

## ***North America Before the European Invasions***

**Alice Beck Kehoe** / Routledge, 2017 (chapter 9)

### **Cahokia and the Mississippian Period, 950–1600 C.E.**

After Hopewell diminished, in the fifth century C.E., with no more great geometric embankments built and the distinctive ceramic styles no longer made, societies around the Gulf of Mexico continued to live in towns, constructing burial and platform mounds and manufacturing sophisticated pottery. Classic Maya kingdoms flourished in the first millennium C.E., during and after Teotihuacan's glory in central Mexico, undergoing political and economic shifts in the tenth and eleventh centuries that prompt archeologists to designate the centuries after 900 as the Postclassic. On the north side of the Gulf of Mexico, in the United States, the decline of Hopewell during what was the Early Classic in Mexico led to more modest societies. Those in the South, still committed to public ceremonies displaying rank, contrasted with those in the temperate Midwest and East, who no longer honored rank with extravagant outlay. Then, in the eleventh century, an American Postclassic began with an early climax at Cahokia, a truly impressive city where St. Louis now stands, and balkanized kingdoms after Cahokia collapsed, 1200 C.E.. Astute readers will notice that the dates for Cahokia parallel those for Chaco in the Southwest.

Several questions challenge us when we examine data for this Late Prehistoric period. Why did the cosmological vision embodied in the Hopewell works, and reflected in the tombs of their mighty, no longer drive Woodland societies to such monumental labor? Conversely, why did the temperate-latitude Late Woodland change in this way, while those in the South retained a considerable semblance of Middle Woodland achievements? What spurred Cahokia? What caused its collapse? What were the kingdoms De Soto disrupted in his ill-fated entrada into the Southeast, 1539?

Answers to these questions have been handicapped by America's Manifest Destiny conviction that the European colonists' predecessors were inferior, doomed to be a vanishing race because they hadn't developed private property laws and a money economy. In spite of De Soto's and John Smith's (at Jamestown) descriptions of small kingdoms comparable to those in much of

Europe (as late as the mid-nineteenth century, e.g., in Italy and Germany), many American archeologists write of “chiefdoms” and calculate how few people might have managed to construct mounds. Ohioans squared the Circleville Hopewell had bequeathed them, and citizens of southern Illinois built a subdivision of ranch homes on the Great Plaza the Cahokians had so kindly made perfectly level. At Cahokia, at least, this is now reversed, thanks to a determined band of avocational archeologists and local historians who lobbied for years to have Cahokia listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the State of Illinois to accept its obligation to protect that heritage.

### **What the Turk Described**

Spanish conquistador Francisco Vázquez de Coronado bought two enslaved captives from Pueblos to guide his expedition to fabled cities of gold in interior America. The men were Pawnee or Wichita, related Caddoan speakers from the Kansas–Nebraska region. One of the men, called “The Turk” because, like many Southeastern men, he wore a cloth turban, described a Mississippian kingdom on a wide river. The lord of the realm rode in a flotilla of large canoes, seated under a canopy at the stern of one boat with a large “gold eagle” on the prow. “Fish as big as horses” (alligator gar) swam in the wide river. The Turk continued,

The lord of that land took his siesta beneath a large tree from which hung great quantities of gold jingle bells which in the breeze soothed him. He said further that the ordinary table service of all in general was made of wrought silver and the jugs, plates and bowls of gold. He called the gold Acochis.

(Wedel 1988:43)

“Acochis” probably is the Wichita word *ha:kwicis*, “metal.” The Turk told the Spaniards, in a mixture of sign language and broken “Mexicano” (Nahuatl), how the “acochis” was extracted, heated, and “washed,” an account that fits copper processing. Given the value placed on copper by Midwestern First Nations, The Turk presumably spoke about the yellow metal, copper, but his Spanish interlocutors jumped to the conclusion he meant gold. When Coronado finally reached Wichita country, the farthest he would go, a chief there presented him with a copper pendant. He was not pleased.

Copper tinklers (not bells, but rolled cones of sheet copper) have been found in Mississippian sites. The Turk described, in sign language, structures of “many stories” that Coronado interpreted to mean houses, rather than the platform mounds The Turk had seen. The Turk told Coronado that in the eastern kingdoms, there were quantities of *mantas*, large shawls or cloaks, and indeed Coronado’s contemporary, De Soto, did receive many *mantas* from the Southeastern towns he threatened. De Soto’s party, when they reached

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the Mississippi River, were awed by the salute they received from the vassals of the Lord of Aquixo,

200 vessels [canoes] full of Indians with their bows and arrows, painted with ocher and having great plumes of white and many colored feathers on either side [headdresses?], and holding shields in their hands with which they covered [protected] the paddlers, while the warriors were standing from prow to stern with their bows and arrows in their hands. The vessel in which the cacique [chief] came had an awning spread in the stern and he was seated under the canopy. Also other vessels came bearing other Indian notables. The chief from his position under the canopy controlled and gave orders to the other men.

(Wedel 1988:42)

Survivors of De Soto’s entrada reported that the big canoes and oars were polished and colored, and that the oarsmen sang rhythmically of military glories as they paddled in formation.

Such matching accounts from the Coronado and De Soto entradas of 1540, marching into the Midwest from southwestern and southeastern approaches, corroborate the picture of Mississippian kingdoms full of pomp. Between these first, sixteenth-century entradas and seventeenth-century colonization came severe epidemics, wars, and displacements, obscuring the Mississippian civilizations. De Soto himself and nearly all his several hundred Spaniards died in America, many from fevers, leaving as legacy the famous razorback hogs of Arkansas, descended from the pigs herded along by the would-be conquistadors.

## The Deep South

The Gulf Coastal Plain and interior plateaus of the South never abandoned the practice of constructing burial and platform mounds, a practice now realized to have persisted for nearly six millennia. Near Lake Okeechobee in central southern Florida, a large circle and ditch were constructed at the Fort Center site (actually, three such circles, in succession) in the late first millennium BCE, when sand-tempered (rather than the earlier fiber-tempered) ceramics appear, and maize pollen in paleofeces, the ditch, and in the paint on carved wooden birds that probably topped posts around a mortuary house in the first millennium CE. After 400 CE, the decline of Hopewell in the Midwest broke off the South's extensive trade into that region, without diminishing the South's own towns. Not until the eighth century did population concentrations and public works apparently lessen, to be invigorated again a century or two later as Mississippian.

Much of the Southeast in the first millennium CE manufactured distinctive ceramics decorated by stamping the damp clay with elaborately curvilinear designs, reminiscent of the tattooing seen on people's bodies by the

