

Monks Mound—Center of the universe?

By John McClarey

A hyperbole or a facsimile? I think the case can be made that Monks Mound and the entire layout of this ancient metropolis in the American Bottom near East St. Louis was a facsimile or model of Cahokia's place in the cosmos, similar to the Black Hills as a "mirror or heaven" or the heart of all that is." These are good metaphors to describe Cahokia's center in the three-layer cake concept of the universe—the Underworld, the Earth, and the Sky. Cahokia by the 12th century B.C.E., was the place for people to connect with the spirits of this sacred sphere.

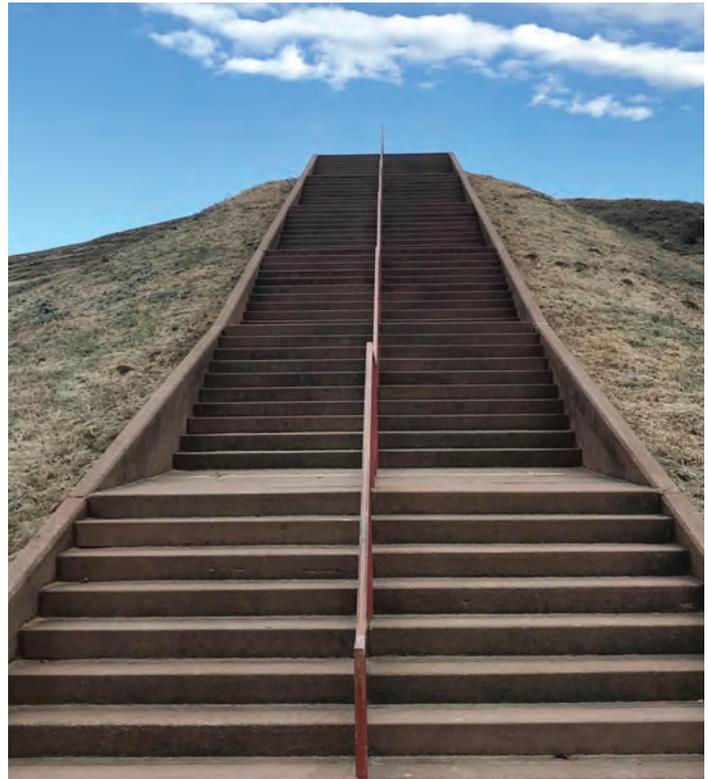


In this article I will identify the sacred elements that made this place special to local and non-local populations and the role of the Birdman chiefs, priests, and shamans to interpret this unique place as a center in a larger world. Additionally, I identify the similarities of Cahokia as a sacred place to other societies at different times and places.

My fascination with Cahokia Mounds developed over a period of time with many visits from the early 1970s to the present. Briefly, Cahokia was the largest American city north of Mexico before the coming of the Europeans in the 15th century. It is believed that Cahokia was a political, religious, and economic center for perhaps as many as 500,000 Indians in the Mississippi Valley. It was a planned city with everything laid out on the cardinal points on the compass, Monks Mound, the largest mound at the center, served as the official residence of the Great Sun god or Birdman deity. Cahokia's location in the Mississippi Bottoms in southwestern Illinois and the annual flooding of great rivers in the area deposited alluvial soil important to large scale agriculture. Artifacts of Cahokia indicate an extensive trade network that reached far distant markets throughout the Midwest, the southeast, and to the Gulf of Mexico, and perhaps to South America. The Cahokians mysteriously disappeared from this place after 1400 B.C.E. Different theories exist as to the causes and likely places for their resettlement. One theory is that the Cahokians intermingled with other tribes with time and lost their identity, or perhaps migrated to Mexico or other places. There were no signs of invasion or warfare at Cahokia or breaches in the stockades that surrounded the complex.

Cahokia resembled other ancient cities around the world from Egypt to the Yucatan in Mexico, which were also laid out according to precise geometry. Cahokia's connection to other Mississippian Indian sites at Etowah Mounds in Georgia, Spiro Mounds in Oklahoma, Moundville in Alabama, and Cahokia's similarities to Aztec and Mayan pyramids are of considerable interest. Different stories about the origin and building of Cahokia suggest that they may have been built by "superior" races of people such as the Greeks, the Israelites, or otherworld cultures. The consensus of most observers is that they were built by indigenous peoples. There was so much more that stirred my interest.

Sacred places or sacred geography can be found all over



the world and in all religions, but the focus here is on the Cahokia Mounds in southern Illinois and cross culture comparisons. Cahokia's unique story includes the cruciform layout, the incarnate Birdman legend, the flat-topped pyramid mounds—the temple on Monks Mound, the sacred or eternal flame. Elaborate burials, woodhenge, pilgrimages, sacred relics, paintings and stone carvings, and festivals suggest religious beliefs and practices. Other narratives about early peoples' belief in the presence of the spirit world in all objects of nature, animate and inanimate, had religious significance to the Cahokians. For example, at a recent workshop on Ecology, the speaker, imitating an early Indian practice, asked: "Have you hugged a tree today?" Also, in some Indian societies animals were thanked for their sacrifices necessary to feed the people—an act necessary to prevent revenge by the offended spirits of slain animals. Animistic beliefs and practices are found in Biblical accounts and indicated in some contemporary religion beliefs and practices. Now I turn to this "mirror of heaven or the "heart of all that is"—the lens to view this sacred space.

