

Shorter Contributions

Abstracts from the Big Levels Symposium

Banisteria, Number 13, pages 209-210
© 1999 by the Virginia Natural History Society

PREHISTORY OF BIG LEVELS: 12,500 YEARS OF CULTURAL EVOLUTION - Big Levels and environs have been occupied by humankind for approximately 12,500 years. Human use, however, has varied through time both in intensity and with function. The earliest groups utilized the environment over extensive territories within a central based wandering pattern and possibly a higher reliance on hunting than in later periods. As the Pleistocene became the Holocene, settlement and subsistence activities evolved into a seasonal round focusing on needed commodities as they became available. As band level groups of 25-50 people, the hunters and gatherers were egalitarian with community relations based on achieved as opposed to ascribed status. Gradually, the prime subsistence strategies emphasized plants with a clear sexual division of labor. Until circa 2500 BC, settlement patterns were sylvan in nature exploiting a broad environmental spectrum. At that time, the major drainages became the focus with floodplains and terrace systems the central place of settlement and subsistence emphasizing white-tailed deer, seed crops, nuts, and

fish. The beginnings of horticulture occurred during this time with an ever-increasing reliance on raised crops. By AD 900-1000, the triad of corn, beans, and squash formed the basis of foodways supplemented by continued hunting and fishing. The more fertile floodplains were the cultural focus for the gardening of crops, the location of towns and villages, and the interplay of tribal-level societies.

Big Levels was occupied from circa 8000 BC through the contact period. The major use of the area, however, occurred during late Archaic times from about 2500-1000 BC. In addition to hunting and gathering opportunities, the outcrops and secondary deposits of quartzite were extensively used for the production of stone tools. Unique environmental attributes of Big Levels during the Xenothermic may have led to other exploitation of the area. Recent excavations at 44AU548, a quartzite quarry site, recovered a tool assemblage involving extensive spear point and shaft production.

George A. Tolley and Michael B. Barber
USDA-Forest Service
George Washington and Jefferson National Forests
Roanoke, VA 24019