

# A Mississippian conflagration at East St. Louis and its political-historical implications

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A walled portion of the extensive Precolumbian civic-ceremonial precinct of East St. Louis, near present day St. Louis, Missouri, enclosed a cluster of as many as 100 small buildings or huts. The huts were associated with a walled ritual-residential zone or elite compound dating to the late Stirling phase (A.D. 1150–1200) and, importantly, were burned in a single conflagration. The burning of East St. Louis may have resulted from a ritual commemoration, an act of aggression, or an accidental fire; circumstantial evidence primarily supports the first scenario. With strongly diminished mound and architectural construction at the site in subsequent decades, and with the coeval disappearance of key ritual-residential buildings from the regional landscape after the burning, the ancient East St. Louis fire was part of a larger pattern of historical events that mark a downward turning point in the social and political history of Greater Cahokia.

**Keywords:** ritual burning, political transformation, palisade, Cahokia, Mississippian culture

## Introduction

Human actions coordinated on a large scale have the potential to reshape regional relationships and entire cultural orders, an argument that has been made repeatedly to explain the rise of the Cahokian polity (e.g., Benson *et al.* 2009; Emerson 1997a; Pauketat 2004). Details of a widespread late 12th-century fire at the East St. Louis civic-ceremonial precinct within Greater Cahokia allow such an argument to be extended to a later phase of decline in the history of this same polity. We present here evidence for assessing the East St. Louis fire and its aftermath, focusing on a series of burned huts from an apparent ritual-residential zone or compound. We then place the fire in a context of other regional changes in ritual-residential architecture that demonstrate the fire is part of a series of events that initiated a regional shift in local power relations.

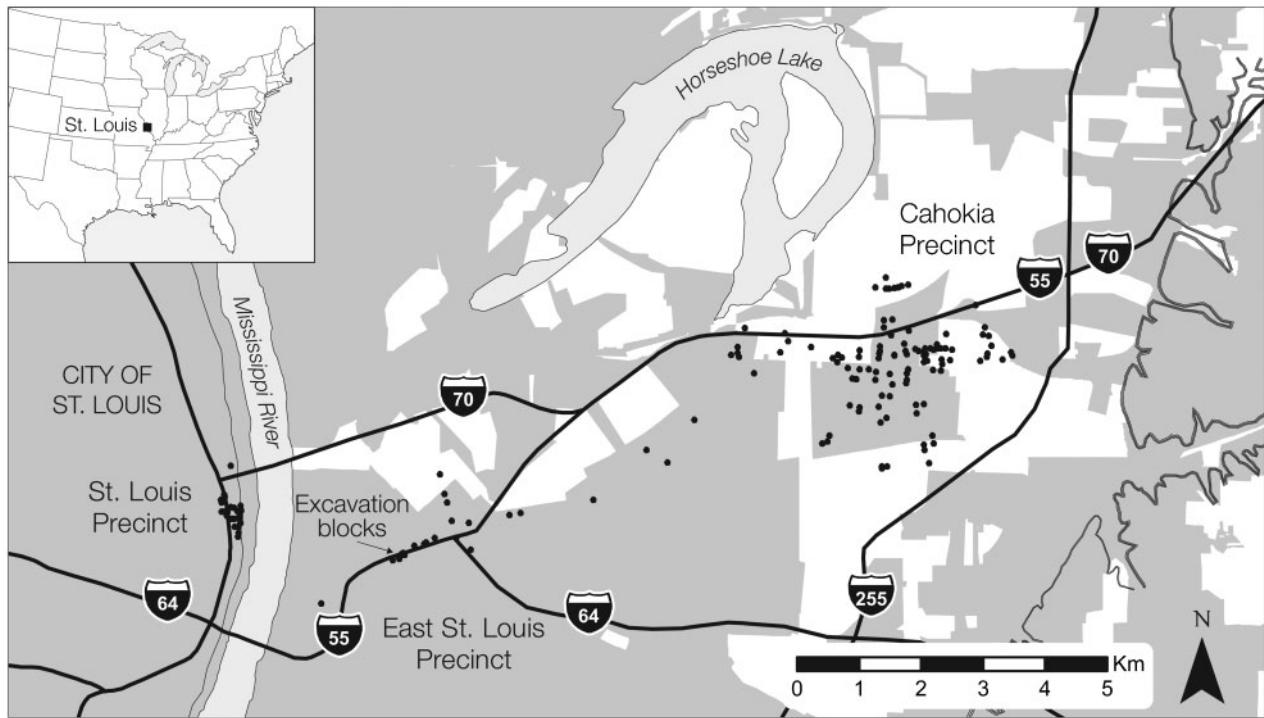
Although the reasons for the conflagration remain uncertain, three plausible scenarios are examined here: an accidental fire, warfare or insurrection, and ritual incineration. More important for present purposes, the conflagration appears as a harbinger of pervasive, qualitative social and political changes within East St. Louis proper and beyond. The fire demarcates the beginning of the scaled-back occupation of the East St. Louis precinct and corresponds to a revealing series of architectural, ritual, and

domestic changes across the region. These include the disappearance of what Emerson (1997a) has described as Cahokia's "architecture of power." We infer a late 12th century chronology wherein greater Cahokia and its contiguous civic-ceremonial sprawl was downsized and reorganized.

## *Contextualizing the East St. Louis precinct*

Several major syntheses exist that describe the ancient city of Cahokia and its region from different points of view (Dalan *et al.* 2003; Emerson 1997a, 2002; Milner 1998; Pauketat 2004; Pauketat and Emerson 1997a). Most agree on the fundamentals: its areal extent, monumental proportions, and population density were without parallel in North America. Cahokia and its two contiguous civic-ceremonial precincts, East St. Louis and St. Louis, formed the central administrative core (Pauketat 1994; Stark 1999) of Greater Cahokia that stretched along a narrow 14 km east-west corridor reaching from the eastern to the western bluffs of the Mississippi River floodplain, all within the confines of modern metropolitan St. Louis (FIG. 1). Positioned less than 2 km from the shoreline of the Mississippi River and only 8 km west of the central ceremonial precinct of Cahokia was a sprawling extension of the Greater Cahokia polity called the East St. Louis Mound precinct. In 1811, Henry Marie Brackenridge saw 45 earthen mounds and smaller "artificial elevations" in this location which, according to his brief description, formed a semicircle approximately one mile in extent (Brackenridge 1814: 187). These mounds, he realized, were

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**Figure 1** The modern context of Greater Cahokia. Black dots represent major recorded mounds and mound clusters between St. Louis and the eastern Mississippi River bluff line; heavily urbanized municipal boundaries are shown in dark gray shading; the Mississippi River and major lakes are shown in light gray shading. The arrow points to the zone of the Northside-Southside Excavation Blocks shown in Figure 2.

