Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site

Monks Mound is the largest earthen structure at Cahokia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>St. Clair County, Illinois, USA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nearest city</td>
<td>Collinsville, Illinois</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinates</td>
<td>38°39′14″N 90°3′52″W</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area</td>
<td>2200 acres (unknown operator: u'strong' ha)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governing body</td>
<td>Illinois Historic Preservation Agency</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

UNESCO World Heritage Site

Official name: Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type:</th>
<th>Cultural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criteria:</td>
<td>iii, iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designated:</td>
<td>1982 (6th session)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference #:</td>
<td>198 [1]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Party:</td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region:</td>
<td>Europe and North America</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

U.S. National Register of Historic Places

Official name: Cahokia Mounds
Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site ( /kəˈhoʊkiə/) is the area of an ancient indigenous city (c. 600–1400 CE) located in the American Bottom floodplain, between East Saint Louis and Collinsville in south-western Illinois, across the Mississippi River from St. Louis, Missouri.[3] The 2200-acre (unknown operator: u'strong' ha) site included 120 human-built earthwork mounds over an area of six square miles, of which 80 remain.[4] Cahokia Mounds is the largest archaeological site related to the Mississippian culture, which developed advanced societies in the central and eastern present-day United States, beginning more than five centuries before the arrival of Europeans.[5] In the 1200s, its population was as large or larger than European cities, and it was not surpassed by any later United States city until 1800.

Cahokia Mounds is a National Historic Landmark and designated site for state protection. In addition, it is one of only 21 World Heritage Sites within the United States. It is the largest prehistoric earthen construction in the Americas north of Mexico.[4]

Designations
Cahokia Mounds was designated a National Historic Landmark on July 19, 1964, and listed on the National Register of Historic Places on October 15, 1966.[2]

In 1982 UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) designated Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site as a World Heritage Site. The park protects 2200 acres (unknown operator: u'strong' ha), and is the center of continuing archaeological research. This is the only such site in Illinois and among only twenty-one cultural World Heritage Sites in the United States.[6] United States Representative Evelyn M. Bowles wrote about the Cahokia Mounds site:

"Through the years my friends and I made occasional Sunday afternoon trips to the Mounds. When I became the State Senator, it afforded me the opportunity to secure funds for the acquisition of additional acreage in which there are smaller Mounds. Many of these have contained additional artifacts." The designation has helped protect the property and attract funds to conduct research on this significant civilization.[7]

History
Although there is some evidence of Late Archaic period (approximately 1200 BCE) occupation in and around the site,[8] Cahokia as it is now defined was settled around 600 CE, during the Late Woodland period. Mound building at this location began with the Emergent Mississippian cultural period, about the 9th century CE.[9] The inhabitants left no written records beyond symbols on pottery, shell, copper, wood and stone, but the elaborately planned community, woodhenge, mounds and burials reveal a complex and sophisticated society.[10] The city's original name is unknown.

The original site contained 120 earthen mounds over an area of six square miles, of which 80 remain today. To achieve that, thousands of workers over decades moved more than an "estimated 55 million cubic feet of earth in woven baskets to create this network of mounds and community plazas. Monks Mound, for example, covers 14 acres (unknown operator: u'strong' ha), rises 100 ft (unknown operator: u'strong' m), and was topped by a massive 5000 sq ft (unknown operator: u'strong' m²) building another 50 ft (unknown operator: u'strong' m) high."[4]
The Mounds were later named after a clan of historic Illiniwek people living in the area when the first French explorers arrived in the 17th century. As this was centuries after Cahokia was abandoned by its original inhabitants, the Cahokia were not necessarily descendants of the original Mississippian-era people. Scholars do not know which, if any Native American groups, are the living descendants of the people who originally built and lived at the Mound site, although many are plausible. Native American bands migrated through different areas, and those living in territories at the time of European encounter were often not the descendants of peoples who had lived there before.

