



MEDIEVAL MISSISSIPPIANS

The Cahokian World

Edited by Timothy R. Pauketat and Susan M. Alt

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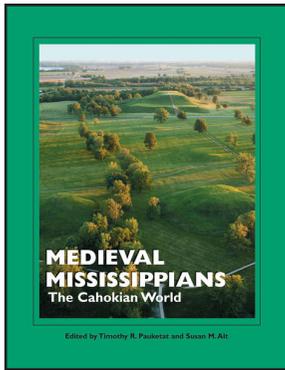
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Medieval Mississippians: The Cahokian World

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plates, 104 figures, 3 maps. \$59.95 (hardcover), \$24.95
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Reviewed by Susan Caba, freelance journalist

When I think of archaeology and ancient cities, images of Macchu Pichu in Peru pop into my mind. Pyramids? I think Egypt.

Or I did, until I moved to St. Louis, Missouri several years ago, and became familiar with the Cahokia mounds and other sites related to the Mississippian period culture. As the result of research for several magazine assignments, I learned that Cahokia—in Illinois, just across the river from St. Louis—was probably the first city in North America north of Mexico, with close to 20,000 inhabitants at its peak around 1100 A.D. The Cahokians' sophisticated urban culture quickly spread throughout the Midwest and southeastern third of what is now the United States, with outposts dotting riverside locations from the Great Plains and Great Lakes to the coastal plain of the Gulf of Mexico in the Deep South.

Now there is a comprehensive guidebook to the Mississippian sites scattered across the landscape of North America. *Medieval Mississippians: The Cahokian World*, edited by anthropologists Timothy R. Pauketat and Susan M. Alt, is akin to the travel guides I've taken on trips foreign countries, referring to a chapter here and another there, as I visit a particular attraction. The book is packed with cultural and historical information about the spiritual beliefs, residential patterns, diets, ceremonial events and even games of the mysterious Mississippians.

It is essential reading for those interested in the Cahokian world in particular, but also for archaeological enthusiasts in general. Photos, illustrations, maps and sidebars illuminate current archaeological techniques for discovering sites, deciphering and preserving artifacts, dating soil layers, and interpreting historical and cultural connections. And because archaeological protocol these days calls for sites to be explored and then covered back over upon completion of the dig—unlike Macchu Pichu, which remains exposed and is undergoing reconstruction—the book is an indispensable help in visualizing long-gone communities whose remnants are largely invisible. I would not have pictured Cahokia, for example, as anything like Macchu Pichu if I hadn't learned what lies beneath the rolling landscape east of the Mississippi.

The book is “snack-able.” You can consume it in random chapters or from cover to cover, depending on your appetite. I envision enthusiasts keeping a copy in the car, to consult on road trips to the various sites. (The introduction contains an index of several dozen, with very brief histories and, where available, information about public facilities and hours.) The first essay of 17, by the editors and Mississippian experts Pauketat and Alt, is fairly dense with timelines, an overview of theories about Mississippian history, and thoughts about connections with the cultures of subsequent eras. The remaining chapters were easier for me—not by any means an archaeology expert—to digest.

Book Review

As I think about the essays, written by experts in various fields of study, I keep picturing them as the basis for science fair projects or teaching guides. Most can be adapted for various levels of reader sophistication, from the most basic to fairly knowledgeable. The book serves the vital purpose of making science not only educational, but accessible and even entertaining.

For example, who knew corn contributed to the development of class distinctions in society and may have been among the first taxes levied on the producers of food? That's an over-simplification, of course. A more complex explanation is offered in *Medieval Mississippians* by Amber M. VanDerwarker, associate professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She studies relationships between humans and food in the New World, especially in the periods when cultures moved from itinerant lifestyles to agriculture-based communities. Here, she describes how maize—the first field crop—evolved into a staple crop that anchored communities to permanent locations and reshaped society.

I learned about LiDAR, a technology called Light Detection and Ranging, used by archaeologists to map the Earth's surface using laser scanners mounted on aircraft. LiDAR produces extremely accurate contour maps—based on a number of measurements—that reveal subtle features of sites long hidden by foliage and subsequent man-made development. Archaeologists depend on ever-more-sophisticated technology to detect, for example, building patterns that indicate the relationship between an ancient community and features of the night sky.

On the flip side, it fascinates me that archaeologists still rely on painstaking hand work to learn about the ancient past. They literally get down in the dirt with shovels and brushes to uncover—inch by inch, square by square—clues to the past: A bit of shell, carved into a button; twine, woven into fabric; a broken bit of clay, the remnants of a pipe. Occasionally, there is the thrilling discovery of an intact vessel or figure, such as the red-clay kneeling woman pulled in 2009 from the soil of the East St. Louis Mound Complex, which is now buried beneath a highway approach. Holly Mitchell Nazetta, then a student at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, recalls the moment she turned over the bit of ceramic and saw its face.

“It was incredible knowing I had the honor of getting to see and hold the figurine for the first time since it was buried a thousand years ago,” Nazetta recalled.

That sense of discovery, of connection to the past, is ultimately the gift of *Medieval Mississippians*. The authors share the thrill of turning up a bit of cloth, a chipped stone tool, the outlines of a food storage bin, a charred piece of wood, even burial mounds. They weave those remnants into the stories of human beings, not so unlike ourselves in their life stories, their daily habits and occupations, their joys and tragedies. In the end, they help us realize that our civilizations are both brief and enduring.