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A City for All Times

By

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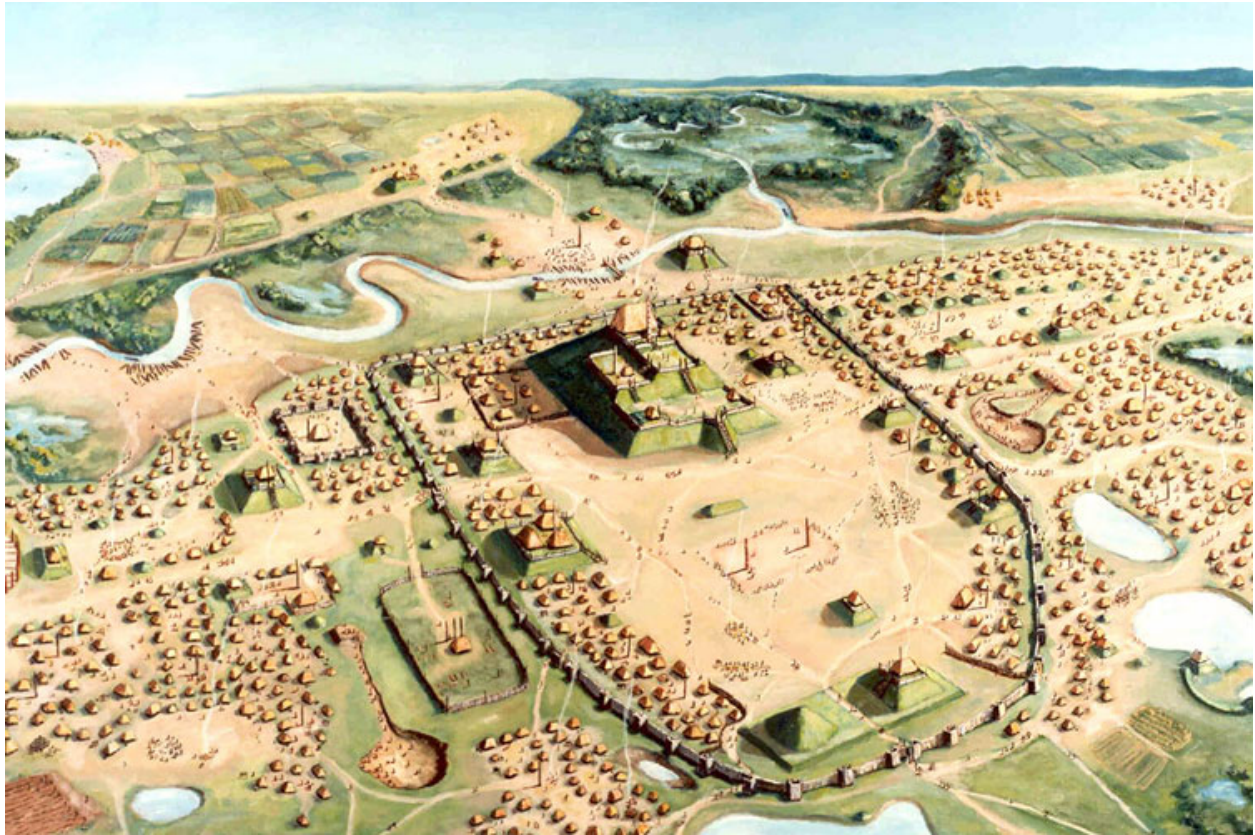


Figure 1. A painting of Cahokia around 1250 CE (Iseminger 1982)

“Contemporary settlers follow the mandate provided for them by their imperial forefathers’ colonial legacy, not by attempting to eradicate the physical signs of Indigenous peoples as human bodies, but by trying to eradicate their existence as peoples through the erasure of the histories and geographies that provide the foundation for Indigenous cultural identities and sense of self.”

-Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel

Abstract

Archeologists have produced a number of academic histories about Cahokia over the last century. Unfortunately, many of them rely almost entirely on archeological data and written records from early European explorers. This leaves Indigenous oral histories and linguistics to play a secondary role or even none at all in their narratives. That is a problem because it leads academics to create less accurate histories and it strips contemporary Indigenous communities

out of the narrative. This thesis attempts to fix that problem by combining archeology, oral histories, interviews, early written accounts, and linguistics to create a historical narrative that covers Cahokia's history from the millennia before it became a city to the modern day. This thesis also covers a variety of modern policy issues related to the Cahokia State Historic Site, such as co-management, funding, and the push to make the state park a national one.



Figure 2. A photo of Monk's Mound I took during my trip there in 2021.

Introduction

More than a millennium ago, ancestors of the Omaha, Quapaw, Kansa, Osage, Ponca, Peoria, Miami, Muscogee, Chickasaw, Shawnee, and Ho-Chunk nations among others came together and built the largest metropolis of their era. Spanning both sides of the Mississippi River near modern-day Saint Louis, Cahokia would stand as the most populous settlement ever built in the United States until the rise of Philadelphia in the late 1700s (Mann 2005 pg. 291).

Cosmopolitan to its core, Cahokia drew in people from a multitude of cultures, languages, and

geographies, and bound them together in a new identity. Its elite relied on public feasts, sporting events, religious devotion, and a monopoly on violence to reinforce their rule over the city and push its sphere of influence outward. The explosive growth that characterized Cahokia's rise also contributed to its death. When the climate changed and disaster struck, the elite proved unable to face the underlying crises besetting the city. As quickly as Cahokia rose, it was gone.

Traditionally, academics writing about its history have relied primarily on archeological data and early written accounts from European explorers and missionaries to reconstruct a vision of the city and life within it. Yet, these are not the only kinds of sources that are available that can help reimagine Cahokia as it was. Direct descendants of the Cahokians exist. Their communities have endured mass migrations, wars, pandemics, colonization, and a physical and cultural genocide to pass down their culture and language to their children and grandchildren. Linguistic data and oral histories drawn from these communities offer the context within which one can make sense of the archeological discoveries unearthed at Cahokia. As indigenous archeologist Logan Pappenfort puts it "North American archeology is included under the discipline of anthropology, so it is ironic that some archeologists use these idealized and inaccurate histories rather than speaking to the living descendants of those they are trying to better understand." (Illinois State Archeological Survey 2021). Approximately two-thirds of this thesis present a general history of the city drawn from a diverse methodology. The point of reviewing Cahokia's history is to gain the context to better understand what it means to Indigenous communities and the country today.

In the final third, this thesis addresses contemporary issues relating to Cahokia State Historic Site. Since 1979, millions of people have flocked there to visit the mounds and learn about what once was. Yet in recent years, local activists have partnered with federal politicians to

push for Cahokia to become a National Historic Park managed by the National Park Service (NPS). Their movement has not yet succeeded, but it has provided the space to reimagine what the NPS and Cahokia could be. From its founding, the NPS has actively participated in several manifestations of American colonialism. The federal government fought and committed massacres to take those lands. After the conquest was over, the NPS helped spread the myth that Indigenous people had no hand in building the “wild” landscapes they thought worthy of conserving (Treuer 2021). If Cahokia becomes a National Historic Park or even if it remains as it is, more can be done to combat the effects of physical and cultural genocide by taking steps to extend Indigenous sovereignty there. As a sacred site for many nations, Cahokia could be a laboratory in which to experiment with new forms of co-management and Indigenous solidarity. Perhaps one day soon Cahokia will be widely considered as an example to emulate once again.

I first became interested in Cahokia because of the book *1491: The Americas Before Columbus*, published by science journalist Charles Mann in 2005. He geared his narrative towards a popular audience in a way that engaged me long before any purely academic writer did. As a person of mixed European and Middle Eastern ancestry, raised in the United States as a settler, I benefit personally from colonialism and its manifestations in numerous ways. Yet, I decided to write this narrative not out of guilt or shame, but because this topic is genuinely very interesting and very important. I was never taught about Cahokia or much about Indigenous history in kindergarten through highschool. Like most Americans, I spent most of my life ignorant about almost all American history before colonization. Yet, learning about Cahokia and then visiting it myself inspired me to want to do something to help preserve that kind of American heritage and spread knowledge about it. Settlers have spent centuries trying to destroy or subsume every native culture in the United States into settler culture. Even today, politicians

like Governor Stitt of Oklahoma are keeping these efforts going. Yet, Indigenous communities remain.



Figure 3. A photo of Logan Pappenfort in front of Dickson Mounds State Museum where he works.

Ferguson 2021)

Methods

Writing the historical section of this thesis involved a literature review of archaeological studies, oral histories, general histories, and linguistic analysis related to Cahokia.

Anthropologists wrote most of those books and papers, but I preferred to use sources produced by or in close collaboration with Cahokia's descendants themselves whenever possible. In the historical section, the sources did not always agree with each other, but for this thesis, I tried to produce a streamlined narrative that highlighted why the city was important, while framing these debates but not straying too far into them. The one area where I erred from this policy is on who the descendants of Cahokia are. A lot of prominent histories, including Mann's fail to name specific nations. I thought that essential to link the past to the present, so I spent a lot of time researching the broader Mississippian world to gain a better understanding of the people of Cahokia and the communities descended from them. Yet, research regarding Cahokia's religion,

political hierarchy, and the overall scope of its polity remain hotly contested by academics. Be aware of that as you read.

In the final third of the paper, I relied on data sourced from newspaper articles, the National Park Service, and several government and tribal agencies to examine topics like co-management and the push to make Cahokia a National Historic Park. I supplemented those sources with academic articles when necessary, but interviews were especially key for that section. In fact, interviews were an important source of information for this entire thesis. Over the past year, I contacted and spoke with a number of key stakeholders involved with Cahokia and the work of Indigenous cultural and historic preservation more broadly. That list includes Carrie Wilson who is the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) Director for the Quapaw Nation, Superintendent of Cahokia State Historic Site Lori Belknap, Miami Tribal Historic Preservation Officer Diane Hunter, Director of Spiro Mounds Archeological Center Anna Vincent, and finally former second chief of the Peoria Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma and archeologist at Dickson Mounds State Museum Logan Pappenfort. I would have liked to present more quotes in this thesis from all of them, but unfortunately, due to several technical malfunctions, I failed to record any of the interviews except for one with Carrie Wilson. Even so, I will work to represent each interview as best as possible because they all revealed different elements of Cahokia's past and present and exposed interesting takes on subjects like the national park push and co-management.

