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Ancient North America

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF A CONTINENT

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SUMMARY

- Eastern Woodlands societies embarked on a complex trajectory of change around 1000 BCE, the conventional boundary between the Archaic and the Woodland.

- As populations rose and territories grew smaller, there was an increasing emphasis on the cultivation of starchy seed plants and on exchange of basic commodities, using social networks.

- The Adena (c. 500 BCE to the first century CE) is a generic name for dozens of local Early and sometimes Middle Woodland cultures, remarkable for their ceremonialism, that developed out of earlier Archaic societies. Adena was a series of mortuary rituals and spiritual beliefs reflected in burial mounds, especially in the Ohio Valley. Clan and lineage ties were important sources of social and economic stability.

- Adena groups foreshadowed the much greater astronomical and cosmological thinking of their Hopewell successors. Hopewell (c. 200 BCE to c. 400 CE) was an ideology in a spiritual sense, a set of understandings shared by numerous societies across the Midwest, accompanied by distinctive artifacts and mortuary rituals.

- Hopewell religious beliefs were associated with a vision of a layered cosmos. Elaborate mounds and spectacular geometric earthworks place its center on Ohio, but the beliefs spread far afield. Intimate kin relationships lay at the heart of Hopewell life, in an ebb and flow of social and spiritual alliances. Ceremonial centers provided the context for ceremonies that satisfied daily needs and rituals that surrounded healing, death, and the ancestors. Social and spiritual partnerships linked dispersed communities, as did shared cemeteries.

- Hopewell leadership was highly diversified and decentralized, with larger polities represented by such centrally located sites as Hopewell and Newark.

- Between 325 and 350 CE the Hopewell Tradition dissolved, perhaps for spiritual reasons. Moundbuilding continued in local cultures, among them Fort Ancient in Ohio and the Effigy Moundbuilders of Iowa.

CHAPTER

12

Mississippian and Calusa

The Mississippian was a mosaic of societies of every size that flourished for about six centuries, up to European contact and beyond. Such a complicated jigsaw of peoples raises intriguing questions. Why and when did Mississippian society achieve such elaboration? What kind of leaders presided over the major centers? What was the basis of their power? It is only in recent years that we have begun to acquire some answers, thanks to research not only in archaeology but in oral history and ethnography as well. Further south the Calusa chiefdoms of southern Florida achieved significant complexity in the centuries before Europeans arrived in Florida. Their culture survived remarkably intact into the nineteenth century.

Mississippian Origins

The Mississippian Tradition developed among many local societies that flourished in the Late Woodland Southeast. The origins of the Mississippian do not lie in earlier Woodland societies; although, obviously, there were continuities, it is better to think of "Mississippianization" as a result of cultural entanglements between diverse groups (Wilson, 2017). The new traditions and cosmologies that make up what Gregory Wilson and Lynne Sullivan (2017) call "a tapestry of Mississippian lifestyles" was to spread widely and eventually mantle the Southeast and midcontinent. The complex threads that formed that tapestry passed from group to group as a result of many processes, among them people moving back and forth, long distance exchange, also missionization and pilgrimage (Anderson, 2017). What is remarkable is that a distinctive ethnic identity developed that transcended environmental and linguistic frontiers, also numerous cultural differences. There were many Mississippian beginnings, worked out by groups with varying cultural traditions and different histories.

Every Mississippian society had a unique history, its Mississippianization markedly different. No standardized chiefdom model works across all of them. What led to the constant interactions that culturally entangled dozens of societies? As far as is known the earliest Mississippian beginnings took hold at Cahokia in the American Bottom near modern-day St. Louis. There were cultural borrowings from earlier traditions, among them platform mounds from further south (see Figure 12.3), but many examples, such as Weeden Island (see Box: Weeden Island: Weeden Island territory. On the other it is a sacred, ceremonial complex that may have developed from earlier Hopewell-like belief systems and religious usages. This complex may have revolved around elaborate mortuary rituals centered on low platform mounds used as bases for charnel houses, the residences of important individuals, and for preparing bones for burial. The nature of this complex was illustrated dramatically at the McKeithen site in northern Florida in Weeden Island territory. Here, three low platform mounds form a horseshoe-shaped settlement with a central plaza (Figure 12.3). The first settlers arrived in about 200 CE. Their descendants constructed the three mounds between 350 and 475 CE. The structures on them burnt down in about 475.

The mounds themselves formed an isosceles triangle. One supported a temple, where a priest lived and was buried. The second mound supported a charnel house, the third a pine-post screen where the dead were washed before being taken to the charnel house. These low tumuli formed part of a complex mortuary process, presumably supervised by the person buried in the temple. The perpendicular, formed by a line from mound B to the triangle base, points toward the position of the rising sun at the summer solstice. Between 700 and 1000 CE such villages as McKeithen, and their religious specialists, assumed ever greater importance.

WEEDEN ISLAND: A TRAJECTORY TOWARD MISSISSIPPIAN

The Weeden Island culture arose among the ancient peoples who lived amid deciduous and mixed pine forests, near lakes, rivers, and wet prairies, on the Gulf coastal plain between Florida, Alabama, and Georgia about 200 CE (Milanich *et al.*, 1997).

