Georgia’s Prehistoric Past

What does the word “prehistoric” bring to mind? Dinosaurs, woolly mammoths, or cavemen with spears and clubs? Prehistory—which means “before history”—simply refers to that period of the past before written records were kept. This could go as far back as the beginning of time. In this book, however, we will look at the prehistoric past only during the period in which humans have inhabited Georgia.

The date the prehistoric era ended can be different from place to place and people to people. For example, Georgia’s prehistory ended earlier than in California or Michigan but later than in England or China. The key is to find out when people first kept written records about their culture. The answers will differ around the world.

Writing appears to have developed first in Africa along the Nile River. There, messages have been found carved or drawn on stone from as early as 5000 or 6000 B.C. Later, the Egyptians developed hieroglyphics—a form of early writing that used symbols and images. Once they invented the calendar, a process for making paper, and pen and ink, the Egyptians began recording the story of their culture. Egypt’s prehistory, thus, ended thousands of years ago.

In contrast, Georgia’s prehistoric period ended less than 500 years ago. Native Americans had lived here for thousands of years but had not developed a written language. Without writing, they could not permanently record the story of their past. Prehistoric jewelry, arrowheads, tools, pottery, and other evidence have been unearthed, but these early Indians left nothing in writing to tell us about their culture.
In 1540, Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto and a party of 600 adventurers became the first Europeans to write eyewitness accounts about the Indians they saw. One even drew a map so others could learn of their discovery. For the first time, written information was recorded about Georgia. That is why we consider 1540 as the end of Georgia’s prehistoric era and the beginning of its historic period.

Unearthing Clues to Georgia’s Prehistoric Past

How is it possible to learn about Georgia’s prehistoric Indians if they left no books, letters, or written records? The answer is that these early inhabitants left behind other types of evidence about their lifestyle. Scientists known as archaeologists learn about previous societies by looking for clues in the physical evidence they left behind. Archaeologists look for three types of evidence: (1) artifacts (objects made or shaped by humans, such as arrowheads, tools, pottery, and jewelry), (2) ecofacts (natural objects such as pollen, seeds, bones, teeth, skulls, and shells), and (3) features (a specific area of human activity visible in the ground such as a stain in the soil or a manmade arrangement of rocks or bricks). Archaeologists use the term “ecofact” to refer to remains of living matter, such as grain, shells, and bone, that have not been shaped by humans. Features are manmade and often contain artifacts and ecofacts.

The location, shape, and contents of a feature give important clues about life in the past. Postholes, fire pits, trash pits, and burial sites are common prehistoric features. Historic features found by archaeologists include wells, cisterns, outhouses, postholes, trash dumps, and burial sites. All three types of evidence are important to unlocking the secrets of the past.

Artifacts and other remains provide clues to the culture, or way of life, of societies that vanished long ago. It’s like working on a jigsaw puzzle. Too bad that archaeologists are never able to find all the pieces they need. Normally, the most durable materials—like stone, metal, and bone—can survive for hundreds or thousands of years.

Yet even from a few pieces of evidence, much can be learned about the lives of people who lived long ago. This is because archaeologists look for evidence in a scientific manner. When they dig for objects like clay pots and arrowheads, they aren’t looking for souvenirs. They’re digging for information.

Like the historian, the archaeologist starts with questions. Both might ask, “What kind of food did a particular people eat, and

Archaeologists are uncertain about what these two-foot marble figures meant to the Mississippian Indians living at the Etowah Mounds near Cartersville. Artifacts reveal a lot about the past, but there are always unsolved mysteries.

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how did they prepare it?” To find the answer, the historian could read descriptions of meals in diaries or printed in recipe books at the time. The archaeologist looking at prehistoric societies, however, would have to find other sources. The answer would come from examining human bones or from clues in the ashes and garbage pits of ancient settlements.

**Fieldwork**

The task of getting information from artifacts, ecofacts, and features begins in the field. The field location where an archaeological team works is called a site. It may be an abandoned village, burial ground, or earthen mound used centuries ago. Sometimes archaeologists are able to predict the general area where a settlement was likely, such as near a river. They may use ground penetrating radar (GPR) to locate and identify features beneath the earth’s surface prior to digging. Then they conduct a series of test digs to look for evidence of an Indian village. In other cases, a site is discovered by chance, as when a farmer plowing a field uncovers scattered projectile points (spear- and arrowheads), pottery sherds (bits of broken pottery), and other artifacts. Archaeologists use laser transits to record the exact location of a site and produce computer-generated site maps. A Global Positioning System (GPS) can also be used to accurately record the exact location of a site.

