

DISCOVERING Alabama

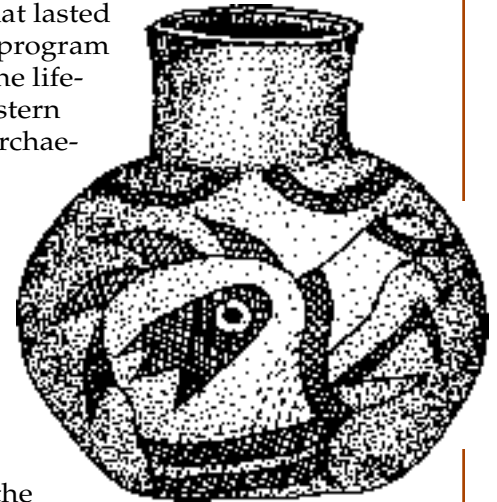
Teacher's Guide

Moundville

Synopsis

This video features Moundville Archaeological Park and the mound-building Indian culture of the pre-historic Mississippian Period that lasted from around A.D. 1000 to 1550. The program examines the symbols, beliefs, and the life-ways of this once dominant southeastern culture and traces two centuries of archaeological study to create a better understanding of these early Native Americans and the significance of their earthen mounds.

Archaeological evidence suggests that the Moundville Indians based much of their society on beliefs and symbols derived from nature. Their large earthen mounds are thought to be associated, in part, with the people's religious belief in the regenerative powers of the Earth. This video links the emergence of science, particularly the science of archaeology, with the timeless human quest to understand the meaning of life. The story of Moundville offers a unique opportunity for interdisciplinary instruction in history, social studies, science, geography, and environmental education.



Suggested Curriculum Areas

- Science
- Archaeology
- Social Studies
- Art

Suggested Grade Levels

4–12

Key Concepts

- Ecosystems & Ecotones
- Cultural Symbolism
- Life-styles

Key Skills

- Critical Thinking
- Evaluation
- Research
- Problem-Solving



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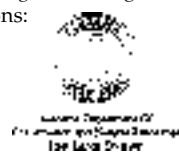


Discovering Alabama is a production of the Alabama Museum of Natural History in cooperation with Alabama Public Television. For a complete list of titles in the *Discovering Alabama* series, as well as for information about ordering videos and accompanying Teacher's Guides, contact us at either: *Discovering Alabama*, Box 870340, Tuscaloosa AL 35487-0340; phone: 205-348-2036; fax: 205-348-4219; or email: orders@discoveringalabama.org. Also visit our website: www.discoveringalabama.org.

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#14 Moundville © Doug Phillips, 1996; revised 2001

Before Viewing

1. Ask students to think quietly for a moment about the main symbols in their lives, then ask each student to make a brief list of these symbols. (There may be questions about what is meant by the word **symbol**, but do not define the term at this point. Leave students free to interpret the term from their own perspective.) Invite several students to read their lists, which might include brand names, logos, religious symbols, road signs, achievement honors, sports, famous people, and other icons. As students share their lists, record them on the blackboard.

2. Solicit students' thoughts on the meaning of the word **symbol**. Suggest that a cultural symbol is an object or an image, which stands for both itself and something beyond itself, such as a society's beliefs, values, or lifeways. Discuss which of the students' listed symbols might qualify as cultural symbols for our society today. Explore with the students the beliefs, values, and lifeways of our society that may be expressed through these cultural symbols.

3. Introduce the video by explaining that it introduces a society that thrived eight hundred years ago—the prehistoric Indians of Moundville, Alabama—whose most conspicuous cultural symbols were the mysterious earthen mounds that remain there today. Ask students to note the other cultural symbols they will see in the video and the significance of each symbol in revealing how the Moundville Indians might have interpreted the world.



While Viewing

A standard human tendency is to view the habits of distant cultures as being different or odd, while accepting analogous practices in our own culture as being quite normal. As an example, you may remember this old joke: "What strange society practices a daily ritual of eating the underside of a scavenging animal, the embryos of a hapless bird, a glob of ground-up grass, and washes it down with a mind-altering brew from a toxic plant?" The answer, of course, is our **own society**, enjoying bacon, eggs, toast, and coffee.