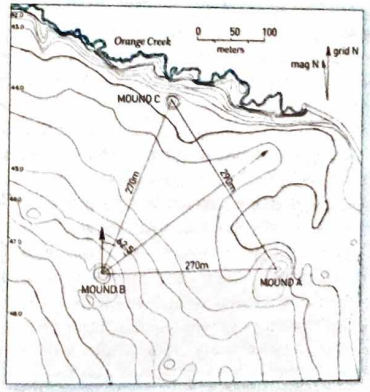
Characteristic Weeden Island pottery appears at about 200 CE, and may have developed out of earlier ceramic traditions on the Alabama–Georgia border. Weeden sites extend into western parts of northern Florida and as far west as the Tombigbee River in Alabama along the Gulf Coast and into the interior. An early Weeden Island I period lasted from about 200 to 700 CE, Weeden Island II from 700 to between 900 and 1000, each distinguished by characteristic pottery styles. About 900 to 1000 CE, Weeden II developed in situ into local forms of Mississippian culture at many locales, to the point that it might legitimately be called "proto-Mississippian" (Figures 12.1 and 12.2) (Milanich *et al.*, 1997). Some Weeden II communities may have survived in parts of northern Florida into the fifteenth century. The Weeden people were surrounded by other Late Woodland cultures, among them the Troyville and Coles Creek developments of the low-lying Mississippi and Louisiana coast, and the St. Johns culture to the southeast that developed continuously from Middle Archaic times right into the historic eastern Timucuan groups encountered by both Spanish and French explorers in the sixteenth century.

Weeden Island is part of a long evolutionary continuum that started in Paleo-Indian times, continued through the Archaic and Woodland, and culminated in the Mississippian. As populations increased during Late Archaic and Early Woodland periods, the inhabitants of the Southeast developed more complex settlements and more elaborate forms of social organization. Jerald Milanich and his colleagues argue that by 200 CE lineages and other forms of social status were well established among all Southeastern peoples. At times, too, even more complex forms of social organization may have appeared for brief periods—witness Poverty Point (see Chapter 8). All these economic, social, and ideological changes culminated during the three centuries after 700 CE, among Weeden II and related cultures.

Weeden Island is a far more complex culture than it might first appear, and can be interpreted in several ways. On the one hand it is an ever-changing, secular pottery complex that occurs at most village sites throughout

12.1 Weeden Island. A red pedastalled duck effigy from Kolomoki Mound D, Georgia. Height: 13.4 in. (34 cm).

12.2 Weeden Island punctated bowl, from Carter Mound I.



12.3 An enduring mound tradition. Plan of the McKeithen village in northern Florida, showing the platform mounds.

A Trajectory Toward Mississippian), suggest a cosmological, spiritual motivation. Cahokia attracted large numbers of migrants and became an important center. Other centers arose, too, among them Etowah in Georgia and Moundville in Alabama, each with much in common, but also with their own interpretations of what Wilson and Sullivan call "shared wisdoms." The cults that began at Cahokia spread widely, but inevitably became localized sects. There were shared beginnings, though, which provide us with a sense of unity. While constant shifts in shared beliefs and local cults never ceased as the Mississippian thrived over the centuries, one common development emerged throughout: intensification of agriculture.

Maize, Beans, and Starchy Seeds

Maize did not become a truly significant crop until after political consolidation was well under way. Nor was the adoption of maize agriculture necessarily the catalyst. For example, maize intensification developed in such areas as the Illinois River Valley, where populations remained fairly low and there was no development of a political hierarchy. For years experts have assumed that maize agriculture lay behind the rise of Mississippian society. They were wrong, for we now know that it was starchy seeds rather than maize that were the staple as Cahokia in the American Bottom grew ever larger (Vanderwarker *et al.*, 2017). Even so, maize certainly was grown in Cahokia on a modest scale, and may have entered Mississippian society from there, conceivably as part of a group of ideas, sacred objects, and ideologies that were to spread throughout the Midwest and Southeast. Some of this spread may have been associated with large-scale ceremonial and feasting that could have involved members of even tiny communities as shows of friendship or to foster potential alliances. There was a slow shift toward a wider social and political order. In such environments as the Lower Mississippi Valley subsistence had long depended on such harvests as acorns and hickory, and the cultivation of native seed plants; maize was added to these established practices, but did not become important until much later. At Etowah in Georgia, for instance, maize consumption rose sharply between 1000 and 1600 CE.

The relationship between the adoption of maize farming and the development of the Mississippian was extremely complex and varied from area to area, though it was always close. The crop had many meanings in Early Mississippian society, tied to the unique social and political history of each region: competitive feasting at which individuals and groups exhibited generosity was one; the creation of new political economies underwritten by surplus foods was another. Participating in large-scale rituals was also a catalyst for the tradition's development, drawing as they did both on older customs and on potentially new Mississippian identities. Some adopted what has been called a "Mississippian package" that stemmed from frequent interactions and culture contacts. At Cahokia the intensive cultivation of starchy foods was deeply embedded in society to provide surpluses. These provided the means to construct major public structures, such as platform mounds, and also played a role in feasting rituals.

The intensification of agriculture coincided in general terms with the greater warmth of the Medieval Warm Period. The larger food surpluses produced by intensive cultivation supported not only imposing buildings and public architecture, but also elaborate and large-scale social and ritual events. Add ambitious kin groups and ancient traditions that defined group identities, also strongly felt loyalties, and you have the ingredients that transformed the political and social history of what was to become the Mississippian world.

Mississippian societies coalesced across much of the Southeast during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, with an early efflorescence in the Central Mississippi Valley, including the Cahokia region, in about 1050 CE (Milner, 1998). They developed in river valleys, often expanding up small tributaries of major waterways. Fertile agricultural soils formed bands within these same valleys. A constant supply of water-borne nutrients helped these floodplain areas sustain high human population densities and a rich biomass of animals and plants. Fish and waterfowl may have provided much of the protein intake of people living along the bottomlands of the Mississippi, for the river lay on a major waterfowl flyway. Fall nut harvests were always of vital importance, since maize yields provided only a fraction of a household's yearly needs at the subsistence level. Eventually, with larger fields resulting from political or social stimuli, quite large food surpluses could have been manipulated for political ends.

