

Cahokia: A Pre-Columbian American City

by Timothy R. Pauketat¹

Almost a thousand years ago, American Indians built a city along the Mississippi River in the middle of North America. Located opposite modern-day St. Louis, Missouri, this city is called Cahokia by archaeologists, and it was as large in its day as New York and Philadelphia before the mid-1700s. Ten thousand indigenous citizens once called it home. Tens of thousands more, farmers mostly, lived in the nearby countryside. For a time, Cahokia was the center of ancient society in North America, and its people changed the course of human history.

At its peak around AD 1100, the city of Cahokia covered more than five square miles and was made up of 120 earthen pyramids (often called “mounds” today). Built entirely of packed earth, the main pyramid—“Monks Mound”—covered fifteen acres and rose in three major terraces to a height of one hundred feet, making it the third largest in the Americas. A fifty-acre rectangular plaza sat at the foot of this tremendous monument. Other plazas stretched out in all directions, and eighty more pyramids and several more plazas were built in two related mound complexes five to six miles away in present-day St. Louis and East St. Louis. Residential neighborhoods filled the spaces around the mounds and between Cahokia, St. Louis, and East St. Louis. What had caused all of this to happen?

CAHOKIA’S BEGINNINGS

Cahokia was not the first archaeological site with large earthen mounds. Mounded sites as old as 5,500 years are known in northeastern Louisiana, dating to what is termed the “Archaic period” (8000–500 BC). Some of these mounds were platforms built to elevate the community’s central rituals. Later mounds of the “Woodland period” (500 BC–AD 800) included similar stages but were also built to cover the burials of important people and, sometimes, to enclose sacred ceremonial spaces in which great crowds would gather. Some of the most complex and extensive mound complexes of the Woodland period are in Ohio.

By the end of the “Late Woodland period” (AD 800–1050), mound building was less widespread. In its place,

the people of the southern Midwest between modern-day St. Louis, Missouri, and Memphis, Tennessee, had moved to permanent villages and intensified crop production. They grew squash, local grains (such as goosefoot and maygrass), sunflowers, and maize or corn. Maize originated in the American Southwest and Mexico, and early varieties were difficult to grow in the Midwest. But by Late Woodland times, maize had adapted to the northern climate, and people made it a staple in their diets.

We now know that Cahokia began as a modest-sized, Late Woodland agricultural village. Around the wide floodplain of the Mississippi River opposite St. Louis, villages were becoming sizeable, with several having up to several hundred residents. By the year 1000, the largest village in this part of the Midwest was located at Cahokia, and it held over a thousand souls. Probably, these earliest Cahokians were especially fortunate farmers who managed to convert their surplus into social status. A few distant families seem to have married into these prominent local families, judging from the varieties of broken, locally made pots found in kitchen middens. Village life revolved around farming. Rituals focused on the important events in people’s lives, and families played a game called “chunkey.” As recorded in the colonial period, chunkey consisted of throwing scoring sticks or poles after rolling a small stone disk.

It seems unlikely that the early success and agricultural output of Cahokia alone was the reason for events that followed. But at or shortly after AD 1050, everything at and around the old village of Cahokia changed. The exact year is uncertain owing to the imprecision of radiocarbon dating, but it is clear from archaeological discoveries that, over a very short period of time, a small group of planners—perhaps even one single person—redesigned Cahokia from a village into a city. Implementing the new design meant that hundreds of old village houses had to be ripped down and, in some areas, the naturally undulating bottomland had to be leveled. Cahokia’s huge earthen pyramids and plazas were built. Around them, new neighborhoods were laid out, with homes now built with prefabricated sapling walls each topped with a thatched roof. Inside these one-room houses, there was enough space for a family of five to sleep; store their possessions, dried foodstuffs, and cooking wares; and build a small fire to heat the interior.

¹ Pauketat, Timothy R. “Cahokia: A Pre-Columbian American City.” *The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*. N.p., nd. Web. 29 July 2015.

LIFE, RELIGION, AND HISTORY

Almost all socializing, gaming, and work happened outdoors. A day in the life of an average Cahokian family involved spending most of the day working in the fields, fishing, and hunting. The women and girls probably tended the crops, snared some game, and collected greens, berries, and roots. The men and boys worked in the fields too, and made short hunting and fishing excursions to the lakes and forests within two- or three-days' walk of Cahokia. Most evening meals would find all gathered together, perhaps with extended families and friends, mending nets, grinding corn, working wood, resharpening their stone hoe or axe blades, and telling stories around the outdoor cookfires. Some might be making things for the next festival.

Religious rituals and community festivals were annual affairs, timed to their calendar. That calendar seems to be commemorated by a large circle of posts, called the "Woodhenge," at Cahokia. Various constructions of this post-circle monument were built with cedar posts that numbered in multiples of twelve, indicating a recognition of the number of lunar months in a year. Presumably, the Woodhenge was used to time the major festivals of the year. Most likely, farmers and more distant pilgrims would show up to take part. There they would listen, sing, dance, and pray to their gods. They would also play chunky, which became the official sport of the people.

