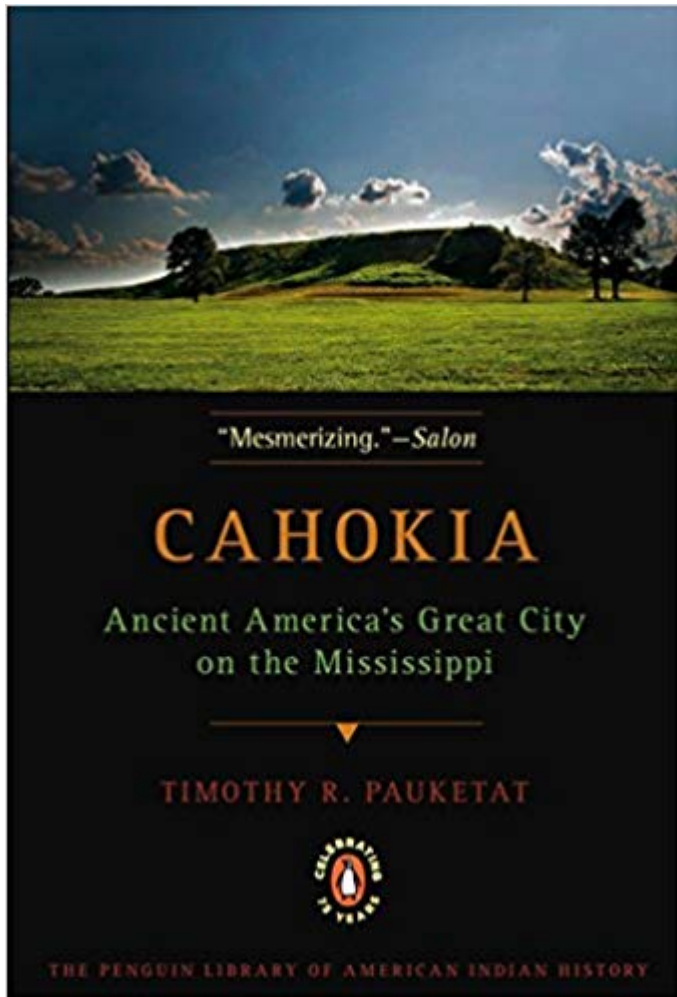
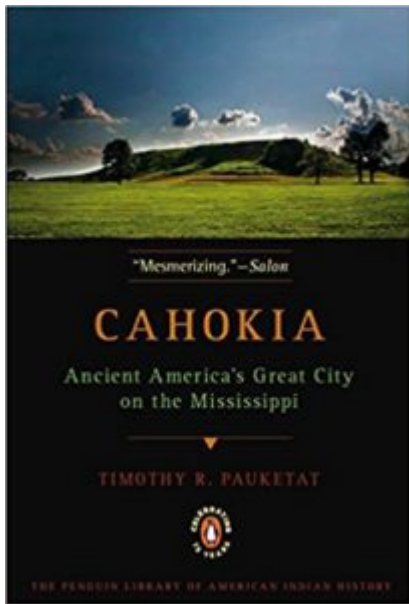


# North America's "Big Bang"



On July 4, 1054, Chinese astronomers noted a “guest star” in the constellation Taurus. They had actually witnessed a supernova, whose remnants today constitute the crab nebula. For twenty-three days, a perceptive observer would have seen this guest star during the day or night. The supernova remained bright in the night sky for the next two years. The indigenous inhabitants of North America, many of them avid sky-watchers, likely pondered the significance of this new visitor. Perhaps not coincidentally, around this time at a spot east of present-day St. Louis, Native North Americans replaced a small village with the greatest city north of Mexico, known today as Cahokia (named after a later group of the Illini). In *Cahokia: Ancient America's Great City on the Mississippi*, archaeologist Timothy Pauketat sees Cahokia as North America's “big bang,” an abruptly appearing city that served as the hub of what became known as Mississippian culture, spread up and down the great river by its residents and their descendants. Balancing speculation and empirical findings, he intertwines three stories: the story of Cahokia itself, its near destruction by modern developers, and its rescue by twentieth-century archaeologists.



