

# Medieval Life in America's Heartland

*Timothy R. Pauketat and Susan M. Alt*

In the middle of the eleventh century, just as Europe entered its High Middle Ages, North American Indians in the Mississippi River valley began building their first true city, a place now called Cahokia (plate 1). Soon, new capital towns sprang up throughout what is now the U.S. Southeast. Over each place towered from one to as many as two hundred flat-topped pyramids surmounted by large pole-and-thatch temples, residences, and warehouses of community priests and elites. Hereditary rulers or powerful councils led the citizens of individual provinces, who paid tribute and provisions to their leaders. Provinces rose to power or fell from it as their yearly corn crops and their alliances and wars with neighbors either succeeded or failed.

Archaeologists once called these people the Mound Builders, but today we know them simply as the Mississippians. In the early 1500s, Spanish explorers met their descendants in the Southeast—people living in towns, each still centered on one or more earthen pyramids topped with wooden temples and elite houses (chapter 12). In fields and farmsteads surrounding the towns, countryside dwellers grew maize (Indian corn), beans, and squash without the aid of draft animals. These people were all children of Cahokia, and the history of their civilization begins along the Mississippi River—that Great Father of Waters, that Nile of North America.

In about the year 1050 of the common era (CE, the equivalent of AD), the first Mississippians emerged seemingly full-blown among people still following earlier “Woodland” ways of life. Within just a few decades, Mississippians were colonizing new places and making their influence felt up and down the rivers of the continent’s interior. Ultimately, they would alter the geopolitical landscape of North America, spread and intensify the cultivation of maize, and “Mississippianize” people from the Great Plains and Great Lakes to the Gulf coastal plain of today’s Deep South. American history would have been different had the Mississippians never existed.

Much of the Mississippians’ footprint on the landscape has been lost. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, people who cared little about the history of American Indians flattened many of their great earthen monuments. Modern cities now sprawl over the ruins of ancient towns. But much still exists, both above ground and below, and researchers have been excavating and studying Mississippian archaeological sites for well over a century.

In the 1930s, the colossal excavations of southern archaeological sites carried out through President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal blew open the doors to understanding the Mississippian past. Large crews of men and women excavated the remains of mounds, domestic houses, and cemeteries, beginning to detail the histories of Mississippian towns.



Figure 1.2. Central Cahokia, now crossed by a modern highway. Monks Mound (Mound 38) looms in the background, Mound 41 is the low rise in front of the trees, and Mound 42 is partly visible in the left foreground.

Archaeological research continues in the Midwest and Southeast today, complemented by the traditional histories and contemporary perspectives of Native people. In this book, archaeologists and other specialists, including two Native descendants of the Mississippians themselves, tell of the great ceremonial city of Cahokia, chart the florescence and eventual decline of the Mississippians, and offer snapshots of their way of life—their religion, architecture, farming economy, crafts, and much more.

People today seldom think of pre-Columbian American Indians as medieval, a word that usually denotes the European Middle Ages. But we like to call the Mississippians medieval because they were part of a worldwide phenomenon that climate scientists have labeled the Medieval Warm Period. During the three centuries from 950 to 1250 CE, the Earth's climate warmed by two or more degrees Fahrenheit. It seems a small change, but in many places it brought slightly heavier rainfall, enough that farmers were able to grow bigger, more reliable crops of grain. Herders found lusher grazing for their animals. Parts of the world where previously

no one had wanted to live started to look desirable.

As a result, the Medieval Warm Period saw cultures on the move and religions spreading across continents. In Europe during the tenth through the thirteenth centuries, devout Christians made arduous religious pilgrimages, launched bloody crusades, and built breathtaking cathedrals. In sub-Saharan Africa, trade cities emerged, founded on commerce with Arabs to the north and ocean-going Asians to the east. Having swept North Africa, Islam penetrated central Asia, where Genghis Khan was establishing his Mongol empire. Meanwhile, Hinduism spread eastward out of the cities of southern India into Cambodia, where it took form in the Khmer civilization's monumental stone temples, such as Angkor Wat.

