

# 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 **I**

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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 world in 2015.

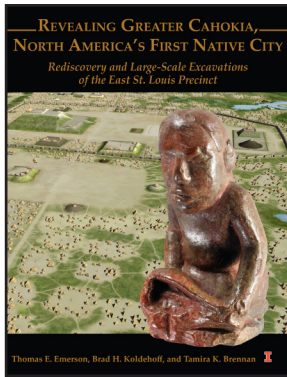


Recognizing  
Outstanding Contributions  
to the Advancement of  
Our Knowledge of the Human Past

THOMAS EUGENE EMERSON

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## 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 m<sup>3</sup>. 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.