Cahokian religion seems to have merged beliefs about life and death with the movements of stars, sun, and moon in the heavens. Specific deities were recognized, the most prominent being a female goddess (depicted in small red stone sculptures found at and around Cahokia). The goddess is depicted associated with the bones of the dead, a monstrous mythical serpent, and agricultural crops. Offerings to her were probably intended to ensure a good harvest.

These offerings seem to have included human sacrifices. In several burial mounds and in the ceremonial areas of what archaeologists call the "East St. Louis site," pits have been found containing the remains of between one and fifty-three young females executed as part of single events. In Cahokia's first century, such sacrificial rites might have occurred every few years, perhaps in conjunction with the passing of a planet or star. Similar rites still existed among one group of Pawnee on the Plains in the early 1800s.

Whatever their religious practices, it seems that Cahokians exported them to distant lands shortly after 1050. The sites of Aztalan and Trempealeau, Wisconsin, for instance, were set up by or with Cahokians. Trempealeau is located over 500 miles to the north in a

land of rocky bluffs, caves, and springs. The local people were unlike Cahokians, and built small burial mounds in the shapes of animals. Upon their arrival, Cahokians built a temple-and-pyramid complex and conducted the same sorts of religious rites they had conducted in their homeland. They used pots, hoe blades, and utensils imported from Cahokia, and they played chunky using the stone disks they had carried with them.

The effects are readily apparent to archaeologists, who refer to this campaign as a "Cahokianization" of some distant places. Some Cahokianized populations, such as people in the Illinois River valley a hundred miles north of Cahokia, developed independently of the city to the south. Initially friendly, the relations between the two might have soured, and by the later 1100s some archaeologists suspect that military actions might have taken place. While the events are unclear at present, Cahokians did build an elaborate defensive palisade wall around the central city by about 1160 or 1170 (based on radiocarbon dates). This palisade was two miles in length, built using some 15,000 logs, and studded with bastions, or projections that enabled archers to fire their arrows down on any would-be attacker. Cahokians, it seems, were under threat of attack.

Whether or not an attack ever came is not known. The elite residential area at the East St. Louis site was burned down around this time. But this particular burning might have been an intentional one by Cahokians themselves, who are thought to have used fire in rituals. Possibly, this was their way of commemorating the death of a leading figure, perhaps a ruler. But whether a ritual burning or a fire started by attackers, social and political change followed the burning down of the East St. Louis site. People began to leave the city, and farmers began to emigrate away from the region.

THE END OF CAHOKIA

There was an attempt, perhaps by the next generation of prestigious leaders or influential priests, to forestall the collapse of Cahokia. New rituals were introduced. New symbols were incised onto their pottery. But Cahokia and its hinterlands continued to shrink. By 1200, the population of the city had probably fallen to less than 5,000 people; by 1250, that figure was probably no more than 2,000. In the countryside, many thousands of farmers had already left. No more than a few thousand remained by 1250. What had gone wrong?

Besides the political troubles, the region had also experienced a severe drought in the late 1100s, and additional droughts in the 1200s. Moreover, the climate was cooling, and it was probably proving difficult to produce the bumper maize crops needed to support the

pomp and pageantry of Cahokian religious and political celebrations. In the end, Cahokia simply seems to have faded away. Where did the people go, and who did they become?

The answer is disputed today, but the facts of Cahokia's founding and its prolonged demise suggest that Cahokia was—like so many cities around the world—made up of more than one ethnic group. Its people might have spoken more than one language. Possibly, the people of Cahokia included local farmers and contingents of dignitaries and representatives from far-off peoples in the Plains, Midwest, and South. As Cahokia dissolved, the nonlocal citizens might have simply gone home. The descendants of Cahokians might include people in various tribal groups in the Plains and the South today: the Quapaw, Omaha, Pawnee, Chickasaw, Ponca, Mandan, Choctaw, and Osage, among others. One group might have descended from the Cahokian elite, and another from farmers. Or one might have lived on, on the east side of Cahokia, while another might have occupied East St. Louis before it burned.

Whoever they became, and however Cahokia fell, another important archaeological mystery yet remains. Possible descendants include the peoples of great American Indian nations and tribal groups met by Lewis and Clark in 1804 or painted by George Catlin in the 1830s. And yet among them, including the Quapaw, Omaha, Pawnee, and others, there are no stories that speak of the city of Cahokia. Why might the descendants of Cahokia have chosen to forget Cahokia?

The answers might remain in the ruins of Cahokia, the central portion of which is preserved within Illinois' Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site. But most of the suburban complexes, associated towns, and hundreds of farming villages and religious shrines that have not already been destroyed today are yet unprotected. We owe it to the descendants of this once-great place, if not to American history generally, to preserve that which is left—mounds, the buried debris of religious festivals, and the rotted remains of thousands of homes.

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