

Archaic Tradition

Hunters and Gatherers 8,000 to 500 B.C.

Introduction

The Archaic tradition lasted for a very long time, the longest of any of the periods in Wisconsin. Even though it is the longest period, very little has been investigated by archaeologists because very few sites have been discovered. The picture we have of these people is based on limited excavations in Wisconsin and information obtained from similar sites outside the state.



Archaic scene.

The Archaic tradition follows the Paleo tradition. People were changing from being highly mobile hunters to groups that could settle in one area and concentrate on that area. They could become familiar with the resources in their area, and become experts on exploiting them. The Archaic people were very successful in doing this, and their lifestyle didn't change for a long time because it was so successful.

The Archaic tradition first appears in the southern part of the state and later in the northern part of Wisconsin. This difference is probably because the glaciers had left southern Wisconsin long before they had melted from northern Wisconsin. People in each area adapted to their environment as it changed.

Climatic and Environmental Change



Archaic setting

During this period the climatic conditions changed greatly. At the beginning of the Archaic period, the glaciers were retreating northward. The climate was not as cold as during the Paleo times but was colder and moister than today. Oak, hickory, and maple forests replaced the evergreens. A large quantity and variety of plants and animals were present.

During the middle of this period the temperature became warmer and dryer than today. Prairies expanded into areas that are now covered with forests. Some areas had active sand dunes that were shifting across the land, just like those that are found in the deserts of the southwest today.



Prairie

At the end of the period the temperature became similar to what we are familiar with today.

Water levels on Lake Michigan also fluctuated greatly during this time. Sometimes the lake levels were higher than today, and at other times they were lower. Rising lake levels have left some Archaic sites under water.

Hunting and Gathering

Archaic peoples got their food by hunting wild animals and gathering wild plants. As the climate changed during the Archaic period, the type and availability of plants and animals also changed.

People living during this time needed to adapt to these changes. People did not need to hunt in large groups, unlike the earlier Paleo peoples who had hunted big animals such as mammoths and mastodons. These large animals were now extinct. People began to do more individualized hunting of small game. Elk and deer could be found throughout the state. Moose and caribou were still in the northern part of the state. People also hunted smaller game like raccoons, rabbits, beaver, birds and **aquatic** resources like fish and shellfish.

Deer became the most important game animal hunted in Wisconsin, a title it has kept to the present day. The deer was the perfect size for a single hunter to kill, butcher, and return to the camp. The deer was the source of meat, fat, hides for clothing and shelter, and bone and antler for tools. Virtually every part of the animal was used. The tendons were used for sinew to bind spear points to their haft. The bones were cracked open to get the bone marrow.

Archaeologists find evidence of domesticated dogs at some Archaic sites. Dogs would have helped in hunting, guarded the camps, and might have served as a source of food in hard times.

Plant foods became important during this time. They used mainly nuts, but seeds, fruits and berries were also important. Archaeologists find the first nutting stones and date them to this time. These stones were used for the bulk processing of nuts and other plants. They may have collected wild gourds for use as containers.



Deer were one of the most important animal resources.



Nutting stone on left, with hammerstone on right.



Nuts, including hickory, walnut, and hazelnut.

Settlement

The smaller game hunted by the Archaic hunters roamed over smaller distances than the large animals of the earlier Paleo times. Because of this, people during this time could hunt and gather in smaller territories. They still needed to move around to take advantage of seasonal resources, but they didn't have to roam over as large a territory as the Paleo people did. During this time groups were beginning to develop their own territories for hunting and gathering. They still, however, traded over large distances for particularly good stones to make tools, or perhaps for other things that have not been preserved.

Archaeologists know little about the shelters in which Archaic people lived since evidence of structures has not been found. The shelters still needed to be movable, or quickly made from local material, since people were still moving frequently. They were still probably made with hides, sticks and/or brush. Moving to sheltered areas such as caves or rockshelters during the winter provided protection from the elements.



View from inside a small rockshelter.