The fabric of Mississippian society depended on the household, a self-sufficient unit. Everywhere individual communities tried to minimize the risk of starvation by cultivating a mosaic of gardens located in different environmental zones. They must also have relied heavily on reciprocity, on kin in neighboring communities, who would provide food or grain in times of stress. In all communities storage pits and granaries assumed central importance. At a certain level kin ties would have been adequate for these purposes, but occasional food shortages may have been such that entire regions had to cooperate with one another, a process requiring more formal leadership.

Thousands of households were grouped together into larger communities, with both mound centers and settlements linked to them. Small local groups composed of a single mound center with affiliated smaller settlements formed much of the Mississippian world. Larger and more complex political and social units coalesced around a single dominant center, with lesser ones close by. This form of segmental organization, with a great deal of local variation, survived the rise, apogee, and decline of Mississippian societies across the Eastern Woodlands. The same social structure was typical of historically known societies in the region.

Wide-ranging exchange networks lay at the core of Mississippian society. For example, sea shells passed from hand to hand over vast areas of the Southeast. Specialists turned these into ornaments, often engraved with distinctive designs that included flying figures (shamans, warriors, or mythical heroes) and abstract faces (Figure 12.4). Experts can often identify motifs executed and repeated by individual artisans. Chert from Mill Creek, Illinois, was a hard material ideal for making hoes, and was widely traded after 900 CE, traveling up to 430 miles (700 km) from source. Salt production assumed great importance, as maize farmers had to supplement their diet with salt.

Person-to-person bartering and kin-based formal redistribution were the most common ways of exchanging goods and commodities in Mississippian society. The processes of exchange were highly politicized, often taking place at major ceremonial gatherings of a kind that still flourished in historic times. These occasions involved feasting and dancing, the sharing of food, exchanges, and the reaffirmation of ties with other villages and individuals.

12.4 Belief systems of later Southeastern peoples were closely tied to local political and social organization. Artists depicted complex symbols on clay vessels and stone, copper, and shell objects. The meanings of many symbols elude us, but they include "weeping eyes," birds, serpents, skulls, and hands. This shell head has weeping eyes and other facial decoration. Height: 2.1 in. (6 cm).

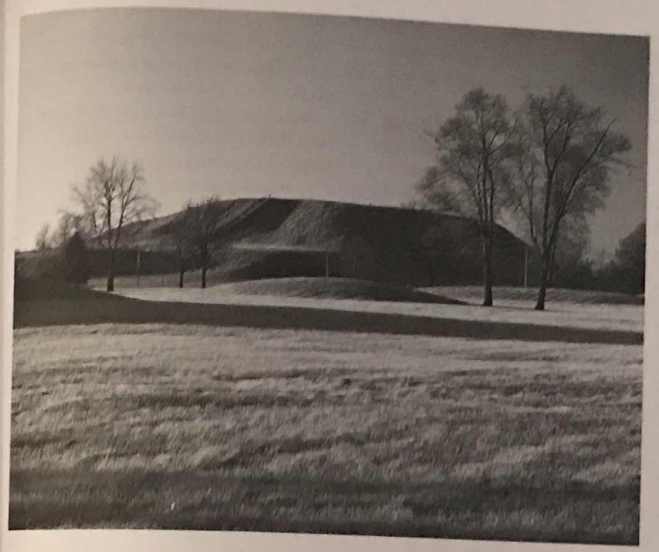
Cahokia: 1050 to c. 1400 CE

Some Mississippian centers nurtured more complex social and political structures than others, the most famous being Cahokia in the American Bottom on the Mississippi River opposite St. Louis, Illinois. These centers raise important questions about the political organization of these most elaborate of all ancient North American societies (see Box: Complex Chiefdoms or States?, p. 276) (Milner, 1998).

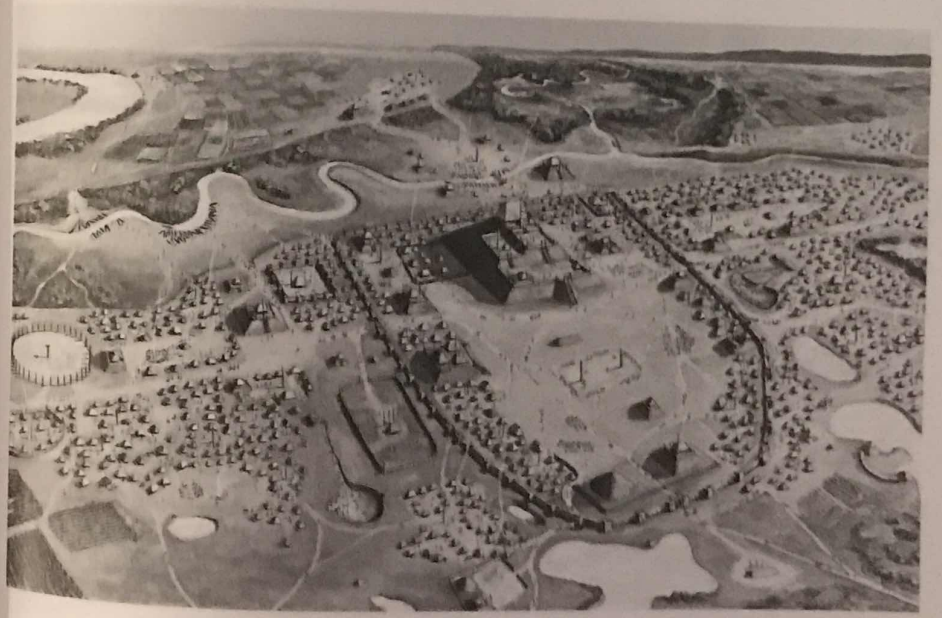
The American Bottom is a pocket of low-lying floodplain along the Mississippi, the widest portion of which extends downstream from the confluence of the Illinois River for about 25 miles (40 km), with a maximum width of about 11 miles (18 km). Meanderings of the Mississippi over the flatlands formed swamps and oxbow lakes in abandoned channels. The American Bottom environment was exceptionally diverse, with fertile soils lying on the margins of several ecological zones. It was here that Cahokia flourished, with what was probably the highest population density north of Mexico.

Sedentary villages prospered at or near Cahokia after 600 CE. Then, apparently within a few decades around 1050 CE, a great center emerged at Cahokia itself, surrounded by several smaller administrative and political centers and rural homesteads (Pauketat, 2004, 2010). Carbon isotopes from Mississippian skeletons show that their owners ate a lot of corn. Cahokia's population rose dramatically. Hundreds of people were resettled in small and large villages, even at some distance from Cahokia itself. These moves must have involved complex political negotiations among kin-based social groups, and the exploitation of religious beliefs that linked chief and villager. Imposing public structures and shrines, sweat houses, common art traditions, and the promotion of carefully chosen community traditions—all may have been symbols that linked elite and commoner in displays of common cultural meanings and values. The result: a regional chiefdom (for want of a better word) that melded Cahokia's authority with ancient community interests. But Cahokia was short-lived. Competing factions and periodic inabilities to mobilize community labor helped fashion an inherently unstable polity that appeared and dissipated with bewildering speed. At the height of its power, between 1050 and 1250 CE, Cahokia extended over an area of more than 3.8 square miles (10 km^2). Dwellings covered some 2,000 acres (800 ha). The population may have been as low as 3,000, perhaps as high as 16,000. Many people lived elsewhere on the floodplain and in the surrounding uplands (Emerson and Lewis, 1999). More than a hundred earthen mounds of various shapes, sizes, and functions, many of them along the dry central ridge of the site, cluster around a series of open plazas. The most extensive grouping lies around Monk's Mound, the largest earthwork built by ancient North Americans (Figure 12.5). The tumulus is 100 ft (30 m) high and covers 16 acres (6.5 ha); it rose in four stages, beginning before 1000 CE and ending some three centuries later (Figure 12.6).

A stairway once led up the south side to the first level, perhaps even higher to the second level; it faced the main plaza, the central focal point of the site. The third and fourth levels rose after 1200 CE on the northeast quadrant of the earthwork. A large building measuring 100 by 40 ft (30 by 12 m) stood on the summit of the highest terrace with a large wooden post in front of it, apparently a temple with a thatched roof. Teams of villagers supervised by experts erected the mound by heaping up 21.7 million cubic feet (615,000 m^3) of earth basket



12.5 *Monk's Mound, Cahokia.* The mound as seen today is a much-eroded version of an imposing stepped structure that rose in four stages, beginning in 1000 CE.



12.6 Monk's Mound dominated Cahokia's central precincts, with many smaller mounds and houses surrounding it. Trading and major public ceremonies took place in the main plaza. A log stockade protected the central area, with a solar calendar at far left. Maize gardens surrounded Cahokia; water came from Cahokia Creek and clay borrow pits, dug to quarry clay for moundbuilding.

COMPLEX CHIEFDOMS OR STATES?

What are chiefdoms? The simplest chiefdoms are single-tier societies in social terms, where a single chief is expected to be a generous kinsman who redistributes goods and commodities to other members of society. More complex chiefdoms, for example those of the Mississippians and the Calusa of southern Florida, have two or even three tiers of political hierarchy. Nobles are clearly distinct from commoners: they do not produce everything they need to support their households, but consume tribute, such as food and exotic artifacts; they confine their reciprocity to ritual and secular services that only they can perform. Such societies depend on the paramount chief having power over lesser nobles, each of whom controls specific territories.

The overall leader's power hangs on his ability to access large quantities of tribute passed up the line by his subordinates and their subjects. In the case of the Mississippians, the move toward greater political complexity may have come partly from control of long-distance exchange, especially in exotic goods, and in the use of this wealth to control local labor. These exotic artifacts became symbols of chiefly legitimacy, a legitimacy grounded in a special relationship with the supernatural world. Cahokia and other such centers were the settings for the great ceremonies that linked the commoner and the elite. Judging from historic Native American institutions in the Southeast, major Mississippian centers may have had both peace chiefs and warrior chiefs.

Mississippian leaders never exercised strict control over commoners. Rather they drew them in with compelling religious ideology and distinctive cult items. They headed chiefdoms in a constant state of flux, fueled by intensely competitive political dynamics—just as was the case with ancient chiefdoms everywhere. With their regular feasts and elaborate ceremonies, Mississippian chiefs validated their authority in vivid, symbolic ways, well aware that their powers depended on negotiating the fine line between coercion and reciprocity and on balancing the powerful cults that defined human existence over a wide area.

by basket. In places the architects alternated layers of sand and clay, perhaps in an effort to stabilize the structure and prevent slumping. The entire earthwork would have taken a theoretical 370,000 workdays to complete, with additional days for contouring and finishing.

