Revealing Greater Cahokia, North America’s First Native City

Rediscovery and Large-Scale Excavations of the East St. Louis Precinct

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CONTENTS

List of Figures ......................................................................................................................................................................... xi
List of Tables ........................................................................................................................................................................... xix
List of Boxes ............................................................................................................................................................................ xx
Acknowledgments .......................................................................................................................................................... xxiii
Foreword ............................................................................................................................................................................... xxix

1. INTRODUCTION: GREATER CAHOKIA AND THE NEW MISSISSIPPI RIVER BRIDGE PROJECT,
   THOMAS E. EMERSON AND BRAD H. KOLDEHOFF ................................................................. 1
   The River: Corridor, Barrier, and Bridge ................................................................................................................ 5
   The Land: Roadways, Monuments, and Resources ......................................................................................... 9
   Revealing Greater Cahokia .................................................................................................................................. 12
   Rediscovery of the East St. Louis Civic Ceremonial Core ........................................................................ 13
   Doing Research in a Black Box .......................................................................................................................... 15
   This Volume ......................................................................................................................................................... 19
   References ............................................................................................................................................................ 21

2. CREATING GREATER CAHOKIA: THE CULTURAL CONTENT AND CONTEXT
   OF THE EAST ST. LOUIS PRECINCT, THOMAS E. EMERSON ................................................. 25
   The Land and the People ........................................................................................................................................ 25
   Early Native Occupation .................................................................................................................................. 26
   The Cahokia Big Bang ......................................................................................................................................... 32
   Chronology ......................................................................................................................................................... 49
   Revealing the East St. Louis Precinct .............................................................................................................. 51
   References ............................................................................................................................................................ 55

CHAPTER 3. AN OVERVIEW OF THE EAST ST. LOUIS PRECINCT AND ITS ARCHAEOLOGICAL
   INVESTIGATIONS, JOSEPH M. GALLOY .................................................................................... 59
   The East St. Louis Precinct: A Brief Overview ............................................................................................. 60
   History of Investigations .................................................................................................................................. 60
   The Nineteenth Century: Discovery, Documentation, and Destruction ...................................................... 62
   The Twentieth Century: Rediscovery and Professional Investigation ..................................................... 68
   Early Conservation Efforts .............................................................................................................................. 71
   The NMRB Project .......................................................................................................................................... 71
   The Janey B. Goode Site ........................................................................................................................................ 73
   The East St. Louis Precinct: Testing ................................................................................................................ 73
   The East St. Louis Precinct: Data Recovery .................................................................................................. 80
   Historic Period Deposits ................................................................................................................................... 89
   The Future of the Past in East St. Louis ........................................................................................................ 89
   References ............................................................................................................................................................ 90

CHAPTER 4. RIVERINE AND ANTHROPOGENIC LANDSCAPES OF THE EAST ST. LOUIS AREA,
   MICHAEL F. KOLB ......................................................................................................................... 95
   Introduction ....................................................................................................................................................... 95
   Physical Landscape .......................................................................................................................................... 95
   Cultural Landscape .......................................................................................................................................... 95
   Regional Geologic Context ............................................................................................................................ 98
   Channel Belts and the Missouri River Fluvial Fan ...................................................................................... 98
### Methods
- Depositional Environments ................................................................. 101
- Mississippi Riverine Landscape of East St. Louis ............................... 102
- Horseshoe Lake Landscape ................................................................. 102
  - Abandoned Channel Deposits and Stratigraphy ............................ 105
  - Point Bar Deposits ........................................................................... 113
  - Chronology ...................................................................................... 113
- Small Magnitude Channel Belt Landscape ........................................ 113
- SMCB Island Bar Deposits ................................................................. 114
- SMCB Abandoned Channel Deposits and Stratigraphy ..................... 114
  - Chronology ...................................................................................... 114
- Island Braided Channel Belt ............................................................... 114
- Islands ................................................................................................ 115
- Mississippian Cultural Landscape Transformation ............................ 115
  - East St. Louis Precinct ................................................................. 115
    - Stockyard Tract/Main Street Mound Locality .............................. 115
    - Ceremonial Core Locality ............................................................ 118
    - Janey B. Goode Site Locality ....................................................... 118
  - Summary and Discussion ................................................................. 120
  - Evolution of the Landscape ............................................................. 120
  - Landscape Position .......................................................................... 120
  - People, Mounds, and Plazas ......................................................... 120
- References .......................................................................................... 122

### Chapter 5. In and Around Cemetery Mound: The Northside and Southside Excavations

**AT THE EAST ST. LOUIS PRECINCT**, TIMOTHY R. PAUSEAT ........................................ 127
- Cemetery Mound ................................................................................ 128
- Foundational Deposits, Posts, Pole-and-Thatch Architecture, and Mounds ...................................................... 130
- Walls and an Incineration Event: 1170 ± 20 CE ................................ 139
- The Big Picture .................................................................................. 141
- Endnotes ............................................................................................ 144
- References .......................................................................................... 144

### Chapter 6. Community Organization of the East St. Louis Precinct, TAMIRA K. BRENNAN,

**ALLEEN M. BETZENHAUSER, MICHAEL BRENT LANDDELL, LUKE A. PLOCHER, VICTORIA E. POTTER,**

**AND DANIEL F. BLOODGETT** ........................................................................ 147
- Defining Time in the East St. Louis Precinct ..................................... 148
- Chronology and Spatial Layout ......................................................... 148
- Feature Types ................................................................................... 149
- Terminal Late Woodland I (AD 900–975) ........................................ 186
- Terminal Late Woodland II (AD 975–1050) ....................................... 187
- Lohmann (AD 1050–1100) ................................................................. 189
- Stirling (AD 1100–1200) .................................................................. 193
- Latest Stirling–Moorehead (ca. AD 1175–1225?) ............................... 196
- Summary .......................................................................................... 197
- New Insights ..................................................................................... 198
- References .......................................................................................... 199

### Chapter 7. Main Street Mound and the Mississippian Landscape, TAMIRA K. BRENNAN .......... 203
- Ridgetops in the American Bottom .................................................. 205
- Main Street Mound .......................................................................... 206
- Main Street’s Mortuary Grouping ..................................................... 210
Contents