In the Americas, too, the politics of the day carried religious overtones. New, independent cities arose in ancient Mexico following both the fall of the great imperial city of Teotihuacan in the 600s CE and the end of the Classic Maya kingdoms around 950. The people of these cities adopted distinctive Postclassic art styles and warrior symbolism



Figure 1.3. Excavations at the Grossmann site, which lay in a Mississippian farming area just southeast of Cahokia, carried out by a crew from the University of Illinois in 2001. Black plastic covers the remains of house basins and associated features.

and worshiped new gods, among them a serpentine wind god and a long-nosed, goggle-eyed rain deity. These gods and other Postclassic Mexican objects and ideas spread as far northwest as today's New Mexico and Arizona. The people of Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, for example, imported chocolate and colorful macaws from tropical Mexico, and until 1140 CE their great stone pueblos drew pilgrims from across the American Southwest.

We believe the eleventh-century emergence of Mississippian religion and lifeways was yet another manifestation of these Postclassic Mexican influences on the north, coupled with the climate trends seen all around the world during the Medieval Warm Period. In the American Midwest, an increase in average yearly precipitation accompanied the warmer weather, permitting maize farming to thrive. Without the food stores offered by maize and other domesticated plants, the populous, hierarchical, ever-spreading society of the Mississippians would never have gained a foothold.

Before about 200 BCE ("before the common era"), no one in eastern North America grew maize. During the early part of what archaeologists called the Woodland era, roughly 500 BCE to 1050 CE,

families in the eastern continent lived in hamlets and small villages of bent-pole wigwams, where they tended gardens of squash, sunflower, knotweed, lambsquarter, and maygrass—but no maize. They ate wild plants, too, and hunted game animals, fished, and collected mollusks.

This way of life began to change after 200 BCE, when some Woodland farmers experimented with growing small plots of maize and tobacco, two domesticated plants that had been carried north from Mexico. Corn caught on and became a staple in some places at some times—but not everywhere in eastern North America, and not always continuously.

For example, an early religious and cultural phenomenon along the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, which researchers call the Hopewell tradition, was founded on a horticultural economy that sometimes included small plots of maize. But maize was not yet a staple crop and might have been reserved for use in special Hopewell ceremonies. From about 100 BCE to 400 CE, the leaders, priests, and shamans who conducted those ceremonies also designed imposing, geometrically shaped earthworks using sophisticated engineering and astronomical principles. After death, these men and

women were entombed in great burial mounds. After the Hopewell religion and the regional confederacies dependent on it dissolved about 400 CE, maize farming and the ceremonies associated with it virtually disappeared for three hundred to four hundred years.

By the 800s, though, Late Woodland people living around present-day St. Louis, Missouri, among other places, had again begun growing maize in large quantities. One village there, the place soon to become the city of Cahokia, was prospering, with perhaps more than a thousand residents. Yet if anyone alive at the beginning of the Medieval Warm Period could have predicted that an American Indian city would arise in eastern North America, he or she would never have guessed it might happen where it did—in a quiet farming village in a swampy river bottom where no one had ever yet built a pyramid.

Mound building itself, as the Hopewell tradition shows, was hardly new in the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys. The roots of the tradition reached back as far as 3500 BCE, when some people living in what is now northeastern Louisiana began piling earth into eleven mounds as much as twenty-five feet high, all connected in an oval. Another well-known mound-building tradition, besides Hopewell, is the Effigy Mound culture. Prominent in the northern Mississippi Valley from 600 to 1050 CE, it tells us that maize farming was not necessary in order for people to build mounds. Effigy Mound people ate no corn but still buried their dead in small conical, linear, and animal-shaped mounds, all of which probably were effigies of mythical creatures or animal spirits and totems. These people, in modern-day Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, and northern Illinois, would soon come face-to-face with Mississippians from downriver (chapter 8).

We think the actual founders of Cahokia were not Effigy Mound folk but a mix of local Late Woodland people who had long called the area home and immigrants from places to the south and southwest of the central Mississippi Valley. Along the southern river itself, in present-day Mississippi and Louisiana, lived people whom archaeologists know as the Coles Creek culture (chapter 2), probably speakers of a Siouan or Muskogean language.

