

Before Creek and Cherokee:

The Colonial Transformation of Prehistoric Georgia

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## Introduction

It is not at all uncommon for present-day residents of Georgia to find physical evidence of the first inhabitants of Georgia on occasion, typically in the form of Indian "arrowheads" or bits and pieces of broken pottery. Although many of these end up in shoeboxes, never to be seen again, professional archaeologists are sometimes consulted in order to help identify and date these finds. Among the most common questions asked is "What Indian tribe made this?" Whether stated or not, the answer generally expected by Georgians, and particularly those from the Piedmont region around Atlanta, is Creek or Cherokee. This is not an illogical assumption, because it is common knowledge that the two major Indian tribes that lived on the western and northern frontier of Georgia during its first century as a colony and state (1733-1838) were the Creek and the Cherokee.

What is not well known, however, is that these two familiar Indian societies, so important in Georgia's early history, were essentially products of the early colonial era, built out of the ruins of prehistoric chiefdoms that once dotted the Southeastern landscape. The turbulent and devastating years after first contact and colonization by Europeans resulted in the fragmentation and extinction of many indigenous Indian societies, and it is only the transformed societies created by the survivors (principally the Creek and Cherokee for Georgia) whose names persist in modern memory. Older names such as Coosa and Altamaha remain only as geographic features, and the names of Guale, Mocama, and Ocute, to mention but a few, are all but forgotten. The chiefdoms of the late prehistoric era have only recently begun to be more fully understood in this context, and the details of the connection between them and later groups such as the Creek and Cherokee are still being studied by archaeologists and historians.

The following very brief overview of the transformations of the early colonial era should serve as an introduction to establishing that link with the predecessors of the Creek and Cherokee. It should also reveal why only a tiny fraction of the more recent Indian artifacts to be found in Georgia can truly be attributed to the Creek or Cherokee, and why those names have little meaning prior to the European colonial period. Volumes have been written on this subject, and a vast amount remains to be understood. Much of the research on which this essay is based is quite recent (in some cases within the last decade), and has been carried out by many different archaeologists, historians, and other scholars.

## Late Prehistoric Chiefdoms in Georgia

When the first Europeans arrived in present-day Georgia during the first half of the 16th century, the landscape was home to more than a dozen largely distinct Indian chiefdoms scattered across all the major physiographic regions in the state. These societies were composed of the descendants of the first nomadic bands that arrived in the region now known as Georgia more than eleven thousand years earlier. The story of their long occupation of Georgia is far beyond the scope of this essay, but it suffices to say that the chiefdoms noted here were but the most recent development in a lengthy and complex history of cultural development in southeastern North America. Most of the chiefdoms visited by early Spanish explorers in the Southeast were part of a broader cultural phenomenon that had developed only during the last six centuries, making it difficult to push many of the societies mentioned below farther back into the past than perhaps only C.E. 900 (and indeed far more recently for much of Georgia). As a consequence, it should be kept in mind that just as the Creek and Cherokee tribes of the 18th-century were quite different from their predecessors two centuries earlier, the chiefdoms of 16th-century Georgia had very little resemblance to the many and varied indigenous societies which preceded them by thousands of years.

The social geography of Georgia at the time of European contact was very different from that of later centuries. The dozen or so major indigenous chiefdoms scattered across the state's river valleys and coastal estuaries represented politically centralized Indian societies ruled by hereditary chiefs. To oversimplify a remarkably complex phenomenon, each chiefdom was composed of a number of distinct towns, villages, hamlets, and farmsteads under the political control of a single leader, whose office was inherited matrilineally, or thorough the mother's line (typically uncle to nephew). In some cases, several geographically separate chiefdoms were nominally under the control of one paramount chief, although decision-making was probably carried out by councils of regional chiefs. Southeastern chiefdoms were supported by an agricultural economy centering on the cultivation of corn, beans, and squash as staple foodstuffs, and as such were frequently located along the widest stretches of rich bottomland soils within the floodplains of major rivers. As a result, the distribution of these chiefdoms across Georgia was closely linked to physical geography and the natural environment. Both natural and cultural forces thus played a role in shaping the indigenous social geography of Georgia.

