A Glance at Georgia's Prehistory

By the time Christopher Columbus set sail for the New World, the native population of North America had inhabited this continent for more than 12,000 years. Their complex cultures and societies thrived throughout what is now the United States, including Georgia. The following presents an overview of the lifestyle changes of prehistoric peoples in what is now Georgia.

The Paleoindian Period (10,000-8,000 BC)

A much cooler climate existed in this period. Ice sheets covered Canada. In 10,000 BC, spruce and pine forests, much like those of modern-day upper North America, blanketed the Southeast. Small, nomadic family groups hunted very large mammals, such as mammoth and mastodon. These large mammals became extinct in North America by the period's end. Paleoindian peoples also hunted small game and gathered wild plants for food. The large, finely made spear points they crafted are called Clovis points (Figure 1). Paleoindian artifacts in Georgia are scarce.

The Archaic Period (8000-1000 BC)

An increasingly warmer climate, the extinction of very large mammals, and changing vegetation forced Archaic period peoples in Georgia to change their hunting and gathering patterns. Oak and hickory dominated the Archaic forest. The thick forest offered an abundance of both large and small animals like deer and raccoon, along with wild plant foods like hickory nuts and acorns. Archaic peoples also developed tools that differed from those used by Paleoindian peoples.

In the southeastern United States, the Archaic Period is divided into three subperiods: Early, Middle, and Late Archaic. Each period has its own distinctive stone