Landscape Alteration and the Lohmann Community ............................................................................. 213
Stirling Phase Mounds and Beyond ........................................................................................................ 214
Discussion .............................................................................................................................................. 215
References .............................................................................................................................................. 216

Chapter 8. The People of East St. Louis, Lenna M. Nash, Kristin M. Hedman, and Matthew A. Fort ......................................................................................................................... 219

Introduction ............................................................................................................................................... 219
Methodology ........................................................................................................................................... 219
Preservation ............................................................................................................................................. 219
Population Profile ................................................................................................................................. 219
Way of Life ............................................................................................................................................ 239
Health .................................................................................................................................................... 231
Activities ............................................................................................................................................... 233
Place of Origin ..................................................................................................................................... 241
Cultural Modification ........................................................................................................................... 242
Mortuary Treatment ............................................................................................................................. 243
Discussion ............................................................................................................................................. 253
Endnotes ............................................................................................................................................... 256
References ............................................................................................................................................. 256

Chapter 9. Chronological Implications and External Connections in the East St. Louis Precinct Ceramic Assemblage, Alleen Betzenhauser, Tambra K. Brennan, Michael Brent Lansdell, Sarah E. Harken, and Victoria E. Potter ............................................................................. 263

Ceramic Analysis Terminology and Variables ......................................................................................... 263

The East St. Louis Precinct Ceramic Assemblage .................................................................................. 277

St amalgamated Woodland I (TLW I AD 900–975) ..............................................................................286
Jars .................................................................................................................................................. 286
Bowls ................................................................................................................................................ 288
Stumpware ........................................................................................................................................ 288

Terminal Late Woodland II (TLW II AD 975–1050) .............................................................................. 289
Jars .................................................................................................................................................. 289
Bowls ................................................................................................................................................ 289
Straight-Walled Bowls ........................................................................................................................ 289
Seed Jars ............................................................................................................................................ 299
Bottles ............................................................................................................................................... 299
Stumpware ........................................................................................................................................ 299
Nonlocal Vessels ................................................................................................................................. 299

Late TLW II to Lohmann Transition ..................................................................................................... 299

Lohmann (AD 1050–1100) ...................................................................................................................... 300
Jars .................................................................................................................................................. 300
Bowls ................................................................................................................................................ 300

Stirling (AD 1100–1200) ....................................................................................................................... 305
Jars .................................................................................................................................................. 305
Bowls ................................................................................................................................................ 307
CONTENTS

Terminal Late Woodland ...............................................................................................................................377
Mississippian Lohmann Phase ....................................................................................................................378
Mississippian Stirling Phase .......................................................................................................................379
Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................................380
References ..................................................................................................................................................381

CHAPTER 11. CRAFTING AND EXOTICA AT THE EAST ST. LOUIS PRECINCT, STEVEN L. BOLES,
TAMIRA K. BRENNAN, LAURA KOZUCH, STEVEN R. KUEHN, AND MARY L. SIMON.........................387
Introduction ..................................................................................................................................................387
Crafting and Exotics at the East St. Louis Precinct ..................................................................................388
Exotic Lithics and Elite Crafting, by Steven L. Boles ...........................................................................388
Exotic Arrow Points ..................................................................................................................................389
Microliths—Cores, Blades, and Drills ........................................................................................................392
Crafting—Basalt, Minerals, and Metal/Ore ..............................................................................................394
Ax-Head Manufacturing ..........................................................................................................................394
Pipestone Crafting .....................................................................................................................................394
Crystal Crafting ..........................................................................................................................................396
Mica Crafting ..............................................................................................................................................399
Galena Bead Manufacture ..........................................................................................................................399
Pigment Production .................................................................................................................................400
Copper Crafting: Tools and Ornaments ........................................................................................................403
Flint Clay Figurines ....................................................................................................................................406
Exotic Lithics and Elite Crafting Summary ...............................................................................................407
Shark Teeth and Sea Shells from East St. Louis, by Laura Kozuch ..........................................................408
  Shark Teeth .............................................................................................................................................408
  Marine Molluskss ....................................................................................................................................409
  Lightning Whelk Shell Beads ..................................................................................................................412
  Shell Bead Making ................................................................................................................................413
Exotic and Interesting Nonshell Fauna, by Steven R. Kuehn .................................................................418
  Pronghorn Tooth ..................................................................................................................................418
  Giant Catfish Remains .............................................................................................................................420
  Unusual Birds ..........................................................................................................................................424
  Domestic Dogs .........................................................................................................................................424
  Carnivore Remains ..................................................................................................................................424
Exotic and Interesting Fauna Summary ....................................................................................................425
Exotic and Ritual-Use Flora, by Mary L. Simon .........................................................................................425
  Maize .........................................................................................................................................................427
  Red Cedar ..............................................................................................................................................428
Herbaceous Plants .......................................................................................................................................430
  Contexts of Exotic Plant Recovery .........................................................................................................433
Summary and Conclusion ..........................................................................................................................434
Endnote: ....................................................................................................................................................437
References ..................................................................................................................................................437

CHAPTER 12. PLANTS AND BURNED STRUCTURES AT THE EAST ST. LOUIS PRECINCT,
MARY L. SIMON ..........................................................................................................................................445
The Archaeological Context .......................................................................................................................445
The Archaeobotanical Record from Stirling Phase Burned Structures ..................................................447
Construction Materials ..............................................................................................................................451
Botanical Material Culture ..........................................................................................................................454
Plant Subsistence Evidence ..........................................................................................................................456
Understanding the Burned Structure Plant Assemblage ..........................................................................459
References ..................................................................................................................................................461
CHAPTER 13. THINKING THROUGH THE ASHES, ARCHITECTURE, AND ARTIFACTS OF ANCIENT EAST ST. LOUIS, TIMOTHY R. PALIKETAT .......................................................... 463

14. GREATER CAHOKIA—CHIEFDOM, STATE, OR CITY? URBANISM IN THE NORTH AMERICAN MIDCONTINENT, AD 1050–1250, THOMAS E. EMERSON ........................................ 487
LIST OF FIGURES

