

Learning Through Archaeology

Kolomoki



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What is Kolomoki and where is it?

Kolomoki (pronounced “Coal-oh-moe-key”) is a site in Southwest Georgia where Native Americans lived, worked, played, and died. It was most heavily populated from A.D. 350-750. The Native Americans there built houses, buildings, and mounds; hunted game and gathered plants for food. They made pottery and tools to help them in their everyday tasks. But life wasn’t all work. They played games, danced, and participated in religious ceremonies. The main settlement where Indians lived at Kolomoki is one of the oldest Indian mound sites in Georgia. This is one of the things that makes Kolomoki unique.

Who built the mounds and when did they use them?

About 1,650 years ago, the people living at Kolomoki began building earthen mounds. They built at least eight mounds and used them until around 1,250 years ago. The Kolomoki mounds were an Indian ceremonial center and are older than other mounds in Georgia, such as the Etowah and Ocmulgee mounds.



For what purpose were the mounds used?

Native Americans used different mounds for different things. The largest mound (Mound A) is 56 feet tall, and was even taller originally! Archaeologists think the Native Americans at Kolomoki used the flat top of this mound either as a place for public ceremonies associated with funerals, or as a place where important leaders may have lived. Two other mounds (Mounds

B and C) are much smaller and may have been used in religious ceremonies. Mounds D and E were burial mounds. Native Americans buried five to seven people at what is now the base of the mound. Some were buried in log-lined pits. Indians covered the burials with soil. These mounds kept getting taller as the process of placing bodies on the surface of the mound and covering them with layers of soil was repeated over the course of several generations. Mound D held at least 77 burials, many of which contained grave goods such as shell beads, mica disks, copper and iron ornaments, pottery, and stone tools. The other mounds (Mounds F, G, and H) are low and oval-shaped. Currently, archaeologists think Mounds F, G, and H may have been used in religious ceremonies, but not for burials.

What other structures stood at Kolomoki?

Historical accounts from the past and aerial photographs from the 1940s recorded a 1 to 3 foot tall earthen wall enclosing part of the site. The site once contained a plaza area and numerous houses, as well. The Kolomoki Indians built houses typical of the period. They dug a shallow pit in the ground measuring on average 10 feet square. They dug out a smooth dirt ramp leading from the doorway to the floor of the house. The Indians then erected large, round posts around the pit and constructed a thatched roof on top. They wove vines and canes (known as “wattle”) for the base of the walls and then covered this with a plaster of wet clay (known as “daub”). A clay hearth in the center of the house supplied heat and a place to cook. Archaeologists



found one such fireplace at Kolomoki with part of the last meal cooked there, which was a young deer. They found daub and stains in the soil caused by decaying logs that were used in the construction of these houses. These stains tell us the size and shape of the houses.

Why are the mounds smaller now than when Indians built them?

For years farmers have plowed the mounds at Kolomoki, scattering the soil and increasing erosion. Looters have also dug into the site, looking for artifacts to sell or keep. This has disturbed the soil and permanently destroyed important information. Now the site is owned, protected, and managed by the state of Georgia, for all her citizens and visitors.

Have archaeologists excavated at Kolomoki?

Antiquarians have studied Kolomoki since the late 1800s, when scholars from the Smithsonian Institute visited the site. At that time, most people were only interested in exotic artifacts and archaeology was still not much of a science, therefore early work of these antiquarians has not contributed greatly to our understanding of the past. Between 1948 and 1953, archaeologists with the University of Georgia conducted excavations there and learned how the mounds were constructed. Between 1998-2001, archaeologists sponsored by the National Geographic Society, the LAMAR Institute, and the University of Georgia, returned to Kolomoki. This recent work focused on discovering what everyday life was like for the Native Americans, rather than studying the mounds and the ceremonies relating to them. They wanted to learn things like: how many people lived at Kolomoki? Did they live here year-round, or only during certain seasons?

What have we learned from archaeological studies here?

Archaeology is a field that develops with each additional site that is scientifically excavated. Archaeologists can take new information from such sites and add it to databases to test hypotheses and gain a more accurate picture of the past. Advances in technology, such as DNA studies and new dating

methods, aid in these discoveries. During the mid-twentieth century, archaeologists were laying the basis for the science by excavating sites, but they did not have many other sites with which to compare and contrast their results. An archaeologist in the 1950s concluded incorrectly, that the Kolomoki mounds were built around 800 years ago during the Mississippian Period of prehistory because the flat-topped mound and some of the pottery looked like that at other Mississippian Period sites. Today, archaeologists studying the site realize that the Kolomoki pottery was made between 1600 and 1200 years ago, during the Woodland Period. Now they conclude that the mounds are really 400-800 years older than first thought! They learned that many Indian houses were located throughout the site during the Woodland period. Today, we recognize that archaeology is a destructive science. Rather than excavate large areas, archaeologists now take a more cautious approach to preserve the site for new technology and future generations.

