

1 Civilization in North America

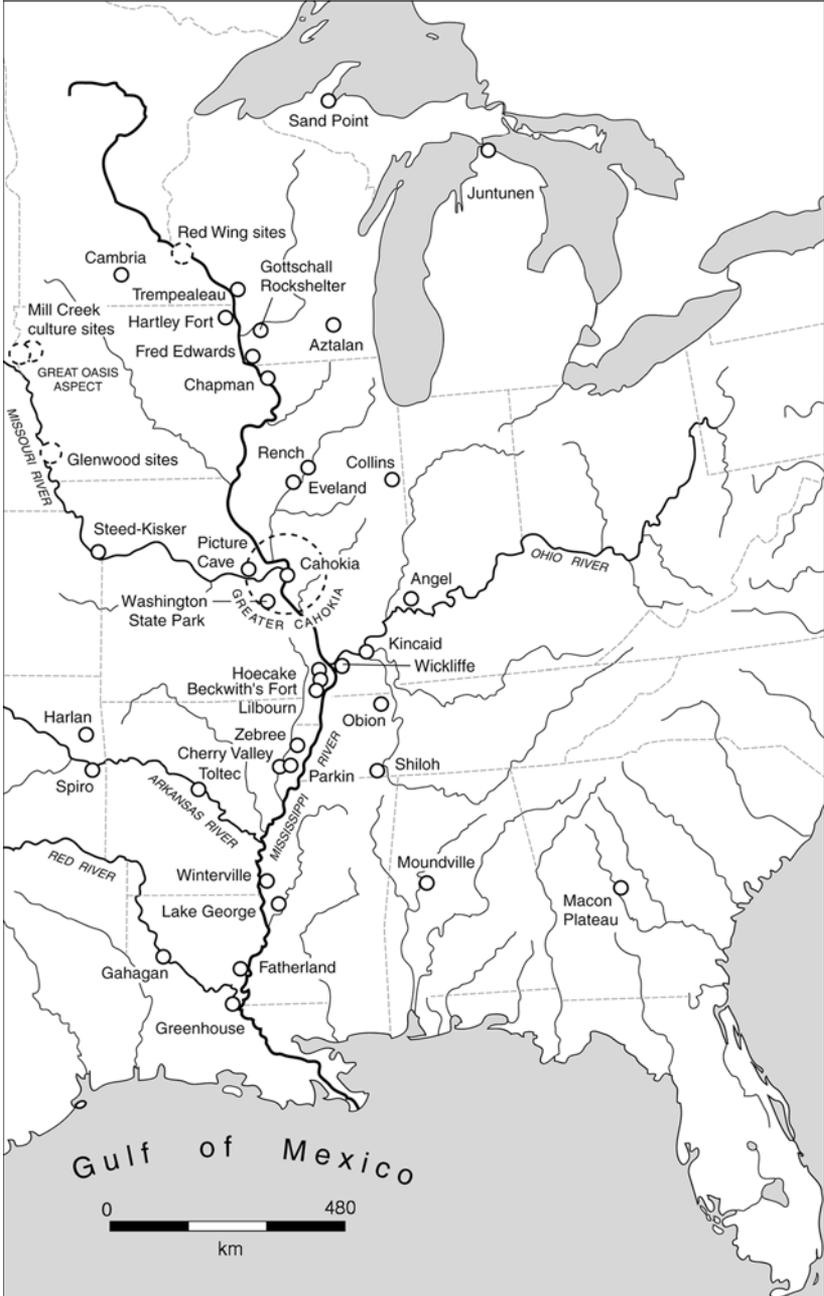
This wasn't a chiefdom; it was a kingdom!

Robert Carneiro¹

“Civilization” is not a word typically associated with ancient North America. The cities, stone pyramids, and writing systems of the Old World, Mexico, or Peru are not generally thought to have existed in the pre-Columbian Mississippi valley. However, if we define a civilization as a kind of political culture or as a great tradition associated with populated administrative centers and spread across some portion of a continent, then it is clear that there was a pre-Columbian civilization in the Mississippi valley, or at least the early stages of one. Archaeologists often call it “Mississippian culture” and refer to the many peoples of the time simply as “Mississippians.”