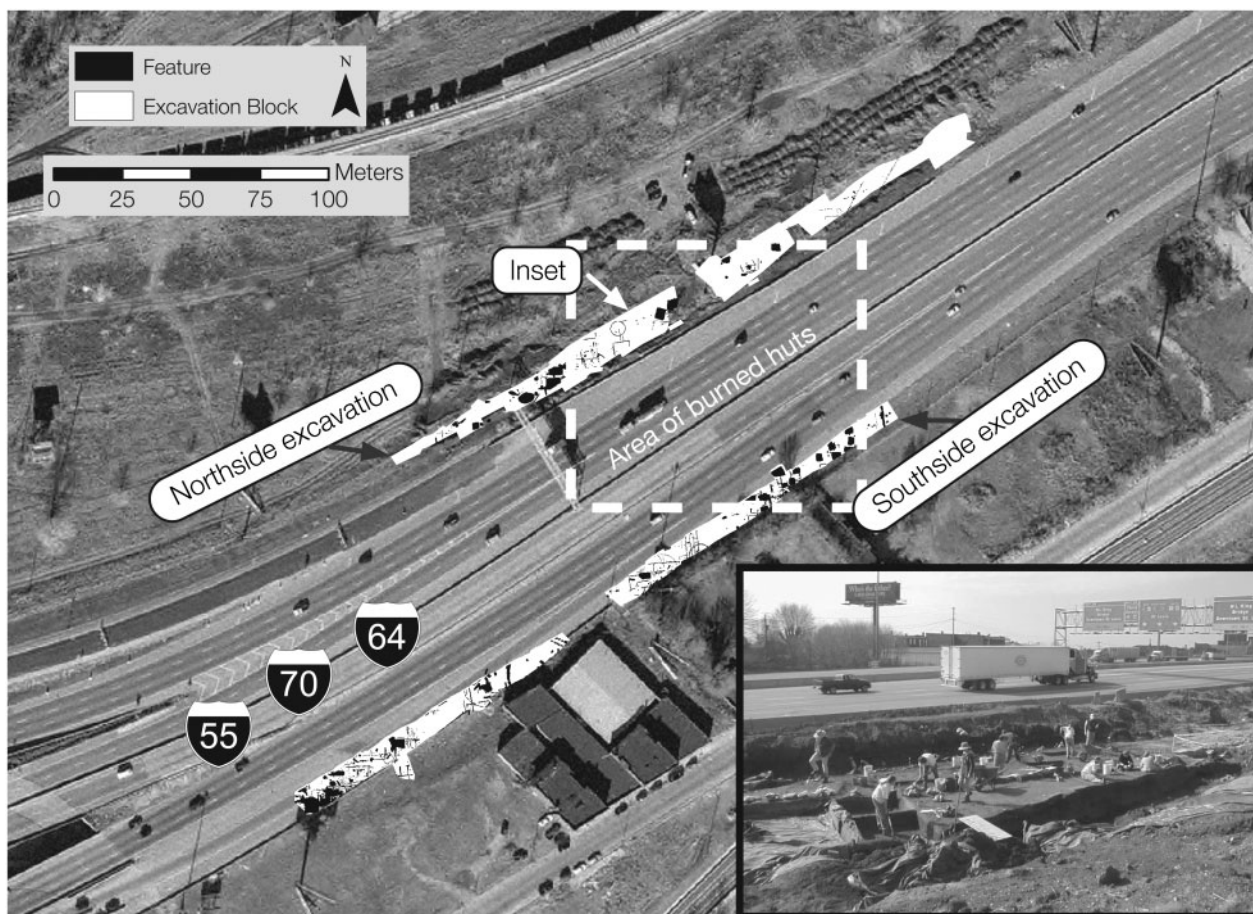
situated immediately opposite the 26 better known earthen pyramids of the St. Louis site on the west bank of the river. They were also connected to the greatest concentration of 120 or more tumuli at Cahokia proper via a continuous series of mounds and habitation zones that stretched out along the bank of an oxbow lake (Fowler 1997). Cahokia, the preeminent civic-ceremonial precinct, was marked by an imposing 30 m high central earthen pyramid that loomed over a 20 ha Grand Plaza and was surrounded in all directions by additional public spaces, pole-and-thatch buildings, and domestic neighborhoods, all covering an area of more than 10 sq km.

Greater Cahokia (i.e., the Cahokia precinct and its contiguous civic-ceremonial precincts, East St. Louis and St. Louis) sat in the middle of an extensive agricultural region during a period of maximum productive potential (Alt *et al.* 2010; Benson *et al.* 2009; Pauketat 2003; Sherwood and Kidder 2011). Given these attributes, Greater Cahokia's historical impact on neighboring regions from the upper Midwest to the Plains and south was dramatic and enduring (e.g., Brown and Kelly 2000; Emerson and Lewis 1991; Emerson *et al.* 2003; Hall 1997; Stoltman 1991). Recent explanations for the development of this indigenous American phenomenon have stressed the politics, economics, and religion of an agricultural society. The farmlands within one to two days' walk of Cahokia were extensive, and many Lohmann (A.D. 1050–1100) and Stirling (A.D. 1100–1200) phase

farmsteads and villages are known, some arguably occupied by immigrants from the east and south (Alt 2001, 2002; Milner 1986; Pauketat 2003). The ritual and political organization of these rural areas has provided evidence of Cahokia's rise and decline (e.g., Emerson 1997a, 1997c; Mehrer 1995; Milner 1998; Pauketat 2004).

### Archaeology of the East St. Louis Precinct

By the late 1860s, only 15 mounds of the East St. Louis precinct survived within what was by then the bustling commercial city of East St. Louis, Illinois. By the next decade, all of these mounds had been leveled, and their fills dumped elsewhere to help raise the city's grade (Federal Writers Project 1983; Galloy and Kolb 2008). Little is known concerning the dimensions or contents of the earthen mounds, save the largest, a 100 m long, 12 m high ridgetop feature, elliptical or rectilinear in outline, locally called the Cemetery Mound (Kelly 1994). According to eyewitness accounts, two cedar-post and log-lined "vaults" containing human remains—smaller individuals in one and larger individuals in the other—were uncovered deep in the mound along with considerable quantities of pots, stone tools and ornaments, mollusk shell objects, and likely bead studded garments (Kelly 1994). Similar to other St. Louis, Mitchell, and Cahokia sites, the Cemetery Mound in its final form was a ridgetop sepulcher mound, a form known almost exclusively from the Greater Cahokia



**Figure 2** Plan view of the excavation blocks and hut compound overlaid on an aerial photo. Inset photo looks south across the interstate highway from the Northside Excavation Block.

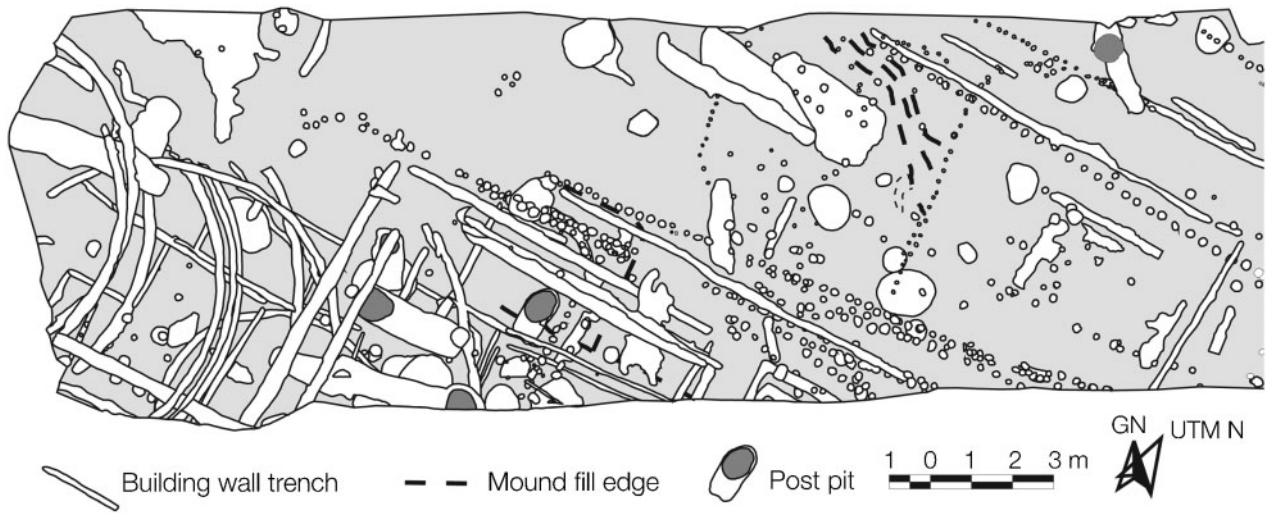
region where they consistently contain elite burials of individuals who probably had been interred during public mortuary spectacles (Alt and Pauketat 2007; Emerson and Pauketat 2002; Fowler *et al.* 1999; Milner 1984b; Porubcan 2000). Based on diagnostic artifacts from this mound examined by Kelly (1994), especially the columnar marine shell beads not known to have been made after the Stirling phase, Pauketat (2005a: 314) inferred a terminus ante quem date of 1200 for the vaults in the Cemetery Mound.

By the 1960s, most archaeologists assumed that nothing remained of ancient East St. Louis. For this reason, Interstate Highway 55/64/70 was built through the middle of the site without any archaeological investigations (FIG. 2). Since then, however, much of this once impressive complex, excluding the upper portions of mounds, has been rediscovered intact buried under 19th- and 20th-century fills (Fortier 2007; Kruchten and Koldehoff 2008; Pauketat 2005a).

