

Agriculture in Prehistoric Mississippi

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All the Native American peoples who lived in Mississippi when the first European explorers arrived depended on raising crops for much of their food. The best documented are the Chickasaws, the Choctaws, and the Natchez. The most important domesticated plant by far was corn, supplemented by beans. Indians also grew squash, bottle gourd, sunflower, and various weedy native domesticates such as chenopodium.

These crops were domesticated at various times and places, as archaeological evidence tells us. Corn and beans came ultimately from Mexico, where they were grown for thousands of years before they begin to appear in eastern North America. The earliest corn east of the Mississippi River is as much as 2000 years old, but specimens that old have been found only rarely. Beans appear much later, after about A.D. 1200. Gourds, sunflower, and chenopodium were native plants that were domesticated locally by prehistoric peoples, rather than brought in from elsewhere. Merely because people possessed such crops did not mean they were agricultural; the domesticates formed only a small part of a diet dominated by wild plants and animals, including hickory nuts, deer, turkey, fish, turtles, and freshwater mussels.

In Mississippi, this changed around A.D. 1000-1200. In materials dating from this time (called the Mississippian period, A.D. 1000-1550), archaeologists find marked increases in the occurrence of charred corn cobs and cupules (the husks that surround each kernel). Charred beans also appear. Usually, only plant remains that have been burned and reduced to charcoal can survive in archaeological sites; uncharred plant parts rot away in the soil. Carbon isotope analyses of human bone also indicate that people ate increasingly more corn, so that corn made up as much as 60% of the diet by A.D. 1700. It is appropriate to classify these people as agricultural, as they not only raised crops but also depended on them for much of their food.

It is often assumed that people settled down and began making pottery for the first time when they became agricultural. Archaeologists have found that, in Mississippi, people probably became sedentary, and thus ceased moving in a yearly cycle, as long as 4000 years ago. This was during the Poverty Point period (1700-700 B.C.). Archaeological sites of the Poverty Point period do not contain much pottery, however. In the next periods, Gulf Formational and Woodland (700 B.C.-A.D. 1000), pottery began to be made in large quantities. This evidence shows that both settled life and pottery-making were well established before agricultural subsistence evolved.

Why did people become increasingly dependent on cultivated crops? There is evidence from the Tombigbee River valley in east Mississippi that, late in the Woodland period, health declined as a result of population increases and pressure on food resources. This decline is indicated by increased evidence of dietary deficiencies, especially iron-deficiency anemia, that shows up in human bone. Also, there is evidence of increased trauma to bones, including fractures of arm caused by parrying blows, as well as stone projectile points found embedded in bones. These are likely due to conflict between groups. One way to solve these problems was to increase corn production, since this was subject to human control to some extent, while wild food productivity was less so. Succeeding Mississippian populations were healthier, with lessening of trauma, so growing more corn did lead to improved lives.

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