

Contextualizing Aggregation and Nucleation as Demographic Processes Leading to Cahokia's Emergence as an Incipient Urban Center

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For nearly fifty years the large Mississippian town and mound complex, Cahokia, has been viewed as North America's only pre-Columbian city. To a large extent this was based on a trait list used by Childe to define a city. Since Childe's early efforts our understanding of what it means to be a city has expanded significantly beyond a simple list.

Nonetheless, Kelly and Brown (2014) have recently argued that Cahokia and the surrounding region represent the beginnings of the urban process in the eastern woodlands of North America. It is important to realize that after some five centuries this process was truncated as indigenous societies became part of a much larger global system. While our recent discussion has focused on Cahokia's unique cosmological configuration of four quadrilateral plazas centered on a large, 30-meter high earthen platform mound, this ritualized core of large earthen platform mounds, large constructed plazas, and massive wooden architecture comprises a landscape encompassing over 100 hectares. This built environment is at the heart of a ritual city covering nearly 15 square kilometers, and has its roots in the site's late Emergent Mississippian community.

This discussion is focused on the demographic and social processes leading to urbanism in the central Mississippi river valley. These processes trace back some three to four centuries earlier when populations initially aggregated into small villages, and then within a century these smaller settlement units nucleated into larger communities resulting in much larger, urban settlements. Especially important to our understanding of this process is the social and cosmological mechanisms employed in the organization at the most fundamental level of settlement as they were the building blocks involved in integrating more people into larger spaces that resulted in the urban center of Cahokia and other nearby towns.