Religion and Innovation in Human Affairs (RIHA)
Exploring the Role of Religion in the Origins of Novelty and the Diffusion of Innovation in the Progress of Civilizations

Religion and Innovation in Pre-Columbian Societies

Field Research at "Emerald" Site, Cahokia ($180,000). Indiana University. PIs: Timothy Pauketat (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign) and Susan Alt (Indiana University)

The Project examines the complex causal relationships between place, experience, and human and non-human agencies that produced an emergent religious orthodoxy at the pre-Columbian American Indian city of Cahokia. RIHA investigations in 2012-2014 resulted in the testing of a series of five propositions: (1) Emerald and Pfeffer were, in fact, lunar shrines; (2) they were sites of intimate ritual entanglements based on “hierophantic” experiences; (3) they were visited by pilgrims from distant lands; (4) they were connected to Cahokia and to distant people/places via built processional avenues and pilgrim traces; (5) at least one of them, Emerald, pre-dates the planned reconstruction of Cahokia from a series of horticultural village segments into an ordered city. A series of data recovery techniques were used to test the propositions. The results provide insight into how religion and civilization were intertwined. To wit, a series of “shrine” houses were defined and excavated that appear to have been the central features of the Emerald site. All have lunar alignments, as do other buildings in which offerings were made. Most notably, the Emerald site does pre-date Cahokia, though Cahokians substantially expanded it in later years. Either way, all lines of evidence taken together strongly argue that this American Indian experiment in civilization would have not happened without the lunar shrines.

Pauketat and Alt believe that the fundamental religious associations that generated the city of Cahokia are being revealed in their findings. Future understanding of the singular development of the American Indian city of Cahokia and later “Mississippian” towns and polities across the eastern United States will hinge on the results of their project that, they also believe, will be looked to as a model for understanding early urbanization elsewhere in the world.

Ultimately, their findings should also have a transformative effect on ways in which religion is understood in North American archaeology generally. Currently, religion is treated as secondary to social and political organizations that are, in turn, generally credited to environmental, economic, and subsistence causes. However, the Emerald project will promote an understanding of religion as inseparable and yet determinative of human history.

Major Outputs:
Book:
- Pauketat, Timothy R. & Susan M. Alt, eds. Cahokian Religion and Cultural Innovation (manuscript in progress)
Articles/Book Chapters:

• Pauketat, Timothy R., & Susan M. Alt, a journal article highlighting our revisionary interpretation of Cahokia for either the Cambridge Archaeological Journal or Time and Mind to be written and submitted in 2015.
• Pauketat, Timothy R., Susan M. Alt, Jeffrey D. Kruchten, & William Romain, an article in Science on Emerald’s archaeoastronomy to be written and submitted in 2015.

Conference Session:

• Hopewell Reinvented Six Centuries Later at Emerald Mound: Results of the RIHA Project. A symposium at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Archaeology Conference, Columbus, OH, October 24-27, 2013

Presentations:

• Barzilai, Rebecca M. “Moving People, Moving Pots: Ceramic Analyses from the 2012 and 2013 Excavations at Emerald Mound (11S1).” Indiana University Anthropology Graduate Student Association Symposium, Feb. 21-23, 2014.
• Hogan, Maura E. “Geochemical Insights into Early Mississippian Monumentality: Results from the 2012 Ford Mound Excavation at the Pfeffer Site.” Midwest Archaeological Conference, Columbus, OH (October 24-26, 2013).
• Pauketat, Timothy. “Moon Medicine and Social History in the Indigenous Mississippi Valley,” Brigham Young University (Grace Elizabeth Shallit Memorial Lecture series), March 6, 2014.
• Pauketat, Timothy. “Creating the Great Center Place: The Moons and Missions of Cahokia,” University of Wisconsin, Department of Anthropology, November 22, 2013.
• Pauketat, Timothy. “A Full Moon over Cahokia Mounds 1000 Years Ago,” Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, St. Louis, Missouri, October 18, 2013.

PhD Dissertations:
• Barzilai, Rebecca (Indiana): “A sourcing study and ceramic analysis of the Emerald site pottery,” anticipated April 2017.
• Hogan, Maura (Indiana): “Mound construction and memory at the Pfeffer site,” anticipated 2016-17.

Media Coverage/Events: