William Iseminger: Cahokia mounds: America's first city

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Cahokia is a poorly known archaeological gem in the middle of the United States of America. It is worth coming to know more about this important site and appreciate the lessons it provides to modern society. I first came to learn about Cahokia from reading the book Charles C. Mann's book (2005), "1491: New Revelations of the Native Americans before Columbus" (A. Knopf, publisher) and became determined to visit. I did so in May 2010 and was truly amazed with what I found and learned.

The area of the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers was home to sophisticated mound-building peoples about 1,000 years ago. Cahokia was truly a city, with a population in the thousands, commercial, trade, political, scientific and religious significance. The civilization emerged in about 1000 AD but had collapsed only about 300 years later. The hand-built mounds that remain vary in size shape and style. Some are burial sites, others were used for preparing the dead for burial, others were built for administrative, ceremonial and religious functions. The largest and most impressive mound, called Monk's Mound, is about 30 metres tall and occupies an area of 5.7–6.9 hectares. It was built in stages and had large buildings atop. The whole complex extending several kilometres across is dominated by Monk's Mound and the huge central plaza. Central Cahokia was surrounded by a protective wooden palisade about 3 km long that was replaced several

times as the city developed. There is no doubt that a large population lived outside the palisade in the immediate suburbs. Other mounds and archaeological evidence of buildings abound outside the city wall. The "woodhenges", built 5 times with huge posts numbering from 24 the first time, to 72 posts the 5th time has been interpreted convincingly as an astronomical sun-calendar.

Why did Cahokia, and the Mississippian civilization collapse? That remains a mystery, but over-exploitation of the immediate environment for building materials (wood), game (meat for food) and agricultural production (corn) has been postulated. Pollution from cooking and heating fires, human waste, malnutrition and soil erosion have also been invoked. Climate changes may also have exacerbated the situation. There is little evidence for hostilities from neighbouring peoples, but perhaps internal squabbling and poor leadership contributed to the collapse. Despite Cahokia's proximity to the huge Mississippian river system, fish did not constitute much of the people's diet.

This short book is comfortably written for both scholar and the general public. It is sufficiently detailed to be intriguing, but not so detailed as to be turgid. I recommend this book as an eye-opener to an ancient and lost civilization that is mostly unappreciated in North American human ecology.

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