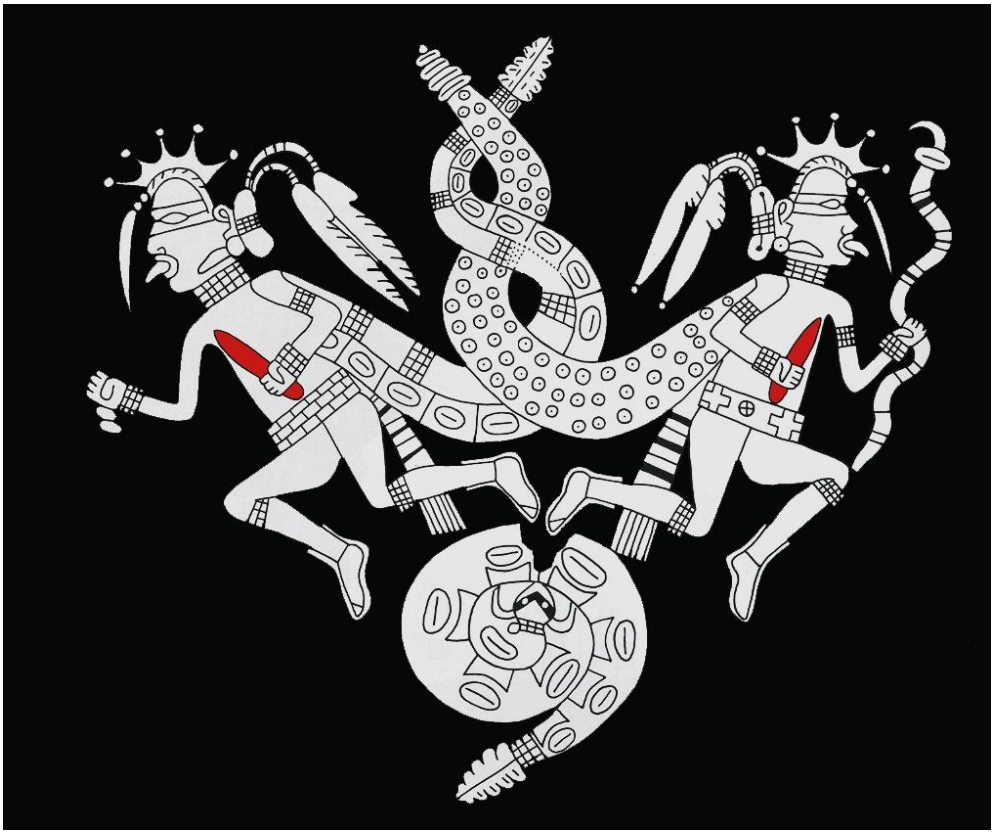
The North American Middle Ages:
Big History from the Mississippi Valley to Northern Mexico

This storyboard is under development (last update: August 2015).



[**colorized version of engraved image on a shell cup from Spiro, Oklahoma, from Phillips, P. and J. Brown 1978, *Pre-Columbian Shell Engravings from the Craig Mound at Spiro, Oklahoma*. With permission from the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts**].

[**Interactive map image 1, Pauketat**.] This map is an anchor allowing people to begin to move around the site. Small icons will be arrayed on it. Clicking on them will open other pages with text, as follows.]

[1a. **Hopewell enclosure image, with moon in background, Ohio Historical Society**]

[associated text] Today, we know that most of the mounds that the first Euroamerican pioneers saw as they travelled into the "Northwest Territories" of the young United States had been built by people called "Hopewell" by archaeologists. Many of the most well-known Hopewellian peoples lived in and around the modern state of Ohio from 150 BC to almost AD 400. But other Hopewellian peoples lived throughout eastern North America and into the Great Plains. They had no cities, but lived in scattered horticultural villages and homesteads, hunted small game and white-tailed deer, and grew a variety of native grasses that were in the process of becoming domesticated. Archaeologists find the chipped-stone points of small spears that were thrown with a spear thrower or "atlatl." The Woodland people did not yet have the bow and arrow—but many did garden with digging sticks and garden hoes. Archaeologists find the small chipped stone blades from those hoes.