West of the river, in southwestern Arkansas and eastern Oklahoma and Texas, lived speakers of languages in the Caddoan family. In between these two, in central Arkansas, resided people of an archaeological culture called Plum Bayou, whose ceremonial center, Toltec Mounds, was misnamed in the nineteenth century for the Toltec Indians of ancient Mexico.

Coles Creek people built flat-topped platform mounds that formed the centerpieces of large, impressive civic and ceremonial centers. Their four-sided pyramids fronted community plazas in ways reminiscent of Mexican cities far to the south, and the layout of their mound centers may have served as the prototype for Cahokia's city plan. Excavators have uncovered pieces of Coles Creek-style pottery at Cahokia and of Cahokia-made pottery at Coles Creek sites. Clearly, the two places had strong connections, and we see no reason why some Coles Creek people, even if just a few knowledgeable leaders, might not have carried their knowledge and wares directly to Cahokia at or just before its founding.

In the Arkansas and Red River valleys, the Woodland-era predecessors of the Caddoans—the “proto-Caddo” people—were already building small burial mounds by 900 CE. After 1050, they added Mississippian-style pyramidal mounds and plazas to their ceremonial centers and towns and became, in archaeologists' terminology, “Caddo-Mississippians.” Just as Coles Creek artifacts strongly connect that culture with Cahokia, so prized Caddoan crafts discovered at Cahokia, such as exotic arrowheads and engraved marine shell cups, do likewise. And at the Caddo-Mississippian site of Spiro Mounds, high-status people were buried with many fine Cahokian things, among them carved red stone figurines (chapter 7). We think it likely that some of the residents of Cahokia, possibly including high-status dignitaries, hailed from Caddo country.

The Toltec site may be the most likely origin of high-status expatriates who migrated to Cahokia, because the date of Toltec's abandonment coincides closely with that of the great city's founding. After growing throughout the 900s CE, Toltec reached its peak in the early 1000s with eighteen mounds

arranged in a distinctive pattern at an unusual angle (chapter 4), in a style much like that seen in the Coles Creek towns. Right around 1050, the inhabitants of Toltec left. Considering the similarities between the earthen monuments and architecture of Toltec and Cahokia, along with finds of Plum Bayou–style pottery at Cahokia, we believe some of the Toltec Mounds people migrated to Cahokia. Perhaps Plum Bayou folk from the great Toltec site, along with Coles Creek and proto-Caddo immigrants, were among the city’s founding elites.

Exactly why such expatriates moved so far north of their homeland and precisely how their arrival altered the course of events at Cahokia are mysteries archaeologists are still trying to unravel. But together the newcomers and local Woodland villagers built a city, and spectacularly so—designing it, laying it out, artificially leveling the land, and raising its monuments using knowledge of engineering, geometry, and astronomy (chapters 3 and 4). This singular development nearly a thousand years ago transformed indigenous America so suddenly and so greatly that we call it Cahokia’s Big Bang. The Cahokians innovated in architecture, introduced novel artifact styles, cleared vast tracts of land, and redesigned community life and agricultural production from the city center outward. Meanwhile, they fomented a new religion, which in a few years they would carry to far-off lands.

The Big Bang radiated outward almost immediately. Even as the pyramids of Cahokia began to rise, people in some way affiliated with the city—whether as colonists, allies, or even missionaries of a sort, converts to the new religion—traveled north up the Mississippi and founded villages and shrines in places now called the Eveland site, in Illinois, and the Aztalan and Trempealeau sites, in Wisconsin. In quick succession, “Cahokianized”