Full of impressive research, Cahokia also contains fascinating questions and avenues of future exploration.

Drawing upon recent work in archaeology, Pauketat makes a strong case that Cahokia's construction required thousands of laborers and reflected the designs of a stratified society. The city contained more than one hundred and twenty earthwork pyramids, often described as "mounds." At Cahokia's heart stood the pyramid now called "Monks Mounds," with a volume of 25 million cubic feet. In front of Monks Mound, Cahokians carefully leveled a fifty-acre plaza. Pauketat notes that laborers built this grand plaza in one massive public works project, leading him to hypothesize that Cahokia housed approximately 10,000 residents, with another 20,000 to 30,000 in the surrounding hinterland of smaller communities and farms.

Cahokian elites commanded authority through large feasts and rituals, which sometimes involved human sacrifice. These rituals have left a compelling mystery in their wake. "Mound 72," for instance, contained two elite men and evidence of accompanying executions. Cahokians buried these men with two bundles of arrows: light tipped arrows aligned with the summer solstice sunset; dark tipped arrows pointed toward the winter solstice sunset. In an intriguing interpretation, Pauketat connects these elites to later Ho-Chunk sagas of a mythical hero named Red Horn and, more broadly, twin stories found throughout native North America. These stories focused on themes of duality and balance between male and female, good and evil, and upper and lower worlds. The arrows likely represented similar themes: "They simultaneously referred to the passing of a day, the seasons of a year, and the forces of light and dark, day and night, and life and death" (83). Perhaps these two men were unifiers. This interpretation, simultaneously speculative but also well informed, demonstrates how scholars can imagine a distant world that left no written history.

European and European-American writers have long been fascinated by stories of human sacrifice in Native North America, but Pauketat shows equal interest in

the lives of Cahokia's farmers. A day's walk from Cahokia, archaeologists discovered perhaps the most telling of these agricultural sites. Here, the farmers' housing and pottery styles differed from Cahokia, suggesting an immigrant population. Examining their waste, archaeologists conclude that the immigrants ate too little protein and far too much corn (perhaps these people were more like contemporary Americans than we usually assume). These people "had experienced the closest thing to a peasant lifestyle that had ever existed in pre-Columbian North America" (123). At Cahokia, then, Native farmers may have migrated from afar to their own frontier, where they experienced hardships, and eventually moved on to try their luck elsewhere. Less dramatic than human sacrifice, the prospect of poor farmers supporting Cahokia is, in its own subtle way, equally revelatory.

Full of impressive research, Cahokia also contains fascinating questions and avenues of future exploration. With the exception of an obsidian stone found in Oklahoma, no trade goods link Mesoamerica with Cahokia. Yet the two regions contain intriguing similarities in their mythology and artwork. Both Mississippian and Mesoamerican myths contain stories of heroic twins. Mississippian artwork also shared important traits with Mexican works: "goggle eyes, distorted noses, and (via historical accounts) hints of fangs" (147). Some illustrations or photographs would have helped readers see these connections, Cahokia's imprint on the landscape, and its complex culture. Pauketat's previous academic synthesis, *Ancient Cahokia and the Mississippians*, contains striking photographs of Mississippian artifacts, but unfortunately, Cahokia's only illustration depicts a modest home which fails to capture the grandeur of the city.

