



Kentucky Archaeology Month
September 2022

*Broadening interaction in the social, economic, and
political spheres of the Eastern Woodlands*

BROADENING INTERACTION IN THE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, AND POLITICAL SPHERES IN THE EASTERN WOODLANDS

THE LATE ARCHAIC 4000-1000 BCE

Native American groups in the Eastern Woodlands interacted with each other throughout time. During the Late Archaic period, this interaction increased, as populations grew and spread across the land. This place we now call Kentucky was a perfect interaction zone because of its central location and its major navigable rivers. The Green River Valley and the Falls of the Ohio River were especially dynamic Late Archaic period centers of interaction. Groups walked overland trails, many of which were made by migrating animals, and Native peoples also traveled waterways in canoes.

Maintaining social, economic, and political relationships with neighbors was important for Kentucky's Late Archaic residents. This interaction was both direct and indirect. When people traveled, that was direct or face-to-face interaction. Attending feasts or marriage celebrations extended family bonds. The exchange of raw materials or finished items strengthened economic relationships. Political alliances established with outside groups provided regional stability.

Artifacts offer archaeologists information about direct interaction during the Late Archaic period. Some of these objects were made from raw materials that do not occur naturally in Kentucky. People would have brought these items to Kentucky in finished form. But in other cases, Kentucky residents made things they needed out of these non-local materials.

Native craftspeople carved steatite (soapstone), a soft rock from the eastern mountains of Virginia and North Carolina, into bowls and smoking pipes. Hematite is found in many places in the eastern

U.S., including Kentucky, but plummet made from hematite often occur in sites along the Mississippi River. Objects made of copper from the North have been recovered from Green River Valley shell midden sites. Archaeologists also have documented conch and marginella shells at Green River sites. These items came from the Gulf of Mexico or the south Atlantic Coast.

Natural forces, like the Ohio River, also transported non-local materials into Kentucky. Residents made axes and grinding stones from hard granitic rock. They transformed cannel coal from the eastern mountains into beads and gaming pieces. Banded slate that occurred north of the Ohio River in Ohio and Pennsylvania became personal adornments and weights for spear throwers.

The spread of ideas rather than objects reflects indirect interaction. Native craftsmen made items from locally available flint or animal bone, but some, like with stemmed spear or dart points, share design elements with points from across a broad region. Geometric designs carved into bone pins found southwest of the Falls are like those created by peoples who lived in the Midwest. Clay cooking balls collected from Late Archaic sites at the Falls occur at northern Louisiana sites. But the Kentucky examples were not made in the South. The shared designs on both the engraved bone pins and the clay cooking balls probably had special meaning for family or related groups. If people used similar technology and stylistic information, they probably shared how to do many other things as well.



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