motifs: deer, puma, wildcat, turtle, and fox.

## Discussion / Questions

Dance:

The civilizations in North America used dance in conjunction with religious ceremonies and to express connections to animals, natural phenomena, and spirituality. Some of the ways that they expressed the connection was through music and the costumes used in dance, which included masks and skins. Describe the shamanistic beliefs expressed through dance.

## References:

Dance:

Brown, Jean M., Naomi Mindlin, Charles Humphrey Woodford, Charles H. Woodford. (1998). *The Vision of Modern Dance: In the Words of Its Creators, Ed 2*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Book Company.

Cass, Joan, etal. (1993) *Dancing Through History, Edition 1*. New York: Pearson.

Highwater, Jamake. (1996). *Dance: Rituals of Experience, Edition 3*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Johnston, Kay. (2003). *The Spirit of Powwow*. Boston: Hancock House Publishers.

Patterson, Daniel W. (2000) *The Shaker Spiritual*. NY: Dover Publications.

## **WORLDVIEW**

### **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

Religion:

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?

### References:

Religion:

Lacome, Denis. (2014). *Religion in America: A Political History*. New York: Columbia UP.

### **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 the 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.

### Discussion / Questions:

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.

### References:

Reingold, Nathan. *Science American Style*. New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1991.

Rosenberg, Charles. *No Other Gods*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1997. Ch. 14.

Spanier, Bonnie. *Impartial Science*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana U Press, 1999.