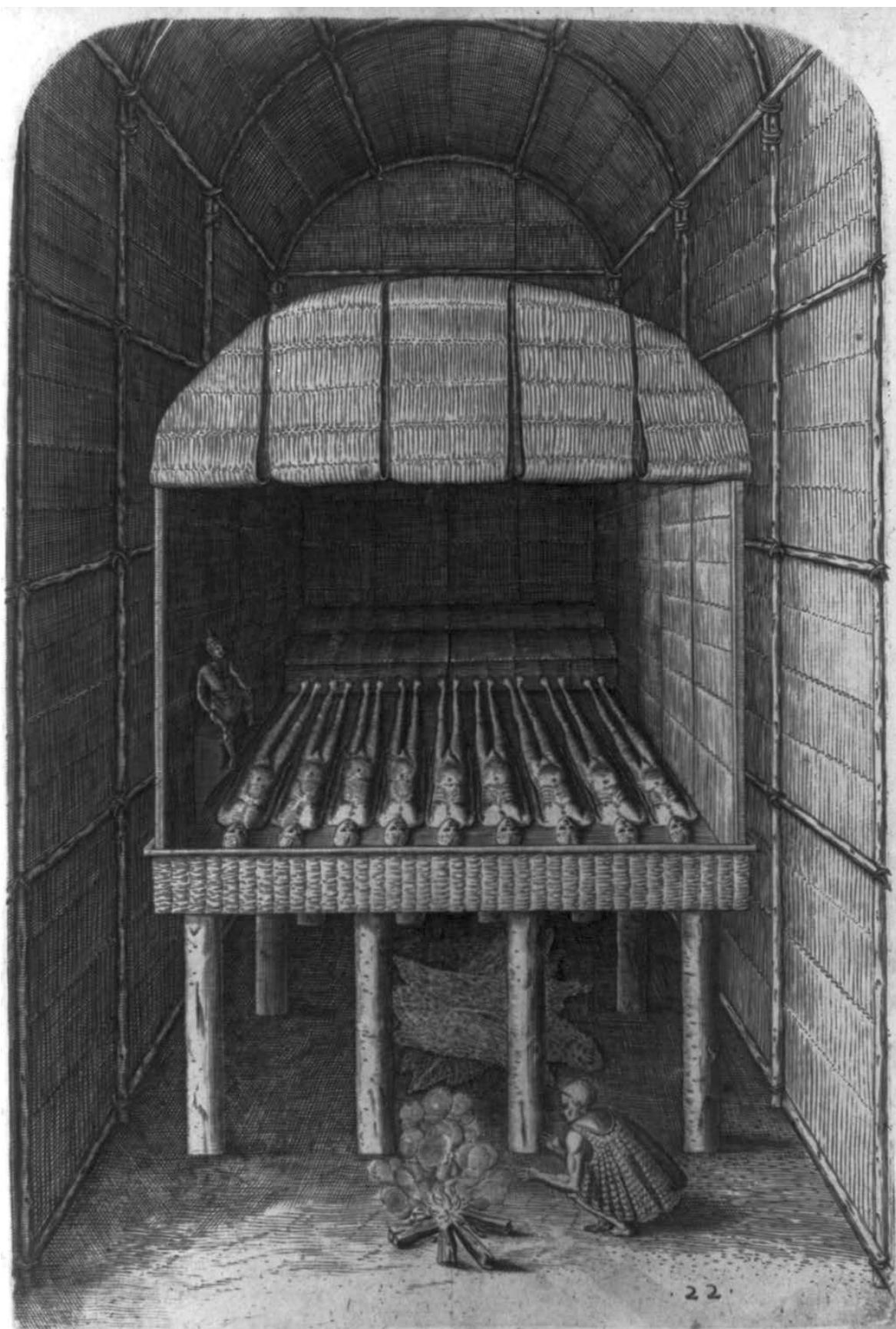
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sixteenth-century Spanish expeditions. Picturing the first-millennium people displaying on their skin the designs adorning their serving bowls is probably valid—in the warm, humid South little clothing was worn, making tattoos very visible ornamentation. The sinuous curves of their designs, preserved for us only on the pottery, would have flowed with people's movements if they were tattoos. For graves in the burial mounds, animal and human effigy vessels were crafted. These vessels' artistic excellence reflects the elaborate rites attending the death of high-status persons: first a log tomb would be built in a pit and covered with a layer of stones and an earthen mound, on the east side of this mound was placed an offering shrine with the special pottery and cremated human remains, the entire mound then burned and capped with stones, and finally more mound built over that, often including "bundle burials" of principal bones from previously buried or desiccated dead. Other, platform mounds were constructed beside these first-millennium villages, some of the platforms supporting wooden buildings and others the community's charnel

house, screened off from view, where bodies were prepared and kept for burial at ritual times. Wooden posts five or six feet (two meters) high were set up around temples and mortuary houses, the posts topped with carved wooden or ceramic effigy animals—eagles, panthers, foxes, herons, bears, otters, alligators—and perhaps human-face masks and painted wooden panels such as were found in the waterlogged site Key Marco. Early European travelers reported that the skeletons of ancestors of the ruling lineage were retained on platforms of mortuary houses, priests tending a perpetual fire under the platform. Enemies attacking a village would target the aristocrats' mortuary house for destruction, signaling victory over them.

At the McKeithen site in northern Florida, a leader who died about 475 C.E. seems to have lived in a house on one of the site's mounds and then buried in the floor of that house along with the remains of forebears taken from their mortuary house, fine ceramics, and food. The house tomb was burned, with thirty-six people, presumably sacrificed, spaced evenly around the border of the platform, and the mound covered with sand. Intriguingly, the principal personage was slightly built, probably a woman, and died from infection following being shot in the buttock with a ten-inch-long stone-pointed arrow. At Kolomoki in southern Georgia, the largest site of this first-millennium cultural pattern, eighty-six people accompanied the central personage, and some if not all had been sacrificed for him. After about 800 C.E., such honors were no longer given, only small burial mounds built, with a few special pots left with the deceased.

Maize agriculture was established in northern Florida about 750 C.E., a couple of centuries after it was apparently given up in the central Florida Lake Okeechobee basin, and the same time that the Early Late Woodland mound-building culture pattern shifted to modest burial mounds in place of mounds built for ostentatious funeral rites. Villages sought out the most fertile arable land, no longer looking primarily for the most efficient sit- ing for obtaining wetlands foods. Similarity in houses from earlier periods



*Figure 9.1* Mortuary house with deceased kings, tended by a priest, c. 1585, Virginia. Credit: Engraving by Theodor de Bry. Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

may indicate ethnic persistence or, equally likely, managing in the Florida climate: winter houses were constructed of poles bent inward and lashed at the top to carry thatch or palmetto roofing, a hearth near a door for ventilation, benches around the walls for sleeping, and little smudge fires under the benches to discourage mosquitoes (yes, Florida mosquitoes can get that bad). During summers, people used open-sided pavilions, like the Seminoles' chickees tourists can see today in Florida. Once maize agriculture became the mainstay, farmsteads became the most common type of settlement,

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clustered as outliers to villages that, in turn, clustered within a day's walk, more or less, of a larger town; at historic contact, most of the Southeast was organized in this manner, with the headpersons of village–farmsteads communities considered to be vassals of the town's governing lineage. Town lords might themselves be vassals of a nobler lineage, paying tribute and contributing soldiers when required. After 1000 C.E., platform mounds were again constructed for aristocrats' residences, temples, and mortuary houses.

The economics of late first-millennium Gulf Coast people, called Weeden Island by archeologists after a Florida site, was strongly oriented to the Gulf and interior wetlands: fish, including sharks, and shellfish, sea and land turtles, alligators, snakes, waterfowl, and in the interior, deer, bear, turkeys and small game, persimmons and plums, nuts, and seeds. Settlements were placed on hummocks, and the larger villages maintained clean plazas, relegating trash to designated disposal areas. Accumulation of shells from eating shellfish continued, with favored coast or river sites coming to be mounds of shells several hundred feet (about one hundred meters) long by fifteen feet (five meters) high, and dozens of such shell middens around a bay. Some shell middens in Tampa Bay, Florida, are nearly entirely conchs, which not only contain a couple of pounds of meat per shell but the shells were in demand for ceremonial drinking chalices, trumpets, and necklace pendants throughout the eastern United States. (In Mexico across the Gulf, the columnar spiral center of the conch shell was the icon of dynamic vital power attributed to *Quezalcoatl*, the Plumed Serpent,

god of the wind, whose dancing brought into being our present world.) South (peninsular) Florida apparently never took up maize agriculture, although they may have raised squashes; the country was too waterlogged and soils poor. To compensate, south Florida had the ocean, estuaries, streams, and lakes, with manatees, dolphins, and, off the southeastern coast, whales, as well as sharks, alligators, and big turtles. Canoes scooted around the mangrove swamps and between harvesting camps and base villages. At Pine Island, on Florida's southwest coast, a canal was dug, six to seven yards (five to six meters) wide, one to two yards (meters) deep, and an astonishing two-and-a-half miles (four kilometers) long across the island, so travelers could cut across rather than paddle around it. To overcome the rise in elevation as the canal reached across the middle of the island, the Indians—probable ancestors of the historic Calusa—made a series of small dams that functioned like canal locks: each section of impounded water was a little higher than the adjacent one, and by lifting canoes over the narrow dams, the boats floated on progressively higher stretches until the crest was reached and the water levels lowered to return the canoes to sea level.

