

Elliot Abrams is a Professor of Anthropology, having begun his career at Ohio University in 1985. He received his PhD from Penn State in 1984, focusing on Mesoamerican archaeology. Since then, his research has expanded into Ohio Valley archaeology, especially that of the Hocking River Valley. He is married to Ann Freter, also an archaeology professor, and has one child, Zach.

The Prehistoric Past in Athens, Ohio

By Elliot M. Abrams

People from all over America travel great distances, often at considerable effort and expense, to visit famous archaeological sites around the world. Some of the recently updated “Wonders of the World” – the Great Wall of China, the Great Pyramids in Egypt, and Peru’s Macchu Picchu. – are archaeological sites which fascinate the public and serve as touchstones to a distant and often mysterious past.

But archaeology is everywhere and, in a sense, all archaeology is local. Every place bears the remnants of its past buried beneath the surface. Here in Athens County and the vicinity, there are thousands of archaeological sites; yes, none are quite as famous as Stonehenge, but all are equally valuable and relevant to Native Americans and hopefully all Americans, for these sites allow archaeologists to reconstruct the lives of the people who created these sites. The archaeological sites in the area represent the places where people lived, prayed, worked, and assembled as larger groups. Each is worthy of respect as they allow us to access the past.

As a professor of anthropological archaeology, I began a research program in the Hocking Valley, and Athens in particular, back in 1985 and have conducted excavations in and around Athens since that time. Inspired mostly by curiosity, the local people who

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have sites have been very kind to let me and my field school students dig up portions of their land. It's amazing to me how rich this area is in terms of archaeological sites and how long this region of Ohio has been home to so many different indigenous societies. If one were to drive along the Hocking River in any direction, slowly observing the waterways, floodplain, terraces, and hills and ridge tops, one would see a completely changing and exciting array of societies as they changed over time.

Athens and vicinity, some 12,000 years ago, was locked in the cold embrace of the Ice Age. The region was a steppe forest dominated by dispersed spruce trees and larger than life animal species – giant sloths, mammoths, and mastodons. Yet people would have lived here, hunting these animals and living a highly nomadic life, traveling extensively in and out of the area. The remains of these animals have been found in Athens County and stone point types – spear points and arrowheads – from this time period are numerous and widely found in the region. Although no archaeological sites from this time period have yet been found, the Meadowcroft Rockshelter, just a three hour drive from here in southwestern Pennsylvania, has yielded evidence of these people dating back some 17,000 years. It's quite likely that small groups of these earliest occupants of the continent traveled through Athens County, using rockshelters before they moved on.

As the ice and cold receded some 10,000 years ago, the area became heavily occupied by people living in small communities of highly nomadic hunters and gatherers. The spruce trees were replaced by pine, oak, hickory, walnut, and others which allowed nut collecting to take hold as a major economic activity. We find evidence for these “Early Archaic” communities scattered throughout the county in virtually every creek

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system that flows into the Hocking River. This must have been a very bountiful time for these people, surrounded by mild weather and an abundance of food resources. This period lasted for several millennia but, as one thing we learn from archaeology, nothing lasts forever.

Sometime between 7000 and 5000 years ago, this good life came to an end in the Athens area. A long and devastating period of drought appears to have set in, and the evidence from those Early Archaic communities shows us that most of the people simply, and wisely, left the area, presumably moving to regions where food was more plentiful. This was hardly an isolated climate event, as most of Ohio was abandoned at this time! The climate improved about 4500 years ago, and people returned as did the rainfall. Now nut bearing species, white-tailed deer and fish were available in large numbers again. This was a tremendously rich time for these communities. Although they stayed small – numbering about 15 people in any one hamlet – and lived on elevated terraces near water but above the potential for flooding, the number of archaeological sites increased significantly with every tributary of the Hocking in-filling with these small settlements. Anyone who lives along Federal, Monday, Sunday, Margaret Creek, or any other waterway, probably is near a site or two of these “Late Archaic” communities.

Climate change is a large part of the natural record; we trace it archaeologically in the changing animal, plant, and pollen remains, and about 2500 years ago, the climate once again had dramatic negative affects on the people directly dependent upon wild plants and animals. Droughts once again set in, reducing the availability of foods, and now the number of people was relatively high. Being wise collectors, they decided to counteract the decline in nuts with the addition of seeds from local plants – goosefoot or

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lamb's quarters, marshelder, maygrass, and a few others. These species are weeds in Ohio today – we've all driven passed most of them in the late summer as they grow along the edge of the roadways -- but back then they were managed and eventually gardened as communities now became more fixed, or sedentary, on the landscape. Horticulture – what we call gardening – became part of the economy and life was never the same. This shift to growing food occurred elsewhere – for example, in the Middle East's Fertile Crescent – at different times and with different species, and it still ranks as one of the great transformations in human society. And it happened right here in Athens County!