Ample evidence of elite facilities, public ritual, and monumental constructions comparable in some ways to that first seen during the destruction of the Cemetery Mound now exists from two completed archaeological excavations performed on opposite sides of an interstate highway by Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) archaeologists (Fortier

2007; Pauketat 2005a) (FIG. 2). The first major excavation, the “Southside” project (1991–1992), uncovered all or portions of 56 wall-trench or single-post buildings; more than 100 isolated walls, fences, or post clusters; 74 pits; 41 monumental post pits; 11 hearths; four human burials; one area of sub-mound midden and construction fills; a number of ancient ditches, gullies, or wash zones; the basal portions of three different earthen mounds (E-1, E-6, and E-11); and several possible compound (or palisade) wall segments (FIG. 3). The second investigation, the “Northside” project (1999–2000), uncovered 23 more buildings, 35 pits, 17 short isolated walls or screens, one of the two compound (or palisade) walls, and 13 more post pits, one of which contained the remains of a likely sacrificial victim (Fortier 2007; Hargrave 2007). In addition, the Northside investigations also uncovered the basal portions of two previously unrecognized mounds (E-12 and E-13) as well as a sequence of engineered anthropogenic fills used to elevate a portion of the site.

In 2008, the Illinois State Archaeological Survey (ISAS) initiated additional excavations for IDOT just north of the earlier work on a 1 km long east-west corridor through the ancient East St. Louis precinct. These ongoing extensive excavations have exposed



**Figure 3** Selected plan view of a portion of the Southside Excavation Block, Mound E-11 area, showing multiple superimposed buildings, compound walls, and mound slopes.

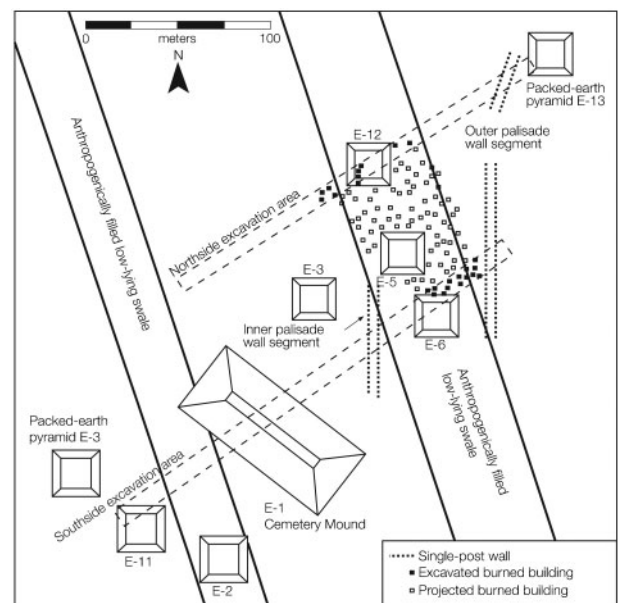
nearly 1500 structures, more than 70 large monumental post features, about 3600 pits, and several burial areas, as well as the base of a heretofore unknown rectangular mound. The remains date primarily between A.D 900 and 1200 and confirm many of the patterns reported above in the Northside and Southside ceremonial areas.

Evidence from these excavations indicates that the East St. Louis precinct was founded as a public ceremonial complex at the beginning of the Lohmann phase, virtually concurrent with the dramatic redesign of Cahokia and the reordering of the rural landscape (Alt et al. 2010; Emerson 1997a, 1997c; Holley et al. 1993; Pauketat 1994, 2002, 2004; Pauketat and Emerson 1997a). One of the two earliest features in the Southside area is a packed earth pyramid, Mound E-6, at the base of which is a Lohmann phase midden (FIG. 4). Based on the high density of charred plant and animal remains recovered from this 10 cm deep deposit, the midden appears to represent a mix of elite domestic refuse, sumptuary items, and feasting debris (Kelly et al. 2005a: 50–76).

It also seems that, although the East St. Louis precinct was founded in the middle of the 11th century, extensive landscaping of the site dates to the early Stirling phase. Based on geomorphological coring and excavation at the site, a series of specially mixed fills and alternating light and dark or sandy and clayey sediments were added to raise the location’s low-lying areas (Kolb 2007). As exposed in the Northside excavation, these deposits consisted of specially prepared layers with distinctive color and composition characteristics reminiscent of Mississippian mounds in the region as well as of the fills associated with the massive Grand Plaza at Cahokia (Alt et al. 2010; Dalan et al. 2003; Holley et al. 1993; Pauketat 1993; Pauketat et al. 2010). These construction fills extend southward into the Southside excavations, where they

fill a broad low-lying swale located between two natural sand ridges in this portion of the site. The resulting leveled surface may have constituted a special open space, possibly even a plaza, at one point in the site’s history (Fortier 2007).

On this flat constructed surface and adjacent natural sand ridges, a series of pole-and-thatch structures were built, large marker posts were emplaced, and the early stages of at least two packed earth pyramids (Mounds E-6 and E-12) were initiated or enlarged with their lower-stage fills superimposing the swale-construction fills (FIG. 4) (Fortier and Finney 2007). The Stirling phase buildings were often spacious, with their projected floor areas ranging up to 531 sq m (Pauketat 2005b: table 4.2). Having both circular and rectangular plans, the buildings crowded the space



**Figure 4** Simplified schematic view of the ritual-residential precinct at East St. Louis showing mounds, burned buildings, and the Northside and Southside Excavation Blocks.

in the Southside area and were repeatedly rebuilt, presumably through the late Stirling phase and often in the same location on or near the early stage surfaces of Mounds E-1, E-6, and E-11 (FIG. 3). Given their size, rigid orientations, and lack of domestic debris, these buildings might have been meeting halls, elite housing, and special religious, administrative, or storage facilities. Near the buildings were post pits, which were often clustered or arranged in rows.

The base of an oversized circular rotunda, 27 m in diameter and dating to the early Stirling phase, was found under what Kelly (1997a: 155) believes to be the former Cemetery Mound (E-1). It is also likely that a compound or inner palisade wall—consisting of a double row of posts and possible shielded entryways—stood 45 m east of the Cemetery Mound. The walls of this feature, which may have been rebuilt once, were spaced 4.5 m apart, each with closely set posts ranging from 15–20 cm in diameter (Pauketat 2005b: 183). Superpositioning and stratigraphy leave little doubt that the compound wall had been built prior to or coeval with the deposition of construction fills into the swale next to Mound E-6, which was in turn completed sometime during the late Stirling phase. Up to that time, Mound E-6 was a low platform surmounted by a series of large wall-trench, pole-and-thatch buildings.

In the Northside excavations, the earliest constructions seem to consist of a series of replacements of 13 large marker posts, preceding most if not all of the other pole-and-thatch buildings in that location (Fortier and Finney 2007). Like those to the south—and as was common at Cahokia proper—the marker posts had been repeatedly removed and then reset, leaving behind numerous superimposed insertion and extraction ramps. A human interment—a young woman—found facedown on the sloping ramp of one of the larger post pits had apparently been cast into the pit along with a couple of pots immediately after the ca. 1.5 m diameter post had been removed; her tightly crossed ankles and her arms tucked under her chest suggest that her limbs may have been bound (Fortier and Finney 2007;

Hargrave 2007). In the Northside area, later Stirling phase houses replaced the posts. These later buildings, smaller than most of their Southside counterparts, were reconstructed in the late Stirling phase.

All but a few of the buildings excavated at East St. Louis lack interior pits and significant accumulations of domestic refuse or production debris from manufacturing fabrics, shell beads, or groundstone axe heads, as are known from various Cahokian neighborhoods and rural settlements (Alt 1999; Pauketat 1997; Yerkes 1991). Also, compared to domestic zones at Cahokia or outlying residential settlements, secondary refuse at East St. Louis is found in low densities (TABLE 1). The paucity of such refuse in feature fills at East St. Louis is characteristic of the site. Especially noteworthy for their low densities are items typically associated with food processing and cooking: accumulations of potsherds, burned hearth debris, exhausted expedient chert-flake tools, and food remains.

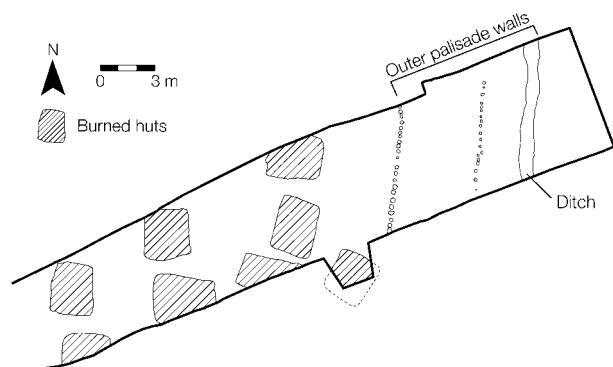
The scarcity of these items indicates an atypically meager domestic occupation in this portion of the larger East St. Louis precinct. The few animal remains include anomalous bones inferred to be nonfood elements including swan humeri, turkey spurs, long-tailed weasel mandibles, snake vertebrae, a mountain lion metacarpal, and marine gastropod shells (Kelly 2005; Scott 2007). Food species exist but in low densities compared to those recovered from typical habitation sites, leading Scott (2007: 775) to conclude that “the collection simply doesn’t have the ‘heft’ of household refuse, either in numbers or in bone weight.” A similar description seems apt for the macrobotanical remains. The remains of plant foods other than maize are evident but scarce, and “the paucity of [non-maize] starchy grains ... is particularly striking” (Simon 2007: 766). On the other hand, the structural remains of buildings—charred wood and roof thatch—are disproportionately well represented (Parker 2005; Simon 2007).