The cruciform layout

The city was laid out in a cruciform, with four intersecting paths that aligned with the four cardinal points on the compass. Monks Mound dominated the center with four plazas and other important structures—North, South, East, and West. All points were designed to lead to the center or a pathway to the spiritual world. Tenochtitlan, the Mexico center of the magnificent Aztec empire, was laid out in a similar plan.

The Birdman legend

(See figure 1). Cahokia's Birdman symbol. The image shows a man wearing a mask with a birdlike beak with feathers attached to his arms, and with a pattern on the back side representing the skin of a snake. This image is similar to Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent found in Aztec and Mayan cultures. Several members of my family and I visited Chichen Itza and saw the feathered serpent image on the base of the pyramid. This duality of the deity represents both the benevolent and evil nature of god and man. The falcon bird image represents the ability of a god to fly anywhere in the universe—the sky world, the earth world, and the underworld—to connect with its people. The serpent, or trickster half of this duality, resided in the underworld and although a personification of evil, was capable of shedding its skin, suggesting rebirth—common in Christian and other cross-culture studies of religion.

In the Mississippian legend the Sun god sent a flame of itself to Cahokia to teach people how to live better. The flame became incarnated and embodied in the chief or the Birdman. It had to be kept alive and not allowed to be stolen or extinguished lest the people die. This assignment was the responsibility of the chief and his subordinates as well as the obligation to welcome the morning sun and other natural phenomenon. The several satellite cities surrounding Cahokia also served the purpose for protecting the flame. The responsibility in our culture is assigned not only to our headman, the President, but to all of the people lest our democratic republican system die. Mound 72 at Cahokia has been thoroughly excavated and reveals a highly placed individual, surrounded by headless guards, lying on an elaborate arrangement of shell beads and other precious stones fashioned in the form of a falcon. Some believe that this figure was the Sun god or Birdman.

The flat-topped pyramid mounds

The center structure at Cahokia, Monks Mound, rose to a height of 100 feet with the temple. It was the head-



Figure 1. Cahokia's Birdman symbol.

quarters for the Birdman. God and his sub-chiefs. High places for contact between the gods and man are found in many cultures such as the Sioux burial places high in the Black Hills, where the spirits of the deceased met with their star people ancestors and the gods. Mounds in Judeo-Christian narratives were places for human and god figures to meet. Jacob's ladder, in Judeo-Christian lore, reached to the heavens. Church spires reach upward with the same meaning and expectation.

Woodhenge

The woodhenge structure, south of Monks Mound, consisted of a circle of posts with a central post for sighting the summer and winter solstices, and the four seasons of the year. Ceremonies and festivals throughout the year celebrated the gifts of the season such as planting and harvesting time. Appeals were made to the gods for good rains and a plentiful harvest and successful hunts. It is likely that the 53 young women sacrificed and interred in one of the mounds served as offerings to the rain god, a similar practice found at Chichén Itzá. Animal and human sacrifices are found in the Judeo-Christian lore as well.

Sacred relics, pots, paintings and stone carvings were important in religious ceremonies. The Birdman, Hero

Twins, Morning Star, the Falcon, and other figures have been found in many of the Mississippian sites. The Hero Twins are found also in Aztec and Mayan artwork and legend. They are difficult to understand. In one interpretation, the Twins were born of a sun goddess (another virgin birth story) and were revered as heroes in that they avenged the death of their father by slaying the giant serpent in the underworld—similar in some respects to the Christian legend of tossing the Devil or Satan into a bottomless lake for 1,000 years.

Pilgrimages to Cahokia

In a figurative sense all roads lead to Cahokia, and pilgrims from surrounding areas, even as far away as the Gulf of Mexico, came to this metropolis of perhaps 15,000-20,000 people to see this magnificent place of some 120 mounds, including the suburbs, laid out in in geometric order with four plazas for games, trading, socializing, etc. Surrounding this site was a stockade and a settled area for hundreds of dwellings for farmers, artisans, and bountiful forests, streams, and the Mississippi River. It was a place that local and non-locals could socialize, enjoy the amenities, and become empowered by a relationship with nature and the gods, and to seek peace in a community not known for war. Fantastic accounts of otherworldly visitations and promises return were no doubt exchanged, such as the Aztec Quetzalcoatl along with the Cahokian Birdman. Some Aztecs believed that the Spanish Conquistadors were the returning gods. Pilgrimages to sacred spots are found in many religions, such as Jerusalem, a sacred place for Jews, Muslims, and Christians. What is sacred is what the people say is sacred.

A good book to help understand this unique religious aspect of Cahokia is *Shaman, Priest, Practice, Belief—Materials of Ritual and Religion in Eastern North America*, by Stephen B. Carmody and Casey R. Barrier (University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa) 2020. 

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