



Cahokia Mounds

Glossary

prehistoric—before written records

archaeologist—scientist who studies the people, customs, and life of ancient times in order to construct a picture of life in the past

artifact—any object made by people

culture—the beliefs, customs, practices, and behavior of groups of people

Mississippian Culture—the prehistoric mound builders; A.D. 800-1500

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From A.D. 700 to 1400, a group of people built a settlement near the Mississippi River in southwestern Illinois eight miles east of what is now St. Louis. The site, located near the many rivers in the area, allowed the people to trade over long distances, support a large population, and build one of the most advanced **prehistoric** native cities in North America. There are no written records about these people. **Archaeologists** and other scientists study the site, the **artifacts**, and the human remains there to learn about the history and **culture** of this example of **Mississippian Culture**.



Birds-eye view of Cahokia 1150 A.D. Artist Bill Iseminger. Courtesy Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site.

The ancient city was named Cahokia by local historians to honor an **Illiniwek Confederation** tribe—the Cahokia—who lived in the area starting in the 1600s. At its peak, the city

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Illiniwek Confederation—tribes of Indians living in Illinois who shared a common language and beliefs and who worked together for the good of the larger group

covered nearly six square miles and contained more than 120 mounds made of earth. By the years A.D. 1050 - 1200 Cahokia was the largest city north of Mexico and may have had a population as large as 10,000 to 20,000 people. However, the population started to decline, and by A.D. 1400 the city had been completely abandoned.

Many artifacts remained behind after the people deserted Cahokia. Some archaeologists found artifacts inside the mounds and in the area around the mounds. Archaeologists learned that there was a log wall around the center of the city and that the city was built around a 40-acre plaza that was used for sports, ceremonies, and other events.



Community life in Cahokia by Michael Hampshire. This painting depicts people building homes and performing ceremonies in the Grand Plaza. Monks Mound can be seen in the distance. Courtesy Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site.

borrow pit—a hole left where dirt, stones, or other material have been dug up for use in building somewhere else

Some people think the most impressive remains of this culture are the many earthen mounds built by the people of Cahokia. Using tools made from stone, wood, bone, and shell, they dug the earth and then carried it to the mounds in baskets on their backs. The digging left low places that are called ***borrow pits***. Most of the mounds were rectangular with flat tops on which the Cahokians constructed temples, government buildings, and homes of the leaders. The largest mound in the city, now called Monks Mound, was 100 feet tall. Other mounds were shaped like ridges or cones. These mounds were used to mark important locations or to bury important people.

The people of Cahokia farmed, fished, hunted and gathered a great deal of food to support the city's large



Aerial view of Monks Mound. Courtesy Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site.

population. They relied on corn, melons, squash, and beans that they planted for fresh produce, as well as drying and preserving this food for use through the winter. Much of the meat they



One of several groups of arrowheads found in Mound 72. Courtesy Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site.

fished or hunted was also dried and stored for use during the cold winter months.

No one knows exactly why the prehistoric Cahokians left their city or what happened to the people who left. It took a long time for this to happen. Archaeologists have many ideas but no certain explanation. Some think the food resources were simply used up—the soil wore out and all the nearby game was hunted. A change in the climate might have affected their crops and the food sources of the game animals. Other scientists think that war or disease killed many Cahokians or forced them to leave. It is an unsolved mystery.

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effigy—an image or representation especially of a person



Human effigy block pipe from the Mississippian Period. Courtesy Illinois State Museum.

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