In the Southside area, there are human burials of both adults and children, perhaps the elite occupants of this portion of the site (Hedman 2005). But again,

**Table 1 Comparisons of secondary refuse densities.**

Site (phase)*	No. buildings	No. vessels in secondary refuse	No. lithics	Vessels/building	Lithics/building
East St. Louis	79	235	3666	3	46
Cahokia 15A (pre-Mississippian)	63	262	3605	4	57
Cahokia 15A (Lohmann)	92	506	13,711	6	149
Cahokia 15A (Stirling)	4	151	518	38	130
Cahokia 15A (Moorehead)	23	189	1231	8	54
Cahokia ICT-II (Lohmann)	22	872	18,270	40	830
Cahokia ICT-II (Stirling)	50	1293	20,011	26	400
Cahokia ICT-II (Moorehead)	12	265	6127	22	511
Sponemann (Stirling)	12	284	6404	24	534

\*Sources: Fortier 2007; Demott et al. 1993; Jackson et al. 1992; Holley 1989; Pauketat 1998, 2005a.



**Figure 5** Plan view of burned huts and the outer wall and palisade segment in the Southside Excavation Block.

“while the buildings were actively maintained and rebuilt, they may not have housed the same number of people as did ordinary domiciles” elsewhere at East St. Louis or Cahokia (Pauketat 2005a: 313). The Southside and Northside architecture, in other words, in combination with evidence of land modification, low artifact density, and few inhabitants, suggests a complex that was overbuilt and underused. Material objects and food remains found in a set of burned late Stirling phase features suggest that this complex was extraordinary in other ways as well.

#### *The Hut Compound*

The excavated late Stirling phase features include at least 25 small single set post and wall-trench structures located immediately inside an outer compound or palisade wall in the eastern portions of both the Southside and Northside excavation areas at East St. Louis (FIGS. 2, 4, 5). Other contemporary buildings sat to the west, as readily evident in the Southside excavations. The small buildings, however, seem to have been constructed as a set alongside the outer wall complex that appears to postdate the inner wall near the Cemetery Mound, indicating an enlargement of the ritual-residential precinct within.

The new outer wall, like the earlier inner palisade, was actually two or three walls. Like the earlier version, this outer wall consisted of two parallel rows of individually dug postholes (Kelly 1997a). In the Southside area, these rows were spaced 4.5 m apart and an additional shallow wall trench or ditch paralleled the post walls, giving the entire wall complex a width of 7 m. In the Northside area, two parallel post walls spaced 7 m apart trend in a northeast-southwest direction. Segments of two or three east-west wall segments are also evident and it remains unclear which of the Northside wall segments match the Southside wall segments. The postholes in each wall, whether the Northside or Southside segments, average 15–25 cm in diameter with posts spaced from 5–30 cm apart depending on the wall segment. In the north, a few additional evenly spaced posts on the interior of one wall might have served as

buttresses. Likewise, a short trench segment inside the southern trench or ditch might have been designed to shore up that wall.

Inside this possible double- or triple-walled barrier in both the Northside and Southside areas are the 25 excavated small rectilinear buildings. Most of these are square in plan and, given their size, are labeled “huts” to distinguish them from other normal-sized rectangular buildings, of which three are included in this sample. Kelly (1997a: 159) labeled 11 of the Southside buildings “storage sheds.” In fact, there are 14 such sheds or huts in the Southside cluster, most with roughly square outlines and floor areas that range from 4 to 7 sq m (TABLE 2). Moreover, all 14 appear contemporaneous and all produced evidence of incineration (see below). The 11 buildings in the Northside area, on the other hand, are larger on average, with floor areas that range from 6 to 23 sq m. Of these, there are eight roughly square huts, slightly larger than those in the Southside area, and three other small buildings with more elongated rectangular shapes typical of Mississippian domiciles. Of these Northside buildings, at least eight had been destroyed by fire.

Only three of the larger or unusually shaped buildings show evidence of possible central support posts and, where evident, most wall posts had diameters of 10 cm or less. Such attributes probably indicate that these were arbor or peak roofed bent-pole structures with sapling sized uprights used to construct the wall frameworks (Pauketat 2005b: fig. 4.41). Ample evidence among the burned debris on their floors indicates that the wall exteriors were thatched. In at least two cases, burned sections of likely floor mats were found inside (Fortier and Finney 2007).

Small structures such as the East St. Louis huts have been encountered at several sites in the region, although never as clustered as at East St. Louis. Using the outer edges of the outermost buildings as the limits of the cluster, there is about one hut per 36 sq m in the Southside cluster and one per 112 sq m in the Northside cluster. By comparison, in the densest residential neighborhoods of Cahokia, which date to the Lohmann phase, there was one building per 405 sq m (Pauketat and Lopinot 1997: table 6.2).

Few huts are known from other residential spaces in the Greater Cahokia region. There were one or possibly two similar but slightly larger late Stirling phase square buildings (F144 and F248) at the Sponemann site (Fortier 1992). In comparison, at the Lohmann phase Halliday site, one or two such small square huts were routinely included with each courtyard group of seven to 10 domiciles (Alt 2002: 227). At Cahokia’s Interpretive Center Tract II, a single small 2 × 2 m hut dating to the Lohmann phase was situated adjacent to a large marker post in the middle of a small

neighborhood plaza (Collins 1990: 83–85). Based on its size and location, Collins (1990, 1997) interpreted this building as a communal granary.

Whatever their function, at least 22 of the 25 buildings considered here have been destroyed by fire (FIGS. 5, 6). On the floors of these burned pole-and-thatch buildings were a series of de facto or catastrophically preserved remains. Each of the East St. Louis Northside and Southside buildings produced burned organic debris and charred artifacts in varying amounts. In addition, one pit (F617) in the Northside area has been included in the present analysis owing to its likely connection to the burned huts.

Viewed as a single assemblage, the 34 ceramic vessels, 91 chipped stone tools, and 60 other objects or maize concentrations from the 22 burned huts and small buildings appear similar to those known from early Mississippian domestic contexts in the Greater Cahokia region (e.g., DeMott et al. 1993; Emerson 1997a; Holley 1989; Jackson et al. 1992; Milner et al. 1984; Pauketat 1998). However, at the time of their burning and deposition, the pots were still usable, the tools were still functional, and the food was still edible. This contrasts with standard ceramic, lithic, zooarchaeological, and archaeobotanical refuse both from

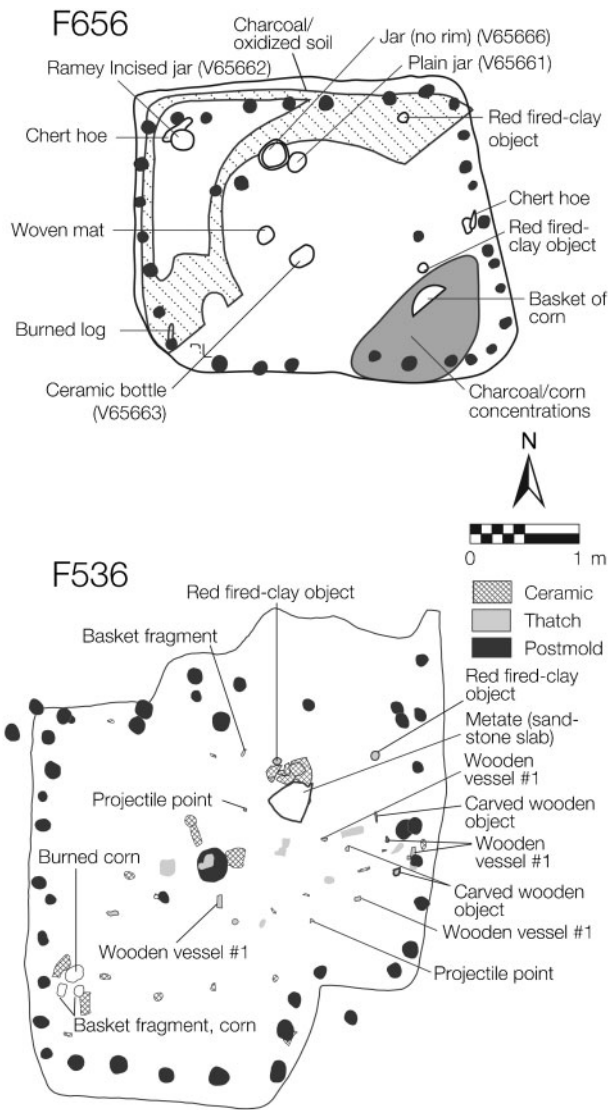
domestic zones and ritual deposits. For instance, the array and state of objects and food remains in the great feasting deposits beneath Cahokia’s Mound 51 differ markedly from the contents of the burned East St. Louis buildings (Pauketat et al. 2002).

