Chapter 8: Eastern North America

# Chapter Summary [Copied from Olszewski 2019, Chapter 8]

* During the Late Archaic period in the North American East, hunter–gatherer–forager groups domesticated local seed crops such as sunflower and maygrass.
* The Late Archaic period is known for mound-building. These large constructions were made using earth, such as at Poverty Point in Louisiana, or from the shells of shellfish food debris such as at the Sapelo Island Shellfish Ring Complex.
* Long-distance trade and exchange networks established during the Archaic period continued into the Woodland and Mississippian periods, as did mound building.
* Woodland groups such as the Adena and Hopewell cultures relied more heavily on domesticated native plants than did Archaic period groups.
* The Hopewell (Middle Woodland period) built burial mounds containing individuals with large quantities of grave goods including exotic items such as copper, mica, and quartz. These burials likely represent people with leadership roles, including ritual specialists. The presence of exotic materials was partly the result of the Hopewell Interaction Sphere, which linked many Hopewell and other groups together in trade and exchange networks.
* During the Late Woodland period, greater agricultural investment was made in the growing of maize, which had been introduced from Mexico a few centuries earlier.
* The Early Mississippian period saw the rise of Cahokia, a major social and ceremonial center. Cahokia had earthen pyramids, plazas, elaborate burials, a woodhenge, and many other features indicating its importance in the region. Surrounding Cahokia were many smaller towns with their own plazas and pyramids, as well as hamlets where farmers lived and worked.
* Centers such as Cahokia partially served as focus points for rituals such as feasting and other ceremonies and activities (such as chunkey games) that integrated people across the region. These events, as well as the building of the monuments, were likely under the control of elites and their families.
* Evidence for elites at Cahokia comes from the types and quantities of grave goods found with them, the unusual positioning (such as the young adult female and male buried in the midst of thousands of shell beads in Mound 72), burial within earthen mounds, and bioarchaeological studies of their bones showing that they had better access to higher-quality diets.
* Bioarchaeology shows that many people at Cahokia and smaller sites in the region were migrants from elsewhere in the North American East.
* By AD 1200, Cahokia and its surrounding region was mostly abandoned and other Mississippian period centers became more prominent. Why people left Cahokia is not entirely clear, although abandonment might have been related to overuse of the land for maize agriculture, droughts that affected agricultural productively, and increased conflicts.
* Late Mississippian centers, such as Moundville, also contained plazas, earthen mounds, and elaborate burials. During this period there are many examples of depopulation of areas of the North American East, possibly because of increased warfare or climatic changes that affected agricultural productivity.
* When the Spanish arrived in the AD 1500s, they encountered Mississippian period peoples. However, diseases that the Spanish and other foreigners brought from Europe decimated these Native American populations, resulting in further depopulation. Descendants of these Mississipian societies include the Coosa, Apalachee, and Natchez.

# Key Terms

**Adena**: an archaeological mound building tradition that first appears during the Early Woodland period in Eastern North America, about 1000 cal BC. The conical mounds contain burials that accumulated over many years, with the size of the mounds growing as basket-carried earth was added to cover new burials in the same place.

**Cahokia**: an Early Mississippian period site in Illinois (Eastern North America). Cahokia was one of the most important political and ritual centers of the Mississippian period. Its “downtown” area contained Monk’s Mound, the Great Plaza, a Woodhenge, sub-Mound 51, and a wooden palisade, as well as several other earthen mounds (such as Mound 72) and plazas. It was associated with the complexes at the East St. Louis Site and the Mound City Site.

**Hopewell**: an Eastern North America tradition of mound building, burial complexes, and long-distance exchange networks that appears during the Middle Woodland period, starting about 200 cal BC; there are several regional groups, including the Ohio Hopewell.

**Hopewell Interaction Sphere**: a Middle Woodland “phenomenon” in which certain aspects of ritual and ceremony were shared across a wide region in Eastern North America among Hopewell-affiliated groups. They also participated to varying extents in long-distance trade and exchange networks and in constructing earthen mounds used for burials and for other ceremonies.

**Hopewell Site**: a Middle Woodland period site in Ohio that contains earthen works, including burial mounds with tens of thousands of exotic materials as grave goods and as ceremonial deposits within mounds. It is a mound complex site associated with the Hopewell tradition.

**Indian Knoll**: a Late Archaic period site in Kentucky dating between 3000 and 2500 cal BC. It has a shell midden (mound) and a cemetery with more than 1100 individual burials. Some burials have exotic materials such as copper and marine shell, perhaps indicating differences in status, while others suggest that people were buried with probable gender-related objects such as axes and fishhooks with males and nutting stones and bone beads with females.

**Monk’s Mound**: an Early Mississippian period earthen truncated pyramid at Cahokia in Eastern North America; it is the largest, pre-Columbian man-made construction north of Mexico.

**Mound 72**: an Early Mississippian period burial mound at Cahokia, Illinois. It contains evidence for elaborate burial rituals for elite male individuals, as well as probable sacrifice burials (usually of numerous females) and offerings of exotic goods such as mica, copper, and shell beads.

**Moundville**: a Late Mississippian period site in Alabama with 29 earthen mounds, a plaza, and a palisade. It became a significant center around AD 1200, but most of its residents moved away about AD 1250, except for elite families and their retainers.

**Poverty Point**: a Late Archaic period site in Louisiana with complex earthworks called mounds. It dates from 1750 to 1350 cal BC and represents a highly organized construction of concentric, segmented ridge mounds associated with several high mounds such as Mound A. There is a large open plaza area inside the inner ridge. People living on the inner ridge likely had greater social rank or standing than those living on other ridges, which had no direct line of sight into the plaza. Very high-status individuals and families may have lived on the taller mounds such as Mound A.

**Sapelo Island Shell Ring Complex**: a Late Archaic period site in Georgia, it has evidence for three shell rings. Rings II and III are very low and appear to be habitation areas where dwellings were placed inside the ring and shared the open plaza area there. Ring I is more substantial and seasonality evidence suggests that parts of it may have been rapidly deposited, perhaps indicating ritual feasting events.

**Southeastern Ceremonial Complex**: artistic motifs that were carved onto shell cups and gorgets, as well as hammered onto copper, during the Late Mississippian period in the North American East. Images include males wearing costumes, snakes, weapons, decapitations, chunkey players, and raptors.

**Sub-Mound 51**: this Early Mississippian period feature was originally a borrow pit from which sediment was removed to construct earthen works at Cahokia and perhaps to level the Great Plaza. It was later filled in by several very large debris deposition events including feasting remains.