There were political and religious centers associated with the Mississippian civilization, the largest of which was Cahokia, along the middle portion of the Mississippi (Fig. 1.1).² And there were historical effects emanating from each Mississippian center. Cahokia's historical effects were great. If there were founding events that kicked off Mississippian history, they happened at Cahokia. In this way, Cahokians created early Mississippian culture and they laid the groundwork for things to come, including the so-called “Southern Cult.” Their descendants greeted Hernando de Soto in the twilight years of the Mississippian world, and proved worthy opponents to the westward expansion of the young United States.

The original Mississippians built huge monuments of earth, wood, and thatch. Their political capitals were home to many hundreds to thousands of people. The ideas behind their monuments, symbols, and capital towns were founded on the traditions of centuries past, but the fact of their founding forever altered the futures of many people throughout the mid-continent, the Great Plains, and the Gulf Coastal Plain over a period of several centuries, from the eleventh to well into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries AD. In fact, the timing of the invasion of North America by Europeans in the sixteenth century meant that many of the people met



1.1 The Mississippi River valley, showing select Pre-Columbian sites

by the Old World intruders were Mississippians. The circumstances of that meeting, in one way or another, shaped the contours of the colonial experience that led up to the founding of the United States in 1776.

It also gave shape to the science of archaeology. Thomas Jefferson's well-known excavations of a Virginia burial mound and his recognition of America's Indian heritage mark the beginning of scientific archaeology, but a less enlightened view soon supplanted the Jeffersonian vision (Wallace 1999). By the end of the eighteenth century, many Indian peoples had forgotten the mound-building traditions, and westward-looking Anglo-Americans were all too eager to dispossess Indians of their lands. By the time Andrew Jackson became president, in 1829, the idea that Indians could have built the mounds was concluded to be absurd. Mythical peoples from the Old World were imagined to have built them. Indians were thought incapable of the coordinated labor necessary for construction projects.

Unfortunately, the legacy of this nineteenth-century "Moundbuilder Myth" still lurks in the dark corners of archaeology, shrouded in some of the well-meaning interpretive schemes used by archaeologists and laypersons alike (see Kehoe 1998; Patterson 1995). In plain words, that legacy is racist. But it lives wherever archaeologists understate the cultural achievements or de-emphasize the historical importance of First Nations peoples. It is hidden in words. For instance, Cahokia has been called a "mound center," a "town-and-mound" complex, or the "ceremonial center" of a "chiefdom." Few North American archaeologists call it a city. Fewer still would think it was the center of a kingdom or a state. Even the term "pyramid" is thought too immodest by many eastern North American archaeologists. They prefer to call these four-sided and flat-topped equivalents of stone pyramids in Mexico or adobe *huacas* in Peru, simply, mounds.

However, if Cahokia, Cahokians, and Cahokia's mounds had been in ancient Mesopotamia, China, or Africa, archaeologists might not hesitate to identify pyramids in a city at the center of an early state. Certainly, as the Near Eastern archaeologist Norman Yoffee has succinctly put it, when it comes to thinking about the big picture, many North American archaeologists are "downsizers" (Yoffee *et al.* 1999:267). We have inherited the conservative and subtly racist terminology of the nineteenth century (Kehoe 1998). So perhaps it is justifiable if a little cynical to wonder if Cahokia might be more easily conceptualized as a city if only Cahokians had built with stone instead of earth and wood, or if Cahokia had been in Asia or the Near East, instead of North America. If so, then cultural biases have crept into our interpretations of New World people, and the Moundbuilder Myth lives.

Goal of the book

If the first challenge of North American archaeology is to avoid the biases of the shared heritage of Indian removal and cultural disenfranchisement, the second challenge is to figure out what places such as Cahokia were all about. To that end, we have to admit that no two archaeologists in any part of the world completely agree on how to identify a city, a chiefdom, or an early state. Was early Monte Albán a chiefly capital, a city-state, or an early imperial capital? What about Eridu, Great Zimbabwe, or Chavín de Huantar? Was the Predynastic Egyptian “Scorpion King” actually just a chief?

