

**Invoking Power: Restoration of Native American Women's Power Through the
Mississippian Earthmother**

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Master of Arts

In Museum Studies

Invoking Power: Restoration of Native American Women's Power Through the Mississippian Earthmother

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July 28, 2026

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my mother. She taught me the importance of learning family history and history in general. Without that, I would never have started this journey into college. Growing up, I never even dreamed of college. I was from a small town, the daughter of a farmer, and from a typical low-income Oklahoma family. My goals were only to get married and have children, and that is just what I did. I had my first child at 18 and finally married shortly after my second child was born, when I was 22. By the time I had my third child, I was 26. When she started school, I still had so much more life to live and suddenly had a lot of free time. I found that I needed an identity outside of being a wife and mother. I started substituting at my children's school, and that led to the idea of college. But only now do I realize that the seeds were planted years ago, when I was a teenager, after she had moved her and me out on our own to start a new life. She was gaining her own identity outside of being a wife and mother for the first time. She took classes and taught the "Latchkey" kids who waited for their parents to pick them up after school. Watching her start a new life gave me the courage to do the same. Thank you, Mom, for giving me that courage, and I wish you were still here to see just what kind of influence you had on me.

I also dedicate this thesis to my children, Tristian, Dorian, and Cordelia. I am so proud of the people you are becoming. I hope that by seeing me break the typical societal mold, you, too, will live your lives outside the box and never let others tell you how to live. There is so much more to life than what they want you to believe. I will always have your back in whatever you choose to do.

And last, but certainly not least, I want to dedicate this thesis to my husband, James. I most assuredly would not have been able to do this without you. You let me focus on my classes while you worked and made sure that our little family was taken care of. You sacrificed your money, time, and energy to ensure that I could succeed. I hope that you know that I saw that. Without all of your help, I would not have been able to accomplish what I have in my life, even beyond this thesis. You have stood by every choice I made and supported it, never making me feel like they were silly or unjustified decisions. I am so lucky to have you in my life these past 26 years, and I look forward to many more years to come. I love you with all my heart.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank all of the professors I have ever had at the University of Central Oklahoma. When I started college, I was a high school dropout (at least with a GED), a stay-at-home mother, and had no clue what I was doing. Not one professor made me feel inadequate or that any question was ever dumb. Every professor, even the ones I deemed “hard,” taught me that working hard and just being willing to learn were the keys to success.

One professor I have to point out is Dr. Joey Williams. He is no longer at UCO, but my time in his classes set me on the path to the Museum Studies Program. He gave me a love and appreciation for archaeology, and working in a museum was the next best thing. He challenged me to push myself out of my comfort zone and take on projects I never would have pursued on my own, one of which led me to work with Dr. Eric Singleton at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum.

Which brings me to my next acknowledgment. I absolutely need to thank Dr. Eric Singleton. Working with him and discussing iconography, researchers in the field, and Mississippi history helped me formulate my thoughts on how I wanted to approach this thesis. His conversations and guidance helped me gain so much insight. He always had a new source for me to check out, a new idea to pursue, and was always there to help talk me through my thoughts. This thesis would not exist without him.

And then of course I have to thank my thesis committee, Dr. Natalie Panther, Dr. Chelsea Ball, Dr. Reid Weber, and Heidi Vaughn. You four have put up with so much with me. My time management skills, especially. But you guys worked with me, and I greatly appreciated it. You

four made sure to give me great feedback and to help me along, never hesitating to answer any question. Thank you all for all your help.

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Abstract

Historians and scholars have written much in feminist Indigenous studies about the Native women who call North America, or Turtle Island, home. But when historians wrote about Mississippian women or their descendant communities, they left out crucial information about these women and how they lived day to day. They have also failed to realize just how much their religions shaped their worlds. Earthmother was a Mississippian deity that can still be seen today in the rituals and ceremonies of the Southeast Indigenous nations who descend from the Mississippians. Through research into archaeological and iconographic records, evidence of how Earthmother shaped women's roles and gave them power over certain aspects of society can be seen. If the teachings of Earthmother could be restored, women could regain their sacred power and take a more prominent place in their communities.

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Introduction

Statement of the Problem or Issue

Historians and scholars have written much in feminist Indigenous studies about the Native women who call North America, or Turtle Island, home. But when historians wrote about Mississippian women or their descendant communities, they left out crucial information about these women and how they lived day to day.

Thesis Statement

Drawing on research across multiple historical disciplines that cover the Mississippian culture of the Southeastern United States, this thesis argues that Earthmother shaped the sacred roles of Mississippian women by granting them authority over many aspects of their communities, including agriculture, fertility rituals, care of house and children, and other activities that connected them to their roles as the “pathways to life”. These roles persisted among descendant women over time but faded with the introduction of external Western cultural influences, causing them to lose the power and authority they once enjoyed.

Statement of Research Methodology

For this thesis and the following chapters, ethnohistory will be used to navigate the sources, both old and contemporary. Due to the age of the Mississippian culture, reliance on

iconography will be heavy. Using Ethnohistory and its offshoot discipline, “upstreaming,” reveals the duality of the sexes, the importance of agriculture in the women’s realm, and the portrayal of Mississippian women in the historiographical record.¹ The hope is that the evolution of Mississippian women and their descendants, who have been characterized only as background players in their histories, will be shaped into much more than that. Native women played major roles in the history of their societies, and they have been overlooked or even outright ignored.

I do confess that most of my sources were secondary, given the nature of the culture I was studying. In this case, we mostly only have archaeology and iconography to go off of for the study of the Mississippians, since they did not have a written language themselves, and only a handful of explorers encountered and wrote about them. Most of my sources were varied, but the majority were ethnological, archaeological, historical, and feminist studies. The journal articles are written mostly by archaeologists and published in archaeological journals. These made up a large number of my sources, closely followed by books. The books were mostly made up of essays written by archaeologists, ethnologists, and iconographers in the Mississippian fields of study. For primary sources, I used what was available from early explorers and then relied mostly on more recent primary sources on modern-day Indigenous communities descended from the Mississippians. One of the most prominent sources was that of the Annual Reports of the Bureau of American Ethnology and the author's materials outside of the reports.

¹ Upstreaming was developed by anthropologist William Fenton. According to Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green in their book *The Columbian Guide to American Indians of the Southeast*, the process recognizes that cultures change, but slowly. Ethnologists can glean insights into ritualistic activities that have been carried on for generations by what still lingers over time.; Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green, *The Columbian Guide to American Indians of the Southeast* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 8.

While we only have archaeological and ethnographic histories of the Mississippians to draw on, the power held by women can be understood through this means of research. Looking at these sources, we can see that women held a prominent place in society and that power was granted to them through the Earthmother. Earthmother, a Mississippian deity, is found not only in archaeology and iconography but also in indigenous rituals and spiritual practices still practiced today. Although both native men and women held her in high regard, she, along with her power, was associated with women in society because of their sacred duties. This correlation gave women a prominent place in their societies and certain ritualistic roles that had to be enacted for the betterment and continuation of their worlds.² Earthmother can be seen in most of the descendant communities, but under many different names. She resides in the Underworld and is also associated with the moon, water, and fertility. As a mother to humanity, she is intricately linked to women. Though this made women powerful in certain aspects of the community, they were not more powerful than men; one should think of it as a duality and partnership. Each sex had roles given to them by the First Man and First Woman.³ Still, most historians do not cover the erosion of the Native women's place in their societies, while the Earthmother archetype vanishes from the predominant religion.

An important point to stress is that throughout this paper, there will be no argument that women were ever of a higher status. Rather, men and women had distinct roles and held authority in their respective roles. Over time, with the introduction of Western ideals,

² F. Kent Reilly and James F. Garber, "Introduction," in *Ancient Objects and Sacred Realms*, eds. F. Kent Reilly and James F. Garber (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 1.; Trista Wilmot, "Invoking Power: Rebirth, Renewal, and Restoration with the Sacred Feministic Architecture of the Mississippians" (Class paper, University of Central Oklahoma, 2024), 2.; Trista Wilmot, "Invoking Power: Sacred Feminism and the Motherhood of the Mississippians" (Class Paper, University of Central Oklahoma, 2023), 3.

³ First Woman is also another archetype of Earthmother. She is also simultaneously the daughter of Earthmother.

culture, interference, technology, and especially the loss of identity triggered by the cumulative effects of these hegemonic Western attitudes, both indigenous men and women lost their “places” in their societies. This paper will explore Indigenous women’s place and the correlation between their losses and the loss of the Mississippian religious figure, Earthmother.

Brief Summary of the Literature/ Historiography:

Duality is everything in the religion of much of the Southeast. Charles Hudson is the author of *The Southeastern Indians*, written in 1976, one of the seminal works in the Native Southeastern histories. Although Hudson is a prominent anthropologist and historian in the field of Mississippian studies, it seems he even failed to make that observation fully. However, he was one of the first to recognize the use of descendant oral histories and practices as a means of deciphering Mississippian religion and lifeways. He presents a duality of the sexes, in a sense, but lacks the nuance that would show the importance of those roles. As a male historian focused on Southeastern culture as a whole, he overlooked the roles of women as significant counterparts to those of men. He posits that the daily activities of men and women are distinctly different, and that the genders remain exclusively in their respective areas.⁴ He acknowledges that agriculture is women's exclusive domain, with men only helping to clear fields and sometimes tending them.⁵ But with that, you get the sense that, as he writes about the roles of women and men, he is viewing them through a Western lens and does not grasp the sacredness of the daily tasks performed by the opposite gender.

And in fact, this is precisely what Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green point out in their book, *The Columbian Guide to American Indians of the Southeast*. They point out that early

⁴ Charles Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976), 260.

⁵ Ibid, 264-268.

1900s ethnologists were men and would not have had the ability to gain access to women and their lifeways. These ethnologists would have been the sources Hudson used in his book. This caused a lack of perspective on women and their duties in domestic life, as well as on the ceremonies specific to women and agriculture in history.⁶ Hence, most feminist writings had to sift and piece together those perspectives. This gave rise to a new ethnographic and historical field, known as ethnohistory. Ethnohistory got its start in the 1950s, and Charles Hudson did use ethnohistory himself, but I feel he did not take it as far in his research as Perdue and Green did. Perdue and Green realized that with ethnohistory, they could use a process coined “upstreaming” by the anthropologist William Fenton. In this process, it is determined that cultures usually change slowly, and ethnographic research into an earlier culture can be done by examining the practices and beliefs of the later cultures that descend. They warn that this process must be used with caution, since not all cultures are monolithic and change at different rates. Therefore, standardization for this process cannot be established.⁷ Ethnohistory interrogates sources, seeking the “hows” and “whys” of cultural change between the former and later cultures.⁸ They also point out that by taking this ethnohistorical approach, you can help give back some of the agency of the Native voices that have been missing in their own history. This makes the Native community more complex than it has been in Anglo-American/European history. Ethnohistorians should also remember to acknowledge the oppression and victimization while also realizing that this is not a full history of Native lives. That sad history of removal and oppression only spans a fraction of the history that we can examine.⁹

⁶ Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green. *The Columbia Guide to American Indians of the Southeast* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 8.

⁷ *Ibid*, 9.

⁸ *Ibid*, 12.

⁹ *Ibid*, 12.

Instead, Perdue and Green suggest, when looking at the history of the Native people after contact, ethnohistorians need to take acculturation into account. Acculturation, a term used in the social sciences, refers to societies taking on aspects of a foreign culture, but not fully. The Native society will use its cultural values as a guide for what they adopt and what they discard. They will also take those new adaptations and change them to fit their own standards and cultural values.¹⁰ Perdue and Green incorporate the ethnohistorical aspect into their research and bring it together into their writings on the Southeastern cultures of the United States, but only as a broad overview of the Southeastern Nations. They pinpoint the women and their roles where they can, but that was not the focus of their book.

Just like Perdue and Green, Paula Gunn Allen takes another approach to the history and representation of Native culture, giving us an almost exclusive focus on women. In 1986, Paula Gunn Allen published her book, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, as a collection of her essays. Allen tackles the feminine aspect across the American continent. She is a descendant of the Laguna Pueblo and Sioux, but is sure to also incorporate cultural aspects from other Native Nations. She takes another novel approach, drawing on anthropology, literary studies, folklore, psychology, sociology, historiography, philosophy, cultural studies, and women's studies in her research. Like Perdue and Green, Allen sees that women in Native studies have been overlooked, but she goes a step further and points out the idea of "gynocracy" in Native societies. She points out that with the fall of gynocracy, so too did women's place. Gynocracy is a tribal society focused on matriarchs, matriarchal lineages, and matriarchal control over household goods and resources. This is often accompanied by female deities held in high esteem and believed to be present and active in tribal life and religious

¹⁰ Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green, *Columbia Guide*, 14-15.

activities.¹¹ She asserts that gynocracies tend to make societies more concerned with social obligations and responsibilities that benefit the community as a whole rather than the individual, unlike most Western societies.¹² She even ties in the attributes of religion and the archetype of the Earthmother, and how they played a role in societal ways and structures. She even discusses how the connection between the three worlds (Upper World, Middle World, and Below World) of the cosmology must be balanced. That balance can be attained and brought forth through the actions of the people in the Middle World, or the place we call Earth.¹³ This balance also plays into the duality aspect between the Upper and Lower worlds (again, duality is a concern). Allen credits the tearing down of the tribal gynocracy as the catalyst that brought women out of their sacred positions to positions more like that of the Western patriarchal lean.

In *Women in Prehistory: North America and Mesoamerica*, a 1997 book of essays by multiple authors, we see a look at women not only across the United States but also in Central and South America. The editors, Cheryl Claassen and Rosemary A. Joyce, saw the need to bring essays together that focused on women, gender, and feminism. They wanted to challenge the dominant ideas in archaeology and anthropology with feminist thought and theory. In one essay, “Where Have all the Menstrual Huts Gone: The Invisibility of Menstrual Seclusion in the Late Prehistoric Southeast,” by Patricia Gallaway, her main argument is that menstrual huts are not commonly found in the archaeological record because they are overlooked. But as was so often the case, the archaeologists (usually men) did not see the site for what it was and assumed it was just a temple structure. Gallaway, along with Allen, took on a more focused look at women in the history of the Mississippians and descendant communities.

¹¹ Paula Gunn Allen *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 3-4.

¹² Ibid 2-3.

¹³ Ibid, 22.

Also, in *Women in Prehistory*, the journal article entitled “Earth Mothers, Warriors, Horticulturists, Artists, and Chiefs: Women Among the Mississippian and Mississippian-Oneota People, A. D. 1000 to 1750,” written by Lyle Koehler. Koehler notes that, to his knowledge, little to no attention is paid to women in Mississippian/Mississippian-Oneota studies when writing his article. He believes that with the help of ceramic imagery, carvings/paintings on various rock faces, ethnographic material from early Spanish and French sources, and the archaeological record, a picture of Mississippian women and their counterparts, the Mississippian-Oneota, who mixed after A. D. 1400 in Illinois and Missouri, could emerge.¹⁴ He focuses on Earthmother and her influence on women's societal roles, saying that women had the power of the “creative agent, reproductively, productively, and cosmologically.”¹⁵ He presents archaeological evidence, intertwined with historical sources, to support his claims. This includes studies of the oral histories and religious mythologies of the descendants compared with those in the records. This article does well to show that women are the focus and the correlation of Earthmother to women.

When studying the Mississippians, one will often encounter research by Timothy Pauketat. Pauketat, a prominent Mississippian archaeologist, wrote *Cahokia: Ancient America's Great City on the Mississippi*. This book is an overarching view of the great Mississippian civilization of Cahokia. He looks at the extended power and influence on the region. While the focus is on the city itself, there is a discussion of gender, but it is a far cry from providing a full view of the lives of women in this Mississippian city. He presents Earthmother and her influence on the societal thoughts and attitudes that shaped the city. When he can, though, Pauketat does

¹⁴ Lyle Koehler, “Earth Mothers, Warriors, Horticulturists, Artists, and Chiefs: Women Among the Mississippian and Mississippian-Oneota People, A. D. 1000 to 1750,” in the book *Women in Prehistory: North History and Mesoamerica*, Cheryl Claassen and Rosemary A. Joyce (Philadelphia: University Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 6.

