

RADIOCARBON DATING

Anything organic—anything that breathes in the naturally occurring radioactive carbon in the air or water—can be radiocarbon dated. Dates are reported as (for example) 6570 +/- 80 B.P. The B.P. stands for “Before Present”, the +/- term is the range of error on either side of the date, and the ‘6570’ is the number of years ‘before present,’ which by the standards set when the technique was developed, is 1950. Over the years, scientists have learned that a number of corrections and calibrations are necessary to translate these “raw” counts of remaining radioactive carbon to B.C. and A.D. dates. One of the most important calibrations is with tree rings, which, it turns out, are more accurate than radiocarbon dating! Dates throughout this exhibit are corrected and calibrated.

LOUISIANA'S PREHISTORIC CULTURES

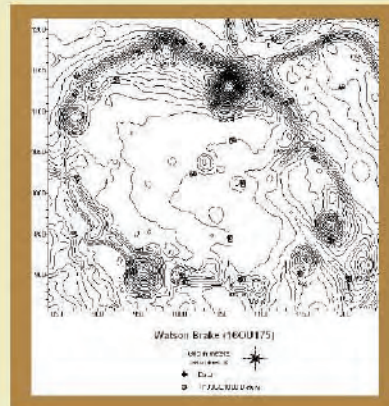
The actual names of prehistoric societies in Louisiana are not known. Therefore, we can only refer to prehistoric “cultures” by somewhat arbitrary names that archaeologists apply. These are: Paleolithic, Archaic, Poverty Point, Tchefuncte, Marksville, Troyville, Coles Creek, and Plaquemine/Mississippian. The Plaquemine/Mississippian cultures are the immediate predecessors of historically known tribes.

PALEOINDIAN. Little is known of Louisiana's Paleoindian (10,000-8,000 B.C.) cultures. Stone tools are generally all that remains. No known mounds are known for Paleoindian cultures.

LOUISIANA MOUNDS 6000 B.C. - A.D. 500

ARCHAIC. The earliest dated mounds in the U.S. are in Louisiana. These were constructed by Archaic cultures sometime around 5000 B.C. The LSU Mounds, though younger (4000 B.C.), closely resemble those earliest mounds.

Archaic mound sites became more elaborate through time. The Watson Brake Site (3400 B.C.) is a set of 11 mounds tied together by an embankment. These encircle a 200-yard plaza, possibly used for ritual performances and social dancing. As at other Archaic mound sites, no burials have been found. Artifacts include beads, and the drills to make them, as well as dart points and square baked-clay objects.



The Watson Brake site. Image courtesy of Dr. Joe Saunders, Regional Archaeology Program, Department of Geosciences, University of Louisiana at Monroe.

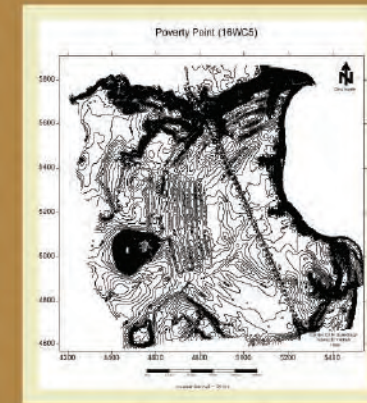
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POVERTY POINT. The Poverty Point site represents the climax of Archaic mound building. Constructed between 1600 and 1300 B.C., the site contains six concentric earthen rings, a 650-yard central plaza, and the third largest mound in the United States. A staggering quantity of dart points, drills, jasper beads, and other objects have been recovered from the site. Many were made of exotic materials. Copper was traded in from as far away as the Great Lakes; stone was imported from Arkansas, Tennessee, and Georgia. Archaeologists still debate what kind of society had so much surplus labor and wealth so early in prehistory.

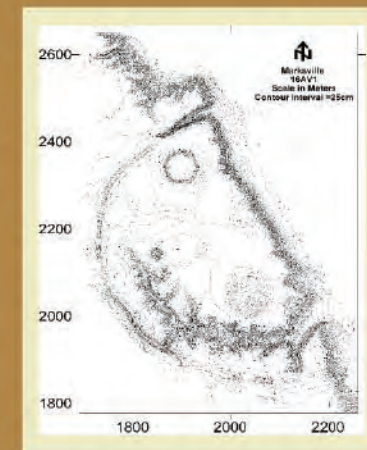
TCHFUNCTE. For unknown reasons, the Poverty Point site was abandoned sometime after 1000 B.C. The complex trade network associated with the site collapsed. The Tchefuncte culture that followed did not build mounds until the very end of the culture, when it was influenced by a loosely integrated politico-religious system called “Hopewell,” which connected Southeastern societies by 100 B.C.

MARKSVILLE. This influence resulted in the Marksville culture, the hallmark of which is the burial mound. These conical burial mounds are often surrounded by embankments. The burial mounds contain evidence of the resurgence of long-distance trade. They contain beautifully crafted platform pipes, musical pan pipes, and ear spools (earrings), often made of exotic materials. Burnished pottery, often incised with bird iconography, is also found. The scroll design used throughout this exhibit is another Marksville design, though the meaning of this motif is unclear.

TROYVILLE. The Marksville culture gradually disappeared, and by A.D. 500, a new culture called Troyville is defined. Changes in pottery and other artifacts indicate influences from eastern cultures, especially from panhandle Florida. Instead of burial mounds, public life was dominated by low flat-topped mounds, which are believed to have functioned as stages for public rituals. These mounds also became more elaborate as sociopolitical roles developed and political positions became inherited.



The Poverty Point site. Image courtesy of Dr. T.R. Kidder, Department of Anthropology, Washington University in St. Louis.



The Marksville site. Image courtesy of Dr. Chip McGimsey, Regional Archaeology Program, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

1.3

Exhibit Funded by:

