4,200 – 2,700 BP Poverty Point: the earliest complex culture in North America

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The Poverty Point people were pre-agricultural hunter-gatherers who built large scale monuments in the Lower Mississippi Valley and imported raw material from a wide area of central North America for their fine stone work, which included stone cooking vessels and fishing net weights. Jewelers of the Poverty Point culture produced unique art including beads in the images of owls, dogs, locusts, and turkey vultures.

The Poverty Point Culture stretched along almost 100 miles of the Mississippi River and Gulf Coast and included over 100 villages.

3,000 years ago, the Poverty Point site, with about 500 to 1,000 people, was the largest settlement in North America.

Artist’s conception of the Poverty Point Mound Complex
The amount of work required to build the Poverty Point site is astounding. Over 1 million ft$^3$, or 1.5 billion pounds (~30 million 50-pound basket loads) of soil were carried by hand.

The Poverty Point site was built over several centuries by successive generations, though some of Poverty Point's earthworks were built quickly, suggesting strong leadership.

About 3,350 years ago, the largest mound at Poverty Point (Mound A) was constructed in less than three months. Made of almost 10 million ft$^3$ of soil, it is the second-largest earthen mound by volume in eastern North America after Monks Mound at Cahokia, built over two thousand years later.

Leadership likely made Poverty Point different from other pre-agricultural societies. Construction of the Poverty Point site required: development of a master plan; layout and construction according to the plan; recruitment, organization, management and feeding of workers; and the cultural will to sustain the effort over many centuries. Before and during the entire project, the workforce needed to be motivated.

Leaders decided to build the earthworks, made plans for them, then convinced people to work on them. Poverty Point is likely a monument to a charismatic leader and a strong belief system. There was no central government; only the people’s
beliefs, peer pressure, and charisma could motivate people to work on a massive project with no clear return on the investment of their time. (Kidder et al. 2008; Wikipedia 2019)

Trade
https://www.crt.state.la.us/dataprojects/archaeology/virtualbooks/poverpoi/trade.htm

The Poverty Point culture developed the earliest known long-distance supply chain in North America, but it was not necessarily a trading network. We don’t know how this supply chain worked, but it doesn’t seem to have been based on trade of durable items.

High quality stone was imported from as far as 1,400 miles away, but very few artifacts from Poverty Point have been found where the stone originated.

The lack of durable exports from Poverty Point seems to eliminate simple barter of durable items. Although unworked stone may have been traded for perishable materials, it seems unlikely that organic goods such as food, hides, or feathers were exported in the quantities necessary to obtain the tons of imported stone found at the various Poverty Point sites.

Down-the-line (neighbor-to-neighbor) trade is unlikely because there is little imported material along the routes between the rock sources and the Poverty Point cultural area, where most rocks have been found. Gathering expeditions may have been sent out from Poverty Point to obtain non-local materials from outcroppings along the Mississippi, Ohio, and Tennessee rivers.
The large number of ornaments and symbolic artifacts at the Poverty Point site suggests its cultural significance.

Artifacts

No earlier culture in North America had as many ornaments and symbolic objects. Poverty Point artifacts point to a shamanistic view that the world is inhabited by spirits which can be manipulated by shamans through prayers and fetishes. Animism lacked the formal organization of religions associated with other monument-building societies, but the shamans of Poverty Point were capable of explaining mysteries and providing direction for its followers. The animals on these engravings possessed unique abilities; flight, night vision, and alertness, and the Poverty point people seem to have respected them enough to engrave their images on stone.

Baked-clay cooking objects used to prepare meals. Cooking balls were heated in a fire and dropped in pits along with food. (Haag and Webb 1953)

A worked section of jaw, drilled for suspension was made from the remains of revered ancestors or brave enemies to serve as objects of power.

Hundreds of stone cones, cylinders, spheres, cubes, trapezoids, buttons, and other non-utilitarian objects were made, likely for ornamental or symbolic purposes.

Cylindrical, tubular, and disc-shaped stone beads of red jasper,

Ground stone pendants were made in a variety of geometric and zoomorphic shapes: mainly silhouettes of birds and bird heads, animal claws or talons, feet or paws, and turtle shells.

Pendants shaped like fat-bellied owls have been found from Louisiana to Florida.

Stone pipes shaped like ice-cream cones or fat cigars, and smoking tubes, made of baked clay, have been found throughout the Poverty Point cultural area.

Lithic Art
Poverty Point beads

Fat-Bellied Owl beads made of Jasper
Poverty Point plummet engraved with a stylized animal.
Stone Engravings

The unique abilities of these animals--flight, night vision, and alertness--were awe-inspiring.

Poverty Point religion as likely an animistic belief system that sees the world as being full of spirits and power.
Such a world can be manipulated by shamans and witches and altered by prayers, fetishes, amulets, and charms.

Animism lacks the formal organization of religions associated with other monument-building societies, but was capable of explaining mysteries and providing direction and meaning for its followers.

Animistic rituals and ceremonies were just as exciting and fearsome as those of later formalized religions, perhaps even more so since the spirit world was always close at hand.

Religion was almost certainly the most powerful and persuasive force in Poverty Point society.

The large number of fetishes and charms at Poverty Point indicates that a great deal of power was concentrated there, and that power and those who were able to control and direct it were undoubtedly responsible, in whole or part, for the great constructions and other remarkable achievements.

Government and Social Structure

Poverty Point communities were basically groups of kinfolks joined by blood and marriage ties. Social relationships were based on familiarity, and status was determined by personal abilities, character, and birthright.

Anthropologists long believed that cultures evolved slowly and steadily from simpler to more complex forms, and that ancient people had the same kinds of socio-political organization as some groups today.

Until Poverty Point, no one had written of the possibility that some kinds of prehistoric groups and their organizations might have disappeared without leaving any cultural descendants.

We now know that the Poverty Point Culture was larger and more complex than earlier mound-building societies and as was more sophisticated than historical hunter-gatherer societies.

The socio-political organization that existed at Poverty Point may have happened only once and only there.

About 2,600 years ago, the Poverty Point Culture disappeared, leaving no evidence of conflict, warfare, or migration.
References


Further Reading

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