The majority of the early 16th-century chiefdoms across Georgia belonged to what archaeologists refer to as the Lamar culture, which is essentially a broad area of Indian societies with a more or less shared material culture (predominantly defined by pottery styles). Based on early historical accounts, it is also known that most of the inhabitants of these Lamar societies in Georgia spoke the Muskogean language, which was also the language of the later Creeks. This is no coincidence, for the remnants of many of these chiefdoms and others eventually assembled to become the Creek confederacy. Nevertheless, in the 16th century, the majority of these prehistoric chiefdoms were relatively autonomous societies, and although they were aware of each other's existence and may have interacted, their inhabitants would never have considered themselves to be part of a single broader society.

What may seem surprising, however, is that many of the areas later inhabited by Cherokee-speaking groups, such as the entire Ridge and Valley region of northwestern Georgia, were originally home to Muskogean (Creek)-speaking chiefdoms during the

prehistoric period. Although there is considerable debate on the precise boundaries of these two broad language-groups in the 16th-century, there is little doubt that the Cherokee language was originally much more restricted in range than was the case at the time of removal in 1838, probably including only the highest mountain valleys and riverine headwaters of the Blue Ridge. This prompts two immediate questions: where did the inhabitants of the Muskogean chiefdoms go, and where did the Cherokee-speakers come from? A further question, and one which is perhaps most interesting, is why did this transformation take place? Beyond this, yet another question might be posed: what happened to the other Indian groups which inhabited Georgia during the late prehistoric period? Specifically, the southeastern region of Georgia was home to yet other types of Indian societies during the early 16th-century, and many of these were not a part of the Lamar culture, nor did they speak the Muskogean or Cherokee languages. Most of these various societies spoke what is now known as the Timucuan language, and their material culture is still being defined by archaeologists. Timucuan is now an extinct language, and the societies that lived in this southern region of Georgia no longer exist.

The answers to these questions lie in the early European colonial era. Although the colony of Georgia was founded in 1733, the vast majority of the changes mentioned above occurred long before James Oglethorpe established Savannah. In the two centuries which preceded the arrival of English colonists in what is now Georgia, the combined effect of Spanish, English, and French exploration and colonization in southeastern North America brought about massive changes in the social geography of the region, totally re-arranging the late prehistoric picture. Moreover, it was during precisely this era that the Creek and Cherokee societies so familiar to modern Georgians were forged out of the remnants of these prehistoric chiefdoms, forever changing the face of Georgia.

### **First Contact: Arrival of the Europeans**

Following the 1492 landfall of Columbus in the Bahamas, European explorers fanned out across the Americas, initially by sea, but increasingly on land as well. Although coastlines of southeastern North America were subject to occasional landfalls by sailors and would-be colonists (such as the 1512-3 visits of Juan Ponce de León to the south Florida coast and the failed 1526 colony of Lúcas Vázquez de Ayllón on the South Carolina or Georgia coast), it was not until the 1539-1543 expedition of Hernando de Soto that Spaniards first penetrated deep into the interior of Georgia. During 1540, Soto's army of some 600 soldiers marched north from Florida into the coastal plain of Georgia, swinging northeast along the fall line into South and North Carolina, and passing through the northwestern corner of Georgia from Tennessee into Alabama. Although the Hernando de Soto expedition was ultimately a failure, leaving less than half of the original army alive to make their escape to Mexico, its ultimate impact on the native inhabitants of the Southeast was devastating. Within only a few decades, the powerful chiefdoms of the late prehistoric period would begin their collapse, and the changes would only accelerate over the next centuries.