Before **excavating** (digging to expose a site), the team will carefully measure the site and mark it into a pattern of squares called a grid. Each square is numbered so the team can record exactly where an object is found. By knowing the exact location of an object, an archaeologist can determine its context—that is, how it relates to its surroundings at a site.

Knowing the context is important, since one artifact can be related to other pieces of information. For instance, a necklace found in a burial pit tells an archaeologist more than a necklace found alone in a plowed field. A necklace uncovered in a burial site tells something about the person, burial customs, and perhaps religion and belief in life after death.

An archaeological excavation may involve dozens of people and go on for several years. Because archaeologists want to collect reliable information, their work has to follow strict proce-
dures. Artifacts such as pottery are fragile. If they are destroyed through carelessness or ignorance, the information they contain is lost forever.

Shovels for digging and wire screens to sift each shovelful of soil for artifacts are basic tools at an excavation. As digging takes place in areas that are less disturbed, smaller tools (such as trowels, ice picks, and brushes) may be necessary to recover some objects without breaking them. A tape measure is needed for recording precise locations of each artifact. Archaeologists take many pictures and fill notebooks with written comments and sketches as they work.

A site map is drawn to show the location of key features of an excavation. This map often reveals something about life at the site hundreds or thousands of years ago. For example, postmolds—stains in the soil left from decayed wooden posts—may reveal the outline of a house. Artifacts found inside the outline can give a clue to the work done by the people who lived there.

Every feature, sherd, tool, and other piece of evidence found at a site can be a useful source of information. Even ecofacts, such as bones and shells, serve as evidence of what materials were available and how they were used long ago.

**Laboratory Work**

When an excavation is finished, the archaeologist’s work shifts to the laboratory. That’s where the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle are put together. Researchers begin by cleaning, sorting, and identifying evidence collected in the field. Some items, especially those made of metal, need conservation work to preserve them and prevent deterioration.

Laboratory work is slow and painstaking. On a given project, archaeologists may spend more time in the lab than in the field. There are hundreds of questions to be answered. What is this object? How was it used? What is it made of? How was it made? Who was its likely owner? Is it similar to objects from other sites?

Depending on the object, there are several different methods to determine the age of some artifacts. **Carbon 14 dating** is one technique frequently used to find the age of plant or animal matter. Carbon 14 is a radioactive element found in all living matter. It begins to disintegrate—or break down—at a steady rate once a plant or animal dies. By determining the amount of carbon 14 in the
remains of something that once was alive, scientists can measure its age. The less carbon 14 found, the older the object.

Carbon 14 can be used to date the remains of objects thousands of years old, with an accuracy within 200 years of the actual age! But carbon 14 can only be used with evidence composed of organic (plant or animal) matter. How could an artifact made of inorganic matter like stone or clay be dated? By knowing its context. Let’s say an archaeologist on a dig finds a stone ax head in a fire pit. A carbon 14 dating lab reveals that the charcoal in the fire pit is about 2,500 years old, but the lab cannot give a date on the ax head because it is not organic. However, by knowing the context of the ax head—that is, it was found in the fire pit—the archaeologist may assume it came from the same time period. To confirm this, the ax head’s style would be checked against other ax heads already identified from this time period.

The final and most important stage in the archaeologist’s work is to report to others what has been found. Into this report will go the archaeologist’s own findings and comparisons with discoveries by other archaeologists at other sites. Perhaps the report will draw some conclusions about the behavior of people whose way of life vanished long ago.

Georgia’s First Inhabitants

Who were the first humans to live in the land we call Georgia? When did they arrive? Where was their original home? Why did they come? What kind of wild animals did they find here? What did these early people eat? What did they wear? Where did they live? This section is about the first people to settle in Georgia—the prehistoric Native Americans.