Video Mystery Question: In terms of geography, where is Moundville, Alabama? (Answer: In an **ecotone**, an area at the juncture of several different geographic regions. Moundville lies on the edge of the Fall Line Hills, between the Valley and Ridge Province to the east, the Cumberland Plateau to the north, and the Coastal Plain to the south.)

After Viewing

1. Initiate discussion about the program by asking students to tell what new information or perspectives they learned from the video. Inquire about the ways in which the Moundville Indian culture was similar to our own in terms of common foods, organized government, artistic expression, and basic human needs associated with events such as birth and death.

2. Assemble students in small groups and ask the members of each group to produce collectively (draw, paint, build) a cultural symbol they think will be indicative of American society a thousand years into the future. Next, have each group present its new symbol to the class and explain how it represents the beliefs and values of the society they envision. Be sure to obtain each group's assessment of how their envisioned society will view its "bond with the Earth." Will your symbol endure for a thousand years in the soil?

Extensions

1. Take the class to visit **Moundville Archaeological Park**. Ask students to imagine that they are archaeologists preparing to conduct scientific studies at the site. Divide the class into teams, each with a different research assignment to be undertaken independently. These assignments are best when drawn from actual questions that you and your students have about the site: the Indians, past or present archaeological work, park facilities, or other pertinent concerns. Contact the park director at 205-371-2234 to help develop the assignments.

2. For hands-on learning, give students the challenge of learning to make pottery. Refer to *NatureSouth*, vol. 3, no. 3, p. 12 for simple instructions. Sources for pre-mixed clay include the Moundville Museum Store, the University of Alabama Supply Store, or your local art supply store.

3. Many questions that may arise from viewing this video will be suitable for independent research, i.e., for term papers, interviews, surveys, or book reports.

Philosophical Reflections

As the video notes, ancient Greek philosophers were curious to answer the question of how we know what we know. They sought to understand the human phenomenon of **knowing** and of what it means to have **knowledge**. This has long been a primary concern of philosophy and, of course, science.

The video suggests that, because of our increasing store of scientific knowledge and technology, we should know more today than we did in ages past. But are there certain kinds of knowledge that human society is losing as we become increasingly committed to technology as a chief means of knowing? Discuss this issue.

Nature in Art

The famous Rattlesnake Disk (see illustration on the opposite page) is a large, incised sandstone disk that is the centerpiece of the displays in the museum at Moundville. The striking design portrays the open hand with an eyelike design in its palm, a common Moundville motif. Encircling the hand are two horned rattlesnakes, knotted together—a design found in only one other artifact.

Experts do not agree as to the meaning of these inscribed images, but they believe that such forms were used by the Mississippian elite to advertise their claims to supernatural powers and divinity. The disk itself was used as a palette for mixing pigments, probably paints used in ceremonial events. Study the design carefully. Try to imagine what the people of Moundville thought about this symbol and what it might have meant to them.

Community Connections

Today's society is wedded to the automobile—the speed, the sexy image; the sense of power and command. Sitting in our air-conditioned, tinted glass, stereo-equipped cultural emblem of success, we are walled off from the realities that once were part of the daily experience of **community**. Simple realities like flowers, neighbors, woodlots, stream crossings, wind, weather, and wildlife are no longer direct experiences in our lives. But the Mississippian Indians traveled by foot or canoe, and their connection to their natural community was more direct than ours.

1. Conduct a **Mississippian Indian Excursion**. In other words, take the class on a walk through a part of your community that is often ignored or overlooked because it is usually seen only from the car window—a city neighborhood or suburban subdivision, a commercial district, or a stretch of dirt road in the countryside, a local farm or a backwoods natural area. Make this a relaxed, unstructured activity but have students note plants,

animals, and other interesting natural or human phenomena along the way. Instruct them to be on the watch for a mini-ecotone. This activity can stimulate student enthusiasm, improve teacher–student rapport, and create new levels of community awareness. A site check in advance is advisable for safety's sake. Plan to enlist a few fellow teachers and parents to help keep an eye on things.

2. Assign the excursion activity as a weekend project for each student to conduct with his or her family. On Monday, ask for verbal reports. (Evaluate on the basis of student enthusiasm, enjoyable student–parent interaction, or new awareness of features in the community.)

Complementary Aids and Activities

Moundville Archaeological Park. For tour information and hours, write: P.O. Box 66, Moundville AL 35474, or call: 205-371-2234.