For example, speaking to Superintendent Belknap brought to the forefront many of the fiscal and bureaucratic roadblocks that Cahokia State Historic Site faces, as well as, a balanced discourse on the pros and cons of co-management and an NPS designation. Meanwhile, Mr. Pappenfort always exuded a powerful optimism about the potential for Indigenous solidarity in

co-management. As the former second Chief of the Peoria and as a direct descendent of the last full-blooded member of the Kaskaskia Nation, he always presented a strong counterexample to the traditional archeologists who prefer to ignore Indigenous sources of knowledge. Speaking to Ms. Hunter brought even more nuance to the co-management discussion. She provided a lot of context about the origin of the Miami people and their ties to Cahokia, and she adopted a very holistic view of the national park push and co-management. She argued that it did not matter much if Cahokia was a municipal park, state park, or national park. Instead, she stressed that what really mattered was the kind of relationship built between the park and the Indigenous communities linked to it. The interviews conducted with Ms. Wilson were also very informative. She provided an insiders' view of the Dhegiha and the bonds and divides between its various constituent tribes. She also presented a somewhat skeptical view of co-management at Cahokia, arguing that it would be very hard to achieve cooperation between all the nations involved. Finally, the interview with Director Vincent was conducted to reveal similarities between Spiro Mounds Archeological Center and Cahokia State Historic Site. Director Vincent echoed many of the concerns of Superintendent Belknap regarding co-management at her site. The thesis will reference each of these interviews in more depth in the pages below.



Figure 4. America during the last Ice Age. (Clark et al. 2014)

Early History (60,000 BCE+ - 7,000 CE)

The story of Cahokia starts with the first people in the Americas. Traditionally, archeologists have argued that humans entered the western hemisphere through a land bridge from Siberia to Alaska called Beringia around 11,200 BCE. However, in the last few decades, many archeologists have begun to push back on this narrative with both the means and the timing being subject to the hottest debates. In 2021, archeologist Paulette F. C. Steves (Cree and Metis nations) published a landmark book titled *The Indigenous Paleolithic of the Western Hemisphere* in which she argues that the first Americans really arrived here between 60,000 and 100,000 years ago. She based these claims on an examination of the available archeological evidence and on the oral histories, genetics, and linguistic patterns of Indigenous American communities.

Although her claims are still contested by many archeologists, the field as a whole is moving in her direction, with most estimates now ranging from between 18,000 to 26,000 years BCE (Bennett et al. 2021). However, her book is also worth highlighting for another reason. In it, she raises a salient critique of modern archeology, tracing its roots and practice back to the height of 19th-century colonialism and the rise of early modern racism. She does a great job calling out

a tension that will permeate this entire paper. Namely, the question of who is writing Indigenous American history and how. Steeves specifically critiques archeology for producing a public-facing history of pre-colonial Indigenous America, while simultaneously excluding Indigenous oral histories and contemporary Indigenous communities from their works (Steeves 2021 pg. 1-54). This critique is critical to remember because during the centuries since colonization, settler society has generally learned about Indigenous history through settler academics trained in the field of archeology. Returning to Mr. Pappenfort, archeology is a subfield of anthropology and anthropology is the study of people. As Pappenfort argues, one cannot effectively study a group of people if you separate their objects from their culture: especially when examples of that culture persist today in descendent communities. Unfortunately, the history we have of Cahokia today is in large part a reflection of this practice. Many histories of the city do not even mention descendent communities and, if they do, they still ignore major clues about what was happening at Cahokia that can be gleaned through oral histories and linguistics. This article strives to ameliorate many of those mistakes by incorporating a broader variety of sources, although admittedly, Cahokia is such a big subject with such a wide ranging impact on the world around it that this article is admittedly limited in scope.

To frame Cahokia's story, one must also understand the geography of the region that is now its home. Located well within the floodplain of the Mississippi River, just south of its confluence with the Illinois and Missouri rivers near modern-day St. Louis, Cahokia was built in a stretch of the Mississippi known as the American Bottom. Seasonal flooding from the river over thousands of years has made the soil of this region rich with nutrients (Jennings 2016 pg. 117). In pre-industrial times, access to the river allowed people to travel and trade with ease and

its wetlands and back-channels would have provided plenty of fish and waterfowl for consumption. Despite the richness of the soil, the first people to enter into this region were highly mobile nomads regarded as part of the Clovis Culture by archeologists (Morrow 1995). They came and left the American Bottom at will as they trekked after different herds of game or searched for high quality sources of chert (Berkson pg. 4-5). They lived off a combination of foods they gathered like persimmon, ragweed, hickory nut, grape, sumpweed, and walnut in addition to what they could hunt and fish (Simon et al. 2006 pg. 215). Their lives rotated around the change of the seasons and studies done in Illinois show groups of these Ice Age nomads traveling as far as 480 to 640 kilometers (300 to 400 miles) a year (Berkson 2001 pg. 5). However, they would not be the only culture present in the American Bottom for long.



Figure 5. An illustration of Poverty Point in its heyday. (Roe 2021)

The First Mound Builders (7000 BCE - 600 CE)

Yet, the urban concept that Cahokia epitomized did not originate in the American Bottom. Instead, it goes back 6,500 years to the hunter-gatherers living in the bayou of modern Louisiana and Mississippi (Saunders et al. 1994). They were the first people to start the mound and plaza building traditions that became hallmarks of Cahokia's civilization. The bayou was an

extremely productive ecosystem in that era. People did not have to travel extremely long distances to obtain food, so they settled seasonally and sometimes built earthworks in their settlements. Archeologists do not know when the oldest mound in American history was made because several likely candidates were destroyed before they could be studied (Saunders et al. 2005 pg. 632). Yet by 3,500 BCE, the practice was growing more complex and large-scale. At Watson Break, ancient Louisianans erected eleven conical and platform mounds arranged in an oval connected together by a ridge enclosing a plaza. The whole earthwork measured some 270 meters (900 feet) across (Kassabaum 2019). Archeologists consider this the first known earthwork mound complex in American history and argue that it was built over the course of centuries and inhabited semi-annually until it was abandoned sometime after 3,000 BCE (Saunders et al. 2005 pg. 631-640).

For a millennium after Watson Break, mound building died out across the region. However, around 1,700 BCE, the practice was reborn on a much grander scale. Across the bayou of Louisiana and Mississippi, hunter-gatherers began a mound construction spree (Kassabaum 2019). The largest settlement they made is called Poverty Point. Some even consider it America's first city. Yet, Poverty Point defied many expectations for a city. Its population did not practice intensive agriculture even though its inhabitants were mostly sedentary (Gibson 2007 pg. 514-516). Once again, the bounty of the wetlands on the southern Mississippi River provided, keeping thousands fed in all seasons. Ultimately, Poverty Point came to stretch some 7 km (4 miles) across northeast Louisiana (Ortman 2010 pg. 657). At the center of this ancient city, the inhabitants constructed a grand plaza surrounded on three sides by six concentric rings of c-shaped ridges (Kassabaum 2019). The residents lived on these ridges and likely used them to avoid seasonal flooding. The residents also built a series of conical, effigy, and platform mounds

across Poverty Point (Kidder 2002 pg 91-95). Archeologists disagree about the exact purpose of these mounds, though they almost certainly held practical and symbolic uses. However, unlike Cahokia and the Hopewell, they were not used for elite burials (Kidder 2002 pg. 91-95).

Furthermore, like the inter-connected cities of ancient Greece or the Yucatan, Poverty Point was hardly alone in its world. There is evidence that it was rivals with another mound-earthwork settlement based out of western Mississippi (Saunders 2004). The two states probably competed for control of early trade routes running from the Gulf of Mexico to Iowa, Georgia, Ohio, and Tennessee (Hill et al. 2016).

Even as Poverty Point reached the height of its power and population, the style of urbanization it embodied remained a far removed example to the people of the American Bottom. There were wetlands in Illinois but they were not as rich as those found in Louisiana and Mississippi. In fact, at that time there was no single ecosystem in contemporary Illinois that was rich enough for people to settle permanently and live off the land (Stafford 2000). So for millennia, their lives revolved around the journeys that came with the passage of the seasons and the search for and conservation of food. At the end of the last Ice Age, southern Illinois grew warmer. More temperate plants moved into the area and deciduous forests gradually replaced ones made up of spruce and pine (Berkson 2001 pg. 4). Grasslands became widespread across the region, bringing with them access to large mammals like buffalo and new migrants from the south.

Around 7,000 BCE, the Dalton Culture moved into southern Illinois and started settling in villages that became sites of repeated habitation throughout parts of the year (Berkson 2001 pg. 4). They integrated or pushed out extant Clovis groups and traveled less than their forerunners averaging an annual migratory range of between 50-100 km (20-40 miles) a year

(Berkson pg. 5). The people of the Dalton culture continued to use spears for hunting as had been done in the Ice Age, but atlatls also grew increasingly common (Howard 2004). Furthermore, archeologists have recovered the oldest known ground stone manos, metates, and pestles in North America from a site in Randolph County, Illinois that was inhabited during this time (Berkson 2001 pg. 6). By approximately 1,000 BCE, the Dalton Culture declined and Illinois became home to a more thoroughly studied and diverse array of cultures. For the first time, the American Bottom became well connected to the trade networks that cut across Turtle Island's interior waterways. Marine shells, copper, hematite, and magnetite all made their way to the region from distant quarries and beaches (Stewart 1989). As the millennia passed on, people continued to use a large variety of semi-domesticated plants and gradually incorporated new ones into their diet. In this era sumpweed, sunflower, goosefoot, and squash were all quite common (Gremillion 1993). Finally, elite burials from around 1,000 BCE feature weapons and jewelry made of copper, flint, and shell, as well as; a distinctive powder made of red ochre that was sometimes spread over the deceased (Hill 2012).

When the American Bottom entered the fifth century BCE, Indigenous groups from the Great Lakes region and the lower Mississippi Delta migrated into the area and introduced handmade pottery to it for the first time (Lynn Marie 2000). This massive technological innovation became a hallmark of Illinois' first mound-building culture, known to archeologists as the Havana Hopewell. They were a more sedentary people than their predecessors, and between 200 BCE to 400 CE, they seasonally inhabited hundreds of villages and built over 300 known mounds across much of western and central Illinois (Berkson 2001 pg. 8-9). Their population still relied primarily on hunting, fishing and gathering for food. However, this era is largely characterized by the intensification of agricultural production across the region.

Traditionally women and the elderly would have done farm work, tending to fields that in this era included tobacco, knotweed, marsh elder, gourds, little barley, sunflower, goosefoot, maygrass, and squash among a variety of other plants (Simon et al. 2006 pg. 219-225).

