



Native Peoples Before Carolina

Educator Content Introduction: Mississippian Collapse and Political Reconfigurations

By the late fourteenth century, life among Mississippian people in North Carolina began to change. The chiefdom-level societies—those who were responsible for building large earthen mounds and exchanging valued goods through trade networks that extended from the Gulf Coast to the Midwest—were in decline. The **social organization**, or the relationship between and among individuals and social groups, of Mississippians changed from being highly stratified with people born into leadership positions to rule by public consensus. Why Mississippian centers with dense populations and **temple mounds** were abandoned, and what caused a drastic change in the social organization of these societies, has been a source of much scholarly research and debate.

Mississippians lived in **chiefdoms**, which are stratified societies whose leader was given their position by birth. Status within a chiefdom is determined by how closely related you are to the chief. Chiefs often received **tributes**, or gifts, of food and goods from their subjects and visitors. They desired valuable crafted objects like carved stone or shell beads from distant regions and participated in major trade networks with other chiefdoms to obtain these valuables. The **simple chiefdom** is the most basic level organization, and included a major settlement where the chief lived, along with control over smaller nearby villages that offered tribute to the chief. As a chiefdom grew in power, the extent of its control also increased. In a **complex chiefdom**, a larger primary settlement controlled one or more simple chiefdom. The largest chiefdoms had a great reach of power over many simple and complex chiefdoms, all under the control of one chief at a major mound center (Anderson, 1994 p. 7-9).

While impressive mounds and large settlements are characteristics of Mississippians, not everyone lived this way. Some Mississippians also lived in small villages without mounds, and their chiefs controlled a relatively small area surrounding the village. However, the size and importance of a town could change drastically. Mississippian chiefdoms experienced periods of “**cycling**,” during which the political leadership of one major town declines while another gains more control. Previously small settlements would rise to gain tremendous power, while major mound centers with far-reaching influence were abandoned. Why did powerful chiefdoms decline over time, while others gained control? Researchers believe that there was not a singular reason for cycling. Instead, several overlapping causes that likely led to cycling, including the impacts of climate, access to resources, and warfare (Anderson, 1994, pp. 44-50; Hally, 1996. (p. 123; Ward & Davis, 1999, p. 176).

Changes to climatic conditions would have made many aspects of Mississippian life difficult. Unlike weather, which involves short-term fluctuations in atmospheric conditions like storms and heat waves, **climate** refers to long-term changes to weather patterns in an area. Variations in the climate led to a drought that affected parts of North Carolina and spanned multiple decades. Regional droughts are common, and often span several years. However, a major drought happened between A.D. 1000 and 1500 that intensified during the end of the



Mississippian culture. Droughts would have made agricultural production difficult, reducing surplus crops used to support large towns and provided as tribute to major chiefdoms. The failure of crops likely caused people to stop believing in the power of the **elite**, or ruling class, resulting in the chiefdom collapsing as people abandoned major towns. Wild resources would have also been affected by the drought as nuts and other gathered foods became increasingly difficult to find. Rather than living together in densely populated towns that required large amounts of food production to function, Mississippian people spread out across the landscape and lived in smaller towns and hamlets (Anderson, 1994, pp. 35-39; Cable, 2020, pp. 99-113; Larson, 1972).

Competition for power and **prestige**, meaning having gained a reputation or influence, between rival leaders may have been another major reason large chiefdoms become unstable governments and collapsed. As elites compete with one other for control, one leader may replace another. While a new chief in one town establishes their authority, the leader of another major town may become more powerful. People may leave one town to join another, causing a once complex chiefdom to decline. As new leaders rise to power, the center of political life shifts across the landscape (Anderson, 1994, p. 50).

Major mound centers, like Town Creek, were mostly abandoned in the late-fourteenth and early-fifteenth century. People who once lived in large Mississippian towns dispersed to the surrounding area. However, these locations remained important **ceremonial centers**, or places with significant religious or spiritual meaning, that people living in the surrounding area visited. Rather than being ruled by an elite chief, people living in these smaller towns operated by public consensus. Archaeological evidence for this shift in governance includes an increased use of large public **council houses** where town members would meet and make decisions together. This is a very different type of leadership structure compared to the chiefly temples built on top of mounds (Boudreaux, 2007, pp. 109-110; Ward & Davis, 1999, p. 132).

Possible Essential Historical Questions:

Middle grades

- What is a chiefdom, and what types of Mississippian chiefdoms were there?
- What climactic event may have led to the downfall of Mississippian chiefdoms, and what were its effects?

High school

- What is chiefdom cycling?
- How did the political systems of Mississippian peoples change in the late-fourteenth to early-fifteenth century, and why did this change occur?



Keywords:

social organization

temple mound

chiefdom

tribute

simple chiefdom

complex chiefdom

cycling

climate

elite

prestige

ceremonial center

council house

Resources:

Town Creek Indian Mound. North Carolina Historic Sites. <https://historicsites.nc.gov/all-sites/town-creek-indian-mound>

Town Creek (Montgomery County). Ancient North Carolinians: A Virtual Museum of North Carolina Archaeology. Research Laboratories of Archaeology, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. ancientnc.web.unc.edu

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Boudreaux, E. A., (2007). *The Archaeology of Town Creek* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press), 109-110; Ward and Davis, *Time before History*, 132

Cable, J. S., (2020). *Megadrought in the Carolinas: The archaeology of Mississippian collapse, abandonment, and coalescence*. The University of Alabama Press.

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