

# Archaeology of North America

Introduction:

Basic concepts, cultural areas, and  
climate zones

## **North American Archaeology: Past, present and future:**

- Archaeology as anthropology
- Archaeology as an investigative science
- Archaeology as an inferential science
- Archaeology as institutionally based: museums, universities, and government agencies
- Archaeology and the national “Past with a capital P”
- Community-based and constituency-driven archaeology

# Regions of North America

- “Culture area”: “a geographic area within which ethnic groups tend to have similar cultural traits”
- Regions are geographical, not political:  
“boundaries” shift dramatically over time, and peoples move dynamically back and forth
- Over time, these regions are as much “interaction spheres” as bounded regions

# North American Climate Zones, or “Biomes”

- Paleo-  
environmental  
reconstruction
- Recent data  
on micro-  
climatological  
variability  
across time,  
space
- Humans have  
both adapted  
to and  
modified these  
environments  
over time

# What “Climate Change” means...

- Holocene Transition , ca. 14,000 to 12,000 BP
- General trends: drier, warmer (but this is really variable, from north to south and across the continent)
- Climate change affects resources (what’s where, and how much)
- Climate change affects human mobility
- Climate change affects resource predictability

**Environmental transformation as part of the  
human dynamic ...**

# **“Systematics”: How do we identify and describe pattern, and change over time?**

- Cultural histories
- Horizon and tradition
- Cultural Evolution
- Periods: Paleoindian, Archaic, Woodland, and Historic
- Socio-economic systems: foragers, complex hunter-gatherers, and agriculturalists
- Political economies: bands, tribes, chiefdoms, and states

# Thematic Research Questions in North American Archaeology

1. How and when did the original settlement of North America occur?  
[How many settlement phases occurred, over all?]
2. How have humans adapted to the diverse environments of North America and to climate change over time? [How have humans modified their environments here?]
3. How, when, and where did food production develop in North America?
4. How, when, and where did sociopolitically complex, internally differentiated cultural systems develop in North America?
5. What ethnic identities can be identified and historically traced in North America's past? [What is 'ethnogenesis', and what kinds of dynamics shaped the interactions *between* ethnic groups in North America?]
6. How did settlement by Europeans and culture contact between Native Americans and Europeans transform North American cultural and natural landscapes?
7. How did the United States and Canada develop into global and industrial powers?
8. Can archaeology serve as a tool for social problem-solving in contemporary American society?

Cahokia mounds, near St. Louis