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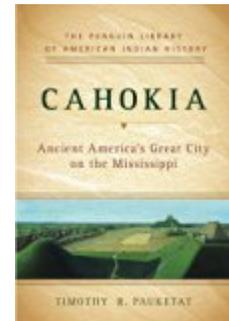
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Timothy R. Pauketat. *Cahokia: Ancient America's Great City on the Mississippi*. New York: Viking, 2009. 208 pp. \$22.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-670-02090-4.

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Urban Centers in Prehistoric Societies: A North American Example

Most cities, from Uruk in southern Mesopotamia five thousand years ago onward, were created by societies that also had systems of writing. But there were exceptions. Any general theory of why cities develop needs to take account of these special cases—urban centers in prehistoric societies.

This delightful little book by Timothy R. Pauketat is a splendid introduction to Cahokia, the largest and most complex settlement known from North America north of Mexico before the arrival of Europeans. The site became the locus of a major place around 1050 AD and thrived for roughly three centuries. The book provides a well-informed and very accessible overview of research conducted on the site and of what we know about it and the people who built and inhabited it. The notes include full bibliographic information for those who want to read further. Surprising for a book about an archaeological site, there are only two illustrations, an excellent map and a reconstruction view of a house. An inset on the map shows the location of Cahokia just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis, and the main part is a detailed plan of the site.

The text combines engaging stories about early nineteenth-century visitors to the site and descriptions by them and accounts of fieldwork carried out, with discussion of the rise of Cahokia to prominence and its overall character as an urban center. As I read the book, I was struck by many similarities between Cahokia and the urban centers of late Iron Age Europe, the *oppida* de-

scribed by Julius Caesar in his commentaries on the war he waged in Gaul from 58 to 51 BC. The rest of this review will focus on these comparisons, because together Cahokia and the European *oppida* are exceptionally well-documented examples of urban formation without the presence of a system of writing. Cahokia and the Iron Age *oppida* have in common built-up areas much larger than those of any earlier settlements in their regions and populations greater than those of any previous sites.

In the cases of both Cahokia and the European *oppida*, the centers developed rapidly, without clear evidence of long periods of gradual growth. But we can identify indications that some communities in the regions where the centers emerged showed signs of increasing complexity. Pauketat notes a few larger settlements that developed in the region of Cahokia early in the eleventh century. In temperate Europe, evidence for increasing trade and manufacturing could be understood to presage the formation of the *oppida*. In both cases, once the centers were established—at Cahokia around 1050 AD, in temperate Europe beginning around the middle of the second century BC (some 150 *oppida* have been identified throughout the central regions of the continent)—there is good archaeological evidence of migration of rural communities into the growing centers.

Pauketat tells us that the area of Cahokia was between three and five square miles, roughly two to three thousand acres, and suggests a population between ten thousand and sixteen thousand, with more in the

surrounding hinterlands. The European *oppida* were not that large in area; the most thoroughly investigated, at Manching in southern Bavaria, Germany, had an area of about a thousand acres within its great encircling wall. Populations of prehistoric settlements are extremely difficult to estimate; for larger *oppida*, such as Bibracte in France, Manching in Germany, and Stradonice in Bohemia, numbers around five thousand have been suggested, and they are probably on the right order of magnitude. (In any detailed discussion of population, we would need to consider both the “urban core” of such sites and the surrounding communities. Also, some people, such as merchants, are likely to have been transient, sometimes resident in the city and sometimes not.)

At both Cahokia and the *oppida*, rituals involving manipulating human bones were practiced. This point is important with regard to the functions of urban centers, because in many cultural contexts, treatment of the dead (including cremation and burial) is carried out beyond settlement limits, not within them. Many of the earth mounds at Cahokia contain burials of humans. At the *oppida*, human skeletal remains are not uncommon on the settlement surfaces and in pits, and their deposition is now generally considered to be the result of specific ritual practices.

We do not know exactly why Cahokia ceased to be an important center after about three hundred years. For the *oppida* of Gaul, west of the Rhine River, we know what happened—Julius Caesar tells us in detail how he conquered them or made allies of the groups who inhabited them. Following the Roman conquest, people left the fortified *oppida* and moved down into the river valleys. But east of the Rhine, we are faced with the same problem as that of Cahokia. What happened? Why did these big centers cease to perform their urban functions? Pauketat’s suggestion would fit the central and eastern European *oppida* as well as it does Cahokia—complex changes in farming communities’ producing of surpluses, shifts in ecological adaptations, changing political conditions—are all likely to have contributed to upsetting the balance required to maintain the centers.

Cahokia and the *oppida* share the lack of literacy. In many other parts of the world—Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, the Indus Valley, Mesoamerica—early cities were accompanied by the development of systems of writing. But, as far as we know, in North America north of Mexico and in temperate Europe, no indigenous system of writing existed before or at these cities. (At the *oppida* there is limited evidence of the use of Greek and Latin script,

but that can be explained by interaction with merchants based in the Mediterranean world.) This lack of literacy is important for two reasons. First, we are dependent exclusively on the material evidence of archaeology to understand these cities. Second, the fact that so many ancient civilizations that had cities developed writing raises the question of why these cases were so different.

The evidence we have at Cahokia suggests that a very large proportion of the community’s energy and resources went into activity that we commonly call “ritual,” specifically building earth mounds and structures on top of them, as well as carrying out complex rituals involving the dead. Pauketat informs us that at one time, there were more than two hundred packed earth mounds at Cahokia. The largest was some hundred feet high, and it was topped by a monumental building which he suggests may have been a meeting hall or residence of rulers. The author describes mass graves associated with some of the mounds, and richly equipped burials of members of the ruling elites. The *oppida* do not have monumental mounds comparable to the earth pyramids, but they do have great walls built of earth, stone, and timber around them, many of which still impress today by their monumental scale. In contrast to the interior of Cahokia with its mounds, burials, and huge open plaza, the interiors of the *oppida* were densely occupied by modest post-built structures that appear to have been mainly residences and workshops. There is some evidence for “ritual” activity practiced at the *oppida*, as in the skeletal remains discussed above, but the overall impression we get from the results of excavations at these centers is that the focus of activity was manufacturing and commerce.

As I read the book, I wondered to what extent the picture we have of Cahokia, as a center mainly of political and ritual activity, and that of the European *oppida*, as centers of commerce, is more a result of the research questions posed by investigators than of what was going on at these different places. It would be interesting for a specialist in Cahokia to evaluate evidence from the *oppida*, and vice versa. Such an exercise would help us to get to the very heart of the question of what prehistoric cities were really like.

From Timothy Pauketat’s book, the reader learns a great deal about this unique pre-European North American city. Anyone seriously interested in understanding urbanism as a phenomenon in human experience would find the book both very enlightening and a great pleasure to read.

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