The international trade links that eventually made Cahokia a great power also continued to develop in this era. People traveled by dugout canoes or on foot overland bringing objects like obsidian, mica, copper, marine shells, and shark teeth to Illinois from communities over a thousand miles away (Turnbaugh 1980). A key link in this trade network was with the Hopewell Culture based around the central and southern parts of modern Ohio. They too were semi-sedentary farmers and gained widespread renown for building settlements characterized by massive effigy and conical burial mounds and for crafting extremely intricate pipes, pottery, and ear spools among other finished goods. Contact between the Ohio and Havana Hopewell led to an exchange of items and ideas that made the Havanans more like their neighbors. For example, the Havanans adopted Ohio Hopewell mound-building practices and religious iconography (Berkson 2001 pg. 9). However they still retained a distinct material and cultural identity. Havana Hopewell were well known across the Midwest for their pottery style which eventually came to be adopted in communities across the region (Whittaker 2015).

In fact, between 50-200 CE the people of the American Bottom began importing Hopewell made ceramics for their own use and there is even evidence to suggest several groups of Havana Hopewell migrated south into the region bringing their semi-sedentary farming practices with them (Simon et al. 2006 pg. 223). Yet, these settlements were relatively small scale and by 350 CE Hopewell influence collapsed in the region, leaving much of the American Bottom relatively uninhabited for half a century (Simon et al. 2006 pg. 224). When people returned to the floodplain, they continued to live a semi-sedentary lifestyle in which hunting and

wild plant collection remained as important as plant cultivation. The end of the Hopewell era did not leave the region ignorant of its past. Instead, people continued to look back on the Hopewell through oral traditions and the ruins of their settlements as something to revere and aspire to (Jennings 2016 pg. 122). Soon people began building on the shoulders of their forefathers. Around 600 CE, hunter-gatherer-farmers settled Cahokia settled for the first time as a seasonal village (Byers 2009 pg. 105-107).

Academics will probably never know the exact ethnic or linguistic composition of the American Bottom during Cahokia's height or even in the centuries before that. However, oral history, linguistics, and archeology offer some clues as to which ethnic groups were in the region in the centuries before Cahokia's rise and at its peak. According to accounts from the Quapaw, Kansa, Ponca, Omaha, and Osage, all five tribes were once part of a single nation known as the Dhegiha (Vehik 1993 pg. 231-232). Today, each nation speaks its own language. However, all are part of the Mississippi Valley branch of the Siouan language family. In fact, Quapaw and Osage still share more than 80% of their vocabulary in common (Vehik 1993 pg. 242). Dhegiha oral histories trace the lineage of their nation back to the east coast (Bandy 2020 pg. 2). Sometime roughly around the end of the Hopewell era, they arrived in the Ohio River valley and became established in a region including much of central and western Kentucky, southern Illinois, southern Indiana, and eastern Missouri (Bandy 2020 pg. 2-4). They remained there and went on to become the primary ethnic group present at Cahokia during its time as a great city. After the end of Cahokia the Dhegiha split apart, breaking into the constituent nations we know today as they migrated even further west and south into modern-day Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota (Vehik 1993 pg. 232-246).

One of the through lines linking Poverty Point, the Ohio Hopewell, and Cahokia is that

they were international centers where a diverse cast of nations engaged with, competed, and cooperated alongside each other. In Cahokia's case, the Dhegiha may have been at the center, but on all sides neighbors who shaped the story of their city in unique ways surrounded them. To the north there was another Siouan-speaking nation composed of the modern Iowa, Otoe-Missouria, Winnebago, and Ho-Chunk nations residing near Lake Michigan and Lake Superior in modern Wisconsin (Thiessen 2004). Meanwhile, the southern stretches of the Mississippi were home to an extremely diverse cast of nations, including the ancestors of the Muskogee and Natchez nations, among others (Smith 1984). To the west, much of Missouri, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma would have been controlled by Caddoan speaking ancestors of the Caddo and Wichita nations (Vehik 1993 pg. 242-245). To the east, the ancestors of the Algonquin-speaking Shawnee nation resided in southern Ohio, eastern Indiana, and eastern Kentucky (Clark 2018). Finally, throughout the interior and Great Lakes coast of much of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, lower Michigan, and lower Wisconsin, Algonquian-speaking nations, including the ancestors of the modern Peoria and Miami nations, would have reigned (Bergquist 1981). The American Bottom was a crossroads for all these groups. Although the Dhegiha predominated, waterways and roads connected the region to a much larger world anchored by the Mississippi River and its tributaries.



Figure 6. Three varieties of corn traditionally cultivated in the American southwest. (Murphy 2018)

Food for All (750-1050 CE)

Around 750 CE, the people of the American Bottom found their societies becoming increasingly more sedentary and hierarchical. This move was spurred by the adoption of two key technologies combined with political and cultural changes that created a unique urban culture. One of the aforementioned technologies was the bow and arrow. Invented in the Canadian arctic between 3,000 and 1,600 BCE, it took until the 8th century for this weapon to become the primary tool of choice for hunters and warriors in the American Bottom (Tomka 2013 pg 565). Although worse at taking down big prey than an atlatl, its superior range and penetrating power allowed individual hunters to more easily take down small and medium size game. For centuries, the atlatl and bow and arrow coexisted in many communities, but increasingly it dominated in areas that lacked big game like the American Bottom (Tomka 2013 pg. 564-566). As more hunters adopted the weapon, the communities they provided for gained access to more protein, helping grow the population. The bow and arrow also transformed warfare. Up and down the Mississippi, communities began building moats and wooden palisades for defense (Milner 1999). People who traditionally lived in separate bands for much of the year began to cluster closer

together for mutual protection, providing the impetus for the creation of larger villages and towns while also supporting the growth of a more centralized state (Byers 2009 pg. 85-89).

Maize is the second major innovation of note. This miracle plant entered mass cultivation across the American Bottom around the same time bows and arrows made their rise to prominence (Simon et al. 2006 pg. 225-233). First cultivated in southern Mexico around 7,000 BCE, maize was transformed from a small wild grass into a staple crop capable of feeding millions over thousands of years of cultivation by Indigenous people. It probably first reached the American Bottom via trade routes going through the southwest or the Gulf of Mexico. Maize was present in the American Bottom as far back as the Havana Hopewell period, but it took centuries to develop landraces of corn capable of surviving in the north (Simon et al. 2006 pg. 225-233). However, once new landraces entered mass cultivation, life in the American Bottom shifted dramatically in the space of a generation (Fortier 2002). Around 900 CE, villages that were once inhabited seasonally—by semi-sedentary populations increasingly became sites of permanent habitation. This change can be partially explained by the emergent medieval warm period, which lowered the Mississippi's water levels, revealing more arable land while making droughts and floods less common (Jennings pg. 119-120),

It is hard to overstate the importance of maize. Communities that might have once gone hungry had they relied only on farming could feed themselves and produce some extra surplus. Soon towns dotted the land and the number of villages and hamlets exploded (Byers 2009 pg. 178-222). Maize may have even become an object of religious significance, yet its exact role as a symbol certainly varied widely from culture to culture (Byers 2009 pg. 137-162). For example, some Indigenous oral traditions link the arrival of corn to a spirit from the underworld known as the corn maiden, while others may have seen it as a symbol of renewal and purification (Byers

2009 pg. 137-162). It is unknown exactly where the Dhegiha fell. Unfortunately, another side effect of corn's introduction and the transition to a more sedentary lifestyle was an increase in child mortality and a sharp decrease in the overall health of the population (Pauketat 2007 pg. 44-56). As a staple food, maize lacked enough nutrition to sustain a person as the only pillar of their diet, and yet it rapidly became the food of the common people.

Intensive corn cultivation also transformed the geography of the settlements in the American Bottom. As settlement density grew, large central plazas were built to serve as the focal point of religious, commercial, and sporting activities in these settlements (Jennings 2016 pg. 120-127). Local leaders sought to reinforce their status by constructing imposing residences near the central plaza and they usually housed their principal subordinates around smaller plazas next to the central one (Byers 2009 pg. 137-162). This architectural development points to the fact that as the society of the American Bottom grew more sedentary and agrarian, it also became less egalitarian and more hierarchical. Most archeologists agree that Cahokia's political and social structure developed naturally from these societies, as the region's political and religious elite exerted ever more power over the lives of their subjects (Jennings 2016 pg. 121-122).

This period saw Cahokia expand from a tiny village into the largest town in the American Bottom. By around 1000 CE, its population may have numbered no more than two thousand people (Pauketat 2010 pg. 9-10). That was enough to build Cahokia's first platform mounds, which doubled as elite residences and its first major temples. As corn cultivation intensified across Turtle Island, the richness of Cahokia's soil drew attention from far and wide. Some people moved to the town from smaller villages and hamlets across the American Bottom, but others came in from much further afield. In the early 11th century, groups of immigrants from Arkansas and Louisiana moved to Cahokia and helped transform the settlement by

complementing its traditions with their own unique cultures (Pauketat 2010 pg. 11-15). They also supplied much-needed manpower to the town, aiding in the cultivation of corn and the raising of mounds. Their hard work helped the Dhegihan polity become even more economically and politically important, thus setting the stage for Cahokia’s rebirth as the largest city of the Mississippian world.