Chiefdoms, city-states, and kingdoms come in various shapes and sizes. Those in China may have been quite unlike those in Mesopotamia, Peru, or Ghana. To get around this obvious problem, archaeologists tend to assume that while the shapes and sizes of their territories may vary, the governing bodies at the heart of any polity were similar and thus so were their developmental histories. Unfortunately, this is seldom actually proven (see chapter 8). For this reason, if no other, Cahokia and the Mississippian peoples of North America can provide much-needed perspective from which to view other civilizations. How did Mississippian North Americans govern themselves? How did diverse Mississippi valley peoples become *a people*, living under the moral authority of Mississippian rules or rulers? To what degree did government suppress or celebrate community, or vice versa? Did group identities and ethnicities develop hand-in-hand with a division of labor, warfare, social stratification, or economic centralization? Did Mississippian civilization emerge as part of a struggle among politically motivated people with divergent interests *or* was it an outcome of forces beyond anyone’s control? The answers to these questions are the answers to civilization itself. Archaeologists hotly debate them.

The debates between archaeologists, especially as they involve the Mississippians, often boil down to differences of opinion about the importance of people, material culture, places, and historical events in shaping the North American experience. Fortunately, the opinions of archaeologists are only as good as the archaeological data that we have on hand. New finds and excavations keep changing our minds about what happened in the past. Thus, I am confident that present-day disagreements will be laid to rest with more of the kinds of archaeological data summarized in this book. But whatever the final answers to the questions posed, most can agree that the processes of civilization were under way in the Mississippi valley.

The goal of this book is to allow the reader to weigh the evidence for how and why ancient Cahokia and the Mississippians developed over a

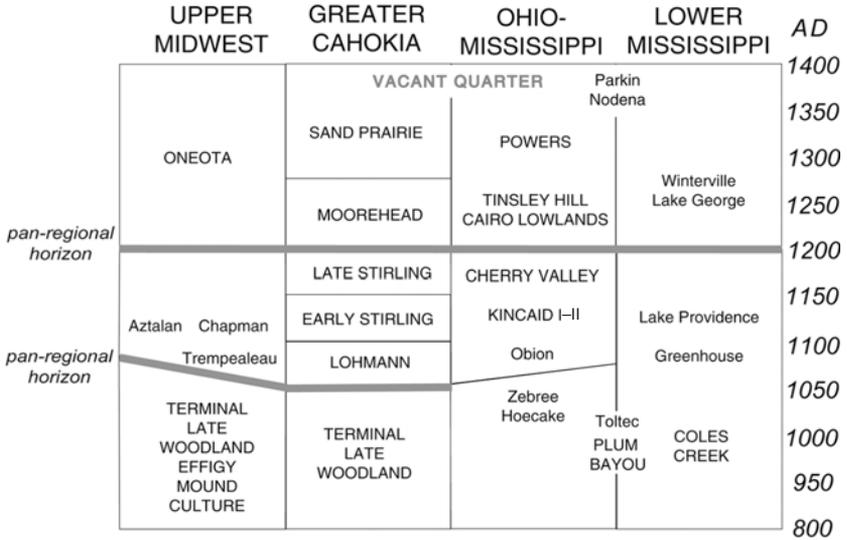
six-century span. This is the story of the early Mississippian peoples. I begin with an overview of the cultural chronology of the Mississippi valley and then turn to the archaeologists, their discoveries, and their projects. The chapter ends with some notes on the theoretical framework of this book. The rest of the book examines the economic, social, religious, and political underpinnings of the Mississippian world.

Time and place

At AD 900, a diverse array of peoples lived along the Mississippi River and its tributaries large and small. Most were living what archaeologists generally refer to as “Woodland” cultural traditions. The people lived these traditions to the extent that they actively incorporated remembrances of their forebears into their own cultural creations and daily practices. But change was also a part of these lived traditions. In the centuries leading up to the day that Hernando de Soto’s army crossed the cypress-lined Mississippi in 1541, populations had segmented, recombined, and migrated into or out of regions where native governments had arisen or fallen.

