

Toltec Mounds

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Toltec Mounds is one of the largest and most impressive archeological sites in the Mississippi River valley. The immense man-made mounds, surrounded by an embankment similar to a modern levee, fascinated the first modern owners of the land in the 1850s. The site is large both in area—covering 100 acres—and in the size and number of mounds. The two tallest mounds are 49 feet (14 meters) and 39 feet (11.5 meters) high. There are sixteen smaller mounds, though some have not survived to modern times. The site is beside a lake. A ditch and embankment made of earth form an enclosure on the other three sides. The embankment was once eight to ten feet (2.5 meters) high and more than one mile (1615 meters) long.

Learning about the people who lived in the area and built the mounds is a long process. Archeologists are still busy studying the artifacts and other data uncovered over the last 30 or so years. Excavations will begin again once these results are made available to the public and to the scientific community.

Who Were the People Who Built the Mounds?

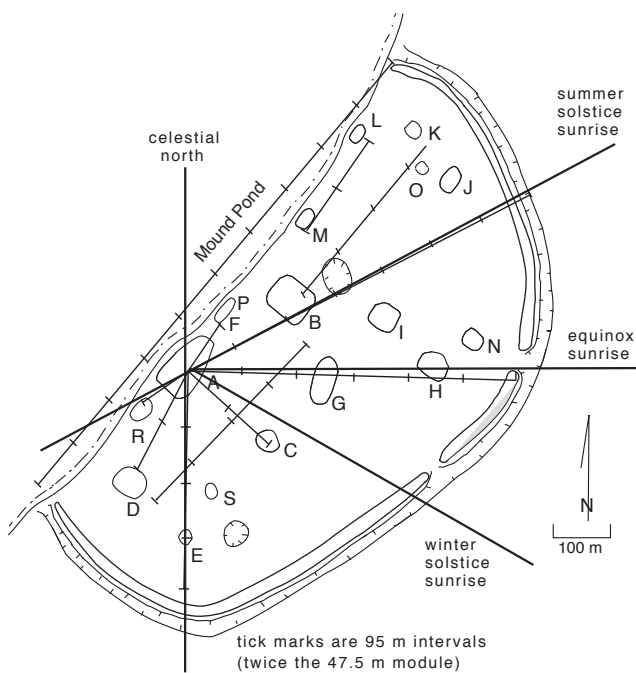
People started living at this place sometime before A.D. 700. Distinctive aspects of their culture are the arrangement and construction of the mounds, the

style of decoration on the pottery, and the kinds of stone tools. Archeologists named this culture Plum Bayou, after the name of a local stream. We do not know what the Indians who built the mounds called themselves because they did not have writing. The Plum Bayou people seem to have abandoned Toltec Mounds and the surrounding area sometime around A.D. 1050. We do not know where they went, nor do we know who their descendants were.

How and Why Did They Build the Mounds?

We do know that the people were impressive builders and that they planned the construction of this mound center. Excavations have shown that the mounds were built of soil and were flat on top. These “platform mounds” were not all used at the same time; some were built, used and abandoned, and then others were built. For example, Mound S was built and used about A.D. 750 to 800, and Mound D was used about A.D. 950 to 1050. The platform mounds were apparently used for ceremonies or had buildings such as a temple or the residence of an important person on top. The 39 foot high Mound B was a platform. It was built in stages, with each stage used for a period of time, so the mound increased in height gradually





and may have been in use for 300 years. The highest mound, Mound A, has not been excavated. Only Mound C is known to have been a place of burial.

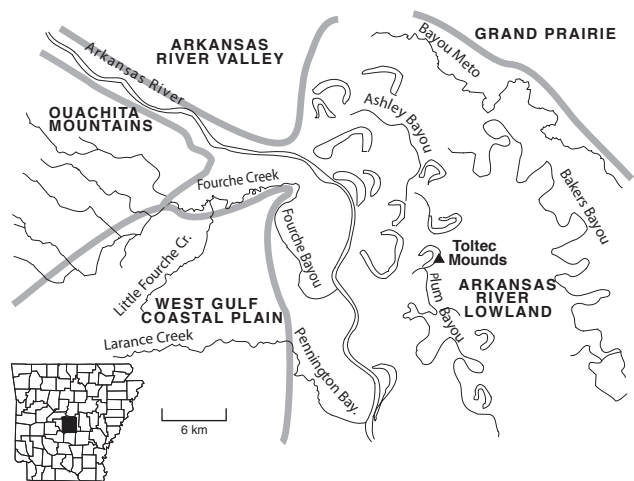
Some mounds were placed to line up with each other and with the positions of the sun on the horizon at sunrise and sunset on the solstices and equinoxes. A person standing on Mound A saw the sun rise over Mound B on the summer solstice, June 21, and over Mound H on the equinoxes, March 21 and September 21. Standing on Mound H, an observer saw the sun set over Mound B at summer solstice and over Mound A on the equinoxes. From Mound E, the north star could be seen directly above Mound A.