Humans Arrive in North America

Exactly when and how the first humans set foot on the North American continent continues to be a matter of debate among archaeologists. However, it is widely believed that as recently as 12,000 years ago, humans came on foot from Asia. Look at a map or globe and you will see that Asia and North America are separated by an ocean. How, then, was it possible to walk to our continent? The first humans arrived long ago during a geological period known as the Ice Age. Cold temperatures caused a great deal of the earth’s water to freeze into glaciers and polar ice. As a result, ocean levels were as much as 300 feet lower than today. One land mass exposed during the Ice Age was Beringia—the land between present-day Alaska and Siberia.
Beringia served as a “land bridge” because it allowed passage from one continent to another. Scientists estimate it was as wide as 1,300 miles, or four times the length of Georgia! Later, as global temperatures rose, the world’s great ice fields melted, causing the sea to rise. Today, Beringia is covered by the ocean, and the area is known as the Bering Strait.

The migration—or movement—of people from Asia into North America was not planned. The first migrants were nomads—or wanderers—in search of food. Without maps, they had no idea where they were going. Perhaps while following a herd of game, the first of many bands eventually crossed Beringia into North America. Others followed, and slowly the new inhabitants pushed southward, where the climate was warmer and food more abundant. Here they found woolly mammoths, mastodons, great ground sloths, giant bison, musk ox, moose, bear, sheep, antelope, and a variety of other game. From these bands of Asian nomads descended all Native Americans—or “Indians”—in both North and South America.

By 10,000 B.C., the first humans had arrived in the Southeast. We divide the next 11,700 years of Georgia prehistory into four cultural periods—sometimes called traditions—that developed among Native Americans: (1) Paleo, (2) Archaic, (3) Woodland, and (4) Mississippian.

**Paleo-Indian Period (10,000 to 8000 B.C.)**

The first 2,000 years of Indian life in the Southeast is called the Paleo-Indian period. (The word “paleo” means “ancient.”) These natives lived in small bands, or groups, of 20 or so adults and children. Paleo-Indians depended on wild animals—or game—for food, clothing, and even many tools. Their diet consisted mainly of meat from giant bison, mastodons, giant sloths, and other large mammals—most of which are now extinct. They also ate small game, berries, and wild fruits and vegetables.

On the move in search of food, the early Indians never stayed in one place for long. Usually they camped out in the open. To protect against cold and wind, they might dig pits or build shelters covered with bark, brush, or animal hides, but we have no evidence of permanent settlements.

Paleo-Indians faced a hard life. Few lived to be older than 30 or 40, and many children died before their first birthday. Yet,
helped by a moderate climate, the Indians were able to turn to nature for all their needs. The animals they hunted provided food, bone and antler for tools, leather for shoes and clothing, hide for blankets and shelter, and fur for coats. They knew which type of rock to use for making knives, spearheads, ax heads, and tools. Small tree trunks and cane were good for spear shafts, ax and tool handles, and poles for shelters. Today, it is hard to imagine living totally off nature—but Georgia’s early Indians did.

Among the many Paleo artifacts uncovered at former campsites are large, distinctive spearheads known as “Clovis” points. Clovis points have been found all over North America, including Georgia, and even in South America. These points were used on heavy spears, which were used for jabbing more than throwing. The bow and arrow had not yet been invented, and hunters had to get very close to their prey before making a kill with a spear. In time, Paleo-Indians may have developed the spear-throwing device known as the atlatl. Clovis points have been found with the bones of a variety of extinct mammals, including mammoths and mastodons, suggesting the Paleo-Indians were brave and skillful hunters.

What else do we know about this culture? Few items have survived—or at least been uncovered so far—other than tool and weapon artifacts. Likely, they believed in spirits, but we do not know if they had specific religious beliefs.

Archaic Period (8000 to 1000 B.C.)

Around 8000 B.C., the culture of Georgia’s Indians began to change, making way for a new tradition known as the Archaic Period. During the next 7,000 years, Archaic Indians adapted to a warming climate and the disappearance of big game, such as the mammoth and the giant sloth. They became dependent on a combination of hunting, fishing, and gathering. Deer, bear, small game (such as rabbit and squirrel), fish, berries, nuts, and wild fruits and vegetables were their main sources of food. Great heaps of shellfish and oyster shells discarded by the Indians have been found near the coast and in the interior. These heaps are called middens. One shell midden on Stallings Island, located in the Savannah River near Augusta, is 500 feet wide, 1,500 feet long, and 6 to 12 feet deep. A garbage pile this size indicates that the Indians returned year after year.