These small sedentary communities of hunters, gatherers and gardeners eventually began to distinctly honor their dead by laying the deceased on a flattened natural surface, ritually burning the deceased, and then covering with earth. One or more communities would participate, over time adding more soil to the burial. These “burial mounds” were associated with the small community sites but often were placed on the ridge tops in this area. So when one hikes up the “Mound Trail” at Dow Lake, what you're seeing is the burial mound built by a small community that would have lived at a lower elevation, closer to the old run or the river itself. Athens County has over 200 recorded mounds, one of the largest numbers of burial mounds in Ohio.

Although the cultural name of the people who built these mounds is unknown to us as they did not have writing, archaeologists some years ago gave them the name “Adena.” This familiar name conveys that these people shared a religious connection at least by honoring their dead in this manner. Evidence for shamans - religious leaders – comes from excavations of some of these burial mounds.

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Many Ohioans also know of the “Hopewell,” another name given by archaeologists for a set of past societies who built even larger mounds as well as geometric earthworks in religious centers. Anyone who is familiar with Chillicothe has probably visited Mound City or the Seip Mound and has been amazed that indigenous people built such impressive mounds, the largest of which should really be called earthen pyramids. The city of Newark, Ohio, has the largest Hopewellian earthwork center in the entire country. In the Athens area, we don’t have earthworks identical to those in other parts of Hopewellian Ohio, but we do have one rather unique mound center. It is located in The Plains, just north of Athens. In The Plains there once existed about 30 earthen mounds and circles, collectively representing a center comparable to but smaller in scale than those built by Hopewellian societies. The mounds in The Plains were built beginning about 2000 years ago, with construction lasting about 300 years. The most notable of these burial mounds is the Hartman Mound, not surprisingly located on Mound Street. As a reflection of the archaeological significance of The Plains, all of these earthworks are part of the National Register of Historic Sites.

The earthwork center in The Plains was periodically visited by sets of the small communities dotting the surrounding waterways during this “Woodland” period. These communities had now formed social and political alliances with more formal leaders, and each of these larger groups would be affiliated with one or more of the earthworks in The Plains. Thus, larger regional alliances or confederacies were being created, although the local community was composed of only about 25 people who still fished, hunted, gathered and gardened.

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The area again was largely abandoned from about 1700 to 1500 years ago. We don't exactly know why, but I suspect the climate changed for the worst, and people moved to better locations. When their descendents returned to the Athens area, they built small villages and resumed the life that their ancestors had created. However, one major change was about to alter much of the pace of life.

Digging in 1990, we discovered several small pieces of corn, or maize, at a site along Margaret Creek, just southwest of Athens. When the maize was radiocarbon dated, we learned that it was grown about 1300 years ago, as early as maize was grown in Midwest sites. This maize had made its way via travelers and traders up the Mississippi and across the Ohio, adopted by locals along the way. It's just one plant, but once it took hold, the economy and many elements of social life changed. Work habits, the division of labor, pottery types, storage facilities – all were altered with the new crop which eventually dominated the plant inventory. Villages grew and population size in the entire valley shot up. If you were walking along the river 1000 years ago, you would have seen permanent villages of 50 to 60 people every two miles or so along the floodplain, with large maize fields flanking each of the villages. When we drive into Athens today, those vibrant villages are no longer present, but these would have been located wherever large maize fields could have been planted.

Nonetheless, these villagers too left the area about 600 years ago, not due to the incursion of the new Americans with roots in Europe, but rather to a series of droughts which once again impacted the agricultural economy. Many of the valleys across southern Ohio were abandoned at this time, the populations probably moving south towards and beyond the Ohio River. It's here, after nearly 10,000 years of people living

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their lives, having families, teaching their kids, mourning their dead, and wondering about the unknowns of the universe, that “prehistory” ends.

So when people today travel to see the great archaeological sites of the past, they should know that in Athens and other parts of southeastern Ohio, often right under their feet or within their view, there once were communities of people who thrived in the area for very long periods of time. They lived a very different way of life than is lived in the modern world but, as challenging as it is, archaeology strives to better understand all people. Fortunately, while the past is gone, the sites of these past people still exist throughout Athens. And to archaeologists, these sites have much yet to tell of their builders.