

Illinois State Archaeological Survey Research Reports



New Mississippi River Bridge Project

Main Street Mound

A Ridgetop Monument at the East St. Louis Mound Complex

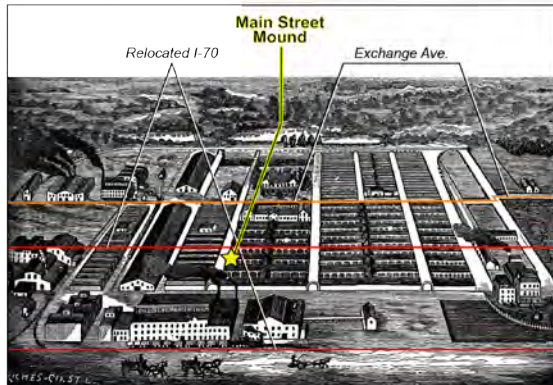
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Research Report 36

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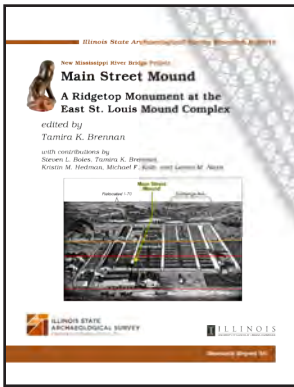
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Main Street Mound A Ridgetop Monument at the East St. Louis Mound Complex

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Reviewed by David G. Anderson, Department of Anthropology, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

The Main Street Mound, the basal portions of an apparent ridgetop mound, was discovered during mechanical stripping operations removing historic overburden within the ca. 11.5 footprint of the I-70 relocation corridor that ran through portions of the East St. Louis Mound Complex, a ca. 290 ha multi-mound center associated with what Pauketat and Emerson have called the “Central Political-Administrative Complex,” encompassing the Cahokia, East St. Louis, and St. Louis mound groups. The area of the Main Street Mound—also designated Tract 5, Feature 2000, Mound 26—was archaeologically examined over a two month period in the late spring and early summer of 2011, with the fieldwork and analysis results, including appreciable interpretive detail, documented in this report. Given its significance, which became clear during the excavation program, the remaining portions of the Main Street Mound were preserved in place in August 2011, following consultation with state and federal agencies, and representatives of the Osage Nation. The mitigation effort associated with the relocation of the I-70 highway corridor, also known as the New Mississippi River Bridge (NMRB) project, represents one of the largest archaeological mitigations in the modern era, and this report is one of a number completed or in preparation under the direction of the Illinois State Archaeological Survey.

The project area and its natural and historic setting, including the local prehistoric sequence, previous archaeological investigations, and the reasons for the current field program are provided in an introductory chapter by Tamira K. Brennan. The mound was built during the early Mississippian Lohmann phase, and the area appears to have continued in use into and perhaps beyond the Stirling phase, toward the end of which the East St. Louis center precipitously declined. The Main Street Mound thus provides an important window on developments associated with the use of ridgetop mounds as well as the emergence of Mississippian itself, both locally and, through comparison with similar mounds, across the larger region.

The excavations within the mound area are described and extensively illustrated in Chapter 2, also by Brennan. Following surface cleaning and feature mapping, some 90 m of narrow excavation profiles were opened and mapped. The mound area was then gridded and a series of 2x2 m units opened and carefully excavated. Numerous remarkably clear and clean color photographs and drawings of the features and profiles document the

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work, together with drawings of the immediate excavations as well as areas examined around the mound during other phases of the NMRB project. While the Main Street Mound was isolated from other mounds within the complex, a number of features were present nearby, including a possible cemetery and plaza area to the west, while to the south were several borrow pits, two major post pits and several residential and specialized nondomestic structures. The archaeological findings in this chapter are complemented by the discussion of "Landscape Modification" in Chapter 5 by Brennan, Michael F. Kolb, and Steven L. Boles, where the natural landscape and considerable anthropogenic modification to it is documented in the vicinity of the mound. A major program of coring and profile excavation and analysis demonstrates that nearby swales were filled in and the premound surface was carefully prepared, with borrowing and filling used to create the mound and plazas around it, a process that was ongoing and not restricted to a single event. As with many Mississippian sites, the excavations at the Main Street Mound demonstrate that monumentality at Mississippian centers involved much more than simply building mounds.