¹⁵ Ibid, 211.

not shy away from tying femininity to the Cahokian sites and artifacts. He describes the duality of the sexes in many aspects of social life in Cahokia, and this even includes some of the small aspects, like that of the game of Chunkey. Chunkey had a huge impact on Mississippian societies. It was often referred to as “The Little Brother of War.” In this game, each player has a stick, and there is one disk-shaped stone that is rolled along the ground. The players, usually male, would throw their sticks at the disc, trying to “penetrate” its center. This harkens to the idea in the following chapters of the masculine penetrating the feminine, such as the sun's morning rays (masculine) falling onto the hearths of indigenous structures (feminine) in some Southeastern nations.¹⁶

So, while not overtly represented in all aspects of society, women were shown to have a place in the duality of the sexes. Duality in the mythologies is also discussed, as in the masculine (Morning Star) and the Feminine (Evening Star/Earthmother), who are tied to creation.¹⁷ Pauketat also acknowledges that this duality empowered both sexes. The feminine and masculine coexist, relying on each other in the religions and social practices of Mississippian society.¹⁸ Pauketat clearly uses ethnohistory as well. In his research, he uses ethnological sources, historical, anthropological, and archaeological sources, oral histories, and others to support the arguments he puts forward in his book, especially with the feminine aspects he presents. The only downside of this book is that it, too, is a broad overview of Cahokia, so it does not focus on Mississippian women.

In *Indigenous American Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism*, written in 1997, the author, Devon Abbot Mihesuah, takes a feminist approach and points out the changes

¹⁶ Timothy Pauketat, *Cahokia: Ancient America's Great City on the Mississippi* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 43.

¹⁷ Ibid, 94.

¹⁸ Ibid, 117.

in indigenous societies that have stripped women of power. She states that “indeed, women's powerful economic, political, social, and religious positions within most tribes are not honored as they once were, violence against Indigenous women has escalated, and many women suffer from psychological stress brought on in part by identity confusion.”¹⁹ She also emphasizes that the loss of identities, both men and women, caused a great psychological impact that was a detriment to both genders (and others). She, like Paula Gunn Allen, addresses religious beliefs, the archetype of the Earthmother, and the influence this deity has played in women's roles and lives. She also notes that most non-Indigenous scholars are detached from these communities and, as such, need to be careful in how they research and present them. She also cautions against the integration of Indigenous feminist studies with those of the dominant feminist studies. The idea of Indigenous feminism is not the same as the dominant feminist ideals, usually promoted by Anglo-American women. She points out that women did not necessarily serve as tribal leaders, but they did have control over some aspects of the society. They had a say over who could receive crops, and they could sway opinions on who could serve as leaders. However, they did serve in societal roles as mothers, advisors, medicine women, and midwives. They were also the primary members of the tribe that manufactured skins, hides, clothing, and implements.²⁰ Most can see that from this list of women's activities, the predominant idea of Anglo-American feminism would scoff at some of them. These were often looked at as the same activities that were enforced on Anglo-American women to keep them in “their place.”

In *Rediscovering Turtle Island: A First People's Account of the Sacred Geography of America*, written in 2024, Indigenous author Taylor Keen gives an indigenous male perspective.

¹⁹ Devon Abbot Mihesuah, *Indigenous American Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press 2003), xiv.

²⁰ Ibid, 34.

Like Pauketat, who he acknowledges as a huge influence on this book, he focuses on the Mississippians and the city of Cahokia. He writes about the correlation between women and water and the sacred feminine.²¹ Keen also devotes a whole chapter to analyzing the sacred tribal feminine tradition. He acknowledges that both males and females had a balance (a duality) of powers that kept the world in balance, and he even argues that it was “an excess of the masculine that eventually toppled megacenter communities like Cahokia.”²² He ties the moon to women and explains how Mississippians used the moon as a guide to make their structures sacred.²³ He also argues “that the loss of the sacred feminine is at the heart of unrest, war, and lack of harmony in our societies today.” This is not limited to Native cultures but to all cultures.²⁴ He also discusses the cosmology and the archetype of Earthmother amongst other deities of the Mississippians, and how it influenced their world and, in turn, their descendants. He makes it very clear that the duality of men and women is a possibility for the unrest felt in the Indigenous community, especially pertaining to women. This harkens back to the arguments Mihesuah raises about the loss of identity and the unresolved anger felt by indigenous communities. Keen explores the female aspect in Cahokia, but is sure to tell the stories of both men and women. His use of sacred geography also offers more food for thought about women's connection to land and landscape, and, by extension, to agriculture.

In *Mississippian Women*, written in 2024, we are presented with a collection of essays exclusively on Mississippian women. The editors state that the purpose of this publication is to address archaeologists in the field of Mississippian studies and how they have ignored the social

²¹ Taylor Keen, *Rediscovering Turtle Island: A First Peoples Account of the Sacred Geography of America* (Rochester, Vermont: Bear and Company, 2024), 58.

²² Ibid 75.

²³ Ibid, 73.

²⁴ Ibid, 76.

power of Indigenous women. These Indigenous women held power in political, ritual, and economic matters, as well as in their everyday domestic practices. This means that women were not relegated to the background of their societies, but rather they had an imperative role in their communities.²⁵ The editors and the authors of the essays contend with the lack of research on early Mississippian culture and note that early studies were not focused on gender per se; the information collected by ethnographers early on is inherently biased by a male gaze (as most early ethnographers were male).²⁶

In one essay, “Recognizing Women at Cahokia: Farmers; Weavers; Agents of Polity Integration,” Gayle J. Fritz points out that Indigenous women have been overlooked in the archaeological record of Cahokia. Fritz also asserts that women probably learned the secrets of agriculture from each other. Women were the experts; they understood soil qualities and crop attributes. Women were not opposed to learning from each other. They observed and showed interest in learning how to plant and care for their crops. This is especially true at the Emerald site, which Fritz also argues is a place of great importance to women in the archaeological record.

The next essay from *Mississippian Women* is “Mississippian Geographies of Fertility: A Multiscalar View from Southeast Missouri,” written by Jennifer Bengtson and Toni Alexander. Bengtson and Alexander offer a spatial approach to the study of women, fertility, and the corresponding biological, emotional, ritual, and cosmological experiences. They attest that women and fertility are linked to the landscape through underlying meanings within communities and constructions of cosmology. They look into the structures and villages, along with the outlying natural and cultural sacred spaces that can be linked to fertility and, therefore,

²⁵ Rachel V. Briggs and Micaelyn S. Harle, “Current State of (Mississippian) Women,” 4-5.

²⁶ Ibid, 14-15.

linked to women.²⁷ This goes back to Keen's work, published in the same year. It seems that the theory of linking women to land/agriculture is now solidifying.

While each of the sources varies in its field of study, they also show an evolution of thought and attitudes toward women in Mississippian studies. The earlier ethnological and historical sources barely touched on women, and as the years passed, scholars saw that there was much to glean even from the male-biased and non-indigenous ethnological primary sources, however sparse the records on women were. We see that the field of study had to be broadened, not just because of the lack of primary sources, but also because it just serves a historian well to investigate all artifacts by distant cultures, be they written or not. Creating Ethnohistory helped in that endeavor and in showing how our knowledge of Mississippian women, their role in duality, and their connections to agriculture has advanced. It serves historians well to take in more knowledge from other academic disciplines.

²⁷ Jennifer Bengtson and Toni Alexander, "Mississippian Geographies of Fertility: A Multiscalar View from Southeast Missouri," in the book *Mississippian Women*, Rachel V. Briggs and Michaelyn S. Harle (University Press of Florida, 2024), 116.

Summary of Chapters:

Chapter one investigates early agriculturist Earth Mother and Earth Goddess religions, predominantly in Archaic Europe, and extends to the Greek and Roman eras of gods and goddesses. Throughout the chapter, comparisons are drawn between these early belief structures and their role in helping us understand the Mississippian Earth Mother. By examining the similarities, we can gain a clearer picture of the Earthmother and her relationship with the Mississippians.

Chapter two delves into the history and current understanding of Earthmother. It introduces the relationship between Earthmother and women in particular. To discuss and understand their relationship, it is also necessary to understand men's roles. Throughout the chapter, the concept of duality is strongly emphasized as a defining characteristic of Mississippian culture.

Chapter three presents the idea that Earthmother influenced the architecture and rituals associated with earth lodges, sweat lodges, and ceremonial mounds. The earth lodges and sweat lodges, along with the rituals tied to them, are among the most important links to the past of the Mississippian Earthmother and to more contemporary Native cultures.

Chapter four examines the burial customs of the Mississippian cultures, the Earthmothers' influence on those customs, and how she continues to influence the customs of more contemporary Indigenous cultures.

Earthmother never really disappeared from the rituals and customs that descended from the Mississippians down to today's Indigenous communities of the Southeast. She has just gone into the shadows. She is hidden in the details of customs, rituals, religions, iconography, and

social structures. However, her influence has been greatly diminished, so much so that Native women lost their place in the very societies they are supposed to have a voice in. For women to regain their sacred feminist roles guaranteed by Earthmother, they will need to rediscover her and the sacred roles of their societies. These may not be the same roles of the past. Just as the community has changed over time and under outside influences, so too will societal roles. It will be up to the women and the men of the communities to learn their new roles that place all genders back into a duality and equality that is fair for all.

Chapter 1

Earth Goddess Worship

Scholars of many cultures have documented Earth Goddess worship throughout human history. Even before written records, archaeological evidence from around the world attests to a widespread connection with ancient goddess traditions closely tied to our Earth. What led early human societies to adopt a nearly universal belief in a feminine Earth deity? Across many diverse geographic regions, agricultural societies consistently demonstrate a shared conception of the Earth as feminine. These communities (typically sedentary) relied on agricultural cultivation and planting for survival. The act of planting seeds into the earth naturally evokes ideas of fertility, rebirth, transformation, and growth, all concepts that became symbols of agriculture and goddess figures.

Some agricultural societies worshipped Earth Goddesses for crop fertility, sustenance, and protection. They regarded these goddesses as essential to their survival and prosperity. Scholars in these fields describe Earth Mothers as deities associated with life-giving, nurturing roles to their practitioners. Some cultures show explicit connections to the Earth Mother religions, such as the Mississippian Earthmother, while in others they are more subtle. If we examine Earth Mother and Goddess deities, along with their roles and cultural significance, it helps us understand the Earth Goddess archetype. Studying the ancient agricultural goddess traditions highlights the importance of the Mississippian Earthmother and her continued influence.

Archaeologists have brought to light some of the earliest evidence of goddess worship through artifacts such as primitive goddess statuettes from the Upper Paleolithic (40,000 B.C.E. - 10,000 B.C.E.) and Neolithic (7000 B.C.E. - 6000 B.C.E.) eras.²⁸ Though these artifacts lack a

²⁸ C.E. (Common Era) and B.C.E. (Before Common Era) will be used in place of A.D. (Anno Domini) and B.C. (Before Christ).

written explanation of an Earth Mother, they highly evoke the feminine aspects of fertility and birth. In the *Language of the Goddess*, Marija Gimbutas writes, “Archaeological materials are not mute. They speak their own language. And they need to be used for the great source they are to help unravel the spirituality of those of our ancestors who predate the Indo-European by many thousands of years.” Birth, death, and the renewal of life themes and symbols associate themselves with the older goddess worship. These are the mysteries that surrounded the life cycles of early man. Life events occur in cycles; thus, time is cyclical rather than linear in these early agricultural societies. This common concept of time highlights birth and death as connected cycles, where one leads to the other.²⁹

Earth mother goddesses share associations with plants, animals, and celestial objects. Grains (corn, wheat, rye, rice, and others) are a major plant association. Grains are grown, and the crop dies off only to return the next year (rebirth). Animal associations include felines, such as lions, panthers, tigers, and leopards. Serpents are another animal associated with the goddesses. Serpents shed their skin (often thought of as a death of sorts, or even a transformation) and are reborn. Serpents share their wisdom with the goddess. Today’s culture depicts serpents as evil, but in these early goddess religions, they regarded them only with apprehension due to their danger, not evilness. Finally, in the celestial realm, the association is often with the moon. The moon dies (as a new moon) only to be reborn in phases until it is a full moon, completing the cycle and then going through it again. In some cultures, the association is flipped. Some regard the moon as masculine while the sun is feminine. Often, when the sun is thought of as feminine, it is because it embodies the energy that brings life, just as women can bring life into the world. The sun promotes the growth of all plant life on Earth. We see this in

²⁹ Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), xix.

the early Neolithic and the high Bronze Age. But the main association of these earth mothers is with land. Land and women provide, so they are linked together. The two take on aspects of the other, with the land thought of as feminine and women not only as providers but also as caretakers, as a refuge, and as the heart of the communities.³⁰

In addition, the iconography of early civilizations included symbols that correlated with mother goddesses and earth mothers. Some of these symbols included whirling, twisting, and spirals. These had a center point in which the symbols move around the focal center. These center points, or the axis, are the mother goddess in symbolic form. This kind of symbolism shows that the mother goddess is the axis point of their universe.³¹ For most cultures, these symbols are also in motion; they are not static. They move with time, cycling always.³² Their motion evokes water, much like a whirlpool. The swastika, though seen negatively now, also served as a Goddess symbol before Nazi iconography transformed its modern interpretations.³³

Circles, crescents, and horns are among the symbols seen throughout the worship of the Goddess. Crescent shapes are half parts of circles, and circles symbolize completeness. Simplified horn drawings, when shown on their side, look like a crescent moon. These symbols associate with the moon and therefore take on its meaning of renewal and rebirth.

³⁰ Pamela Berger, *The Goddess Obscured: Transformation of the Grain Protectress from Goddess to Saint*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 5.

³¹ Campbell, *Goddesses*, 189.

³² Gambutas, *Language of the Goddess*, 295.

³³ Campbell, *Goddesses*, 189.

The goddess took authority over the things she was associated with, such as crops, trees,

and other plant life. On a Sumerian seal from c. 2500 B.C.E., the goddess sits with her hand outstretched, a snake depicted at her back as her consort. On the other side of the seal, a man with horns sits with his hand outstretched. The goddess and male, probably a lunar deity, face each other with a tree of life between them.

Scholars believe that this male deity is asking to receive the fruit, and that the goddess is obliging him.³⁴

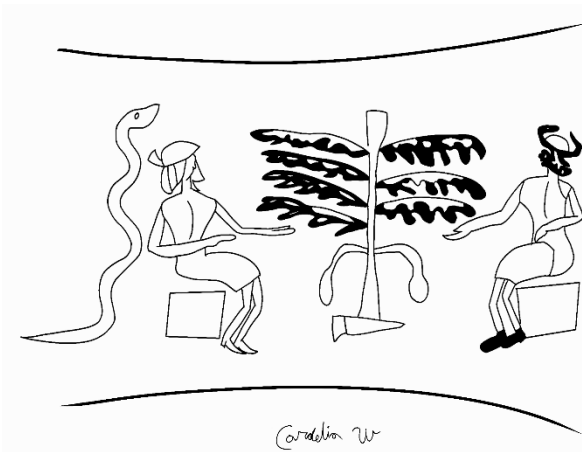


Figure 1 Sumerian Seal ca 2500 B.C.E. drawn by Cordelia Wilmot

Duality is another important concept to consider when discussing these religious concepts. The duality of good and evil became apparent to Adam and Eve when they ate the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.³⁵ We also have the duality of night and day, male and female, sun and moon, life and death, and yin and yang, to name a few. Dualities surrounded the people, and they used these dualities to understand their world.

