

Quick Study

Archaic Period (8000 BC to 1000 BC)

The second oldest known cultural period in North America is the Archaic. The term, loosely defined, means Ancient Ones. Archaic Indians are direct descendants of Paleoindians. Like Paleoindians, they lived in all parts of North America. They, too, were nomadic hunters and gatherers who generally had no pottery and no permanent villages.

Archaic Indians lived so much like Paleoindians that archaeologists find it difficult to make distinctions between them. But there is a fundamental difference that archaeologists use to draw what they admit is an arbitrary cultural line. It is this: Paleoindians arrived in and lived throughout the Americas during the late Pleistocene (Ice Age) while Archaic Indians lived during the subsequent (and modern) Holocene epoch. In chronological terms, this puts the Archaic period's start at about 8000 BC, and in North Carolina it lasts until 1000 BC.

Like the Paleoindians, eastern Archaic Indians had a broad-based hunting and gathering subsistence. No single resource sustained them. They supplemented abundant deer and nuts, such as acorn and hickory, with bear, rabbit, turtle, and turkey. Assorted berries and nutritious seeds from riverine plants like goosefoot and sunflower contributed to their diets. Fish and shellfish were also important to some groups.

Animals furnished much more besides meat. Archaic people crafted skins into clothing or covers for shelters; they shaped bones into tools, such as hooks to catch fish or awls and needles to sew hides. Sinew became sturdy string; stomachs became pouches. Over time and as work demanded, people developed new tools: ground-stone axes, grinding slabs for nuts, and a variety of spear-point styles.

Even though the Holocene went through growing pains of unsettled climates and ecologies before settling into today's environment, Archaic people thrived. Skilled adapters, their population grew. One effect of growing numbers was their territories became smaller than the Paleoindians' and had loose, but identifiable, borders. Yet each territory was still large enough to boast a diverse ecosystem that provided an array of seasonal foods. To collect them efficiently, an Archaic family group (band) of 25 to 100 people systematically traveled through its territory. Archaeologists today find countless traces of their short-term hunting and gathering camps. Periodically, Archaic bands from different areas congregated for a while in centrally-located base camps near food, water, and stone used for tools.

Key Characteristics

- The climate is warming and becoming like today's.
- Territories are smaller than in Paleoindian times; in North Carolina, archaeologists think family groups (called bands) of 25 to 100 people lived in discrete territories. Population is slowly increasing.
- Bands are nomadic. Seasonally on the move, they briefly camp in spots to hunt and gather. But they congregate periodically in base camps near food, water and resources like rock for tools. Most are on or near river floodplains.

- Little is known of Archaic dwellings, but they may be more substantial than in Paleoindian times. They were almost certainly built of wooden poles covered with bark, hides, mats, or thatch.
- Deer, small game, and aquatic animals like turtles and shellfish are important sources of meat. The atlatl, or spear thrower, is used to hunt. This tool launches spears forcefully and far.
- Many wild plants are collected for food, as well as for medicines and drinks. Nuts (hickory, acorns, chestnuts) are very important. So are seed-bearing plants growing wild in floodplain soils near base camps; these include goosefoot, marsh elder, and sunflower.
- Plant domestication takes its first step during the late Archaic. People help nature along by selecting and saving seeds from wild seed plants to throw in faded, natural stands to boost next year's production.
- Stone tools are not just chipped, but some are ground smooth and polished. Among the polished stone tools are grooved axes and balancing weights for atlatls called bannerstones. Bone is carved for some tools, like fish hooks and awls; bone and shell are also made into jewelry, such as decorative pins and necklaces.
- Long-distance trade exists; for example, people living far from the coast obtain marine shell they use to carve into jewelry.
- People weave baskets. Late in the Archaic, people begin creating other containers. They carve steatite bowls; steatite is a soft, soapy-feeling rock also called soapstone. A few people around the Cape Fear and Neuse Rivers also make a thick, clay vessel.