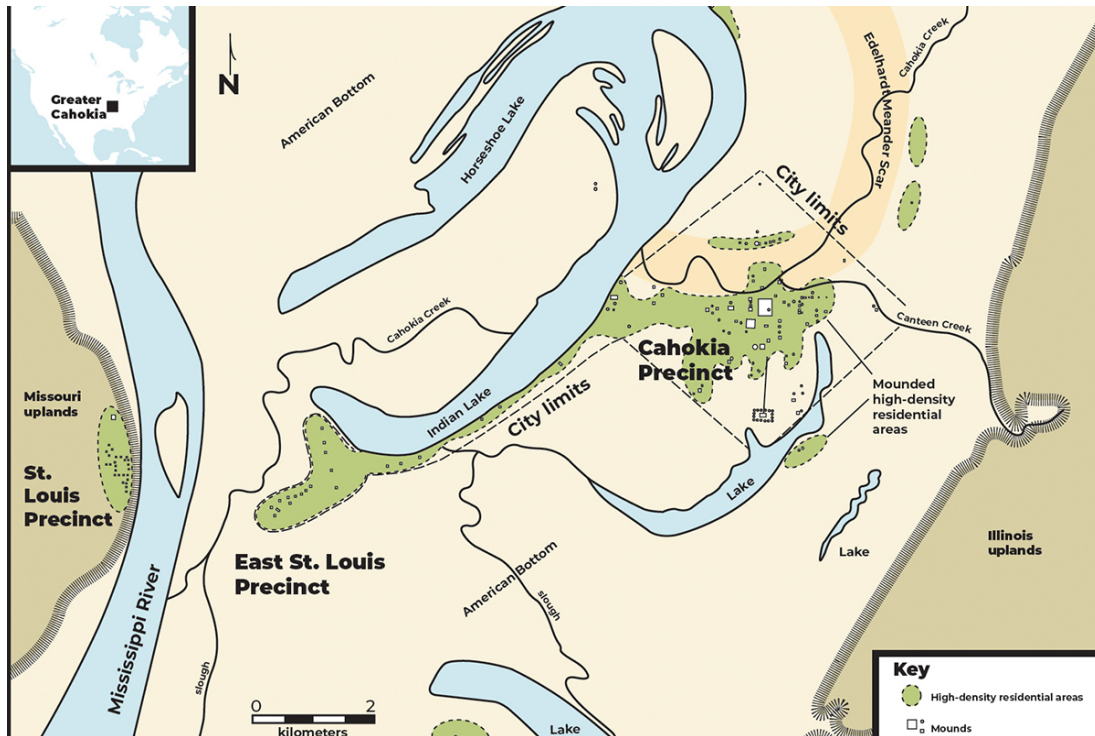


Figure 7. A map of the city at its fullest extent including the mound group in Saint Louis. (Vincent 2020)

The Big Bang (1050-1150 CE)

On July 4, 1054, a star exploded in a distant part of the Milky Way galaxy. Its detonation was so massive that people all across Earth could see the supernova fixed in the sky, day and night for years thereafter (Pauketat 2010 pg. 11-13). The prominent archeologist Timothy Pauketat has hypothesized that this supernova was one trigger for a political and religious revolution that rebuilt Cahokia in a new image around 1050 CE. The so-called “Big Bang” started when the inhabitants of Cahokia burned their town to the ground and covered the ashes

with dirt. In its place, they built a pre-planned city offset five degrees from true north and aligned both with the summer solstice sunrise and the southern maximum lunar moonrise (Pauketat et al. 2015). This imbued the city with one overt layer of religious symbolism, but there are several present in the city.

At the center of new Cahokia, construction crews moved tons of dirt by hand to erect the centerpiece of the city – a massive earthen pyramid that is now known as Monk’s Mound. When completed, it stood as the largest structure ever built north of Mexico until the colonial era. Yet, it started out around 900 CE as a small platform mound (Iseminger 2011 pg. 43) . When Cahokia was reborn, generations of city dwellers worked to expand the structure until it reached more than ten stories tall and included four separate terraces (Iseminger 2011 pg. 40-65). Like all the mounds in Cahokia, its builders used alternating layers of dark clay, light clay, sod, and light-colored sand to aid with drainage and decrease erosion (Jennings 2016 pg. 122). It is also likely that these different layers had some religious or symbolic significance (Pauketat 2010 pg. 11-24). Archeologists believe the uppermost terrace of the pyramid was home to Cahokia’s paramount leader for most of the city’s history.

Below Monk’s Mound, just to the south, construction crews flattened the earth and constructed a grand central plaza. Like in the towns that predated Cahokia in the American Bottom, this plaza served as the city’s central market, sporting stadium, and park (Iseminger 2011 pg. 84-95). Massive crowds of spectators would have gathered there to watch the Mississippian world’s best athletes play the forerunner of lacrosse and a more obscure sport called chunky. Chunky was very popular with the citizens of Cahokia. In fact, one of the major innovations to come out of the city was a standardized chunky disc (Pauketat 2009 pg. 23-24). Players would roll the disk and throw spears at it in an attempt to land theirs closest to where the

disk ended up. Archeologists believe this sport was invented in eastern Missouri and western Illinois, including the American Bottom, around 600 CE (Pauketat 2009 pg. 23). Its popularity probably helped bring migrants into Cahokia and tie its diverse population together (Jennings 2016 pg. 124-125). The sport remained popular with many Indigenous communities well after the start of the colonial era and can be used to help track the influence of Cahokia with their chunky discs found from South Carolina to Oklahoma, Louisiana and Wisconsin (Pauketat 2009 pg. 20-25).

Many smaller mounds flanked the grand central plaza on all sides. Some of them were flat-topped platform mounds, while others were small conical mounds often used as cemeteries for the dead (Iseminger 2011 pg. 84-95). In the middle of the grand central plaza stood a small ridge-top mound, which is a unique mound type that originated in Cahokia. Archeologists still argue over the exact purpose of these structures, but the extent evidence suggests they were used for mass sacrifices and elite burials. Around this central district rose miles of neighborhoods, each centered on its own central plaza built along the central alignment of the city (Jennings 2016 pg. 123-125). Some archeologists have argued that these neighborhoods each were home to a distinct ethnic group or economic subgroup. This may be true to an extent. In modern cities, neighborhoods made up of a majority of people from one ethnic or religious group are common, but very diverse neighborhoods also exist in modern cities. Given how multicultural Cahokia was, it is likely that there were some neighborhoods where most of the citizens were of a single ethnic or linguistic group. These neighborhoods probably served as a touch point for immigrants, pilgrims, and merchants who were new to the city. However, it is also likely that some neighborhoods were very mixed and that most citizens of Cahokia possessed some degree of multilingualism, given how linguistically fractured the Mississippian world was.

It is also worth mentioning that the houses that were built in these neighborhoods represent an interesting technological innovation in themselves. Before Cahokia, the inhabitants of the American Bottom dug post holes and put saplings or long sticks in them to create the frame to build their homes (Jennings 2016 pg. 125). During the building spree that characterizes the “Big Bang” at Cahokia, the urbanites streamlined this process by using hoes to dig trenches for the foundation of the building. Simultaneously, they prefabricated the walls and roof of the structure (Jennings 2016 pg. 125). Those elements would then be assembled on top of the foundation, which allowed construction workers to build these neighborhoods much more efficiently than they had before. This invention probably reinforced people’s reliance on the central authorities, as it made it so that specialized expertise was required to provide shelter (Jennings 2016 pg. 125). These structures may also have been more sturdy than their predecessors, as archeologists believe they lasted longer before having to be torn down. However, it is common to see these neighborhoods burnt down and rebuilt once every few decades (Iseminger 2011 pg. 32-39). Regardless, this innovation helped Cahokia grow larger than any settlement to come before it, so that by 1100 CE, the city spilled over the Mississippi and into the confines of modern-day Saint Louis. At its height during the 12th century, approximately 10,000 to 15,000 people lived in Cahokia proper (the site that’s now a state park) with another 20,000 to 30,000 inhabiting its immediate environs (Pauketat 2010 pg. 16).

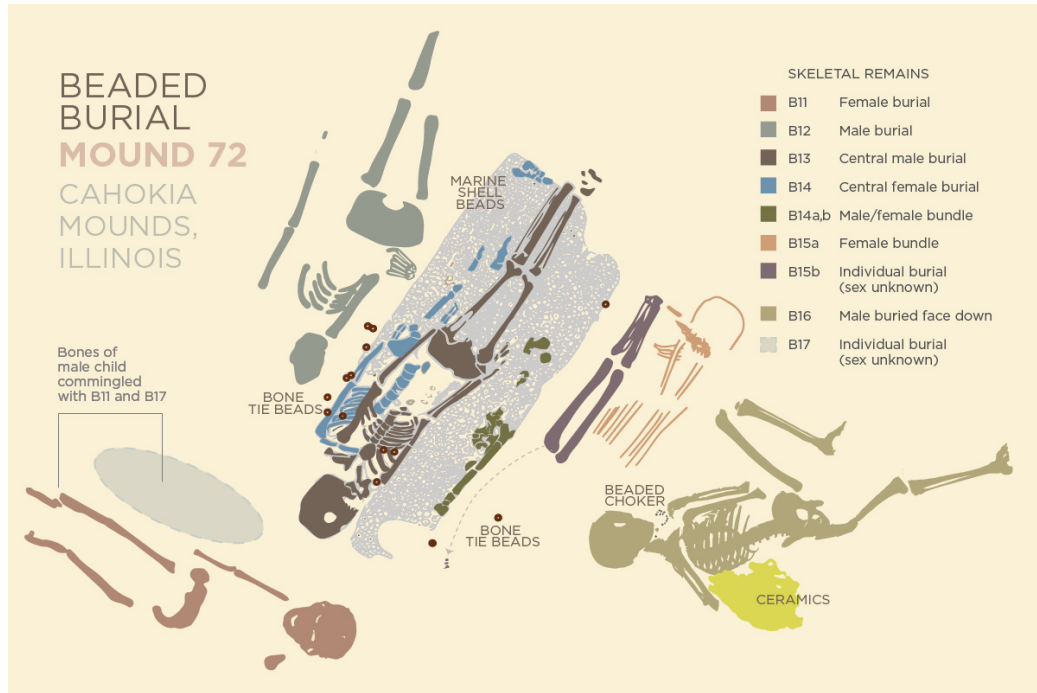


Figure 8. An image showing the most famous burial in Mound 72. (Yates et al. 2016)

Cahokian Religion and Politics

It is difficult to discern the precise political or religious system that gave rise to this rapid transformation. Yet, this topic again shows how important it is to study the archeological record alongside linguistic evidence and oral histories. Starting with Cahokian cosmology, it is clear that the denizens of this city, like many of their descendants, saw the world literally divided into three parts (Townsend et al. 2004). Two of them, one called the Overworld, and another called the Underworld, exist in opposition to each other. The Overworld represents order, while the Underworld represents chaos. Yet, neither of these worlds are purely good or evil places. Both have spirits that can be helpful to humans, depending on the situation. For example, some oral traditions from the southeast world link corn's arrival to a benevolent spirit from the underworld called the Corn Maiden (Snow 2006). Humans live in a middle world where these forces are supposed to exist in balance. However, that does not mean some people did not seek a close association with one world or another. For instance, the Osage divided their nation into two

groups. One half was associated with the sky and the other half was associated with the Earth. The Osage believe that life itself came from the sky and associate it and the sun with masculinity while holding the Earth and the moon to be feminine (La Flesche 1999). In Cahokia, it is clear that there were numerous efforts to balance these two sides. The leader's palace on top of Monk's Mound was associated with the upper world because the Sun would literally rise from it during certain solstices (Pauketat 2010 pg. 99-103). However, this symbolism was balanced by a large platform mound temple complex known as the Emerald Site that was directly linked to Monk's Mound by a 24-kilometer-long road (15 miles). At the Emerald Site, religious ceremonies revolved around the cycles of the moon and involved human sacrifices with water, both of which are intricately associated with Mississippian conceptions of femininity and the underworld (Skousen et al. 2018).

