

# Cahokia's Complexities

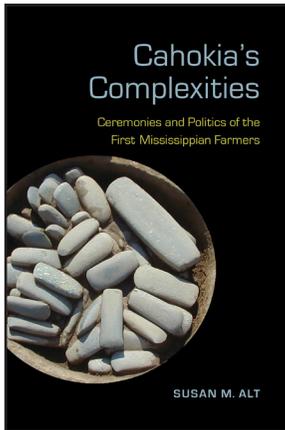
Ceremonies and Politics of the  
First Mississippian Farmers



**SUSAN M. ALT**

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## Cahokia's Complexities: Ceremonies and Politics of the First Mississippian Farmers

Susan M. Alt. 2018. [University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa](https://www.uapress.edu/book/9780807374999). ix+158 pp., 58 figures, 7 tables, references. \$49.95 (Trade Cloth), \$49.95 (E Book).

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I think it's safe to say that no other Mississippian mound center has received more archaeological investigation than Cahokia and its surrounding hinterland. Most of the excavations in this region were, and continue to be driven by federal and state legislation as they relate to development in the St. Louis Metro East area. While Cahokia and numerous related sites in the American Bottom floodplain benefitted most from this work, especially during the construction of FAI-270 ca. late 1970s thru the early 1990s, the uplands to the east of Cahokia received far less attention until the late 1990s. It was at this time that Tim Pauketat and Susan Alt began investigating Cahokia-related sites in an area they refer to as the Richland Complex. The focus of their work was to gain a better understanding of not only the scale of Greater Cahokia, but more importantly the dynamics of Cahokian administrative interaction and influence with outlying groups. Their investigations were primarily funded through large grants that allowed them to conduct large-scale excavations. Although detailed site reports from many of these investigations are yet forthcoming, Alt in the interim provides a wealth of data, comparisons, and interpretations for these sites in *Cahokia's Complexities: Ceremonies and Politics of the First Mississippian Farmers*.

In this book, Alt builds on Thomas Emerson's 1997 settlement model and provides evidence for a new settlement type exemplified by the Grossmann site. She argues that Grossmann served an administrative function that not only ensured surplus grain and other crafting items made their way to central Cahokia, but more importantly, integrated resettled local farmers as well as immigrant farmers into a novel early Mississippian culture. Alt explores the means by which Cahokian administrators may have accomplished these goals through familiar concepts of practice, memory, power, and place, as well as less familiar concepts of hybridity and the creation of thirdspaces. She also posits that while these social concepts were instrumental in Cahokia's rise, they may have eventually contributed to its demise.

Alt's book consists of six chapters, with Chapter 1 serving as both an introduction to the archaeological subject matter as well as to relevant theoretical discussion and definitions of hybridity and thirdspaces. Briefly per Alt's discussion, hybridity is the creation of something new that is greater than the sum of its parts with the result not necessarily referencing its origins (p. 9) and thirdspaces as "locations or contexts where differences meet and innovations occur" (p. 5).

Although Alt's main focus is the Grossmann site, Chapter 2 is devoted to framing her discussion by first reviewing material culture and feature data from Cahokia's central core

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as well as several regional floodplain sites; Chapter 3 provides additional framing for several upland sites in the Richland Complex. Alt does an excellent job of summarizing large data sets and describing the variability in architecture, village layout, and material culture between these sites. Her interpretations for the variability emphasize the daily negotiations of multi-ethnic communities with the over-arching administrative control emanating from Cahokia via the Grossmann site.

In Chapter 4, Alt describes the Grossmann village layout and the various feature types. Her work was funded by a National Science Foundation fellowship grant that allowed the site to be excavated in its entirety. This rare opportunity greatly enhanced the assessment of the site's function as well as its relationship with neighboring sites. Chapter 5 is devoted to the materiality from the Grossmann site. Here, Alt provides detailed descriptions of certain features and associated material culture that she interprets as the remains from special events or key moments. She argues that such events encompassed more than people and their traditions as attendants would also have been affected by other sensorial qualities such as objects, place, and nonhuman entities. She suggests that these events served as a means of integrating diverse upland populations and also provided opportunities and outcomes that created hybridity and thirdspaces, critical elements in creating and negotiating a regional and novel Cahokian culture.

In the final chapter, Alt explores the complexity of early Cahokia as seen through evidence of Cahokian administration of the uplands via the Grossmann site. The focus of this chapter is on discussing the complexity of Cahokia. This is followed by investigating Cahokia's causes and effects, which generated a novel early Mississippian culture. Given that the Grossmann site arose in the late AD 1000s and was abandoned by the mid-1100s, Alt suggests that Cahokia's attempt to control the upland villagers ended in failure and that unintended consequences of hybridity perhaps contributed to the demise, exacerbated by profound natural events.

To underscore the importance of Alt's book, decades of archaeological work in the Greater Cahokia region make it increasingly clear that temporally and regionally similar sites, or even different areas within a site, often yield unexpected or novel finds. Some of these discoveries support previous models while others challenge them, and as a result, both site and big picture interpretations are greatly enhanced. Alt's book is a testimony to the invaluable insights gained from conducting long-term, large-scale, regional investigations. Additionally, her theoretical approach challenges us to think beyond merely quantifying archaeological remains of material culture and features to envision the ways in which these along with place may have been manipulated, negotiated, and experienced by its residents in novel ways that effected cultural change. Such an approach allows variability in the archaeological record to reflect agency rather than unexplainable anomalies to be ignored, or worse, manipulated and pigeonholed into static cultural constructs.

In closing and for disclosure, I must admit that my reaction to the first mention of hybridity and thirdspaces raised an eyebrow as much of my work has been geared towards presenting data and limiting my interpretations to regional comparisons of site activities and events. However, I found Alt's well-written presentation of these

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concepts easily accessible and her application of these with the archaeological data quite intriguing. While this book is a must read for Cahokia researchers, Alt's refreshing interpretative approach to archaeological data and cultural history make this book relevant to all archaeologists, regardless of focus or locale.