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Review of "Cahokia: Ancient America's Great City on the Mississippi"

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Timothy R. Pauketat. *Cahokia: Ancient America's Great City on the Mississippi*. New York: Viking, 2009, 194 pages. \$22.95

Cahokia, a pre-contact mound city on the Mississippi River, whose population reached perhaps as high as 16,000 around 1200 rivaling that of London, still remains an enigma because archaeological digs have only uncovered perhaps less than ten percent of its original six square mile settlement. Even its original inhabitants are still a mystery. The name Cahokia came from seventeenth century French settlers who encountered a tribe of the Illinois Confederacy the French called Cahokians living in the area. It was not until after World War II when the state and federal governments realized it was indeed a monument belonging to ancient peoples and should be preserved before all of its artifacts, in particular its 120 mounds, would be lost forever to bulldozers and pavement.

Saved from total destruction, the entire complex is now known as the Cahokia Mounds Historical Interpretive Site located in Collinsville, Illinois. Cahokia attracts thousands of visitors every year and they can now walk through the grounds and visit the state of the art Interpretive Center replete with a host of artifacts but gaps in Cahokia's past still leave many unanswered questions. How did Cahokia evolve into a massive metropolis? What caused its decline beginning about 1250? Due to the additional careful and methodical research of noted anthropologist Timothy Pauketat of the University of Illinois, further speculation of the site's significance has surfaced. Pauketat ascribes the beginnings of Cahokia to a 1054 supernova in the constellation Taurus lighting up the sky day and night for 23 days. A small village existed at that time. As a hierarchical society with a ruling elite class, the influence of Indian elites allowed them to use the supernova as a way to extend their power throughout the surrounding region with its own system of well laid out towns and villages. Their power attracted thousands to resettle in what became a megalopolis in the richly agricultural based American Bottom at the confluence of the Mississippi, Missouri, and Illinois rivers. Elites harnessed their recently arrived settlers' labor and Cahokia evolved into a very labor-intensive society. Following the dictates of the powerful privileged, the laboring class built a planned city with avenues, plazas, multiple dwellings, stockades, and mounds.

Laboring in a methodical manner, pre-contact peoples dug up the earth and carried millions of baskets of dirt to build the largest earthen mound in North America, Monk's Mound, so named after Trappist monks who moved into the area in the late eighteenth century and constructed their chapel on top. Laboring class power built this massive mound for their leader, the Sun God, whose military force came from living as close as possible to the sun. Spread out in front of his massive terraced dwelling was the Grand Plaza, where ceremonies and the game called chunky took place. A time oriented society, Cahokians built Woodhenge perfectly lined up with the sun to mark the solstice and equinox. Equally fascinating for readers is Pauketat's revelation that human sacrifices took place and these archaeological remains provide partial evidence that internal strife may have led to Cahokia's demise. So what else does Pauketat attribute to its decline beginning

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about 1250? He speculates that Cahokia's ability to project military might eventually caused a power vacuum to develop and the society, no longer centered on the Sun God, began to scatter. A succinct and well organized monograph, Pauketat's *Cahokia* is a part of the recently published Penguin Library on America Indian History Series edited by well known Native American scholar of Dartmouth College Colin Calloway. Calloway has attracted notable scholars to write on their specialties, and Pauketat's contribution is one more indication of that excellence.