1.1. Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site Interpretive Center with Monks Mound ...........................................1
1.2. Modern map showing locations of precolombian precincts of Greater Cahokia: St. Louis, East St. Louis, and Cahokia .................................................................2
1.3. Romanticized painting of American Bottom mounds, possibly representing the Pulcher Mound Group .................................................................3
1.4. Image of new Stan Musial Veterans Memorial Bridge with bird’s-eye view showing location of the archaeological investigations .........................................................4
1.5. Shanghai Archaelogical Forum medal and award .........................................................................................4
1.6. Ethnohistoric and ethnographic depiction of native peoples’ use of dugouts: “Their Manner of Fishing in Virginia” by Theodore de Bry, 1590 ..................................................5
1.7. Cahokia’s place within the U.S. midcontinent ................................................................................................6
1.8. Modern photograph of rapids at Chain-of-Rocks, St. Louis ........................................................................7
1.9. Artist’s depiction of steamboats at St. Louis ...................................................................................................8
1.10. Images of Eads Bridge under construction and in modern times .................................................................9
1.11. Mural of downtown Cahokia Precinct .........................................................................................................11
1.12. Archaeological corridors following the numerous large-scale highway infrastructure developments in the American Bottom .............................................................12
1.13. Modern roads and various Cahokia/East St. Louis excavations showing the Northside, Southside, and NMRB corridor placements .................................................................16
1.14. An aerial view the Range site excavations that revealed large settlement plans of Terminal Late Woodland villages for the first time .............................................................17
1.15. Aerial view of NMRB corridor under construction with the Feature 2000 Preserve outlined and protected by a concrete barrier .................................................................18
1.16. Crews completing excavations in the last days of the NMRB project with nearby bridge construction under way ..........................................................................................20
2.1. The Gateway Arch is part of the Gateway Arch National Expansion Memorial in St. Louis, Missouri, constructed to celebrate the United States’ western expansion with the Louisiana Purchase ...........................................................................................................26
2.2. Reconstruction of the rivers, creeks, and lakes in the American Bottom circa 1800, showing locations of the major Mississippian sites .................................................................27
2.3. Decaying industrial landscape in East St. Louis stockyard area .................................................................28
2.4. American Bottom calibrated chronology chart ..........................................................................................29
2.5. Village arrangement of the late TLW II component at the Range site ........................................................33
2.6. Cahokia mural looking north from Round Top Mound across the Grand Plaza toward Monks Mound ..........................................................................................................................34
2.7. Lidar topographic image of Emerald Mound site ..........................................................................................34
2.2.1. Fowler’s barrios ........................................................................................................................................38
2.2.2. Neighborhoods .........................................................................................................................................39
2.2.3. Examples of nodal households and temple/mortuary nodes ......................................................................40
2.8. Map of the central American Bottom region showing the locations of the St. Louis, East St. Louis, and Cahokia Precincts ................................................................................................42
2.9. Lidar topographic image showing Cahokia’s central precinct (i.e., “Downtown” Cahokia) .........................43
2.10. Aerial photograph looking northwest to Monks Mound ...........................................................................44
2.11. Map of the known East St. Louis Precinct recorded in the nineteenth century .........................................45
2.12. Drawing of the St. Louis mound complex by Titan Ramsay Peale ............................................................46
2.13. Progressive destruction of Big Mound, St. Louis, in 1869 .............................................................................47
2.14. Map showing contemporaneous outlying Mississippian mound groups surrounding the Cahokia Precinct ..............................................................................................................49

xi
3.1. The East St. Louis Precinct and its numbered tracts..........................61
3.1.1. The estimated boundaries of the East St. Louis Precinct over time........64
3.2. Locations of early discoveries of archaeological materials and features in relation to the earliest historic-period occupation of the East St. Louis locale.................66
3.3. Patrick's map of the precinct's remaining mounds..............................67
3.4. The I-55/70 Civic Ceremonial Core Northside and Southside excavations..........................70
3.5. Mississippian structures, post pits, and earthworks revealed by the Civic Ceremonial Core Southside excavations..............................71
3.6. The NMRB project area, circa 1996..............................................72
3.7. Janey B. Goode site excavation blocks.........................................74
3.8. Preserved perishable items from Janey B. Goode..........................75
3.9. Brick fragments below transposed mound fill in the CSX rail yard (Tract 3)....76
3.10. The East St. Louis Precinct and the locations of the I-55/70 and NMRB excavation blocks........77
3.11. Aerial view of the St. Louis National Stockyards, circa 1971, facing southwest ..........79
3.12. Excavations in the parking lot of Becker’s Industrial and Farm Supply (Tract 6)................80
3.13. Workers digging near concrete hog pens along Exchange Avenue (Tract 5)........81
3.14. Partially intact Mississippian structures adjacent to a large cistern in the stockyards (Tract 5) ....83
3.15. Lithograph of the St. Louis National Stockyards showing the Relocated I-70 right-of-way and the original Exchange Avenue alignment..........................85
3.16. Mississippian structures impacted by historic drains (Tract 5)..............86
3.17. Mississippian features under excavation in the stockyards (Tract 5)........87
3.18. Crew excavating prehistoric features around the footings of a former meatpacking plant (Tract 4) .............................................................................................................88
3.19. Excavations alongside the massive foundation of a former meatpacking plant (Tract 4) ..........89
3.20. As fieldwork was ending, construction closed in around the excavation crews.................90
3.21. Aerial photo of the last active excavation blocks................................91
4.1. The East St. Louis Precinct and the Janey B. Goode site locations plotted on a 1940 1:24,000 scale topographic map illustrating the degree of urban development near its peak in the mid-twentieth century.........................................................96
4.2. Map showing the locations of the stratigraphic cross sections .................97
4.3. Landforms located in the northern and central American Bottom............99
4.4. Landforms of East St. Louis area around the East St. Louis Precinct and the Janey B. Goode site........103
4.5. Reconstruction of the position of the Horseshoe Lake meander in the small magnitude channel belt and the island-brained channel belt .........................................................104
4.6. Map showing the localities referred to in the text ................................106
4.7. Map showing the locations of the stratigraphic cross sections..................107
4.8. Stratigraphic cross section (C483–C485) that extends from the northern arm of the Horseshoe Lake meander across the Janey B. Goode site and into the Cahokia Creek arm of the Horseshoe Lake meander..........................................................108
4.9. Stratigraphic cross section (C376–C436) that extends across the Janey B. Goode site from west to east .................................................................................................................109
4.10. Stratigraphic cross section (C301–C307) located in the abandoned Horseshoe Lake meander just east of the Janey B. Goode site .........................................................111
4.11. East St. Louis Precinct: Stockyard Tract cross section (C531–C216) northwest to southeast.......116
4.12. East St. Louis Precinct: Stockyard Tract cross section (R1–C90) northeast to southwest ..........117
4.13. East St. Louis Precinct: Civic Ceremonial Core cross section (C112–C100) .....................119
5.1. Suspected area of burned huts, as revealed in both Northside and Southside excavations........129
5.2. Northeastern portion of the Southside excavation trench showing the inner and outer compound walls, the location of Mound E6, and the burned huts on the slopes of Mound E6 ....130
5.3. Lower construction or plaza fill beneath Northside excavation area and between Mounds E12 and E13 .......................................................................................................................131
List of Figures

