



FEEDING CAHOKIA

Early Agriculture in the North American Heartland



GAYLE J. FRITZ

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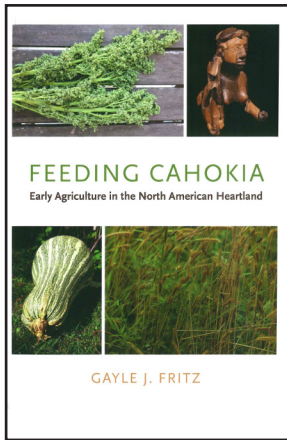
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Feeding Cahokia: Early Agriculture in the North American Heartland

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Reviewed by Mary Simon, Illinois State Archaeological Survey, Prairie Research Institute, University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign.

The Greater Cahokian complex is widely recognized as among the oldest and most extensive Native American cities in North America. At its height, the area housed over 20,000 people, including many not directly engaged in

food production. In her new book, *Feeding Cahokia: Early Agriculture in the North American Heart-land*, Gayle Fritz addresses important questions concerning the nature and structure of the farming communities that provided the food necessary to sustain this large Mississippian Period population. Rather than taking the position that production was controlled by elite personages in a top down manner, here Fritz argues that plant production strategies were governed by the decisions of the producers themselves, specifically by women farmers possessing the traditional knowledge needed to ensure ample harvests of native cultivated plants. By virtue of this knowledge of best land use practices, ranging from knowing when to plant what crops in which location to the best time to harvest and how to select seed for future crops, women farmers retained a measure of power that is not always considered in discussions of the Cahokian socio-political systems.

This book is the outcome of Fritz's long-term engagement with the archaeology of the region as well as the result of many years of research that have made her one of the lead-ing, and most widely respected, paleoethobotanists working in North America. Although engaging a number of arguments and data sets in support of her thesis, two stand out. The first is the strong and extensive Midwestern archaeobotanical record for importance of the native crop plants comprising the "Eastern Agricultural Complex." In this respect, she relies not only on decades of archaeobotanical data, but also on her well-grounded knowledge of the plants involved and their optimal cultivation practices. The second is the ethnohistoric record for women as farmers, including in particular Wilson's documentation of early twentieth-century Hidatsa cultivation practices. Other areas of support include modern experimental native crop production studies and her interpretation of Mississippian iconography and the belief systems of historically documented groups.

The book is readily divided into two parts. In the first, Fritz synthesizes a large body of botanical data from both open air and dry cave sites to summarize the histories of use for both bottle gourd, with its enigmatic beginnings, and the native cultivated plants. These histories not only include recovery contexts for the individual plants, but also explore the contextual frameworks of use to help the reader understand how and why those plants were so important to native people living in the interior Midwest

throughout prehistory. The chapters are organized chronologically, in a very logical and easy to follow manner. Fritz begins her narrative by exploring the histories of what are the oldest of the native cultigens, gourd and squash, in the context of Archaic period anthropogenic land disturbance and niche construction. This is followed by a discussion of sunflower and sumpweed, both of which were under cultivation by the Late Archaic. In Chapter 3, she outlines the rise of starchy grain crops, chenopod, erect knot weed and may-grass and in Chapter 4 introduces the grain little barley as well as the important ritual plant tobacco. These histories provide the reader with an excellent overview of the plants themselves, and are a welcome compilation of data. Not only is the information important, but I found myself once again reminded how appreciative I am of all the work done by pioneer post-flotation revolution archaeobotanists. Regardless of one's theoretical leanings, I highly recommend these chapters to anyone who wants to familiarize themselves with the native cultivated plants and understanding how, why, and where they came to be so important to prehistoric subsistence, in some cases to the point of intentional manipulation resulting in domestication. And even though many Southeastern and Midwestern archaeologists will be familiar with the information presented, having a single citable resource is more than welcome.

In the following Chapters 5 through 10, Fritz shifts her attention to the American Bottom of Illinois, specifically detailing her interpretation of the archaeobotanical and archaeological records for food production, leading up to and through the emergence and demise of the Cahokian polity. In Chapter 5, she focuses on the period prior to that emergence and argues that the archaeological and archaeobotanical data from Late Woodland and Terminal Late Woodland contexts (ca AD 650–1050) reflect a burgeoning farming economy based on native crop cultivation and active land clearance, with only very late and minimal incorporation of maize. Her discussion of land use practices and arguments countering the need for frequent population movement are of particular interest and relevance.

This discussion is continued in Chapters 7, 9 and 10, which cover the Mississippian Period coincident with and subsequent to the “Big Bang” of Cahokian development. Several main themes prevail, not the least of which is continuing importance of native plant cultivation even with the introduction of the Mesoamerican crop, maize. In this respect, maize is seen as an important addition to the subsistence economy, but not solely responsible for provisioning the Cahokian population. That importance is exemplified in the feasting residues from Mississippian contexts in Sub-Mound 51 at Cahokia described in Chapter 6. It is also reflected in Mississippian iconography, in particular female figurines depicting plants and here interpreted as imaging the “Old Woman Who Never Dies,” as discussed in Chapter 8.

Equally important to the use of native crops is the examination of women's roles as farmers, responsible for providing plant foods for their extended family groups and perhaps beyond. This is couched in part as a counter argument to idea that Cahokia ruling elites exerted top-down control on food production. In fact, as

Fritz points out, women farmers were invaluable not only because they possessed knowledge of farm-ing practices passed down through generations but also because they were doing the actual work of farming. The upshot, as Fritz outlines in Chapter 10, is that farmers retained the power to remove themselves from the area, which they did in great num-bers at the end of the Mississippian period.

I very much enjoyed reading *Feeding Cahokia*, and think it is an excellent summation of cultivated plant subsistence practices as evidenced by the material record from the interior Midwest. Because it is written in an accessible manner, it will appeal to anyone interested in the native cultivated crop complex; first in documenting its very existence and secondly for setting the record straight on its importance. As such, it is a good introduction to those topics for archaeologists wanting to understand and incorporate the archaeobotanical record into their research. I think that Fritz's discussions of the practice of farming and of the roles of farmers, particularly women farmers, in sup-orting the development of Cahokia is important, and deserves attention. The fact that not all researchers agree about the degree of control exerted by elites, whether at Cahokia or in any other socially stratified society, elicits healthy and necessary dis-cussions. As Fritz alludes to, the Cahokian population was comprised of individual people, including women, and was far from a homogeneous group lacking in initiative or ability.