WHAT'S THE POINT?

By Matt Smith

GRADE LEVEL

4

OVERVIEW

Students will use activity sheets to "collect" Archaic-period projectile points from a dig site, classify the points based on key characteristics, and arrange them in chronological order.

COMPETENCIES

Social Studies – Grade 4 (Mississippi Studies)

- Competency 1: Develop an understanding of the state in relationship to the expanding horizon theme.
- Competency 3: Demonstrate the ability to use social studies tools (e.g., timelines, maps, primary sources, globes, compasses, graphs, technological resources, grids, schedules, etc.).

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- work cooperatively to classify projectile points based on key characteristics;
- use basic concepts of stratigraphy to match the points to an Archaic-period chronology;
- discuss the factors influencing changes in artifact styles, and the importance of these styles in dating archaeological sites and understanding prehistoric cultures.

MATERIALS

- For each student, copies of the Archaic Projectile Points information sheet and the Identifying Projectile Points worksheet.
- For each group of students, copies of the Site Profile worksheet and the Artifact Bags information sheet.
- For the teacher, transparencies of the Site Profile worksheet, the Archaic Projectile Points information sheet, and the Site Profile Answer Sheet.
- Pencil and paper.

BACKGROUND

The Archaic period in Mississippi stretched from approximately 8,000 B.C. to 500 B.C. This period was characterized by a warming climate in which Mississippi's environments became more similar to today's. As many of the large Ice Age mammals became extinct, humans in Mississippi transitioned from a heavily hunting-based lifestyle to one that depended more on fishing, gathering of wild plant foods, and hunting of smaller game such as deer. This transition coincided with a shift toward larger social groups and more sedentary living arrangements.

The atlatl or spear-thrower, a modified stick with a handle at one end and a groove at the other, was the most important Archaic hunting tool. Fitting the wooden shaft of a spear into the atlatl's groove allowed hunters to throw the spear much more powerfully than they could by hand alone. The spear points (or *projectile points*) themselves were

made of certain preferred kinds of stone, and were constructed by using wooden, rock, or bone implements to chip off pieces from the stone until it attained the desired shape.

Over the long duration of the Archaic period, many different styles of projectile points were adopted. These changes may have been driven by performance, functionality, or sheer fashion. Dozens of distinct point types have been described by archaeologists, each one classified according to characteristics like size, overall shape, presence or absence of a notch, and shape of the point base. Each type is typically named for the site at which it was first collected or described. For instance, the Pickwick point of the Late Archaic period was named after Pickwick Lake, which borders the northeast corner of Mississippi.

Within the larger span of the Archaic period, several smaller intervals can be distinguished according to changes in environment, lifestyle, and technology. The Early Archaic period, stretching from approximately 8,000 B.C. to 6,000 B.C., saw hunters abandon the hefty, elongated spear points of the previous (Paleo-Indian) period in favor of smaller, often more triangular styles. The Middle Archaic (6,000 B.C. to 3,000 B.C.) saw a further diversification of projectile point styles, along with a warming and drying of the environment and a growth in long-distance trade networks. During the cooler, wetter Late Archaic (3,000 B.C. to 5,000 B.C.), regional cultures distinguished themselves to an unprecedented degree, and many of these cultures began to develop the permanent settlements and large earthworks that would characterize the subsequent Woodland period. Many of the diverse Late Archaic projectile points were made of exotic materials that suggest the existence of elaborate trade networks.

OPENING THE LESSON

Encourage students to think of ways in which modern-day “artifacts” have changed in appearance. Good examples might include cars, computers, or clothing. Have them discuss the factors that might be driving these changes. Which changes have been driven by purely practical concerns? Which ones have been driven by marketing or fashion? In what ways are these familiar cases similar to, and/or different from, the changes in Archaic projectile point styles?

DEVELOPING THE LESSON

1. Present the background information to the students.
2. Pass out the Archaic Projectile Points information sheets and project the transparency. Draw attention to the differences in projectile point styles, focusing on shapes, sizes, and presence/absence of key characteristics.
3. Pass out the Identifying Projectile Points worksheets. Have students identify each point using the information from the Archaic Projectile Points information sheet.
4. Divide students into small groups. Give each group one Site Profile worksheet and one Site Artifact Bags activity sheet. Tell the students to imagine that they are participating in an archaeological dig at a site in Mississippi, and explain that the Site Profile worksheet represents a "map" of the various strata that make up the site. Inform or remind them that these strata each represent a distinct period of time, with the oldest strata being furthest from the surface. Explain that, as archaeologists, the students will be starting their excavation at the surface (most recent stratum) and working "backwards" in time.
5. Explain that the Site Artifact Bags activity sheet shows the soil characteristics of each stratum, along the various artifacts that were recovered from that stratum. Direct each group to complete the Site Profile worksheet by matching each stratum to the correct dates and projectile point types, using the Archaic Projectile Points information sheet to identify each projectile point "recovered" from the dig.
6. Project the Site Profile Answer Sheet transparency, present the correct answers, and discuss how the students arrived at their own conclusions.

CONCLUDING THE LESSON

Encourage the students to take an archaeologist's perspective, and discuss the importance of projectile point styles in making sense of real-world archaeological sites. Point out that these styles can provide a method of *cross-dating* different sites in the absence of other reliable evidence. Finish up by having the students reflect on how even the smallest, most insignificant-seeming artifacts can serve as windows into entire cultures, lifestyles, and landscapes. What will the archaeologists of the distant future be able to infer about our own culture?

ASSESSMENT

Have students turn in their worksheets for evaluation.

EXTENSION

Have students write and illustrate a story set during the Archaic Period, and featuring the use of one or more of the artifacts discussed in this lesson.

SOURCES

- Culberson, Linda Crawford. 1993. *Arrowheads and Spear Points in the Prehistoric Southeast*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Justice, Noel D. 1987. *Stone Age Spear and Arrow Points of the Midcontinental and Eastern United States*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- McGahey, Samuel O. 2004. *Mississippi Projectile Point Guide*. Archaeological Report No. 31. Jackson: Mississippi Department of Archives and History.