### **The Interior South and Midwest: Cahokian Period**

Mississippian societies flourished in the rich, broad valleys of the major rivers of the physiographic Gulf Coastal Plain, the head of which lies at St. Louis where the Missouri flows into the Mississippi. Below that, the Ohio flows

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in, creating the immense river celebrated by Mark Twain. Frequent floods and shifting channels give the Central and Lower Mississippi Valley rich soils, sloughs, and wetlands. Uplands above the valley wall bluffs were forested, inviting hunting camps and backwoods hamlets. Pine barrens, poor in edible resources and unsuited to sustained maize agriculture, cover much of the interior Coastal Plains, from the fall line of the Piedmont to tidewater (sections of rivers, up from their mouths, affected by daily ocean tides). This zone discouraged Interior South nations from colonizing toward the coasts, with settlement and trade finding principal routes to be river valley corridors.



Following several centuries of apparently small-scale subsistence-oriented societies in the first millennium C.E. after Hopewell, intensive maize agriculture associated with large towns and conspicuous display of power materialized in the major valleys between the Appalachians and the western border of the Midwest, from Illinois to the Gulf. That there was continuity between earlier populations and those we label Mississippian is amply demonstrated in icons such as hawks seen in Hopewell and again in Mississippian, in mounds, and in utilitarian artifacts; that there was significant difference is shown in the quantities of maize and the political economy it supported. Mississippians grew maize on labor-intensive raised ridge and ditch fields, where fertility is replenished every year when the farmers clean out the ditches, throwing the rich muck up on to the planting ridges. Hundreds of acres (or hectares) of Mississippian ridge and ditch fields have been identified in the Midwest and South—corn hills described much later by European colonists may be a less laborious version, with the soil heaped up just at the planting spot rather than in a continuous ridge. Earlier Eastern Woodlands domesticates, the indigenous chenopods, knotweed, little-barley, and maygrass, were still cultivated, giving the Mississippians a series of harvests, the nutrition of the higher-protein native grains, and some hedge against crop failure.

Mississippian towns, marked by their platform mounds and plazas, dominated the flat river valleys, a number of them located to control the confluence of a tributary with a main river. Ironically, this siting led to the destruction of many in the nineteenth century, because railroads were sited in the same major transport corridors and used the handy unoccupied mounds for railbed ballast. U.S. towns were built on top of Mississippian towns for the same reason the Mississippians chose to settle there, to facilitate controlling an agricultural zone and trade routes. Only by digging into local archives to find historic mention of “Mound Builders” preceding the pioneers can many Mississippian towns be put on a map.

The Mississippian period has two phases, that of Cahokia, eleventh to late-thirteenth century, and then that of many small kingdoms. Cahokia’s heyday was the time of climatologists’ Medieval Warm Episode, a climate ideal for the Southern race of maize grown at Cahokia. Cahokia’s collapse roughly correlates with the onset of climate shifting toward bringing about the Northern

Hemisphere's "Little Ice Age," three centuries (1550–1850 C.E.) of somewhat colder climate. Thus, Cahokia's rise and fall could be explained — —

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by an advantageous climate for maize-growing, bracketed between the colder period of the mid-first millennium ce and that beginning in the late thirteenth century. Likewise, in the Southwest, Chaco's rise and fall can be linked to the same Northern Hemisphere climate episodes. Conversely, the favorable medieval climate can be said to have supported these exceptional political-economic centers but not to be sufficient explanation why people labored to construct imposing urban centers. Mexico's series of major centers, each waxing strong and then weakening, to be superseded by another region's ambitious nations, cannot be explained as adaptations to climate shifts.

Underlining the importance of ideological goads in the formation of Cahokia are a pair of figurines associated with what seems to have been a suburban community temple near the city. Fine ceramic serving bowls, mica, galena, red cedar, and hallucinogenic jimson weed, and lack of ordinary domestic debris, indicates the special function of the building. Half of a red flint-clay figurine of a woman, named the Keller figurine, was found in a shallow pit inside this building, the other half in a garbage pit outside (south of ) the building. A second red flint-clay figurine of a woman, the Birger figurine, had been deliberately buried in a small pit also outside, and east of, the building. Three other flint-clay figurines of women, and fragments of possibly more figurines, were recovered from a comparable temple in another suburban site. The Keller figurine sits, legs folded under her, on a folded bearskin, her outstretched arms grasping a rodlike object on top of what looks like a box. With her lips slightly parted and her face uplifted, she looks as if she may be singing. The stylized object in front of her may be a cane box or basket such as historic Muskokee Beloved Women, aristocratic women community leaders, kept to hold tokens of each clan in the community, symbolic of their shared concerns. The object might, on the other hand, represent a loom on which the woman weaves a fabric symbolic of the interwoven families, another ritual practice recalled by Muskokee. Or the object may be meant to invoke both symbols. In contrast, the Birger figurine has a strained expression on her face. She, too, kneels, tugging a stone-bladed hoe or possibly hide-scraper. On her back, gourd plants twine up

around her into a burden basket. Around her is coiled a double-headed serpent, and her hoe or scraper is digging into his back. Some archeologists glibly write off the figurines as fertility fetishes, but surely they are better interpreted as a pair, Keller inside the temple symbolizing the community bound together, Birger outside, with her plants and serpent, symbolizing the power of the natural world. Birger could well be she whom the Siouan-speaking Hidatsa call Grandmother-Who-Never-Dies, a female power nurturing the Corn Maidens in her earth lodge over the winter, sending them out with the migrating geese in spring to invigorate the maize plants in Hidatsa women's fields. Grandmother-Who-Never-Dies lives with her consort, the Underwater Panther with the long serpent tail, a male power that roils up bodies of water and eats unwary bathers. Often pictured with stag's antlers in the Midwest, there was a large petroglyph of this icon on the rock bluff at Alton,

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*Figure 9.2* Cahokia: Monks Mound from the air, looking northwest. The Mississippi River and, across it, St. Louis, Missouri, in the background. A local four-lane highway crosses the Grand Plaza in front of Monks Mound; the automobile on it gives the scale of the scene.

Credit: Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site; paintings by Lloyd K. Townsend and Michael Hampshire

Illinois, at the narrows where Mississippi River traffic en route to Cahokia could be controlled.

Cahokia is bigger by far than any other archeological site north of central Mexico. It filled the Mississippi River floodplain at what is now St. Louis with well over one hundred monumental mounds and thousands of homesteads on raised foundations. Urban planning is obvious at Cahokia, with the plazas, platform mounds, and commoner residences laid out oriented toward the cardinal directions. Conical mounds, a few on the terraces of massive Monks Mound, and great circles of huge wooden posts balance the angularity of the overall layout, and some small oval mounds lie southeast–northwest, possibly solstice oriented. Cahokia's urban plan is Mesoamerican, based on rectangular plazas bounded by platform mounds elevating temples and elite residences; its homesteads also fall within a common Mesoamerican plan of three structures around a courtyard, a basic plan that persisted into the historic period among the Creeks (Muskokee), who customarily erected three structures, called the man's house, the woman's house, and the storage house. During the eleventh-century height of Cahokian urban growth, neighborhood clusters of small rectangular houses replaced courtyard homesteads in the center of the city. No other pre-European site in the United States is anywhere as large as Cahokia (an estimated five square miles [twelve square kilometers] without including present-day St. Louis on the opposite side of the river), none other can have held its population

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(fifteen thousand is a reasonable figure), and no other exhibits such an overarching design. Erection of such a well-thought-out city at the nexus of the midcontinent waterways and the river highway to the Gulf of Mexico was a political act.