While balance with natural and supernatural forces was essential, emphasis on this concept did not translate into a homogenous society. Instead, archeological data points to the fact that class was a prominent feature of Cahokia. Archeological analysis has shown that the people who lived in the downtown ate better and were healthier than their neighbors (Pauketat 2010 pg. 137-142). Diet is often a good indicator of class. In Cahokia, the elite had access to many sources of protein like deer, fish, and waterfowl, as well as a variety of vegetables and fruits. Meanwhile, the poor who mostly lived on the outskirts of Cahokia proper or in nearby farming villages consumed dog and maize as the two main staples of their diet (Pauketat 2010 pg. 146-150). Neighborhoods of poor, middle, and upper-class people were all present within the city and a class of impoverished rural farmers presided outside it (Holt 2009 pg. 232-237). The elites exerted a lot of power over these commoners. They used big public ceremonies like feasts, funerals, and chunky games to reinforce their authority and were able to resort to violence to

enact their will if need be. Using this mix, they kept a hold on power for centuries. The presence of Monk's Mound and other structures like it serve as a testament to the power they wielded, as do the high status burials that dot the city. Inside these tombs, archeologists have found bodies richly adorned with luxury goods and weapons, as well as many human sacrifices.

The most well-known example of human sacrifice at Cahokia was inside the inconspicuously named Mound 72. This ridgetop mound got its start as a woodhenge when Cahokia was still a small town around 950 CE (Iseminger 2011 pg. 66-70). In pre-colonial North America, woodhenges were used in the same way Stonehenge was, to keep track of astronomical events for political and religious reasons. In the early 11th century, the Cahokians replaced this woodhenge and in its stead started erecting three separate mounds that were eventually joined into Mound 72 (Butz 2015). The first people to be buried there were a man and woman who probably ruled Cahokia sometime between 1000 and 1050 CE (Emerson et al. 2016 pg. 406-415). Archeologists have named their grave the Birdman Burial because the man and woman at the center of it were stacked on top of each other and then laid to rest on a bed made up of approximately 20,000 marine shells arranged in the shape of a bird of prey alongside a number of luxury goods (Yates et al. 2016).

The Cahokians and Mississippians more broadly saw birds of prey as a symbol of martial prowess and courage because of the role they play in their mythology. According to Siouan and other Indigenous oral traditions, there was once a mythological hero variously called Red Horn, Red Man, and "He Who Wears (Man) Faces on His Ears". In the stories, this part man, part falcon, warrior hero was sent to Earth from the Upper World to do battle with a race of giants and water spirits from the Underworld, who were attacking humanity (Round 2018 pg. 448-449). He was successful and worked with other mythic beings from the Upper World called

thunderbirds (thought to control storms and other weather events) to bring balance to Earth. According to Logan Pappenfort, many Indigenous communities believe that the conflict between Upper and Under World spirits is still ongoing today in the natural rivalry between birds and snakes. The rulers of Cahokia liked to associate themselves with the Thunderbirds and Red Horn because they wanted to be thought of as great noble warriors who were ready to defend their people (Round 2018 pg. 451-456).

Around the rulers interred in Mound 72, archeologists also found ten other bodies. Most of these individuals were retainers and servants of the couple, as well as their relatives, based on the physical evidence. Yet, archeologists also rely on written records of mass sacrifices like this one carried out by the Natchez nation in the 18th century to interpret human sacrifice at Cahokia (Iseminger 2011 pg. 71-74). Academics consider the Natchez to be the last nation on the continent to maintain a strictly Mississippian class system and royal court (Holt 2009 pg. 237). In 1725 CE, a younger brother of the “Great Sun” or King of the Natchez, died and was buried in a mound alongside his wives and a retinue of servants and commoners who volunteered to be sacrificed. In Natchez society, commoners could help their families become minor or major nobles if they agreed to be sacrificed when the ruler died (White et al. 1971 pg. 376-380). The Natchez would prepare their sacrifices by having them ingest a large dose of nicotine that would disable the person and then they were strangled (White et al. 1971 pg. 377). Many of the people sacrificed at Mound 72 for the Birdman burial were probably dispatched in a similar way (Yates et al. 2016).

However, the birdman burial is not the only case of human sacrifice held within Cahokia or even that mound. As time went on, the sacrifices became larger and more violent at Mound 72. The next mass grave dug there held the remains of 24 women in it (Yates et al. 2016). While,

the one after that held 53 young women between the ages of 15 and 30 (Yates et al. 2016). Archeologists can tell from isotope analysis of their bones and cartilage that their diet consisted mostly of corn and little protein (Pauketat 2010 pg. 77-83). This meant that it is likely that they were commoners and that they might have been recent immigrants to Cahokia and its farming communities or war captives. The final mass grave in Mound 72 dates back to 1030 CE and includes the bodies of 39 men and women who met their ends extremely violently. Some were shot in the back with arrows, while others were beaten to death clubs or beheaded and then thrown into a pit (Yates et al. 2016). Some were still alive when the people of Cahokia buried them and they actually suffocated to death. The meaning of this grave is debated but many archeologists take it as evidence of a rebellion, war, or other conflict that consumed Cahokia in its early years (Holt 2009 pg. 243). It has even been suggested that these men and women were relatives of the young women who were buried below them (Yates et al. 2016). Either way, these burials taken together point to the fact that Cahokia was a highly stratified society. People were compelled or incentivized to give their lives to their rulers for the benefit of their families and for the maintenance of the extant social order.

Taken together, the pre-planned city, the massive construction projects, the organized violence committed on behalf of the elite, the intermingling of high political office and religion, these are all the hallmarks of an organized and centralized state. The existence of states is no anomaly in this region or in this time period. Some archeologists prefer to call them chiefdoms but when Spanish explorers entered the Mississippian world in the 16th century, they found dozens of small chiefdoms with entrenched class structures, led by men and women who used religion to sanctify their rule and raised armies to combat their neighbors and subjugate them like states have done throughout human history (Mann 2005 pg. 107-110). The potential dimensions

of a Cahokian state are hotly debated, but it is evident that around 1050, the city's rulers harnessed their subjects' passions to increase their temporal control over their people. Eventually, they led a state that stretched across the American Bottom into Missouri, with satellite communities controlling trade routes and sending raw materials to the metropole from across the region and farther afield. Without a broad diversity of sources, piecing together Cahokia's culture, religion, and politics would be much more difficult. Again, archeology must work hand in hand with living communities to reimagine the world of the dead.



Figure 9. A conflict between two southern Mississippian chiefdoms. (Mena 2023)

The Fall (1150 - 1400 CE)

As Cahokia nears its end, archaeological sources remain important, but again only offer a sliver of the full picture. No state lasts forever. By 1100 CE, there is evidence that divides between the elite and the commoners at Cahokia were widening. New woodhenges and mounds continued to be built across the city. These projects displaced entire neighborhoods and forced

common people to settle further and further away from the central district. The builders also stopped paying as much attention to the Cahokia's central alignment, perhaps indicating that the some of the religious zeal of Cahokia's founders had been lost (Pauketat 2010 pg. 136-150). These displacements probably increased internal dissent within the polity, leading to the exodus of some groups. Based on Dhegiha oral histories, the Quapaw were the first nation to break off from the other tribes and head off on their own, going south down the Mississippi River (Vehik 1993 pg. 233-244). Academics cannot pinpoint exactly when they left their cousins, but linguistics indicate that it happened between the introduction of corn and the arrival of horses (Bandy 2020 pg. 3-4). Given they were the first nation to split off from the Dhegiha, the exodus may have started as early as the 12th century.

In interviews I have had with Quapaw NAGPRA Director Carrie Wilson, she describes her nation as the "Bohemians of America", highlighting their love of teasing and their skill at art as two essential parts of Quapaw culture. If the Quapaw were also renowned for those traits among the Dhegiha back in that time, then the fact that they were the first group to leave the nation is telling. It suggests that as Cahokia and the state it ruled became more stratified and autocratic, "Bohemians" were among the first to go. Given we lack the details of the Quapaw departure, one can only speculate about whether the migration was sudden or gradual, violent or peaceful. Yet, there is archeological evidence that people from Cahokia founded towns in southeastern Missouri and northeast Arkansas around the end of the 12th century and that they maintained them until the 1400s (Pauketat 2010 pg. 151-155). If that group became Quapaw, then they continued migrating south over the centuries, eventually ending up at the confluence of the Arkansas and Mississippi rivers by the colonial era. The problem for Cahokia is that the Quapaw migration was not an isolated incident. Instead, they were the first trickle in a flood.

Warfare was also a major contributing factor in Cahokia's decline. Although there is no evidence that a battle ever took place in the city's downtown, part of Cahokia in modern East Saint Louis was burnt to the ground by an unknown party around 1150 CE (Iseminger 2011 pg. 137-143). It is possible that this was done by the Cahokians to clear the area in the same way they did with old Cahokia before the "Big Bang", yet the Cahokians never rebuilt in East St. Louis. Therefore, it is likely that the true perpetrators were rebels or a foreign invader. Further evidence for this hypothesis comes from the fact that a massive palisade measuring 3 kilometers (2 miles) long and 6 meters (20 feet) high was built around the time of the fire to enclose the entire central precinct of the city (Benson et al. 2009). Like the construction projects of the early 12th century, this palisade displaced many Cahokians while simultaneously serving as a physical barrier that prevented easy access to the city's most important public spaces (Mann 2005 pg. 298-299). The palisade also had negative environmental effects as it took about 15,000 to 20,000 trees to make one iteration of the palisade (Iseminger 2011 pg. 140). In the years between 1150 and 1400 CE, Cahokia's rulers built and rebuilt the fortification four times, seriously degrading the forests and increasing erosion around their city (Pauketat 2010 pg. 152-154).