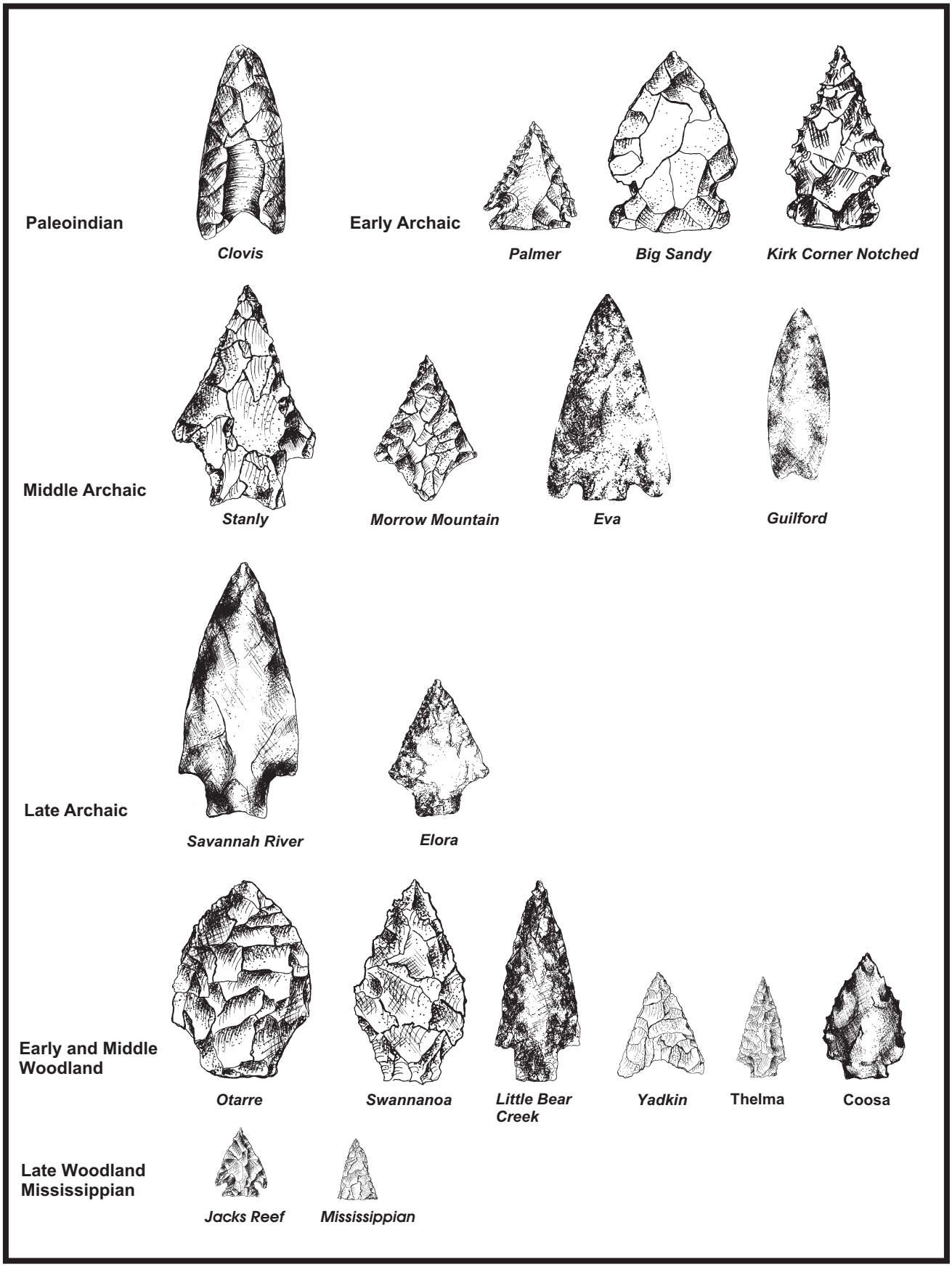

Figure 1. Common projectile points from the Southeastern United States.

projectile points and tools. Archaeologists focus their studies on stone tools because objects of wood and other organic materials often rot away over time.

Early Archaic Period (8000-6000 BC) peoples developed higher levels of social organization and manufactured a greater variety of tools than did Paleoindian peoples. They likely lived in small, highly mobile groups of hunter-gatherers. These group were probably based on a single family and its immediate extensions. Their tool kits included knives, drills, woodworking scrapers, and stemmed and notched projectile points. Typical Early Archaic point types include Palmer, Big Sandy, and Kirk.

The climate in the Middle Archaic Period (6000-3500 BC) continued to become warmer and drier. Middle Archaic peoples still moved about in small, mobile groups to hunt and harvest wild plants, game, and fish. Artifacts, like manos and metates for grinding plants, suggest an increase in plant food harvesting. Celts and grooved axes show that woodworking also became important. Distinctive projectile points associated with this period include Stanly, Morrow Mountain, Eva, and Guilford.

During the Late Archaic Period (3500-1000 BC), peoples in the Southeast tended to stay in one place for longer time periods. They used a wider variety of wild plant and animal resources. Increases in size, number, and complexity of archaeological sites suggest a rise in population size. Late Archaic peoples began making steatite, or soapstone, vessels for cooking and storage. They also made the first clay pottery vessels in North America. For the earliest pottery, they tempered, or strengthened, the clay with Spanish Moss. Archaeologists call this type of pottery Stallings. Figure 2 illustrates many of the decorations used on prehistoric pottery. In addition to the first pottery, Late Archaic peoples also made large, stemmed projectile points. Types include Savannah River and Elora. These points may have been used more as knives than as spear points.