Hopewellian peoples had even acquired early strains of Mesoamerican domesticated plants for ritual and dietary purposes: tobacco for smoking in pipes and maize or corn, for eating on special occasions. The Hopewell peoples built remarkable ceremonial complexes—great earthen embankments and prominent platform or burial mounds—many in alignment with what they perceived to be the living, cosmic powers of their worlds.

[1b. **Edward Curtis photo of Lakota priest Slow Bull: US National archives**]
[associated text] Native Americans in the past, like many people to varying degrees around the world, sensed that our world was occupied by ancestral spirits, animate forces, non-human beings, and holy powers who, along with people, influenced the outcomes of events. Sometimes anthropologists call the resulting way of life "animism," but it is not a kind of organization or belief. Instead, it is simply a label attached to a way of being in the world that can be differentiated from a modern commercial worldview. Priests of many religions, including Slow Bull as photographed by Edward Curtis in 190X, mediate these various powers, beings, and

forces by positioning themselves or other things and bodily movements in alignment or balance with the spiritual world.

[**1c. Teotihuacan and the Classic Mesoamerican World, Pauketat images**]

[associated text] At the same time that Hopewellian peoples were building mounded ceremonial centers in the eastern United States and southern Canada, the indigenous people of Mexico were building pyramids within cities and ceremonial centers. Archaeologists call this period of Mesoamerican civilization the "Classic Period," and it lasted from about 100 BC to AD 600 or later, depending on the location. The largest city with the most lasting historical impacts on the people of the Americas was Teotihuacan, north of modern-day Mexico City. Teotihuacan's pyramids, plazas, and avenues would have inspired anyone who ever saw them, but we are unsure if anyone from the Mississippi and Ohio valleys ever did. When it was partially burned, at least once, around the year 600, Teotihuacan's people left and founded new settlements in central Mexico. Many archaeologists suspect broad historical connections between Mesoamericans and people to the north. For instance, small anthropomorphic clay figurines, seemingly ancestral figures, are known from north and south. Was there a link?

[another click on the earlier map #1 would produce red connector lines, showing historical relationships. Some can be interactive and lead to other images and text, as exemplified by the image/text below.]

[2. Map, with associated text and links, such as the lines and the image(s)]
After the demise of activity associated with major Classic period in Mesoamerica and the Hopewellian ceremonial centers of eastern North America, Native people from Virginia to the Dakotas and northward moved into a period of isolationism called, by archaeologists, the Late Woodland era (AD 400-1050). It was the American equivalent of the Dark Ages. To the south, there never was a Dark Age. From the Coastal Plain of southern Georgia and Alabama west across the Mississippi River and up the Red and Arkansas Rivers into the modern-day states of Oklahoma and Texas, people yet built mounded ceremonial centers up to several hectares in size. Several were very large, and developed between ca. AD 400 and 900. This was a time of population expansion and political integration in the lower Ouachita and lower Red River regions and probably along the Natchez Bluffs to the east as well. Leaders, priests, or prophets might emerge to prominence from time to time to lead the great labor projects that saw massive earthen pyramids constructed and great plazas flattened. But there seems to have been a limit to the expansion, and none of this cultural elaboration was based on maize agriculture.

Meanwhile, in the midcontinent and Great Lakes region to the north, settlements and ritual sites

were smaller. Late Woodland peoples appear to have carved out territories around their settlements, but did not venture too far beyond those regions except on special occasions. Mostly, they tended gardens of wild and domesticated grasses, squash, and sunflower, cooking up porridge in large ceramic pots. Big historical changes did accompany the adoption of the bow and arrow after about AD 300. Some peoples in the Plains adopted it quickly, while others living in the interior lower Mississippi Valley lagged centuries behind. Possibly they even resisted adopting the new technology. Either way, there was an uptick in violence between Late Woodland communities in some parts of eastern North America, who might have feuded over land, marriage partners, or any number of grievances.