Discussion

Have the students read the above information and study the front and back of the Georgia Archaeology Month 2002 poster. Discuss the following:

1. Locate Kolomoki on a state map. What resources might have been nearby in prehistory? (Rivers, forests, Coastal Plain vegetation and animals...)
2. How long was Kolomoki occupied?(over 400 yrs)
3. What is the name scientists give to this period of prehistory? (The Woodland Period)
4. What is the date range of the Woodland Period? (1,000 B.C. - A.D. 900)
5. What was the function of the mounds? (Burial, ceremonial, and possibly residential)
6. Why did archaeologists in the 1950s think the mounds were younger than they really are? (Other similar mounds in Georgia dated to the later Mississippian period. Also originally the layers of soil were misinterpreted.)
7. How did modern archaeologists discover this error? The archaeologist admitted his error. Other archaeologists came and excavated residential areas of the site and uncovered pottery that dated to the earlier Woodland Period.
8. How does more excavation help refine our knowledge of the past? More data allows archaeologists to formulate and test hypotheses. Technology provides means for better mapping, analysis and dating procedures.

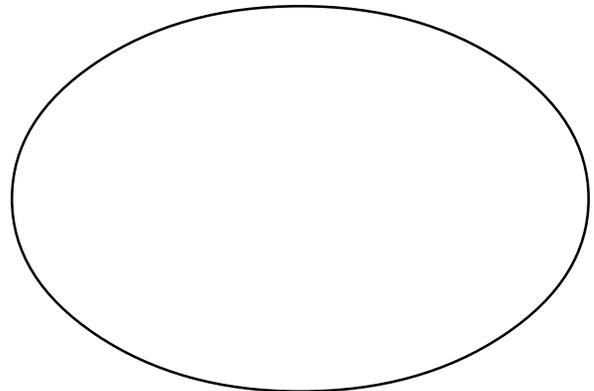


Pretty Pieces of Pottery

During the Middle to Late Woodland Period (200 B.C. to A.D. 900) one common type of pottery made by Native Americans in the Southeastern United States was Swift Creek pottery. This type of pottery has stamped, intricate designs on it. Native Americans carved designs into wooden paddles. They hit these paddles into their newly made wet clay bowls, leaving a stamped impression in the clay. When they fired the bowls, the clay hardened and the impression became a permanent design.

Discussion:

1. Why do you think Woodland Indians put complex designs on pottery? (The designs may be symbols that have religious or other meaning; it may have been a cultural tradition to continue using certain designs; it may have been artistic expression; some may represent designs spread through trade contact or kinship, etc.)
2. What is a symbol? (A picture representing an idea or phrase.)
Class brainstorm (writing examples on board): Do we use symbols in our society today? (Example: no smoking symbol; public telephone; public restrooms; red, yellow, and green traffic lights; smiley face; pedestrian crossing; uneven pavement...etc)
3. Above, right, are a few Swift Creek sherds. What do you think each might have represented to Woodland Indians? (There are no right or wrong answers, since no one alive today knows.) Some archaeologists think they see an eye, a beetle, or a snake in some designs while others may be purely geometric.
4. Imagine that you are living at Kolomoki in A.D. 600. Create a Swift Creek design in the circle at right that might symbolize yourself, your family, or your surroundings. Write a paragraph explaining your design.



Clay Pots

Clay occurs naturally in many parts of Georgia. People have been making things out of Georgia clay for thousands of years. If possible, bring in samples of as many types of clay as you can, such as the ubiquitous orange clay, the gray clays found along stream beds, and the white kaolin clays of south Georgia (such as those mined by large industries today.) Allow the students to feel the different textures and note the various colors. Why are they different colors? (Aluminum silicate is the primary component of clay, and the colors of clays vary according to the amounts of other minerals present. Georgia clay is high in iron content causing its reddish-orange color.)

Discussion

1. Lead a discussion on what clay is used for today (antacids, toothpaste, cosmetics, ceramics, tile, etc.) Clay has even gone high-tech, including the ceramic tiles on the space-shuttle Columbia, which protect the vessel while landing.