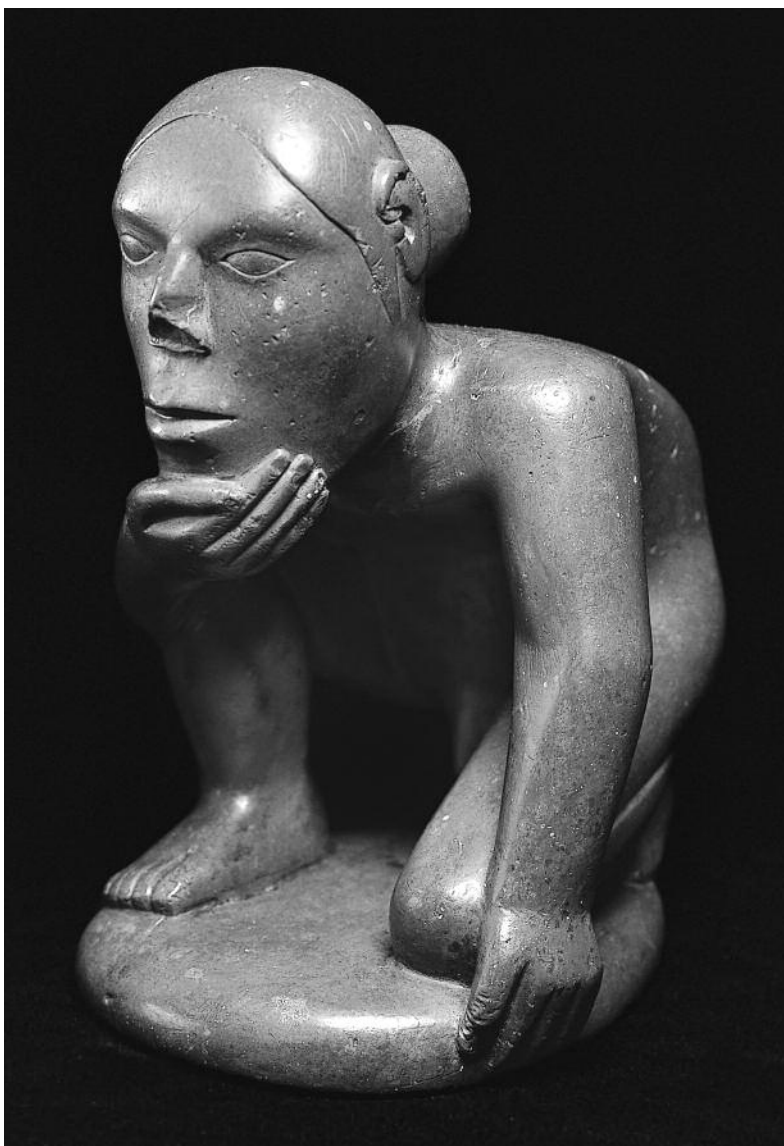


Figure 1.4. A Cahokian red stone smoking-pipe bowl found in Mound C at the Shiloh site, Tennessee.

locals, if not Cahokians themselves, established pyramid towns along rivers throughout the Midwest and Southeast, places now known as the archaeological sites of Angel, Kincaid, Shiloh, Moundville, and Ocmulgee, among others (map 3). To the south and southwest, the peoples who might have given birth to the Cahokians became increasingly Mississippianized in turn. Just as Caddoan speakers became Caddoan-Mississippians, so Coles Creek people became, in archaeologists’ eyes, the “Plaquemine-Mississippian” people. By 1100, only fifty years after the founding of Cahokia, medieval



Figure 1.5. Reconstruction of a Mississippian-style pole-and-thatch house built with wall trenches. University of Illinois, 2001.

Mississippians occupied much of the American Midwest, Southeast, and trans-Mississippi South.

But what turned Woodland people into new Mississippians? What traits, beliefs, and objects did the Cahokians carry with them or export abroad? Most obviously, they brought to some places new, uniform town plans featuring earthen monuments and public plazas. They brought characteristic pottery and finely crafted ritual objects and ornaments, sometimes decorated with elaborate imagery. Some hallmarks of Mississippianism took everyday forms: the way people grew maize, built houses, wove fabric, made tools, crafted pots, and even played games (chapters 6, 9, 10, and 13). Archaeologists find, scattered far and wide in the ruins of Mississippian settlements and monumental centers, small artifacts that once signaled Mississippian beliefs and identity. Small red stone statuettes and smoking-pipe bowls, for example, carved in the shapes of goddesses, ancestors, culture heroes, spirit animals, and shamans, all intimate Cahokian connections. Made at Cahokia itself, these objects were either carried to new homes by Cahokian colonists or given to distant friends and allies as gifts.