**Monks Mound**

Monks Mound (pictured above, right) is the largest structure and central focus of the city: a massive platform mound with four terraces, 10 stories tall, and the largest man-made earthen mound north of Mexico. Facing south, it is 100 ft (unknown operator: u'strong' m) high, 951 ft (unknown operator: u'strong' m) long, 836 ft (unknown operator: u'strong' m) wide and covers 13.8 acres (unknown operator: u'strong' ha).\[11\] It also contains about 814000 cu yd (unknown operator: u'strong' m³) of earth.\[12\] The mound grew in stature over the course of several centuries through as many as ten separate construction episodes, as the mound was made ever higher and the terraces and apron were added.\[11\]

Monks Mounds received its name due to the community of Trappist monks that resided there for a short time, after Euroamericans settled the area. Excavation on the top of Monks Mound has revealed evidence of a large building, likely a temple or the residence of the paramount chief, which would have been seen throughout the city. This building was about 105 ft (unknown operator: u'strong' m) long and 48 feet (unknown operator: u'strong' m) wide, and could have been as much as 50 ft (unknown operator: u'strong' m) high. It was about 5000 sq ft (unknown operator: u'strong' m²).

A large plaza located adjacent to Monks Mound was a place where games and public rituals took place. The most popular of the games was the game of chunky. The game was played with young men rolling a pill-shaped chunky stone across the field. The men would throw spears where they thought the chunky stone would land. The game required a great deal of judgement and aim.\[12\]

The east and northwest sides of Monks Mound were twice excavated in August 2007 during an attempt to avoid erosion due to slumping.\[13\]
Woodhenge

Woodhenge, a circle of posts used to make astronomical sightings, stood to the west of Monks Mound. Archaeologists discovered Woodhenge during excavation of the site and noted that the placement of posts marked solstices and equinoxes, like its namesake, Stonehenge. Detailed analytical work supports the hypothesis that the placement of these posts was by design. The structure was rebuilt several times during the urban center's roughly 300-year history. Evidence of another Woodhenge was discovered near Mound 72, to the south of Monks Mound.

According to Chappell, "A beaker found in a pit near the winter solstice post bore a circle and cross symbol that for many Native Americans symbolizes the Earth and the four cardinal directions. Radiating lines probably symbolized the sun, as they have in countless other civilizations." (Cahokia's Woodhenge is not to be confused with another site of the same name that exists in the United Kingdom). The woodhenges were significant to the timing of the agricultural cycle.

Urban landscape

The Grand Plaza is a large open plaza that spreads out to the south of Monks Mound. Researchers originally thought the flat, open terrain in this area reflected Cahokia's location on the Mississippi's alluvial flood plain but instead soil studies have shown that the landscape was originally undulating. In one of the earliest large scale construction projects, the site had been expertly and deliberately leveled and filled by the city's inhabitants. It is part of the sophisticated engineering displayed throughout the site. The Grand Plaza covered roughly 50 acres (unknown operator: u'strong' ha) and measured over 1600 ft (unknown operator: u'strong' m) in length by over 900 ft (unknown operator: u'strong' m) in width. It was used for large ceremonies and gatherings, as well as for ritual games, such as chunkey. Along with the Grand Plaza to the south, three other very large plazas surround Monks Mound in the cardinal directions to the east, west, and north.

The high-status district of Cahokia was surrounded by a long palisade that was equipped with protective bastions. Where the palisade passed, it separated neighborhoods. Archaeologists found evidence of the stockade during excavation of the area and indications that it was rebuilt several times. Its bastions showed that it was mainly built for defensive purposes.

