**Life in Prehistoric Texas**

**Why It Matters Now**

By learning more about our ancient ancestors, we learn more about who we are and how our diverse cultures came into being.

**TERMS & NAMES**

- prehistoric, culture, Paleo-Indian Period, extinction, Archaic Period, Late Prehistoric Period, civilization, Mesoamerica, social structure

**OBJECTIVES**

1. Identify the major eras in Texas history.
2. Describe the defining characteristics of the major eras in Texas history.
3. Identify the dates and sequence of major eras in Texas history.

**MAIN IDEA**

Scientists have traced the history of Texas back to the time when the first humans arrived. They have determined three distinct time periods between the arrival of humans and the beginning of written history.

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**Early Americans**

The first people to live in North America may have migrated from Asia as early as 37,000 years ago. In their search for food, they most likely crossed a land bridge in the far north connecting the two continents. The land bridge probably formed during the Ice Age. These early peoples came to the Americas in several waves. Each group adjusted to the new environments it encountered. Eventually, these peoples traveled on to the rest of North, Central, and South America. Because these early peoples did not keep a written record, or history, of their daily life, we refer to this period as prehistoric. Prehistoric native cultures can be divided into three periods.

**Prehistoric Periods**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Dates</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paleo-Indian</td>
<td>10,000 B.C.–6000 B.C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archaic</td>
<td>6000 B.C.–A.D. 700</td>
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<tr>
<td>Late Prehistoric</td>
<td>A.D. 700–A.D. 1500</td>
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**Paleo-Indian Period**

In Texas the first of these prehistoric periods is the Paleo-Indian Period, which began about 12,000 years ago. The earliest scientific evidence of people in Texas dates back to this period. During this period, Native Texans used flint-tipped spears to hunt mammoths, mastodons, and giant buffalo. However, at some point during the Paleo-Indian Period, the great animals died off. Why did they die? Some scientists believe humans hunted them to extinction. Others believe they died because of the environmental changes that occurred as the ice caps...
melted. Still others think disease killed them off. No one knows what really happened except that they disappeared by about 8000 B.C. Fortunately, the humans survived. In 1953 archeologists found the bones of a Paleo-Indian woman near Midland. They named her Midland Minnie.

Archaic Period

After the giant animals died off, Native Texans had to adapt to the new environment. A new way of life developed around 6000 B.C. in what is known as the Archaic Period. People began hunting smaller mammals such as buffalo, antelope, and deer. They developed better weapons such as dart points that could be launched from a notched stick called an atlatl. While men hunted, women gathered food from plants, such as roots, seeds, and berries. Humans also began to tame dogs and teach them to help with hauling and other tasks. The remains of a man from the Archaic Period, discovered in 1829 near Abilene, Texas, were named Abilene Man.

Late Prehistoric Period

The Late Prehistoric Period in Texas began around A.D. 700. Native Texans began using the land to greater advantage. In parts of Texas, Late Prehistoric people lived in villages, planted crops, and tamed some animals. They also used the bow and arrow in Texas for the first time. With this weapon, people could successfully hunt both large animals, such as buffalo, and smaller game, such as deer and rabbits. The bow and arrow would become Native Texans’ most important weapon.

Great Civilizations Emerge

Meanwhile, two great empires emerged south of Texas. The Maya and later the Aztecs built great civilizations in southern Mexico and Central America, in an area called Mesoamerica.
Pictographs painted by Native Texans have been found throughout the state. At right is a copy of the pictographs in Paint Rock in Central Texas, which are probably from the Late Prehistoric period. The copy was painted in 1937 by Forrest Kirkland. Below is a photograph of pictographs in Panther Cave in Seminole Canyon, which are estimated to be from the Archaic Period. ● What weapons and tools can you identify in these pictographs?

The Maya developed a complex social structure headed by royal families, high priests, and nobility. They built huge trade and religious centers marked with giant pyramids. The Maya also studied astronomy and developed accurate calendars. Despite these achievements, the Mayan civilization collapsed over 1,000 years ago for reasons no one knows. This is one of the great mysteries of the Americas.

The Aztecs, who are sometimes called the Mexica (meh-HEE-ka), rose to power in central Mexico in about A.D. 1200. They built a great city called Tenochtitlán on the site of present-day Mexico City. Tenochtitlán had a population of over 100,000—several times larger than most European cities of that time. The Aztecs also built huge pyramids and temples and created many works of art.

Mesoamerican influence spread far to the north through trade. Archaeologists have found items from Mesoamerica at ruins in New Mexico. From there, crops from Mesoamerica, such as corn, beans, and squash, may have spread to Texas.
Agriculture and Settlement

What archaeologists call the Prehistoric Period in Texas extends from A.D. 700 until the Europeans arrived in the 1500s. It was during this period that agriculture was first practiced in Texas. Where the climate was favorable, farming produced more food than hunting and gathering. Native Texans could store extra food so that not everyone had to work constantly to produce it. The development of pottery allowed them to keep their food safe from animals and weather. With a stable food supply close at hand, Native Texans could remain in one place for a long period of time.

Native Texan farming was simple. First, trees and brush were cleared and burned. Then farmers planted seeds by poking a hole in the ground with a pointed stick and covering the seed with a little bit of dirt.

Not all Native Texans became farmers. Some lived in areas where it was easier to fish or hunt game at least some of the time. Agriculture, however, made it possible to settle in one place. Native Texans could create permanent villages, and their population grew. Their social structure became more complex. The family was still the central unit. Religious and political leaders began to emerge.

In Northeast Texas a culture of Mound Builders built burial and temple mounds similar to those in Mesoamerica. Here, archaeologists have found objects made of stone, pottery, and copper. They have also found trade items from distant places.

As the early Texans found better ways to adapt to their surroundings, they grew into well-established groups, each with its own culture. It was these cultures that the Europeans encountered when they first came to the Americas.

Terms & Names
Identify:
• prehistoric
• culture
• extinction
• civilization
• Mesoamerica
• social structure

Organizing Information
Use a flowchart as shown to sequence the prehistoric periods of Texas History and summarize each period’s defining characteristics.

In which period were humans first able to live in one place rather than follow the animals they hunted? Why?

Critical Thinking
1. List the name of each prehistoric period described in this section. Research and explain the meaning of each period’s name.

2. Describe the characteristics of each prehistoric period in Texas.

3. What do all civilizations have in common?

Interact with History
Review your response to Interact with History in your Texas Notebook. Now think about what you read in this section. Did you notice any specific aspects of prehistoric life that archaeologists found especially important to their research? How might you revise your answer based on this knowledge?

ACTIVITY
Culture
Research the kinds of artifacts, or human-made items, people from prehistoric periods left behind in Texas. Identify the period to which they belong, and describe what they probably were used for.