One of the humblest but most universal traits of the Mississippian world—to archaeologists, an unailing mark of people's genealogical connections to their Cahokian progenitors—was a technique of house construction unknown in the Mississippi Valley before 1050. From Trempealeau to the Chattahoochee, most Mississippians built their houses using *wall trenches*. Previously, Woodland people had dug individual holes for each wall post, a slow and tedious task performed by families and friends. At Cahokia around the time of the Big Bang, residents shifted almost overnight to digging shallow trenches using hoe blades. Work crews could then prefabricate walls on the ground before lifting them into the trench. As Cahokians and their allies extended their influence or control, they brought wall-trench construction to the hinterlands everywhere. Perhaps, by looking different from earlier houses, wall-trench buildings signaled an affiliation with the storied city of Cahokia, a set of new Mississippian ideals, and a powerful cultural or ethnic identity.

Underpinning everything else in the Mississippian way of life came a new religion. It almost

certainly drew heavily on local, traditional religious practices, but it seems to have elevated key ancestral spirits, a distinctive goddess, and veneration of the moon, with which the goddess was probably affiliated (chapters 4 and 7).

Some features of the new religion probably originated as far away as Mexico, reaching the proto-Caddo and Coles Creek forebears of the Cahokians via the Gulf Coast of Mexico and Texas (map 2). Most North American archaeologists recognize that no sustained trade relations existed between Mexico and Cahokia or any of the other Mississippian civic-ceremonial centers. But over the centuries, travelers from the Midwest and trans-Mississippi South might well have ventured into Mexico, and vice versa, bringing home new ideas and religious practices.

One example of the new ideas is manifested in a swirly design called, when found at Cahokia, the “Ramey scroll” (plate 8). It is similar to motifs used

in Mesoamerica that were often connected with a wind god or with conch shells from the Gulf of Mexico that were sometimes used as trumpets. Similarly, ornaments called “long-nosed god ear-pieces” (plate 4) might have manifested Mexican-inspired ideas. These ornaments depict goggled-eyed, long-nosed deities or spirits, much like images of the rain deity that Postclassic Mesoamericans began worshipping after the fall of Teotihuacan. Archaeologists think that elite Mississippian men wore them on their ears. Among the Ho-Chunk people of today’s upper Midwest, stories of a culture hero, He Who Wears Human Heads As Earrings, persist. Legends tell that he has special powers. At one point he reincarnates his father’s head, and at another, he marries a goddesslike woman. The idea of wearing gods on one’s ears was practically unknown to the Woodland Indians before Cahokia but was widespread in Mesoamerica. Made at Cahokia rather than in

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## Wall Trench Architecture

Wall trenches served as the foundations for pole-supported walls in most Mississippian thatch-roofed wooden buildings. Minimally, wall trenches were narrow ditches, six to ten inches wide and one to two feet deep, around the perimeter of a building’s floor. At Cahokia, builders prefabricated some walls, slipped them into their respective trenches, and tied them together at the corners around a floor set below ground surface. People wove pliable branches or strips of wood (wattle) between the wall posts and heaped earth against the outside to stabilize and weatherize the building. For house-



Figure 1.6. Wall trenches surrounding the floor of a building at the Grossmann site, Illinois.

size buildings and storage huts, bending the upper ends of the wall posts together produced bowed arbor roofs. For larger public buildings, the roof was a separate, gabled construction consisting of timbers and trusses supported by interior posts, all covered with thick bundles of dried grass or thatch.

In the Deep South, wall-trench houses resembled Cahokian ones but were less often set partly below ground. Rather than being buttressed by ramped earth, the walls of these buildings were daubed with mud mixed with grass. Some of the walls of the more important homes or public buildings were painted.