Though the generally brief visits of Soto's army to the various Indian chiefdoms along his route were sometimes marred by violence and bloodshed, the primary legacy of the Hernando de Soto expedition was far more insidious. Europe at that time was riddled

with epidemic diseases, including smallpox, bubonic plague, measles, and many others. Whereas Europeans as a group had developed some resistance to these diseases over the centuries, the native populations of the Americas had never been exposed to such epidemic diseases, and thus when Soto's army made first contact with dozens of Indian chiefdoms across southeastern North America, the results were devastating. Individuals with such diseases, and others acting as carriers, spread a variety of European diseases across much of the interior. Even objects traded or left behind by the explorers, such as iron tools or clothing, could act as agents of disease, spreading dormant viruses far from the initial point of contact. Two later Spanish expeditions into this region (Tristan de Luna in 1559-61 and Juan Pardo in 1566-68) undoubtedly introduced further diseases, augmenting the effect of Soto's original journey. While there is still much debate as to the exact figures, there is now sound documentary evidence to conclude that the indigenous population levels of the Southeast dropped by more than 90% within the first two centuries after contact.

The effect of such population loss on Indian chiefdoms in Georgia and the rest of the Southeast was apparently swift and deadly. With massive numbers of Indians dead or dying, chiefdoms effectively collapsed, unable to maintain an existence without an effective labor force to produce food or carry out other tasks essential to the survival of these societies in their original state. Whole villages may have been laid waste, and in the face of massive and repeated epidemics, the remaining survivors of once-powerful native societies began to move and aggregate. Although such migration was not necessarily a new phenomenon in the Southeast, the scale and rapidity of the changes during the historic period were perhaps without precedent for this region. Archaeological and historical data indicate that the prehistoric social geography of Georgia was almost completely transformed during the space of the next two centuries. Late prehistoric Indian chiefdoms which had existed in a comparatively stable location for centuries were in some cases completely abandoned, their surviving inhabitants relocating to neighboring areas, joining with other survivors in an effort to maintain their existence. Over time, several points of aggregation emerged across the Southeast, and these areas seem to have become havens for refugees from other areas. During the first century after the Hernando de Soto expedition, the interior of Georgia was home to two major areas where Muskogee-speakers aggregated, one centered along the Piedmont stretch of the Oconee River, and another along the upper Coastal Plain section of the Chattahoochee.

A major factor during the initial stages of this transformation, particularly in the deep interior, was indeed epidemic disease. Even without the constant presence of European colonists in these frontier regions, the changes triggered by epidemics functioned independently to depopulate broad areas of the Southeast, sweeping away much of the prehistoric chiefly landscape. This was only the beginning, however, for very soon new European colonists would arrive, introducing even more forces for change. The 17th century thus effectively witnessed the sweeping away of the old order and the establishment of a new social landscape, paving the way for the later foundation of the colony of Georgia.

## Spanish Missions and the Draft Labor System

The 1565 foundation of the Spanish colony of St. Augustine on the northern Atlantic coast of Florida marked the beginning of a Spanish colonial effort that would ultimately last two centuries. During this time, Spanish missionaries, soldiers, and colonists would push ever farther to the west and north, gradually assimilating Indian societies in northern Florida and southern Georgia into the developing colonial system centered at St. Augustine. Although several small outposts and Jesuit missions were established along the Georgia coast soon after St. Augustine was founded, it was not until the very end of the 16th century that the establishment and use of missions by Franciscan friars truly began in earnest, pushing the Spanish sphere of influence deeper and deeper into Georgia.

