

SOME PROBLEMS OF RECENT CAHOKIA ARCHAEOLOGY

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During January and February of 1930 and the summer season of 1931, field parties of the University of Illinois carried out archaeological excavations on the site of the Powell mound in the Cahokia area, located on the truck farm of William and Frederick Powell, on Route 11, Fairmount, a suburb of East St. Louis. In 1930, Mr. Thorn Deuel of Chicago and Dr. W. C. McKern of Wisconsin co-operated in studying the large Powell mound; in 1931, a smaller mound about 25-30 yards south of the large Powell mound was carefully excavated with Mr. Gene M. Stirling in charge of local explorations.

The investigation of both mounds revealed important data and the interpretation of the results of our investigations show that the evidence of the two mounds dovetails and, taken as a whole, gives us our first stratigraphic or chronological evidence in Cahokia, and helps to some extent to fit the so-called Cahokia complex of cultures into the prehistoric sequence tentatively established in Fulton County, Illinois.

Notes and photographs taken on the profile through the long axis of the large Powell mound by Dr. L. E. Workman of the State Geological Survey during the course of mound removal by steam shovel in 1930, indicate that the mound was constructed in two stages, and consisted of a top layer of mound earth about 18-20 feet in height, brought to an apex in a hogback ridge running along the greater axis of the mound, and an underlying original mound core which was approximately 27 feet high. The older mound was of the rectangular, flat-topped variety familiar in the Cahokia area. No burials or burial furniture were found in the basal mound structure, and the potsherds and artifacts contained therein were evidently chance inclusions made while the mound-builders were obtaining the baskets of mound-earth from adjacent camp and village sites.

Later a second mound was built over the original flat-topped structure, but first the mound builders made two unique burial plots on the surface of the basal mound. The first of these burial plots was destroyed by steam shovel; the second was hand trowelled by a member of the University staff and adequate notes were taken. The long bones and skulls of several secondary interments had been placed between alternating sheaths of cedar bark with a blanket of shells covering the bones. A thin corn husk or grass matting had covered the whole burial plot, approximately 18-20 feet in diameter. Two wooden spools covered with sheet copper, interpreted as ear pendants, fell from the burial level during excavation. The spools and the small marine shells have definite associations with Florida and the southeastern Atlantic region.

Other burials found on the slopes of the mound were without burial furniture. No material of cultural significance was found in the upper 20 feet of the Powell mound.

Excavations made in February, 1931, provided information as to the structure of the seven feet of mound material left at the base of the large mound destroyed by steam shovel. Beneath the mound were extensive

village site remains, potsherds, stone and bone artifacts, and kitchen refuse. The pottery in the underlying camp-site was of the same or related type as that accidentally included in the earth used in mound construction.

The excavation of the second and smaller mound on the Powell farm yielded data pertinent to the explanation of features in the large mound. Below the second Powell mound, were found evidences of a second village site culture entirely different from that found under the large Powell mound. The outstanding feature of the village site under the second mound was an extensive system of pit structures, 30 to 40 feet in diameter, varying in depth from 4 to 9 feet, and extending at least 100 feet from north to south. Our reconstruction of the site from transit readings shows an area some 40 by 50 feet (the east-west diameter will be shown to be longer on further excavation) surrounded on the north, east, and south by a continuous pit structure. There is a definite suggestion here of large subterranean house structures surrounding three sides of a central court. Present data do not inform us as to how far the court extends to the west or whether it is enclosed by pit structures on that side.

The bottom portions of these subterranean pits had been filled by storm water or river silting, with the occurrence of ash and charcoal at different levels in the pits, as well as charred floor matting, to indicate occupation at different levels or floors. Finally, after the abandonment of the village site and complete filling of the pits by sand and refuse or wind-blown materials, the mound, rectangular in shape, and probably relatively low and flat-topped in structure, had been constructed after careful preparation and smoothing of the ground which had accumulated over the old village site.

Burials were found only outside the mound, either just at feather edge or on the slopes after soil creep from the mound had started. Pottery and artifacts found with the burials are different and belong to a later culture than those found in the bottoms of the pit structures. The pits occur under the mound, running out to the west and north. They do not extend very far to the north, however, for the field party in 1930 found under the large mound pottery characteristic of the village site outside the pit-structures. Moreover, they found no evidence of the presence of such large pits under the large mound. For a square mile or more in the Fairmount region to the south of the Collinsville Bluffs and extending to the west into the built-over sections of East St. Louis, along both banks of the former course of Cahokia Creek, is found a huge village site. To this extensive surface culture is attributed the pottery and flint industry found associated with burials outside of and definitely more recent than the sub-mound village site culture on the Powell site. We have called the culture of the pit structures the "pure village site" culture, because the mound built over the village site has served to mantle and isolate the early village from interpolation of pottery and artifacts belonging to succeeding cultural developments.

The culture found outside the mound is more recent though definitely pre-historic, and is distinguished by several traits of material culture not found in the "pure village site" culture of the large pit structures. Outstanding is the occurrence with the burials, made intrusive into the top of the pits outside the second Powell mound, of a soft-textured, gray and black shell-tempered ware, often modelled on the rim in the form of animal heads, the head and tail of the duck being highly conventionalized and stylized in a characteristic manner. Also, there has been found with intrusive burials around the second Powell mound, at McCary's farm a quarter of a mile east of Powell's, and underneath the first Powell mound, but never in the pit structures, another characteristic pottery form—a flat-bottomed beaker pot

with conventionalized spout on the rim and a small pottery plug inserted in the side near the top of the beaker as a handle. This pot has been dubbed the "bean pot" by members of the field party. It has a wide distribution all over the surrounding area. Formerly, the pots themselves had not been found, but many of the pot handles had broken out entire and had aroused considerable speculation among collectors when picked up at many places on the village site south of the Collinsville Bluffs.

Both the "bean pot" and the duck-effigy bowls occur in the burial furniture in the famous Don Dixon mound at Lewiston. They have been found likewise in a mound explored by Charles Harris in Schuyler County, a location between Cahokia and Lewistown. Other features of pottery design and manufacture, hitherto regarded as "Cahokia" are distributed in the same way.

Historically, we must continue to call the whole Mississippi Bottoms in the region of St. Louis the Cahokia region. But recent investigations imply that we should hesitate to denominate a particular culture in the area as "Cahokia culture." The pottery of the "pure village site" at Powell's has a markedly higher percentage of superior ware, from the point of view of manufacture and design. As far away as the site of the Aztalan terraced mounds, a Wisconsin counterpart of Monk's Mound in the Cahokia region, Dr. W. C. McKern and Dr. S. A. Barrett find numerous parallels to both the "pure village site" culture and the "Bean pot-effigy bowl" culture, morphological pottery traits of both cultures occurring in about equal strength according to a recent analysis by Dr. W. C. McKern. As between Lewiston and Cahokia, a common conclusion has been reached in regard to the chronological position of the "Bean pot-duck effigy" culture; it is tentatively regarded in both places as the most recent cultural phase.