The position of the sun on the horizon changes throughout the year. A person watching the sunrise or sunset can observe these changes, and use them to mark the seasons and to schedule activities such as planting crops and holding ceremonies. At first, posts may have been set into the ground to mark the sun's positions on the solstices and equinoxes, and the mounds built later on these locations. Because mounds were important in the social and religious lives of the people, it is reasonable to suppose that

these astronomical viewing positions must also have been important.

The mounds were built around two rectangular areas called plazas that were probably kept clear for ceremonies and other activities. This arrangement resulted from the use of a standardized measurement that in modern terms is 155.8 feet or 47.5 meters. We do not know why this measurement was important or how it was made. The platform mounds were spaced using multiples of the standard measurement. The length of the main plaza was eight times the standard measure, 1246.7 feet or 380 meters. The distance between the ends of the embankment on the lake shore was 20 times the standard measure, 3117 feet or 950 meters. The length of the embankment and ditch was 5298 feet or 1615 meters, which is 34 times the standard measure.

The number of people living at Toltec Mounds at any time was small, perhaps no more than 50. These were probably the religious and social leaders and their families. Most of the Plum Bayou people lived in small villages or farms in the surrounding countryside. Many small archeological sites—the remains of these villages and farms—are present on the floodplain of the Arkansas River. The people probably came to Toltec Mounds several times every year to participate in religious ceremonies and to renew social and family ties.



What Was Their Way of Life Like?

The Toltec Mounds are right next to a horseshoe-shaped lake that was once a channel of the ancient Arkansas River. The location is in the floodplain where each year when the river overflowed its banks a new layer of soil was deposited, enriching the land for farming. The Plum Bayou people used a variety of resources for food. They hunted deer, turkey, and other game with the bow and arrow; fished in the lakes; and gathered acorns, hickory nuts, and other wild plants. They cultivated plants that produced abundant starchy seeds, such as little barley and maygrass, along with some maize, or corn. Wood, cane, and other plants were used to make many things. Houses were built with a frame of wood poles covered with cane mats for the walls and topped with a thatched roof.

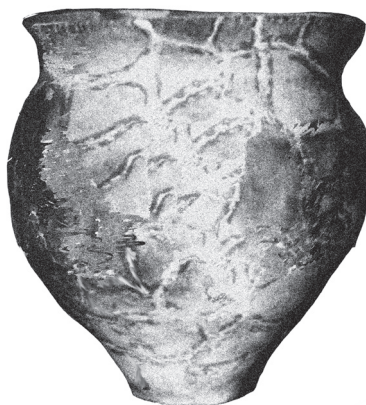


little barley & maygrass

The floodplain of the Arkansas River, the Arkansas River Lowland, is composed primarily of fine silt and clay soils, but gravel deposits are also present. Rocks collected from these gravels and from the West Gulf Coastal Plain and Ouachita Mountains to the west provided raw material for woodworking tools such as adzes and axes, and for a variety of stone knives, drills, awls, scrapers, and arrowpoints.

Containers for cooking, serving, and storing food were made of local clay, fired hard to make them durable. Common vessel shapes were bowls and deep jars with flaring rims. Surfaces of bowls were occasionally sealed with a film of red clay. Most pottery decoration was simple, such as incised lines or rows of nicks or notches placed under the rim.

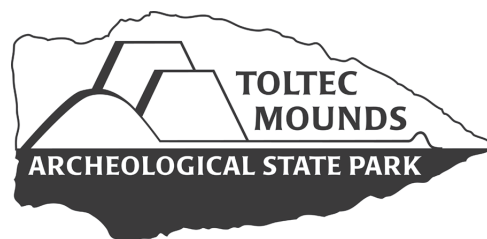
The people who lived in the area around Toltec



Mounds were not isolated from their neighbors. They traded stone for making tools to people living along the Arkansas and White rivers and their tributary streams. Some long-distance trade also took place. We have found objects made of marine shell from the Gulf of Mexico and copper from the Great Lakes region here.

Who Discovered the Mounds?

French and American explorers and visitors to the Arkansas country in the early 1800s knew about the mounds. Two descriptions were published in 1821. The Quapaw tribe lived in several villages along the Arkansas River and knew about the mounds, but did not build them. During the 1800s, prejudicial attitudes led many people to believe that the local Indians could not have built the impressive mound sites of the southeastern United States. Historians and anthropologists in those days thought the mounds had been built by mysterious people who were later replaced by the historical tribes. The Toltecs of Mexico were one of the ancient civilizations considered as possible builders of the mounds. The owners of the Toltec Mounds site knew about these ideas concerning “mound builders.” In 1891 they used the name Toltec for the local railway station and community. The name continues in use even though we now know that the Toltecs of Mexico had nothing to do with building these mounds. In fact, an archeological study of mound sites in the 1880s proved that the mounds were not built by people from Mexico, but by ancestors of the Indian tribes who lived in the southeastern U.S.



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For Further Reading (Advanced Level)

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