



## The First Peoples of Illinois

### Glossary

**Beringia**—the land bridge that once united Asia and North America

**seasonally nomadic**—moving from place to place as seasons change in order to hunt and gather food

**archaeologists**—scientists who study the people, customs, and life of ancient times in order to reconstruct a picture of life in the past

**megafauna**—very large prehistoric animals

**Pleistocene**—a time beginning around 2

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### Paleo-Indians

Around 10,000 to 12,000 years ago, shortly after the last glacier retreated from Illinois, peoples from Asia traveled through Siberia to present-day Alaska. They crossed into North America on a land bridge called **Beringia** that connected Asia and North America.

Eventually these **seasonally nomadic** peoples, known to **archaeologists** as Paleo-Indians, followed animals that they hunted into the woodlands of what is now Illinois. They did not plant crops but fed themselves by gathering plants, fishing, and hunting

both large and small animals. The very large animals, called **megafauna**, were **Pleistocene** mammals such as woolly mammoths, mastodons, giant ground sloths, musk oxen, and giant beavers. All of these species would become **extinct**. Paleo-Indians lived in small groups of only a few families. Food and other resources were widely scattered, and hunting methods for very large animals were not efficient enough to support large



Map of Asia and North America showing Beringia and the possible routes of Paleo—indian people. Courtesy Illinois State Museum.

groups of people. Men hunted large animals while women and children gathered plants, probably trapped small animals, and collected shellfish from the rivers. By far, plants made up the majority of their diet: nuts, berries, roots, and leaves of many different plants.

Landscape of Illinois 16,000 years ago. Courtesy Illinois State Museum.



## Archaic

Over thousands of years Illinois' climate, plants, and animals slowly changed. For example, many of the big mammals became extinct. The animals that survived the climate changes were smaller

and faster. Different tools were needed to be successful at hunting these smaller animals. Some of the new tools were improved spears, knives, snares, nets, and fishhooks. They were made from materials that could be better sharpened and some were designed to work better than earlier versions. Archaeologists refer to this time as the Archaic Period.

million years ago and ending about 11,500 years ago; The Ice Age occurred during this time period when numerous separate ice ages occurred.

**extinct**—died out; no longer exists

**snares**—a kind of trap made from some type of string

**cultivated**—farmed

## Woodland

Around 2,600 years ago the peoples in Illinois developed survival skills that enabled them to live in larger groups and in permanent locations. They began farming in a more systematic way, making pottery, and improving tools for hunting. These new tools and reliable ways to produce food meant that the bands of people did less moving from place to place in a seasonal search for food. They cultivated the earth, grew food, hunted, and stayed longer in one place. Having a more dependable source for food also enabled them to support more members in the group. This time is called the Woodland Period. During this period the people made greater use of the many rivers in Illinois to travel to distant



Early Archaic spear points. Courtesy Illinois State Museum.

villages to trade goods. The river system had a major impact on the lives of Illinois' people during the Woodland Period .

By the Middle Woodland Period, 2,100 to 1,650 years ago, Illinois' climate was close to the same climate as today. Also by this period the peoples in Illinois had developed into very good craftsmen. They had expanded a type of earlier construction for which they are named: Mound Builders. The mounds were built with dirt over long periods of time. Most were used to bury the dead, but some were used for other types

Middle Woodland village. Courtesy Dickson Mounds Museum.



of ceremonies. When archeologists investigated the burial mounds they discovered exotic artifacts made with materials from places far from Illinois. Seashells from the Gulf of Mexico, copper from Lake Superior, mica from the Appalachian Mountains, and obsidian from Montana, near modern-day Yellowstone National Park, had been crafted into tools, pipes, jewelry, and ornaments that were buried with the bodies. Bone and antler objects, as well as pottery and **textiles**, were

also found in the burial sites. These materials and artifacts are another indication that the peoples of Illinois used the river system to link up with others for trading purposes.

## Glossary

**textiles**—woven fabrics; pieces of cloth

The Woodland culture eventually faded away. Archeologists are puzzled about why this happened. A similar fate would face the people of Cahokia, the last prehistoric culture to exist in Illinois.

## Mississippian

The Mississippian culture was thriving in the year 900 A.D., especially in the city of Cahokia, thought to be the largest city in North America at that time. Archaeologists named the site Cahokia although no records have been found to indicate what the people who lived there called their city. Cahokia is located in Illinois, near present-day St. Louis. This location, near three important rivers—the Mississippi, the Illinois, and the Missouri—helped the Mississippian culture grow and influence other peoples across a broad area.

As Cahokia grew in population, it was necessary for the people to develop a more complex system of government so that

Bear tooth knife and sheath from the woodland period. Courtesy Illinois State Museum.



Stone figurine from the Mississippian Period. Courtesy Illinois State Museum.



the many people could live together successfully. It is estimated that, at its greatest, more than 10,000 people lived in Cahokia. Temples, government buildings, and the homes of important government and religious officials were built on top of the large platform mounds. Other mounds were used for burials. All of the mounds were constructed by people hauling baskets of dirt that were piled dirt higher and higher. Archaeologists call the largest of the mounds at this site Monks Mound.

As with the peoples who came before them, the Mississippians grew crops, such as corn and squash, fished the nearby rivers, and hunted for the majority of their food. Feeding the large population was a major task. The people of Cahokia also traded goods by using the extensive river system for traveling to distant villages. As with Illinois today, agriculture and river transportation were very important. However, not too long before the time that Christopher Columbus was exploring the islands of the Caribbean Sea, the city of Cahokia was abandoned and the people left for other places. Some archaeologists think disease may have brought this about while others believe that over use of the land led to years of crop failures. Still others believe that climatic changes made it necessary for the people of Cahokia to disband and scatter.

*Central Cahokia* by Lloyd K. Townsend. Monks Mound is in the distance. Courtesy Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site.



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