After 1250 CE Cahokia's population gradually tapered off over the next 150 years, as people migrated out from the American Bottom and more dispersed settlement patterns again prevailed. This may have been a response to much drier conditions and lengthy droughts that caused food shortages, and perhaps violence. By the latter half of the thirteenth century there were few Mississippians left in the American Bottom. This may be connected with the arrival of hardy Maiz *de ocho* (eight-row corn): adaptable to many conditions, when combined with beans this crop allowed farming on higher ground and in other less favorable environments.

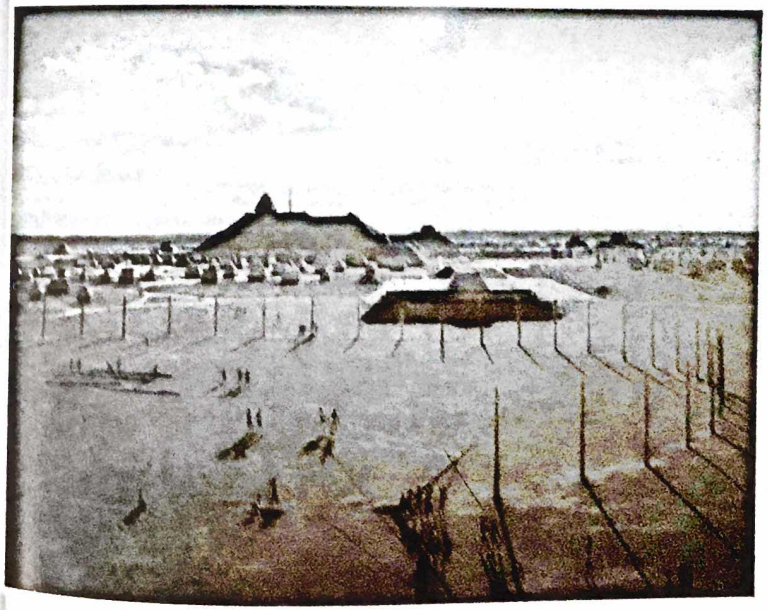
Some of the largest Cahokia earthworks lie in two rows on either side of Monk's Mound. Most were platform mounds topped with important public buildings or elite dwellings (Figure 12.7). Some of these structures may have been charnel houses for the corpses of prominent ancestors. A log palisade with watchtowers and gates surrounded the entire 200 acres (80 ha) of the central area. We know that the defensive wall, studded with bastions, was rebuilt at least four times, perhaps as a result of factional warfare.

Cahokia's central precincts were the setting for major public rituals that validated the authority of the kin groups who presided over the polity. Mortuary rites and human sacrifice played a major role in Mississippian ritual, in a society where fertility was a major ceremonial theme. The celebrated mortuary complex in Mound 72 may have served as a kind of theater where certain mortuary

THE MYSTERY OF CAHOKIA'S MOUND 72

Mound 72 at Cahokia is one of those archaeological sites that poses more questions than it answers. Just south of Cahokia's central plaza, it is inconspicuous, but of central importance to the founding of Cahokia. A structured deposit of human remains and artifact caches was laid out on a black earth platform in the southeastern portion of the mound (Emerson *et al.*, 2016). Melvin Fowler, who excavated between 1961 and 1967, originally believed that there were two principal burials, one lying above and another below a mass of over 20,000 shell beads, surrounded by sacrificial victims. Over 270 people came from twenty-five burial features, some of them suggesting human sacrifice. Large votive caches of arrow bundles, mica, and shell beads also came from the mound. Construction began with the erection of large marker posts and a charnel house, dating to before 1000 CE. The elaborate so-called "Beaded Burials" with their shell beads were interred before 1050, a time when there were also several mass sacrificial burial events. Three original sub mounds with commemorative deposits were eventually merged into one ridgetop mound.

Almost certainly the carefully staged Beaded Burials, other human remains, and artifact caches were a tableau that represented Cahokia's founding events. They lay close to a wooden marker post that may have been a solstice indicator, for Cahokia had strong astronomical associations. What does this tableau mean? Current thinking considers it a broad cultural statement that included symbolic references to political structure, social hierarchy, and cosmological beliefs laid out within a ritualized mortuary program. In his skeletal analysis Melvin Fowler concluded that the Beaded Burials were males. Skeletal analysis has improved since Fowler's study and a re-analysis of the bones reveals that the two individuals, one lying atop the other, are in fact a man and a woman, both in their early to mid-twenties. Bone beads near their limbs suggest that the two bodies were bound together. A child's bones were comingled with them. Furthermore, the beads were deposited not at a single moment, but in several episodes. There is also ▸▸



12.7 Such wood structures as this so-called "woodhenge" at Cahokia lay on higher ground above a swamp, close to the central precincts. The large wooden posts were erected by sliding them into deep pits with a sloping side, then pushing them upright.

a secondary bundle of a male and a female among a complex of at least seventeen burials.

The mound was used from about 1050 CE and finally closed off around 1100 to 1200. Precise radiocarbon dates place the Beaded Burial event somewhere around 990 CE—the Early Mississippian. Instead of a single bead deposit, the new researches point to a layer of beads being deposited on the black earth platform covering an area that would lie beneath the legs and pelvis of the extended body of the young adult female. Once the corpse was laid out, beads were placed over her thighs and lower legs. Some of these beads may have been strung. Then the body of a young adult man was placed atop the woman, covering her right side but leaving the left arm, chest, and hip exposed. A combination of strung and loose beads was then set down, some of them forming an arc from the shoulder and face of the man.