Yet, they probably had good reason. The period that brought on Cahokia's collapse was also a difficult one for most of the Mississippian world. Iroquois oral histories trace the start of their confederacy to a total eclipse in 1142 CE (Sharma 2021). That date is hotly contested by academics, but there is archeological evidence and oral histories that show Iroquoian people moved from modern-day Quebec near Montreal into New York during the 12th and 13th centuries (Klees 2003) This led to a chain of migrations, as the Iroquoian invasion caused Algonquian refugees to flee south and west. Sometimes these migrations generated new conflicts, which likely disrupted the very trade routes that Cahokia's export based economy

relied on. There is even evidence to suggest Iroquoians invaded the Dhegihan homeland in western Kentucky around the 12th century (Burns 2004 pg. 15-22). These conflicts probably exacerbated ones between rival Mississippian powers and helped create an era of widespread warfare that destroyed much of Cahokia's prosperity.

Environmental instability is another significant structural factor that underwrote the metropolis's decline. Around 1200 CE, a major earthquake hit Cahokia around the same time a bad flood struck the city (Mann 2005 pg. 299-300, Munoz 2015). These disasters heralded the start of decades of major droughts that presaged the end of the medieval warm period (White et al. 2019). Maize is a water hungry crop. When the rains did not come and the harvests failed, people starved and the legitimacy of the religious and political system that held Cahokia together began to come apart at the seams. Between 1100 and 1250 CE, Cahokia's population fell from a high of at least 15,000 people to a nadir of approximately 3,750 (Mann 2005 pg. 291, 300). People voted with their feet and, like the Quapaw, new nations broke off from the Dhegiha and migrated west and south in search of more productive lands elsewhere across the Mississippi and her tributaries. Between 1350 and 1400 CE, Cahokia was left almost entirely abandoned, with only a few families or individuals clinging on to life amidst the ruins (Jennings 2016 pg. 136-140). This mostly left Algonquians like the ancestors of the Illinois Confederation to inhabit the American Bottom until forced removal.



Figure 10. A chunky player effigy pipe a shell gorget and a stone disc. All sourced from across the Mississippian world. The shell gorget depicts an important spirit represented by the water spider while the stone disc depicts a hand-eye motif surrounded by twisted rattlesnakes. (Singleton 2021)

Historical Legacy

Cahokia's impact on the world did not end with the city itself, however. During the 11th and 12th centuries, its role as the metropolis at the center of the Mississippi meant it served as a model that many sought to emulate. Cities, towns, and villages across the midwest and southeast looked at Cahokia's massive platform mounds, grand plazas, trench houses, pottery styles, public feasts, chunky games, religion, government, and more and sought to adapt elements of each technology and institution to fit their own needs (Jennings 2016 pg. 130-136). The large immigrant communities present in Cahokia aided in the diffusion of this knowledge as individuals moved back and forth between the city and their homelands (Pauketat 2010 pg. 105-108). Cahokia's rulers took an active role in this process. They held public events that drew new people into the city, but they also sought to push their power abroad through trade. Cahokia was the biggest producer of finished goods anywhere along the Mississippi at its height. They

imported raw materials and food and exported finished goods like pottery, jewelry, and copper tablets (Jennings 2016 pg. 135). So many Cahokian made finished goods have been found at sites like Aztalan in Wisconsin and Dickson Mounds in central Illinois that archeologists have speculated that they were Cahokian colonies (Jennings 2016 pg. 134). These networks were disrupted by the crises of the 12th and 13th centuries, but the import of Cahokian wares and ideas left a lasting impact on many cultures.

Cities like Emerald Mounds in Mississippi, Etowah and Ocmulgee in Georgia, Moundville in Alabama, and Spiro in Oklahoma learned from Cahokia's example and eventually came to rival her as Mississippian powers in their own right (Jennings 2016 pg. 139-140). Some even outlived Cahokia. Yet the 12th through 15th centuries saw many of these settlements grow smaller as the population became more diffuse (Pauketat 2010 pg. 157-160). In some regions, Mississippians took on a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle when they found lands that could support that but in others people remained fully sedentary and simply lived in smaller towns and villages rather than big cities.

When the Spanish conquistador Hernando de Soto entered the former Mississippian heartland in the early 1540s, he found cultures that still possessed many of the hallmarks of Mississippian civilization as epitomized by Cahokia (Milanich 1992). For example, mounds were still used as temples, burial grounds, and symbols of political power. Corn still served as the staple of the diet. Warfare was still a major concern and many towns and even villages were fortified with palisades boasting towers plastered over with wattle and daub the same way Cahokia's palisade was. Chiefs were considered semi-religious deities by their people, serving as conduits between this world and the deities of the upper and underworlds (Mann 2005 pg. 108). Chunkey was still played in grand plazas and houses were still made using the trench method

(Jennings 2016 pg. 139-140). Some cultures even continued to form their pottery in the same way Cahokia did, using crushed-up freshwater muscle shells to help temper it. Early European explorers even wrote about encountering Siouan speakers, potential descendants of Cahokia — as far south as the Gulf of Mexico (Pauketat 2010 pg 141-150).

Even so, it's not like the world stood still between 1300 and 1540. When the Dhegihans headed west and south out of Cahokia, they encountered Caddoan speaking people on the western side of the Mississippi in the interior of Missouri and Arkansas (Vehik 1994 pg. 245-246). Their migration led to generations of warfare between these two groups which eventually resulted in the Dhegihans and especially the Osage conquering most of Missouri from the Caddoans and forcing them west into a region encompassing parts of Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas (Burns 2004 pg. 23-86). The climatic changes and conflicts that characterized the 12th, 13th, and 14th centuries in the Mississippian world led to the reduction of many of its largest cities and the depopulation of the American Bottom. Yet, people who lived in the south and southeast maintained a primarily sedentary lifestyle derived from the Mississippian culture until the 16th century when De Soto's conquistadors came through and left a trail of atrocities in their wake (Mann 2005 pg 108-109).

Mass murder and slavery were calling cards of Spain in this era and De Soto's expedition was no exception, yet their impact went beyond the physical wounds inflicted by their swords. The pigs De Soto brought with him got loose and soon spread without check across the south. The pigs and De Soto's men transferred diseases like measles and smallpox to the region's Indigenous population causing a terrible epidemic. By the time European explorers returned to the Mississippi in the 17th century, they found villages abandoned and almost all the urbanized societies wiped out (Mann 2005 pg. 109-110). Even so, some Indigenous nations retained a

classical Mississippian class structure and urbanized society right up to the 18th century, with the Natchez continuing to maintain their temple mounds and royal lineage until the 1730s (La Vere 2007).

One might even trace the true end of the Mississippian culture to the 1830s and 40s when the United States government removed many Indigenous nations from the southeast and midwest and death marched them to Oklahoma. Before colonization to this day, many nations, including the Osage, Peoria, Muscogee, and Cherokee revere the mound settlements as sacred places made by their ancestors. Every year, ceremonies are held at Cahokia by Indigenous Americans to celebrate the summer and winter solstices. Even in 2021, 39 Indigenous nations from every corner of Oklahoma came together to establish the First Americans Museum in Oklahoma City. They moved directly to claim the heritage of their ancestors, the mound-builders by incorporating a massive 21st-century mound into its design (Allen 2022 pg. 333-337).



Figure 11. Photos of the destruction of St. Louis's "Big Mound". (Easterly 1869)

From the 15th Century to the 20th

To understand how Cahokia became what it is today, it's important to track its history from the centuries after the end of the city to the modern era. Starting with the land itself, the Little Ice Age caused the Great Plains to expand east (Morrissey 2015 pg. 671-672). This brought large herds of buffalo into Illinois for the first time in centuries and caused many Siouan speakers who remained in the region to move west in pursuit of bigger herds. Meanwhile, from the east came the predecessors of the Illinois Confederacy. Descended from Algonquian speakers who inhabited the territories south of Lake Erie in modern Ohio, they were sedentary farmers during the Mississippian era who made the same transition the Dhegiha did (Morrissey 2015 pg 669-670). Pushed by droughts that killed their corn crops, as well as invasions from the east, they migrated west into modern-day Indiana and Illinois and started pushing out or integrating the remaining Siouans (Morrissey 2015 pg. 671-676). Their society shared some cultural ties to Cahokia and the Siouans, adopting many aspects of eastern Siouan cosmology and their post-Mississippian Great Plains lifestyle. However, there were also many important differences. For example, unlike their Mississippian predecessors, class was not deeply ingrained into their society and their culture remained deeply influenced by their Algonquian language and their links to other Algonquian nations around the Great Lakes (Morrissey 2015 pg. 676-677).

The first Europeans to arrive in Illinois were explorers led by the Frenchman René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle in the 1680s. When his party reached the American Bottom, they found the region inhabited by two tribes. One known as the Kaskaskia and one known as the Cahokia. Both spoke dialects of the Miami-Illinois language and were considered relatives by the other Illinois (Morrissey 2015 pg. 682). By 1699, French Jesuits established their first missions in the American Bottom, and seeing the Cahokia tribe living in the same region as the former metropolis, they named the entire city after them (Iseminger 2011 pg. 42). It is a

misleading name like many in American archeology, but it has stuck ever since. Monk's Mound got its modern name during the colonial era as well. In the early 19th century, a group of French Trappists built a mission among Cahokia's ruins, including four cabins on top of Monk's Mound itself (Roger 1994).

Over the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, war came to consume the Illinois. Deaths due to disease and raids by hostile neighbors led to a never-ending cycle of conflict in which the Illinois tried to replace their losses by taking slaves from foreign people only later to adopt these individuals into the tribe (Morrissey 2015 pg. 677-680). This led the Illinois to concentrate their population into only a few main settlements, giving rise to the region's final Indigenous city before colonization, known as the Grand Village of the Kaskaskia. However, being at war with the Iroquois to the east and Siouans to the north and west eventually proved untenable. The Illinois declined throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, forcing tribes like the Cahokia to confederate with their relatives. During the French and Indian Wars, the Illinois sided with the French, only to be divided against each other during Pontiac's War. In fact, a member of the Illinois affiliated Peoria tribe murdered Pontiac in the American Bottom near the ruins of Cahokia, three years after the end of his rebellion (Dowd 2004 pg. 249-276). This led Pontiac's former allies to seek retribution against the Illinois which further devastated them and forced some bands to move into Kansas (Dowd 2004 pg. 249-276). Yet, many Illinois stayed in the state that now bears their name until the American government forcibly removed them west in the 1830s. Today, the Illinois people live on in the Peoria Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma, which includes descendants of both the Cahokia and Kaskaskia.