5.4. Schematic plan view of the Civic Ceremonial Core, with its swale fills, mounds, walls, burned huts, and Northside and Southside excavations.................................................................134
5.5. Female human offering in post pit Feature 666 in plan view and profile........................................135
5.6. Portion of early Stirling phase circular building F643 as exposed in Northside excavations...........136
5.7. Portions of the Northside excation trench showing the distribution of wall-trench buildings and post-wall huts ..................................................................................................................................137
5.8. Northside burned storage hut F656 in plan and profile view............................................................138
5.9. Portions of Southside rotunda F32; note ramp of central roof-support post pit and the squared shape of some of the wall posts ........................................................................................................139
5.10. Biwalled inner palisade, superimposed by later Stirling phase circular building, with nearby human burial to the east ...........................................................................................................140
5.11. Plan view of a cluster of burned huts inside the outer palisade walls, Southside excavations........141
6.1. Box-and-whisker plot of floor areas by phase ................................................................................149
6.2. Feature density within the project limits at East St. Louis during the Terminal Late Woodland II, Lohmann, Stirling, and latest Stirling–Moorehead phases ........................................................................152
6.3. Plan map of Terminal Late Woodland I occupation at East St. Louis.............................................153
6.1.1. Plan map of ditch and Terminal Late Woodland habitation ................................................................154
6.1.2. Profile illustration and photo of Terminal Late Woodland ditch feature .........................................155
6.4. Plan map of dense Terminal Late Woodland II occupation at East St. Louis ....................................156
6.5. Artist’s depiction of the Terminal Late Woodland II occupation at East St. Louis .............................157
6.2.1. Plan photograph of a portion of three double-row features, with white nails defining the limits of individual pits ........................................................................................................................................158
6.2.2. Profile photos of individual pits within the double-row features showing the narrow and irregular bases caused by excavation with a sharp tool........................................................................159
6.2.3. Primary locations of double-row features and Terminal Late Woodland occupation ....................160
6.4.1. Illustration of a post pit profile with insertion and extraction ramps identified .............................165
6.4.2. Photograph of the remnants of a monumental post discovered at the Mitchell site .....................166
6.4.3. Illustration and photograph of a post pit with the mold where the post rotted ...............................167
6.4.4. Profile of one of the largest post pits on-site showing a small portion of the original area excavated for the posthole and the backfilled extraction ramp ...........................................................................168
6.6. Plan map of a Lohmann phase community area with an open plaza and monumental post pit ......170
6.7. Artist’s depiction of the Lohmann occupation at East St. Louis .......................................................171
6.5.1. Plan of Feature 5-0181 and nearby Stirling phase features ..........................................................172
6.6. Plan map of the densest area of Stirling phase occupation ................................................................174
6.8. Artist’s depiction of the Stirling occupation at East St. Louis ..........................................................175
6.10. Plan map of the late Stirling to Moorehead community ....................................................................176
6.11. Artist’s depiction of the Moorehead occupation at East St. Louis ....................................................177
6.12. Examples of various pit shapes in profile view ................................................................................178
6.13. Examples of plan shapes of monumental post pits and structural post pits ......................................179
6.14. Examples of plan shapes of massive pits .......................................................................................180
6.15. Examples of hearths in profile ........................................................................................................180
6.6.1. Profile illustration and photo of Terminal Late Woodland II massive pit ........................................181
6.6.2. Plan map of massive pits relative to other Terminal Late Woodland features ...............................182
6.16. Plan maps of Lohmann phase houses with single-set post and wall-trench house construction .........183
6.17. To-scale plan views of different types of special-use architecture found at East St. Louis ................184
6.18. Stirling phase screen features creating an area shielded from view in the southwest corner of Tract 6 and additional features within this area, some of which were likely contemporaneous with the screens ...........................................................................................................185
6.19. Plan of two Terminal Late Woodland II courtyard groups ................................................................190
6.20. Plan map of Lohmann phase ritual precinct at the eastern edge of the project limits .......................192
7.1. Recorded mounds at the East St. Louis Precinct .............................................................................204
7.2. Artist’s reconstruction of a ridgetop mound at the Cahokia Precinct ...............................................206
7.3. Main Street Mound and the earliest Lohmann habitation ................................................................208
8.2. Bone collagen δ13C by component ................................................................................................. 220
8.3. Bone and enamel apatite δ13C by component ............................................................................... 223
7.8. Distribution of mortuary features by component .............................................................................. 220–228
7.6. Plan map of multiple mound edges encountered in excavations and photograph of clayey southernmost edge depicted in the plan map .................................................................................. 209
8.1. Location of exposed burials and empty grave pits along the southern and southwestern edges of Main Street Mound ............................................................................................................ 211
8.2. Mound and plan view of buckshot fills observed beneath historic Main Street ......................... 212
8.1. Layout of a possible early Lohmann cemetery immediately west of Main Street Mound .............. 213
8.1.1. Location of smaller burial clusters at the East St. Louis Precinct ................................................. 254
8.1.2. Unique mortuary treatments: ossuary and post pit burial .......................................................... 250
8.1.3. Spatial organization of mortuary precinct .................................................................................... 251
8.1.4. Location of mortuary precinct, ossuary, and discrete burial cluster .......................................... 250
8.1.5. Location of mortuary precinct, ossuary, and discrete burial cluster .......................................... 250
8.1.6. Burial cluster (F4-2250) ................................................................................................................. 252
8.1.7. Location of smaller burial clusters at the East St. Louis Precinct ................................................. 254
8.1.8. Culturally modified teeth ............................................................................................................ 243
8.1.9. Dental caries on occlusal surface of molar, antemortem tooth loss .............................................. 249
8.1.10. Postmortem cut marks on distal humerus consistent with mortuary processing ..................... 241
8.1.11. Strontium (87Sr/86Sr) isotope ratios by component ...................................................................... 242
8.1.12. Human bone (cranial) ear spools ................................................................................................ 244
8.1.13. Mortuary treatment identified at the East St. Louis Precinct ..................................................... 246
8.1.14. Postmortem cut marks on distal humerus consistent with mortuary processing ..................... 241
8.1.15. Burial cluster (F4-2250) ................................................................................................................. 252
8.1.16. Location of smaller burial clusters at the East St. Louis Precinct ................................................. 254
8.1.17. Spatial organization of mortuary precinct .................................................................................... 251
8.1.18. Location of mortuary precinct, ossuary, and discrete burial cluster .......................................... 250
8.1.19. Location of mortuary precinct, ossuary, and discrete burial cluster .......................................... 250
9.1. Paste variation: bottomland clays, Madison County Shale, and Monroe County upland clays ..... 264
9.1.1. Spindle whorls and disks .......................................................................................................... 265
9.1.2. Discoids ................................................................................................................................ 266
9.1.3. Palette, pipes, and pottery trowels ................................................................................................ 267
9.2. Vessel forms and parts of a pot ....................................................................................................... 269–270
9.2.1. Vessel decorations in the NMRB assemblage: percentage of vessel forms with decoration within each assemblage and distribution of common decorations between the TLW II and Mississippian assemblages ............................................................................................................. 274
9.2.2. Examples of lip decorations ........................................................................................................ 275
9.2.3. Examples of body decorations .................................................................................................... 276
9.3.1. Decorated beakers ...................................................................................................................... 279
9.3.2. Beaker handles ........................................................................................................................... 280
9.3.3. Rim riders and effigy bowls ......................................................................................................... 282
9.3.4. Effigy hooded bottles .................................................................................................................. 283
9.3.5. Owl and human effigy objects ..................................................................................................... 294
9.3.6. Engraved pottery ......................................................................................................................... 285
9.4. Terminal Late Woodland I vessels ................................................................................................. 287
9.5. Terminal Late Woodland II vessels ................................................................................................. 290–291
9.6. Nonlocal vessel source areas .......................................................................................................... 293
9.5.2. Nonlocal pottery from the northern Midwest and Indiana ................................................................. 294