In one area, around modern-day St. Louis, crop surpluses were produced in ever-increasing amounts as gardens were expanded into fields using larger stone-bladed hoes. In this region, children and adults also began playing a game known historically as "chunkey." It involved rolling a circular flat stone, no bigger than one's palm, across a flat playing field while competing team members threw dart-like sticks at it to score points. Possibly, the chunkey game was another way of diffusing inter-community disputes instead of resorting to open warfare.

[Late Woodland era limestone hoe blade, held by Alleen Betzenhauser, Pauketat image, and Late Woodland chunkey stone, Pauketat image]

[clicking on one line or dot in Map 2 would lead to this blurb and images]

[2a. **Toltec Mounds, Arkansas, Pauketat image**]

Social changes and the end of the American Dark Ages were tied to the reappearance and intensification of maize agriculture, which had never been widespread in the earlier Hopewell era. By AD 700, some of the Late Woodland peoples on the southern Plains and in the Trans-Mississippi South (Arkansas, eastern Oklahoma, northwestern Louisiana and eastern Texas)

began cultivating a newer strain of the exotic plant. At a great ceremonial center near Little Rock, Arkansas, misnamed the "Toltec" mounds in the early 1800s, corn has been found to date to AD 700. By the early 800s, it is also known among the "Terminal" Late Woodland peoples around the modern-day city of St. Louis. Did the people of the two regions speak the same language? Varieties of proto-Siouan or Caddoan language families are possible at either. Toltec was abandoned by AD 1100 at about the same time that people were migrating to the new city of Cahokia, opposite St. Louis. So there might have been a connection between the two peoples and places. Moreover, a new analysis of Toltec's layout by archaeoastronomer William Romain shows a lunar alignment, similar to that which may have been used to set up Cahokia at around AD 1050.

[2b. clicking on Cahokia, the center of the asterisk on the map, leads you to a new page with embedded text and images—perhaps using a good banner, such as a National Geographic artist's watercolor…]

[…and connected to a graphic something like this Google Earth view which would again be an interactive map of sorts]

[clicking on the red diamond would take you to the next map image 3 or to image 4 below, and so on … but first, clicking on the earlier Map 2 image would lead directly to this explanation of the identity of the Cahokians]

[2b1. An important Cahokian man or hero figure, wearing human-head earpieces like those carved from conch shell and found with a buried man near Cahokia in the 1940s. University of Arkansas Museum; Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa OK]

Who were the people who built Cahokia, an American Indian city of earthen pyramids, timber structures, and roof thatch? Up until the late 1990s, most archaeologists believed that they were local people who had always lived in the region where the Missouri River meets the mighty Mississippi. Excavations during the 1990s in a farming district east of Cahokia, called the Richland Complex, began to change that idea. Around certain village remains were broken pots and tools that seemed to originate from locations to the south and east 200 to 300 kilometers away. Similar pot styles, making up to 30 percent of the broken vessels in some early neighborhoods, had always been found at Cahokia, but had been assumed to be trade items. By the 2000s, archaeologists began to realize that they were not trade items at all, but local pots made in foreign styles. Archaeologist Susan Alt even suggested that immigration might have been the driving force behind the founding of Cahokia. Recent bone-chemistry studies by the Illinois State Archaeological Survey have confirmed that, throughout the history of Cahokia, up to 30 percent of Cahokians had been born outside the Cahokia region. Their recent excavations in the East St. Louis precinct have produced small numbers of artifacts from the Great Plains and the Upper Mississippi Valley.

So who were the Cahokians? They were many peoples. They may have included local and nonlocal residents, part-time occupants, or visitors who spoke any number of Siouan, Caddoan, and even Algonkian language dialects. When they eventually left Cahokia behind, beginning in the 12th and lasting until the 14th centuries AD, the population might have splintered and gone any number of directions, especially south and west.

A better way to answer the question of who the Cahokians were is by looking at how they lived

their lives and related to the larger world as they perceived it. Most Cahokians were farmers, and they grew a variety of native grasses, sunflowers, squash and maize, or corn. Maize had been around the Mississippi valley since the Hopewell first imported it from the American Southwest or Mesoamerica. But its production had not been intensified into a staple crop until after the year 700, from present-day Arkansas up to St. Louis, Missouri. Its intensification laid the foundation for rise of Cahokia. So too did the warmer, wetter years of the global climate phenomenon known as the Medieval Warm Period, circa AD 900-1200.