Pauketat tells a story of a landscape lost—or nearly lost—as much as it was discovered. Unique in scale, Cahokia's treatment by European-Americans was actually rather typical. Creating a new nation involved destroying the landscape and history of old nations. Some European-Americans saw ancient Indian works as remnants of a great civilization, one far too advanced to have been created by Indians. They invented theories of a lost race, or imagined that medieval Europeans somehow built the pyramids. Others, perhaps the majority of Americans, cared little for the Native landscape. Prior to the Civil War, locals destroyed twenty-five mounds in St. Louis as generations of plowing destroyed artifacts and ruined the original designs of earthworks at Cahokia and elsewhere. Through physical destruction and cultural myopia, Americans spun a tale of their nation as an untouched wilderness—a view still fundamental to popular interpretations of the United States' past. In the twentieth century, a steam shovel leveled the second largest mound and the federal government decided to build a freeway through parts of Cahokia. Archaeologists scrambled to salvage what they could, but they were helpless as construction crews destroyed other unstudied sections of the settlement. One resident even decided to put in a swimming pool at the base of the great pyramid (it has since been filled). Pauketat notes that in the end nine of the ten largest pyramids had considerable damage. Today, visitors can see the core of what remains of Cahokia in the Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site.

Cahokia's legacy for Native North America becomes murkier in the penultimate chapter, where Pauketat notes that Cahokia left "an almost nonexistent cultural memory" (160). Unlike other great cities, such as Teotihuacán in Mexico, no known oral traditions relate epics of Cahokia. Following such careful reconstruction of such a large city's history and its sprawling cultural reach, this silence is difficult to fathom. Pauketat speculates that during the city's late twelfth-century decline "people were seeking to escape Cahokia, and their desire to forget it—and create a more perfect, communal post-Cahokian society—were all part of starting over" (160). Archaeologists have speculated that the city's living conditions were poor, or that its collapse was too violent to merit remembering. However, earlier in the book, Pauketat relates that Revolutionary War general George Rodgers Clark had spoken to Illini Indians, who claimed mounds south of Cahokia were "the works of their forefathers," and had been "formerly as numerous as the trees in the woods" (27). This claim suggests some memory remained. Perhaps scholars will someday uncover additional evidence that connects "historic" Indians and their memories with Cahokia and America's ancient landscape.

Pauketat places Cahokia at the foundation of subsequent plains and woodland Indian history, but general readers may need additional guidance to ponder the city's legacy. Pauketat's view of Cahokia's legacy relies upon his understanding of Cahokia as a large city, capable of projecting military and cultural power across the plains and woodlands. He speculates that Cahokians sustained a "Pax Cahokiana," and without the city's military power the plains descended into violence, detected by archaeologists (168). Moreover, because the subsequent plains and woodlands Indians drew upon a Cahokian cultural legacy, the city "also affected the shape and direction of European colonization and, later, America's westward expansion" (38-39). Pauketat briefly notes that during the early nineteenth century, the Osage, possible descendants of Cahokians, temporarily obstructed Thomas Jefferson's commercial goals within the Louisiana Purchase. He adds that the Pawnee, another possible nation of Cahokian descendants, "held key portions of the Missouri and remained loyal allies of Spain into the American period, forcing drawn-out negotiations by United States Indian agents" (169). These examples aside, much of Cahokia's lasting significance remains implied.

Perhaps Cahokia's greatest legacy was its collapse, an ending that remains largely unexplained. Pauketat sees Cahokia as "pre-Columbian America's experiment in civilization," an experiment but not a precedent (169). Following Cahokia's collapse, north of Mexico, Native North America trended toward less hierarchal societies. Unlike the Spanish conquistadors in Mexico and South America, European colonizers encountered no centralized powers in the future United States, at least nothing comparable to the empires of the Aztecs or Incas. Navigating the diverse political landscape of North America required complex diplomatic maneuvering for Europeans and Indians alike, as indicated by Pauketat's mention of the Pawnee. Culturally diverse populations, America's Indian nations nevertheless shared some broad commonalities, suggested by the mythology and artwork Pauketat documents. This common ground enabled the

formation of new societies and political alliances, a process in progress after Cahokia's collapse and quickened by the arrival of Europeans, their warfare, and deadly pathogens. Cahokia is an important reminder of this interconnected, deep and dynamic history, which was well underway long before contact with Europeans.