At first, Archaic Indians continued living as nomads, traveling much of the time in search of food. Gradually, this changed. Archaic Indians learned to use the resources around them in new ways. Their diet had more variety, and they no longer depended heavily on large game. They used a wider variety of tools and weapons that changed the way they hunted, saving them time and effort.
One such tool, the atlatl, came into wide use. The atlatl is a wooden shaft about two feet long with a bone or antler hook on one end in which a spear can be placed. The atlatl serves as an extension of a hunter’s arm and allows a spear to be thrown farther and harder than with the arm alone.

Archaic Indians hunted many animals, including bear, fox, raccoon, opossum, squirrel, and turkey, but deer was their favorite game animal. The Indians learned to burn small areas of the forest to improve their hunting. The bushes and plants that grew back in the cleared areas attracted deer and other game.

With less time required for hunting, the Indians had more time for other activities. Their shelters, framed with wooden poles and covered with deer hides, branches, and bark, were intended to last for a longer period of time. Archaic Indians learned how to polish stone and crafted many useful as well as decorative items from stone and bone. At the end of the Archaic Period, they found out how to make clay pottery—a discovery that changed the way they prepared their food.

The oldest evidence of pottery in North America, dating to about 2500 B.C., has also been found on Stallings Island.
This early pottery was made of clay and mixed with fibers of Spanish moss or grass to keep it from cracking during firing. With pottery, Indians were able to cook their food with water or oil. It is also evidence that life was becoming more settled. After all, pottery couldn't easily be carried long distances without being broken.

Archaic Indians surely had some type of religious beliefs. Proper burial of the dead seems to have become important. Tools, weapons, and body ornaments found in some burial pits suggest a belief in life after death.

**Woodland Period (1000 B.C. to A.D. 1000)**

By about 1000 B.C., a new Indian tradition was emerging. During this period, **Woodland Indians** throughout the Southeast built thousands of earthen mounds, many of which remain today. Kolomoki Mounds, located near Blakely in Early County, were built during this period. The mounds varied in size, shape, and usage. Some were only a few feet high, while others were enormous. Some were round and others flat on top. Through excavations, archaeologists have discovered that there were many different types of these earthen structures. Some were burial mounds and some were flat-topped, perhaps for ceremonial activities. The Indians even made mounds in the shapes of animals. In Georgia, Rock Eagle is a well-known ef-

figy mound from this tradition.

Like their Archaic ancestors, Woodland Indians were at home in the forest. For hunting, they developed a new weapon, the bow and arrow. The arrowheads were much smaller than the spear points used earlier. Even more important was the development of agriculture.

Woodland Indians began to save seeds in the fall for spring planting in cleared forest areas. Nuts became more important in their diet, and they dug underground pits to store nuts and seeds. Corn, squash, and bottle gourd from what is now Mexico were other, less important, plant species used by the Indians.

These practices helped increase the food supply. The population grew, smaller groups joined together to form tribes, and
villages began to appear. The Indians became more settled, and archaeologists have discovered traces of sturdy houses built to stand longer than the earlier Indian shelters.

During this time, the use of pottery became widespread throughout the Southeast. Instead of plant fibers, pottery makers began using sand, grit, or ground-up pieces of pottery with the clay. Designs were stamped on the pots, or the surface was engraved with a stick. Each region had its own special designs.

There is evidence that Woodland Indians traded throughout what is now the eastern United States. Artifacts have been found in Georgia made of copper from as far away as the Great Lakes.

This evidence also reveals that Georgia’s Indians may have shared religious ideas and practices with other Indians of the eastern woodlands. Their burial mounds, made of earth and stone, often contained jewelry, pottery figurines of humans and animals, and other ceremonial objects.

**Mississippian Period (A.D. 1000 to 1600)**

Between A.D. 700 and 900, a new cultural tradition developed along the Mississippi River, later spreading to other areas in the Southeast. The **Mississippian Indians** preferred places that offered (1) rich bottomlands by rivers, (2) long, moist growing seasons, and (3) good deer and turkey hunting. This tradition is named for the area where it first began.