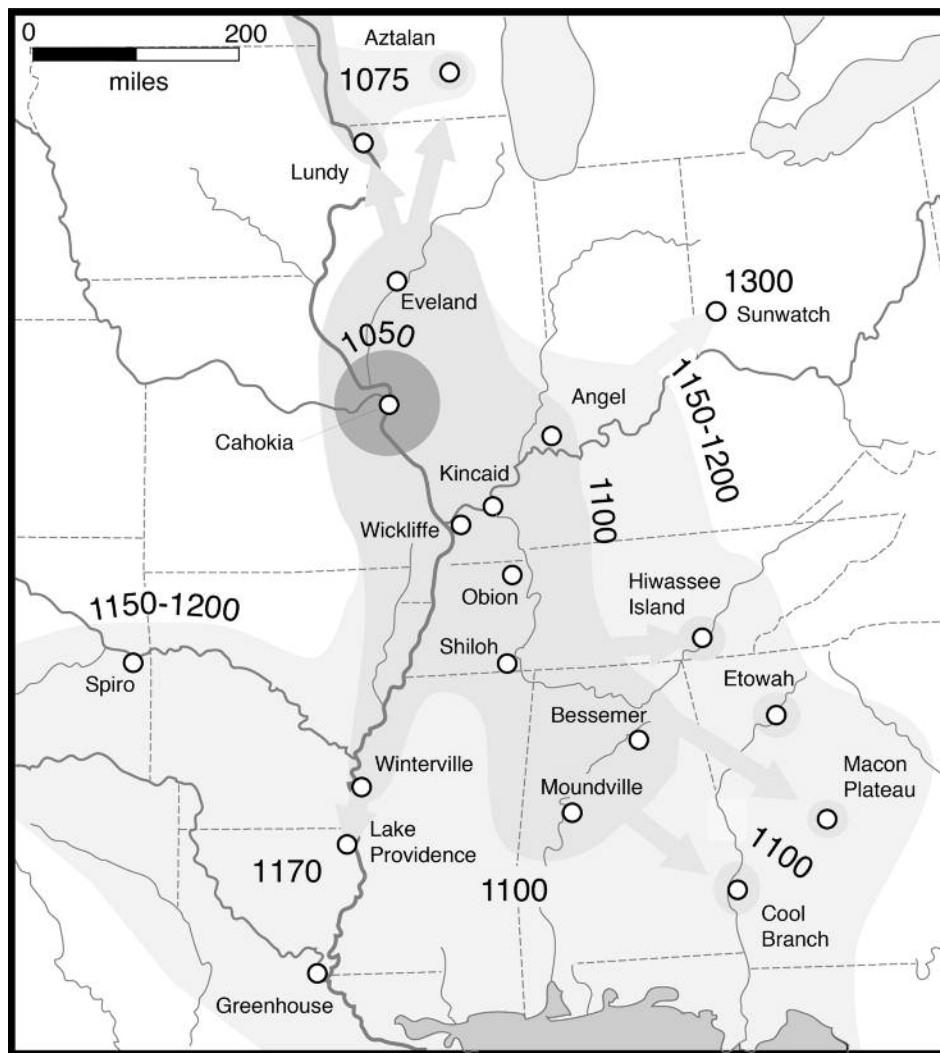


Figure 1.7. The spread of Cahokia-Mississippianism, based on the known distribution of wall-trench architecture.

Mexico, these prestigious ornaments have been uncovered in important burials and ritual deposits as far afield as Caddo country, the eastern Great Plains, and the Deep South.

Another idea that seems to connect Mexico and Cahokia, perhaps via the Caddo and Coles Creek peoples, was that of associating great upright poles with gods and ancestors. In central and western Mexico, posts and trees linked people on earth to various sky, wind, and rain gods. Still today, *voladores* along the Gulf Coast of Mexico perform ceremonies in which they “dance” in midair at the ends of ropes anchored to the tops of posts, all to appease the rain god. In late precolonial Mexico,

human sacrifice, too, was associated with wooden poles, the victims sometimes being tied to a pole or pole framework to enable the sky gods to receive the spirit offering. Aztec and Maya paintings, pottery decorations, and books of hieroglyphic writing (codices) also depict some gods in the form of a chipped-stone dagger that priests used to cut out the hearts of sacrificial victims. Interestingly, a locally made but Mexican-style chipped stone dagger, known as the “Ramey knife,” appears in Cahokian deposits beginning at 1050 CE. Later forms of daggers and swords are known from other Mississippian centers, although their associations are often unclear.