The East St. Louis materials instead compare well with the intact domestic tool and vessel assemblages from at least two ritually burned late Stirling phase houses (F178 and House 4) at Cahokia proper (Collins 1990; Holley 1989; Pauketat 1987b). Like those assemblages, the numbers and proportions of artifacts in the late Stirling phase buildings at East St. Louis are extraordinary; they are unlike those in typical secondary refuse deposits elsewhere around the region. The vessel assemblage, for instance, includes the usual array of jars, bowls, seed jars, jugs, funnels, and beakers commonly associated with domestic contexts in the middle to late 12th century, but in unusual proportions (e.g., Emerson 1997a; Holley 1989; Jackson et al. 1992; Pauketat 1989, 1998). Decorated Ramey Incised jars, for instance, are proportionately overrepresented in the East St. Louis assemblage, comprising 43% of the total number of jars. Such overrepresentation might indicate a nondomestic assemblage, possibly one awaiting service in ceremonial feasts (Emerson 1989; Pauketat

**Table 2 East St. Louis small building data.**

Excavation area/ feature number	Feature qualities				Basic metrics			
	Type	Wall type *	In situ burning	Post incineration cleanup	Length (m)	Width (m)	Area (sq m)	Depth (m)
<b>Southside excavations</b>								
340/458	hut	sp	yes	n/a	>3.0	>2.0	>6.0	0.20
351	hut	wt	yes	n/a	>1.0	2.0	>2.0	0.30
376	hut	wt	n/a	n/a	>2.0	>1.7	>3.4	0.30
381	hut	wt	yes?	debris in upper fill	ca. 2.2	ca. 1.7	ca. 3.7	0.15
388	hut	wt	yes	debris in upper fill	>3.0	ca. 1.6	>4.8	0.30
390	hut	n/a	yes?	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.35
413/417	hut	wt	yes	n/a	2.3	2.0	4.6	0.32
425/456/457/475	hut	sp	yes	n/a	ca. 3.3	ca. 2.0	ca. 6.6	0.26
426	hut	n/a	n/a	n/a	ca. 2.2	ca. 2.0	ca. 4.4	0.24
428	hut	wt	yes	n/a	ca. 3.0	ca. 2.4	ca. 7.2	0.35
437	hut	n/a	yes	pot in upper basin	ca. 2.5	ca. 2.0	ca. 5.0	0.20
455	hut	wt	yes	debris in upper fill	2.2	2.0	4.4	0.20
477	hut	sp	yes	n/a	>2.4	>1.2	>2.9	n/a
479	hut	sp	yes	debris in upper fill	> 1.3	n/a	>1.3	0.55
<b>Northside excavations</b>								
488	hut	sp	yes	n/a	3.2	2.5	8.1	0.32
506	hut	sp	yes	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0.14
529	hut	wt	yes	n/a	>2.5	2.5	>6.3	0.15
536	hut	sp	yes	objects in upper fill	4.3	3.8	16.2	0.35
543	hut	sp	yes	n/a	4.0	3.5	14.1	0.33
558	building	wt	yes	n/a	6.0	2.3	13.5	0.25
562	building	wt	yes	n/a	5.1	3.1	16.1	0.50
617	pit	n/a	yes	n/a	2.5	2.5	6.2	0.41
654	building	wt	yes	n/a	5.4	4.2	22.8	0.64
656	hut	sp	yes	n/a	3.3	3	9.8	0.28
673	hut	sp	yes	n/a	4.1	3.8	15.2	0.47
684	hut	sp	no	n/a	3.2	2.1	6.6	n/a
<b>Total Mean</b>	<b>N=26</b>							
<b>Mean</b>	<b>hut</b>				<b>2.70</b>	<b>2.20</b>	<b>6.60</b>	<b>0.30</b>
<b>Mean</b>	<b>building</b>				<b>5.50</b>	<b>3.20</b>	<b>17.50</b>	<b>0.46</b>
<b>Mean</b>	<b>all</b>				<b>3.10</b>	<b>2.40</b>	<b>8.00</b>	<b>0.32</b>

\*sp=single-pole; wt=wall-trench.



**Figure 6** Plan maps showing the distributions of materials found on the floors of catastrophically burned huts F536 and F656.

and Emerson 1991). Of course, the scarcity of decorated Ramey Incised jars in domestic refuse elsewhere in the region, where they comprise less than 20% of the minimum number of Stirling phase jars, could also be a function of the longer average use lives of these pots (Pauketat 1989).

Similarly, the array of stone tools is clearly weighted toward formal bifacial categories, such as whole or nearly whole hoe, adze, and knife blades as opposed to the informal expedient flake tools so common in domestic assemblages (FIG. 7). Many of these tools—the bifacial hoe blades, axe heads, and projectile points—are found in domestic refuse across the Greater Cahokia region. However, concentrations of these materials are unusual outside of a few other burned buildings known from the region (Pauketat 1989). Pigment stones, crystals, slab abraders (used to pulverize mineral pigments), and unusual small red hemispherical fired-clay objects are



**Figure 7** Selected lithic tools from burned huts: A) Chipped stone hoe blade; B) Ground-stone axe head; C) Chipped stone knife or dagger; D) Chipped stone adze; E-F) Chipped stone projectile points.

also proportionately overrepresented in the assemblage (Daniels 2007; Jackson and Finney 2007).

Also overrepresented are charred masses of maize. Eight of the East St. Louis buildings had concentrations—between 1 and 3 L—of maize on their floors. In seven of these cases, the maize remains consisted mostly of shelled kernels either heaped on the floor or held in wooden bowls, baskets, ceramic containers, or pliable bags (Parker 2005; Simon 2007). In addition, over “one-third of flotation materials [from the Northside excavations] were corn remains, consisting of kernels, cupules, and loose embryos” while the concentrations of maize from the burned buildings were primarily kernels (Simon 2007: 757). From the Southside excavations, cob fragments, i.e., cupule and glume, were “outnumbered by kernels (including embryos) 195 to 5512” (Parker 2005: 281). However, in no case was a building full of maize. Moreover, in no case was there a concentration or container full of any other plant or animal food—native starchy seeds, cucurbits, dried fruits, or jerked meats of any kind—other than shelled maize. Such foods are otherwise common to both domestic and feasting refuse at Cahokia (e.g., Pauketat et al. 2002) and their near absence here, taken in conjunction with other lines of evidence, has significant implications. The content profile is reminiscent of articles commonly associated with temples and charnel houses in the American Southeast (DePratter 1983: table 6; Knight 1986; Seaman 1979: table 2).