What do the beads mean? The mass of marine seashells is thought to be a symbol of water, fertility, and the primordial Underworld, a common belief in the Native American world. There are also claims that the shells represented a mythic birdman, known to be part of Mississippian ritual beliefs. The male–female pairing may also recall long-held creation myths among plains and prairie groups, for example the Caddo to the west, which talk of intercourse between the Morning and Evening Stars creating the first woman. This is, of course, entirely speculation, but it seems likely that the mound burial tableau is linked to creation myths, world renewal, and fertility, the interlinked male and female being connected to tales of the first man and woman.

narratives were performed by a high-status kin group using human bodies and ritual objects (see Box: The Mystery of Cahokia's Mound 72, p. 277–78).

The layout of Cahokia and other great centers reflects a traditional Southeastern cosmos with four opposed sides, reflected in the layout of platform mounds, great tumuli, and plazas. Four-sided Mississippian platform mounds may portray the cosmos as earth-islands, the earth being flat-topped and flat-sided. The north-south axis of Cahokia echoes observations of the sun. Perhaps its rulers used the sun to schedule the annual rituals that commemorated the agricultural cycles.

At first settlement layouts reflected kin groups that controlled fertility rituals in villages divided into symbolic quarters. Later centers displayed more formal layouts with central plazas, elaborate sacred buildings, also storage and ritual pits filled with pots and other offerings made during fertility ceremonies that symbolically renewed the world. These changes reflect profound shifts in Mississippian society as power passed to an elite based at major centers.

The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex and a Triad of Cults

Mississippian cosmology and beliefs have generated an extensive academic literature, much of it surrounding the so-called **Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (SECC)** (King, 2007). There was a thematic unity that focused on mythic animals, people, and their activities in the supernatural Above World. These motifs and themes occur over a wide area, not only in classic Mississippian centers, such as Etowah, Georgia, and Moundville, Alabama, but also in Spiro, Oklahoma, to the west, part of the related Caddoan moundbuilding culture (Brown, 1996). Originally there was talk among researchers of a Southern Cult that swept across the Southeast, but we now know that the Southern Cult was too simplistic a formulation. Despite sharing common elements, Mississippian ritual beliefs were very complex and varied from one region to another.

Mississippian beliefs changed significantly through the centuries. The change-over is well documented at Etowah in northern Georgia, where there were few symbols that depicted elite individuals before 1250 CE. New ritual themes then arrived, among them the Birdman, a ritual theme linked to a supernatural being among people in the upper Midwest known as Morning Star, or Red Horn. He was a great warrior associated with the Sky World, who fought battles in the supernatural realm on behalf of humans. Birdman was also linked to reincarnation and the triumph of life over death and of day over night. Unlike earlier themes, Birdman and his symbols, which included falcon imagery, were a shift to the power of an individual. The symbolism of individual power in the Birdman was a sign of a new social order, of a melding of both ancient and more recent narratives and ritual themes that served as the ideological underpinning of Etowah when it was at its most powerful. The compelling Birdman theme seems to have originated at Cahokia before 1200, as the supernatural justification for a new social order of individual power that reached Etowah a half century later.

A triad of religious cults lay at the core of Mississippian society (Brown and Kelly, 2000; King, 2007): a cult of warfare, a nature and fertility cult, and an ancestor cult. The cult of warfare was an important power base for the elite. It is known from exotic motifs and symbols and from the use of costly raw materials, such as copper and sea shells (Figure 12.8). Such objects occur in elite burials,

12.8 Engraved shell gorget with a pair of figures, Late Braden, Cartersville style, from the Rutherford–Kizer site, Tennessee. Dated 1300–1400 CE.

12.9 Mississippian artistry. (a) A wooden knife covered with copper plating, from the Craig Mound, Spiro site, Oklahoma. Length: 11.2 in. (28.5 cm). Dated *c.* 1250–1350 CE. (b) A seated figure with human-head ear ornaments, carved of Missouri flint clay, from the Craig Mound, Spiro site, Oklahoma. Height: 10.6 in. (27 cm). Dated *c.* 1100–1200 CE. (c) Great Serpent / Underwater Panther vessel from the Campbell site, Permiscot County, Missouri. Height: 6.75 in. (17.2 cm). Dated *c.* 1550–1650 CE.

12.10 Mississippian effigy vase depicting a human being. The weeping eyes suggest an association between tears, rain, and water in Mississippian cosmology. *c.* 1000 AD. Height: 7.8 in. (20 cm). Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago.

12.11 This copper head appears to have been cut out of a larger plate, with the feather then riveted on. It was found in the Craig Mound at Spiro, Oklahoma. Length: 9.4 in. (24 cm).

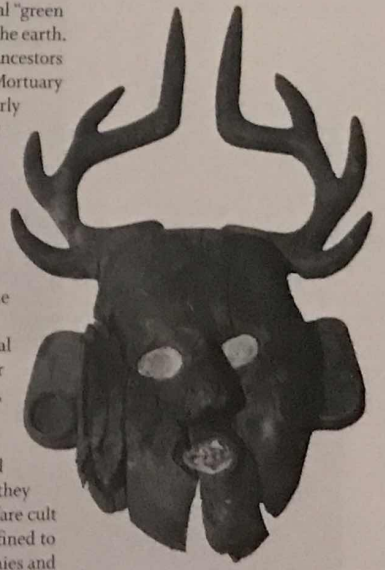
along with war axes, maces, and other weapons. Other artifacts bear cosmic imagery that depicts animals, humans, and mythic beasts (Figure 12.9). Some may be references to legendary warrior-heroes and their supernatural exploits, in artifacts that were perhaps part of sacred bundles kept by priests. This symbolic imagery melded warfare, cosmology, and nobility into a coherent whole. Dozens of Mississippian cemeteries and mound centers contain finely made pottery and other artifacts associated with this chiefly cult.