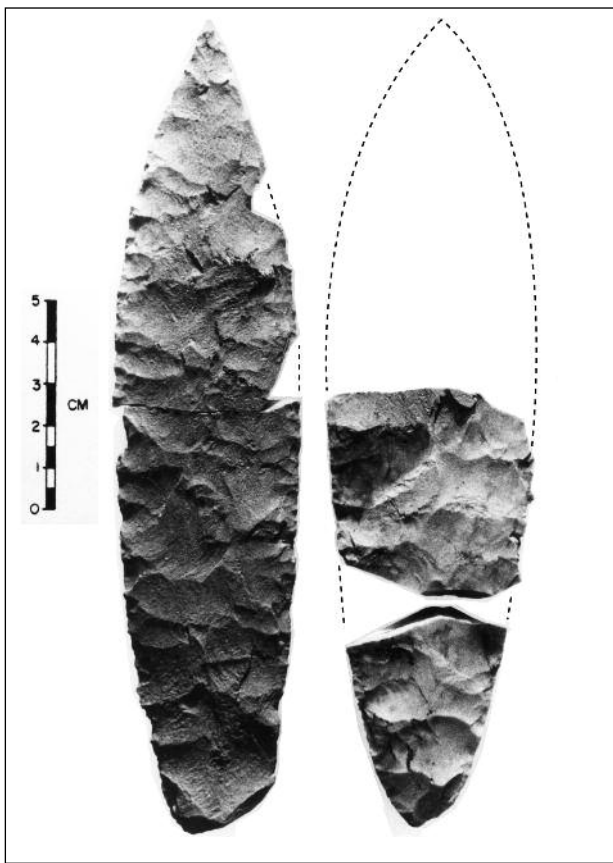


Figure 1.8. Cahokian daggers, or “Ramey knives,” from a small site south of Cahokia.

Coles Creek people had been planting vertical posts on the tops of mounds since at least 400 CE. Cahokians continued the practice, but they placed posts in many locations, sometimes in rows aligned with distant landmarks and celestial events. At Cahokia and other Mississippian mound sites, posts were monumentally large: three feet in diameter and sixty feet high. Sometimes Mississippians painted and possibly carved their posts. Never did they leave them to rot in place; instead, they cared for them and ceremonially moved them from time to time. At Cahokia, pulling the great post from the ground was sometimes an occasion for human sacrifice.

Almost every human society in history has seen a time when it deemed human sacrifice necessary to satisfy the gods or some other forces governing existence, who could restore order and abundance when famine or political upheaval struck. In midwestern and southeastern North America, human sacrifice was virtually unknown as a public specta-

cle before Cahokia, although several likely sacrificed women and possibly children are known from one mound in the Coles Creek region dating to about 800 CE. Cahokians, however, occasionally sacrificed from one to as many as fifty-three persons, usually women (chapter 3). A single body might be buried in a pit where a symbolic upright post had stood, after the post was ritually removed. Even more dramatically, whole groups of victims might be buried together above a former post pit or under an earthen mound.

This kind and scale of human sacrifice is not yet known to have existed at other Mississippian towns. Nevertheless, great Mississippian places such as Shiloh, Ocmulgee, Etowah, and Moundville were sacred centers of worship as well as seats of government. Much of their power and influence rested on religion. That people might experience all the powers of distant lands and the cosmos at such places could even have been the reason Cahokia—a novel political capital and densely populated city—succeeded in the first place. It might explain the rapid founding of outposts and copycat towns, and it might account for the rapid and widespread adoption of all things Mississippian, from wall-trench houses to gods worn on the ears. In other words, a deep-seated desire to be in tune with the universe and its great unseen powers could be a reason people joined Mississippian civilization.

At Cahokia and across the Mississippian world, religion was probably inseparable from government, society, and economy. Leaders, priests, and shamans, we think, created rules, organized their followers’ lives, and traveled great distances to obtain materials needed to keep the world in balance. They performed religious rituals including great processions, dances in the public plazas, and a hugely popular sport, a game now called *chunkey*. They presided over ceremonial feasts in which participants consumed the best fruits, berries, meats, soups, and drinks—among the last, a caffeinated tea, the “black drink,” made from leaves of an exotic holly bush and drunk from special mugs (plates 2 and 5).