Mississippi valley archaeologists track their movements and the passage of time using pottery styles, absolute dates, horizon markers, and cypress tree-rings. In regions yet to see significant archaeological excavations, the chronologies remain coarse-grained and reliant on very general pottery stylistic changes and a few radiocarbon, archaeomagnetic, or thermoluminescence dates. The chronologies of these regions consist of a series of one or two century-long phases, too lengthy to permit observations of anything but the most general economic or cultural change. However, in the greater Cahokia region, archaeologists use the temporally sensitive pottery attributes of stratified or superimposed deposits of garbage to create micro-chronologies for specific places, obtaining suites of radiocarbon dates to frame the time-series at sites like Cahokia. Here, extensive excavations allow archaeologists to measure change between decades and, sometimes, years or even seasons. Indeed, there is a series of historical events or moments that can be isolated owing to their appearance in multiple media at multiple places. In this way, archaeologists begin to approach the historical event as a real unit of observation (e.g., Pauketat *et al.* 2002).

Such time-series data can be compared across and between regions if anchored by absolute dates or *horizon markers*. Radiocarbon assays are most widely used to tie cultural sequences to real time. However, even the best dates have one-sigma error values of plus-or-minus sixty years. Dendrochronology offers another way to anchor portions of the later Mississippian period, although coverage is spotty at best. There are a few



1.2 Chronology chart

floating tree-ring sequences showing possible correlations between major events and climatic fluctuations (see Lopinot 1994; Ollendorf 1993).

Thus, horizon markers are highly useful in tying the Mississippian regions together. Such temporal anchors in the Mississippi valley include specific craft objects or decorative motifs associated with particular sites, schools of artisans, or centrally sponsored distribution events. Because of their wide distribution, Cahokia’s horizon markers serve to calibrate other less secure Mississippian chronologies up and down the Mississippi, and give us a sense of the importance of the place in Mississippian cultural histories (Fig. 1.2). For instance, Thomas Emerson and colleagues (2003) have discovered that some famous carved-stone figurines were not made over a long timespan in the various places where they were discovered, but were made at Cahokia in the early 1100s and later carried to distant places. Similarly, James Stoltman (2000) has used petrographic techniques to identify Cahokian pots and thereby link a series of sites to twelfth-century Cahokia. Likewise, Phillip Phillips and James Brown (1978) isolated a “Braden” style that they associated with Cahokia (see also Brown and Kelly 2000).

Archaic and Woodland periods

Six millennia after the first known human “Paleo-Indian” inhabitants arrived in the Mississippi valley, Archaic period peoples in present-day

Louisiana built some of the first public monuments in the New World. These were the mounds at the Watson Brake site, raised around an oval plaza, indicating some kind of social complexity already at about 3400 BC (Saunders *et al.* 1997; Sassaman and Hackenberger 2001). There were other such sites over the subsequent centuries, including the well-known Poverty Point site at about 1600 BC. Besides mounds, the Late Archaic Poverty Point culture in Louisiana is defined by a suite of ritual or craft objects and practices that seem to have diffused well up the Mississippi River by 800 BC or so. By this time, the beginning of the Early Woodland period, pottery had been adopted across much of the Southeast and interior Midwest (Sassaman 1995).

The subsequent Woodland period can be demarcated by the intensification of horticulture and the use of pottery by families to cook the seeds of native grasses. On the heels of the Late Archaic, semi-sedentary “base camps” seem to have disappeared across much of the Midwest, even as the people of distinctive corporate groups engaged in elaborate mortuary rituals and, in the Ohio valley, built impressive “Adena” burial mounds. In the lower Mississippi valley, mound construction on the scale of Poverty Point had ceased. But mortuary rites became complicated central affairs there and elsewhere during the Middle Woodland period (200 BC–AD 400).