Activity

1. Have the students look around their house for items having clay as an ingredient. Let them bring in these products to show the class. An extended activity would be to have them go to a grocery or drug store and make a list of as many other products as they can find with clay or kaolin listed as an ingredient. Let them share the list with the class.

Discussion

2. Lead a class discussion on the importance of clay to Native Americans. Clay was easy to form; it could be fired to make it durable; it could be amended with temper, or ingredients such as sand, ground shell, Spanish moss, ground bits of pottery, or ground quartz to make it easier to work and to fire; it could be

made into functional shapes; it could be made into decorative shapes; and it could be decorated.

Activity

2. Requires self-hardening clay. Optional-ground shell/quartz/pottery; Spanish moss or sand. Have the students make two coil pots out of clay, in the same manner as Native Americans. (If you have collected any tempering agents, allow students to choose one type of tempering agent to mix sparingly in with the clay for each pot.) Let the students know that one pot is to keep and one will be broken.

After they make each pot, allow them to smooth the coils with a wet stick or round rock dipped in water repeatedly and rubbed across the outside of the pot. Once the coil lines are rubbed into a smooth surface, let students decorate their pots in traditional Southeastern Native American designs. They can use bamboo to press circles into the clay. Archaeologists call this design “punctate”. They can make “incised” pottery by taking a pointed stick and scratching lines and designs into the damp clay. They might choose to wrap rough string or vines around a branch and hit this into the clay, making “cordmarked” pottery.

*Particularly energetic teachers might want their students to make stamped designs similar to Swift Creek pottery. Students can prepare for this in advance of making the coil pots. Items needed include styrofoam trays or aluminum foil, plaster of paris, and pencils. Students can make clay paddle replicas by using plaster of paris. Mix up the plaster and pour it into styrofoam trays



or aluminum foil molded into paddle shapes. When the plaster begins to harden, students can take a pencil and incise a deep design, such as the one they created in the “Pretty Pieces of Pottery” activity, into the exposed face of the plaster. (Deep, wide grooves work best.) After the plaster dries, the students remove them from the styrofoam or foil. They can then make coil pots as described above, and gently pat their plaster paddles into the outside of the wet pot, leaving a molded impression on the pottery.

Discussion

3. Lead a discussion about why pottery is so important to archaeologists. Pottery is one of the most durable types of artifacts and can survive for thousands of years in the ground. People using pottery frequently break it, so archaeologists find a lot of it to study.

Pottery can often tell archaeologists how old a site is. Three Native American pottery characteristics varied through time: shape, decoration, and temper. Each of these alone, and in various combinations, helps archaeologists determine when and where the pots were made. For example, if archaeologists discovered pottery with a ground oyster shell temper on a site in the north Georgia mountains, what might they conclude? (Perhaps that the group using the pottery visited the coast and brought back oysters, or perhaps had an extensive trade network in which they received oysters/oyster shells in exchange for some other goods or services.) In addition, if the shell-tempered pottery had a certain type of decoration, archaeologists might be able to figure out how old it was based on comparisons with similar pots from other sites. While decorations are usually on the surface of

a pot, sometimes the entire pot is a decoration! For example, effigy pots are shaped like animals or people. The picture on the first page of this booklet shows an effigy pot similar to ones found at Kolmoki. Sites with mounds often contain effigy pots, although they can be found on other sites, too.

Activity

3. After drying time has elapsed, take the second pot that each student made and break into small pieces. Pull out several pieces from each pot and put these pieces on the side. Take all remaining pieces of the pots (sherds) and put them into one large bag and mix. Randomly divide the sherds into four somewhat unequal piles and place each pile into a bag.

Divide your class into four groups and give one bag to each group. Allow each group to pour the contents of the bag onto a table. Sort the sherds into similar categories by examining the temper and the decoration. Further subdivide each pile of sherds into different piles based on the shape of the vessel. Is it a bowl, a jar, an effigy pot? Try to determine if any of these mend, that is, are any from the same vessel?

Have each group fill out a copy of the “Pottery Analysis Form” in this packet. Let each group discuss the results with the class. Were the results of each group the same? Why or why not? (Some sites have a lot of pottery while others do not, as a result of site size, site population, length of occupancy, time period of occupation, or other factors.) Do any sherds from one group match with another group’s sherds? What might this mean? (Perhaps the sites were occupied at the same time. Perhaps they were occupied by the same people or by people who knew each other or were related to each other.)



