

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Fall 1998

Review of *Cahokia: Domination and Ideology in the
Mississippian World* Edited by Timothy R. Pauketat
and Thomas E. Emerson

Alan J. Osborn

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, Aosborn2@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Osborn, Alan J., "Review of *Cahokia: Domination and Ideology in the Mississippian World* Edited by Timothy R. Pauketat and Thomas E. Emerson" (1998). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 412.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/412>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Cahokia: Domination and Ideology in the Mississippian World. Edited by Timothy R. Pauketat and Thomas E. Emerson. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. ix+360 pp. Maps, figures, tables, references, index. \$55.00 cloth (ISBN 0-8032-3708-1).

Cahokia is a spectacular eleventh- to twelfth-century village and earth mound complex near the confluence of the Missouri and the Mississippi

rivers east of present day St. Louis. This prehistoric community may have supported 10,000 inhabitants and was part of an even larger array of settlements, platform and burial mounds, and cemeteries that stretched across 86,000 acres of fertile flood plains (the American Bottoms). Extensive archaeological work associated with highway construction in the 1970s and 1980s provided rich, diverse evidence for day-to-day domestic activities, as well as regional trade, immense corvée labor projects (e.g., platform mounds, “woodhenges,” and palisades), military activities, complex burial rites, and politico-religious observances. The Mississippian people, as they are referred to by archaeologists, constructed 120 earth mounds at Cahokia, including Monks Mound (300 meters square and 30 meters high). Mound building at Cahokia involved the transport of 50 million tons of earth. Consequently, archaeologists have always wanted to know more about this ancient society that mobilized and coordinated such tremendous construction efforts.

Timothy Pauketat and Thomas Emerson’s thirteen chapter study focuses on the central role of “domination and ideology” in the emergence, expansion, and collapse of Cahokian society. Like many recent books dealing with Southeastern archaeology, most contributors to this volume employ a mentalist view of culture (ideas cause behavior) to explain the emergence of political and religious leaders within Cahokia and nearby communities circa 1050-1100 C. E. These archaeologists assert that commoners followed the dictates of select individuals and their families once the legitimacy of a newly created “dominant ideology” had been established. Apparently, the commoners became mesmerized by the oratory of the elite and dazzled by their “badges” of authority and power—shining copper breast plates, glistening mica and marine shell ornaments, evocative Ramey incised clay pots, and ominous monolithic stone axes. Pauketat states in *The Ascent of Chiefs* (1994): “Thus the materialization of an ideology touting elite separateness would have presented the consciousness of the nonelite with an unacceptable challenge to common sense and subordinate ideologies.”

Such pictures of Mississippian “lived experiences” are captivating until the reader asks, “How do these guys know this?” Anthropological archaeologists will certainly ask about the strength of the gossamer linking arguments spun to connect a tremendously rich archaeological record to a Mississippian “mindscape” involving “legitimization, domination, world renewal, negotiations of meaning, and reconciliation of ideologies.”

Most contributors to this volume devote little attention to the material world within which the Mississippian people existed. They rarely speak of

the benefits, e.g., “crop insurance, disaster relief, and military protection” that the Cahokian commoners might have received in return for their support of the chiefs, their families, and their allies. A very real threat that Mississippian people in the American Bottoms faced was catastrophic flooding. Recent geomorphological studies within the Upper Mississippi Valley provide evidence for more frequent, large magnitude floods between 1,000 and 500 years ago. Interestingly, Pauketat suggests that the short, intensive burst of plaza leveling, rebuilding, and reorganizing of “domestic and community space” circa 1050 C. E. throughout the northern American Bottoms was the result of dramatic ideological change and consolidation. Yet, from a materialist perspective, Pauketat’s “Big Bang in the Bottom” quite possibly may have been a coordinated response to the devastation caused by a catastrophic flood. This example points out one of the most significant weaknesses of postmodernist-inspired archaeology: past ideas did not create the archaeological record, past behavior did—and, most importantly, past human behavior within a biophysical environment that included other potentially competitive human populations.

The contributors ignore evolutionary ecology and the central role that genetic distance, inclusive fitness, nepotism, and reciprocal altruism, no doubt, played in the formation of chiefdoms. Unrelated or distantly related “commoners” may have striven to affiliate themselves with larger families and their “risk management” networks. In return, these commoners may have provided corvée labor, tribute, reproductive access, and military allegiance. We might expect that complex chiefdoms, given their population size, would be unstable political systems, stretching the cohesive forces of kinship to their limits. These are issues that can be monitored in the archaeological record. David Anderson and David Hally, for example, have both proposed that a twenty to thirty year cycle of platform mound construction throughout parts of the Southeast may reflect political instability within chiefdoms. Each stage of new construction may coincide with the emergence of a new chief due to death(s) or a change in leadership.

Pauketat and Emerson’s book provides detailed discussions of Cahokia archaeology and untestable stories about what produced it. It is well-written, well-organized, and worth reading. Yet its conclusions about Mississippian “domination and ideology” cannot be evaluated in any robust way using the extraordinary archaeology in the American Bottoms. Legitimation of Pauketat and Emerson’s ideology may only occur if restated in an empirically-based, verifiable form. **Alan J. Osborn**, *Department of Anthropology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln*.