As in Europe during the Middle Ages, so in midwestern and southeastern North America religion was the force that unified people. In this way,

the Mississippians were as medieval as any other civilization of their time. Few empires held sway over the rest of the medieval world, and we are fairly certain that there was no sustained Mississippian empire, either. Intruding Mississippians might have made enemies of local people, but no Mississippian army routinely marched the length and breadth of the Mississippi valley, and Cahokia was no imperial city, at least for long. Rather, the Mississippian world grew to look more like medieval Japan, where feudal, warrior societies and religion defined social life and cultural history.

For Cahokia and the early Mississippians, this unifying religious force assumed a life of its own. Some outposts, shrines, and sister complexes attest to Cahokians proselytizing outsiders, and pilgrims journeyed to Cahokia to take part in the great events and lucrative trade that animated the cosmopolitan city (chapters 11 and 15; plate 3). People as far away as present-day Georgia looked to the fabled mound city on the Mississippi for inspiration (chapter 17).

Of course in all societies, medieval or otherwise, political unifications and territorial conquests can be fleeting. As it happened, by 1350 all the residents of Cahokia had departed, dispersing in every direction. Political or military mishaps, an uptick in organized violence, a loss of faith, and crop failures might all have been to blame—possibly in that order. After 1200, nearly all significant Mississippian population centers were fortified; apparently, some of Cahokia's former colonies and friends became its foes. Sometimes these places were sacked and burned. Cahokians might well have been the aggressors along the central Mississippi Valley and up into the Illinois River valley (chapter 14). Meanwhile, the Medieval Warm Period was drawing to a close. Temperatures were cooling, and less rain fell on farmers' crops.

The new political landscape of the times may be depicted in a rare rock-art map that sits on the edge of the Mississippi River at a place called Thebes Gap. There, some ancient cartographer pecked into the rock a long squiggly line, likely depicting the Mississippi River, together with other lines, dots, a bird, an eye, and a moccasin print. Perhaps these motifs indicate trails, places, and the identities of

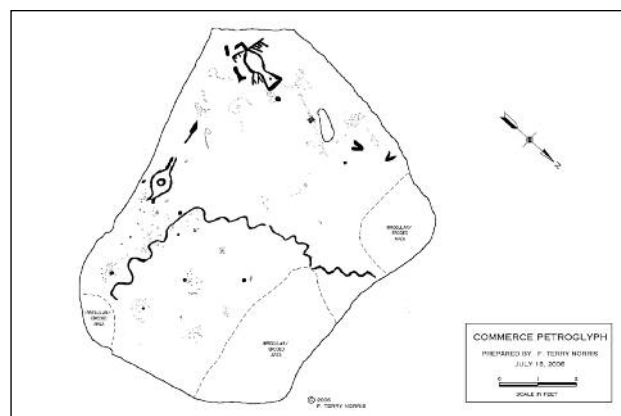


Figure 1.9. Rock-art map of the Mississippi. Top: a drawing of the map; bottom: the rock's position on the bank of the Mississippi River.

people affiliated with towns in the region, all of which date later than 1200.

By 1400, most central Mississippi Valley towns had emptied. To the north and northwest, violence was out of control among Mississippianized tribes whom archaeologists call the Oneota (chapter 5). Mississippian peoples in the Deep South had become balkanized into warring provinces. These were the peoples who met the Europeans after 1492 and who were soon devastated by European diseases, the Caribbean slave trade, and ever-escalating warfare between Native tribes and European powers. The medieval Mississippian world had ended.

Yet the descendants of Cahokians and other Mississippians endure, and the remains of their ancient city, capital towns, and ceremonial centers have much to teach us about how civilizations happened in the past and how all Americans today

are connected to that past. Cahokia and its followers and allies were responsible for the culinary practices, religious beliefs, cultural rules, social institutions, and tribal affiliations of many indigenous midwestern and southern peoples. It was they who fed and sheltered European explorers, warred with the United States, and defined the early American experience, helping to make us all what we are today.

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