

When thinking about the great diversity of river landscapes in North America, certain sites stand out from the rest because of factors such as an unusual historical importance or scenic beauty. Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon's Colorado River gorge, and the Mississippi River's source at Lake Itasca come to mind at once. An area in southwestern Illinois called the "American Bottom" also comes to mind, but not for such obvious reasons. The American Bottom, in fact, is quite a curious area, a complex mixture or meeting of influences and consequences. This flat land of floodplain between distant bluffs is here because two of America's great rivers, the Mississippi and the Missouri, meet here. We also find in this spot clashing cultures, prosperity and poverty, prehistory and the present, waste and plenty, toxic and pristine, the violent and peaceful, all sending one's mind in myriad directions. But to understand the confusion, to take in the American Bottom as a whole, one must rise above the plain; and this is most effectively done at only one place, in my view, where everything can be focused and brought together in a manner that seems to

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make sense: at the top of Monk's Mound, a 100-foot-high earthen platform mound constructed by prehistoric Native Americans between A.D. 900 and 1250, at Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site.

So attempting to beat the rising heat and humidity of the day in late June, I awoke early and headed directly to Monk's Mound. Though I have visited this site many times before, as I approached the mound on this visit, its massive size once again took me by surprise; because for some reason, I always recall the mound smaller than its actual size of 14 acres at its base. This mismatch between reality and recollection adds to its mystique and to my sudden feelings of insignificance, something I have little doubt was in the minds of its designers. In fact, the power wielded by the elite rulers of the Mississippians who built the mound is still palpable. In stark contrast to the prehistoric images in my mind, there was a group of athletes on the steep stairway leading up the front of Monk's Mound; they were training for some upcoming event, I assumed, by running up and down the full stairway. They were quite focused on further tormenting their cardiovascular systems; yet even so, I could still not imagine any of them being completely unaffected by the location chosen for their sufferings.

Then finally at the top, the full expanse of the American Bottom came into view in every direction, from the Illinois bluffs on the east to the distant Missouri hills on the west. I felt as if I could reach out and touch St. Louis' Gateway Arch, though it was eight miles away. Interstate 55/70 roared on just below the mound, leading directly to the arch past the sadly poverty-and crime-stricken East St. Louis area. I discerned mere remnants of wetlands and streams in places, and knew that behind a particular line of trees was Horseshoe Lake, an ancient cut-off meander of the Mississippi River. Here at the American Bottom, over the centuries, the Mississippi and Missouri rivers have changed course here and there across the floodplain, leaving behind oxbow lakes, while flood-deposited alluvium has served to flatten the land. Horseshoe Lake is the most intact oxbow

remaining. Old historic maps show the locations of many other lakes and wetlands in the American Bottom, most since lost to modern land reclamation to become rich floodplain farms, factories turned to rusted hulks of a bygone industrial era, home sites, roads, and acreage-gobbling warehouses.

I stood on the mound imagining the Mississippian society of some 20,000 souls brutally ruled by a minority class of totalitarian elites; those who have dug into some of the other mounds at Cahokia have found evidence of human sacrifice, mass graves, and mutilation. And some suspect that there was, indeed, quite a bit of conflict in what may have been a martial society. We may never know all of the facts; still, it is clear that the time of the Mississippians must have been dangerous. And although I stood upon Monk's Mound in safety and without fear, I recalled that our time also is dangerous, but on a grander scale and to a different degree. Would the next terrorist attack on U.S. soil, if one should occur, be deadlier than that which happened on September 11, 2001? Which despotic, tyrannical regime with weapons of mass destruction would be the first to attempt a launch? North Korea or Iran? China? Pakistan? Or someone else. Despite all of our modern knowledge and supposed sophistication over what came before, substantial parts of the world seem unable to escape the miseries of life under a seemingly inexhaustible supply of corrupt leaders, with the attendant poverty, violence, and strife. And I concluded that human nature has changed not at all across the years.

But those were not the thoughts that I wished to dwell upon at Monk's Mound. Then my attention was drawn to a little blue heron flying past at eye level, while an eastern meadowlark and blue grosbeak sang. The great chief of the Mississippians 800 years ago, at the very spot in which I stood, would have also seen little blue herons and heard exactly the same bird songs at exactly the same time of year, would have seen the same river bluffs, and felt the same heat from the sun.

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And at that moment I became truly connected to the past and felt for a second that I was there, but then instantly determined that it was time to leave. Heat and humidity were building, and the athletes were climbing slower and looking more fatigued. A flock of turkey vultures rose on the first warm air thermals of the day, powered by the Mississippian sun, as I shifted my vehicle into gear. I harbored no naive illusions or nostalgic desires to have been born at an earlier time. For even with all of our world-wide problems, I have no doubt that our current era is still the best time that humanity has ever enjoyed. Confident and satisfied with my conclusions, then, I turned up the CD player and air conditioner, pressed down the accelerator, and drove off, without looking backward.