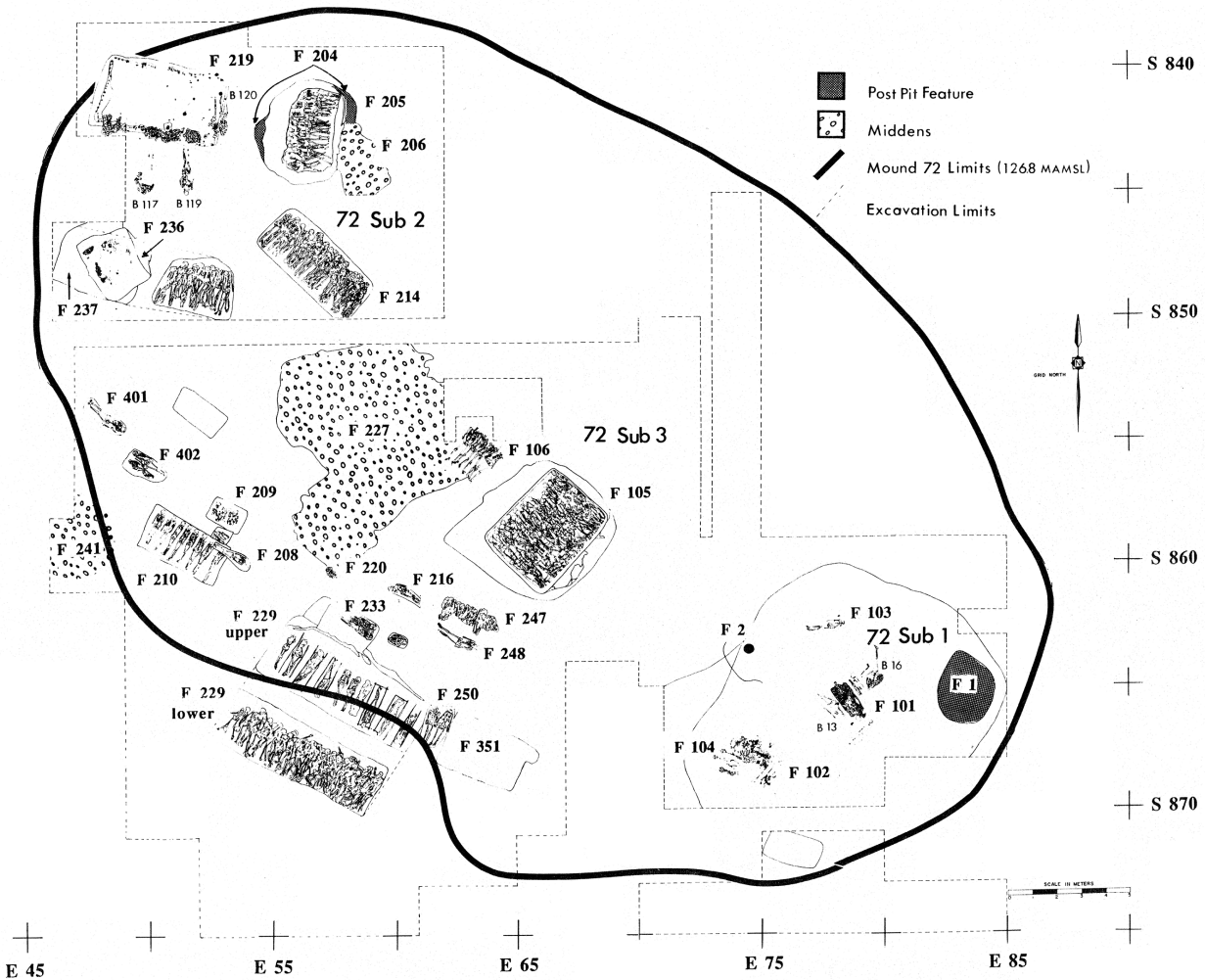
Monks Mound at the center of Cahokia (now Cahokia Mounds State Park at Collinsville, Illinois) was the third-largest structure in the Americas before the modern era. (Teotihuacan's Pyramid of the Sun is the largest, Cholula's manmade Mountain pyramid second. Egypt's Gizeh pyramids are smaller and were not platforms.) Monks Mound, so called because in the nineteenth century a community of Trappist monks built their house and gardens on part of it, is

slightly over one thousand feet (316 meters) long north–south, nearly eight hundred feet (241 meters) wide east–west, and a bit over one hundred feet (thirty meters) high: even the top, fourth, terrace platform is bigger than a football field. Excavations on the top terrace revealed a great timber building more than 135 feet (forty-five meters) wide, its full extent never determined due to lack of further archeological investigation. The Great Plaza stretching south from Monks Mound is nine hundred feet long by 1,200 feet wide (three hundred by four hundred meters), made level by infilling and capping the original ground with up to thirty inches (seventy-five centimeters) of selected soil. To prevent the hulking Monks Mound from slumping, its knowledgeable engineers ordered layers of different types of earth and internal drains. Other mounds at Cahokia show sequences of smaller mounds and colored clay caps, often a pair of round and flat-topped mounds on a low platform eventually coalesced into one by the later additions. Satellite centers, suburban villages, and hamlets and farms filled the floodplain. Late in Cahokia's history, near the end of the twelfth century, a timber palisade with bastions was raised around the central plazas and mounds.

Destruction of mounds in Cahokia has been extensive for a century and a half, and frequently human bones and fine artifacts were reported, in newspapers and by archeologists a century ago whose crews of laborers worked like miners to pull out treasures. The Big Mound in St. Louis, pulled down in 1869 for railbed fill, contained a tomb chamber described as having a ceiling of logs and plastered walls and floor. Dozens of bodies lay in rows, torsos covered with thousands of shell beads presumably originally sewn on cloth mantas; in another part of the mound, two bodies were given conch shell spine pendants, marine shell beads probably strung on a necklace and a pair of small copper masks (pendants) with long noses, symbol of the Siouan superhero He-Who-Wears-Human-Heads-As-Pendants. (The legendary stories make it clear these are not war-trophy real heads but magical little faces that laugh and stick out their tongues.) Other mounds now long gone had similar contents. Hindsight provided by the only reasonably carefully excavated and published mound, the surprisingly small Mound 72 south of the Great Plaza in Cahokia, suggests that the rows of bodies in Big Mound and others may have been sacrificed in rituals or to accompany their lords in death.

Mound 72 was only nine feet (three meters) high, 150 feet (forty-five meters) long by nearly fifty feet (fifteen meters) wide, oval in shape and lying northwest–southeast along the solstice lines—small by Cahokia standards and oriented diagonally to the central city’s principal north–south/east–west grid. Like other mounds at Cahokia, it was constructed in sections, or stages, first a pair of small square platform mounds, one extending over where a large wooden post had been set, the other covering another post pit and a typical Mississippian building of wooden poles set in a foundation trench. A number of burials were placed and covered, the resulting line filled in so that the west mound was extended to the east one, then a large pit was dug in the center of the now-single elongated mound and fifty-three young people, mostly women, deposited in it; a smaller pit dug and four young men placed in it; and, finally, all this covered to make the oval mound seen by historic visitors. Huge cypress logs like those at the site of Mound 72 have been discovered at other locations in Cahokia, too, and hypothesized to have been solstice-observation markers, but between the destruction of so much of ancient Cahokia and the overwhelming scale of the principal mounds and plazas, defying the puny crews and funds allocated to conduct

*Figure 9.3* Mound 72. Credit: Illinois State Museum



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archaeology there, not enough data exist to evaluate the hypothesis definitively—the putative great circles of massive posts might have been cathedral-sized forerunners of historic Sun Dance ceremonial lodges and the circles of posts with dancing maidens depicted in sixteenth-century engravings of Eastern Indian villages.

Sometime in the eleventh century C.E., a man, or possibly an enemy lord captured in battle, had been buried in the southeast of the two first-stage mounds of Mound 72. A woman was laid down, covered with an earthen platform strewn with thousands of glittering shell beads forming a hawk, and the man laid on that (over the buried woman). His head was toward summer solstice sunrise. At his head and left side two adults were laid out, at his right a bundle of bones from a young adult, and next to that another young adult lying

as if thrown down: the three articulated skeletons are assumed to be retainers or bodyguards, the bundle burial may be a previously deceased attendant. Four yards (or meters) away was an offering cache with five young adults, two of them probably women, and two adults more poorly preserved, covered with valuables, and then three more bodies, one partially disarticulated adult and a pair of young adults, man and woman, were laid over the previous set and at a right angle to them. Poorly preserved human remains in this section of Mound 72 bring the total of apparent sacrifices to at least twenty-three apparently associated with the man and woman on the bead-strewn platform; of those whose sex could be identified, seven were men and ten, women. The nonhuman offerings included neat bundles of hundreds of perfectly flaked arrows of the best-quality stone from distant quarries, fifteen polished disk-shaped chunky stones for the bowling-type game popular in the Southeast, a variety of necklaces of shell beads, rolls of sheet copper, and a pile of sheets of shiny mica. No doubt fine cloth was there, too, no longer preserved for us to note. Everything was completely covered with a black clay mound topped with a white clay and sand mix.