**Alternate Scenarios**

While the hut contents suggest special domestic stores or ritual offerings, their state of preservation—intact, in situ, and incinerated—also suggests a common association. All of the huts and small buildings stood



within a walled compound or precinct of some sort at the East St. Louis site and all, it appears, burned down at the same time near the end of the Stirling phase. Six lines of evidence support an inference that the 25 buildings, pit feature 617, and the outer wall complexes were contemporary and, by extension, that the buildings and special pit were torched or otherwise sealed up at one moment in time. These six lines of evidence are as follows:

1. Three of six radiocarbon assays from the charred wooden structural remains of three huts in the Southside area have intercepts of CAL A.D. 1160, 1160, and  $1166 \pm 70$  (ISGS-4742, 4744, and 4750), a date that falls within the calibrated ranges of two of the remaining three assays (Pauketat 2005a: table 2.1).
2. The whole or nearly whole pottery vessels, stone tools, other objects, and burned maize concentrations associated with the floors of the 22 burned buildings were not retrieved by the site inhabitants suggesting uniformity in the contexts of incineration and abandonment.
3. Where present, the pottery vessels in the various buildings are late Stirling phase types (i.e., they fall within a 50-year period), as judged by qualitative and quantitative attributes of jars including flat-to-negative rim-curve ratios, modal rim-protrusion ratios of 0.35–0.60, and elaborations of quadri- and sexta-partitioned vessel walls and Ramey decorations (Jackson and Finney 2007; Pauketat 2005c).
4. The huts and other burned buildings sat inside the outer wall and atop the swale construction fill surfaces in both the Northside and Southside areas with Southside examples built onto the low toe slope of Mound E-6 (Fortier and Finney 2007; Kelly 1997a; Pauketat 2005b).
5. The small buildings all appear in profile in the same horizon as the outer palisade, superimpose earlier Stirling phase deposits and features, and are superimposed by a Moorehead phase mound (E-12) in the Northside area (Mounds E-11 and E-13 are also Moorehead phase [A.D. 1200–1275] constructions).
6. None of the floor plans superimposes any other hut or small building nor does any building exhibit evidence of reconstruction (i.e., new wall trenches or rows of posts set alongside the old) otherwise common to pole-and-thatch buildings in the region that stood more than 10 years.

Importantly, the presence of contemporary burned huts and small buildings in nearly identical contexts adjacent to platform mounds from excavations on opposite sides of the modern interstate highway also suggests that these features may have been part of an even more extensive walled ritual-residential complex wherein some special subset of huts figured prominently. Between the two excavated clusters of burned buildings, each spanning 50 to 100 m northeast to southwest, is an unexcavated highway corridor that is about 70 m wide. Given an average density of about one small building per 74 sq m (based on an average of the Northside and Southside densities of one building per 112 and 36 sq m, respectively), and given

a minimum additional area between the two clusters of ca.  $70 \times 75$  m wide (or 5250 sq m averaging the Northside and Southside spans), we conservatively project that there may be as many as 71 more small huts in the unexcavated area. This means that the incinerated portion of the ritual-residential complex might have included as many as 100 huts or other small structures (FIG. 4). Similarly, interpolating from the known to the projected total number of associated artifacts would produce a conflagration abandonment assemblage of 129 pots, 345 stone tools, and 228 other objects or maize concentrations from this one segment of the larger East St. Louis site (extrapolated from data in Fortier 2007; Pauketat 2005a).

Whatever the specific purposes of the small buildings in this late Stirling phase compound, their common destruction by fire indicates an association with some special or unusual happening as the underlying reason that may shed some light on the purpose or meaning of East St. Louis, the identities or statuses of its inhabitants, and the historical implications of the conflagration. Definitive data are lacking, but the late Stirling phase incineration of a series of other buildings in the region (at Cahokia, Sponemann, and Old Edwardsville Road) could conceivably be tied to the same incident or to one closely related.

#### *Accidental fire*

There are three plausible scenarios that might have led to the conflagration of late Stirling phase East St. Louis: an accidental fire that raged out of control, a violent attack or uprising, or ritual burning. Of these, the accidental scenario seems least likely, the act of aggression scenario is more plausible, and the ritual explanation is most likely, for the following reasons. First, if an accidental fire explained the burning of East St. Louis, one would logically expect that the buildings would have been reconstructed. One might also expect that more than just the small buildings and huts would have burned inside the seemingly defensive wall. But of the architecture west of the burned features within the excavated Northside and Southside areas, there are no burned late Stirling phase buildings. The large rectangular and circular examples in these areas were simply rebuilt repeatedly through the Stirling phase, to be followed by a rectangular Moorehead phase building, a possible temple atop Mound E-11 (FIG. 3). As it turns out, that final elevated building was also burned, but such isolated incinerations are known to mark the closure of individual buildings throughout the history of Mississippian Cahokia as well as of the homes of elite families across the Southeast into the historical period (Kelly *et al.* 2005b; Pauketat 1995).

#### *Violent attack*

That the ancient East St. Louis fire might have been the result of a politically motivated assault seems

more likely than the accident scenario. Since the early 1990s, researchers in the central Mississippi valley have noted that the late 12th and 13th centuries witnessed an upsurge in intergroup violence (Emerson 2007; Milner 1999). For instance, the bastioned palisade encircling downtown Cahokia was first constructed in the middle to late Stirling phase (Holley *et al.* 1990; Iseminger *et al.* 1990). Other palisade walls are known or suspected at other towns or outlying settlements in the region at this time (Baltus 2009; Porter 1974; Woods and Holley 1991). Moreover, walled and occasionally burned towns and villages are known from 11th-century southern Wisconsin in the north, the 12th-century central Illinois valley farther south, and continuing into southeastern Missouri and beyond (Emerson 1991, 2007; Milner 1999).

Besides the indications of warfare across the late 12th- and 13th-century midcontinent, the primary reason to entertain a scenario of destructive assault, factional conflict, or rebellion for East St. Louis is the proximity of the burned buildings to the outer wall. While lacking bastions in the excavated areas, the post diameters of the East St. Louis double precinct or compound lines are comparable to the curtain wall posts of Cahokia's palisade. In fact, Cahokia's curtain wall posts were set farther apart than the East St. Louis posts (compare Fortier and Finney 2007; Iseminger *et al.* 1990). The Cahokia wall, of course, was also built using regularly spaced anchor posts and featured regularly spaced bastions, unlike the simpler inner and outer East St. Louis precinct or compound wall. The reasons for the construction differences remain unclear, although a double-walled palisade, especially if coupled with a ditch and embankment, possesses clear defensive qualities (Keeley *et al.* 2007).

### *Ritual burning*

On the other hand, even the presence of a defensive wall does not necessarily mean that the late Stirling phase conflagration happened as a result of an enemy attack. The late 12th and 13th centuries in the central Mississippi valley, particularly in the Greater Cahokia region, were also characterized by ritual practices involving the destruction of buildings and cultural objects using fire, as noted above for the Moorehead phase building atop Mound E-11. Ceremonious incinerations were associated with public spaces, special religious or "nodal" sites, or important buildings atop or adjacent to platform mounds (e.g., Alt 2006; Emerson 1997a; Emerson and Jackson 1984; Jackson *et al.* 1992; Pauketat 1987b). Even the distinctive sets of objects and the maize concentrations in the East St. Louis buildings might have been offerings, perhaps similar to the burned bags of maize or carved stone figurines in special commemorative offerings documented among the

Stirling phase materials at the BBB Motor, Grossmann, or Sponemann sites (Alt 2006; Emerson and Jackson 1984; Jackson *et al.* 1992). In fact, objects similar to those found in the East St. Louis huts—pots, hoe blades, smoking pipes, sandstone palettes, pigments, and mineral crystals—also occur in the ritually burned deposits and other "renewal" or "Green Corn Ceremonial" deposits at such places (Emerson 1997a, 1997c). Moreover, both ordinary and special buildings dating to the Moorehead phase at and around Cahokia were routinely burned, perhaps ritually or simply to dispose of aging structural debris (Milner 1984a; Pauketat 1987a, 1998; Pauketat and Woods 1986).

In addition to the later Moorehead phase building atop Mound E-11, there are three other lines of circumstantial evidence from the East St. Louis precinct to support the ritual incineration scenario. First, the Cemetery Mound (E-1) burial vaults may date to the late Stirling phase, as bookended by the presumed early Stirling phase date of the sub-mound rotunda and the late Stirling phase characteristics of the objects in the mound's vaults. The large scale theatrical ceremonies of various ridgetop mound mortuaries were capped by final, single event, ridge shaped mound stages. Perhaps the death of the important people buried in the vaults or the termination of a powerful kin group's political influence might also have been accompanied by the ritual closure or destruction of that person's or group's ritual-residential facilities (Alt and Pauketat 2007). That is, it is possible, if speculative, that the incineration of the storage buildings at East St. Louis was tied to a ridgetop mound mortuary ceremony (Pauketat 2005a: 314).

Other circumstantial evidence supporting the ritual incineration scenario takes the form of the items in the various buildings and in pit feature 617. As already noted, the presence of pots, tools, and maize concentrations in the houses—items that seem both domestic and ceremonial—might seem odd in that more of them could have been stored in these buildings. This is especially true of maize. The burned concentrations seem like token amounts distributed in a number of buildings rather than the remains of once filled granaries. Burned corn offerings wrapped in fabric were found in several Stirling phase pits at the Grossmann site (Alt 2006). Perhaps the East St. Louis maize concentrations were temple objects, special stores saved for gifts to visitors, or offerings that, along with other contents, were intentionally arranged prior to a deliberate burn.