The barrier-island chain off the coast of Georgia was soon incorporated into two mission provinces, named Guale and Mocama, and a short-lived mission was even established at the forks of the Altamaha River. By 1630 the Timucua mission province of northern Florida had been extended into deep southern Georgia, where the towns of Arapaja and Cachipile were located along the upper Suwannee River drainage near present-day Valdosta. During the first half of the 17th century, much of southeastern Georgia was within or on the fringes of the Spanish colonial system. Working largely within the pre-existing political systems, Franciscan friars gradually gained entrance into the Indian societies, converting the native leadership, and by their example most of the Indian population, to Catholicism. Missions were established at pre-existing central Indian towns, with churches and convents being erected using a mixture of Indian and European techniques. There, solitary friars labored to continue their conversion efforts, effectively acting as cultural brokers between local Indian populations and the European world that had been thrust upon them. In the mission setting Indians were introduced to a variety of new ideas, tools, techniques, and even foods, and friars diligently learned native languages and cultures, often writing down many of their observations. This cultural exchanges was not one-sided, however, for Spanish friars, soldiers, and colonists adopted many elements of Indian culture, including a remarkable variety of foods, among which corn was one of the most important for this region.

The Franciscan friars and their mission communities were but only one facet of the overall Spanish colonial system, however, and in many ways the least detrimental. During the 17th-century, the mission provinces effectively became the principal labor pool for the Spanish military colony at St. Augustine, providing substantial yearly drafts of male laborers to work in the cornfields around the city. Due in part to the fact that Spanish Florida was an extremely poor garrison colony on the far northern frontier of the Spanish colonial world, and was largely dependent upon direct but unreliable yearly monetary support from the Spanish crown, the inhabitants of St. Augustine became increasingly dependent on the vast labor pool that the mission provinces represented. Indeed, one could argue that without Indian laborers to grow the staple food of Spanish Florida--corn--the colonial garrison-town of St. Augustine might not have survived. As a consequence, the mission system formed an integral part of the economic basis of the Spanish colonial system.

The increased level of Spanish/Indian interaction represented by the 17th-century mission system also led to even further population losses among converted Indian

societies. Continuing epidemic diseases, combined with the stresses of the draft labor system, led to massive population decline through death and fugitivism, which in turn impacted the labor pool on which Spanish Florida was so dependent. Older, more devastated mission provinces near St. Augustine were in turn regenerated by a sort of "backflow" of population from the less-ravaged outer frontier zones, further accelerating the breakdown and transformation of indigenous Indian cultures. As populations declined, once-scattered villages were often intentionally, and in some cases forcibly, resettled to central locations along primary Spanish transportation routes. Occasional uprisings and rebellions typically only accelerated the pace of change, and by the middle of the 17th-century, the mission provinces of north Florida and south Georgia looked less and less like indigenous Indian societies, and more and more like functional parts of a Spanish colony.

The influence of Spanish Florida and the mission system had its effect on the interior of Georgia as well. Although occasional exploratory expeditions by soldiers and friars did penetrate the northern interior (and particularly the province of Tama near present-day Milledgeville) during the closing years of the 16th century and the first third of the 17th century, the greatest impact of the colonial system on the unconverted Indian provinces beyond the realm of the missions was a sort of dynamic frontier effect. Not only were foodstuffs and other items from the interior often traded for Spanish items, such as glass beads, metal tools and ornaments, clothing, etc., but native populations also flowed back and forth along this frontier zone, including fugitives from the labor draft and immigrants from the interior. In broad perspective, the indirect effect of the Spanish colonial system spread much farther into the Southeast than just the mission provinces, and indeed much of present-day Georgia was influenced to some extent.

The expansion and development of the mission system of Spanish Florida persisted through the first half of the 17th-century, and in some cases even later. Although the missions themselves would ultimately persist until the end of the century, the late 17th century witnessed the decline and ruin of the Spanish mission system, and the simultaneous transformation of the interior. The reasons for this were complex, but the primary agent of change can be narrowed down to the appearance and expansion of the English colonies of Carolina, and to a lesser extent Virginia. During this period, the direct and indirect effects of English colonization would exert increasing pressures on the Spanish colonial system, including all those Indian groups within or affected by that system. In the end, a rapidly developing English trade in Indian slaves and animal pelts would finalize the destruction of the Spanish missions, ushering in the age of the Creek and Cherokee.