The second original mound platform, at the northwest end of the final mound, was constructed over the foundation of a wooden building open at the east end where one of the massive log posts had been installed. On the platform, over the former south wall of the building, the disarticulated bones of about thirteen adults were arranged in three piles: long bones, flat bones, and skulls with small bones. A pair of small, burnished black jars were placed with these piles. West of the piles were four bundle burials, apparently four persons, and on the east side of the platform were the bodies of two men, one wearing a shell hair ornament. A man and woman about thirty years of age were buried south of the piles of bones, man on the east and face down, woman to the west, face up, both wearing chokers of shell beads, and a pot of Lower Mississippi Valley style next to the woman. Where the massive post had been, east of the former building, a large north–south rectangular pit was dug, its floor covered with clean sand, and twenty-two women in their twenties were neatly laid in the pit, heads to the west, in two layers separated by mats. South of the former building, a similar pit oriented east–west held



nineteen bodies, young women, two men, and two children, ten on the bottom and nine above them, layered with two kinds of mats. All these were covered, a capping layer applied, and over their pit placed a treasure offering of conch spine pendants; more than thirty-six thousand shell beads; a pile of 451 arrow points of local chert, unhafted; a burnished black ceramic bottle; and five red-slipped jars. Another rectangular pit like the preceding was dug into the southeast corner area, oriented like the final Mound 72 northwest–southeast, and filled with two layers of young women, twenty-four in all, laid on matting or cloth.

Finally, literally capping this ostentatious exhibition of power, yet another rectangular pit was prepared for, this time, fifty-three sacrifices, three-quarters young women, one-quarter men, in two double rows with two women on top of the layers, across the bodies below them. One of these women wore shell beads; none of the others had ornaments, unless some had decayed away. Northwest of this largest set of sacrificed young women, only six feet (two meters) beyond, as if guarding them, was a pit with four young men, their heads and hands removed. South of this set of two pits, in the middle of the south side of the final mound, a deep rectangular pit was dug, and thirty-nine people, both men and women, a few middle-aged, were forcibly thrown into it, not laid neatly; three of these people had their heads chopped off and dropped into the pit, two had arrow points in their bodies (possibly old wounds). These sacrifices were covered with matting and above them were placed, in a careful row, bodies carried on litters of cedar poles: on one, a young man, a young woman, and an adolescent, all disarticulated; next, an adult with a child on top of it; then a woman; then a woman with two children; then an adult with its head cut off and placed on its chest; and lastly, one after another, another woman, an adult of undeterminable sex, and two adolescents who seem to have died somewhat earlier and become partially decomposed. Northwest of this pit was a smaller one with eight persons, including a child, and next to that, a pit with six disarticulated people. The last mass burial pit, in the center of the final Mound 72, had sixteen mostly disarticulated skeletons (nine of them in bundles) over a couple of whole bodies, plus one little child about three years of age—the only very young child in the whole mound. Finishing off were six separate pits with a total of five bodies and four bundle burials. A last covering and capping completed the homage to the Lord Hawk of Cahokia. Two hundred

and seventy youths and adults, and one small child, had been arranged in his monument, nearly all of them sacrificed.

Mound 72 and Monks Mound trumpet Cahokia's singularity: the awesome bulk of Monks Mound is unmatched anywhere in America except Mexico, and there only by two capitals of great states, and the terrible number of sacrifices unmatched except, again, in the capitals of the great Mexican states. Surely eleventh-century Cahokia was the capital of a state more powerful than any other north of central Mexico's broad valleys. Noting the distribution of Cahokia's fine-quality ceramics, of eleventh- and

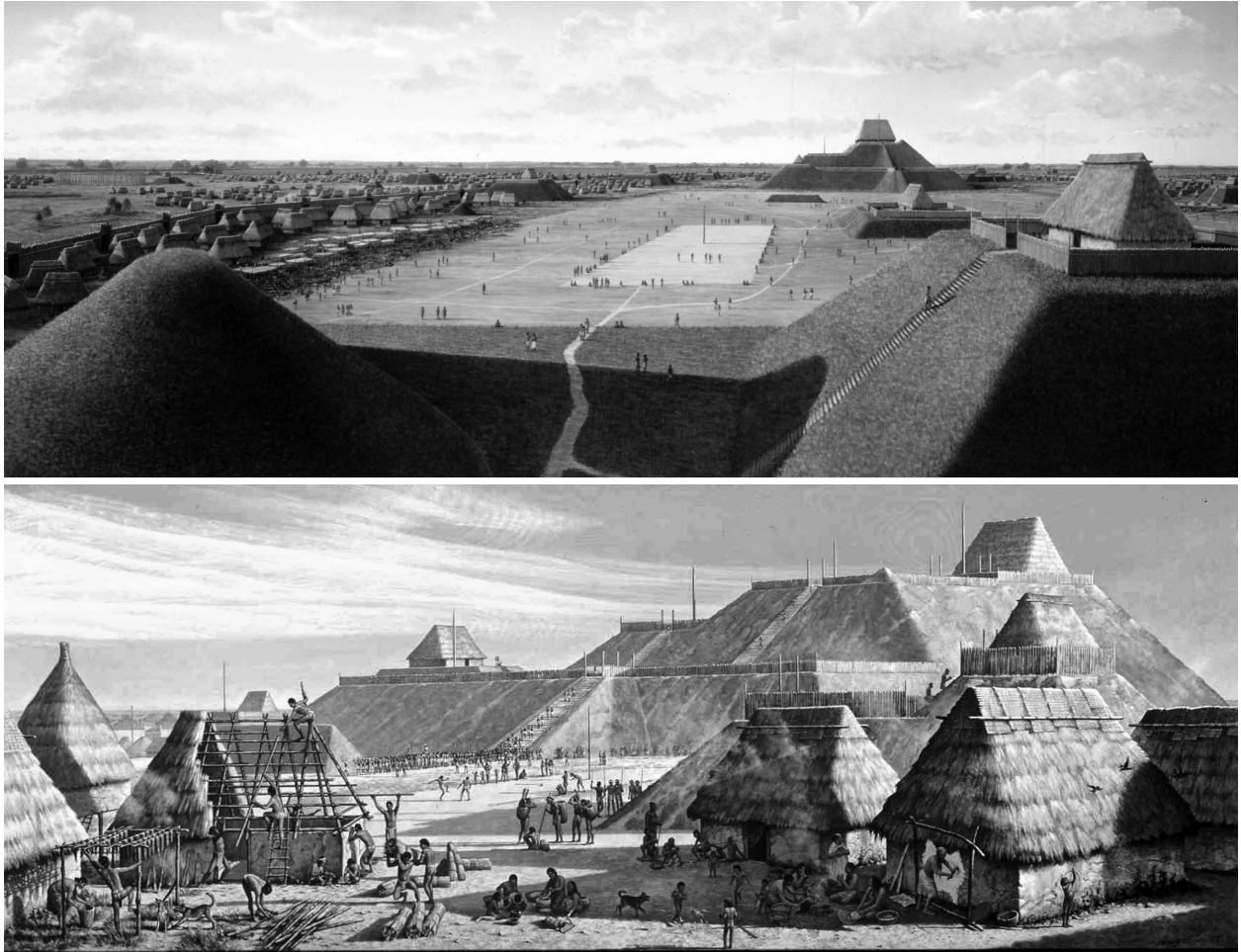
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twelfth-century towns with platform mounds, of principal Indian travel routes in the Midwest, and of petroglyphs of hawk/falcon/thunderbirds associated with pecked crosses in circles—these last territorial markers in Mesoamerica—archaeologist Patricia O'Brien calculated the Cahokian state to encompass fifty-two thousand square kilometers (approximately twenty thousand square miles) of America's heartland. This was difficult land to control, forested outside the settlements and their farms, populations knowledgeable about wild foods so they were able to retreat into the woods to escape state demands, all the men trained and equipped to hunt deer, and therefore humans if politics induce them to do so. The wonder is not that Cahokia could not maintain its power over the generations, but that so imperious a state could be instituted at all.