People continued to live in small family groups as they moved to take advantage of seasonal resources. Summer camps may have consisted of 25-30 people with groups breaking into smaller segments during the winter. Heavier household goods were now being used because they could be left at a campsite that people would return to the next year. Textiles and basketry originated during this time. Grinding stones were used to process food products.

See also [Archaeological Basics-rockshelters](#).

Tools

Some tools, such as scrapers, knives, modified flakes, and hammerstones, are recovered by archaeologists from Archaic sites. These tools are very similar to those found at Paleo sites. Archaic and Paleo people both used spears but the beautiful fluted Folsom and Clovis **projectile points** are no longer used by the Archaic people. They still used projectile points but the style of the points changed. Also, Archaic spear points are different in different regions, unlike Paleo points which were similar across North and South America. For example, Archaic points from Wisconsin are different from those in Arizona. Some materials used to make Wisconsin projectile points came from as far away as Illinois. Silver Mound (near Hixton) was also a favorite place for Archaic people to get their material for points.

See also [Wisconsin Sites-Silver Mound](#)



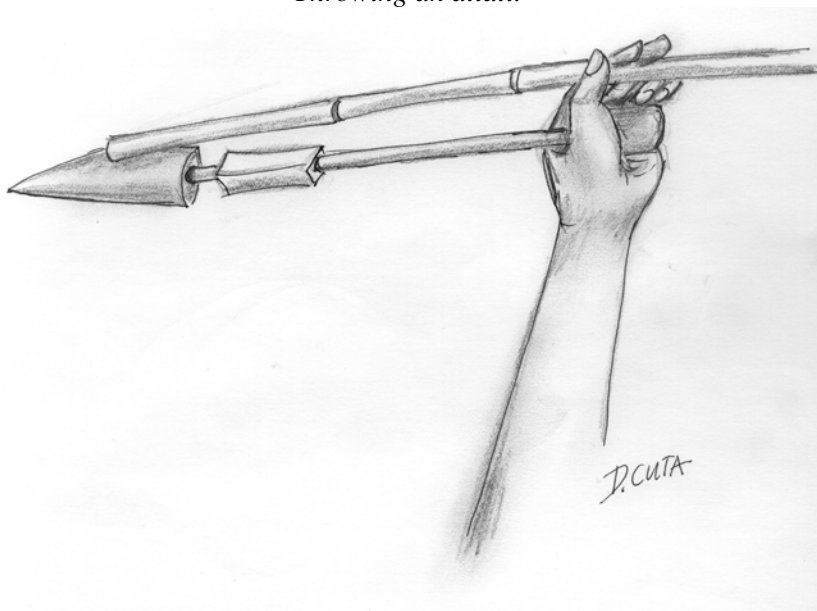
Different point styles mark different times within the Archaic tradition. The Archaic points in the photo extend from the oldest at the left to youngest at the right.

See also [Archaeological Basics-Point Styles](#)

Archaeologists think that a new tool, called an **atlatl**, or spear -thrower, was first used during this period. The atlatl is used with a spear to make it travel farther and with more force. Archaeologists have not recovered any atlatls from Wisconsin but they have recovered **bannerstones** that were used as a weight on an atlatl.



Throwing an atlatl.



The atlatl (at bottom) has a hook into which the base of the spear is fitted.

Another type of tool new to the Archaic period is the ground stone tool. Unlike projectile points that are made by striking two rocks together, ground stone tools are made by first pecking the surface with another stone to get the general shape, then grinding with a stone like sandstone, to polish the surface and edges. The sandstone acts like an abrasive, something like sandpaper. With lots of pecking and grinding a useful tool, such as an axe or adze, can be made. Archaic people used this technique to make axes, bannerstones and fishing gear.



The groove on an axe can help archaeologists to tell how old it is. Middle Archaic axes usually have a groove extending the whole way around the axe, as on the left. Late Archaic axes may have a groove that extends only partially around the haft, as on the right.

