

Enduring Landscapes: The Middle Archaic 6000-4000 BCE



KENTUCKY ARCHAEOLOGY MONTH
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ENDURING LANDSCAPES

THE MIDDLE ARCHAIC 6000-4000 BCE

Over the course of the Middle Archaic period, 8000-5000 Before the Common Era (BCE), Native groups became less and less mobile. They moved from site to site within smaller, more restricted, and specific home territories than had their ancestors. Season after season, year after year, they returned to the same places to harvest, collect, and hunt local plants and animals.

The climate became warmer and drier during this period. These changes drew Native peoples to wetter areas along rivers and streams, to permanent springs and karst windows (a kind of sinkhole), and to low-lying wetlands. Native groups did not abandon the uplands, however. They still hunted there and collected important resources, like chert (flint), for their stone tools.

Middle Archaic people came to rely more on local resources than had their ancestors. For example, they used locally available chert to the near exclusion of higher-quality chert from more distant sources. Over time, these Native groups also began making objects in regionally distinctive styles: stone tools, bone pins engraved with geometric designs, and bannerstones (stone spearthrower weights). These items may have functioned to distinguish one group from another.

Middle Archaic people harvested freshwater mussels and snails from rivers and streams. They caught fish of all kinds and hunted wetland species like turtle. Deer was an important upland resource. Their use of plants increased during this period. Native people collected and processed nuts and berries and grains using stone pestles and nutting stones. Too heavy to carry from one site to another, groups

stored these tools in large pits in the ground until the next year, when they would be needed again. Weavers used plant fibers to make cordage for baskets, mats, and clothing. Working wood with stone axes also was an important activity.

The land and its resources became increasingly familiar to these people. They wrote their history across the landscape. Some locations became persistent places for them - more special than others. These included small knolls or hills with advantages: like their visibility from afar, or because they were easy to defend, or were higher and drier, or because they were located at strategic landmarks or transportation route junctions. Certain caves and rock overhangs offered shelter. Deep, permanent, spring-fed pools were sources of year-round water. Some persistent places also may have held special spiritual or ritual importance.

Over time, these ancient people changed the landscape. Many of these modifications can still be seen today. In addition to trails, which may have started out as animal paths, the people built stone weirs in streams to catch fish. Either intentionally or due to trash disposal, large heaps of mussel shells built up along rivers where they camped. Their cemeteries not only honored lost family members, but also signaled to the rest of the Native world that this ground belonged to them; was sacred to their people. Collectively, these developments reflect a deepening connection to the land and to HOME.



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