When European settlers fully colonized the American Bottom, it was terrible news for the former metropolis on the Mississippi. At first, the mounds in the region were so plentiful that

Saint Louis was nicknamed “Mound City”. Yet, throughout the 19th century, settlers systematically leveled hundreds of these mounds in order to make way for new buildings or reuse the earth for their own projects (Pauketat 2010 pg. 158-160). Outside the city, farmers were no more sensitive and claimed many of the mounds with their plows. Today only one mound survives in Saint Louis, while across the river around Cahokia only a fraction of the former cityscape remains intact. This kind of systematic destruction is not unique to Cahokia and has significantly impacted the ability of Indigenous communities and archeologists to study pre-Columbian history.

In fact, at Cahokia alone, the city’s second-largest mound was leveled over the course of two months in the 1930s so that horseradish farmers could use it for fill (Hodges 2021). Some of the base of the mound survived this episode, yet in the 1960s this too was destroyed so that a large discount store could be built on top of it (Admin 2015). Other parts of the city have been destroyed to make way for a dog racing track, housing subdivisions, and two major highways. Even today, destruction of parts of Cahokia continues unabated as efforts to develop East St. Louis clash with preserving what remains of the city (LaCapra 2012). According to prominent Mississippian archeologist Timothy Pauketat, only about 10% of the former cityscape had been excavated and surveyed by archeologists while the other 90% has been destroyed or is buried under the city of Saint Louis and its environs (LaCapra 2012). Again, Cahokia is not the exception to the rule, but a great example of it. Even with federal laws like the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) the destruction of Indigenous historic sites and their purchase and sale by private non-Indigenous actors continues without abatement to this day (Gershon 2021). As we move forward, it is important to remember that these events shape popular memory of Cahokia as much as what happened while it was a city. Destroying mounds is

like burning books. It is a sacrilege against the dead that places whatever information stored within beyond recovery.



Figure 12. The emblem of the Cahokia Mounds Museum Society.

A State Park With Problems

To get an even grasp on Cahokia's current situation, it is important to track the development of Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site from its origins to the modern day and to gain a better understanding of some of the institutional problems it now faces. In the 1960s, Cahokia was a state park like any other. The land was managed by the Illinois Department of Conservation and it was treated as a local oddity rather than a historic site. During the winter, children would go sledding down the mounds and hundreds of Cahokian artifacts went missing into private collections as people looted the site without restraint (Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum). However, things started to change when a highway construction led to a few archeological studies that generated a lot of academic interest in the city. Over time, a movement developed to preserve Cahokia so that in 1979, the state of Illinois established Cahokia Mounds State Historic site, covering some 8.9 square kilometers (3.4 square miles) of the old metropolis.

Centered on the former “downtown”, the park preserves 51 mounds out of an estimated 120 that once made up central Cahokia (UNESCO 2016). In its early years, the park lacked any facility to greet visitors and educate them, but its creation sparked interest from locals and tourists alike. Within three years, the park was designated as the fifteenth United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization World Heritage Site in the United States (UNESCO 2016). This brought even more attention to Cahokia and helped spur the state to fund the construction of an interpretive center for the park. Unveiled in 1989, just a few hundred feet to the southeast of Monk’s Mound, the interpretive center was considered a state-of-the-art facility when it first opened, boasting a life size diorama of a Cahokian neighborhood, a large movie theater, and an open gallery from which you could view much of the cityscape as it stands today (Allen 2022 pg. 157-158). Approximately 300,000 people come to see the mounds and visit the interpretive center annually (Leonard 2019). Yet, as the displays there have aged, they’ve come under intensifying criticism from Chadwick Allen (Chickasaw) an author and professor of English and American Indian Studies at the University of Washington.

In his most recent book titled *Earthworks Rising: Mound Building in Native Literature and Arts* (2022) Allen has charged Cahokia’s interpretive center with presenting a skewed version of the city and its history that is saturated by the systemic racism of archeology. Namely, the exclusion of Indigenous oral histories, Indigenous linguistics, and contemporary Indigenous voices from the exhibits presented in the interpretive center. His critique is a compelling one and has been raised repeatedly in different forms by numerous activists, archeologists, and writers. Things are starting to change in the discipline, but the norm for archeologists should be that they work proactively with Indigenous nations as partners in the digs that they do on Indigenous historic sites. This will help Indigenous communities reclaim sovereignty over their own history

and it will improve the quality of the research that is produced by archeologists. Narratives that only rely on archeological evidence strip the objects they study of their cultural context and can only provide a small fraction of the story at best.

Having visited Cahokia's interpretive center myself (an experience I recommend to all readers), it was difficult to find any explicit mention of the Dhegiha or other specific ethnic groups present during Cahokia's height. This tendency contributes to a disconnect that leaves people questioning where the descendants of the mound builders went and if indeed there are any. I also feel the center failed to provide an appropriate sense of scope in their exhibits. They focus very narrowly on Cahokia and specifically its "downtown", yet Cahokia was a massive trade and population center for the entire Mississippian world and things that happened beyond the confines of the palisade had a big impact on the course of its history. A lot of context is lost when Cahokia is viewed in an isolated bubble and not as part of a complex web of competing and cooperating societies. Furthermore, presenting Cahokia only as a part of the distant pre-Columbian past negates important parts of how its modern identity and how that has been shaped by colonialism. In my experience, the interpretive center's original curators put a lot of effort into making exhibits that described archeological practice and highlighted archeological discoveries while simultaneously leaving the Indigenous communities that are connected to Cahokia out of the narrative (past and present) almost entirely. The failure to loudly acknowledge the Indigenous nations linked to Cahokia, or to actively incorporate them into history that is presented at that interpretive center, reinforces racist narratives of history and the ignorance that flows from them.

For centuries, people have argued that Cahokia and other mounds across the Americas were built by Egyptians, Hindus, Vikings, and aliens. Misconceptions like these are baked into a

lot of conspiracy theories and even the theology of the Mormon religion, which holds that Indigenous Americans are descended from several lost tribes of Israel who arrived in the hemisphere around 600 BCE. Not only are all these theories blatantly wrong, but at their core is the presumption that Indigenous Americans were incapable of building earthworks or any type of major settlement without influence from a more “civilized society” whether that be in Europe, Asia, Africa, or outer space (Dahl 1961). These theories are problematic because they are racist and work to obscure Indigenous achievements and minimize their civilizations. Failing to link Indigenous historic sites to living people leaves space for these kinds of conspiracies to grow unchecked.

In April 2023, I interviewed Lori Belknap, who has served as the Superintendent of Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site since 2019. I sought her out to get her view on Chadwick Allen’s critique of her institution and on other pressing issues facing the park. Superintendent Belknap’s answers surprised me. Responding to a question about the way that Cahokia’s history is presented at the interpretive center, she wrote “yes in general we concur with Chadwick Allen’s critique. Our museum was developed in 1988 and has changed little with administrations since that time, largely due to financial constraints imposed by the State”. In order to fact check her claims, I dug to find out if Cahokia’s budget really was being cut and found examples of the state slashing spending in 2015 (Leonard 2015), 2014 (IHPA 2014), 2002 (Staff 2002), and possibly 2004 (Staff 2004). In 2015, the cuts were so bad that the Interpretive Center was forced to close on Mondays and Tuesdays (Leonard 2015). Yet, these budget cuts are only the beginning of the park’s financial troubles. The state of Illinois only pays for operational expenses at the site like ground maintenance and staff salaries (Leonard 2016). Therefore, the public must rely on the Cahokia Mounds Museum Society nonprofit to pay for all public events held at the site

throughout the year, fund new research, and put up cash for new land acquisitions. The money for these projects comes from voluntary donations and the proceeds from the Interpretive Center's gift shop. However, since 2019, the Interpretive Center has struggled to stay open. First, it was closed down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and in March 2022, it closed again due to major ongoing renovations to the building itself, including minor repairs on gallery exhibits (Schmid 2022).

Superintendent Belknap also pointed to state policy surrounding procurement requirements as a further obstruction to change, writing that "It has been part of our strategic plans since 2019 to modify the Gallery and develop more Native-facing interpretive pieces in the Gallery, but the State procurement process has limited the response of vendors submitting acceptable bids to do the Gallery work. Other aspects of the bidding process come into play as well, making the process of large-scale changes a cumbersome and complex one.". Taken together, these problems point to a larger set of issues. Namely, that Cahokia State Historic Park and institutions like it that present pre-colonial Indigenous history rank quite low on the state's list of priorities. Budgetary neglect leaves these institutions to view reform as one of many prerogatives that they are forced to balance. During my interviews with Quapaw Nation NAGPRA Director Carrie Wilson, she used the term "orphan sites" to describe this dynamic and her words possess the ring of truth. It is extremely rare to find a well-resourced park dedicated to preserving Indigenous American history. The lack of funding creates a feedback loop where "orphan sites" contribute to public disinterest resulting in less funding. There has never been a period in American history where people working to conserve this history were very well resourced.



Figure 13. The emblem of the NPS. (National Park Service 2022)

Cahokia Mounds Mississippian Culture National Historic Park

Yet, that does not mean America lacks the opportunity to change. Since 2014, a local non-profit organization named the HeartLands Conservancy has been lobbying the federal government to transform Cahokia State Historic Site into a National Historical Park (Leonard 2017). Their goal is to secure more attention and funding for Cahokia through the designation, while also enlarging it to include many settlements that were once closely linked to the city. According to a National Park reconnaissance survey published in 2016, these sites would likely include the Lunar temple complex at Emerald Mounds, a former Cahokian satellite village named Pulcher Mounds, and Sugarloaf Mound which is now owned by the Osage Nation and is especially significant as the last surviving mound in St. Louis. Enlarging the park is especially important because it will help recast the scope of Cahokia to visitors and it will aid in the preservation of numerous Mississippian settlements. The same survey also found that Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site met all four criteria for a National Park Service (NPS) designation; including suitability, feasibility, need for NPS management, and national significance.

However, the federal government does not hand out such designations lightly. There are two ways for Cahokia to get an NPS designation. One is through an act of Congress and the other is through a Presidential order under the federal Antiquities Act of 1906. Despite the lobbying efforts of the HeartLands Conservancy and sympathetic politicians like Senator Durbin little progress has made in gaining the attention of the executive branch. So far, presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden have all ignored the issue. Given that Biden and Trump are both current frontrunners in their respective primaries that's unlikely to change. Meanwhile, in Congress, attempts were made in 2019 and 2021 to pass a law establishing "Cahokia Mounds Mississippian Culture National Historic Park" but both bills failed without reaching the floor for a vote. These efforts were spearheaded by Republican Congressman Mike Bost and Democratic Senator Dick Durbin, with numerous co-sponsors from across Missouri and Illinois, including progressive Congresswoman Cori Bush.

