

LAND OF  
WATER,  
CITY OF  
THE DEAD

RELIGION AND  
CAHOKIA'S  
EMERGENCE

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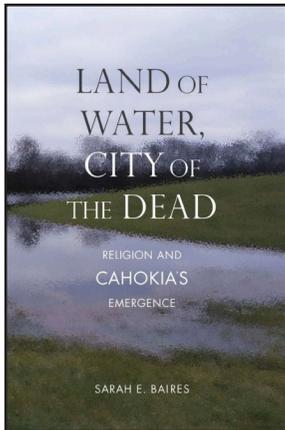
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## Land of Water, City of the Dead: Religion and Cahokia's Emergence

Sarah E. Baires. [The University of Alabama Press](#), 2017. 195 pp., 21 figures, 5 tables, references. \$54.95 (Cloth or Ebook)

*Reviewed by Gregory D. Wilson, University of California, Santa Barbara.*

Previous archaeological scholarship has often focused on the political and economic or ecological dimensions of the origins of Mississippian societies thus overlooking the role of religion. *Land of Water, City of the Dead: Religion and Cahokia's Emergence* is a reminder that religious meanings and practices

are an important and pervasive phenomena through which Mississippian groups experienced and made sense of their world and formed relationships among one another.

In this book, Baires makes the case that Cahokia was a pre-Columbian North American city empowered and made meaningful through the alignment of earthen monuments, causeways, and residential complexes with celestial objects and aspects of the natural world. This was a religious phenomenon that entailed the creation of a spiritual landscape that *presenced* ancestors through the spatial juxtaposition of a watery underworld with mortuary mounds and residential spaces. Informing her scholarship on this matter are contemporary theoretical perspectives on relational ontologies, practice, place, and landscape.

The book consists of six chapters. An introductory chapter is followed by two chapters that review anthropological research on religion and complexity at Cahokia and beyond. I appreciated the deep historical review of religion which effectively demonstrates why the recent turn towards the New Animism and relational ontologies more generally are critical and necessary. Indeed, it would appear that structuralist thinkers have too long conceptualized religion as performing certain key societal functions but otherwise as set apart from the lives of ancient peoples. As Baires effectively illustrates in this study, religion did not loom above and apart from people's experiences but served a critical role in mediating them. In her own words: "the practicing and complexity of religion informed the creation of Cahokia" (Baires 2018:62).

In Chapter 3, Baires begins an in-depth discussion of the principal focus of the book—the construction and use of ridge-top mounds. These were large earthen monuments with narrow ridge tops—the shape of which have been likened to the hipped roofs of some Mississippian structures. Seventeen or more of these monuments may have originally been built by Mississippian groups in the northern American Bottom. Baires focuses her analysis on seven. Her detailed examination illustrates that ridge-top mounds commonly had complex histories of construction and use involving multiple building stages that incorporated elaborate high-status burials, artifact caches, buildings, and large wooden "marker" posts.

Events involving these monuments entailed the participation of large groups of people: builders, mourners, and spectators as well as sacrificial victims. These events were public spectacles in which ancestors' remains were theatrically laid to rest and occasionally large groups of people were ritually executed. Those who witnessed and/or participated in

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these events likely left with altered religious understandings of life, death, violence, and their placement in the greater Cahokian community. Considering that many or most ridge-top mounds were constructed early in Cahokia's history, they probably played a central role in generating the sociopolitical relationships that were foundational to the polity.

In Chapters 4 and 5 Baires focuses her discussion directly on the Wilson Mound, the Rattlesnake Mound, and the Rattlesnake causeway, which connects the latter monument to the Cahokia site's grand plaza. Her summary of previous archaeological research at the now destroyed Wilson Mound is paired with new radiocarbon dates and analyses of ceramic assemblages and human skeletal remains generated from Preston Holder's 1954–1966 excavations. As a result she is able to date the initial construction of the Mound to the era of Cahokia's 11th century political consolidation. She also identified evidence of cut marks on the human remains which provides details on the ritual processes through which deceased bodies were handled and transformed prior to their interment in the mound.

Baires also summarizes information from her analysis of legacy collections as well as from her own recent excavations of the Rattlesnake Causeway and Rattlesnake Mound. Her efforts at the latter targeted areas previously uncovered by J. L. B. Taylor in 1927. In doing so, she was able to more precisely document the sequence of the mound's construction and use while also identifying a decommissioned wall-trench structure (that Taylor had missed) in which a number of bundle burials had been ritually interred. Baires makes a strong case that the Rattlesnake mound was intentionally built in a swampy low-lying area along the southern edge of the Cahokia precinct. This swampy, water-laden area has clear symbolic references to the Underworld and death. Thus, funerary processions moving southward along the Rattlesnake Causeway to the Rattlesnake Mound may have actively conjured up cosmological notions about the Path of Souls, a route that the recently deceased must traverse to successfully arrive in the afterlife. Baires concludes that ridge-top mounds, the Rattlesnake Mound and Causeway in particular were critical to the establishment of early Cahokia. Moreover, as politically and cosmologically charged locations, these monuments continued to play an important role in generating religious meanings and social relationships and identities throughout much of Cahokia's history of occupation.

*Land of Water, City of the Dead: Religion and Cahokia's Emergence* provides a refreshing new take on the origins and organization of Cahokia that is a must read for any Mississippian archaeologist. More generally, it will be of interest to archaeological scholars of religion and social complexity who work elsewhere in the World. On a final note I commend Baires for taking on the important task of analyzing long neglected legacy collections and I look forward to seeing where her research goes from here.