Pottery Analysis Form

1. *Make up a name for each group of sherds* (pieces of pottery) and describe what characteristics pottery must have to be in each group. (Characteristics can include things like the type of temper, the kind of design/decoration, the shape of the vessel, the shape of the rim). This is the sherd “type”. Make a list of your types along with their descriptions.
2. *Fill out the form below for all the sherds in your bag.* Decorations can include stamped, incised, punctate (circles made by bamboo), cord-marked, and nothing (plain pottery!). Temper can be ground shell, ground sherds, sand, ground quartz, mica, or Spanish moss.
3. *Total the first column before trying to finish the last column.*

Quantity	Type	Decoration	Temper	Percent of Total
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=Total Number of Sherds



Kolomoki at the Center

Archaeologists know Kolomoki to have been a major center during the Woodland Period. The many mounds and the exotic trade goods such as copper, iron, and pearls attest to this. The question is, “the center of what”? Was it a political, religious, or defensive center, or something else entirely? Archaeologists hope that excavating more of Kolomoki, including the village around the mounds, will help give an answer to this question.

Discussion:

1. Our society is extremely complex. What types, or categories, of centers do we have in the United States? (Example: religious, political, financial, commercial, defensive, recreational, etc.)
2. On what levels do these centers function? (Example: local, community, state, regional, national, and global, etc.)
3. Write the left column, below, on the board. Ask students to identify the category, or type, of each center on the list below, and at what level each center functions.
4. How might Kolomoki have served as a religious, defensive, trade, and distribution or redistribution center?
5. How could archaeologists test your hypotheses listed in #4? For example, if Kolomoki was a trade center, then archaeologists might expect to find large numbers of artifacts made from exotic materials not found in Southwest Georgia, such as obsidian or galena.
6. Imagine you are an archaeologist preparing to excavate at Kolomoki. Which part or parts would you choose to excavate? Would you examine one or more of the mounds, the village area, a larger area surrounding the mounds and in the outlying countryside, or somewhere else? Why? Make a list of research questions you would hope to answer by your excavation. How could artifacts help you answer these questions?
7. Why would you want to leave some part of Kolomoiki unexcavated?

Center	Type	Level(s)
County Courthouses	Political	Local/community
United Nations	Political	Global
Wall Street	Financial	National/global
Synagoges	Religious	Local/community
Pentagon	Defensive	National/global
Banks	Financial	Local/community
Shopping Malls	Commercial	Local/community
Naval Bases	Defensive	National/global
Capitol (Atlanta)	Political	State



Resources

Books

The Southeastern Indians by Charles Hudson. This is the most comprehensive book available about the Indians of the southeastern United States. It covers their daily lives, social and political organization, and religion.

The Archaeology of Precolumbian Florida by Jerald T. Milanich. This is a very readable summary of the archaeology of Florida and adjacent portions of Georgia. It includes a discussion of Kolomoki, as well as Swift Creek and Weeden Island pottery.

Web Sites

The Society for Georgia Archaeology-Information on opportunities for the public; free teachers archaeology manual for download. <http://www.georgia-archaeology.org/>

More Web Sites

The Society for American Archaeology-Public education newsletter for educators; resource materials. <http://www.saa.org/Pubedu/index.html>

The National Park Service Southeast Archeological Center-Native American and archaeological content; resource material. <http://www.cr.nps.gov/seac.html>

The Society for Historical Archaeology-Information about archaeology as a career; resource material. <http://www.sha.org/>

The LAMAR Institute-Free archaeology reports for download. <http://shapiro.anthro.uga.edu/LAMAR/index.html>

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This is one of a series of educational packets produced annually by The Society for Georgia Archaeology during Archaeology Month activities in May. The series reflect new themes annually and is distributed free-of-charge, along with an associated poster, to all middle/junior high public schools in the state, regional libraries, state parks and historic sites, and other entities. With the exception of the Events Calendar, the posters and educational packets are timeless. Librarians at schools and regional public libraries are encouraged to catalog these materials so that they may be used in the future by educators and patrons. The 2002 issue represents the 6th in the series. We hope you enjoy it.

This packet was created by Rita Folse Elliott, with major contributions by Thomas Pluckhahn. Swift Creek drawings by Bettye Broyles, courtesy of "A World Engraved, Archaeology of the Swift Creek Culture", Mark Williams and Daniel T. Elliott, eds. (The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, 1998). Pottery activities were adapted from Early Georgia, Volume 20, No.1, Rita Folse Elliott, ed. (The Society for Georgia Archaeology, Athens, Georgia, 1992)