9.5.3. Nonlocal pottery from the central Mississippi Valley ............................................................... 295–296
9.5.4. Nonlocal pottery from the lower Mississippi Valley and Gulf Coast ........................................... 297
9.5.5. Decorated bowl with Caddo-inspired design and form ............................................................... 298
9.7. Lohmann vessels ............................................................................................................................... 302–303
9.8. Stirling vessels ................................................................................................................................. 306–310
9.6.1. Common Ramey Incised jar designs and variants ................................................................. 313–314
9.6.2. Rare Ramey Incised jar designs ................................................................................................. 315
9.9. Moorehead vessels ......................................................................................................................... 318
9.10. Assemblage vessel forms .............................................................................................................. 321
9.11. Assemblage temper proportions by weight ................................................................................... 322
9.12. Assemblage exterior surface treatment proportions by weight ...................................................... 323
9.13. Average jar and bowl diameters ................................................................................................. 324
9.15. Average jar lip protrusion index ................................................................................................... 325
9.16. Proportion of decorated and undecorated vessels ....................................................................... 326
10.1. Excavations at East St. Louis Precinct (ca. 2009) showing trackhoe removing the historic... 334
10.1.1. Special abraders from Mississippian context ............................................................................. 341
10.2. Mississippian notched hoes: Kaolin and Mill Creek ...................................................................... 347
10.3. Tract 6 Feature 136 hoe cache in situ ............................................................................................ 349
10.4. Oval Mill Creek hoe in situ with “sterile-looking” fill in the bottom of a Lohmann phase pit .......... 350
10.5. Lohmann phase oval Mill Creek hoe cache from Tract 4 Feature 2053 ........................................... 351
10.6. Mississippian celts.......................................................................................................................... 352
10.4.1. Celt caches: Steve Boles, Dr. Susan Alt, and Dr. Timothy Pauketat comparing the Grossman... 353
10.7. Tract 5 Feature 1237 basalt Celt preform from Lohmann phase Celt cache ...................................... 354
10.8. Tract 5 Feature 1237 unfinished Lohmann phase basalt Celts in situ with bone awl ....................... 355
10.9. Stirling phase adzes: Burlington and Kornthal ............................................................................. 356
10.10. Lohmann phase pair cache from Tract 4 Feature 228: diabase Celt and Mill Creek adze ............ 357
10.11. Stirling phase pair cache, Mill Creek adzes in situ on House floor ............................................. 357
10.12. TLW Burlington adze pair cache from Tract 4 Feature 85 ............................................................... 358
10.13. TLW arrow-point types: Klunk, Roxana, Schild Spike, and Wanda ........................................... 359
10.14. Mississippian Cahokia point cherts: Mill Creek, Cobden, gravel, Burlington, Kaolin, and Indeterminate cherts .............................................................. 360
10.15. Arrow points, knives, and preforms from TLW features ............................................................... 361
10.16. Madison hypertrophic arrow points, knives, and preforms from Mississippian context ............ 362
10.17. Mound 72–style Cahokia points from East St. Louis ..................................................................... 363
10.18. Ground-stone spuds .................................................................................................................. 363
10.19. Ground-stone spuds .................................................................................................................. 364
10.20. Ramey knives from TLW and Mississippian contexts ................................................................. 365–366
10.6.1. Excavation of burned structure: Tract 5 Feature 181, circa 2009 .............................................. 367
10.6.2. Arrow-point assemblage from Tract 5 Feature 181 ................................................................. 368
10.21. Pipes from TLW and Mississippian contexts .............................................................................. 369
10.22. Discoidals from TLW and Mississippian contexts ....................................................................... 372–373
10.23. Stirling phase discoidals ............................................................................................................. 373
10.8.1. Personal adornment items from Cahokia’s Ramey Tract surface collections: clay owl pendant from Cahokia’s Mound 18, galena lip plug, and steatite weeping eye bead ............................ 375
10.24. Personal adornments from TLW and Mississippian contexts .................................................... 376
11.1. Exotic or exoticly influenced arrow points .................................................................................... 390–391
11.2. Madison points made from exotic materials ................................................................................. 392
11.3. Chipped-stone Burlington microliths from East St. Louis .............................................................. 383
11.4. Lohmann and Stirling phase features including Baraboo and workshop Feature 5-1020 floor assemblage ................................................................................................................................ 395
11.5. Lohmann phase, Stirling phase, and out-of-context ear spools and fragments ........................................396–397
11.6. Minerals recovered from TLW and Mississippian features.................................................................398–399
11.7. Beads used for personal adornment: galena beads and galena bead production failures .........................400
11.8. Map of Stirling phase structure Feature 5-2916, site of galena bead production ......................................401
11.9. Abraders with pigment residue ...........................................................................................................402
11.10. Copper artifacts recovered from Mississippian features .................................................................404
11.11. Map of the Stirling neighborhood at the south end of Tract 5 showing copper-laden pit Feature 4368 and other features containing copper artifacts and/or fragments ........................................405
11.12. Flint figurines: Exchange Avenue and Stockyard Head ........................................................................407
11.13. Shark teeth from East St. Louis .......................................................................................................408
11.15. Shark teeth from Cahokia, Monks Mound ..........................................................................................409
11.16. Shark-tooth effigy club (replica) and possible shark-tooth effigies .......................................................410
11.17. Large lightning whelk cup from Feature 5-3766 ..............................................................................411
11.18. Lightning whelk and shark teeth coastal sources and major Mississippian sites ................................412
11.19. Finished lightning whelk beads from Feature 4-0604 ........................................................................414
11.20. Disk bead size chart .........................................................................................................................413
11.21. Finished disk beads from Feature 5-1906 made from lightning whelk shells .........................................418
11.22. Feature 5-447 cache of lightning whelk shells with outer whorls removed ..........................................419
11.23. Cut columella from Feature 5-4447 ..................................................................................................419
11.24. Grooved columella from James Ramey Mound, Cahokia .................................................................420
11.25. Columella beads from the now-destroyed Cemetery Mound, except for lower left (Oliva sp.) and lower right center (flat disk bead) ...............................................................420
11.26. Columella beads from the now-destroyed Cemetery Mound, except for lower left (Oliva sp.) and lower right center (flat disk bead) ...............................................................420
11.27. Marginella beads from the East St. Louis site, New Mississippi River Bridge project (Tract 5, Feature 3788)......................................................................................................................421
11.28. Marginella beads from the now-destroyed Cemetery Mound at the East St. Louis site ............................421
11.29. Pectoral spines from a giant catfish (Ictalurus sp.) found in F5-1554 and from a modern average-sized specimen ..................................................................................................................424
11.30. Tract 5 location of Lohmann phase structures group with highest concentration of morning glory seeds 432
11.31. Pie chart showing estimated percentage of time spent on crafting different types of marine-shell beads at Greater Cahokia ........................................................................................................417
11.32. Tract 6 location of Stirling phase possible ritual structure group, including post pit Feature 6-0652 and pit Feature 6-0315 with high red cedar wood counts .................................................................................435
11.33. Tract 6 location of T-shaped structures and Feature 6-0551, area of high red cedar and night shade seed counts ........................................................................................................................................436
12.1. Locations of analyzed burned structures in the Civic Ceremonial Core, north of interstate ........................446
12.2. Locations of analyzed burned structures in the Civic Ceremonial Core, south of interstate ......................446
12.3. Wall trench and hut construction schematic ..........................................................................................447
12.4. Locations of analyzed burned structures, New Mississippi River Bridge Tract 5 area ..................................448
12.5. Structure 5-0181 burned wall posts in situ ..........................................................................................450
12.6. Plan map of structure Feature 5-0181 showing locations of piece-plotted materials .............................452
12.7. Feature 5-0914: thick grass and willow stem thatching and associated willow-wood framework and robust and split stem monocot thatch sample ..............................................................................454
12.8. Feature 5-0181 plaited mat fragment in situ ........................................................................................455
12.9. Feature 5-0181 plaited mat body and end wrapped around cedar log ....................................................456
12.10. Plaited fabric from Feature 5-0914 .....................................................................................................456
12.11. Black walnut wooden bowl fragments .................................................................................................457
12.12. Ash wooden bowl rim and neck fragments ..........................................................................................458
12.13. Feature 536 (Civic Ceremonial Core) embedded corn cob ....................................................................459
LIST OF FIGURES