Lastly, these ancient societies were often matriarchal. Communities saw women as the progenitors of life. They seemed to create life in their wombs from nothing. Though we know this is not the case today, early man did not understand the inner workings of conception and birth.³⁶ These societies also leaned toward ancestor worship and the worship of their deities.³⁷

³⁴ Campbell, *Goddesses*, 78.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 29.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 11.

³⁷ Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (New York and London: Harvest/HBJ book, 1976), 12.

The early Gravettian culture was prolific in the production of statuary. The Gravettians



Figure 3 Venus of Laussel, Figure Engraved in Stone, Colored with Red Ocher. n.d. 13 3/4" high. Peabody Museum of Natural History. Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History. Artstor. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.12317721>.

were responsible for the early Venus figures, like the *Venus of Willendorf* and the *Venus of Laussel*. Created with stone, bone, and clay, these figures were made as far back as 25,000 B.C.E.³⁸ Archaeologists found these small figures at sites in present-day Spain, France, Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, and Russia. They were usually in small niches on the walls of dwellings and were rarely found on the outside of homes.³⁹ This shows us that these figures were tied to the home and the inner workings of the family unit. Figures often depict the transformations of the female body during

pregnancy.⁴⁰ The *Venus of Laussel* is an interesting case study. This also depicts the changes of a female body in pregnancy, but it also shows the female holding up the horn of a bison-like creature. On that horn are thirteen vertical markings. These markings could indicate the number of nights between the first crescent moon and the full moon and/or the importance of the thirteenth day of a woman's fertility cycle.⁴¹ For most women, ovulation occurs around the thirteenth day of the cycle.



Figure 2

Statuette (Oolitic Limestone; Ht. 4 1/8"; Traces of Pink Color). n.d. Sculpture. Vienna: Mus., Naturhistorisches.; Found during excavations at the station of Willendorf, (lower Austria, Danube Valley), by Hugo Obermaier, 1908. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.11650893>.

³⁸ Stone, *God Was a Woman*, 13.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 13.

⁴⁰ Campbell, *Goddesses*, 8.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 9.

Another ancient city to explore is Çatalhöyük in Turkey, one of the first sites to show evidence of agriculture in the region and quite possibly the first in the world. Builders of this community laid it out much like Puebloan homes, with homes built one atop the other. To enter the homes, occupants had to enter from the roof using ladders.⁴² Archaeologists have also found ceramic goddess figures throughout the location. These figures are some of the earliest depictions



Figure 4 Catal Huyuk: Mother Goddess Giving Birth. ca. 5800 B.C.E. Clay, h. 20.3cm. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.18136212>.

of goddesses.⁴³ Archaeologists also found about 40 shrines dating to 6500 B.C.E. The deity depicted was often portrayed as a woman in three forms. She is either a young woman, a pregnant woman, or an older woman. Women held a prominent place in this society, and the community respected their femininity. There were more graves of women, and most of the graves found with red ochre were those of women.⁴⁴ One goddess statue depicts a large, pregnant woman seated on a throne, giving birth, with two lions flanking her. Found in a grain bin, the figure is thought to indicate that she was not only a mother

(or fertility) goddess for women but also for the area's agriculture.⁴⁵ Another interesting statuette shows a woman in two phases of life. One side shows her in a man's embrace, while the other shows a woman holding a small baby.⁴⁶

In the myths of agricultural societies, a sacrifice or murder occurs in which the body of the victim, once buried, creates or promotes the growth of plants that the society then eats and

⁴² Campbell, *Goddesses*, 23.

⁴³ Ibid, 24.

⁴⁴ Stone, *God Was a Woman*, 17.

⁴⁵ Campbell, *Goddesses*, 26.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 24.

reveres.⁴⁷ One Indonesian myth of creation tells the story of dancers inside a labyrinth who dance a dance of nine circles (a number associated with the moon). The men danced while the women stayed in the center. On the first night, a little girl offered the dancers gifts of refreshments. The girl continued each night, handing out gifts, and with each night, the gifts grew more extravagant. Eventually, the people grew confused and feared the girl. This fear and confusion caused the people to panic and trample the little girl to death in the center of the labyrinth. The people buried the girl in that center spot. Soon after her death, plants began to grow from her grave. The people then ate the produce on the plants.⁴⁸

Shamanism is also connected to these goddesses and nature-based societies. Though people prayed to the deity, they believed a shaman functioned as an intermediary to the deities on their behalf.⁴⁹ People came to the Shamans for advice and help during difficult times. The shaman then communicates with the spirits or deities through visions, usually to gain an understanding of how to advise the troubled person. There is evidence that women, as well as men, have served in this sacred role. Shamans are also known as priestesses, medicine women, wise women, and many other names. In classical antiquity, some Priestesses served the goddesses of Greece and Rome. The goddess Athena held a high place of authority on matters of the city. In one instance, the Priestess helped evacuate Athens right before the battle of Salamis in 480 B.C.E. by reporting that Athena's sacred serpent had already left the Acropolis.⁵⁰

In the early days of Rome, Ceres was revered because the people relied on agriculture and its ties to religion. The Latin roots of her name even mean “to produce” and “to grow.” Along with

⁴⁷ Campbell, *Goddesses*, xvii.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 41.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 182.

⁵⁰ Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses. Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (Schocken Books, 1995), 75.

Ceres, the Romans worshipped Tellus, their Mother Earth deity, for fertility and grain production. Though Tellus did not have priestesses (she had priests), the Priestesses of Ceres played key roles in their communities. The two goddesses served as protectors of women and held reverence over procreation. In early Roman society, people blamed women for sterile marriages, leaving women to pray and ask Ceres and Tellus for help in those situations. Ceres protected women from divorce. Husbands were only allowed to divorce their wives if the wives poisoned their children, counterfeited their keys, or committed adultery. If they divorced their wives for any reason other



Figure 5 Statue. n.d. Sculpture. Naples: Mus., National. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.11658331>.

than these offenses, their property would be divided, with half going to their wives and the other half consecrated to Ceres. He then met capital punishment through an execution and consecration to Ceres.⁵¹

Later communities continued to worship goddesses. They took on many of the same attributes and even mixed those attributes, usually to fit what people wanted or needed. A figure of Cybele carved in marble in the late Roman period of the third century depicts Cybele sitting on a throne flanked on either side by two lions, with the lions having ties to the sun. She looks much like the earlier described Çatalhöyük figure found in the grain bin. This portrayal of Cybele retains the attributes mostly seen in portrayals of her. An added crown worn on her head signifies a city, showing that she is the patron goddess of that city. She holds a solar disk in her hand. This disk signifies the cycle of rebirth, serving as a conduit or door through which the goddess cult believed the soul passed into infinity. In this depiction, the goddess is a solar deity, while the moon is

⁵¹ Pomeroy, *Women in Antiquity*, 215.

connected to a masculine god.⁵² In another iconographic image of Demeter with Plutus. Demeter is reclining on a throne, with two serpents behind her. She reaches out toward Plutus, placing wheat into his basket. This iconography evokes the same scene discussed earlier on the Sumerian seal, with the goddess and male deity, the tree of life between them. In this example, Demeter is shown with identifying features. She holds a torch that signifies the “chthonic, or underworld, journey.”⁵³ Demeter is an Earth Mother figure here, with the wheat and the torch, which gives her an aspect that ties her to her daughter, Persephone, who descends to the underworld to be reborn in the spring. Again, this imagery evokes death and rebirth.⁵⁴ Demeter also had festivals held in her honor that tied her to agriculture and especially women, though she was worshiped by men, women, and children alike. Women observed the festival of Thesmophoria. This festival was to bring about the fertility of the harvest grains. Women would observe the ritual activity in autumn. They would honor Demeter for three days, during which they would retrieve pig remains (an honored animal for Demeter) from subterranean caves on the first day. After retrieving the remains, they would mix them with grains and place them upon the altar. The women fasted on the second day, imitating Demeter in the throes of sadness (from her daughter being stolen away), all the while staying seated on the ground. On the third day, the rest of the remains of pigs and grains that had been mixed were then thrown out into the fields. The women who participated in this ritual were free;

⁵² Campbell, *Goddesses*, 26.

⁵³ Ibid, 190.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 190.

enslaved people were not allowed to participate. The women were to guard their fertility and be chaste three days before and during the ritual.⁵⁵

Demeter, a perfect embodiment of the earth mother archetype, represents the changing of the seasons and is revered for bountiful harvests. Another statuette mixes her with the Egyptian goddess Isis, who was the sister and wife of Osiris. Isis represented fertility and agriculture. She gave the people the gift of agriculture and medicine, along with the laws of the land.⁵⁶ Isis was also a mother goddess and represented marriage. Mixing Demeter and Isis in this figure makes sense. They closely represent the same, though one might lack what the other might not. By merging the two deities, more power could be attained. The statue holds attributes of an Earth Mother archetype, wearing a crown that incorporates wheat. She is also adorned with serpent

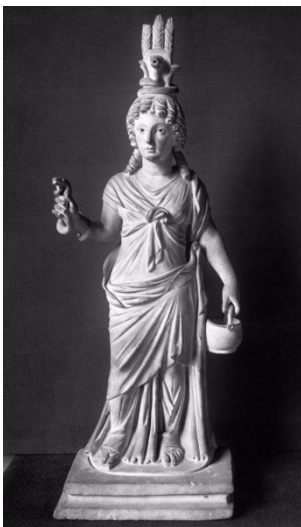


Figure 6 Isis-Demeter with Snake and Situla [Standfigur Der Isis-Demeter Mit Schlange Und Situla]. 30 BCE - 313 CE. White marble; Marmor / weiß, height: 85 cm. Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin; <http://www.smb.museum/smb/home/in>

motifs.

As one can see, there is extensive iconography associated with the Earth Mother archetypes. One point worth mentioning is the mother aspects. Most of these figures represent everything we associate with a loving, caring mother. They helped, guided, comforted, and provided for their people in times of need.

So, where did these Earth and Mother Goddesses go? In early Europe, the Indo-Europeans had invaded and brought with them their male-centered religious beliefs.⁵⁷ These invaders had a sense of superiority and were warrior types. Their gods mirrored those thoughts. Their gods were storm gods, lords

⁵⁵ Pomeroy, *Women in Classical Antiquity*, 77-78.

⁵⁶ Stone, *God Was a Woman*, 36.

⁵⁷ Campbell, *Goddesses*, 3.

of lightning, or blazing with fire.⁵⁸ Unlike agriculturalists, they are constantly on the move. These altars and gods, then, must be transportable or all-encompassing, like the sky or the sun. They had to be able to worship their gods wherever they were.⁵⁹ The new inhabitants lacked a connection to the earth. Unlike the agriculturist, they depended on other means of survival other than agriculture, since they were always on the move.

Later, paternity became more important in European countries as a means of passing on land, wealth, and titles to their sons. This caused wealth to flow through the male lines. Maternity no longer mattered as it had once with the agriculturists.⁶⁰

Then things got even worse with the introduction of the Judeo religions. They described their God as jealous. Their God commanded that they only follow one God, Himself. Bringing about a new monotheistic religion that proved to snuff out most other religions. In the Bible, he commanded that all altars and temples to any other gods be destroyed. Merlin Stone asserts that even though these other gods are not named per se, you can see clues that most were altars and temples to Goddesses.⁶¹ With the shift to the Judeo religions and patriarchal attitudes, the Earth Goddesses began to disappear, surviving only through some rituals and customs.

In this chapter, an introduction to Earth and Mother Goddesses was provided to gain an understanding of what these goddesses were. In the following chapters, we will examine the Mississippian Earthmother and see how she correlates with the archetype of the Mother/Earth Goddess. Though she is unique, she shares many similarities with past Earth Goddesses.

⁵⁸ Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (New York: A Harvest/ HBJ Book, 1978), 63-65.

⁵⁹ Campbell, *Goddesses*, 181.

⁶⁰ Stone, *When God Was a Woman*, 161.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 163-179.

Chapter 2

Sacred Feminism and the Motherhood of the Mississippians

Native American societies highly respected women, especially mothers. They wielded influence over specific aspects of the community, a power granted by their deity, Earthmother. This was particularly true among the Southeastern tribes descended from the pre-Columbian Mississippian civilization. Over time, Western culture and ideas stripped away this sacred power, which Native women had enjoyed for generations. Along with that loss of power, Earthmother also faded. However, she is not completely gone. Earthmother persists in cosmological myths, art, folklore, archaeology, architecture, rituals, and the burial practices of Mississippian descendant communities. The reverence for these past and present deities demonstrates women's sacred power and social authority. These beliefs were structurally embedded in both belief and material culture, not only in the past but even now. Native women do not have to look far to reclaim that power.

The ancient Mississippian civilization (800-1500 CE) inhabited the eastern half of what is today North America. This culture emerged from the earlier Woodland Period (500 BCE- 500 CE), and its influence can be seen in the descendant Mississippian culture.⁶² The Mississippians resided from Oklahoma to the East Coast, with the Mississippi River and the Mississippi Valley being major zones of activity. Mississippian culture influenced communities throughout North America through trade, religion, and economics.⁶³ Over the years, scholars have referred to the Mississippian culture as the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (SECC), the Mississippian Art

⁶² F. Kent Reilly and James F. Garber, "Introduction," in *Ancient Objects and Sacred Realms*, eds. F. Kent Reilly and James F. Garber (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 1.; F. Kent Reilly III, James F. Garber, and George E. Lankford, "Introduction," in *Visualizing the Sacred: Cosmic Visions, Regionalism, and the Art of the Mississippian World*, ed. George E. Lankford, F. Kent Reilly, and James F. Garber (University of Texas Press, 2011), xi. Timothy R. Pauketat, *Cahokia: Ancient America's Great City on the Mississippi*, (Penguin Group 2010), 17, 23-24.

⁶³ Eric D. Singleton (Curator of Ethnology at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum) in discussion with the author, December 2023.

and Ceremonial Complex, and the Mississippian Ideological Interaction Sphere.⁶⁴ Earlier descriptions referred to the culture's religious nature as a cult, but many frowned upon this terminology.⁶⁵

Numerous native cultures can claim a connection to the Mississippians even today. Their way of life, beliefs, iconography, and much more can be seen in these descendant communities. Analyzing their ceremonies, societal structures, and beliefs helps us reconstruct those of the Mississippians. A few of the communities discussed here to gain that understanding are the Pawnee, Osage, Winnebago, Chickasaw, Cherokee, Wichita, Yuchi, Caddo, and others.

The perceptions of the cosmos presented in this paper are from the Osage, but elements of this structure closely resemble those of other Native nations. They believed that the cosmos was divided into three layers: the Above World, the Middle World, and the Below World. The Above World was home to the thunderers and lords of lightning, the Middle World is home to humans, and the Below World is underwater.⁶⁶ All three worlds are connected by the axis mundi, represented as a tree, and referred to as the Tree of Life.⁶⁷ The ability to move between realms is granted only to certain entities, who use the axis mundi through portals. Earthmother is one such deity who moves between realms via the Tree of Life. The Above and Below Worlds revolve around the Middle World, causing day and night. The Chumash also hold this ideology in their belief system, believing that the placement of the Middle World was intended to influence both

⁶⁴ Eric David Singleton, "Hallowed Path: An Historical Analysis of the Mutable Perspectives on Interpretations of Mississippian Period Iconography." (Doctorate Thesis, Oklahoma State University, 2017), 1.

⁶⁵ Lankford, George E., "Regional Approaches to Regional Iconographic Art," in *Visualizing the Sacred: Cosmic Visions, Regionalism, and the Art of the Mississippian World*, ed. George E. Lankford, F. Kent Reilly, and James F. Garber (University of Texas Press, 2011), 4.

⁶⁶ Charles Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians* (The University of Tennessee Press, 1976), 122.