The Mesoamerican cultigen, maize, made its first appearance in eastern North America during the Middle Woodland period, although its adoption was tentative and discontinuous across the east (Fritz 1990; Hart 1999; Riley *et al.* 1990). By this time, the well-known Hopewell culture(s) had coalesced along the Ohio River. The lesser-known Marksville and Havana cultures, among others, were the Hopewellian counterparts along the Mississippi River, stretching from Louisiana to Wisconsin. Tomb burials and village sites dating to this well-known period are frequently associated with specific horizon markers of the period: obsidian knives, hammered copper axes and ornaments, carved-stone smoking pipes, antler headdresses, and “Hopewell” pots boldly incised with abstract eyes, long-necked birds, and perhaps bodily representations (e.g., Benn and Green 2000:467).

Late Woodland period (AD 400–900)

Hopewellian-style artifact types and mortuary rituals disappeared by or were heavily remodeled during Late Woodland times (AD 400–900). The peoples of these “good gray cultures” could be said to have experienced a cultural “collapse” or a sweeping transformation of “technologies, ideologies, and organization[s]” (Benn and Green 2000:479; McElrath *et al.* 2000:15; Williams 1963). The period is marked by population expansion,

possible migrations, localized isolationism, the introduction of the bow and arrow, food production intensification and, to the south, mound-and-plaza constructions (Anderson and Mainfort 2001; McElrath *et al.* 2000). Rock cairns and possibly defensive “hill forts” are found through the interior hills of Missouri, southern Illinois, and Kentucky. Effigy mounds of birds, bears, water spirits, and such are found in special places from Iowa to Ohio, but no mounds were built in the region soon to see the rise of Cahokia. Settlement locations and sizes shift in different ways, by locality, perhaps related to social and defense exigencies associated with the widespread adoption of the bow and arrow around AD 600. Sites decreased in size in some parts of the central Mississippi valley, nucleated in others, and became major “ceremonial centers” in the central Arkansas and lower Mississippi river valleys. Much pottery from the mid-continent was cordmarked or cord-impressed and minimally decorated, while southern ceramic traditions appear to continue in intricate Gulf Coast modes.

Along the middle stretch of the Mississippi, pottery seems to have changed little for centuries, meaning that archaeologists there necessarily rely on absolute dating techniques to track change. Carefully calibrated radiocarbon assays, taking the fluctuations in atmospheric carbon isotopes into account, show that the Late Woodland period lasted up to AD 1050 in southwestern Illinois. In other Midwestern and Midsouthern locations, there were Late Woodland people at least up to AD 1200, while in far-off Great Lakes, Great Plains, or northeastern areas the period lasted until European contact.

Crushed mussel shell temper in pots, a major “Mississippian” hallmark, appears to have been an innovation of southeast Missouri potters in the eighth century AD, based on a suite of thermoluminescence dates (Lynott 1987). However, this technological novelty may not have been as readily “selected” by people up and down the Mississippi as occasionally asserted (O’Brien *et al.* 1994). Shell-tempered pots make up only a fraction of ceramic refuse both of northern “Mississippianized” and of southern “Coles Creek” and “Baytown” peoples even at AD 1100. Michael Nassaney (1991) years ago recognized the persistence of various Late Woodland attributes to comprise a kind of cultural resistance to Mississippian changes. It seems they were selecting *against* the ideas, meanings, or practices embodied by this so-called innovation.

Likewise, the adoption of maize has been used as a hallmark of the Mississippian period, and yet it was differentially adopted before, during, and after the Mississippian period in eastern North America. The growing of maize, or the decision not to grow maize, may have been quite intentional. Maize intensification lagged especially in the more “insular” Coles Creek

region of the lower Mississippi valley (see Kidder 1992, 2002; Kidder and Fritz 1993; Lynott *et al.* 1986). There, people built elaborate flat-topped pyramids around rectangular plazas long before adding corn to their diets. In fact, the intensified production of maize appears to have co-occurred with the introduction of shell-tempered pottery only in a restricted zone of southeast Missouri and northeast Arkansas (e.g., Morse and Morse 1983). So, was there really a gradual emergence of Mississippian ways of life? Perhaps not. However, it is likely that new cultural boundaries if not distinct cultural identities were under construction during the “terminal Late Woodland” period, as indicated by the adoption of or resistance to agricultural intensification, technologies, settlement forms, and material-cultural forms after AD 900 (Fortier and McElrath 2002).

