

Cahokia: Mirror of the Cosmos

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ISSN 0003-4827

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Recommended Citation

Barnhart, Terry A. "Cahokia: Mirror of the Cosmos." *The Annals of Iowa* 61 (2002), 428-429.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.10626>

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Cahokia: Mirror of the Cosmos, by Sally A. Kitt Chappell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002. xviii, 218 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$38.00 cloth.

Reviewer Terry A. Barnhart is professor of history at Eastern Illinois University. His research interests center on the history of American archeology and the history and culture of the American Midwest.

What the Cahokia mounds meant to the people who erected them will never be known with any degree of certainty or completeness, but the interdisciplinary research carried forward by several generations of scholars has made Cahokia far less a mystery than it once was. The orientation of the site, the positioning of the mounds in relationship to each other, the iconography of artifacts found there, the comparative study of other archeological sites, and the use of ethnological analogies all suggest that life at Cahokia was intimately connected to the rhythms of the seasons, the solstices and equinoxes, and to the cosmological ideas of its ancient inhabitants. What was the original inspiration for the elaborate complex of mounds, and what was their significance? According to the author of *Cahokia: Mirror of the Cosmos*, it was the cosmos itself: "they patterned their great mound city to echo the rhythms of the cosmos" (xvii). The work is an ecological, geological, geographical, and cultural interpretation of Cahokia and what it tells us of the worldview of the ancient Cahokians, and what the site has meant to others centuries after their departure.

Sally A. Kitt Chappell, an architectural historian and professor emeritus in the department of art at DePaul University, is author of *Architecture and Planning: Graham, Anderson, Probst, and White, 1912-1936* and a contributor to the travel section of the *New York Times*. William R. Iseminger and John E. Kelly collaborated with her as consultants and assisted in the research and writing of this work. Richly illustrated with 128 figures, it is more than a coffee table book and less than an academic monograph. It seeks a middle course for a lay audience and tracks it admirably. It is above all else an expression of the author's fascination with the site and her enthusiasm for studying it as an architectural historian. The illustrations in the work are not eye-wash but integral parts of the story and evidence in their own right.

The book's greatest strength lies in its humanistic value. The author does an excellent job of showing how the site reflects the values of its successive cultures: the archaic hunters and gatherers who first lived there, the Mississippian people who built the mounds and occupied the site between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, their Euro-American successors, and those who are stewards of Cahokia today (in 1982 Cahokia was designated a World Heritage site possessing a

cultural significance belonging to the "common inheritance of all mankind"). Cultural landscapes often have layered meanings (and sometimes contested ones), especially those such as Cahokia that date to prehistoric times and have been home to ethnically, culturally, and chronologically distinct peoples, each of whom viewed the site through different and often competing sets of values. Euro-American and Native American visitors continue to draw meaning from the site six centuries after its abandonment by the original inhabitants, although their views as to its spiritual significance are not always the same.

Those who want an entrée to the cultural history of the site and the problems of research and interpretation that frame it will do well to begin here, although the discussion of the Big Bang and the creation of the cosmos, an original feature of this book, could be dispensed with at no cost to the volume's overall worth. *Cahokia: Mirror of the Cosmos* is an excellent companion to Biloine Whiting Young and Melvin L. Fowler's *Cahokia: The Great Native American Metropolis* (University of Illinois Press, 2000). Both works have the virtue of distilling dense monographic research and technical site reports into a smoothly flowing and heartfelt narrative for the nonspecialist.

Iowa—Portrait of the Land. Des Moines: Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 2000. viii, 89 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography. \$5.00 paper.

Reviewer Lori Vermaas is a historical researcher and free-lance writer. Her forthcoming book, *Sequoia: The Heralded Tree in American Art and Culture*, will be published by the Smithsonian Institution Press in 2003.

During the nineteenth century, Iowans dramatically transformed the state's strikingly diverse prairie land into a farm monoculture, a mercurial metamorphosis reflecting Americans' troublesome relationship with nature. Actually, the changes took only about 75 years. The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) briefly surveys that history in *Iowa—Portrait of the Land*, starting with Native Americans' balanced affinity with nature, Euro-Americans' dominating control after 1800, and the conservation movement's emergence in Iowa during the early twentieth century. But the DNR also amply describes and illustrates the natural bounty that remains or that has been recovered, a proactive attempt to stimulate more imaginative perceptions of Iowa's landscape informed by the state's geological, industrial, and natural history.

That is a huge, although highly admirable, goal. At 89 pages, this portrait can only be a basic introduction to Iowa's environmental history. The main purpose of the book, which was released as part of the state's celebration of Earth Day, 2000, is to encourage more responsible

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