Cahokia's Mesoamerican-style urban plan would imply a Mexican stimulus, although so little else is distinctively Mesoamerican. Two hundred and seventy adults in the mound tomb echoes the number sacrificed in the Feathered Serpent Pyramid in Teotihuacán, centuries earlier; there, the number is like

*Figures 9.4* Paintings by Lloyd Townsend of the Grand Plaza and Monks Mound, looking north from the seventy-foot conical mound and adjacent flat-topped mound at south end of the Grand Plaza, and by Michael Hampshire of building activities and homes on the east side of the Grand Plaza, portray Cahokia about 1050 ce.

Credit: Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site; paintings by Lloyd K. Townsend and Michael Hampshire



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Meosamerica's 260-day ritual calendar, but the elaborate calendar reckoning of Mesoamerican astronomer-priests isn't known for U.S. First Nations, and poor preservation in humid Cahokia means the number there is approximate. A few individuals with sawtooth-filed front teeth, popular among Mesoamericans, have been excavated from Cahokia-period graves in the Cahokia area—and one from the contemporary Chaco period and region—and these may have been visitors from Mexico, possibly architects and traders, because filed teeth are not otherwise known in U.S. sites. Mound 72 had no Mexican valuables, no feathered serpent designs, no goggled warrior masks, and no macaw bones. Of course, any manner of perishables such as macaw feathers might have quickly decayed in the humid Mississippi Valley, but it is striking that all the treasures given in that ritual were Midwest manufactures or, in the case of the conchs, imports from the American shore of the Gulf.

Weighing the contemporaneity of Chaco in the Southwest and Cahokia, the lack of indications of direct contacts between them, and the contemporaneity of the “Toltec” imperium in Mexico, we may postulate opportunities in the eleventh century for ambitious leaders in the Southwest and Midwest to engage in lucrative trade with Mexico. Chaco could export turquoise; Cahokia could export maize, expertly tanned deer hides, perhaps dried meat, and slaves, taking advantage of its prime water route to southern markets. Thus more advantaged than Chaco in its desert, Cahokia’s ambition to match the glory of its Mexican emporia materialized in its grandiose capital. The wanton sacrifice of so many of the fairest maidens and young men its minions could capture or buy were calculated to make its power awesome. It was, in reality, chimerical: when the “Toltec empire” fell, it seems the frontier states at Chaco and Cahokia lost their power base, their capitals emptied and the territories tenuously held quickly became independent little kingdoms.

### **The Interior South and Midwest: Post-Cahokian Period**

During Cahokia’s prime in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, its heartland was rimmed by towns that were either outposts—Aztalan in south-central Wisconsin at the headwaters of the Rock River, which flows into the Mississippi—or more numerous entrepôts, such as that at the confluence of the Platte River with the Missouri, near Kansas City, where bison products from the Plains met the deer and maize of the Midwest. Cahokia’s thirteenth-century demise correlates with population movements, some into towns strongly fortified with palisades, others into substantial villages sited in the best farmlands. Dependence on maize agriculture expanded during and after the Cahokian era, strengthened by a new, hardy flour corn adapted to short growing seasons called eight-rowed Northern Flint, developed from a variety probably introduced into Florida from the Caribbean. Beans were also introduced from the south, their cultivation spreading quickly

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around 1000 C.E. as far north as upstate New York and into the central Ohio Valley. Oddly, Cahokia-era Mississippians did not accept beans. Only after 1300 C.E. do they appear in central Midwest Mississippian sites, completing the famous “Three Sisters” of Eastern American agriculture—corn, beans, and

squashes. Because beans fix nitrogen in their roots, by planting beans between maize plants, not only do the maize stalks serve to support the bean runners, the beans replenish the soil with nitrogen taken up by the maize. Beans also provide protein, deficient in maize, balancing a farm-based diet. All Mississippians harvested deer and fish, very likely maintaining deer parks beyond their farms by regularly burning browse areas, so protein may not have been a problem, and the Cahokians' ridge and ditch fields replenished nitrogen when the ditch muck was shoveled onto the planting ridges, lessening the role beans would have played. Cahokia's eastern frontier might be marked by a "bean line," beyond which independent societies pursued their own economic regimes.

Conventionally, archeologists distinguished "Mississippian" from concurrent "Late Woodland," assigning the Mississippian label if a site had platform mounds, reliance on maize, and shell-tempered pottery. "Late Woodland" was the label for sites, usually small and on uplands, with grit-tempered pottery and less evidence of maize. Obviously—and archaeology is increasingly demonstrating this—"Late Woodland" sites could be Mississippians' seasonal camps for hunting deer, harvesting nuts or other wild foods, or cutting wood. Other "Late Woodland" sites may be small nations taking refuge from Cahokian dominance in bush country unsuited for Mississippian intensive agriculture. "Mississippian" sites, such as Toltec Mounds (not related to Mexican "Toltec") near Little Rock, Arkansas, sometimes challenge archeologists by, as at Toltec, having more than a dozen platform mounds and a plaza, but (1) beginning construction of the mounds in mid-seventh century C.E., "too early" to be Mississippian; (2) cultivating the indigenous Midwest small grains, that is, chenopods, maygrass, knotweed, and little-barley, rather than depending entirely on maize; and (3) making pottery tempered with hard clay particles. Toltec Mounds is an Arkansas River town sharing the ancient Lower Mississippi Valley mound-building tradition, continuing the Midwest indigenous plants agriculture developed in the Late Archaic, and in its later phase trading downriver with "true" Mississippian, as evidenced by some shell-tempered pots. Cahokia's frontiers were ringed by independent societies like these, living their own trajectories of history. According to their own tradition, the historic Osage nation on the Ozark Plateau of Missouri was descended from Cahokia, having retreated to a more defensible territory after the city's fall.

Smaller kingdoms and confederations of towns become very visible in the fourteenth century, freed of Cahokia's shadow. Moundville in Alabama, Etowah in Georgia, Angel in Indiana, and Kincaid in Illinois on the lower Ohio River, are towns with a plaza, a few up to two dozen mounds, usually a palisade, many single-family pole-and-thatch houses, and plenty of maize.

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Historically, and still today, the Creeks (Muskokee) distinguish between *etulwa*, "town," having a ceremonial ground (plaza) and sacred fire, established and formally named with the proper ritual, and *talofa*, "village," simply a settlement and affiliated with a "mother town," *etulwa*, politically and to participate in rituals. The difference in scale between Cahokia and even the largest of the post-Cahokian towns, Moundville, is dramatic. These were the kingdoms described by De Soto's chroniclers, not so different from the many kingdoms and principalities in sixteenth-century Europe.

As Christianity provided a set of symbols overriding the political divisions in medieval and early modern Europe, so post-Cahokia Mississippians shared a set of symbols referred to as the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex. Elements of the Complex have been recognized at Cahokia, but the full-blown Complex postdates it and seems to have borrowed from contemporary Late Postclassic Mexico, but, like the Aztecs claiming legitimacy through a link to the "Toltecs" before them, Late Mississippian rulers treasured icons from Cahokia: the Lord of Spiro on the Arkansas River was buried about 1400 C.E. with some heirlooms already several centuries old. Archeologists recognize the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex from preserved stone, ceramic, shell, and copper objects, ranging from full-sized battle-axes laboriously made from single pieces of stone, through conch-shell chalices engraved with themes of war and power, fine shell-tempered ceramic serving wares, to repoussé copper plates similar to the "coppers" worn on headdresses by Northwest Coast nobles. That cloth and well-tanned deer hides also were decorated with motifs of the Complex, rarely preserved even in fragments, may be inferred from Europeans' sixteenth-century accounts of the pomp and gifts displayed by Southeastern *caciques*, as the Spanish termed the aristocratic leaders they met.