[Maize at fall harvest time, October, Pauketat]

[Right, Cahokian hoe blade mounted on a wooden handle, Pauketat]

In a brief window of time sometimes called Cahokia's "big bang," near the mid-1000s, the people who were farming the floodplain of the Mississippi River near modern-day St. Louis reinvented themselves and built a city: Cahokia. Massive labor projects saw Cahokians, or the people who would soon identify with that place, level landforms and raise great earthen platforms, or pyramids, atop which public or religious buildings were constructed. Away from the city's three precincts, farmers cleared fields with stone-bladed axes and large hoes, the blades of which were made from imported stone. Old outlying villages disappeared as people moved to the city. Pilgrims and immigrants arrived. More monuments were built. New farmlands, probably administered by Cahokians, were dotted with scattered farmsteads. Produce was harvested and gathered up for Cahokian ceremonies.

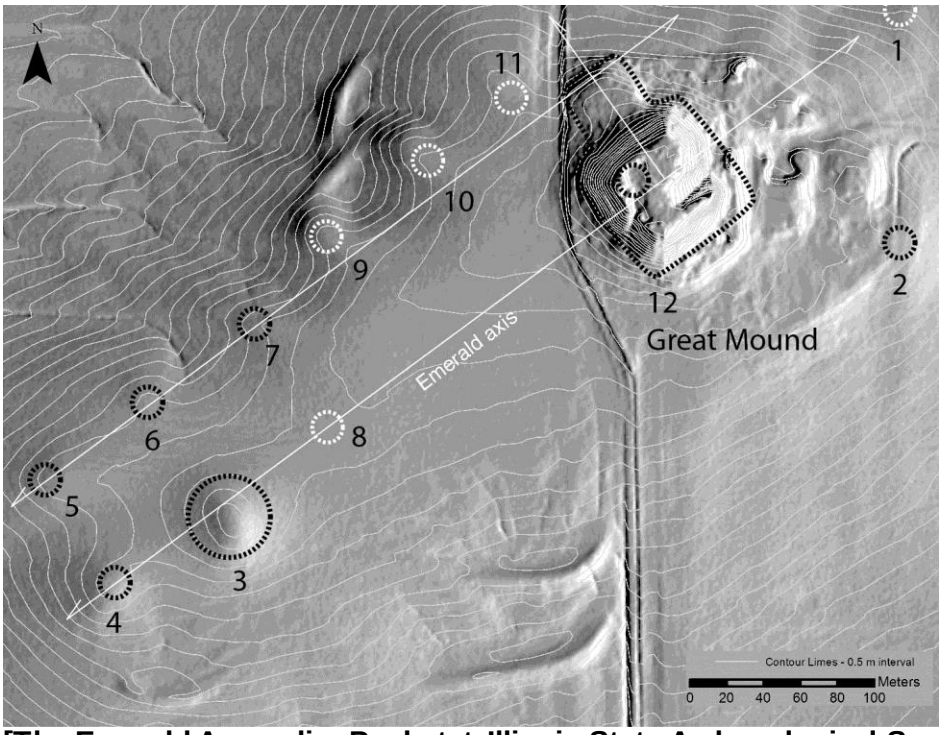
In those years, celestial and political events were marked with occasional human sacrifice, from one to 53 young people, mostly women. Such women many have embodied supernatural powers, or perhaps were offerings to the principal goddess of Cahokia. She is shown repeatedly in small statuettes made from a soft red stone obtained from sinkholes in the hills of nearby Missouri. In some carvings, she emerges from a basket of ancestral bones. Crops may grow from her body. And the great snake monster may be wrapped around her head. In all cases, she appears to be the god of crops, fertility, and the earth. She may also have been the deity connected to the dead and the night, if not also the moon, a nighttime luminary. Cahokian

religion probably revolved around her and her many powerful associations.