⁶⁷ Eric D. Singleton, "A Changing Canvas: Narrative Symbolism in Native American Art," in *Recovering Ancient Spiro: Native American Art, Ritual, and Cosmic Renewal*, eds. Eric D. Singleton and F. Kent Reilly III (Oklahoma City: National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, 2020), 259.

the Above and Below Worlds.⁶⁸ This placed a great responsibility on the people to interact and perform certain actions, rituals, and ceremonies to help maintain the continuity of the world. Of immense importance here is the Below World. This is the world of night, covered with water,



Figure 7 Incised Mississippian Vessel

Mississippian. Vessel with Incised Motifs. c.1400-1600. Ceramic, 7 3/4 x 6 3/4 in. (19.7 x 17.1 cm). Saint Louis Art Museum, Director's Discretionary Fund and funds given by donors to the Art Enrichment Fund. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.14730024>.

where the moon or Earthmother dwells. This local associates her with water, night, stars, rebirth, and renewal. The Below World holds much of the power believed to exist, and many deities, creatures, iconography, and objects can access it. Even a ceramic pot is used to gain this power. The opening of the pot signifies the portal, or you could even look at it as a birth canal, and the inside is the Below World. Whatever is placed into the pot then gains the power of the Below World.⁶⁹

Their religion was their reality.⁷⁰ They lived it, breathed it, and even reenacted mythological stories believed to have impacted the world. These reenactments became rituals

performed by descendant tribes. Some rituals were so pivotal to the people that they believed the world could cease to exist if they were not performed. It made up who they were, and it could not be separated from their psyche. This “religion” permeated every activity they undertook.

It might be helpful to go over the chapter's central themes. As the title suggests, there will be a discussion of “sacred feminism.” Most people define feminism as simply the equality of

⁶⁸ George Sabo III and Jan F. Simek, “Materiality, Maturity and the Cultural Landscapes in Native America,” eds. Carol Diaz-Granados, Jan Simek, George Sabo, and Mark Waggoner (Havertown: Oxbow Books, Limited, 2018), 6.

⁶⁹ E. D. Singleton 2023.

⁷⁰ Hudson, *Southeastern Indians*, 120.; E. D. Singleton 2023.; Åke Hultkrantz, *The Religion of the American Indians*, translated by Monica Setterwakk (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 10.; Sarah E. Baires, *Land of Water, City of the Dead: Religion and Cahokia's Emergence*, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2017), 1.

the sexes. Defining “sacred” is trickier. It is one of those definitions that can mean a variety of things to many. But in its most radical form, it is something that is held in great esteem, something imbued with a higher power, even. For this, equality should be emphasized. For Mississippians, the sexes were completely equal, but there is a caveat. Each sex had its role in society to precipitate balance between the Above and Below Worlds, making their positions sacred. For the Osage, there was a clear duality in the sexes' responsibilities. The men represented and participated in activities involving death, hunting, and war. In comparison, women were thought of as pathways to life and as the means of all life-sustaining activities.⁷¹ Women were not put into the caretaker and agriculturalist roles because they were inferior, as some early ethnographers and anthropologists believed. This was an honored and sacred position, a position given to them by the Mississippian Earthmother.

Earthmother is an honored deity in the Mississippian pantheon. Descendant communities have their own versions of the Earthmother and her accompanying stories. But there are elements in each of these that correspond. Therefore, scholars often assume that each (or most) of these stories reflects the same Earthmother archetype. Depending on the descendant community, she could be called Earthmother, Corn Mother, Old-Woman-Who-Never-Dies, Spider Grandmother, Mother Earth, Grandmother, or simply Old Woman.⁷² As mentioned above, she is connected to the moon and the night of the Below World. The Below world also holds duality. It is home to

⁷¹ David Dye, “Snaring Life from the Stars and the Sun: Mississippian Tattooing and the Enduring Cycle of the Life and Death,” in *Drawing with Great Needles: Ancient Tattoo Tradition of North America*, eds. Aaron Deter-Wolf and Carol Diaz-Granados (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 221.

⁷² Guy Prentice, “An Analysis of the Symbolism Expressed by the Birgir Figurine,” *American Antiquity* 51, no. 2 (1986): 249.

evil, danger, and monsters such as the Uktena and the water panther. At the same time, it is the source of water and fertility and a place that holds power that could be harnessed to defeat evil.⁷³

This Earthmother archetype is revered by the agricultural societies of the southeastern United States due to her association with planting. This association with corn can be explained by the variety, eastern flint, grown by the Mississippians. Eastern flint was easy to grow and fared well in the Southeast's climate. Introduced at about the same time as eastern flint are beans.⁷⁴ As seen in the cultural myth of Selu below, these two foods came to be paired in myth as well as at the table. This pairing was not accidental, as corn and beans perfectly complement each other in terms of nutrients.⁷⁵ These became the life-sustaining agricultural staples of survival. Just like corn became a sustainer of life, so did Earthmother. She represented life and provided food for her people. In many of the stories associated with her, she is the one who gives of herself, so that her "children" can continue. She becomes associated with corn because corn, their staple food, also gives of itself to keep them fed.

According to an old Cherokee tale, their Earthmother-type figure, *Selu*, produces corn and beans from her body. She rubs her stomach for corn and beans when she rubs her armpits. She performs this miraculous act only out of her household's view, in the storehouse, leaving her two sons to wonder how she did it. One day, they chose to follow her to the storehouse. Through a hole in the wall, they see her rubbing these foods off her body, assume she is a witch, and become distressed. They quickly decide that they must kill her. Later, she reads their thoughts and tells them that if they are going to kill her, they should do so and follow her explicit

⁷³ Thomas E. Emerson, "Water, Serpents, and the Underworld: An Exploration into Cahokian Symbolism," in *The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex: Artifacts and Analysis: The Cottonlandia Conference*, eds. Patricia Galloway (Lincoln and London, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 59.

⁷⁴ Hudson, *Southeastern Indians*, 81.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 82.

instructions on what to do with her body afterward. She instructs them to clear a large space and drag her body seven times in a circle. The boys kill her and only clear seven small spots. They dragged her over the cleared spots only twice, and where her blood fell, corn sprang up. By morning, the corn was full and ripe.⁷⁶ Since the boys did not follow the directions correctly, corn now grows in small areas and only twice a year. In this story, we see that *Selu* was willing to be sacrificed. The Cherokee revered the sacrifice that *Selu* made for them. They work in the fields taking care of her corn, to honor that sacrifice. They understand that this keeps things in balance. Pawnee women even had a set of rites that they performed in preparation for planting. These rites served to awaken the earth from its winter sleep.⁷⁷ Take note that *Selu's* blood was the key element in this story.

In a Huron version, Earthmother, called *Ataentsic*, was a vegetation goddess who fell from the sky through a hole. A hole she made earlier when she tore up the tree of heaven by the roots. She landed in the Middle World and shortly after gave birth to twin sons. One of these sons was evil and killed her during labor. Her good son took her body and formed the middle world from it. The sun was made from her face. The moon and stars from her breasts, and corn, beans, and pumpkins grew from her body.⁷⁸ Here, we see the literal giving of her body to be the source of sustenance. She makes up our astrological sky as well. She is also tied to the sun, which is often regarded as a male deity.

⁷⁶ James Mooney, *James Mooney's history, myths, and sacred formulas of the Cherokees* (Asheville, North Carolina: Historical Images, 1992), 224-225.; Gudmund Hatt, "The Cornmother in America and Indonesia," *Anthropos* 46, no. 5/6 (1951): 854-856.; Patricia Galloway, "Where Have All the Menstrual Huts Gone? The Invisibility of Menstrual Seclusion in the Late Prehistoric Southeast," in *Women in Prehistory*, eds. Cheryl Claassen and Rosemary A. Joyce (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 58.

⁷⁷ Sabo III and Simek, "Materiality and the Cultural Landscapes in Native America," 16.

⁷⁸ Hultkrantz, *Religion of the American Indians*, 57.

The Creek also has a Cornmother myth in which she grew corn by using her body as a catalyst. She instructed her son to drag her body over a newly burned field upon her death. After doing what she asked, he returned in three months and saw that corn and beans had started to grow where he had dragged her. The Ojibway have a ritual that could be related to this cultural Creek myth, in which a nude woman goes out at night and drags her best garment (thought to represent the Cornmother's body) across the cornfield to ensure a good harvest.⁷⁹

In the Wichita mythologies, there are not one but three feminine figures. They are the Moon, Woman-Having-Powers-in-the-Water, and Mother-Earth. Moon is the guardian of women. She came down from the heavens as the first woman. She instructs the first woman on how to plant and on everything she would need to know. The first woman then shared that knowledge with others before turning back into the moon and returning to her night sky.⁸⁰ Just as the moon increases, so do people, animals, and plants. Her face tells women when they are about to enter menses or are pregnant. And if they kept count of her changing faces, they could predict when their child would be born. If they appealed to her through ritual, she would bless the new baby.⁸¹ The Woman-Having-Power-in-the-Waters is the master and supplier of all things water. She provides healing water that cleanses and rules over the things living there. Mothers took new babies to the water to cleanse them and asked the moon to bless them. This ensures that the child grows into old age. Women bathed often to obtain power from her water.⁸² Lastly, Mother-Earth is the mother who gave birth to all things. She supplies all medicines for healing from her body and is referred to as a “medicine chest.” Her breath gives life, and when they die, they return to

⁷⁹ Hultkrantz, *Religion of the American Indians*, 56-57.

⁸⁰ Time is cyclical; therefore, she can be both the first woman and the moon.

⁸¹ George A. Dorsey, *The Mythology of the Wichita* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1904), 19 and 28-29.

⁸² Dorsey, *The Mythology of the Wichita*, 19. This ritual of bathing to cleanse can be seen throughout the southeastern tribes. Especially tied to the cleansing of war power and after menses.

the bosom of their mother.⁸³ All three of these Wichita deities share aspects with other Earthmother figures across the southeast. One can imagine that it is like the Catholic Trinity.⁸⁴ While Catholics worship the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, there is a clear belief that these are all the same.

There's power in the blood; Blood connects family. And as we saw in the story of *Selu*, blood caused the corn to grow. In one Yuchi myth, just a drop of menstrual blood from the feminine solar deity was powerful enough to create a child who would become a cultural hero.⁸⁵ Blood was a source of power held by women in these cultures. It was so revered that women had to stay away from the community during menses and could not prepare food for others.⁸⁶ When John R. Swanton wrote his account on the Choctaw, he wrote of this and how the husband of the woman who was menstruating reacted to having found out he had eaten food prepared by her. Swanton stayed with this couple for some time, woke up one morning hungry, and went to find the wife, who was staying a distance from their home. He asked her to make him a little something to eat, not knowing why she was away or knowing of the custom. She refused for a time, but eventually gave in to the request, and he sat down to eat.

As I was beginning to eat her husband arrived. I asked him if he wanted some, and having answered me that he did, he began to eat with me but when the plate was half emptied it occurred to him to ask me who had prepared it; it is to be remarked that he had recognized the cause of his wife's absence through some articles which were missing from the house; When I replied that it was his wife who had been my cook, he was at once seized with sickness and went to the door to vomit. Then, reentering and looking into the dish, he noticed some red things in the porridge, which were nothing else than the skin of the corn, some grains of which are red. He said to me: "how have you the courage to eat of this stew? Do you not see the blood in it?" Then he began vomiting again and

⁸³ Dorsey, *The Mythology of the Wichita*, 19.

⁸⁴ E. D. Singleton 2023.

⁸⁵ Frank G. Speck, *Ethnology of the Yuchi Indians* (Philadelphia: Anthropology Public University Museum, 1909), 106. It should be noted that there are other versions of his creation in the Yuchi mythologies. This is just one of them.

⁸⁶ John R. Swanton, "An Early Account of the Choctaw Indians," *Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association* 5, no. 2 (1918): 49.

continued until he had vomited up all that he had eaten; and as his imagination was so strongly affected that he was sick on account of it for some days afterward. It is a thing which they take such great care to observe as to absent themselves during that time, and to bathe well before reentering the house.⁸⁷

While reading the account of Swanton, you can see that he misunderstands the husband as vomiting in disgust. Ruth Trocolli posits that this isolation from the women, “can be viewed as a power issue, because blood is considered extremely powerful.”

“Women bleed and do not die- a process heavily imbued with metaphors of power.”⁸⁸ Menstrual blood is a destructive and highly dangerous substance. Women’s powers were also, at the same time, life-giving. The men were the warriors/hunters/life-takers, while the women gave life/sustained life. Therefore, for example, in Chickasaw belief, the warriors, after they have performed a ritual in which they gain their power, must be kept apart from the menstruating women for fear that both could counteract and/or lessen the effects of the other.⁸⁹ Just like women had their place when menstruating, likewise, men were not wanted in the fields either. Fogelson relates a story told to him by a Cherokee woman named Mollie, who said that women did not want men working alongside them in the fields. She referred to them as “bloody.” She



Figure 8 Keller Figurine
Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:Keller figurine.jpg," Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Keller_figurine.jpg&oldid=613082516 (accessed December 12, 2023).

⁸⁷ Swanton, “An Early Account of the Choctaw Indians,” 60.

⁸⁸ Ruth Trocolli, “Women Leaders in Native North American Societies, in *Manifesting Power: Gender Interpretations of Power in Archaeology* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1999), 52.

⁸⁹ Wendy St. Jean, “Trading Paths: Mapping Chickasaw History in the Eighteenth Century,” *American Indian Quarterly* 27, Summer (2003): 767. <https://doi.org/10.1353/aiq.2004.0085>.

and the other women feared that the men's presence would endanger the crops due to their destructive, life-taking power.⁹⁰

While archaeologists have not definitively found these “menstrual huts” where the women stayed, several sources offer insight into what we are looking for and why these places can be hard to find. Mooney, in his *Swimmer Manuscript*, gives some idea of what kind of structure we are looking for in the archaeological record. Descriptions of these huts were acquired through interviews with Cherokee informants. The structure would be a “small low hut” set apart from the rest of the community. It housed women in labor and sick persons, along with menstruating women. He also says that this structure would be used for ceremonial purposes and



Figure 9 Birgir Figurine Wikimedia Commons contributors, "File:Birger figurine (2).jpg," Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Birger_figurine_\(2\).jpg&oldid=824620698](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Birger_figurine_(2).jpg&oldid=824620698) (accessed December 12, 2023).

would be a place to recite certain important cultural myths.⁹¹

Patricia Galloway argues that examples of these structures have been found but have been overlooked or mislabeled. After all, if women are using these structures every month and at every delivery, it stands to reason that they must be substantial enough to appear in the archaeological record.⁹² She also posits that it would not stand out much as it would be a structure made to be lived in by different women for different lengths of time, much like any other home. Spanning from a few days to more, depending on their situation with sickness or birthing.⁹³ She discusses two sites referred to as “temple sites.” These

⁹⁰ Richard D. Fogelson, “On the ‘Petticoat’ Government of the Eighteenth Century Cherokee,” *Personality and the Cultural Construction of Society*, eds. by David K. Jordan and Mark J. Swartz, (University of Alabama Press, 2010): 175.

⁹¹ James Mooney, “The Swimmer Manuscript: Cherokee Sacred Formulas and Medicinal Prescriptions,” in *Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology* 99 (1932): 34.

⁹² Galloway, “Menstrual Huts,” 54.; Galloway, “Menstrual Huts,” 49.