Old Copper Culture

The first use of copper seems to take place during this time period. Items made from copper appear to be useful items rather than objects for adornment. Artifacts that have been recovered include: spear points, knives, drills, axes, hooks and harpoons. Some items discovered in limited quantities include things such as rings, beads and pendants which were probably made for personal adornment.



Copper artifacts, including a chunk of unfinished copper and two points on the left, a copper point on the top right, and a copper awl on the bottom right.

While Archaic people across Wisconsin were involved in similar lifeways, archaeologists find that copper artifacts are mainly found in the eastern and northern part of the state. Archaeologists call the people involved in the use of copper the Old Copper Culture. Archaeologists still don't know why there are only limited copper artifacts found in the western part of the state.

See also [Wisconsin Sites-Old Copper sites.](#)

See also [Archaeological Basics-Regional Differences](#)

Back to [Woodland Red Ocher Culture](#)

The copper that Wisconsin Archaic people used was mined on the shores of Lake Superior. To get an item from one place to another people had to carry it. People may have traveled themselves to the area and brought back the item. Another way would be if people, traders, went to the area and brought the item back with them. Old Copper Culture people probably used both of these techniques to get copper. Archaeologists do know that widespread trading must have taken place because items such as **marine** shells from the southern Gulf Coast are found at Archaic sites.

See also [Native Technologies-Copper](#)

Lifestyle Changes

Archaic people continued to hunt and gather just as they had during the earlier Paleo times, however, they hunted and gathered different types of animals and plants. They exploited the full range of wild plants and animals that could be found in their environment. There was a very successful adaptation and it lasted for a long time.

Archaeologists know little about Archaic people's religion and political systems. Archaeologists find the first formal cemeteries at the end of the Archaic period. The use of cemeteries and the establishment of trade networks are further developed during the later Woodland tradition.





Early Cultures: Pre-European Peoples of Wisconsin

OVERVIEW OF THE ARCHAIC TRADITION

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Name: _____

Tradition Name	
Lifeways	
Time	
Climate	
Environment	
Settlement	
Food	
Tools	
Toolkit	
Household	
Religion/Rituals	
Social/Political	
How Different From Previous Group	
Major World Events	



Early Cultures: Pre-European Peoples of Wisconsin

OVERVIEW OF THE ARCHAIC TRADITION

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Tradition Name	Archaic
Lifeways	Hunters and gatherers
Time	8,000 - 500 B.C.
Climate	It grew warmer as the glaciers retreated, then it became warmer than today, and finally changed to about today's conditions.
Environment	Oak, hickory, and maple forests replaced the evergreens in the southern part of the state. A large quantity and variety of plants and animals were present.
Settlement	Small bands continued in seasonal camps. Summer camps consisted of 25 to 30 people. During the winter the people may have lived in smaller groups in sheltered areas such as caves or rockshelters. They were roving less and territories were beginning to develop.
Food	They used a wide variety of large and small game, mainly deer. Plant foods became more important. They used mainly nuts, but seeds, fruits and berries were also very important.
Tools	Most of the tools used during Paleo times were also used during this time period. Axes were used to cut down trees. During the middle of this period the use of copper began. It was used for spear points and decorative and ceremonial objects.
Toolkit	Spear points, atlatl, knives, modified flakes, hammerstones, ground stone axes, nutting stones
Household	Heavier household goods were now being used, for they could be left at a campsite. Textiles and basketry originated during this time. Grinding stones were used to process food products. Containers may have been made from gourds and skins.
Religion/Rituals	Decorative and ceremonial pieces were introduced. Cemeteries and special individual burials are known, particularly from the end of the period.
Social/Political	Social organization was still based on the family. Hunting was no longer always in large groups. People were doing more individualized hunting.
How Different From Previous Group	The glaciers had retreated to the north. The people during this period adapted to and fully exploited the environment in which they lived. They began to use different food types, developed localized territories, used copper and had some special burial practices.
Major World Events	6,000 B.C. - Earliest writing in Mesopotamia 2,500 B.C. - Egyptian pyramids 1,200 B.C. - Stonehenge in England 1,000 B.C. - Beginning of Mayan civilization