



Decorated Fort Ancient (AD 1000-1650) rim sherd from the Reinhardt site (33PI880).
Photo by Jacob E. Deppen

Ohio's Prehistoric People An Introduction to the Archaeological Cultures of Ohio

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This pamphlet will introduce you to the major trends in Ohio Prehistory, focusing on changes in subsistence (diet), and settlement patterns (e.g., stationary vs. mobile). In this pamphlet some materials recovered from the Reinhardt Tract Archaeological Survey Project will be used to illustrate some of the material changes discussed. This project was made possible in part by a grant from the U.S. Department of the Interior's Historic Preservation Fund, administered by the Ohio Historic Preservation Office of the Ohio Historical Society¹. Additional funding for fieldwork was provided by the National Science Foundation's Dissertation Improvement Grant program.



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The OAI Database

The Ohio Archaeological Inventory (OAI) is a database of recorded archaeological sites in Ohio. The OAI is kept by the Ohio Historic Preservation Office (OHPO) of the Ohio Historical Society (OHS). While the OAI is the most comprehensive source of information about Ohio's past, not all sites get reported. Unknown sites are continually being destroyed and information about Ohio's past is lost everyday. You can help preserve and record Ohio's past. Contact the Ohio Historical Society if you know of a site that should be recorded.



Known prehistoric sites recorded in the OAI. Map provided by OHPO.

What is Prehistory?

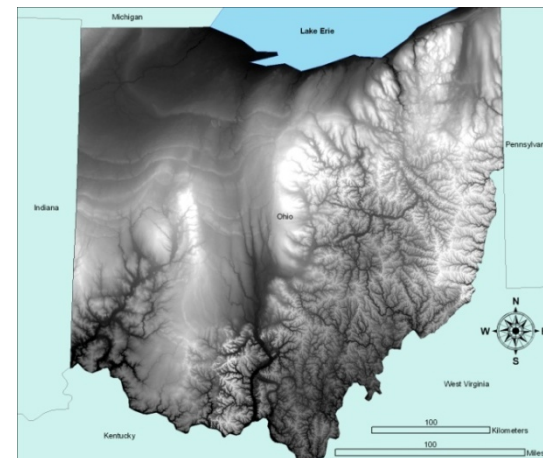
Prehistory is the time before written records. History begins in the Middle East ~5000 years ago. The beginning of the "historic" period in the Americas is related to the arrival of Europeans, ~500 years ago. However, the historic period doesn't start in Ohio until around AD 1795 with the signing of the Treaty of Greenville and the settling of the Northwest Territory (Ohio).

Archaeological Timeline

PaleoIndian	14,000-9,500 BC
Archaic	9,500-500 BC
Woodland	800 BC – AD 1000
Early (Adena)	800 BC – AD 1
Middle (Hopewell)	50 BC – AD 500
Late	AD 500 – 1000
Late Prehistoric	AD 1000 – 1540
Protohistoric	AD 1540 (DeSoto) – 1795 (Greenville)

Glaciers

Glaciers played an important role in shaping Ohio's landscape and providing opportunities for its occupants (historic and prehistoric). The formation of glaciers opened the Bering Land Bridge due to the lowering of sea levels, and the extent of glacier coverage shaped the topography of the state.



The above map shows how the progression of glaciers flattened the western portion of the state.

Paleoindian Period

The first occupants of the state are referred to as the Paleoindians. During this period people lived in small, mobile groups. The Paleoindian people obtained their food by hunting wild animals and gathering wild plants. The climate during this period was much cooler than it is today. As the glaciers melted new land was opened up to humans.



Reconstruction of Paleoindian life. Image provided by Voyageur Media Group website.

Archaic Period

During this period the landscape was slowly becoming modern. River beds were being cut and modern plant and animal communities were established. The megafauna was now gone. Most people were still mobile during this time period. Gradually, people started staying in one place longer. Some groups became sedentary by the end of the Archaic. Most of their food was still from wild sources, but some groups began domesticating local weeds. Additionally, we see the first pottery towards the end of this period, probably associated with a shift in diet to a focus on seeds.



We see groundstone tools like this full grooved axe for the first time during the Archaic period. This axe was found on the surface of the Reinhardt Tract in Pickaway County by Jacob E. Deppen. Photo by Kevin C. Nolan

Woodland Period

Many dramatic changes happened during this period. These changes are generally grouped into Early, Middle, and Late Woodland stages. During the Early Woodland there was an increase in trade and community-wide ceremonialism (religion). Many groups began to construct massive mounds and earthworks. Some of these areas were used to bury the dead. Some groups started living year-round in one place while others were more mobile life.



Reconstruction of Early Woodland life. Image provided by Voyageur Media Group website.

During the Middle Woodland both ceremonialism and trade increased. We also find that people during this time were growing even more of their food, although people still ate lots of wild foods. Many Middle Woodland people were sedentary, living in small hamlets. The Hopewell people built very large earthworks, although it appears there was no special ranking in Hopewell society.



Image from Lepper (2005:145), used with permission of Voyageur Media and Orange Frazier Publishing.

In the Late Woodland both trade and ceremonialism stop. Settlement patterns changed too. People started living in large villages, unlike the dispersed, small hamlets of the Early and Middle Woodland. Agriculture became more important and around AD 800-900 corn began to replace the local seed crops. It is also around AD 800 that the bow-and-arrow was first used in this area.



Reconstruction of Late Woodland life. Image provided by Voyageur Media Group website.

Late Prehistoric Period

During the final prehistoric period agriculture became more important, with corn making up ~50% of the diet for some people. Additionally, the nucleated villages became more organized. Many villages were organized in a circular shape with an open plaza in the center and concentric zones of activity around the plaza (burials, houses, waste disposal). Some of these villages were fortified.

In some cases, there were astronomical alignments with special parts of the village. At SunWatch Village in Dayton, Ohio, there is an alignment with the sunrise that helped the villagers plan their planting and harvesting schedules.



Center pole alignment with big house at SunWatch. Image used with permission of William Kennedy of the Dayton Society of Natural History.

The Reinhardt Tract

The Reinhardt Tract, in Pickaway County, illustrates many important things about Ohio's prehistory. The largest site on the property is a Late Prehistoric village. The rest of the farm has scattered activity areas representing multiple time periods. The best plots of land, especially near rivers, were repeatedly used throughout prehistory. Most of the remains around the village date the Archaic period. This is typical given the length of the Archaic and the highly mobile lifestyle. The Woodland period is represented by a previously unknown, buried earthwork, probably from the Middle Woodland. Other remains from the Middle Woodland period are scattered on the raised parts of the farm. This is expected given the small and dispersed settlement patterns of the time.

The Late Prehistoric village is about 200 feet across, small for the time period. The remains recovered so far have revealed that, like most other Late Prehistoric people, they were agriculturalists who stored their surplus in large underground pits. Additionally, the Reinhardt villagers ate lots of deer meat, and had domesticated dogs.



Dog burial found at the Reinhardt site at the bottom Feature 6 (180 cm below the surface).

Recommended Reading:

Ohio Archaeology: An Illustrated Chronicle of Ohio's Ancient American Indian Cultures, by Dr. Bradley T. Lepper.

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