The terminal Late Woodland Red-Filmed Horizon (AD 900–1050)

From the central alluvial valley northward, the terminal Late Woodland period is a time of notable changes in settlement form and location. Certain villages grew larger as populations gravitated toward the agricultural resources of rich floodplain localities. At this time, Cahokia was one of several villages in a 120 km stretch of floodplain or “bottom” called, in colonial times, the “American Bottom.” A similar minimally centralized settlement pattern characterizes a series of floodplain localities or variously named “bottoms” during the tenth century north of Thebes Gap south to Memphis (Kreisa 1987; Lafferty and Price 1996; Mainfort 1996).

Here, the people also intensified maize production after AD 800 (Kelly 1990a; Mainfort 1996; D. Morse and P. Morse 1990a), leading some to call these the “Emergent Mississippian” people (but see Fortier and McElrath 2002; Muller 1997:118). This maize intensification did not continue south of the Toltec site, where there was only a “slight use of maize” (Rolingson 1998:132, 2002:55; Schambach 2002:103–8). From the American Bottom south to Reelfoot Lake, Tennessee, the fact of food-production intensification was accompanied by the use of pottery coated with red films, particularly in the area around the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. Red films or “slips” involve the application of a thin coat of liquefied clay premixed with pulverized hematite for color (see Rice 1987). This phenomenon was in no way uniformly adopted across the Midsouth, but seems nonetheless to represent both a temporal horizon and a series of interacting peoples, at least some of whom may have relocated from one part of the middle Mississippi area to another.

This “Red-Filmed Horizon” also witnessed the introduction of a new chipped-stone hoe blade type. These were large and durable versions of

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older and more modest Woodland digging tools, now made from “Mill Creek” chert in Union County, Illinois (Cobb 2000). In years to come, many Cahokian and Midsouthern farmers would use these widely traded Mill Creek hoe blades.

Newly calibrated radiocarbon assays suggest that the terminal Late Woodland period or the Red-Filmed Horizon did not end until the eleventh century AD in the American Bottom. In other parts of the Mississippi valley, the terminal Late Woodland period ended abruptly when Cahokians or their representatives contacted local people. Even in the American Bottom itself, Cahokia’s abrupt appearance represents a historical disjuncture. Increased exchange or culture contact, particularly between people living in the lower Mississippi valley and those occupying the growing village of Cahokia, also characterizes the terminal Late Woodland period (Kelly 1991). Cahokian novelties were overlaid on the local material-cultural repertoires of mid-continental Late Woodland peoples. Some populations may have been displaced as a direct or indirect result of terminal Late Woodland and early Mississippian changes emanating from the American Bottom. In any case, the abrupt historical character of this contact ensures archaeological difficulties when attempting to use conventional radiometric techniques to pinpoint it in time. Complicating the matter further are the blips in the radiocarbon curve between AD 1000 and 1200 (Stuiver and Pearson 1986). There are several possible calendar dates for any one individual radiocarbon assay during this time, owing to erratic fluctuations in the amount of atmospheric radiocarbon.

The Early Mississippian period (AD 1050–1200)

The formation of Cahokia is synonymous with the beginning of the early Mississippian period (Pauketat 1994). A suite of horizon markers denote this rapid development: triangular Cahokia-type arrowheads, Cahokia-style “chunkey” stones, the predominance of shell-tempered pottery, a novel wall trench architectural style, pyramidal mound construction, and a suite of icons depicting supernatural themes. The appearance of these attributes is not uniform outside of Cahokia itself, although a distinctive set of early Mississippian pottery attributes (incurved-rim jars, bi-knobbed loop handles, blank-faced hooded bottles, etc.) has been used to delineate an early Mississippian horizon stretching from eastern Oklahoma to western Tennessee, and down into the oddly out-of-place Ocmulgee region of central Georgia (Griffin 1952, 1967). Given the pan-Mississippi valley appearance of a distinctive type of decorative