13.1. Map of Greater Cahokia and adjacent sites mentioned in text.............................................464
13.2. Projected Cahokia village areas in the early and late Terminal Late Woodland period compared
to the later Lohmann and Stirling phase site limits, mounds, and causeway..............................466
13.3. Profile of a massive pit at the East St. Louis site ....................................................................469
13.4. Grid pattern of Stirling phase political-religious buildings in the NMRB Tract 6, East St. Louis.....474
14.1. Early illustration of Downtown Cahokia, to scale, that conveys the impression that it is a
typical palisaded Mississippian temple town and a map of the location of the context
of Greater Cahokia......................................................................................................................508
14.2. Map of ruralized countryside showing locations of excavated rural households, nodal
households, and temple/mortuary nodes .....................................................................................510
14.3. Array of cultic objects linked to the twelfth-century world renewal/fertility cult
within Greater Cahokia..............................................................................................................518
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of Tables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1. American Bottom Mississippian Mound Centers in Cahokia Precinct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1. Radiocarbon Dates from the Horseshoe Lake Paleochannel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1. Inventory of Nonarchitectural Features in the Northside and Southside Excavations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2. Inventory of Architectural Features in the Northside and Southside Excavations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1. Descriptive Statistics of Floor Areas by Phase, Excluding Extreme Outliers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2. Features at East St. Louis by Class and Component by Phase (Excluding Historic Features)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3. Estimates of Population within the NMRB Corridor at East St. Louis by Phase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4. Extrapolated Population Estimates for Entire East St. Louis Precinct by Phase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5. Descriptive Stats of Width to Length Ratios by Phase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6. Orientations of Dwellings versus Special-Use Structures by Phase, Excluding Proposed Storage Huts and Circular Structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.7. Descriptive Statistics of Floor Area, Basin Depth, and Post Metrics for Terminal Late Woodland II Structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1. Demographic Distribution (Age and Sex) by Component</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2. Summary Statistics of Human Bone and Enamel Apatite Stable Isotope Data and Human Enamel Apatite Strontium Isotope Data from the East St. Louis Precinct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3. Summary of Skeletal and Dental Pathologies by Component</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4. Summary of Mortuary Treatment by Component</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5. Pathologies (F4-2250)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1. Vessel Forms by Component</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2. TLW I Vessel Forms and Tempers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.3. TLW I Vessel Forms and Exterior Surface Treatments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.4. TLW II Vessel Forms and Tempers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.5. TLW II Vessel Forms and Exterior Surface Treatments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.6. Lohmann Vessel Forms and Tempers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.7. Lohmann Vessel Forms and Exterior Surface Treatments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.8. Stirling Vessel Forms and Tempers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.9. Stirling Vessel Forms and Exterior Surface Treatments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.10. Moorehead Vessel Forms and Tempers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.11. Moorehead Vessel Forms and Exterior Surface Treatments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.1. Total Lithic Assemblage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.2. Terminal Late Woodland Chipped Stone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3. Mississippian Chipped Stone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.4. Ground-Stone Totals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.5. TLW Formal Tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.6. Mississippian Formal Tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.7. Arrow-Point Types</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.8. Discoidal Styles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.1. Evidence for Pigment Production at East St. Louis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.2. Shell Bead Summary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.3. All Known Beads from East St. Louis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.4. Number of Features by Type Analyzed for Botanical Remains from East St. Louis, New Mississippi River Bridge Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.5. Maize Recovery Levels from Mississippian Contexts at East St. Louis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.6. Exotic Plant Taxa Recovered from Flotation Samples, East St. Louis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.1. Burned Structures with Analyzed Plant Remains, East St. Louis Precinct (11S706)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.2. Cahokia’s and Mesoamerican Cities’ Densities and Populations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# List of Boxes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1. Understanding Archaeological Cultures, Time, and Space</td>
<td>30–31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2. Bounding Cahokia</td>
<td>35–41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3. East St. Louis Quick Facts</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1. The East St. Louis Precinct’s Evolving Boundaries</td>
<td>63–65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2. The St. Louis National Stockyards</td>
<td>82–83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1. The Ditch: A Woodland Period Feature</td>
<td>154–155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2. Double-Row Features: A Possible Agricultural Innovation</td>
<td>158–161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4. Post Pits: Evidence of Monumental Poles of Special Meaning</td>
<td>165–169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5. Feature 5-0181: A Burned Stirling Phase Temple</td>
<td>172–173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6. Massive Pits</td>
<td>181–183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1. Stable Isotopes and Diet Reconstruction</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2. Collagen Radiocarbon Dates of East St. Louis Precinct</td>
<td>247–248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1. Ceramic Objects</td>
<td>265–267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2. Decoration</td>
<td>273–277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.3. Beakers and Black Drink</td>
<td>278–280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.5. Nonlocal Pottery</td>
<td>293–298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.6. Ramey Designs</td>
<td>313–315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.1. Tattooing</td>
<td>341–342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.2. Portable Rock Art and Mississippian Iconography</td>
<td>343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3. East St. Louis Precinct: Home of the Notched Hoe</td>
<td>348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.5. Experimental Archaeology: Celt Manufacture and Use</td>
<td>355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.6. Burning for Purification</td>
<td>367–368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.7. Gambling: A Long-Lived Tradition</td>
<td>371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.8. Personal Adornments: Not Just Bling on a String</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.1. Lithic Shark-Tooth Effigies</td>
<td>410–411</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.2. How to Make Shell Beads</td>
<td>415–416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.3. Marine Shell Crafting and Labor</td>
<td>417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.4. Contextualizing Marine Shell Cups</td>
<td>422–423</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.1. What Is a City?</td>
<td>493</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Shanghai Archaeological Forum of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, named the Illinois State Archaeological Survey's East St. Louis archaeological project as one of the top ten archaeological field discoveries in the world in 2015.
Revealing Greater Cahokia, North America’s First Native City: Rediscovery and Large-Scale Excavations of the East St. Louis Precinct