Beyond Monks Mound, as many as 120 more mounds stood at varying distances from the city center. To date, 109 mounds have been located, 68 of which are in the park area. The mounds are divided into several different types: platform, conical, ridge-top, etc.. Each appeared to have had its own meaning and function. In general terms, the city center seems to have been laid out in a diamond-shaped pattern approximately 1 mi (unknown operator: u'strong' km) from end to end, while the entire city is 5 mi (unknown operator: u'strong' km) across from east to west.
Ancient city

Cahokia was the most important center for the peoples known today as Mississippians. Their settlements ranged across what is now the Midwest, Eastern, and Southeastern United States. Cahokia was located in a strategic position near the confluence of the Mississippi, Missouri and Illinois rivers. It maintained trade links with communities as far away as the Great Lakes to the north and the Gulf Coast to the south, trading in such exotic items as copper, Mill Creek chert, and whelk shells. Mill Creek chert, most notably, was used in the production of hoes, a high demand tool for farmers around Cahokia and other Mississippian centers. Cahokia's control of the manufacture and distribution of these hand tools was an important economic activity that allowed the city to thrive. Mississippian culture pottery and stone tools in the Cahokian style were found at the Silvernale site near Red Wing, Minnesota, and materials and trade goods from Pennsylvania, the Gulf Coast and Lake Superior have been excavated at Cahokia.

At the high point of its development, Cahokia was the largest urban center north of the great Mesoamerican cities in Mexico. Although it was home to only about 1,000 people before c. 1050, its population grew explosively after that date. Archaeologists estimate the city's population at between 6,000 and 40,000 at its peak, with more people living in outlying farming villages that supplied the main urban center. In 1250, its population was about 15,000, comparable to that of London or Paris during the same period.

If the highest population estimates are correct, Cahokia was larger than any subsequent city in the United States until the 1780s, when Philadelphia’s population grew beyond 40,000.

One of the major problems that large centers like Cahokia faced was keeping a steady supply of food, and waste disposal was also an issue, which made Cahokia an unhealthy place. Being that it was such an unhealthy place to live in, the town had to rely on social and political attractions to bring in a steady supply of new immigrants, otherwise the town’s death rate would have left it abandoned earlier.

Mound 72

During excavation of Mound 72, a ridge-top burial mound south of Monks Mound, archaeologists found the remains of a man in his 40s who was probably an important Cahokian ruler. The man was buried on a bed of more than 20,000 marine-shell disc beads arranged in the shape of a falcon, with the bird’s head appearing beneath and beside the man’s head, and its wings and tail beneath his arms and legs. The falcon warrior or "birdman" is a common motif in Mississippian culture. This burial clearly had powerful iconographic significance. In addition, a cache of sophisticated, finely worked arrowheads in a variety of different styles and materials was found near the grave of this important man.

Archeologists recovered more than 250 other skeletons from Mound 72. Scholars believe almost 62 percent of these were sacrificial victims, based on signs of ritual execution, method of burial, and other factors. The skeletons include:

- Four young males, missing their hands and skulls.
- A mass grave of more than 50 women around 21 years old, with the bodies arranged in two layers separated by matting.
A mass burial containing 40 men and women who appear to have been violently killed. The suggestion has been made that some of these were buried alive: "From the vertical position of some of the fingers, which appear to have been digging in the sand, it is apparent that not all of the victims were dead when they were interred — that some had been trying to pull themselves out of the mass of bodies."[25]

The relationship of these burials to the central burial is unclear. It is unlikely that they were all deposited at the same time. Wood in several parts of the mound has been radiocarbon-dated to between 950 and 1000 CE.

