

Cahokia civilization stirs wonder

The precipitous decline of an advanced tribe based in present-day Illinois remains intriguing.

The Associated Press

CAHOKIA MOUNDS STATE HISTORIC SITE — More than 1,000 years ago, a group of Native Americans reached down into the fertile soil of the Mississippi River Valley, scooped the dark earth into wooden baskets and began building a civilization of unprecedented proportions.

To this day, their mark remains vivid against the remnants of Illinois' ancient prairie: an earthen mound of startling dimensions: 14 acres across, 100 feet high, filled with 22 million cubic feet of dirt.

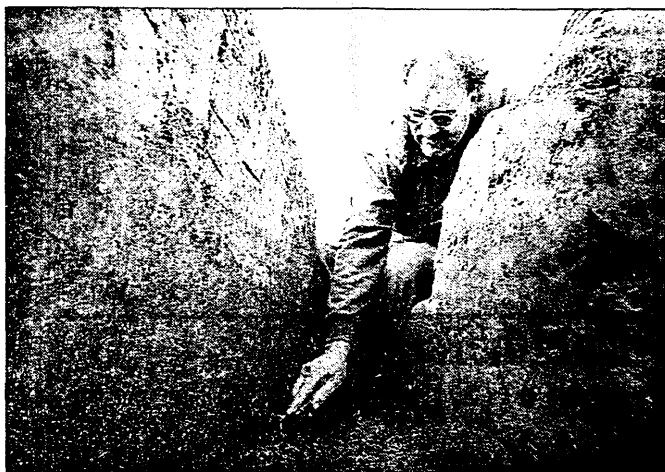
It is Monks Mound, and it lies at the heart of what was once the largest metropolis north of Mexico — a thriving city of perhaps 20,000 people at the center of a trade network that extended from the Gulf of Mexico to Michigan and east to the Great Smoky Mountains and beyond.

It grew up in a flash, blossomed and then — just as suddenly — declined in disease, hunger, environmental degradation and conflict. By the time European visitors first reached the area, the mounds and great plazas that set this civilization apart from its predecessors had been abandoned. Now known as Cahokia Mounds, the site is located near Collinsville, about 12 miles east of St. Louis.

Shadows of the mounds' makers remain with us, their mythology and lifestyle evident in any number of native tribes. But just who they were, why their culture rose so quickly and why it fell remain tantalizing mysteries.

"There's absolutely no question that something very unusual and very important happened at Cahokia," said Jon Muller, a Southern Illinois University archaeologist who has studied the mound-building culture for 33 years. "The big question is what."

The Mississippians — archaeologists' name for the people who built Cahokia and a network of similar but much smaller mounds throughout



Archaeologist Joe Harl of St. Louis works on an excavation Nov. 11 in East St. Louis, where archaeologists from the University of Illinois have discovered evidence of an ancient Indian community related to the culture of the Cahokia Mounds.

the southeast — may be the most well-known "lost people" in the world.

Their temples, warehouses, homes and garbage pits have been extensively studied, painstakingly recreated and probed for similarities to historic native American cultures.

Archaeologists know intimate details of their diet, such as their penchant for lambsquarter and other plants modern Illinois farmers deride as weeds. They know they were small in stature, died young but suffered few warlike injuries. They know the Mississippians practiced ritual sacrifice.

They lived in square thatched-roof homes arranged in neat rows surrounding a 40-acre plaza at the foot of Monks Mound — one of 120 mounds that served as ceremonial sites, residences and tombs for Cahokia's leaders and servants.

Their city was surrounded in part by two miles of stockade fence, 15 feet high, and included a sun calendar made of wooden posts known as Woodhenge.

Cahokia went from a fairly mundane village of hunter-gatherers to a complex, crowded community in as little as a few decades — an unprecedented time scale for prehistoric societies and a highly unusual form of organization for early

Native Americans, said Timothy Pauketat, a University of Illinois archaeologist who specializes in the site's origins.

"Why would people go along with this? It really would have been something that was so different," he said.

There are no signs of disease or malnourishment that might drive residents to band together, no evidence of major upheaval. All Pauketat can surmise is that a charismatic leader with a grand vision for his people was behind the settlement's meteoric rise.

"You have to think about it almost in terms of a messianic movement," Pauketat said. "There was something very appealing that went very beyond their already OK lifestyles."

That suggests a complex, hierarchical society — one more complicated than previously seen in prehistoric North American cultures, Pauketat said.

Some archaeologists believe Mississippian society was highly specialized, populated by farmers, craftsmen, warriors and priests.

Some may even have been professional athletes, said William Iseninger, an archaeologist with the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency. They found numerous stones used in a game that survived into historic times buried with one Cahokia resident.