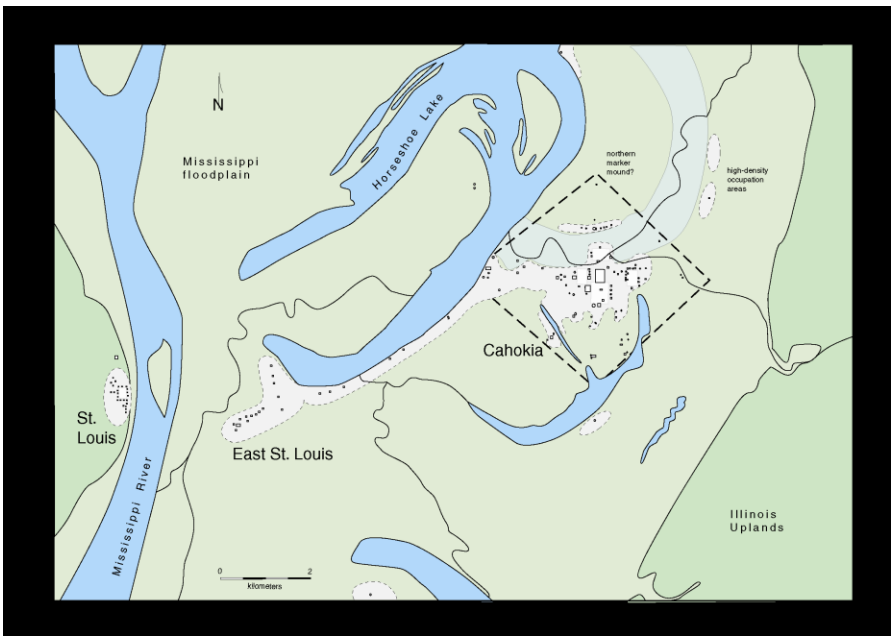
Temples or “shrine houses” connected to her, the ancestors, or the moon have been located around Cahokia, especially at the end of an Indian avenue that extended for 24 km east of the Indian city. Here, at the edge of a great prairie, sat the Emerald Acropolis and a series of related smaller sites. The Emerald Acropolis was a hilltop specially enlarged and reshaped by Cahokians as part of the big-bang moment of 1050, plus or minus 10 or 20 years. Its summit is covered by three rows of small mounds and a large pyramid similar in shape to Cahokia’s Monks Mound. On the slopes around the hilltop site are a series of the special temples. Current estimates, based on excavations in 2012-2016, are that a hundred such temples may have sat on the site at any one time between AD 1050-1150. Around them were hundreds more temporary shelters for celebrants and other religious architecture. All were aligned to one of four possible moonrises connected to that celestial body’s long 18.6-year cycle. In fact, the entire site was aligned to a maximum north moonrise, recalling the lunar geometry known among Hopewellian people centuries earlier.

[2b2. Left, Cahokian goddess digging her hoe into the back of the mythical earth monster, from whom crops emerge and grow up her back, Illinois State Archaeological Survey; right, human sacrifices in Cahokia’s Mound 72, including four headless and handless men and a pit full of 53 women, Illinois State Museum, colorized]

[The floor of a lunar temple at a site near the Emerald Acropolis, Pauketat]



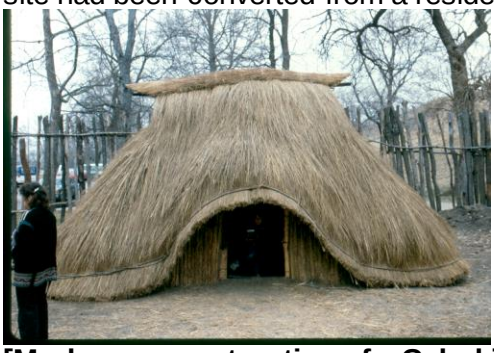
[The Emerald Acropolis, Pauketat, Illinois State Archaeological Survey]



[3. **Pauketat image, to which a series of icons would link more images such as 3a-c, below**]

[3a. Aerial view of the central pyramids and plaza of Cahokia's main precinct, National