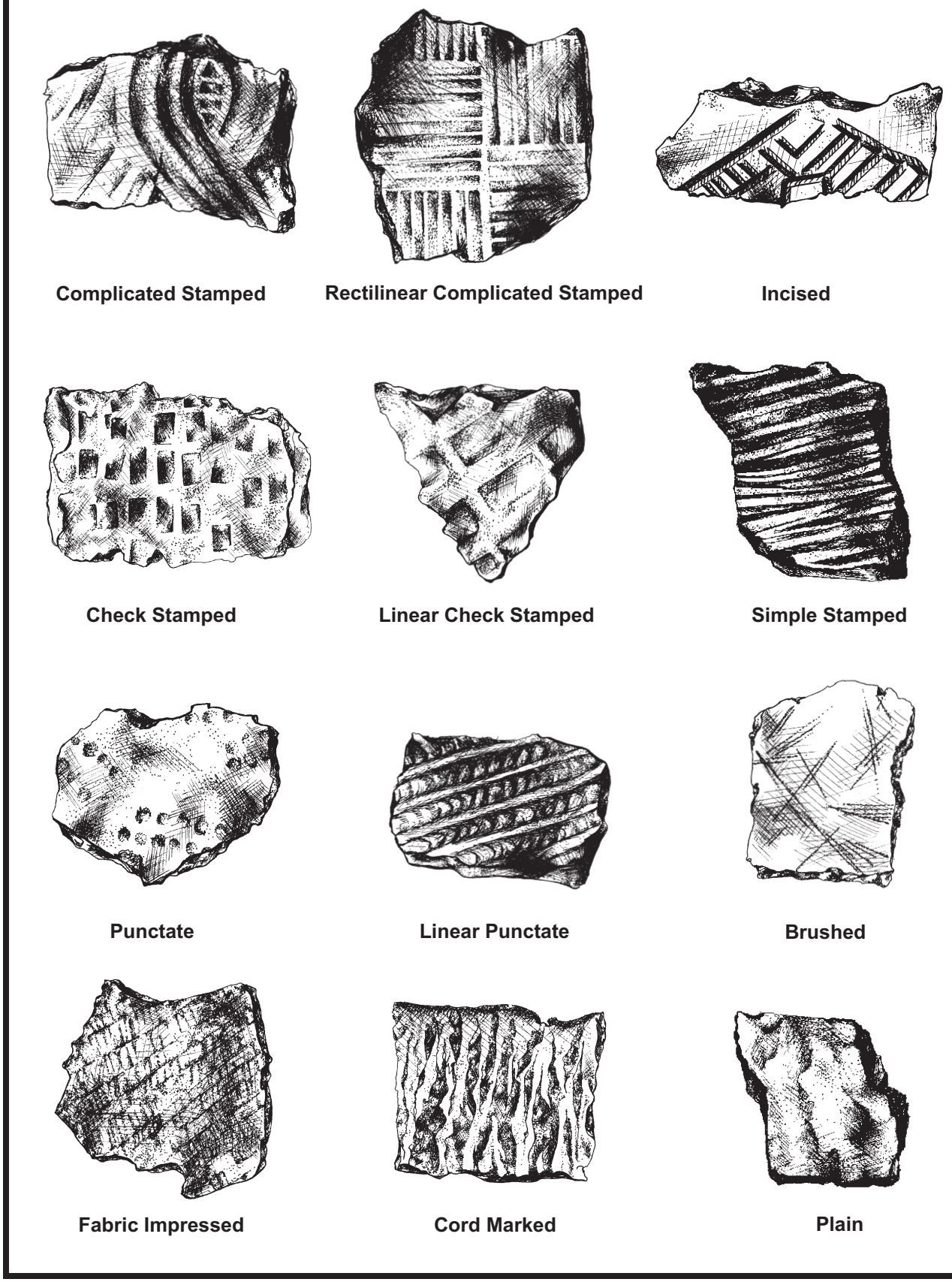

Figure 2. Ceramic decorations common in the Southeastern United States.

The Woodland Period (1000 BC - AD 900)

By the Woodland period, the Southeastern forests and climate existed much like today's. People continued to stay in one place for longer and longer time periods. Small family groups of the Archaic Period were replaced by small seasonal villages. During this period, native populations increased their pottery use, began experimenting with agriculture, and developed trade networks. They constructed earthworks, such as burial mounds. The way Woodland peoples made pottery and applied decorations allow archaeologists to divide the Woodland Period into three subperiods: Early, Middle, and Late.

Early Woodland Period (1000 - 300 BC) peoples began to build larger, more permanent villages. They situated these on narrow, low lands close to streams. They also began to trade resources with other native peoples throughout the Southeast. Early Woodland peoples developed new designs for their pottery such as fabric impressing and simple stamping. Lithic artifacts common during this period include stemmed projectile points (Otarre, Swannanoa, Little Bear Creek, Thelma, and Coosa), and triangular points (Yadkin). Also, Early Woodland peoples used groundstone manos, metates, and nutting stones to process plant foods.

In the Middle Woodland Period (300 BC - AD 600), villages continued to increase in size and density. Middle Woodland peoples experimented with agriculture, built complex trade networks, and constructed earthen burial mounds. New pottery decorations include check stamped and complicated stamped wares. Middle Woodland peoples continued to use the same projectile points types used in the Early Woodland period.

In the Late Woodland Period (AD 600 - 900), Georgia's native inhabitants expanded their previously limited production of agricultural crops like corn (maize), beans, squash, pumpkins, and sunflowers. Hunting and gathering remained

important. Late Woodland peoples created very distinctive complicated stamped designs for their pottery. Their potters carved the intricate designs into wooden blocks, then stamped the designs on the still moist ceramic vessel. Jacks Reef and triangular projectile point varieties became common. These small points probably indicate the introduction and widespread use of the bow and arrow.