The artifacts include axes with head and shaft carved from a single piece of stone, copper pendants adorned with circles of weeping eyes, decorated clay pots and effigy vessels, and also copper plates and engraved shell cups adorned with male figures in ceremonial dress (Figures 12.10 and 12.11). Such themes as bird symbolism, circles, crosses, and weeping eyes have deep roots in more ancient societies of the Eastern Woodlands.

The nature and fertility cult had close links with the earthen platform mounds so characteristic of Mississippian centers. These flat-topped tumuli may represent the Southeastern belief that the earth was a flat surface oriented toward four quarters of the world. The mounds acted as a symbol of renewal and fertility, the platform serving as the earth. There are historically documented connections between additions to platform mounds and the communal "green corn" ceremony, which celebrated the new harvest and the fertility of the earth.

The third cult involved the ancestors. It was a powerful element, for ancestors provided vital connections between the living and the land. The Great Mortuary in the Craig Mound at Spiro, Oklahoma, came into being in the early 1400s (Brown, 1996). Built on the site of earlier funerary structures, the Mortuary held clumps of human bones and fragmentary artifacts taken from sites elsewhere laid on a cane floor, with formal burials interred above them. Baskets of ceremonial artifacts, such as copper-headed axes and piles of textiles, lay with containers of sea shells, wooden masks, and statues (Figure 12.12). Subsequently a set of cedar poles was raised over the center of the mortuary deposit, creating both a void and a marker after the mortuary was sealed. This Great Mortuary became a living part of the subsequent history of the Craig Mound.

These powerful cults, which defined both chiefly and communal society, spread throughout the South and Southeast and transcended their different cultural and ecological boundaries. They created a dynamic, constantly changing, and highly factionalized society with tremendous variation in social complexity. Cahokia and other large centers lay at one end of this spectrum of complexity, hundreds of small centers and minor chiefdoms at the other. Each of the three cults was distinct; they were enacted and affected people in different ways. As part of the warfare cult both priests and warriors held different chiefly roles, which were confined to privileged kin groups. These were validated through elaborate ceremonies and rituals performed by the chiefs. Platform-mound cults, with their emphasis on fertility and renewal, were communal rites involving entire kin groups and communities that survived long after European contact. Ancestor worship cut across society, putting the priests—who maintained temples, burial houses, sacred fires, and mortuary rituals for the ancestors—in a powerful position to mediate disputes and competing interests.



12.12 A cedarwood mask from Spiro Mound, Oklahoma, perhaps worn by a shaman, with shell inlay and antlers carved in imitation of those of a deer. Height: 11.4 in. (29 cm). Chiefs used ceremony and ritual to validate their power.

Moundville: 1250 to *c.* 1500 CE

Cahokia's power declined after 1250 CE, when other large centers rose to prominence. Moundville, by the Black Warrior River in west-central Alabama, flourished between 1250 and *c.* 1500 CE (Knight, 2010). The site, with its twenty-nine or more earthen mounds, covers more than 185 acres (75 ha) (Figure 12.13). The larger mounds, the biggest about 56 ft (17 m) high, delineate a quadrilateral plaza of about 79 acres (32 ha); some support public buildings or the dwellings of important people (Figure 12.14). A bastioned and much-rebuilt palisade protected the three sides of the site that faced away from the river. Hundreds of people lived within the general site area, perhaps as many as 1,000 souls. Altogether 3,051 burials have been excavated at Moundville. Leaders were interred in the mounds, people of lesser status in major village areas along the northern boundary of the site.

Back in 900 CE, a time of considerable political unrest and increasingly circumscribed territory, a relatively small number of people lived in the Moundville area. Maize production intensified between 950 and 1000 CE, at a time when

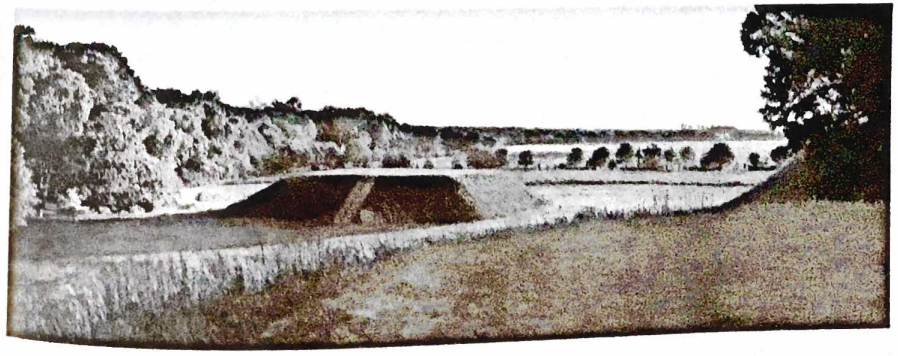
12.13 Aerial view of Moundville Archaeological Park, Alabama.

12.14 Platform mound at Moundville, Alabama.

settlements grew larger, production of shell beads increased, and warfare became more commonplace. Between 1050 and 1250 maize and bean agriculture provided as much as 40 percent of the diet as the Black Warrior Valley became an important farming area. Moundville developed into an important ceremonial center in a process that culminated with the creation of the highly formalized fortified town. The earthworks and plazas became a symbolic landscape, oriented from east to west, with pairings of residential and mortuary mounds and a well-defined ranking of social spaces within the site. The center assumed an importance outside its own boundaries. Tribute from perhaps 10,000 people scattered through the surrounding area supported the elite, who engaged in long-distance trade. The formal layout of the public architecture in the heart of the site probably reflected the status relationships of different kin groups set in the context of a sacred landscape. The paramount chief derived his position both from his supernatural authority and from the power conferred on him by the sacred landscape.