Geographic]
The Cahokia complex's central precinct is preserved today as Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site, in Collinsville, Illinois. These include the third-largest Pre-Columbian monument in the Americas, the 100-foot-high "Monks Mound," which sits at the north end of the 50-acre "Grand Plaza." Lesser pyramids surround this plaza and smaller pyramids and possible smaller plazas surround this inner sanctum. Formerly comprised of about 120 earthen pyramids, many of the Cahokia precinct's tumuli have been leveled over the years, including the second largest in the region, the so-called "Powell Mound." At AD 1050, some 10,000 people resided in hundreds of pole-and-thatch houses set at right angles to each other in neighborhoods around the various pyramids and plazas. Thousands more lived nearby in the East St. Louis and St. Louis precincts. By AD 1200, those numbers had been reduced considerably, and the East St. Louis site had been converted from a residential precinct to an empty ceremonial shrine complex.



[Modern reconstruction of a Cahokian pole and thatch building of an early 11th century style, Pauketat image]

[3b. 1960 excavations at Cahokia's Tract 15B, Illinois State Museum]
The history of Cahokia is understood in large part through excavations that have occurred in the region ahead of the construction of major interstate highways and other federally funded construction projects. The first of these was conducted beginning in 1960, when the Illinois Highway Department paid to have archaeologists excavate in advance of a highway overpass realignment. Here, at what came to be called Tract 15B, archaeologists found portions of an extensive pre-Mississippian village area (dating to before 1050), followed by the construction of monumental buildings beginning at 1050. Great rotundas and rectangular compounds and public buildings were built over the next 150 years until Cahokia began its decline around AD 1200. The last Cahokians lived here as late as AD 1350 before they too departed, leaving the ancient city in ruins: its eroding earthen pyramids were first described in writing by Henry Marie Brackenridge in 1810.

[3c. Illinois State Archaeological Survey excavations at the East St. Louis precinct, Pauketat image]

[2c. Clicking on a line that connects Cahokia to the Caddo area would lead us to another page where the early Caddo are discussed]

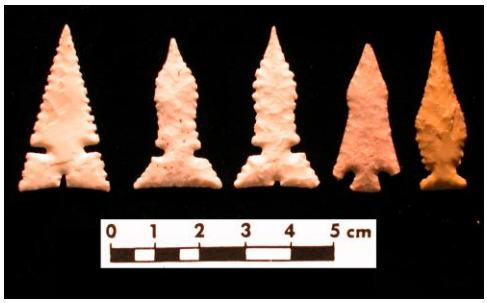
That which archaeologists call the Caddo culture appeared around AD 900, and fully coalesced as such in the mid-1000s.

MORE TEXT, DESCRIBING WHAT IT WAS, WHERE IT WAS, WHAT ITS EARLY SITES AND ARTIFACTS LOOK LIKE. THEN CONNECTION MADE TO CAHOKIA, OR AT LEAST CAHOKIAN THINGS.

Cahokia's possible interests in the south may have included maintaining a supply of the leaves of the "yaupon" holly bush from which a caffeinated tea, or Black Drink, was produced. A recent study has shown that Cahokian beakers contained trace amounts of the drink. The natural range of the yaupon plant extends no farther north than modern-day Little Rock, Arkansas. And Cahokians are known from the area. For instance, recent work by University of Mississippi archaeologists at the Carson site, in northwestern Mississippi, has located a possible Cahokian colony at the site. Certainly, Cahokian-made things are known from Caddoan sites as well, from northwestern Louisiana to east-central Oklahoma. In addition, fragments of Caddoan engraved shell cups, famously connected to the Spiro site in Oklahoma, have been found in Cahokian

deposits dating to the 1200s.

[Left, Cahokian beakers or beverage mugs from which the Black Drink, a potent caffeinated tea, was consumed on ceremonial occasions; right, arrowheads from Mound 72, including local Cahokia points (left), Lower Mississippi valley points (right), and hybridized versions of both (center)]



[Caddo pot of a style also found at Cahokia, J. Girard]

[2c. Clicking on the long line that connects Cahokia and the Caddo to the Huastec region of northern Mexico would lead us to another page where this is fully discussed]

The engraved shell cups of the Caddoan world have possible counterparts in northern Mesoamerica among the Huastec peoples, where conch shells were engraved with scenes often connected to the Mesoamerican wind god Quetzalcoatl.