Thomas E. Emerson, Brad H. Koldehoff, and Tamira K. Brennan, Eds. 2018. Illinois State Archaeological Survey, University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign. Studies in Archaeology Number 12, xxxi+535 pp., 249 figures, 47 tables, 32 boxes, references. $100.00 (Hardback).

Reviewed by John F. Doershuk, State Archaeologist and Director, University of Iowa Office of the State Archaeologist.

This volume is about archaeological compliance investigations associated with the New Mississippi River Bridge (NMRB) project, a huge undertaking by any standard, even for the Illinois State Archaeological Survey (ISAS) whose personnel have considerable experience in conducting big archaeology projects. It is an overview volume which serves to introduce a series of detailed technical reports—mostly also published in 2018—that thoroughly document the entire NMRB archaeological effort. The fieldwork, analyses, and publication of project results reflects the on-going Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) commitment to appropriate management of archaeological resources and its responsibility to preserve, protect, and enhance peoples’ knowledge about them.

Revealing Greater Cahokia is in part a celebration—and rightfully so. After all, it involves Cahokia, a world-class site even among its peers on the World Heritage Site list (Cahokia was the second US archaeological site to receive WHS designation). The NMRB project spanned five years and involved well over 100 archaeologists, reflected by the volume including 24 authors contributing to 14 chapters. So, the effort should be celebrated as the project likely does represent, “one of the largest excavations ever conducted in the United States (p. 4).” The FHWA recognized the magnitude of the effort by awarding ISAS and IDOT a 2011 Environmental Excellence Award, and in 2015 the Chinese Academy of Science Shanghai Archaeological Forum cited the project as one of the ten most important new archaeological field discoveries worldwide.