Southeastern Ceremonial Complex motifs center on a pair of personages with winged arms and human bodies. We do not know whether they were conceived as deity or apotheosized dynasty founders. One version seems to have hawk wings and sometimes a beak mask over the lower face, the other has tobacco-moth wings and a moth proboscis, and the design may add disks that probably represent stars in the sky. Hawks as symbols of bellicose power of course go back to Hopewell and continued in Cahokia; tobacco moths are large night-flying insects that pollinate tobacco, cultivated in the Hopewell as well as Mississippian eras. Historically among Eastern Woodlands First Nations, tobacco was used in rituals but not for private pleasure—it was a strong South American variety probably introduced via the Caribbean. Tobacco Moth was to Night as Hawk (especially peregrine falcons) was to Day, a highly visible denizen of the air. A third holy personage is a dancing man wearing, as a pendant on his chest, the spiraling spine of the conch shell. Late Postclassic Mexicans used the spiral conch pendant to signify Quetzalcoatl, Lord of our present Fifth World, and derived from his power, signaling legitimate rulers. The necklace of large shell beads with conch spiral pendant is frequently worn by the personages engraved on

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the conch cups and embossed on copper plates. Personages often brandish weapons or scepters, and these may be in the form of serpents. In his other hand, a personage may carry a trophy human head. A few engravings depict chunky players poised to roll their stone disks. Serpents, some clearly rattlesnakes and others monstrous, with horns and wings, are common and may be shown as four intertwined to make a swastika symbol of dynamic power. The common Mesoamerican cross in circle symbol of the world, or of territory, is another frequent motif. Eastern Woodland roots for the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex are obvious, and so are Mexican motifs generally by around the Late Postclassic, of which two striking examples from Spiro are depictions of a man wearing the diadem set with star disks that is the emblem for Venus the Morning Star as War Captain, and a conch cup showing two serpents as canoes bearing a pair of paddlers each with his banner beside him—the Maya image of the celestial ecliptic, two gods eternally paddling around the heavens.

Historical linguistics presents groupings and relationships suggestive of political developments, especially for the Mississippian, most recent precontact period. Muskogean (languages of Muskokee including Creek, Choctaw, Hitchiti, Alabama, and Koasati) appears to have its homeland in the middle Mississippi Valley, expanded eastward into Alabama and then south into Georgia and Florida, and south into (the state of ) Mississippi. Siouan languages lay in a broad band from the mouth of the Ohio eastward through Tennessee into the Carolinas and south into Mississippi. This mapping lets either Muskogean or Siouan be adduced as the language of Cahokia, and whichever may have been spoken in the capital, both would have been so geographically close they would have been culturally similar. Much earlier, in the Late Archaic, Proto-Siouan, Proto-Iroquoian, and Proto-Caddoan may have been developing from mid-Holocene ancestors in the Mid-South, from Tennessee to the Mississippi Valley. Iroquoian would have then moved east and northeast, Caddoan south and southwest.

Congruent with archeological differences, the Lower Mississippi Valley is linguistically distinct from Muskogean and Siouan, its languages being Natchez, Tunica, Atakapa, and Chitimacha. Natchez, in particular, is said to show similarities to Mesoamerican languages, whence some may have spread farther north to Muskogean, Tunica, and (Siouan) Quapaw, through contact with Natchez, if not more directly with Mexico. Among semantic similarities between Mesoamerican usages and Choctaw are calling *mano* “child of metate” and, in the Southeast, *pestle* “child of mortar”—Southeasterners pounding corn in mortars with pestles rather than grinding it on metates; using the same word for “feather” and “fur,” which makes one think of how common feather cloaks were in both Mesoamerica and the Southeast; and the same word to mean “to kiss,” “to suck,” and “to smoke.”

Beautifully engraved conch shell cups, or chalices, very possibly used to serve the purgative “black drink” to men ritually preparing for war, were found in abundance in burials in the mounds at Spiro, in eastern Oklahoma

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on the Arkansas River, commanding a narrows of this major river. Historically in Caddo territory, Spiro is assumed to have been built by ancestral