These results leave me feeling skeptical about whether Cahokia will ever become a National Historical Park, but that is hardly the only front that matters in the fight to preserve its legacy. According to Superintendent Belknap, the HeartLands Conservancy engaged with the Absentee Shawnee, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Eastern Shawnee, Loyal Shawnee, Miami, Osage, Ottawa, Peoria, Ponca, and Quapaw nations in their feasibility studies. Reporting on the issue substantiates her claim and indicates that there is overwhelming support from Cahokia's descendants for an NPS designation (Leonard 2019). Yet, in my interviews with members of the Miami, Quapaw, and Peoria nations who are involved in the work of historic and cultural preservation, none of them saw the NPS designation push as make or break. Instead, they seemed primarily concerned with preserving the remains of the city. Cahokia Mounds State Historic site is currently attempting to do that job, but its scope and resources are limited. If the federal

government will not make a national park, then perhaps activists can settle for making the best state park possible. That would entail securing funding for updates to the interpretive center's exhibits. It could also mean expanding the park's geographic scope to include outlying sites like the Emerald Mound complex, and perhaps most importantly, it would mean working more proactively with Cahokia's descendants to help them reclaim control of the historical narrative about their ancestors.



Figure 14. The entrance to Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park. (Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park 2020)

Co-Management Quandaries

As Cahokia moves forward into the 21st century, it is confronted by a unique set of possibilities and challenges. One of these possibilities is co-management. It is an idea that's been gaining a lot of steam in recent years. Academics have produced numerous studies showing that when governments empower local stakeholders and especially local Indigenous communities to manage an ecosystem, the biodiversity and health of that ecosystem improves (Voorberg 2020). Yet, debates rage on about the practice between those who argue it is an all around good and

those who believe it is or can be a form of co-option by the government (Diver 2016). Despite these debates, both the American and Canadian governments have moved to embrace co-management in recent years, with the Canadian government managing 69% of their federal crown land in partnership with Indigenous nations as of 2019 (Bruce 2019).

The United States lags far behind its northern neighbor in its embrace of co-management, but on March 12, 2019, the United States Congress passed the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act. This bill created Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park, which is perhaps the first national park in American history to be established in cooperation with an Indigenous nation. Located just outside of Macon, Georgia, the park covers some 3,000 acres that includes forests, lakes, and a former Mississippian mound city. This mound city, now known as Ocmulgee Mounds, has been revered by the Muskogee (Creek) Nation for centuries as a sacred place that is home to the bodies and spirits of their ancestors (Beasley 2022). In fact, when the Muskogee made their new capital in Oklahoma after the Civil War, they named it Okmulgee after this mound settlement. Although, Okmulgee Mounds was designated as a National Monument by President Franklin Roosevelt's administration in the 1930s, the Muskogee (Creek) Nation partnered for years with the city of Macon and the Congressional delegation of Georgia to push for a national historical park designation before any bill was signed. Their collaboration resulted in a successful campaign to prevent industrial interests from building new factories in the area and in the creation of a 130-acre preserve near Macon on land that was purchased by the Muskogee (Creek) Nation for members of the tribe (Beasley 2022). Even now, the Muskogee are working with their allies in Congress to pass a bill that would enlarge Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park and bring it into a direct co-management agreement between them and the NPS. If passed, this bill would give the Muskogee (Creek)

greater latitude to manage the ecosystems encompassed by Ocmulgee Mounds and to tell the history of the site in their own way.

When starting this project, I thought that perhaps Ocmulgee Mounds could serve as a template for what might be done with Cahokia. However, although there are some similarities there are also many important differences between the two cases. Ocmulgee is strongly affiliated with one Indigenous nation rather than the variety associated with Cahokia. This may seem like it would make it harder for the Muscogee to achieve their goals, but the Muscogee (Creek) Nation is the fourth most populous tribal nation in the United States today, with approximately 97,000 registered members according to their website. This means that they have the financial and human resources to co-manage a national park. Their unity has also allowed them to move decisively, to coordinate with the city of Macon and Georgia's Congressional delegation to actually move legislation through Congress. They have achieved all this despite the fact that Ocmulgee Mounds received approximately one third the annual visitors that Cahokia State Histories site does (Vermillion 2021).

In Cahokia's case, the community of direct descendants is about the same size as the entire Muskogee (Creek) Nation, but it is much more fractured. Among the Dhegiha alone, the Osage possesses 24,000 citizens, the Omaha 6,000, the Quapaw 3,200, and the Kaw 3,100. The Ponca would be the second largest, with 7,700 combined citizens, but their tribe is split between two governments based out of Nebraska and Oklahoma, respectively. According to the United States Census Bureau, together they are approximately 44,000 people separated into six different tribal governments. The other Indigenous nations associated with Cahokia are also very diverse. The Miami number some 7,000 people based in Oklahoma and Indiana, while the Peoria Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma consists of approximately 3,700 people. The largest nation to claim

descendants from Cahokia are the Chickasaw, with roughly 52,000 tribal citizens.

Indigenous nations are used to coordinating with each other on a whole spectrum of matters ranging from NAGPRA to federal and state education policy. Yet, coordinating all nine of these nations to co-manage Cahokia or even develop a coordinated strategy to deal with the park would be very difficult. As Carrie Wilson put it, “I think a lot of things would fall through the cracks in order to get all the tribes together, especially with such diverse ideas and feelings as the tribes do. You’re going to have some tribes that are very traditional and some tribes that are very business oriented.” Furthermore, given the huge disparities in size, the Osage and Chickasaw have a much greater ability to contribute resources to Cahokia than the other nations. That dynamic could also create tensions between the large tribes and the small ones. If the larger tribes did not work collaboratively, then the smaller tribes could become alienated from the project. Yet, it is also true Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site needs resources. Even if co-management is not currently on the table, should the United States government or the state or Illinois seek to involve Cahokia’s descendants more in history presented at the park then they need to provide more resources for it. If Cahokia’s descendants are asked to pick between using their resources to support Cahokia or fully fund their own government services, they are probably going to pick their government services.

This does not mean co-management at Cahokia as a state park or a national one is impossible. In 2021, the First Americans Museum opened in Oklahoma City. That institution represents the combined effort of all 38 federally recognized tribes in the state of Oklahoma. Its director, James Pepper Henry, is also a leader of the Kaw Nation. If Pepper Henry and other leaders from across the nations could come together to organize and create a strong framework for coordination then certainly an equitable framework for co-management is possible. After all,

their ancestors once built great cities together. Another option may be for the tribes to enter into individual agreements with the Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site and each contribute to it individually and in their own way. Already there are markets held there for Indigenous vendors and events hosted to commemorate moments of traditional religious significance like the solstices. Yet, it is on the park and the government to do more to broaden this collaboration. In a conversation I had with Diane Hunter, Tribal Historic Preservation officer with the Miami Nation, she stressed that it doesn't matter if the park is run by a municipality, a state, or the federal government. At each level, these institutions can build good relationships with the tribes if they seek them out. Cahokia is not an exception to this rule.



Figure 15. A map of the Mississippian world including its largest towns and cities. (Roe 2010)

Conclusion

History's relationship to objectivity is more dependent on its practitioner than most academic disciplines. Factors like time, language, and culture serve to separate the people being studied from the people studying them. When that degree of separation is great enough, writing a

historical narrative is like trying to put together a puzzle when half the pieces are missing. Archeology offers a way out of this conundrum by seemingly offering a scientific way to study the past. Yet, archeology should ideally go hand in hand with cultural context. For example, Timothy Pauketat deduced that Monk's Mound is tied to the sun because he carefully observed its position in relation to the cosmos (PBS 2021). Yet, archeologists probably would have deduced that Cahokia had a religious complex devoted to the Moon sooner had they known that in Osage and other Dhegiha languages, the word for sun and the word for moon are the same (Osage Nation 2022).

Despite the destruction colonialism has caused, many of the missing pieces are still out there for academics to find. Just because western science does not have the answer to a question does all humanity lacks one. Learning more about the cultures and languages of the nations descended from Cahokia really changed the way I viewed the city. Traditional sources that I'd read, almost all written by American archeologists, never touched on missing pieces like the Dhegihan migration story, and in many cases, did not even mention any of the specific cultures that inhabited the city like the Dhegiha, northern Souians, Algonquians, etc. Instead, they focused on things like settlement patterns, pottery shards, and carbon-dated pieces of wood. Their work is important, but to have one without the other is to pretend the present is not connected to the past. Recently, archeologists studying Cahokia have begun to incorporate Indigenous linguistics and oral histories into their work, but all the papers I have read including this one, still only scratch the surface of what might be gleaned from a much more comprehensive and long-term study. Cahokia was once the crossroads of Turtle Island and to fully appreciate the culture that developed there, academics must gain a better understanding of the oral histories and linguistic data of cultures extending all across the Mississippian world.

A big part of this process must be building strong relationships with the Indigenous communities who are the keepers of this knowledge. Since colonization, the physical and mental manifestations of their culture have been targeted by settler society for destruction. Therefore, settler society bears a responsibility to Indigenous communities to repair the damage. At Cahokia, that means preserving all remains of the city while simultaneously promoting efforts to get the descendant communities involved with the state park in a way that benefits them. When the ancestors of Omaha, Quapaw, Kansa, Osage, Ponca, Peoria, Miami, Muscogee, Chickasaw, Shawnee, and Ho-Chunk, among others, built Cahokia, it was the New York City or Chicago of its time. The park should strive to do justice to that memory by ensuring that it does not remain siloed off from the outside world. Instead, it should serve as a meeting place to bring those nations back together again and as an institution to empower the descendant communities and promote cooperation between them. Regardless of whether Cahokia is a state or national park, or whether it is under co-management, there are ways to do this if the administration is willing. Given the great variety of nations that claim descent from the city, there is probably not one policy that will always fit all of them. Therefore, the park administration should at least seek out accommodations with individual nations until a broader consensus can be reached.

In conclusion, Cahokia is a symbol of what this country once was, what it might have been, and what it still could be. As an object of historical study, it reveals the inequities present in western archeology and history. As a site, it showcases how the destruction of physical remnants of Indigenous civilizations is part of an ongoing assault on Indigenous culture, and as a park, it illustrates some of the material issues facing advocates of reform and co-management. Cahokia is a mirror upon which Americans can look to see how this nation treats its indigenous history and observe some of the problems facing advocates of it.

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