[**Museo Nacional de Antropologia, Mexico City**]

It remains unclear if Huastecan influences or cultural contacts happened via the Cahokians or

by way of the Caddoans, but historical connections of some kind probably happened during the 1000s. The evidence is indirect at best. On the Caddoan side of the argument, it is important that Huastecan items are found as far north as Brownsville, Texas around the mouth of the Rio Grande and many have speculated about possible connections between Caddoan and Huastecan travellers. On the Cahokian site of the argument, the intensification of maize in the 800s may have involved the transplanting of Mesoamerican agricultural and religious knowledge into the region between the Toltec site in Arkansas, and the Cahokia site in Illinois. In addition, Mexicanoid elements appear at Cahokia around AD 1050, including Mexican-style daggers, god-maskette earpieces, and circular platforms and shrines.

Of these, the circular platforms at Cahokia may be the most important link. They were unknown before Cahokia's conversion into a city around the year 1050. Like those in Mesoamerica, they were probably topped by circular shrines. Perhaps it is also no coincidence, given the Quetzalcoatl associations of the Mesoamerican shrines, that a sheet-copper serpent was found with a human burial atop the largest circular platform at Cahokia (Mound 59). When such round temples first appeared in Maya regions around 800 CE, they seem associated with a novel wind-god ideology. In the words of Maya archaeologist Patricia McAnany, circular shrines appear

> to have woven together the acquisition of materials from afar with performance of a new kind of ritual practice…. [T]he shape of the buildings and the added presence of spiral 'conch' shells … gives credence to the notion that activities referenced or invoked the feathered serpent deity (McAnany 2012, p. 125).

The timing of the arrival of circular shrines and mounds at Cahokia parallels other happenings in northern Mesoamerica. This was the time of the expansionistic Toltec horizon, known best at the city of Tula in Hidalgo. Here too are found Mexican-style daggers and human sacrifices, perhaps supporting the general argument that Cahokians may have drew inspiration for their city from southern sources. The late Robert Hall suggested that Cahokia's large-scale practice of human sacrifice was historically connected in some way with Mesoamerican deities. Several of the Cahokian individual sacrifices have now also been connected to—or found buried in the open holes left from—the removal of great upright posts, which Hall also believed were related to a widespread world-renewal ceremonialism that, in Mesoamerica, found expression in rituals honoring the flayed-skin god Xolotl.

[**Pyramid and columns at the Post-Classic Mesoamerican city of Tula, AD 900-1150, Pauketat**]

That said, there may have been later waves of Mesoamerican inspiration that swept the peoples farther north. The historically known Caddoan practice of sacrificing a young female to the gods, for instance, has clear counterparts in the Mesoamerican practice as recorded in several Mesoamerican graphic books, or codices. In all cases, the victim was tethered to a wooden wrack and shot with arrows. A similar scene was also carved onto a conch shell from Spiro, likely dating to the 1200s.

[**from the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca,* Bibliothèque Nationale de France**]

By that time, the 13th century, Cahokia was in decline. This great, oddly isolated, North American city appears to have been unable to sustain itself and its thousands of residents, perhaps because it did not weather well both climate change and the increased violence of the times. As Cahokia was gradually abandoned by its diverse peoples, the Caddoan peoples who once drew on its powers turned elsewhere. Mesoamerican influences unseen at Cahokia, such as notions about hero twins, Venus symbolism, and Quetzalcoatl-inspired characters stepping out of a crack in the great earth monster, are known from the art of Spiro, Oklahoma. In later years, other Mesoamerican practices may have also made their way onto the Great Plains through Caddoan peoples who moved northward in the 1300s.

MORE TEXT LINKING HISTORIC-ERA GREAT PLAINS TO THIS EFFECT. MAYBE EVEN A PAGE CONNECTING LIVING PEOPLES TO THIS BIG HISTORY.