Native American Notebook. Issue no. 9, "Questions about Moundville Archaeological Park." Available through Moundville Archaeological Park, see above.

Project Learning Tree, grades 7–12, "Superstitions, Symbols, and Similes." Available through Alabama Forestry Association, 555 Alabama St., Montgomery AL 36104; 334-265-8733.

Aquatic Project WILD, grades 4–12. Ecotone activity, "The Edge of Home." Available through Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, 64 N. Union St., Montgomery AL 36130; 334-242-3623.

Additional References and Resources

NatureSouth, vol. 1, no. 4; vol. 3, no. 3; vol. 4, no. 3; and vol. 5, no. 1, contain stories about Moundville. Order from Alabama Museum of Natural History, University of Alabama Museums, Box 870340, Tuscaloosa AL 35487-0340; 205-348-7550.

Moundville: An Introduction to the Archaeology of a Mississippian Chiefdom by John A. Walthall (1994). Special Publication No. 1, Alabama Museum of Natural History.

The Old Beloved Path by William W. Winn (1992). The Historic Chattahoochee Commission, 205-687-9755, and the Columbus Museum, in cooperation with the Chattahoochee Indian Heritage Association. About Creek Indians in the Chattahoochee River Valley, it is a good reference for Indians of the Southeast.

The Southeastern Indians by Charles M. Hudson (1976).

Sun Circles and Human Hands: The Southeastern Indians Art and Industries, edited by Emma Lila Fundaburk and Mary Douglass Foreman (1968). Order from Southern Publications, P.O. Box 750, Fairhope AL 36533.

Parting Thoughts

As time passes, our present society will become ancient history. Current life-styles, knowledge, and beliefs will change, as they always have from age to age. When the archaeologists of future millennia encounter the artifacts from today's culture, what will they think? Will they uncover the buried remains of our landfills and conclude that our religious beliefs involved the ritual sacrifice of tires, refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, and all manner of paper and plastics? Will they find the remnants of our freeways and shopping malls and surmise that to us the meaning of life was expressed through the symbols of concrete and asphalt? And will they find evidence of the scores of domed football arenas and deduce that we were a ceremonial culture with regular ceremonies held on Monday nights and the main event on Super Sunday? If so, they will probably make a video about our mysterious culture.

Oh yeah, I almost forgot. When you arrange a field trip to Moundville, if possible, bring along the principal, the mayor, parents, or a local business leader or two. Involve them in the student research activities and ask that they participate in discussions about the future of our culture and how we might respect our "bond with the Earth."

Happy outings,



A. D. King



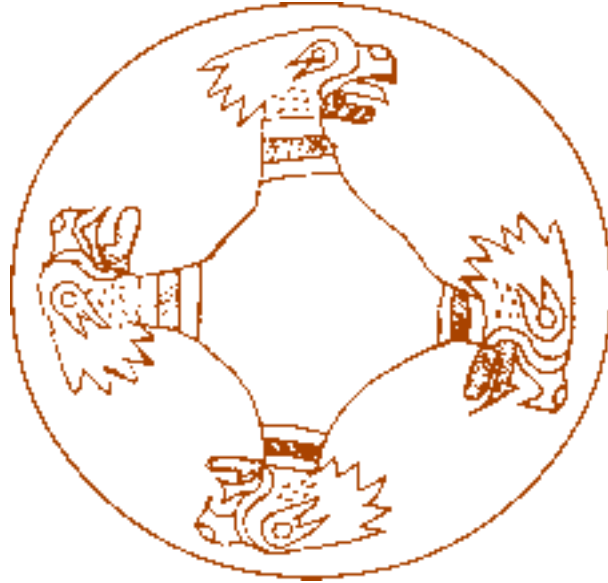
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Activity/Information Sheet

Moundville

Some of the Moundville symbols are realistic objects seen in our natural world. Other symbolic forms draw from nature but go beyond realistic imagery. These icons may then be considered supernatural. The drawings on this page are four principal “supernaturals” frequently found in Moundville art. The meanings of these symbols remain unknown. Try to determine what makes each symbol or icon supernatural. Create your own supernatural symbol using images from both the natural world and your own imagination.

RAPTOR (or Bird of Prey)



MOTH MONSTER



CRESTED BIRD



WINGED SNAKE