For a century and a half after 1300 a firmly entrenched chiefly dynasty ruled Moundville and its environs, as we see from the lavishly adorned burials in its funerary mounds. Effectively the site became a necropolis, used by people from considerable distances away, and conceivably a location where dwelt priests with connections to the supernatural world Beneath (Scarry and Steponaitis, 2016). It may also have been an entry point for the pathway that took the dead to the spiritual realms. As the dynasty became increasingly powerful and more isolated from its subjects, the population moved away from the center into the surrounding landscape. Perhaps the nucleated population left to join coalitions of chiefly competitors occupying new mound centers built a short distance away. Moundville went into decline after 1450 CE. Even in its heyday it was never a large polity, drawing labor and tribute from at most 45 miles (72 km) away. Large-scale tribute gathering may never have extended more than about 9 miles (14.5 km) from the site, simply because of the difficulty of transporting supplies and enforcing assessments.

At the height of their powers Mississippian centers—Cahokia, Moundville, Etowah, and others—were large, complex communities presided over by high-status individuals with great political, social, and religious influence (Figure 12.15)



12.15 Etowah, Barlow County, Georgia.

12.16 An artist's impression, based on excavations, of a palisaded Mississippian settlement at the Rucker's Bottom site in Georgia. Many villages were palisaded for defense against neighbors and enemies.

(for complexity, see Box: Complex Chiefdoms or States?, p. 276). Both peace and war chiefs presided over a patchwork of smaller polities, not over sovereign states, as some claim (Figure 12.16). As time went on the power of the major chiefs declined except, perhaps, for some nominal allegiance. The Mississippian society centered on Moundville—always volatile, always riven by factions (as were so many others)—became entirely decentralized before the first contacts with Spanish explorers in the mid-sixteenth century. Other centers that did survive, especially in the Lower Mississippi Valley, were large enough to impress the Spaniards, although they lasted little more than a century following first contact, and sometimes only a matter of decades.

By the time European traders and explorers reached the Mississippi Valley in the late seventeenth century, Cahokia was long past its apogee. Moundville, though still important, was declining. But when Hernando de Soto and his fellow conquistadors traversed the Southeast much earlier, in 1539–41, they encountered still-powerful chiefdoms (see Box: Funerary Rites of a Natchez Chief). Spanish metal, glass beads, and armor fragments have been found in several locations, notably the King site in northwestern Georgia. This was once a frontier village of the Coosa kingdom, a descendant of the spectacular chiefdoms of a few centuries earlier (for the European *entrada*, see Chapters 14 and 15).

FUNERARY RITES OF A NATCHEZ CHIEF

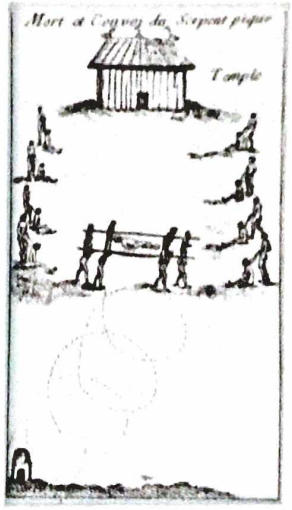
Three platform mounds, a ceremonial plaza, and residential areas formed the Grand Village of the Natchez chiefdom during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Ethnographic accounts of the elaborate Natchez burial rituals, written when Cahokia and Moundville were long abandoned, provide the only eyewitness testimony of the use of North American platform mounds.

The paramount chief of the Natchez, the Great Sun, lived atop Mound B at the Grand Village at the center of the site, which is at modern-day Natchez, Mississippi (Figure 12.17). Mound C, the southernmost mound, supported a temple where a sacred fire was always burning. The foundations of both the chief's house and the temple were unearthed during excavations in 1962. Mound A, at the north end of the site, was seemingly abandoned before European contact.

In 1720 French explorer Le Page du Pratz spent time among the Natchez of the Lower Mississippi, one of the last remnants of the Mississippian way of life that had held sway over such a large area. He befriended a war chief named Tattooed Serpent, brother of the Great Sun. Under the chief were his kin, who served in various official capacities, then "Honored Men" (nobles), and "Stinkards" (commoners). When the chief died unexpectedly in 1725 his hearth was immediately extinguished. He lay on his bed, dressed in his finest clothing, moccasined as if to go on a journey, and wearing his crown of white feathers mingled with red. His arms and pipes of peace lay by his side. A large wooden pole commemorated his victories. The French visitors sat at the side of the temple as the corpse of Tattooed Serpent was carried on a litter to the shrine, followed by sacrificial victims with red daubed hair and their executioners. The victims included two of the chief's wives, one of his sisters, and his chief counselor, doctor, and pipe bearer.

At the temple the victims sat on assigned mats, their heads covered with skins (Figure 12.18). They chewed tobacco pellets that numbed their senses and were strangled swiftly. Then the chief's body was placed in a trench with his wives, and his hut was burnt down. The other victims were either buried with the chief or in their own villages.

12.17 Platform Mound B at the Grand Village of the Natchez. The Great Sun's house stood atop it.



12.18 In 1725 the French explorer Le Page du Pratz depicted a dead Natchez chief being carried on a litter to his temple atop an earthen mound. Sacrificial victims kneel in wait, their executioners behind them.

12.19 Map of major sites and cultures described in Chapter 12.