⁹³ Galloway, “Menstrual Huts,” 58.

are the BBB Motor and Sponemann sites at Cahokia. The BBB Motor site is a distance from the main Cahokia settlement. At the time of settlement, this area was further separated by water and marshes. Archaeologists found important artifacts at these locations, including two bauxite figures, the Birger and Keller figures, and other items to be discussed later.⁹⁴ Both figures are red in color, depict women, and bear evidence of ceremonial “killing” of the figures by being broken.⁹⁵ The Birger figure depicts a squatting woman with a serpent, using a hoe to stroke or till the serpent's back, and wearing a square pack on her back. She has a snarled mouth, which Emerson interprets as a visual signal indicating she is a supernatural being. Her serpent is a hybrid animal with a serpent body and a head with feline aspects. The serpent's body also bifurcates at its end, becoming vines.⁹⁶ The Keller figure is a kneeling woman who sits at what looks to be a stand with a metate. She sits on a base made up of stacked rectangles. These rectangles could represent corn or bundled reeds woven into a mat. She is not as detailed as the Birger figure, but they are both made from the same kind of fireclay used in southeastern Missouri.⁹⁷

Examination of the elements in both figures reveals symbolism tied to the Earthmother, suggesting that these are portrayals of her. The Birger figure is featured with a serpent, a creature that the southeastern cultures have revered. Featured in many artifacts dating back to the Mississippian period, the serpent is a prominent figure in their iconography. The serpent is feared, while at the same time, they respect it.⁹⁸ And just like Earthmother, the serpent is also

⁹⁴ Sarah E. Baires, *Land of Water, City of the Dead: Religion and Cahokia's Emergence*, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2017), 16.; Timothy R. Pauketat, *Cahokia: Ancient America's Great City on the Mississippi*, (Penguin Books, 2009), 115.

⁹⁵ Emerson, “Water, Serpents, and the Underworld,” 50.; Valerie Butterfield, “Broken: Consolidating Killed Objects and Conservation” (MA Thesis, University College London, 2017), 26-27.

⁹⁶ Emerson, “Water, Serpents, and the Underworld,” 50- 52.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 53-54.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 58.

considered a savior figure. In one myth, it was a rattlesnake that saved humanity from a disease sent by the sun.⁹⁹ The serpent is a Below World creature seen during the agricultural season. It



Figure 10 Mississippian Incised Vessel depicting a serpent. Mississippian. Vessel with Incised Motifs. c.1400-1600. Ceramic, 7 3/4 x 6 3/4 in. (19.7 x 17.1 cm). Saint Louis Art Museum, Director's Discretionary Fund and funds given by donors to the Art Enrichment Fund.
<https://jstor.org/stable/community.14729830>.

embodies powers associated with the time of planting, when fertility is heavily imbued into ceremonies for a plentiful harvest. The serpent powers include lightning, thunder, rain, and water. Serpents can also communicate with other animals as well as plants.¹⁰⁰ The Uktena from

Cherokee myths holds these same characteristics as

serpents.¹⁰¹ This winged serpent with spots or rings

bearing horns on its head is said to kill those who look

upon it, as well as the family of the unfortunate victim, or

the victim becomes so stunned that they cannot run and instead run toward the Uktena.¹⁰² This

fear and respect of the Uktena, and serpents in general, is correlated to the same feelings toward

the menstruating women. The Birger figure is also associated with agriculture, due to the hoeing

of the serpent's back and the plants (vines and gourds) that grow from its body.¹⁰³ As shown

above, agriculture is tied heavily to Earthmother and women. The Keller figure is not lacking in

its connection to agriculture either. If the rectangles are corn, then the connection is blatant, but

Hudson, *Southeastern Indians*, 166.

⁹⁹ Emerson, "Water, Serpents, and the Underworld," 58.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 59.

¹⁰¹ James Mooney, *James Mooney's History, Myths, and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees* (Asheville, North Carolina: Historical Images, 1992), 297.; Hudson, *Southeastern Indians*, 166-167.; George E. Lankford, *Reachable Stars: Patterns in the Ethnoastronomy of Eastern North America* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2007), 243.

¹⁰² Emerson, "Water, Serpents, and the Underworld," 59.; Mooney, *History, Myths, and Sacred Formulas*, 297.; Lankford, *Reachable Stars*, 243.

¹⁰³ Emerson, "Water, Serpents, and the Underworld," 61.

regardless, the fact that she appears to be grinding corn at a stand with a metate also portrays the work women do and their connection to agriculture.¹⁰⁴

Other items found at the BBB Motor site of interest include mica, galena, ocher/hematite, and several quartz crystals. Mica is associated with serpent scales, as is Quartz, yet again another tie to the Below World.¹⁰⁵ Galena produces a silver color when ground up and can be used as a pigment to color the body.¹⁰⁶ One can imagine the association of the color silver with the moon, with its home in the Below World, being portrayed here. Ocher, red when ground, was used in the same way as galena, as a body pigment and as a coloring pigment for other items as well. Hematite was thought to have supernatural powers, while quartz was thought to be a source of power for the person who possessed it, as well as a stone used for divination and protection.¹⁰⁷ All these items are found in the ground, and Earthmother's body is the ground. These items and the power that they held could be seen as gifts from Earthmother. These items could be used to harness the power of Earthmother and her world. As Galloway concludes in her article, these sites are candidates for menstrual huts; it is not that far-fetched.¹⁰⁸ Emerson correlates fertility with these sites, and women are the epitome of fertility. Why wouldn't the women make this place (one they must go to often) somewhere they could "come to" Earthmother? It is not hard to imagine women sitting together, telling each other the stories and myths associated with Earthmother and her teachings, just as Mooney described in his account of the menstrual hut.

¹⁰⁴ Emerson, "Water, Serpents, and the Underworld," 61.

¹⁰⁵ Hudson, *Southeastern Indians*, 166-167.

¹⁰⁶ Emerson, "Water, Serpents, and the Underworld," 81.; Thomas E. Emerson, "Priestesses and Priests, Temples, and Goddesses: Structuring and Recentering Ritual in Early Cahokian Religious Landscapes," in *Landscapes of Ritual Performance in Eastern North America*, ed. Patricia Galloway (Oxbow Books, 2023), 41.

¹⁰⁷ Emerson, "Water, Serpents, and the Underworld," 81.; Hudson, *Southeastern Indians*, 168-169.

¹⁰⁸ Galloway, "Menstrual Huts," 62.

The use of the menstrual hut had fallen out of favor by the time Mooney interviewed his Cherokee informants in 1932. None of them had even seen a hut, but they had been told of them and how they were used. The other taboos around menstruating women had become less restrictive, but some still held strong, like the restrictions on food preparation and refraining from housework. Moreover, through his writings, you can see a clear shift in attitudes towards menstruation. It went from reverent fear to unclean fear. A fear of causing disease. Some of this could be Mooney misunderstanding these restrictions. By the time he did these interviews, he already saw that they were losing their stories and being influenced by white culture. He relays another dying ceremony in which a pregnant woman is taken to the river to bathe and cleanse herself in the light of the new moon (Earthmother), to pray for the health and longevity of the child.¹⁰⁹ The mother drinks a concoction in which the significance of the included ingredients is lost.¹¹⁰

Most Native American societies were matriarchal. Women did not rule the community, but rather, they held sway over important matters. They were sought out for their knowledge and guidance. Their place in society was equal to that of men and may have been more important because they held exclusive control over agriculture. Alice Fletcher, an early ethnologist in the late 1800s, wrote about the role of women in Native societies and delivered a speech at the International Council of Women. She lays out how native women enjoyed many rights that they now forfeited under the laws of the US government, “As I have tried to explain our statutes to Indian women, I have met with but one response. They have said: “as an Indian woman I was free. I owned my home, my person, the work of my own hands, and my children could never

¹⁰⁹ Mooney, “Swimmer Manuscript,” 118. This closely resembles the ritual discussed earlier in the Dorsey source about Wichita’s Woman-Having-Power-in-the-Waters.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 120.

forget me. I was better as an Indian woman than under white law.” Men have said: “Your laws show how little your men care for their women. The wife is nothing of herself. She is worth little but to help a man to have 160 acres.” She also relays a message from a chief who is saddened by the loss of women's place in agriculture. A position that has been shown to make up so much of a woman's identity and place. “My young men are to lay aside their weapons: they are to take up the work of the women: they will plow the field and raise the crops: for them I see a future, but my women, they to whom we owe everything, what is there for them to do? I see nothing! You are a woman; have pity on my women when everything is taken from them.” Alice Fletcher saw that native women were losing their place in their society and the protections they once had. “Not only does the woman under our laws lose her independent hold on her property and herself, but there are offenses and injuries which can befall a woman which would have been avenged and punished by relatives under tribal law, but which have no penalty or recognition under our laws.”¹¹¹ Sadly, this meant women lost their social protections and perhaps more importantly, what was ordained by Earthmother, their place in agriculture. They could no longer work to balance the Middle World and keep the Above World and Below World in check.

Native women today are still feeling the reverberations of this loss of power and place. They are among the highest numbers of missing and murdered women in the United States and Canada. Domestic violence plagues their communities. The revered Earthmother once gave them power, but that power is gone, and all that is left in her place is pain and unknowing. Native women must regain their power and place. Native communities should guarantee their safety and respect for their ideas and opinions. Earthmother gave them that honor within society's social

¹¹¹ Alice Fletcher, *The Legal Conditions of the Indian Woman* (Washington, D. C.: Darby Printer, 1888), 240.

structures. Though the belief in Earthmother will never return as a “religion,” her teachings could help restore the reverent equality of sacred feminism.

Chapter 3

Rebirth, Renewal, and Restoration with the Sacred Feminine Architecture of the Mississippians

Earthmother and the Below World were just as important, if not more important, to Mississippian belief systems, particularly in the earlier periods before the environmental and social disruptions of droughts, floods, climate change, warfare, disease, and resource scarcity that began ca. 1100-1200 CE and contributed to the eventual political decline and loss of centralized authority among Mississippian societies by the mid-sixteenth century.¹¹²

Mississippian architectural forms functioned as sacred, cosmologically aligned spaces that symbolically engaged Earthmother and the Below World. Through these built environments, ritual processes of rebirth, renewal, and restoration were materially conveyed in structures such as the earth lodge, sweat lodge, and the Mississippian mounds. Together, these architectural forms convey the feminine authority of Earthmother within Mississippian religious and social systems and their descendant communities.

The Below World was associated with darkness, night, water, the stars, rebirth, and renewal. Within Mississippian cosmology, power could be harnessed through multiple material and ritual practices by those inhabiting the Middle World. This process was discussed earlier in Chapter 2 in relation to ceramic pots.¹¹³ Just as with these pots, the people employed other, larger methods to channel her power. Earthmother held powerful feminine authority over the Mississippians, and they and their descendants activated this power through the architecture of their homes, communities, ritual structures, and sacred spaces, as well as through landscape modification. Archaeological research at Mississippian sites across the eastern portion of the

¹¹² Kathleen Duval, "Interconnectedness and Diversity in 'French Louisiana,'" in *Powhatan's Mantle*, ed. M. Thomas Hatley, Peter H. Wood, and Gregory A. Waselcov (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 134.; Gregory D. Wilson, Tyler Ferree, and Amber VanDerwerker, "War, Power, History: Mississippian Village Formation in the Central Illinois River Valley, in *Warfare and the Dynamics of Political Control*, ed. Brian R. Billman (University of Arizona Press, 2025), 131.

¹¹³ E. D. Singleton 2023.; Trista Wilmot, "Invoking Power: Sacred Feminism," 5.

continent provides evidence of this sacred architecture.¹¹⁴ James A. Brown argues that individuals could create sacred spaces with quadrated symbolism. Breaking the home into four sections created a cosmic center. This space was most often the space that occupied the hearth structure.¹¹⁵ Further, the alignment of the structures and town layouts with the cardinal directions also created sacred space.¹¹⁶ Mississippians created large ceremonial mounds, and the Cahokia mounds in Illinois demonstrate that these mounds and central plazas were built as spaces for the community to come together.¹¹⁷ Architectural spaces were meant to provide structure to the community by offering places to participate in and view community activities. This gave the community a cultural tie to not only their people but also to their place.¹¹⁸

This also brings us to a theory advanced by Vanessa Watts, who discusses the Indigenous concept of Place-Thought. Place-Thought suggests that land is not merely passive but animate and actively engaged in the world. Watts asserts that this perspective extends the belief in the animism of the creatures and the earth we inhabit.¹¹⁹ Rather, the land and earth also think deeply, much as humans do. “It is full of thought, desire, contemplation and will.”¹²⁰ The land acts upon humans just as much as humans act upon it. In Indigenous cosmological narratives, humans were created from the earth only after the earth and the animals had been created, thereby making them eternally connected. Place-Thought emphasizes that place and thought cannot be separated

¹¹⁴ James A. Brown, “The Archaeology of Ancient Religion in the Eastern Woodlands,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26 (1997): 472.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 476.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 478.

¹¹⁷ Joy Mersmann and J. Grant Stauffer, “Center posts, thunder symbolism, and community organization at Cahokia Mounds, Illinois,” in *Archaeologies of Cosmoscapes in the Americas*, ed. J. Grant Stauffer, Bretton T. Giles, and Shawn P. Lambert (Havertown: Oxbow Books, Limited, 2022), 7.

¹¹⁸ Christopher B. Rodning, “Architectural Symbolism and Cherokee Townhouses,” *Southeastern Archaeology* 29, No. 1 (Summer 2010): 59.

¹¹⁹ Vanessa Watts, “Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency Amongst Humans and Non-Humans: First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European World Tour,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 2, no. 1 (2013): 20-23.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 23.

because place has thought; it is alive. The earth, plant world, human world, and spirit world are intertwined and communicate with each other. Communication with the land for Indigenous people takes the form of ceremonies and cosmological stories that connect humans with it.¹²¹ The mounds of the Southeast can be understood as constructions that not only create relationships among Mississippian society but also with the earth. Their use and celestial alignments enable them to establish these relationships. Sarah E. Baires says it perfectly in her book, *Land of Water, City of the Dead*, stating that Cahokian belief centered on a “community of relationships with place, material, people, and the cosmos at the center.”¹²²

Mounds were typically constructed and maintained by the community. This activity served as a ritualistic project that renewed sacred space and established relationships.¹²³ The mounds themselves served as symbols of world renewal and purification, providing sacred landmarks and a shared history throughout the Mississippian world.¹²⁴ They also represented death, burial, and renewal.¹²⁵

Muskogee speakers used words for mounds meaning “earth sitting,” and Yuchi speakers used words meaning “land sitting.”¹²⁶ These terms made mounds earth symbols, and Earthmother is quite literally associated with the earth itself. Returning to Wichita mythology, Mother-Earth gives birth to all things. She is a “medicine chest,” she supplies all that is needed for medicine and healing. She gives the breath of life, and when people die, they return to the bosom of Mother-Earth.¹²⁷ Along with associations with Earthmother, the mounds were

¹²¹ Vanessa Watts, “Indigenous Place-Thought,” 32.

¹²² Sarah E. Baires, *Land of Water, City of the Dead: Religion and Cahokia's Emergence* (University of Alabama Press, 2017), 3.

¹²³ Rodning, “Architectural Symbolism,” 60.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 60.

¹²⁵ Brown, “Archaeology of Ancient Religion,” 475.

¹²⁶ Rodning, “Architectural Symbolism,” 60.

¹²⁷ Dorsey, “Mythology of the Wichita,” 19.; Trista Wilmot, “Invoking Power: Sacred Feminism,” 11.

quadrilateral, creating four corners that could symbolically represent the four corners of the world.

Much like the mounds, earth lodges looked similar. Earth lodges were partly underground structures, covered with earth, used as homes and ceremonial centers. The Pawnee, Hidatsa, Omaha, Arikara, Ponca, Osage, and others widely used these structures for these purposes.¹²⁸ These communities built earth lodges, sacred structures that allowed certain ritual actions to take place. For example, the layout for a Pawnee earth lodge usually includes a tunnel entrance towards the east so that the sunlight could enter the lodge at certain times of the year, lighting up the central fire and the altar that sits at the west side of the wall (more to be discussed on this later).¹²⁹ This section focuses on the Hidatsa and Pawnee earth lodges.