Wild foods remained important to the Indians of the Mississippian period, but they also had come to rely more on agriculture, particularly corn. In addition, these Indians grew beans. Harvested crops were stored in community storehouses, giving the tribe a constant food supply.

Until the arrival of European traders, the bow and arrow was the Mississippian Indian’s main weapon for hunting and battle. (Below) Artist’s idea of the great Mississippian mound complex of Cahokia located in Illinois. Though much smaller, Georgia’s mound village at Etowah would have been similar in appearance.
Agriculture supported a larger population. It enabled the Mississippian people to live in large permanent settlements. A Mississippian settlement was usually protected by a wooden palisade (a wall made of tall posts) and a moat (a wide ditch) outside the palisade. Within the safety of the walls, many structures of wood and clay (known as wattle and daub houses) were built by the people to live in.

A new, more complicated social and political organization developed, called a chiefdom. It might include only a few villages or extend over a wide area and many villages. At the top, a priest-chief ruled, presiding over religious ceremonies as well as political affairs. This job was handed down through the ruling family.

Mississippian Indians built large flat-topped mounds with temples and other buildings for ceremonies at the top. Inside and at the base of mounds were burial places. Buried with the dead were food, tools, ornaments, and ceremonial objects of wood, copper, seashell, and stone. Etowah and Ocmulgee are the best-known Mississippian mound sites in Georgia.

Indian culture reached a high point during the Mississippian period. Evidence recovered from the many sites of the period tells us more about these people than we know about any of their ancestors. We know that Indian traders regularly traveled along waterways and forest trails between settlements such as Etowah (near Cartersville) and Ocmulgee (near Macon). Artifacts unearthed from burials show the high artistic level of the people. We even know what games they played and that they smoked tobacco and decorated themselves with jewelry, feathers, and tattooing. We know their lives were full of ceremony and that they had special places to conduct ceremonies.

It was the Mississippian Indian culture that Hernando de Soto encountered in his exploration through Georgia in 1540. In a very short time, the societies of mound builders and chiefdoms vanished, as Europeans brought death in the form of diseases and steel weapons. The lives of Georgia’s Indians were changed forever. But there were survivors, and from these would come such Indian societies as the Creek and the Cherokee.
Reviewing the Main Ideas

1. What is the difference between history and prehistory?
2. Explain why knowing the context of an artifact can be as important as the artifact.
3. Explain this sentence: The steps that historians and archaeologists take to do their work are similar, but the way they gather evidence is very different.
4. What types of artifacts and ecofacts are being left by our society today for future archaeologists to interpret?
5. Why would the discovery of artifacts in a burial pit suggest Indians were concerned with life after death?

Give It Some Extra Thought

1. Organizing Information. Copy the table and fill in to organize the information about each Indian tradition in Georgia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tradition</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Weapons</th>
<th>Food</th>
<th>Shelters</th>
<th>Evidence of Religion</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Paleo</td>
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<td>Archaic</td>
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<td>Woodland</td>
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<td>Mississippian</td>
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2. Drawing Conclusions about Changes over Time. Use the information on your chart to write a paragraph describing the changes in prehistoric Indian life over time. Write an ending sentence for your paragraph that draws a conclusion about the development of the Indian culture over a long period of time.

Sharpen Your Skills

1. Using the Map Scale. Using the scale on a map of the United States, locate two cities that are approximately 1,300 miles apart in order to “see” how wide the land bridge between Siberia and the North American continent was. Write down the names of the two cities and the mileage between them.

2. Cause and Effect. Copy the graphic organizer and use it to write the effects of the listed events on the culture of the prehistoric Indians.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>Effect</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. invention of the bow and arrow</td>
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<td>b. invention of pottery</td>
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<td>c. contact with Europeans</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. development of agriculture</td>
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<td>e. trading with other tribes</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

3. Using Maps to Explain. Discover how far away the Woodland Indians traded objects. On a U.S. map, using Macon as the Georgia starting point, write down the distance to the following cities around the Great Lakes: Chicago, Illinois; Duluth, Minnesota; and Detroit, Michigan. Do you think the Woodland Indians actually traveled that far to trade?

Going Further

1. Analyze the Artifact. Visit a museum, historic site, or other location that has a display of Indian artifacts. In a report to the class, describe the artifacts you saw and name the Indian tradition that produced them. You may want to include sketches of the artifacts in your report.