Paleoindian

The Paleoindian period (ca. 12,000–10,000 B.P.) represents the earliest substantial human occupation in the Western Hemisphere. Paleoindian populations are conventionally described as highly adaptive, mobile hunter-gatherers whose ancestors had migrated from Siberia into North America between ca. 12,000 to 10,000 years Before Present (B.P.). This migration likely occurred near the end of the last Ice Age, during the Late Pleistocene Epoch, when glaciers were expanding and retreating from fluctuations in the climate from colder to warmer episodes. Human populations presumably moved when the colder periods of the Pleistocene captured large quantities of the Earth's water in glaciers. This lowered sea levels and exposed large portions of the continent, including a land bridge between Siberia and Alaska, which allowed human populations to follow Pleistocene mammals across to the Americas.

At present, increasing evidence is available for occupations of greater antiquity than has been traditionally recognized for the Paleoindian period. These trends, along with additional deficiencies in the conventional model of colonization, have led archaeologists to advance alternative models for the peopling of the Americas, including a route via watercraft down the Pacific coast. Currently, no consensus has been achieved within the professional archaeological community, and these models are still a topic of healthy debate (see Faught 2008; Pitblado 2011). While sites with components that are thought to predate 12,000 B.P. have been discovered elsewhere in the Southeast (e.g., Page-Ladson, FL, Cactus Hill, VA, and Topper, SC), such deposits are currently unknown in Georgia.

According to Anderson (1996:4), the general environmental situation in which North American Paleoindian groups lived was one of transition, with much of the eastern United States experiencing a period of environmental fluctuation as temperatures became warmer in the summer and colder in the winter. North American vegetation reflected these climatic changes as mature mesic oak-hickory forests replaced the Glacial spruce/pine forests that once flourished in the more stable, colder environment. The Coastal Plain of present day Georgia, Alabama, and Florida, however, supported mature oak-hickory-southern pine forests much earlier in the period. This environmental situation was considerably more stable than latitudes above 33° N, where the replacement of the Full Glacial spruce/pine boreal forest by a Post Glacial mesic-oak forest was still an ongoing process.

A regional paleoclimatic model developed by Watts (1992; Watts et al. 1996) posits that post-12,000 B.P., northeast Florida and southeast Georgia saw more xeric flora with some prairie development, low lake levels, and many dried lake basins. A few km west of Okefenokee, evidence suggests Lake Louise was dry prior to 8,500 BP and evidence for the presence of Holocene oak forests at Lake Louise between 8,500 to 5,000 BP indicates significantly lower precipitation during this interval (Delcourt 1980; Watts 1969, 1983). Specifically, it is likely that much of the Okefenokee Basin and surrounding uplands were dry and inhospitable, aside from occasional waterholes, until climate shifted from drier to wetter conditions at approximately 7,000 BP, creating a stand of water in the Okefenokee Basin enhanced by rising sea levels that are identified in peat deposits (Cohen et al. 1984:510). Although nomadic Paleoindian hunters likely utilized portions of the Okefenokee Basin supporting grazing animals prior to swamp formation, archaeological evidence of Paleoindian occupations is likely now deeply submerged under the swamp (Kirkland and Cook 2007).

In Georgia, and in the Southeast generally, the Paleoindian period has been provisionally divided into Early, Middle, and Late or Transitional subperiods based on distinctive changes in material culture and most commonly recognized via projectile point morphology. These changes are considered to roughly correlate