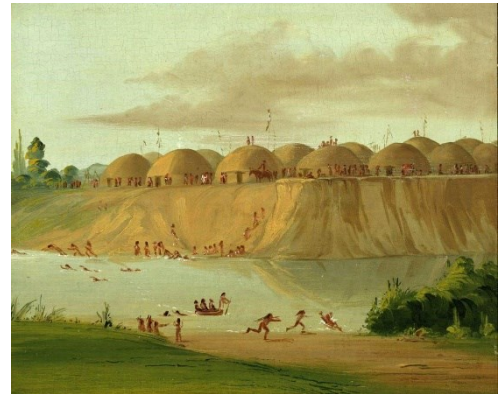


Figure 11

George Catlin, *North American, and American*, 1796-1872, (Artist). *Hidatsa Village, Earth-Covered Lodges, on the Knife River, 1810 Miles above St. Louis*. 1832. Oil on canvas, 11 1/4 x 14 3/8 in. (28.5 x 36.6 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum; Washington, DC, USA; Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.; 1985.66.383; <http://americanart.si.edu/index3.cfm>. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.15666166>

¹²⁸ Frederick Webb Hodge, *Handbook of the American Indians*, (Washington, DC: Washington Government Printing Office, 1907), 410.; Washington Mathews, "Ethnology and Philology of the Hidatsa Indians," *Plains Anthropologist* 14, No. 45 (August 1969): 4.

¹²⁹ Patricia J. Obrien, "Evidence for the Antiquity of Women's Roles in Pawnee Society," *Plains Anthropologist* 36, no. 134 (April 1991): 56.

For the Hidatsa, an earth lodge was regarded as both a microcosm and a macrocosm of the Earth and the universe.¹³⁰ The women controlled the lodge's construction.¹³¹ In a 1916 account, Gilbert L. Wilson writes of his discussions with a seventy-six (or seventy-seven)- year-old Hidatsa woman, Buffalobird-woman. Buffalobird-woman was one of a few women with the knowledge and, most importantly, the authority to build an earth lodge. To gain the honor of a

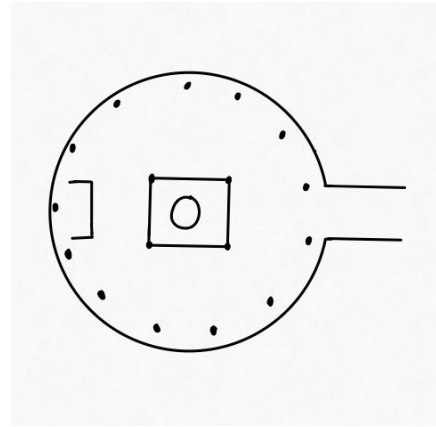


Figure 12

*Hidatsa earth lodge layout drawn
by Cordelia Wilmot*

builder, she purchased it from her mother. As a builder, she was responsible for readying the four supporting posts and the four logs, called stringers by Wilson, that lay on them. The supporting wooden posts, considered sacred, served as the main quadrangular supports, and according to Buffalobird-woman, the Hidatsa honored wood. She undertook the trimming of the posts and stringers. She leveled the ground into a square and marked the posts' placement. She and others dug out the earth just enough to slip the posts snugly into place.¹³² She then oversaw the raising of the posts and logs by an individual, usually a man, who was commissioning the house's construction.¹³³ She measured the posts and holes exactly to ensure that the posts were the same height. After she completed the supporting structures, the lodge was then covered with a sod roof.¹³⁴ The four central posts were hugely important not only structurally, but Buffalobird-woman claimed they even had life. The Hidatsa prayed and made offerings to these posts. After

¹³⁰ Gilbert L. Wilson, *Uses of Plants by the Hidatsas of the Northern Plains*, ed. By Michael Scullin, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 295.

¹³¹ Wilson, "Uses of Plants," 295.; Mathews, W., "Ethnography and Philology of the Hidatsa Indians," *Plains Anthropologist* 14, no. 45 (August 1969): 5.

¹³² Ibid, 298.

¹³³ Ibid, 298.

¹³⁴ Washington, "Ethnography of the Hidatsa," 5.

completion of the lodge, the posts were dressed in buffalo skins cut into squares. Later, brightly colored calico and other cloths were used in place of buffalo skins as offerings for the posts. In the center of these four posts is the central fire.¹³⁵ The Hidatsa considered the earth lodge sacred.¹³⁶ We can see this in the way that Wilson describes his entrance into one of the last Hidatsa earth lodges in the area owned by Hairy Coat,

When I was admitted to the lodge Harry Coat took down from a shelf on one of the main posts a broken piece of pottery, put sweetgrass in it, and lighted this with a coal from the fire. He then placed it before his shrines and prayed to them, asking them not to be offended at this white man coming into their lodge, that he meant no harm and was trying to learn about Indian ways so that these ways would not be forgotten. After this prayer he announced that it would be alright, and I then proceeded to photograph and measure the lodge. The prayer was rather impressive as Harry Coat talked to the shrine with gestures, just as he would to a man, and, in fact, acted just as though he were speaking to a living “presence.”¹³⁷

It can be seen here that Hairy Coat thought of his living space not only as a refuge but also as a living thing. It was a sacred space that must be respected. Earth lodges were used for about seven to ten years and dismantled with ritualistic care reserved for a sacred space. Women again held that position and were called upon to take down the earth lodge. Buffalobird-woman stated that the women always noticed that, even though a clear, calm day was chosen to dismantle the structure, the winds inevitably picked up before the process was finished. They assumed that, since the lodge was a sacred object, it might have been imbued with the power to shift the winds.¹³⁸ While not stated in the sources, one can imagine that the earth lodge was connected to Earthmother. They were built into the earth; earth was used to build them up, and women held the position of authority in both the construction and dismantling of the earth lodge.

¹³⁵ Washington, “Ethnography of the Hidatsa,” 5.

¹³⁶ Wilson, “Uses of Plants,” 304.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 304.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 316.

Further, the power of winds, the breath of life, was attributed to Earthmother, and these structures were seen as alive and could cause the winds to rise when being dismantled.

Like the Hidatsa, the Pawnee also lived in earth lodges. Historically, the Pawnee have shown that their world was structured according to the cosmos as they perceived it. In their



Figure 13

Jackson, William Henry, 1843-1942. *Pawnee Earth Lodges, at Loup Fork.* n.d.
<https://jstor.org/stable/community.13719292>.

mythology, the main players were Morning Star and Evening Star. Sun and Moon, the helpers of Morning and Evening Stars, also contributed as the parents of the first man.¹³⁹

Morning Star is the male aspect and

is associated with the East. He

represents the warrior and hunter

aspect of men.¹⁴⁰ Evening Star is the feminine aspect of creation. She is associated with the West, and she (along with all women) has the power of fruition.¹⁴¹ She is seen as an unwilling participant in the creation. Morning Star must court, pursue, and overcome obstacles to get to Evening Star. He eventually overcame her and, through their union, Evening Star bore a daughter. Even though Evening Star was not a willing participant at the beginning, she showed that she has a maternal love for her daughter and the Pawnee people, who her daughter and the first man conceived. Evening Star gives her daughter, the first woman, seeds from her garden and, most importantly, Mother-Corn. She instructs her to plant Mother-Corn and sends her down to earth on a cloud. Evening Star is also responsible for the rain that sustains crops and people's

¹³⁹ Von Del Chamberlain, *When the Stars Came Down to Earth: Cosmology of the Skidi Pawnee Indians of North America* (Ballena Press/ Center for Archaeoastronomy Cooperative Publication, 1982), 26.

¹⁴⁰ O'Brien, "Evidence for the Antiquity of Women's Roles," 26.

¹⁴¹ Chamberlain, *When the Stars Came Down*, 22.

lives.¹⁴² She also controls water.¹⁴³ We can see here that Evening Star shares many attributes with that of the Earthmother archetype discussed earlier.

Evening Star, like other mythological deities, held a place of honor in Pawnee earth lodges.¹⁴⁴

Gene Weltfish and Mardith K. Shuetz-Miller describe the earth lodge as a womb, with the tunnel ramp seen as a birth canal. The central posts that

support the domed roof are painted in colors

corresponding to their sacred directions and represent the four leading stars of their cosmology.

The roof was the dome of the Upper World, so the posts supported the sky, and the people could use

them as an axis mundi to access the gods' power.¹⁴⁵ In the center of the lodge, between the inner

support posts, stood the fire pit, used as a place to eat and come together as a family. Directly

above the fire pit was a hole in which the “gods poured down their strength from their

appropriate directions in a constant stream.”¹⁴⁶ Between the western wall and the fire pit stood an

altar against the wall and an empty sacred space. This sacred space was thought of as “the place

where the wise words of those who have gone before us are resting.”¹⁴⁷ The space was not

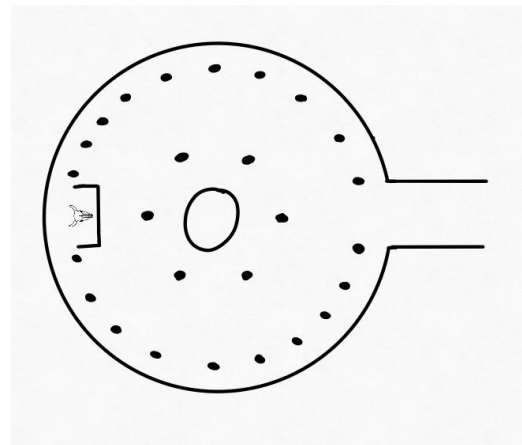


Figure 14

Pawnee earth lodge layout drawn by Cordelia Wilmot based on the illustration in Weltfish's "The Lost Universe."

¹⁴² Chamberlain, *When the Stars Came Down*, 25.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 24.

¹⁴⁴ Alice C. Fletcher, “Star Cult among the Pawnee- A Preliminary Report,” *American Anthropologist* 4, no. 4 (1902): 731.

¹⁴⁵ Gene Weltfish, *The Lost Universe: Pawnee Life and Culture* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 64; Mardith K. Schuetz-Miller, “Spider Grandmother and the Other Avatars of the Moon Goddess I the New World Sacred Architecture,” *Journal of the Southwest* 54, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 366.; Fletcher, “Star Cult among the Pawnee,” 735.

¹⁴⁶ Weltfish, *The Lost Universe*, 63-64.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 63.

passed through, and the occupants of the home took care not to enter it. The altar, a small raised earthen platform mound, on the western wall, contained all the sacred items of the occupants.¹⁴⁸ This altar was located to the west, associated with Evening Star, who also resided in the western corner of the earth within her garden, where she renewed the buffalo and corn every day. A buffalo skull rested on the altar with the sacred bundle, but only if this was the bundle keeper's home. The bundle containing the sacred ears of corn that symbolize her power of renewal, amongst other sacred items, was suspended above this altar.¹⁴⁹ Women cared for this bundle, but the men held the knowledge of the ceremony, the ritual, and its contents.¹⁵⁰ The structure's layout could amplify the bundle's power. Morning Star and his helper, the sun, rose in the east, their light streaming through the tunnel entryway. Upon the light entering, it first “lit the fire in an act of cosmic procreation, symbolizing the first union with the Evening Star in the times of the great creation when he had had to fight off the guardians of the night with which the Evening Star surrounded herself.”¹⁵¹ The structure itself served as a daily reminder of people's place in the cosmos. The beds of the women, the most numerous gender in the home, even lined the walls in a pattern representing the stages of women's lives. The youngest woman was nearest the western wall, and the oldest was nearest the eastern entrance because they were “on their way out” of this life.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Weltfish, *The Lost Universe*, 63.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 64.

¹⁵⁰ Fletcher, “Star Cult among the Pawnee,” 734.

¹⁵¹ Weltfish, *The Lost Universe*, 63.

¹⁵² Pawnees were a matriarchal society and the men lived with their spouses or sisters. O’Brien, “Evidence for the Antiquity of Women’s Roles,” 62. Weltfish, *The Lost Universe*, 64.



Figure 15

Sharp, Joseph. *Ceremonial Sweat Tipi*. 01.39. 1890. Tulsa: Gilcrease Museum, <https://collections.gilcrease.org/object/0139> (03/06/2018).

Earth lodges were not the only structures that held a connection to renewal and, therefore, a connection to Earthmother. Indigenous communities throughout the continent utilize sweat lodges.¹⁵³ MacDonald surmises that the ritual of sweat-bathing created an environment that constrained and tested individuals' limits. This was sometimes combined with hallucinogenic substances, like tobacco, and was performed as a ritualistic

ceremony that created an otherworldly experience. Some of the goals of the sweat lodge experience were to heal, to be renewed, and to create a bond with others. The Huron believe that this activity, performed by shamans, could provide a means of communicating with the spirit world.¹⁵⁴ Kaarina Kailo likens the use of a sweat lodge to a ritual of “holistic, multidimensional world renewal.”¹⁵⁵ When participating in a sweat lodge ceremony, participants seek purification and rebirth.¹⁵⁶ In her memoir, *Lakota Woman*, Mary Crow Dog gives an overview of a Lakota sweat bath ceremony. The sweat bath was one of the oldest ceremonies, and Mary Crow Dog took care to capture every detail.

The sweat lodge is made of 16 Willow sticks, tough but resilient and easy to bend. They are formed into a beehive-shaped dome. The sweat lodges vary in size. They can accommodate anywhere from eight to twenty-four people. The bent Willow sticks are fastened together with strips of red trade cloth. Sometimes offerings of Bull Durham tobacco are tied to the frame, which is then covered with blankets or a tarp. In the old days Buffalo skins were used for the covering, but these are hard to come by now. The

¹⁵³ Robert MacDonald, “Ontario Iroquoian Sweat Lodges,” *Ontario Archaeology* 48 (1988): 17.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 18.

¹⁵⁵ Kaarina Kailo, “Archaic Aspects of the Sauna and the Sweat Lodge: The Gift of Bare Being,” in *Sweating with Finns: Sauna Stories from North America*, eds. R. Walkentin, K. Kailo, and J. Halonen (Thunder Bay: Centre for Northern Studies, Lakehead University, 2005), 45-75.

¹⁵⁶ Kailo, “Archaic Aspects of the Sauna and the Sweat Lodge,” 45-75.; Vine Deloria, Philip J. Deloria, and John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks: The Complete Edition* (University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 112.

floor of the little lodge is covered with sage. In the center is a circular pit to receive the heated rocks. In building a lodge, people should forget old quarrels and have only good thoughts.¹⁵⁷

Inside the lodge, earth is scooped out where the pit will be located, and the dirt is used to make a pathway from the lodge to a small mound formed from this same dirt. This path represents Unci, Grandmother Earth. When this mound is formed, a small prayer is made to it.¹⁵⁸ Outside the structure is also a bison skull altar, with tobacco tied to the horns as an offering.¹⁵⁹ Participants covered only with a towel remove the towel once inside. For the Lakota, with whom Mary Crow Dog was affiliated, gender mixing was uncommon.¹⁶⁰ However, she later recounts visiting another group and participating in a men's sweat bath, which she says differed from the women's and tested her endurance. Clean, free-flowing water plays a huge role in the ceremony.¹⁶¹ Steam rises from the rocks as water is poured onto them throughout the ceremony. The stones are usually white limestone rocks that do not break as easily when subjected to high heat and water. Sometimes these stones had a covering of green moss that crisscrossed their surfaces, which they interpreted as secret spirit writing.¹⁶² The white steam that arose and filled the lodge was called "Grandfather's breath."¹⁶³ Priests sprinkled sage or green cedar onto the hot rocks to cause an aromatic effect.¹⁶⁴ The lodge was known to get extremely hot; the more rocks were used, the hotter it became. To help everyone participate safely, precautions are set. Certain

¹⁵⁷ Mary Crow Dog and Richard Erdoes, *Lakota Woman* (New York: Grove Press, 1990), 202-203. Deloria and Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 112. In this source, Black Elk also says that the structure was built with willow branches, making it round, and covered with a bison robe. He also describes a pit of heated rocks, with water poured over them, and a medicine man leading the sweat ritual.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 203.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 204.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid 203.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 202.