The volume is a comprehensive overview of the NMRB project and provides a richly documented and updated perspective on Greater Cahokia, a spatial concept that links the Monks Mound-area Cahokia Precinct to the west side of the Missouri and the St. Louis Precinct. Understanding Greater Cahokia is greatly enriched by the NMRB excavations of the East St. Louis Precinct. Truly staggering numbers of archaeological features were investigated (“more than 6,500” p. xxiv), and an estimated 1,000,000 artifacts recovered and analyzed. Equally remarkable is the management of the massive amounts of overburden generated; perhaps as much as 300,000 m³. An especially notable preservation success which emerged from the project involved negotiations leading to IDOT engineers reconfiguring construction to avoid and preserve Feature 2000—the intact basal remnant...
of a previously undocumented ridgetop mound discovered under a modern road and several feet of historic rubble. The resulting “Feature 2000 Preserve” has legal standing along with a fence and protective fill cover as well as the full attention of tribal partners, IDOT, and the archaeological community going into the future.

As a key starting point to understanding the scope, research effort, and results of the NMRB project, I found Figure 1.13 particularly helpful. I also appreciate the clear presentation of key interpretive findings (pp. 51–55), not least of which is the extraordinary extent of archaeology still preserved in the East St. Louis Precinct. The NMRB team estimates that upwards of 96% of the Precinct archaeological deposits remain buried and intact. Unfortunately, as the volume editors rightly point out, this means there is an on-going preservation crisis on a colossal scale. Most of the East St. Louis Precinct and Greater Cahokia outside the minor portion protected by the World Heritage Site boundaries is suffering unprecedented destruction due to accelerating urban redevelopment. This is of course yet another iteration of obliteration following that caused by the initial wave of regional urban development which by the later 1800s had wiped out nearly all traces of the St. Louis Precinct portion of Greater Cahokia as, “no remnants appear to exist today” (p. 44) based on Missouri DOT sponsored NMRB work on the west side of the river.

*Revealing Greater Cahokia* contains lots of specifics which more than whet the archaeological appetite for delving into the topical companion volumes, but also provides fresh “big” thinking. As would be expected for such a volume, there are introductory chapters (1&2) which set the project and general Cahokia context. Overview chapters (3&4) position the East St. Louis Precinct as an archaeological research unit and contextualize the landscape formation and transformation of the Greater Cahokia area. Chapters on specific portions and aspects of the precinct are presented including the Cemetery (5) and Main Street (7) mounds, and community organization (6) and people (8). There are chapters on chronology and ceramics (9), lithics (10), exotica (11), and plants and burned structures (12). Many of these chapters are summary presentations based on the full companion volumes in the project series where these data are fully elucidated. Of greatest interest for those not looking for specific contextual details or nuances of artifact analyses are the final two chapters by Pauketat (13) and Emerson (14). These authors underscore Greater Cahokia’s, “complexity and urban character in terms of New World complex societies (p. 21).”

In Chapter 13 Pauketat leads the reader through an enlightening discussion that seeks to disentangle the, “materials, substances, things, and phenomenon” (p. 480) that happen through multidimensional causal processes and result in the, “vibrant assemblage of human and other-than-human” (p. 481) power accounting for Greater Cahokia’s rise, and specifically the East St. Louis Precinct transformation which was archaeologically documented as part of the NMRB project. For Pauketat it is clear the NMRB-explored portion of the East St. Louis Precinct was a planned ritual-residential sector that contrasts in important ways from much of Greater Cahokia. The NMRB data inform on several topics central in understanding urbanization, including the scale of immigration, producer segmentation, and the emergence of neighbor-
hoods. I found of interest the documented shift reported in the NMRB data of food storage practices away from exterior below-ground storage to either increasing usage of interior pits or more outdoor above-ground granaries. This is telling evidence of the emerging importance of corporate household organization. An equally important NMRB finding is the conversion of the East St. Louis Precinct from its Stirling phase hey-day to the documented Moorehead phase “ghost town,” which signals, “a profound transformation in Cahokian social, political, and religious life (p. 479).” These data tell us urbanization is reversible—a pattern well worth looking for elsewhere in the archaeological record.

Emerson, in the concluding chapter of the volume, provides wide-ranging consideration of current perspectives on the transformation of Greater Cahokia from its Terminal Late Woodland II roots through the “Big Bang” and the twelfth century AD, where, “dynamic, fluid, and in a constant state of flux” (p. 501) responses were actively constructed by the burgeoning numbers of diverse and heterogenous inhabitants. The large-scale archaeological exposures within the NMRB East St. Louis Precinct provide new data significant in modeling Greater Cahokia urbanization as focused on the important role of inward-looking household clusters, i.e., neighborhoods. The developing house society (pp. 502–504) expressed by these Cahokia neighborhoods arguably made possible the formation of close fictive corporate relationships that drove the emerging Greater Cahokia economy and created a city. Emerson rightly challenges future Cahokia researchers to archaeologically explore the connections between rural food producers and urban houses, a perspective I endorse as a meaningful and achievable research agenda. Houses, neighborhoods, districts, precincts, and other elements of built (and “empowered” [see pp. 513–517]) landscapes such as mounds and plazas are accessible units of analysis and key interpretative building blocks for understanding something as archaeologically complex as a city the scale of Greater Cahokia.

A closing observation: the volume’s List of Figures may initially confuse some readers as both the chapter figures and the figures which appear within the 32 “Boxes” strategically placed throughout the text are numbered according to pagination. The boxes are an excellent addition providing valuable topical insight for non-specialists. Because multiple boxes can appear in any given chapter, the boxes have their own numbering system. However, this places Figure 2.2.4 (appearing on page 40 as part of Box 2.2) in the List of Figures ahead of Figure 2.7 (p. 34) but after Figure 2.8 (pg. 42); these figures are associated with Chapter 2 but not a box, and so on. Once the reader orients to the presence of the included boxes and associated figures and how the numbering system works, it makes reasonable sense. Otherwise, I found the volume—as is typical for ISAS products—flows well and is richly and capably illustrated, which makes it readily accessible for both professionals and non-specialists seeking an entry point into the massive NMRB archaeological project literature.