The Mississippian Period (AD 900 - 1600)

The Mississippian Period is defined by the complex cultural developments that occurred in the eastern United States. Agriculture focused on corn, beans, and squash and was extremely important. Mississippian peoples occupied large villages and towns throughout the year. They developed complex social and political organizations. Some villages and towns were fortified and had flat-topped earthen mounds for political and religious functions. These villages often served as capitals of large chiefdoms. Ceramic decorative types divide the Mississippian Period into three subperiods: Early, Middle and Late.

Early Mississippian Period (AD 900 - 1200) peoples lived in both small villages and large fortified towns. They grew more agricultural crops than Late Woodland peoples. They constructed mounds that were not used for burials. Early Mississippian peoples also developed new pottery technology and designs. The designs on sand-tempered pottery are associated with Georgia's Etowah and Woodstock cultures. Woodstock potters decorated their vessels with complicated stamp decorations that included oval, diamond, concentric circle, and herringbone patterns. They also used check stamped, simple stamped, and incised decorations. The Etowah culture is represented by line block and ladder-based diamond complicated stamped patterns.

Large mound centers flourished in the Middle Mississippian Period (AD 1200 - 1350). One complex, the Etowah site, (9BR1) in Cartersville, is the most studied in Georgia. Etowah existed as a highly structured society where position and status may

have been passed through families. Middle Mississippian peoples also dramatically increased their agriculture use. They buried their dead with elaborate grave goods such as effigy pipes, copper, and ceremonial projectile points. Their pottery designs are predominantly complicated stamped, with circles replacing diamonds as a common motif.

Late Mississippian Period (1350 - 1600) peoples still lived in large towns and villages. They focused almost exclusively on agricultural crops such as corn, beans, and squash for food. Although mound centers were still in use, their political power was in decline by the start of the Late Mississippian Period. These large chiefdoms continued to decline throughout the period. Georgia's Lamar culture developed during the Late Mississippian Period. Lamar potters used complicated stamped and incised decorations on the thickened ceramic vessel rims. Often, they polished the vessel's body to a smooth, glossy surface.

The European Contact Period (AD 1600 - 1826)

The first Europeans to enter Georgia were probably Spanish explorers in the late sixteenth century. They were followed by both Spanish missionaries and British colonists in the 1600s. At contact, the Cherokee controlled north Georgia, the Yamassee controlled land along the southern Savannah River, and the Creek controlled most of central, southern, and coastal Georgia.

The first two centuries of European contact brought many changes to the lives of Georgia's native inhabitants. The arrival of Europeans eventually led to the loss of native political independence. One dramatic change was the decrease in the Native populations due to the introduction of European diseases such as smallpox, measles, and chicken pox. Changes also occurred in Native American material culture. The Cherokee, Creek, and Yamassee began to use European trade goods, such as imported ceramics, cloth, glass beads, and iron tools. They also established trade partnerships

with the British and Spanish. In some areas, Native Americans married white settlers and adopted their living style.

Despite trade partnerships, relations between the European settlers and Native Americans quickly soured. Increasing pressure from white settlers for more and more land sparked numerous wars between the settlers and the local Indian populations. Throughout the 1700s and early 1800s, the Cherokee, Creek, and Yamassee experienced numerous defeats at the settler's hands. They were forced to cede much of their land. In 1827, the Creek gave up the last of their Georgia lands.

In 1830, the United States government passed the Indian Removal Act. This act required the forced removal of native populations to lands west of the Mississippi River. Despite the Indian Removal Act, the Cherokee retained ownership of some land until 1835. That year, they signed a treaty with the U.S. government agreeing to move to Oklahoma. In 1838, the U.S. Army and the Georgia militia gathered most of the Cherokee Nation into stockades. They forced them to march westward to Oklahoma. Several thousand men, women, and children died during the trek, which is known as the "Trail of Tears."

Today, archaeologists study Georgia's Native American heritage by excavating at some of the sites where these peoples once lived and worked. Several state historic sites such as Etowah, Kolomoki, Chief Vann's House and the Cherokee capitol of New Echota protect Georgia's Indian heritage. Ocmulgee National Monument at Macon is a national park and receives over 150,000 visitors each year. Learning about and understanding the importance of Georgia's prehistory or Indian heritage helps preserve our valuable cultural resources.