¹⁶² Ibid, 203.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 204.

¹⁶⁴ Deloria and Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 101.

phrases, in this case “All my relatives!” could be said to prompt the entrance flap to open to release heat and allow a moment of reprieve, but this was to be a last resort.¹⁶⁵ Mary Crow described how she felt and how her body responded to the sweat bath ritual. “After the sweat, I really felt newly born. My pores were opened, and so was my mind. My body tingled. I felt as if I had never experienced pain. I was deliciously lightheaded, elated, drunk with the spirit. Soon I began looking forward to a good sweat.”¹⁶⁶ With this description of the sweat lodge ceremony and the rebirth of individuals, it is easy to see that this ceremony could have been correlated with Earthmother, even in the prominence of water and the lodge's womb-like structure. However, duality is also shown by the inclusion of a grandfather spirit.

Going back to the Mississippians and what we can glean from the archaeology of their sites. Their sites are almost always aligned to the cardinal directions, and the beliefs associated with these directions are linked to their descendant communities. Their communities contained plazas and mounds that connected them with communal spaces. As early as 1000 CE, community spaces encompassed an intricate network of citizens through solstitial alignments of the earthworks and ritual spaces.¹⁶⁷ These alignments were “an effort to make the humanly built



Figure 16

Mississippian (American). Cahokia Mounds, Community Activities. 11th century.
<https://jstor.org/stable/community.14711461>.

world conform with the cosmos and celestial motions. Since these are unalterable truths, human works made in concert with these geomantic principles are thereby legitimized and take on some of the sanctity of cosmic patterns.”¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ Crow Dog, *Lakota Woman*, 205.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 205.

¹⁶⁷ Brown, “Archaeology of Ancient Religion,” 478.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 479.

Commonly known for building their homes in a more rectangular shape, the Mississippians incorporated wattle-and-daub construction with wall trenches in which the wall posts were set. They built these structures in rows, but we also see the use of more earth lodge-like structures at some Mississippian sites.¹⁶⁹ One of the most well-known sites known for the earth lodge structure is the Macon Plateau at Ocmulgee National Park in Macon, Georgia. This earth lodge, thought to be a men's winter council house, has been reconstructed, and the site is open to visitors today. However, archaeologists found evidence for this structure at Moundville in Alabama as well.



Figure 17

North America (Southeast).
Reference: Mound Complex near
Moundville Mississippian. n.d.
<https://jstor.org/stable/community.13738930>.

Excavations from 1999 to 2002, led by archaeologist Vernon J. Knight at Moundville, uncovered a ceremonial earth lodge atop Mound V. This earth lodge is among the largest in the southeastern region and the westernmost known example in the southern states.¹⁷⁰

Another site that shows strong correlations with what has been discussed in this paper is Cahokia, near modern-day St. Louis, Illinois. Cahokia is the largest and most prominent Mississippian site. Here, the mounds and main religious structures show evidence of planned alignments, especially in the peripheral site of Emerald Acropolis. The Emerald Acropolis is located 24km east of Cahokia, with a processional route that connected the main city of Cahokia

¹⁶⁹ Charles Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976), 91 & 83.

¹⁷⁰ Jeffrey L. Sherard, "Analysis of Daub from Mound V, Moundville: Its Role as an Architectural Indicator," *Bulletin of the Alabama Museum of Natural History* 27 (November 2009): 29.

to the Emerald Acropolis.¹⁷¹ Here, archaeologists found pole-and-thatch structures that were rectangular and some circular ‘shrine buildings’.¹⁷² Twelve mounds, both rectangular and circular, form a row at the Emerald Acropolis site, aligned with the moon’s northern maximum moonrise or southern maximum moonset. The Emerald Acropolis also contains an ever-running underground spring.¹⁷³ Researchers interpreted the rectangular domestic structures as temporary shelters, and these made up 74 percent of the structures found at the Acropolis. These structures



Figure 18

Cahokia. 650-1400 CE.

<https://jstor.org/stable/community.14715723>.

lacked interior roof support posts, storage pits, artifacts, and enriched fill.¹⁷⁴ The other 26 percent of structures were characteristic Cahokian political-religious buildings, such as the T-shaped ‘medicine lodges,’ square temples or ‘council houses,’ small shrine houses rectangular in form, and circular buildings that were possibly rotundas and sweat

baths.¹⁷⁵ The ritualistic ceremony of water in the closing of structures with water-laminated silts, along with the common filling with refuse. Archaeologists found evidence on the floors of the structures of burning hides or mats before the structures were filled with water-redeposited silt. The ritualistic closing and reopening of structures, the temporary use of structures, known ceremonial architecture, and the intermittent abandonment of the site indicate that this could have served as a ceremonial site to which Mississippians undertook a pilgrimage for spiritual

¹⁷¹ Timothy R. Pauketat, Susan M. Alt, and Jeffery D. Kruchten, “The Emerald Acropolis: Elevating the Moon and Water in the Rise of Cahokia,” *Antiquity* 91, no. 355 (2017): 207.

¹⁷² *Ibid*, 207.

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, 208.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 210.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 211.

reasons.¹⁷⁶ Further, the alignment with the moon and the natural spring of water could connect the site with Earthmother and the Below World. Mississippian descendants like the Arikara, Pawnee, Omaha, Kansa, Osage, Quapaw, Iowa, and Ho-Chunk connected water with fertility and, by extension, with femininity, and the moon with night, rain, and water.¹⁷⁷ All aspects of Earthmother.

As pointed out earlier, Cahokia's central precinct is close to the Emerald Acropolis and connected by a possible ceremonial pathway along which Cahokians would make pilgrimages. But Cahokia itself is also created by sacred space. Cahokia is aligned with calendrical and cosmological bodies like the sun, moon, earth, water, and the Below World.¹⁷⁸ During this time of profound change for Cahokia, sweat baths became a foundational ceremony. Robert Hall noticed during his excavations that these steam baths were overlooking bodies of water or wetlands.¹⁷⁹ One of the highest points in Cahokia is Monks Mound, and evidence there suggests that sweat baths once sat atop the mound.¹⁸⁰ Also, around Cahokia are wetlands, underground waterways, and caverns, strengthening the connection to Earthmother and the Below World.

Earthmother may be less visible today, hidden in the details of the past, but we can see that she is there and has always been there. The Mississippians probably worshipped her and held her in high esteem until the droughts challenged their world. She could have started to fall out of favor when the people were being challenged to survive. For the new challenges, they might have turned to another mythological hero, Red Horn. This left Earthmother to fall into the background, but she, through architecture and ceremonies, would never completely disappear.

¹⁷⁶ Pauketat, Alt, and Kruchten, "The Emerald Acropolis," 217.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 218.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 208.

¹⁷⁹ Timothy R. Pauketat, "When the Rains Stopped: Evapotranspiration and the Ontology at Ancient Cahokia," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 76, no. 4 (Winter 2020): 423.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 419.

Chapter 4

Sacred Feminism and Rebirth in Mississippian Burial Practices

In the burial practices of the Mississippians, rituals of renewal were performed. With each ritual, they were evoking Earthmother to receive, protect, and redirect souls toward rebirth. In this chapter, an argument is made that burial rituals and grave assemblages present death as a return to her domain, where the transformation of the “soul” becomes possible. The treatment of women and children in the mortuary record and the materials found provide the clearest evidence of this belief. Women, as life-givers within the community, and children, as the continuation of the lineage, appear repeatedly near Earthmother. Earthmother and her iconography appear throughout the mortuary contexts of burials of both women and children. In comparison with burials of men, these contexts show clear favoritism toward Earthmother and her guidance in the passage from death to renewed life.

Death is a normal part of life. Each culture has its own way of dealing with death and preparing for it. In much of the modern world, death is often ignored and considered a taboo topic. People tend to act as though refusing to think about it will keep it at a distance and allow them to move through life without seriously considering what comes after. Most societies outside European and American societies, in contrast, maintain an oral tradition of origin stories and beliefs that guide the preparation of the dead before and after death. Native Americans understood that death was part of the lifecycle. Death was inevitable, and they wanted their people to know what to expect and how to navigate the realm of the spirit world. Therefore, they told many stories and myths about death.¹⁸¹

Among Mississippians, we see Earthmother in numerous depictions through ceramics, statuary, and other iconographic items. Gorgets (modified seashell discs, usually engraved with designs and worn about the neck) typically feature iconography that ties them to

¹⁸¹ George E. Lankford, *Reachable Stars*, 204.

Earthmother/rebirth/renewal. Archaeologists found most Mississippian gorgets in grave contexts, and most of these graves were of children. Robert V. Sharp argues that people used Earthmother effigies to guard, protect, and guide the deceased soul through the afterlife. This afterlife journey is known as the Path of Souls and traverses the night sky as the Milky Way.¹⁸² On this journey, some people may return to the Middle World to live other lives. Antonia Mills states that, “for some (nations) return is the rule, for some it is the exception, and in some it is not mentioned at all.”¹⁸³ Further, the Mississippian civilization was an agricultural society. The cyclical renewal of crops and planting seasons served as a solid basis for people to assume they could be reborn after death as well.¹⁸⁴ Historical research shows that the plains and prairie tribes, such as the Ponca, Cheyenne, Hidatsa, Mandan, Arapaho, Fox, Winnebago, Chippewa, and Ojibwa, have believed in reincarnation. The Mandan even believe that people were stars before they were born. Likewise, in the east, there are the Cherokee, Creek, Seminole, Yuchi, and Natchez, who carry evidence of reincarnation beliefs.¹⁸⁵

The Path of Souls belief proved to be widespread in the Eastern portion of the North American continent and is well documented. Nations such as the Ojibwe, Fox, Cheyenne, Iroquois, Oglala, Osage, Omaha, Caddo, Pawnee, Chickasaw, and Creek are just a few that hold this belief.¹⁸⁶ True as always, each has their variations of this journey. George Lankford wrote on the variations and commonalities and put together a throughline. First humans have two souls. One soul is tied to the very fibers and bones of a person's body, remaining with it after death.

¹⁸² George E. Lankford, *Reachable Stars: Patterns in the Ethnoastronomy of Eastern North America*, (The University of Alabama Press, 2007), 204.

¹⁸³ Antonia Mills, “Reincarnation Belief among North American Indians and Inuit: Context, Distribution, and Variation.” In *Amerindian Rebirth: Reincarnation Belief Among North American Indians and Inuit*, edited by Antonia Mills and Richard Slobodin (University of Toronto Press, 1994), 21.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 19.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 24.

¹⁸⁶ George E. Lankford, *Reachable Stars*, 205.

The second soul, the free-soul, can leave the body and even travel the world. The free-soul animates the body, and great care is taken at death to ensure that the person has not just “left” their body with their free-soul, only to “return” later. Once buried, the journey begins—the free-soul moves towards the west. The soul will reach a point at which it must jump to the Sky vault on the other side. This must be done carefully and at just the right moment. If they jump and miss, they will fall into the waters of the Below World. If they make it past this point, they will be on the Path of Souls (the Milky Way in the night sky). During this part of the journey, the soul must cross a great river or abyss. To do this, they will need to induce a log (which is really a serpent) to lower itself or drop down so the soul can use it to cross the river. However, they must stay on guard, as there could be dogs that will try to attack the free-soul and knock it off the bridge. Once they make it across, they will come to a fork in the path that leads to either an easier path or a longer route. Their morals throughout life, or the great deeds they accomplished, can determine which path they take. At this fork, there is also a figure who acts as a guide or judge. The Path now changes direction and heads south to the village of the dead. This change in direction aligns with the Milky Way's. Once the free-soul reaches this southern endpoint, they will meet the guardian of this realm. They will enter the village of the dead, and they can live their soul's life now with the souls of other families and friends who reside there.¹⁸⁷ Just as Anatonina Mills stated earlier, George E. Lankford also argues that reincarnation is possible for the free-soul. Mostly, social rank or individual achievement determines that.¹⁸⁸

While people believe that a person of any age can be reborn, the belief seems strongest regarding children, especially children who died young and/or tragically.¹⁸⁹ People believed

¹⁸⁷ George E. Lankford, *Reachable Stars*, 213-215.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 215.

¹⁸⁹ Antonia Mills, “Reincarnation Belief,” 26-27.

warriors who died in battle could return, and some believe their battle scars would appear as birthmarks. They also believed that adults who died tragically have a chance of rebirth.¹⁹⁰ Scholars have received accounts from people who lived a full life or more. In 1909, Paul Radin recorded a claim of the reincarnation of a Winnebago man, Thundercloud. Thundercloud claimed he was in his third life and remembered two previous lives. Between his second and third lives, he was gifted Shamanic powers from the spirit world. To receive these powers, he implored the spirit powers of “Fire, Buffalo, Grizzly Bear, Chief of the Eels, Turtle, Rattlesnake, Night Spirits, Disease-Giver, Sun, and Grandmother Earth.” He claimed that all the spirits answered his plea and that upon his rebirth, he acquired those powers.¹⁹¹ People often attribute the powers shamans have not just to their current lifetimes but to those of the past and to successive lifetimes as well. They often acquire powers in dreams, visions, and the spirit realms.¹⁹² One can assume that these powers can be attributed to Earthmother, along with other deities. The spirit world is the realm of the night sky, and this is her home. She is also tied to death and rebirth, transformations are her territory, and becoming a shaman can be considered a transformation.

Shamans played a pivotal role in society. While women were well-versed in herbal remedies and medicines, they sometimes had to rely on Shamans to intervene and help a loved one.¹⁹³ Shamans, however, could be women, and in fact some graves of women show evidence of this. Some Shaman women could have stepped into spiritual roles for other women in secret

¹⁹⁰ Antonia Mills, “Reincarnation Belief,” 26-27.

¹⁹¹ Paul Radin, “The Reincarnation of Thunder Cloud,” In *Amerindian Rebirth: Reincarnation Belief Among North American Indians and Inuit*, edited by Antonia Mills and Richard Slobodin (University of Toronto Press, 1994), 55.

¹⁹² Ibid, 57.

¹⁹³ Amanda Pesce, “An Iconographic Analysis of Mississippian Kneeling Effigy Figures from the Central Mississippi Valley” (Master of Science, The University of Memphis, 2017), 34.

societies or sodalities.¹⁹⁴ Shamans and community members regularly undertook spiritual journeys to gain access to visions and guidance from their spiritual guides.¹⁹⁵ One substance that has been evidenced to be used is *Datura*. *Datura*, a flowered hallucinogenic plant, has been used in many ceramics recovered from some Mississippian sites.¹⁹⁶ The use of this substance and its importance in this paper will be pointed out later in the chapter.

Death, as we have seen, is not the end in some cases for the individuals who have died. Rather, a journey is undertaken to the Land of the Dead or, in some cases, to reincarnation. Many cultures had diverse ways to cope and help their loved ones along the journey. The Earth itself is considered the bosom of Earthmother.¹⁹⁷ To bury (not all nations bury their dead), you are placing the body into the womb of Mother Earth. Being placed underground brings one closer to the Below World and Earthmother, and, just like planting a seed, the dead are renewed and reborn into something new.¹⁹⁸ Other Indigenous societies are known for putting the dead on burial scaffolds that are essentially platforms that lift the dead into the sky. Each nation had its own burial rituals and practices. The Mississippians seem to have buried most of their dead in a mixture of burial mounds, stone box graves, near their homes, or even in the floors of their homes.

¹⁹⁴ Cheryl Claassen, "Women's Lives in Prehistoric North America," in *Women in Prehistory: North America and Mesoamerica*, eds. Cheryl Claassen, and Rosemary A. Joyce (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 69. Amanda Pesce, "Mississippian Kneeling Effigy," 34.