This line of reasoning is enhanced based on the contents of pit feature 617. The items buried under the burned fill in this pit appear not to have been abandoned in quite the same way as the objects in the

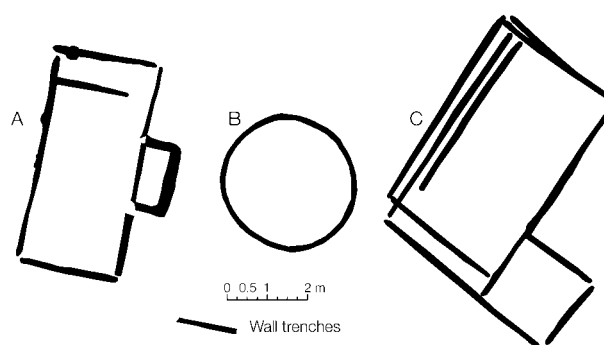
other burned buildings. Here, items were intentionally buried under debris derived from the East St. Louis conflagration, possibly immediately after the fact. Importantly, this pit is directly linked to the late Stirling phase conflagration because of a clay object, the pieces of which were found in both pit feature 617 and a burned hut (F656). It can be stated that the materials in pit feature 617 were buried after the conflagration, during the clean up phase, meaning that both accidental and violent attack scenarios remain viable; otherwise, the locals may have buried the pit feature 617 objects as part of the ritual destruction of this portion of East St. Louis.

### The Fire in a Broader Context

The fire in the ceremonial center of the East St. Louis precinct must have been a climactic and likely traumatic event for the local population. But, in and of itself, this archaeological event is only part of the historic changes that precede the documented down-scaling of the Cahokian polity. To contextualize this event, we need to scrutinize the extensive archaeological evidence collected in the last four decades from the Cahokia hinterlands.

Greater Cahokia and its spectacular ceremonial precincts were connected to the surrounding countryside by a highly organized network of farms, minor elite residences, cemeteries, and temples. Spread throughout this rural landscape are a series of nodal sites, identified based on the presence, size, and frequency of nondomestic architectural constructions and ritual practices similar to those known at Cahokia. Archaeologists have inferred that these rural civic and religious nodes provided the social and religious glue that held the dispersed populations together, and the waxing and waning of such nodes has been proposed to be a direct measure of Greater Cahokia's unity (Alt 2006; Emerson 1997a, 1997b, 1997c; Emerson *et al.* 2008; Emerson and Pauketat 2008; Mehrer 1995). Emerson (1997a, 1997b, 1997c) had initially defined rural nodal sites based on the residues of ritual activities in association with special council houses, circular buildings, and T- and L-shaped pole-and-thatch buildings similar to those known at Cahokia. At the Grossmann site, for instance, Alt (2006) documented a 1 ha hilltop outpost packed with rectangular, T-shaped, L-shaped, and circular buildings and their associated ritual deposits (FIG. 8).

Of such buildings, the circular features were probably sweat lodges (the smaller examples) or rotundas for special councils (the larger examples), while the smaller T- and L-shaped constructions were possible lodges for high status people, priests, and/or their religious articles (Alt 2006; Collins 1990, 1997; Emerson 1997a, 1997c; Mehrer 1995; Porter 1974). Specifically, Alt (2006) and Collins (1990) have argued



**Figure 8** Examples of special building shapes at the Grossmann site. A) T-shaped; B) Circular; C) L-shaped.

from ethnographic analogy and circumstantial evidence that the T- and L-shaped room extensions were not entrances but enclosed alcoves or rooms wherein medicine bundles and other ritual objects were kept.

For present purposes, the specific functions of such unusual buildings are less important than their prominent locations and the regional construction history. At the Cahokian precincts and in rural locations, rotundas, sweat lodges, and the possible T- and L-shaped lodges sometimes occupy special locations atop platform mounds or in residential areas (TABLE 3). The special locations of and restricted time span covered by the rural buildings are among the key reasons that Emerson (1997a, 1997b, 1997c) sees Cahokians exerting religious and political authority over the countryside from A.D. 1050 to 1200. Certainly, great circular rotundas and oversized T-shaped buildings were constructed at Cahokia and East St. Louis during the Lohmann and Stirling phases (Alt and Pauketat 2010; Pauketat 1993, 1998, 2005b). An especially large 25 m wide rotunda is known from Cahokia's Tract 15B (Alt and Pauketat 2010). Even larger circles of posts, or "woodhenges" with diameters up to 138 m, were built elsewhere at Cahokia during the Stirling phase (Pauketat 1998; Wittry 1964). Without exception, all of these T-shaped, L-shaped, and circular buildings date from the beginning of the Lohmann phase to the end of the Stirling phase.

One of the latest circular buildings in the region, with a calibrated radiocarbon date of  $809 \pm 70$  CAL B.P. (ISGS-3084), was burned at the Old Edwardsville Road nodal site several kilometers north of Cahokia (Jackson and Millhouse 2003: 243–248, table 19.1). Likewise, among the last true L-shaped buildings (i.e., those with enclosed room extensions) at Cahokia are two late Stirling phase constructions, H124 on Tract 15A and H114 on Tract 15B (Alt *et al.* 2010; Pauketat 1998: 117). The latter was rebuilt once, possibly as an ordinary rectangular house (H23). Notably, it was surrounded by a large bastioned compound wall, which was also rebuilt once. Such a massive wall complete with bastions surrounding a single lodge is unprecedented in the greater Cahokia region, although

it is roughly coeval with the initial late Stirling phase construction of Cahokia's large central palisade and the possible wall around the great building atop Monks Mound (Holley *et al.* 1990; Iseminger *et al.* 1990; Reed 2009). In addition, the dismantling of the woodhenges and the burning of several other buildings in the region (perhaps including the burned circular building at the Old Edwardsville Road site) may have been contemporaneous with the palisade constructions and with the incineration of much of the East St. Louis complex based on the evidence from the ritual-residential enclave reported here.

These buildings, representing architecture of power and marked by unique architectural forms and often by ritualistic assemblages of pots, magico-ritual icons, crystals, flint-clay statues, and spiritually powerful plant remains such as red cedar, tobacco, and the hallucinogenic *datura*, are closely tied to the centralization of Cahokia (Emerson 1997a; Pauketat 2004; Emerson *et al.* 2008). Their appearance in rural

areas during the Lohmann phase marked a strong Cahokian presence, while their disappearance at the close of the Stirling phase signifies the diminishing of that manifestation. Consequentially, the contemporaneous burning and closure of the ritual-residential enclave at the East St. Louis precinct and the disappearance of ritual architecture from Cahokia and of nodal centers from the Cahokian countryside at the end of the Stirling phase portend a significant transformation of Cahokian society.

### The Aftermath and Its Implications

Whatever the cause of the fire and however it spread, it seems unlikely that the event was seen by the ancient East St. Louisans as an inconsequential mishap. In the days or weeks that followed the conflagration, the East St. Louis complex if not the entire region underwent significant changes. First, some of the burned building basins seem to have been filled in by a cleanup crew (TABLES 1, 2). The hints of a

**Table 3 Inventory of known T-shaped, L-shaped, and circular buildings in the greater Cahokia region. "Oversized" is larger than a typical domestic building. UIUC ISAS = University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Illinois State Archaeological Survey.**

