

Mississippi Valley Introduction



Effigy Bowl & Caddo Jar

Long before European explorers and traders came to North America, a succession of native societies flourished on the continent. We know little about them other than what archaeology has unearthed. Hunting and gathering societies existed in the Southeast as early as 12,000 B.C. Agriculture was developed later. Maize was grown in the Southwest during the first millennium B.C. By the fifth century A.D., a variety of corn known as hard flint maize spread across the Plains into the Mississippi Valley. Corn became a staple and was intensively cultivated throughout the Midwest and eastern Woodlands after A.D. 800.



The cultivation of corn in the flood plains of the Mississippi River Valley made possible the development of a civilization that stretched west to Oklahoma, southeast to the Gulf, and northward into Wisconsin. Later, another staple crop was added. Beans, first introduced to the Mississippi Valley around A.D. 1000, were in common usage by A.D. 1200. The two crops helped to foster densely populated centers out of which grew complex political and social organizations and far-reaching trade networks.

Cities of the Mound Builders

Huge earthen mounds positioned around a plaza characterized the cities that flourished along the Mississippi River and its tributaries. On top of the mounds were temples and homes of nobility. Commoners lived in thatched dwellings at ground level. The whole complex was surrounded by wooden fortifications and outside the city grew fields of corn. Although no one knows what the native people called themselves, archaeologists refer to them as the Mound Builders. The largest of the mounds is near present East St. Louis in Illinois with a base of 200,000 square feet, larger than the pyramids of Egypt. Hundreds of smaller mounds exist, the northernmost of which is near Red Wing, Minnesota.

Artistic Production

Excavations of the various mounds have produced a storehouse of treasures made of clay, shell, marble, and copper. Each region is noted for a particular style of production. For example, sites in and around modern-day Arkansas produced elaborate pottery used in burials as well as many other art objects.



Clay Vessels, Caddo
Mississippi Valley (United States)
Arkansas or Oklahoma
Bowl & Vessel, 1250-1500
Ceramic
The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund,
90.2.7 and 90.2.3

Contact

When Spanish explorers came north from present-day Mexico during the 16th century, they encountered the Mound Builders of the Mississippi Valley. Unfortunately, the native people were unable to survive the epidemic disease that followed and ultimately decimated the population. Only the Natchez people survived and continued to build mounds along the lower Mississippi River into the 17th century.



Maya Mask of a Spanish Conquistador
19th century
wood, pigment
The Paul C. Johnson, Jr. Fund, The
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 99.3.2

Bowl & Vessel

KEY IDEAS

- Native people lived along the Mississippi River long before European explorers came to North America.
- Archaeologists gave the name "Mound Builders" to ancient people who built mounds along the Mississippi River.

Introduction

Earthen mounds are among the evidence left by a people who lived long ago along the Mississippi River. These people were farmers who settled into one area and stayed through all the seasons of sowing, growing and reaping. Since pottery is heavy to move and breaks easily, it is not usually made by people who are continually on the move.

Vessel

Pottery has been excavated from some of the earthen mounds. This clay jar was unearthed in present-day Arkansas. It was hand-made using the coiling technique. The coils of clay were wound around to build up the sides of the jar and then pinched together and smoothed. The design was made by scratching lines into the wet clay after the pot was formed, then the pot was fired to harden the clay.

Bowl

This bowl was also discovered in the region of present-day Arkansas. Many of the pots found in this area were from burial chambers. This is called an effigy bowl, because it contains an image, or effigy, of a bird. Birds were believed to have spiritual powers because they could fly and they were closer to the Great Spirit. Effigy bowls like this one were often used for religious purposes.

Coiling

Like most pottery from the Mississippi River Valley these pots contain ground shell mixed into the clay. The addition of shell made possible the production of larger and more durable pottery because it reduced shrinking which might cause a pot to crack during the firing process.

It is interesting to note that wooden bowls very similar to this ceramic bowl were carved several centuries later by the Pawnee people, descendants of the Caddoans who moved onto the plains. The influence of the Mississippi Mound Building cultures extended into many regions of North America.

Mound Cities

Long before Europeans explored North America, farmers had made mounds along the fertile Mississippi River Valley. Temples as well as homes for important members of society were built on top of these huge mounds. Other people lived in the thatched huts that surrounded the mounds. Wooden fortifications around the mound cities protected them. The people who lived in these cities were farmers and skilled artists who produced beautiful and useful objects, including pottery. Some smaller mounds built by native people of Minnesota are located near Red Wing.



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Illustration of coiling technique