¹⁹⁵ David Dye, "Anthropomorphic Pottery Effigies as Guardian Spirits in the Lower Mississippi Valley," in *Cognitive Archaeology: Mind Ethnography, and the Past in South Africa and Beyond*, eds. David S. Whitley, Johannes H. N. Loubser, and Gavin Whitelaw (New York: Routledge, 2020), 205.

¹⁹⁶ Amanda Pesce, "Mississippian Kneeling Effigy," 40.; Eric Singleton, "A Changing Canvas," 26.

¹⁹⁷ Dorsey, *The Mythology of the Wichita*, 19.

¹⁹⁸ Catherine Hammons and David Dye, "Female Effigy Bottles in the Central Mississippi Valley," in *Pre Columbian Ceramic Art in Arkansas and Missouri: Archaeological, Anthropological, and Art Historical Approaches to the Nodena Art Style* (Memphis: 77th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, 2012), 4.

Another documented burial practice in some Late Woodland (predating Mississippian societies) and Mississippian contexts involves placing stone, clay, or wooden effigies in graves.

These effigies are typically female-gendered, male-gendered, or



Figure 19 Kneeling Hunchback Effigy Jar: Mississippian Period Southeastern Missouri. 1400-1500. Ceramic, h. 9 1/2". <https://jstor-org.libproxy.uco.edu/stable/community.13747099>.

zoomorphic. In some locations, such as the Middle Cumberland Region and the Central Mississippi Valley, we see the use of more women's gendered effigies than men.

Women are decidedly the creators of these effigies.¹⁹⁹ These effigies depict

Earthmother, but in different states of life.

She is most often portrayed as either a

younger, straight-backed woman or an older,

hunchbacked woman. The straight-backed hooded effigy bottles

belonged to the first wave of effigies. In contrast, the humpbacked versions belonged to the

second wave of figures in the 1300s-1450s C.E.²⁰⁰ Women artists produced these effigies, and

Robert V. Sharp has concluded that the first wave had sixteen or more artisans, while the second

wave had just two.²⁰¹ Could these women be shamans who have garnered the spiritual authority

to imbue these figures with life? Robert V. Sharp asserts in *Mississippian Women* that he thinks

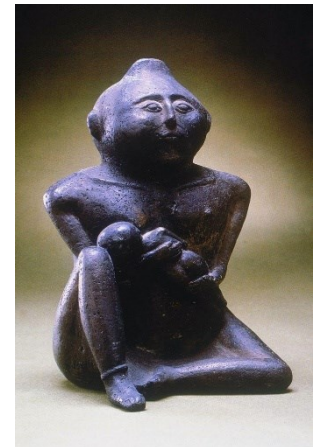


Figure 20 Nursing-Mother Effigy Bottle Mississippian Period. 1200-1400. Ceramic, h. 14.9cm, w. 9.7cm. <https://jstor-org.libproxy.uco.edu/stable/community.13755512>.

¹⁹⁹ The Middle Cumberland is a region in central Tennessee, near the Cumberland River. The Central Mississippi Valley is a region that is most well-known for the location of major activity for the Mississippians. It encompasses Cahokia.; Amanda Pesce, "Mississippian Kneeling Effigy," 39.; Robert V. Sharp, "Earth Mother and Her Children: The Role of Mississippian Women in Shaping Beliefs and Material Culture in the Middle Cumberland Region," in *Mississippian Women*, eds. Rachel V. Briggs et al. (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2024), 212-213.

²⁰⁰ Robert V. Sharp, "Earth Mother and Her Children," 215.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 215.

Amanda Pesce, "Mississippian Kneeling Effigy," 45.

so. He suggests that women were the ones managing the sacred paraphernalia and the temples that provided it.²⁰² The community understood these effigies as living beings rather than merely ritual implements with a utilitarian function.²⁰³ Participants of this ritual used these vessels associated with women to consume herbal tea mixtures (primarily *Datura* decoctions), with the belief that Earthmother blessed both the bottle and the drink it contained.²⁰⁴

In the Middle Cumberland Region, archaeologists most often find effigies in the graves of children beginning around 1250 C.E.²⁰⁵ According to Robert V. Sharp, these effigies served not only as guides but also as a means of resurrection.²⁰⁶ Communities buried children in stone box graves, distinctive to mostly the Middle Cumberland region, but archaeologists have also found burials in the floors of homes, temples (or residences used by groups of women), and in places where women were known to congregate, usually near water sources or places where they cooked.²⁰⁷ One interesting location of burial for five infants was that of a residence that could have served as a sanctuary of sorts for women and fertility rituals at the South Cape Site found in Missouri. Some items that these infants were buried with included a unique effigy bottle of a woman nursing a child.²⁰⁸ Most effigies depict the Earthmother alone and in the form of a straight-backed or humpbacked woman. Other items that could have been associated with fertility or rebirth rituals were a triskele gorget, unworked sheets of mica, and a small piece of

²⁰² Robert V. Sharp, "Earth Mother and Her Children," 202.

²⁰³ David Dye, "Anthropomorphic Pottery Effigies," 212.

Amanda Pesce, "Mississippian Kneeling Effigy," 45.

²⁰⁴ Amanda Pesce, "Mississippian Kneeling Effigy," 46.

²⁰⁵ Robert V. Sharp, "Earth Mother and Her Children," 207-208.

²⁰⁶ Eric Singleton, "A Changing Canvas," 193.

Amanda Pesce, "Mississippian Kneeling Effigy," 47-48.

²⁰⁷ These are graves in the ground that are lined with large stones to create a "box."

Eric Singleton, "A Changing Canvas," 193.

²⁰⁸ Tamira Brennan, "The South Cape Site: A Fortified Mississippian Village in Southeast Missouri," in *The Missouri Archaeology Society Quarterly* (Missouri: Missouri State University, April-June 2010), 14.

copper sheet, along with a couple of other items. Turtle carapaces also cover most of the infants' bodies.²⁰⁹ These items hold significance because they are strongly associated with Earthmother. Turtles carry the world on their back and live in water, the realm of Earthmother. And copper is thought to be the scales, horns, or bones of the Great Serpent/Uktena, manifested in the Middle World.²¹⁰ The Uktena gives copper as gifts, but only to those who respect it. Mica is also a substance that archaeologists have found at women's sites. Thomas Emerson discusses mica found at a potential women's retreat at Cahokia (the BBB Motor site), where women came together during menses or childbirth to segregate themselves.²¹¹ Another item of interest is the



Figure 21 Shell Gorget, Triskele Design, Perforated. A.D. 1000 - 1450. Shell, 8.5 cm x 8.6 cm x 0.4 cm. Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. <https://jstor-org.libproxy.uco.edu/stable/community.10792978>.

gorget. Earlier, it was mentioned that a gorget was also found in the burial of infants under a dwelling at the South Cape Site; however, gorgets are often found in the graves of older children as well. Gorgets are circular pieces of shell engraved with specific symbolism. Community members wore these gorgets on the neck, and they could also signify rank. Most of the gorgets found in the graves of children were imbued with iconography that is associated with Earthmother and the Below World. One of the most prolific symbols is that of a spiral-vortex-like pattern

encircled with other circles, seven circles around that center circle, and then around that, the edge of the shell has been cut into petaloid shapes. This is essentially a map. With the center being the

²⁰⁹ Tamira Brennan, "The South Cape Site," 14.

²¹⁰ George E. Lankford, "The Great Serpent in Eastern North America," eds. F. Kent Reilly III and James F. Garber, in *Ancient Objects and Sacred Realms: Interpretations of Mississippian Iconography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 119.

²¹¹ Thomas E. Emerson, "Water, Serpents, and the Underworld: An Exploration into Cahokian Symbolism," in *The Southeastern Ceremonial Complex: Artifacts and Analysis: The Cottonlandia Conference*, eds. Patricia Galloway (Lincoln and London, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 41.

Below World, the middle being the Middle World, the seven circles are thought to be the Pleiades, and the outside petaloid indicates the Upper World.²¹² This ensured that the guidance of these symbols led the child through the afterlife and back to the Middle World. The Pleiades is also thought to be a place where the souls of children go. Some Native Nations believed that the Pleiades were children who had starved and went up to the sky and stayed as a set of stars. These star children, the Pleiades, could be a portal for children's souls, and the shell shows them that.²¹³

As can be seen from the symbology and iconography, it is already telling in the mortuary context. Most of these symbols call into focus the Earthmother and her “portals.” As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, Earthmother is a being who can access the axis mundi, a portal connecting the three worlds. Other forms of the axis mundi are trees, mountains, fires, and poles.²¹⁴ Other deities and creatures can access it as well, but their numbers are limited. One creature that has that ability is the snake. Snakes in the middle world, especially Eastern Copperheads, have an ogee-like pattern believed to signify their sacredness.²¹⁵ An ogee essentially looks like an elongated circle with arched circles that come together at points on either side of the elongated circle. Almost like an eye shape. This ogee evokes a portal when drawn on items like effigy bottles and the gorgets discussed earlier.

²¹² In most instances, the shell is a whelk shell that is known to be from the Gulf of Mexico. Eric Singleton, “A Changing Canvas,” 194.; F. Kent Reilly III, “The Petaloid Motif: A Celestial Symbolic Locative in the Shell Art of Spiro,” eds. F. Kent Reilly III and James F. Garber, in *Ancient Objects and Sacred Realms: Interpretations of Mississippian Iconography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 39.

²¹³ Eric Singleton, “A Changing Canvas,” 97-98.; Robert V. Sharp, “Our Lady of the Cumberland: Styles, Distribution, and Community,” in *Tennessee Archaeology* 10 no. 1 (2019), 30.

²¹⁴ Amanda Pesce, “Mississippian Kneeling Effigy,” 3.

²¹⁵ Robert V. Sharp, “Our Lady,” 27.; Eric Singleton, “A Changing Canvas,” 94-95.

Another symbology represented on these items is the guilloche. The guilloche represents the Earthmother. This symbol is a square with looped corners. It is believed that this symbol represents the four cardinal directions or winds.²¹⁶ The four cardinal directions are also thought



Figure 22 Shell Gorget with Water Spider Motif. n.d. Shell. <https://jstor-org.libproxy.uco.edu/stable/community.13756031>.

of as “Sky Sisters” who protect women. These sisters were Medicine Women who lived in lodges at the four cardinal directions.²¹⁷ The center of the square shows the location of the middle world, while the corner loops represent the directions.

Another image is that of the spider. The spider is connected to Earthmother, and one of her names is Spider Grandmother.

Catherine Hammons and David Dye explain that “spiders weave webs to trap and ensnare their prey, so that they become a life symbol representing the earth and its ability to attract, snare, and hold life.”²¹⁸

Another form of burial among the Mississippians is their use of mortuary mounds. Communities built these mounds together with dirt brought in from another location.²¹⁹ The mounds held sacred objects and the burials of potential Mississippian elites. These mounds ranged in size, but burial mounds were generally small.²²⁰ Monks Mound at Cahokia is the

²¹⁶ Amanda Pesce, “Mississippian Kneeling Effigy,” 39.

²¹⁷ Ibid, 6.

²¹⁸ Catherine Hammons and David Dye, “Female Effigy Bottles in the Central Mississippi,” 6.

²¹⁹ Kevin E. Smith and James V. Miller, “The Statuary Complex and Ancestor Veneration,” in *Speaking with the Ancestors: Mississippian Stone Statuary of the Tennessee-Cumberland Region* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009), 158.

²²⁰ Eric Singleton, “A Changing Canvas,” 10.

largest burial mound and almost, but not quite, rivals the size of Teotihuacán. These mounds showed continual use with multiple layers.²²¹ With each layer signifying a new iteration of the mound. Mounds that leveled out to form platforms for ritual activities were known as ridge-top mounds. Monks Mound is one of these. Another burial mound at Cahokia with a large number of internments is Mound 72, which contains 260 burials.²²² In Mound 72, archaeologists uncovered



Figure 23 Monk's Mound. 900-1350. Society of Architectural Historians Architecture Resources Archive (SAHARA). Artstor. <https://jstor-org.libproxy.uco.edu/stable/community.14906659>.

the remains of sacrificed women in an arrangement just below the surface layer, with some women entombed in wooden vaults.²²³ Scholars believe that these women may have been sacrificed as impersonations of the Corn Mother/Earthmother. Also included in this burial were the remains of a man wearing a beaded cape shaped like wings and of a

female counterpart.²²⁴ The man could be an impersonation of Morning Star/Hawkman, and the woman his consort or another impersonation of the Earthmother. Regardless of whom they may be impersonating, the two individuals are significant because duality is at play. Both the Above World and the Below World are represented with their main deities.²²⁵ Nearby, seven other bodies could be taking on the role of the Pleiades.²²⁶ Women make up the majority of burials in this mound, which could suggest that it is imbued with a role in fertility and renewal.²²⁷

²²¹ Eric Singleton, "A Changing Canvas," 10.

²²² Robert C. Mainfort and Lynne P. Sullivan, *Mississippian Mortuary Practices: Beyond Hierarchy and the Representationist Perspective* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2010), 31.

²²³ Ibid, 23.

²²⁴ Robert C. Mainfort and Lynne P. Sullivan, *Mississippian Mortuary Practices*, 24.

²²⁵ Gayle J. Fritz, "Recognizing Women at Cahokia; Farmers, Weaver; Agents of Polity Integration," in *Mississippian Women*, eds. Rachel V. Briggs et al. (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2024), 44.

²²⁶ Robert C. Mainfort and Lynne P. Sullivan, *Mississippian Mortuary Practices*, 24.

²²⁷ Gayle J. Fritz, "Recognizing Women," 43.

These graves of women and children show that the people who buried them expected rebirth, resurrection, or, at the very least, guidance for these souls to the Land of the Dead.

Women have been shown to have a true connection to the Earthmother. They, like her, transform themselves during pregnancy and bring life into the world. They are the maternal figures who care for the children and the homes.

Conclusion

Brief Summary of Findings

Throughout this paper, Earthmother and her influence on past and present Indigenous communities of the Southeast constitute most of the argument in this thesis. It is with her slow retreat into the background, along with the introduction of external influences, that the societal structures of gender today were shaped. Women no longer benefit from the respect, influences, or protections they once had.

Though a resurgence is in the making, this thesis would not have been possible merely a few years ago. Academic writing has evolved and now includes so much more about indigenous women than it once did. Some of the earliest historians, like Charles Hudson, had to start broadly and could not put a focus on women. Today, however, historians are breaching this subject more and more with each passing year. A microscopic lens can now be applied to the individual aspects of the Southeast and Mississippian cultures due to the plethora of writings that have come about.

Archaeologists are also making more discoveries every day with every turn of their trowel. Harder questions are being asked, and more researchers are stepping up to answer them, including more Indigenous scholars.

While a religion and belief in the Earthmother might never be resurrected, her lessons and mythologies should be taught and taken to heart again so that Indigenous women and men alike can reclaim their sacred place.

Confirmation, Modification, or Denial of Thesis

While I think I was able to find enough evidence to back up my thesis, I really struggled with its presentation and with how I connected the arguments of each chapter. I tried bringing them together, but found myself losing it again, almost as soon as I started writing again. In my head, I could see the correlations, but had a hard time finding a way to put them into writing adequately.

Statement of the Significance of the Findings

This research was still a significant undertaking. As noted in the historiography, an emphasis on the Earthmother and women in Mississippian culture remains uncommon in research. It has just started to be a topic. While this made my research a bit harder, it made me appreciate that I was doing something worthwhile that might help others in this research area. I think that it is also significant as it shows the influence that the past has on the present, no matter how far we think the past is.

Suggestions for Future Research

For future researchers, I hope that they find more associations between Earthmother and women, thereby adding more credence to the argument. Especially the associations still evident in current rituals and ceremonies. I would also like to extend my research further into the Southwest, to Changing Woman. She, too, is much like Earthmother.

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