### **Onslaught from the North**

Beginning at least as early as the late 1650s, and considerably accelerating after the foundation of Charles Town (Charleston) in 1670, both unconverted Indian groups in the deep frontier and mission Indians within the Spanish colonial system were increasingly subjected to raids by roving bands of marauders from the north. Although these raiders were almost exclusively Indians themselves, their actions were effectively dictated by the demands of English slave trade originating in Virginia and Carolina, and their success was largely determined by firearms. In many cases, relatively small groups of Indians displaced from other regions were given flintlock guns, trained to use them, and

sent off into the southern interior in search of Indian slaves. Soon, these slave-raiders became dependent upon their English sponsors for frequent re-supply of powder and shot, which were part of the spoils gained for the slaves captured and sold. As the demand increased, these groups raided across broader and broader areas, ultimately pushing into the fringe of the Spanish mission system.

Late in the 1650's, a group of slave-raiding Indians known by the Spanish as Chichimecos apparently arrived in the interior of present-day Georgia, armed and supplied by English colonists in Virginia. Although there seem to have been initial raids against unconverted provinces, it was not until the summer of 1661 that the first major slave-raid was carried out by the Chichimecos against the mission province of Guale. Although the Guale mission of Santo Domingo de Talaje near present-day Darien was destroyed, the raiders were eventually fended off by Spanish infantry, and over the next years Guale and the other mission provinces enjoyed a brief but uneasy respite from direct attack. Unconverted provinces in the deep interior were not so fortunate, however, for without the protection of the Spanish, Chichimeco and other raiders ravaged the frontier, laying waste to entire provinces and pushing the survivors to the south and west.

Many groups migrated ever closer to the fringes of the Spanish mission system, particularly along the northern coast of Georgia and in the lower Chattahoochee River valley in southwestern Georgia. Some towns and provinces from the interior even chose to resettle within the mission provinces themselves, and along the Georgia coast in the Guale and Mocama provinces these unconverted refugees came to be known as the Yamassee Indians, emerging by 1663 as a sort of aggregation of the survivors from many different Indian societies, including some from the deep interior of Georgia. In southwestern Georgia, the old Apalachicola region became home to a diversity of refugee groups from across the Southeast, and became a major aggregation of native population during the 17th century, along with much of eastern Alabama. A few Cherokee groups from the Appalachian highlands may even have begun to spread west and south into the valleys of eastern Tennessee and far northwestern Georgia during this period (although their repopulation of northwest Georgia would not be complete until after the American Revolution). The social geography of the interior in the lower Southeast was beginning to take on a new shape, setting the stage for the final era in the colonial transformation.

The establishment of the Carolina colony in 1670 spelled doom for the Spanish mission provinces. By 1674 the Carolinans became the primary sponsors of Chichimeco (known by them as Westo Indians) slave-raids, and attacks on mission Indians increased, including a disastrous 1680 rout on the northernmost Guale mission on St. Catherines Island. Although the Chichimeco were themselves destroyed by the Carolinans due to their uncontrollability, hostilities only increased during the following years under the immigrant Savannah (Shawnee). In 1683-1684, Carolina-supported pirates effectively decimated the old Guale and Mocama provinces, and the indigenous inhabitants of the Georgia coast were forced to retreat southward to Amelia Island on the northern Florida coast. Following the simultaneous northward flight of the Yamassee Indians then living in those provinces, a shift in alliances led the Yamassee under chief Altamaha to lead yet another English-backed slave-raid against the Timucua mission province in interior north Florida in 1685.