Chapter 3, by Lenna M. Nash, Tamira K. Brennan, and Kristin M. Hedman, summarizes the burials and human remains found during the excavations, while Chapter 4, by Brennan, documents the ceramic, lithic, floral, and faunal artifacts, and the dating results. These two chapters include state of the art analyses, with results summarized in numerous tables and figures, providing many details about the diet, health, technology, and lifeways of the local inhabitants, with results that complement one another. The radiocarbon dating supports a Terminal Late Woodland/early Lohmann phase use of the mound area, continuing into the Stirling phase, the earlier use is also clearly demonstrated by the ceramics, most of which are early. While preservation was poor, of the 18 individuals recovered in burials, two and possibly as many as six were female, and most appeared to be adolescent to young adult in age. Stable carbon and nitrogen isotope analyses were conducted with samples from four burials, while strontium was examined using teeth from 12 individuals; the results show that maize was an important part of the diet for these early Mississippian people, but that consumption was more varied than in later populations at the site, and that most of the people appear to have originated locally. The fact that the NMRB mitigation memorandum of agreement allowed for the removal and analysis of human remains is why so much was able to be learned about early Mississippian life and, as importantly, the fact that repatriation, interment, and preservation of the mound and burial area in perpetuity was arranged demonstrates the respect accorded these same people.

The final chapter, by Brennan, provides a valuable discussion about the 17 other known ridgetop mounds, all but one in the local Mississippian Central Political-Administrative Complex, with one known from the St. Louis and two from the East St. Louis mound groups, one to the north at Mitchell, and the remainder in or near Cahokia. While Shiloh, Tennessee and Carson, Mississippi are sites where possible ridgetop mounds may also occur, the discussion properly focuses on the local situation. Unfortunately, as the author documents, few ridgetop mounds have been well excavated to fairly contemporary standards locally, making the work at Main Street Mound

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of great importance. The excavations at Main Street and Cahokia's Mound 72, in fact, demonstrate that burial in mounds was not restricted to males in early Mississippian locally, leading researchers like Emerson to suggest that early Cahokian religion may have had many female aspects, as reflected in both burials and some of the figures represented in Missouri flint clay pipes.

Perhaps the most remarkable part of this report is what is not actually physically present in the volume, and that is the wealth of data in the 24 online appendices (41 files, 456 mb) which I was able to access and download with ease at <https://uofi.app.box.com/Research-Report-36>. This information, coupled with the report and the curated assemblages, means the findings at the Main Street Mound can be subject to re-examination by future generations of archaeologists, bringing new insights and interpretations.

To conclude, archaeologists who excavate well are admired by their colleagues, but the highest accolades rightly go to those who then take the next step and write detailed descriptive and interpretive monographs. This report is an exemplar of the kind of reporting that should accompany all archaeological fieldwork, and should be studied as such by those wishing to grow as archaeologists, and improve their fieldwork and writing. We learn the data collection aspects of our profession in something of an apprenticeship fashion, training usually thought to occur in the field, but that in reality includes extensive time in laboratories and at desks, in analysis and writing activity. Just as we learn how to create squared walls and floors and identify artifacts from mentors who have worked with them before, in the same way we learn what is acceptable reporting by examining existing monographs. What particularly impresses me about the Main Street Mound report is the extent of the reporting and illustration, and the masses of data in the appendices, which can be used by many researchers in the future, apart from or in conjunction with new analyses of the collections and records themselves, which have been carefully curated. Such projects are rarer than they should be, but will become more common given examples like this. The profession owes a debt of gratitude to the leadership of the Illinois State Archaeological Survey and the Illinois Department of Transportation for supporting such work, and to the archaeologists, particularly Tamira K. Brennan, who conducted the fieldwork and put this report together.