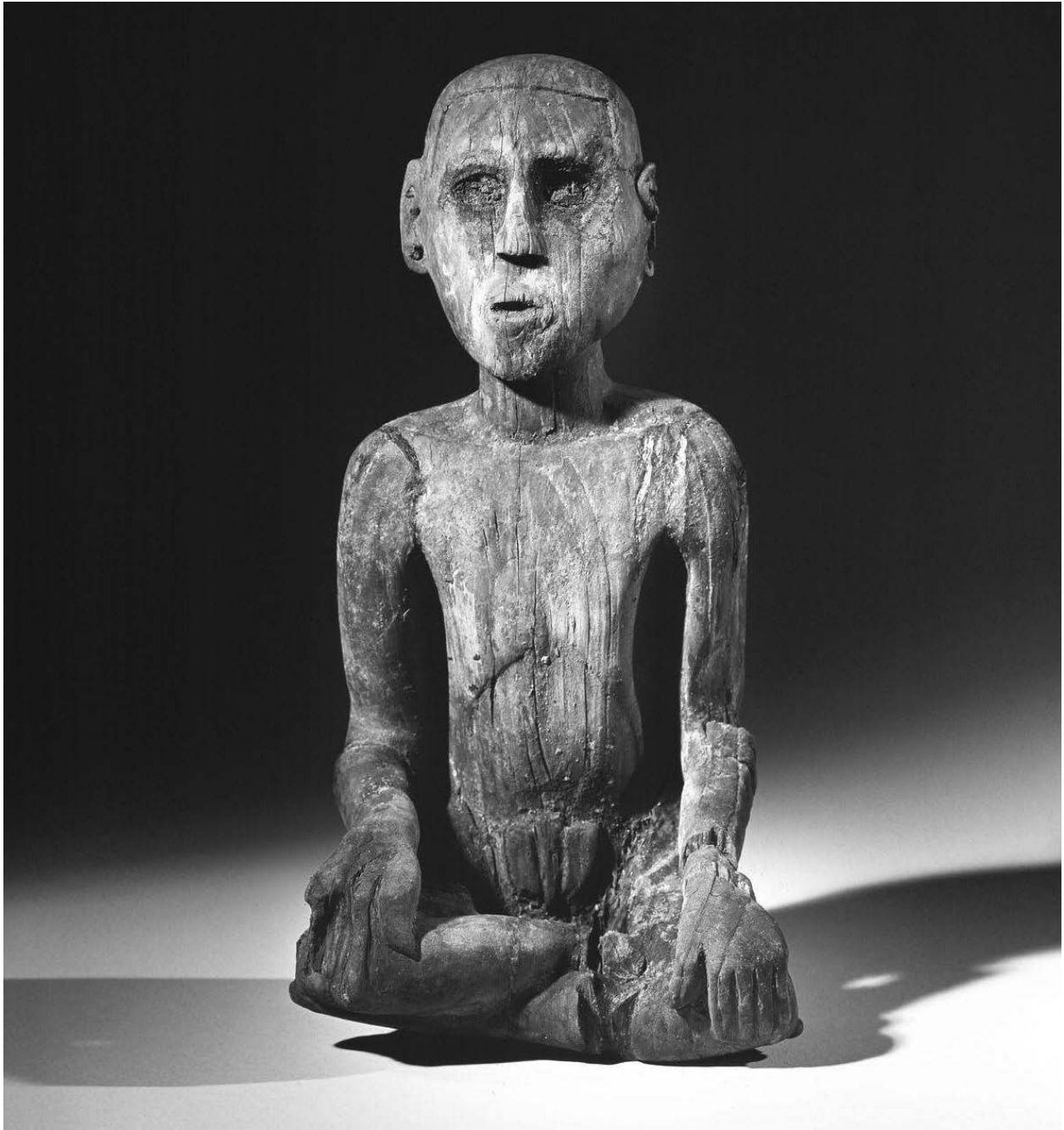


Caddo, although an argument has been made that it more closely fits ethnohistoric descriptions of the Tunica. The site has a large pyramidal mound on one side of a plaza outlined, in a somewhat irregular hexagon, by six small mounds, with another offset, plus three mounds in a line, lower and closer to the river. Sight lines from the large platform mound across other mounds mark summer solstice and the equinox, and distances between the set of mounds around the plaza are multiples of 150 feet (47.5 meters), a unit of measurement identified also at Toltec Mounds. The mounds were drastically looted during the 1930s, treated as a mine of objects that could be sold by the impoverished grave robbers hard hit by the Depression, and then more systematically excavated by federally funded relief labor crews, unfortunately of course not up to today's standards for scientific archaeology. The principal burial mound, in the group near the river, began with a cemetery at the end of the tenth century C.E., then a series of mound layers were constructed, with burials including a body placed in a large twined fabric sack, and finally, in the beginning of the fifteenth century, a large platform on which were placed a great number of burials of which many had been exhumed from previous interment, a circle of tall cedar poles, and at last a rounded cap of earth. The early fifteenth-century event is reminiscent of Cahokia's Mound 72 in that an important person was interred with bodies carried on cedar-pole litters and many more tossed together, plus piles of valuables, but there is no clear evidence of human sacrifices; instead, bones of long-deceased Spiro people together with offerings left in their graves were assembled to lie with the newly dead lord. Many of the valuables, such as conch cups, were broken from pressure of the earth overburden on their original graves. Other valuables, such as textiles, could not have been previously buried, although some may have been antiques already, and the carved wooden masks and human effigies probably, like those in Florida, were set up ringing the consecrated space.

Among the valuables amassed in this newly created cemetery are figurines probably from Cahokia, a handsome young man, an older man, and a woman with a mortar, all two centuries older than the tomb in the Spiro mound. As in Mound 72, thousands of marine shell beads were deposited in the Spiro tomb, piled on textiles, and there were woven cane boxes, some with cremated or exhumed fragments of skeletons, some with copper ax heads, copper beads, and embossed copper plates. One archeologist extrapolates from early

historical documents the possibility that the lords of Spiro became wealthy by controlling production of bows made from Osage orange trees (*bois d'arc*), the very best bow wood in America (comparable to English yew), obtainable only in a limited region in northeast Texas south of Spiro. On the edge of the Southern Plains, this region would have served to transmit bison products, as well: in 1541, De Soto's men noted plenty of "beef " and "cowhides" in the Spiro area, and men working to process the hides to be

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*Figure 9.5* Wooden carving of a man, from Spiro Mound, northeastern Oklahoma, c. 1400 ce.

Credit: National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution

used or traded as winter bed covering. Archaeology and radiocarbon dates at Spiro seem to indicate diminution of its political–economic importance in the later fifteenth century, but the De Soto chronicles challenge this. Spiro’s position on the western boundary of Mississippian societies stemmed from its geographical advantages as an entrepôt, and this location continued to be

advantageous, as attested by the Spanish explorers, in the sixteenth century and into the eighteenth when horses that flourished in the Osage-orange country were traded by Indians to the French in Louisiana.

Archeological distinctions correlate with linguistic boundaries on the East, as well as along the eastern foothills of the Appalachians, where a Mississippian cultural pattern, dependent on maize agriculture in the floodplains, appeared in the eleventh century, changing in the mid-thirteenth century

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as Mid-South societies east of the Mississippi display stronger regional characteristics. Atlantic Coastal Plain societies took up maize agriculture in the Mississippian period, without large towns and platform mounds; the easternmost Mississippian-type site with platform mounds is in the Piedmont. Northeastern-style longhouse villages extend along the Atlantic Coastal Plain into North Carolina; these societies were described in the preceding chapter.

### **Research Puzzles**

There has been a tendency for American archeologists to explain cultural changes as “natural” responses to climate shifts and apparent institutional innovations such as towns as inevitable concomitants of population increase. In one word, American archeologists have tended toward a *provincial* outlook, not considering political and economic movements impinging on a locality from outside the region. This tendency, to be fair, is reinforced by the need for an archeologist to know minute details of thousands of artifacts just to write a basic local history. Wide-ranging comparisons are discouraged and disparaged as speculation. As a result, Mississippian is conventionally explained according to a supposed evolutionary trajectory carrying local populations from hunting-gathering to small settlements to “chiefdoms.”

Related to uncritical acceptance of a seventeenth-century European logical construct (the “tribal” or “chiefdom” stage in a conjectured universal history) is an unfamiliarity with living First Nations. The U.S. policy of exiling them beyond the frontier and subsequently to reservations blocked most Americans, particularly in the East, from mingling with Indian contemporaries. Archeologists training in standard, that is, Western, scientific methods had little

incentive to hang out with rural Indian people or study indigenous knowledge. The 1990 Congressional Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) is having some impact on the provincialism of many archeologists, mandating in many instances negotiation with First Nations that may be affiliated with archeological sites. Only a minority of Midwestern and Eastern archeologists perceive that their standard categories derived from Western philosophers' logic are stereotypes fed by nineteenth-century racism. Growing up in segregated communities, educated in schools teaching that American Indians were no match for "civilized" Europeans, American archeologists are generally comfortable with terminology and interpretations that segregate First Nations into a truncated history failing to achieve "civilization."

The provincial outlook sets the puzzles of Mississippian research. Without texts such as Mesoamerican archeologists read, nor indubitable Mexican imports such as macaws and exports such as turquoise as found in the Southwest, Mississippian archaeology can be a playground for coldly "scientific" interpretations minimizing the economics and politics of the

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Late Prehistoric Eastern Woodlands. For example, one archeologist published calculations purporting to demonstrate that a population of only eight thousand people in the American Bottom would have been sufficient to raise all of Cahokia's (surviving) mounds, ergo, Cahokia was only a "chiefdom" of simple farmers. The same archeologist refused to consider as possible evidence of Mexican contacts the filed teeth of a few Cahokia-area skeletons, dismissing their intriguing similarity to Mexican fashion of the period. It is as if, for a jigsaw puzzle, a player arbitrarily discarded several pieces.

The great research puzzle for the Mississippian is Cahokia. How did it happen that a city of unprecedented, and never later equaled, size and architectural grandeur was relatively quickly built and then, two centuries later, collapsed? What was its relation to the mound-building tradition of the Lower Mississippi Valley? Whence its Mesoamerican-style urban plan? How large was its state? How did it influence the other nations of America, from the Rockies to the Atlantic, during its time and afterward? Cahokia is unique in America north of

central Mexico. If we could understand its history and society, we would be in a position to better interpret the histories of all the nations of Late Prehistoric eastern America.

## **Bibliographical Notes**

Judith Bense's *Archaeology of the Southeastern United States* (San Diego, CA, 1994) is a balanced and reliable outline for the region. Jerald Milanich has published extensively on Florida prehistory and contact-period peoples, for example, in *Archaeology of Precolumbian Florida* (Gainesville, FL, 1994), *Florida's Indians from Ancient Times to the Present* (Gainesville, FL, 1998), and *Florida Indians and the Invasion from Europe* (Gainesville, FL, 1995). *Indians of the Greater Southeast: Historical Archaeology and Ethnohistory* (Gainesville, FL, 2000), edited by Bonnie McEwan, covers the contact period and subsequent histories, nation by nation, while Marvin Smith's *Archaeology of Aboriginal Culture Change in the Interior Southeast* (Gainesville, FL, 1987) presents a powerful interpretation of shifts in Muskokee societies congruent with European disease epidemics and invasions. Robert Neuman's *An Introduction to Louisiana Archaeology* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1984) is detailed and well-illustrated. Half a dozen books focus on Cahokia, but each argues a particular perspective not evident to the nonspecialist; the most accessible books (other than Roger Kennedy's lively *Hidden Cities*) are Timothy R. Pauketat, *Cahokia: Ancient America's Great City on the Mississippi* (New York, 2010) and with Susan M. Alt, *Medieval Mississippians: The Cahokian World* (Santa Fe, NM, 2014).