Reaching out to the north and west during the late 1680's, ambitious Carolina traders ultimately established contacts with many Indian groups in the interior, including all the major refugee-havens mentioned above. When the Spanish retaliated against the Apalachicola province for admitting English traders in their midst, constructing an earthen fortification not far from present-day Columbus in 1689, a large group of these towns migrated yet again, moving to the Ocmulgee River in central Georgia where they could trade freely with the Carolinians. This river, then known as "Ochese Creek" (descending from the prehistoric province of Ichisi, visited by Hernando de Soto), would eventually establish the English-derived name of this emerging society -- the Creek Indians (in this case the Lower Creeks). Far to the north, Carolina traders began to trade with the Lower Towns of the Cherokee (distributed in the highland valleys of the upper Savannah River drainage) no later than 1690.

Raiding continued against the Spanish mission provinces to the south throughout this era, and by the beginning of the 18th-century, the English and the Spanish were headed for direct confrontation. In 1702, the Governor of Carolina and an English fleet descended upon Spanish Florida from the sea, destroying the last refuge of the Guale and Mocama mission provinces on Amelia Island before proceeding southward to burn St. Augustine to the ground. Just two years later, the pivotal Apalachee mission province of western Florida was overrun by English-allied Creek Indians from central Georgia, and hundreds of Christian Indians were led in chains to be sold as slaves in Charles Town, with others resettling voluntarily along the Carolina frontier. Continued raids into peninsular Florida forced the retreat of all remaining Timucuan missions by 1706. The mission system was ruined, and much of old Spanish Florida (including the remaining Indians within the mission provinces) effectively contracted to the immediate area around St. Augustine. Finally, following the Yamassee War of 1715, in which the excesses of Carolina traders sparked a bloody rebellion against the English, the Ochese Creek towns returned to western Georgia and eastern Alabama, and the Yamassee themselves fled south once again to the protection of the Spanish missions in St. Augustine. Carolina overtures to the Cherokee crystallized their support for the English during this conflict, and the Cherokee trade flourished during subsequent years. The stage was set for Oglethorpe's Georgia.

The first decades of the 18th century thus witnessed the dawn of a new era in the history of the Indians of what would soon become Georgia. Perhaps partly as a result of their increasing importance as pawns in the English/Spanish territorial struggles of the late 17th and early 18th-centuries, the major population centers noted above eventually formed the core of what would become the Creek and Cherokee tribes so familiar to modern Georgians. During this pivotal period, the survivors of more than a century and a half of massive upheaval and change banded together as newly emergent societies in the still-developing colonial world of the Southeast. The remnants of numerous prehistoric Indian societies from across Georgia and the Southeast aggregated to become more and more cohesive social units, and it was these newly constructed societies that ultimately survived the following centuries, and which in many cases are still in existence today. As should be amply demonstrated from the discussion above, the social landscape of the mid-18th century Southeast was essentially a *product* of the colonial era, and was thus only a shadowy reflection of the indigenous societies that existed in the very same region just two short centuries before.



## A Story of Survival

In a very real sense, the familiar Creek and Cherokee tribes of the late 18th and early 19th century were not unchanged relics of the prehistoric past, but instead reflected a new type of Southeastern Indian society forged out of the dynamic and turbulent centuries of the European colonial era. Although most of the the individuals, families, and even towns which made up these new societies descended directly from those of the late prehistoric period, many of them had been forced together (geographically and/or politically) from widely separated regions and cultures, often living in regions once occupied by other peoples. The end result (certainly in the case of the Creeks) was a multi-ethnic aggregate made up of the splintered fragments of many ruined prehistoric societies. Even though this means that the names Creek and Cherokee have very little to do with most of the Georgia's prehistoric past, and that these two tribes bore only a partial resemblance to the chiefdoms of that earlier era, this nonetheless does not detract from their status as important components in the history of Southeastern Indians. Indeed, the formation and survival of the Creek and Cherokee societies, even to the present day, serves as a tribute to the persistence and adaptability of the original inhabitants of this continent. The very fact that these and other groups did survive under conditions of extreme necessity makes them one of the few success stories of the dynamic and often tragic era when the Old World met the New.

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