

Feeding Cahokia: Early Agriculture in the North American Heartland. By Gayle J. Fritz. 2019. The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa. 228 pp.

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The Introduction and 12 chapters in this book present a multifaceted chronicle of the evolution of food production and cultivation practices leading up to, during, and after early Cahokia. The primary goal of the book is stated upfront: “to highlight the biologically diverse agricultural system that was unique to the central Mississippi River valley during the early centuries of the second millennium AD and to trace its roots through time” (p. 4). A related goal is to dispel the notion that the emergence of the Cahokian Polity was fueled by maize [*Zea mays*] agriculture (referred to as a zeacentric perspective, alluding to a prejudicial emphasis on maize or corn), rather than a diverse multi-cropping system that also included various members of the Eastern Agricultural Complex (EAC).

The introduction and first three chapters present evidence for the origins of domesticated bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*) and pepo gourd or squash (e.g., *Cucurbita pepo*), the oily seeded sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*) and marshelder (*Iva annua*), and the four starchy seeds (chenopod or goosefoot [*Chenopodium berlandieri*], erect knotweed [*Polygonum erectum*], maygrass [*Phalaris caroliniana*], and little barley [*Hordeum pusillum*]), the latter seven of which comprised the EAC towards the end of the Late Archaic and Early–Middle Woodland times. The evidence for domestication of two of the four starchy seed taxa is described in detail. Fritz also discusses the relatively early management of native vegetation by precontact peoples, a topic that few researchers have broached over the years. She argues that the clearance of nonfood-producing trees and shrubs, sometimes by controlled burning, likely also led to openings in

riverine settings where some early members of the EAC could have thrived and predator competition for fleshy fruit and nut crops could have been lessened. The importance of Late Archaic and Early Woodland paleofecal samples from Salts Cave and Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, as well as the significance of the “flotation revolution” in advancing our knowledge of subsistence in general, are also highlighted.

Chapters 4–5 focus primarily on plant-food production practices during the Middle Woodland and Late Woodland periods, respectively. Throughout these two periods, there is substantial evidence for the growing importance of EAC crop production in relation to socioreligious interaction, and the importance of women as the primary manual laborers contributing to the development of more political complexity.

The emphasis in the next six chapters centers on the American Bottom, an extensive and agriculturally rich area along the Mississippi River south of its confluence with the Missouri River. Fritz notes that the Late Woodland period was generally one of substantial population growth and the intensification of food production practices involving the EAC with maize only added to that suite of crops after AD 900. Data for plant remains from archaeological sites and for pollen cores dating after ca. AD 600 indicate a relative lack of mobility given diverse farming and foraging strategies and the widespread clearance of bottomland and nearby upland forests. Prior to the “Big Bang” signifying the swift rise of the Cahokian Polity ca. AD 1050, Fritz delves into the increase in panregional trade or interaction as well as the record for increasing settlement complexity and size.

Implications of archaeobotanical remains resulting from feasting activities during “Early Cahokia” are also discussed. The remains were obtained from the backfill of a borrow pit beneath Mound 51, likely associated with the construction of nearby Monks Mound, the largest earthen mound in the Western Hemisphere. Besides describing the unusual nature of the animal remains, this rapidly filled borrow pit contained a great assortment of plant remains, some uncarbonized owing to their rapid burial. They included unusual numbers of seeds of tobacco and EAC crops dominated by maygrass grains, which Fritz hypothesized might have been “a necessary ingredient in ceremonial dishes connected with planting, harvesting, and fertility in general” (p. 85).

Mounting evidence documented by Fritz and many others clearly demonstrates that Cahokia’s Big Bang was accompanied by an intensification of the pre-existing “diverse and mixed cropping system” (p. 88). At least with respect to maize, Fritz is critical of previous interpretations of provisioning Cahokia’s population with surplus maize, thereby implying its paramount importance. Instead, the record is indicative of the continued importance of EAC crops in addition to maize during the initial Mississippian Lohmann phase (AD 1050–1100) and subsequent Stirling phase (AD 1110–1200). Fritz presents data reflecting on the changing importance of maize during earlier versus later Mississippian times, including stable carbon isotope values for human remains from Cahokia and elsewhere in the American Bottom area. The stable carbon isotope data presented by Fritz indicate that maize became a pre-eminent crop after Early Mississippian times (i.e., during the later post-AD 1200 Moorehead and Sand Prairie phases), when the population of Cahokia itself gradually diminished. One of the last chapters includes a discussion of the effects of floods and droughts that may have led to the dislocation of people from the American Bottom area. Nevertheless, she also mentions the possibility of political upheaval as a possible cause for the gradual abandonment of Cahokia and many other sites. Whatever the cause(s), it was much like a slow-

growing cancer that ultimately led to the abandonment of Cahokia by AD 1400.

She also describes Stirling-phase plant remains from two ceremonial sites in the American Bottom, where substantial portions of flint-clay figurines of supposed “Corn Goddesses” or “Corn Maidens” were found. The religious-ceremonial significance of the two sites is reflected by the presence of an abundance of red cedar wood charcoal, tobacco and jimsonweed seeds, and the dominance of maygrass seeds among represented EAC crops. Previous researchers have interpreted carvings on four of the five figurines as representing maize, leading to suspected precontact ties to historic “Green Corn Ceremonialism.” However, Fritz argues that none of these figurines depict maize. Instead, she contends that the woman depicted in these figurines is Old Woman Who Never Dies or Grandmother, a Siouan deity who is the guardian of all vegetation and “predates the introduction of corn to eastern North America” (p. 112). A similar argument is made for the Westbrook figurine found in eastern Arkansas.

This book clearly demonstrates Fritz’s extensive knowledge of the archaeological, archaeobotanical, and ethnobiological record in the New World and the importance of “agricultural biodiversity” in fueling the florescence of the Cahokian Polity for about 100–150 years. Fritz also reviews one of the most important ethnohistorical descriptions of a Mississippian society, that of the Natchez by Le Page du Pratz. *Feeding Cahokia* is truly a masterpiece of scholarship in its depth of insights. Yet, it is an easy-to-read record of the past written for both the professional and novice alike. The black-and-white figures and color plates are excellent, and the book even includes Native American recipes at the ends of some chapters. Whether digital or hard copy, this book should command a place in the reading list of anyone having an interest in the origins of agriculture in Eastern North America and the development of the World Heritage Site of Cahokia, the largest prehistoric settlement north of the Valley of Mexico.