Excavations have indicated that Mound 72 was not constructed as a single mound, but rather as a series of smaller mounds. These mounds were reshaped and covered over to give Mound 72 its final ridge-top shape.[26]

**Copper workshop**

Excavations near Mound 34 from 2002–2010 have revealed a copper workshop, although the one of a kind discovery had been previously found in the 1950s by archaeologist Greg Perino but lost for 60 years. It is the only known copper workshop to be found at a Mississippian site.[27] The area contains the remains of three tree stumps thought to have been used to hold anvil stones. Analysis of copper found during excavations showed that it had been annealed, a technique involving repeatedly heating and cooling the metal as it is worked, such as blacksmiths do with iron.[27] Artisans worked here to produce religious items, such as long-nosed god maskettes, ceremonial earrings with a symbolic shape, thought to have been used in fictive kinship rituals.[28][29] Many of the stylistically related Mississippian copper plates such as the Wulfing cache from southeastern Missouri, some of the Etowah plates from Georgia, and many of the Spiro plates from Oklahoma are associated with the Greater Braden Style and are thought to have been made in Cahokia in the 13th century.[30][31][32][33]

**Cahokia's decline**

Cahokia began to decline after 1300 CE. It was abandoned more than a century before Europeans arrived in North America, in the early 16th century,[34] and the area around it was largely uninhabited by indigenous tribes.[35] Scholars have proposed environmental factors, such as over-hunting and deforestation as explanations. The houses, stockade, and residential and industrial fires would have required the annual harvesting of thousands of logs. In addition, climate change could have aggravated effects of erosion due to deforestation, and adversely affected the cultivation of maize, on which the community had depended.

Another possible cause is invasion by outside peoples, though the only evidence of warfare found so far is the wooden stockade and watchtowers that enclosed Cahokia's main ceremonial precinct. Due to the lack of other evidence for warfare, the palisade appears to have been more for ritual or formal separation than for military purposes. Diseases transmitted among the large, dense urban population are another possible cause of decline. Many recent theories propose conquest-induced political collapse as the primary reason for Cahokia's abandonment.[36]
Related Mounds

Until the 19th century a series of similar mounds existed in what is now the city of St. Louis, some 20 km (unknown operator: u'strong' mi) to the south west of the Cahokia site. Most of these mounds were levelled during the construction of St. Louis, as their material was reused in construction projects.

The lone survivor of these mounds is the Sugarloaf Mound, which is located on the west bank of the Mississippi, on the former border between St. Louis and the autonomous city of Carondelet.

The Cahokia Museum and Interpretive Center

The Cahokia Museum and Interpretive Center, which receives up to a million visitors a year, was designed by AAIC Inc. The building which opened in 1989 received the Thomas H. Madigan Award, the St. Louis Construction News & Reviews Readers Choice Award, the Merit Award from the Metal Construction Association and the Outstanding Achievement Award from the Brick Manufacturer Association.

References

[5] Sacredland.org "Mississippian Mounds" (http://www.sacredland.org/historical_sites_pages/miss_mounds.html), Sacred Land Film Project
Further reading

- Introductory Bibliography of Published Sources on Cahokia Archeology (http://www.cahokiamounds.com/bib.html)
- Scholarly Bibliography of Published Sources on Cahokia Archaeology (http://www.cahokiamounds.com/bibsch5-24-00.html)


**External links**

• Cahokia Mounds Homepage (http://www.cahokiamounds.org) and Map of the Site (http://www.cahokiamounds.org/explore)

• "Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site, Illinois" (http://www.cr.nps.gov/worldheritage/cahokia.htm), World Heritage Site, National Park Service

• "Cahokia Mounds" (http://www.illinoishistory.gov/hs/cahokia_mounds.htm), Illinois Historic Preservation Agency

• "Metropolitan Life on the Mississippi" (http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/daily/march/12/cahokia.htm), Washington Post, March 12, 1997

• Mississippian Art and Artifacts (http://www.mississippian-artifacts.com/)

• Visitors' perspectives (http://www.lth6.k12.il.us/schools/gallatin/cahokia.htm)

• Woodhenge and the Cahokia Mounds (http://bbs.keyhole.com/ubb/showflat.php?Number=5363)

• "Cahokia: America’s Lost City" (http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2011/01/cahokia/hodges-text), National Geographic Magazine, January 2011

• Cahokia travel guide from Wikitravel
Article Sources and Contributors

Cahokia

Image Sources, Licenses and Contributors