Site	No. of buildings	Special qualities	References cited
<b>Circular buildings</b>			
Cahokia	24	2 oversized, 1 atop mound, 2 sub-mound, 17 in clusters	Collins 1990; Mehrer 1995; Moorehead 1929; O'Brien 1972; Pauketat 1993, 1998; Smith 1969; Records on file, UIUC ISAS
East St. Louis	15	most oversized, 10 rebuildings atop mound, 1 sub-mound	Fortier 2007; Pauketat 2005a
Mitchell	4	clustered, 2 oversized next to mounds	Porter 1974
Grossmann	3	clustered	Alt 2006
Julien	3	n/a	Milner 1984a
Lambert	3	n/a	Blake 1955
Range	3	n/a	Hanenberger 2003
Labras Lake	2	n/a	Yerkes 1987
Horseshoe Lake	1	atop mound	Pauketat <i>et al.</i> 1998
Old Edwardsville Rd	1	n/a	Jackson and Millhouse 2003
Olin	1	n/a	Baltus 2009
Pfeffer	1	n/a	Records on file, UIUC ISAS
<b>Total</b>	<b>61</b>		
<b>T-shaped buildings</b>			
Cahokia	8	2 atop mounds, 1 sub-mound, 2 front courtyards	Collins 1990; Gergen and Iseminger 1987; Pauketat 1993, 1998; Reed 2009; Salzer 1975
Grossmann	4	1 burned, 1 assoc. human remains	Alt 2006
Mitchell	4	3 sub-mound	Porter 1974
John H. Faust #2	2	isolated	Holley <i>et al.</i> 2001a
Christy Schwaegel	1	isolated, burned	Records on file, UIUC ISAS
Divers	1	n/a	Friemuth 2010
Halliday	1	fronts courtyard	Records on file, UIUC ISAS
Lehman-Sommers	1	n/a	Records on file, UIUC ISAS
Marty Coolidge	1	n/a	Kuttruff 1972
Pfeffer	1	n/a	Records on file, UIUC ISAS
Wal-Mart	1	n/a	Rohrbaugh 1995
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>		
<b>L-shaped buildings</b>			
Cahokia	10	1 oversized, 1 walled, 1 sub-mound, 1 assoc. human remains	Alt and Pauketat 2010; Collins 1990; Pauketat 1993, 1998; Records on file, UIUC ISAS
Mitchell	3	3 sub-mound	Porter 1974
Grossmann	4	n/a	Alt 2006
Fingers South	1	n/a	Records on file, UIUC ISAS
Knoebel	4	n/a	Bareis 1976; Holley <i>et al.</i> 2001b
Marty Coolidge	1	n/a	Kuttruff 1972
Dampier	1	burned, ritual objects in assoc.	Harl <i>et al.</i> 2011
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>		

general cleanup consist of the few items possibly disturbed or interred after the fire. A smoking-clay pipe might have been placed in one Northside hut (F536) after the embers of that building had cooled. Likewise, a few whole or nearly whole artifacts and large wall post fragments in Southside features appear to have been disturbed such that they were vertically displaced upward in the burned ruins of their respective buildings. One Southside hut basin fill was later dug into for reasons unknown. In other hut basins, charcoal-rich debris was found in the upper post incineration fills, possibly indicating the sweeping of debris into the basins by those who returned after the fire. As already noted, such an explanation might also account for the burned earth and charcoal that covered the objects otherwise interred in pit feature 617. It is difficult to know whether other items might have been removed during this cleanup period.

Two dramatic changes are apparent. First, the occupation of East St. Louis changed markedly after the fire (ca. A.D. 1160–1170). Most of the architecture at the site was not rebuilt. The ongoing ISAS excavations to the west of this area have supported this pattern, observed in the Northside-Southside excavations. Field observations of nearly 1300 excavated structures indicate a dominance of Lohmann and Stirling phase buildings with no Moorehead phase structures clearly documented. In fact, at present, nowhere at East St. Louis is there evidence of off mound pole-and-thatch architecture dating to the subsequent Moorehead phase. However, there is clear stratigraphic evidence of continued construction of earthen pyramids and, atop one of those pyramids (Mound E-11), surmounting architecture (Kelly *et al.* 2005b). It is not known if Mounds E-12 and E-13 had surmounting Moorehead phase architecture, but the construction fills of these and Mound E-11 definitely date to the early Moorehead phase. Mound E-12 fills, for instance, actually buried the remains of the burned late Stirling phase storage huts and Mound E-13 may have covered over some portion of the late Stirling phase outer palisade wall that had formerly enclosed the storage huts. Unfortunately, since all three of these later pyramids were subsequently truncated by leveling in the 19th and 20th centuries, we cannot ascertain their final heights.

Thus, while the late Stirling phase conflagration did not lead to the complete abandonment of the East St. Louis precinct, it did entail the elimination of off-mound pole-and-thatch construction at the site. A modest if not largely vacant ceremonial occupation was reestablished during the Moorehead phase that consisted, in the Northside and Southside areas, of a structure and pits on top of Mound E-11 and the construction of at least two new packed earth

pyramids (Mounds E-12 and E-13). Such late phase activity could be interpreted as nondomestic or commemorative. It cannot reasonably be interpreted as the remains of an elite ritual-residential compound similar to the preceding Stirling phase occupation.

Second, these site level architectural and occupational alterations appear to correspond with region-wide political or religious changes and social and technological changes. Among the most obvious, as previously noted, is the disappearance of the ritually or politically significant T-shaped, L-shaped, and circular buildings. If these were the homes of religious specialists or powerful people, houses for curating sacred articles, or the architecture associated with specific religious practices or sodalities (all of which have been argued), then their disappearance at the East St. Louis site and the surrounding region after the fire suggests that a politico-religious transformation had swept through the region. Possibly coeval closures of the Cemetery Mound at East St. Louis, the removal of the woodhenge at Tract 15A, the burning or walling off of other buildings in the region, and the construction of Cahokia's palisade wall may have been causally related in ways that cannot yet be determined.

The public practices and monumental constructions of the Moorehead phase are markedly distinct from the preceding Stirling phase, which has been previously discussed by researchers from several different vantage points (Kelly *et al.* 2007; Kelly *et al.* 2008; Milner 1998; Pauketat and Emerson 1997b; Trubitt 2000). Previously, researchers have noted this transition to be one of increased factionalism and interregional violence (Emerson 2007; Milner 1999; Pauketat 1992). But what may be more telling than these public, monumental, and political trends are the domestic scale developments.

By the end of the Stirling phase, fewer people lived at Cahokia and across the countryside (Milner 1986, 1998; Pauketat 2003; Pauketat and Lopinot 1997). On average, their houses were larger with more intramural storage and variable celestial alignments, leading some to infer a weakening of Cahokian strictures and a greater degree of household self reliance (Collins 1990, 1997; Emerson 2003; Mehrer and Collins 1995; Milner *et al.* 1984; Pauketat 1998; Trubitt 2000). Moreover, a suite of new or altered productive technologies, domestic practices, and public performances seems to have replaced those of the preceding era in fairly short order. These range from the decreased production of cloth using spindle whorls and the reversion to simpler coil and anvil pottery techniques to the increased production and use of decorated plates featuring sun symbolism, the decreased mobilization of deer meat for public ceremonies, and the appearance of small clustered

cemeteries of minor elites outside the centers (Alt 1999; Brown and Kelly 2000; Kelly 1997b; Emerson 2003; Emerson and Hargrave 2000; Emerson *et. al* 2003; Milner 1984b; Pauketat 1998).

## Conclusion

Given the present evidence, it is not possible to say with conclusiveness which of the scenarios—accident, warfare, or ritual—accounts for the late Stirling phase conflagration of East St. Louis. However, the cause may matter less than the effects, which we infer were region-wide and linked to East St. Louis or its people. This extensive civic-ceremonial precinct, the second largest in eastern North America, was situated between Cahokia to the east and northeast and the St. Louis mound precinct to the west across the river. It was overbuilt and underused, possibly for and by prominent religious or administrative families. Certainly, before the late 12th century, a considerable amount of labor was devoted to its landscaping, its massive post emplacements and replacements, its repeated architectural constructions, and its double precinct walls, meaning that East St. Louis was an important place inhabited by consequential people.

Accordingly, it should be of no surprise that the East St. Louis conflagration, even if accidental, may have been related to the restructuring of social, political, and religious life across the region. Regardless of the explanatory scenario, we can be relatively certain that the fire marked a turning point in the history of this once great elite-residential, civic-ceremonial complex. Minimally, the facts surrounding the East St. Louis conflagration would seem to indicate that some small group of residents—a group that could mobilize sufficient labor to level a large part of the site, set and reset great marker posts, construct great mounds, and repeatedly build and rebuild large and largely empty pole-and-thatch buildings—were of sufficient political, social, and/or religious status either to warrant a great commemoration, to be the target of a large scale assault, or to otherwise induce the restructuring of the East St. Louis site. Perhaps status rested to some extent on the potential religious, economic, or political uses or meanings of the objects left inside the huts. These may have been an integral component of a staged ritual conflagration, complete with props and offerings to some person, kin group, or supernatural power.

That the restructured regional landscape completely lacks a subset of Cahokia's so-called architecture of power—buildings presumably indicating the performance of essential ritual practices by vital political or religious functionaries who possessed powerful religious articles—indicates that those practices,

people, and things may not have been a part of the post-1200 Cahokian world. The burning of East St. Louis may have been the cause or consequence of such a radical transformation, an argument made plausible and deserving of future consideration by virtue of the circumstances surrounding the incineration and its aftermath.

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