

# Cahokia Mounds

Many believe that Native American settlement in the United States before European colonization consisted of only small groups of nomadic tribes, but archeological evidence tells a very different story. At the height of its existence in 1250 AD, the ancient city of Cahokia sustained as many as 40,000 inhabitants, roughly the size of London, England at the same time period. The Cahokia Mounds, located in southern Illinois, is the largest known Mesoamerican settlement north of the Rio Grande and gives us a well-preserved snapshot of life before European settlement.

The city was built near the confluence of the Missouri, Illinois, and Mississippi rivers, making it a busy port. Traders brought copper and other treasures from far-away places. Fishermen brought in the daily catch through a system of irrigation and transportation canals. The air was filled with smoke from cooking fires that provided food for the variety of workers in the community.

Established around 600 AD, this relatively flat land was transformed into a series of as many as 120 human-built earthen mounds, 80 of which still exist today as evidence of the inhabitants' incredible construction feat. Archeologists estimate that 55 million cubic feet of dirt, transported using woven baskets, was used to construct this network of mounds that served as venues for gatherings, ceremonies, and recently discovered mass graves that point to human sacrifice. Also a very elaborate grave site was discovered at mound 72, not unlike the royal tombs of ancient Egypt. Buried deep within this mound was a roughly 40 year old man. Accompanying him were over 20,000 seashells in the shape of an eagle. Remains of what archaeologists named "Woodhenge" were reconstructed in 1985, and like England's Stonehenge, this site was possibly used to make astronomical sightings.

Archaeologists have proposed several causes for the decline of this civilization, but the strongest theory is that resources such as firewood were depleted as the population rose into the tens of thousands. Because nearly all trees had been cleared in the area, flash flooding became more intense and more common. Archaeologists believe that this encroaching water may have flooded the agricultural fields too frequently to yield an adequate harvest.

No written records exist from the Cahokia Mounds and in reality, we know very little about their daily lives or the hardships its inhabitants faced. Despite this lack of information, the surviving mounds point to an incredibly sophisticated society that appears to have functioned in many of the same ways we still do today, here in America.

## Source(s):

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