



AMERICAN WOMEN'S HISTORY

A NEW NARRATIVE HISTORY

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WILEY Blackwell

American Women's History

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Brief Introduction

Our goal in writing this book is to highlight the multiplicity of American women's experiences, from the years before Europeans came to North America through the beginning of the twenty-first century. The experiences of women of color, working-class women, and LGBTQ women all figure centrally in these pages. Women from across the political spectrum, from radical leftists to white supremacists, are present. We hope that, by writing a new textbook that starts from the belief that American women's experiences must be rendered in all their diversity and contradictions, we help new generations of students to recognize the importance of women's history in understanding the history of our nation.

Part of understanding women's roles in the history of the nation is understanding the limitations of sources available for studying women's history. Throughout the text, we have attempted to highlight the way the limitations of historical sources shape what historians can know and discuss the way that gender shapes how we know what we know. Many women were unable to create records about themselves due to illiteracy, colonialism, or enslavement. Some remained silent about facets of their experience such as sexuality, gender identity, or simply everyday life, and what was thought to be important enough to record was shaped by ideas about gender. Historical records created about, rather than by, women were also shaped by intersecting hierarchies of power, race, class, colonialism, and gender. The historian's task is to understand these limitations as products of history. Throughout the text, we invite readers to explore both how women's experiences were excluded from records and what we can know about women's lives despite them.

While the three authors share equal credit, we were also each responsible for distinct sections, rather than writing pieces in collaboration. Part I was written by Dr. Maeve Kane, Associate Professor of History at the University at Albany, State University of New York. Part II was written by Dr. Vanessa H. Holden, Associate Professor of History at the University of Kentucky. Part III was written by Dr. Melissa Estes Blair, Associate Professor of History at Auburn University. Any errors in each section, therefore, are solely the responsibility of each author. The bibliography at the conclusion of each chapter lists the sources we used to write that chapter, and all three of us are deeply grateful to the historians listed there for their work. Without their research and writing, this book would not exist.

PART I

Maeve Kane

CHAPTER 1

Sky Woman, Dawn-land, Turtle Island

Gender is foundational to how people, communities, and nations understand themselves and others. In studying the past, our own ideas about gender roles and gender differences shape what questions we ask and what answers we see. This is true for all historical periods, but it is especially true for the distant past and groups who did not leave direct oral or written records about themselves. In ancient North America, what we know about the past is that Indigenous women were important political, social, and economic actors in their nations and that their labor literally reshaped the landscapes of their nations. What we can know about this period comes from a variety of sources including oral histories, archeology, and DNA research, but the way these sources have been understood has been shaped by changing the understanding of gender and women's work.

In many Indigenous North American cultures, including the Haida, Haudenosaunee, and Diné, women are important actors in stories of creation and continue to be important political actors in the lives of their communities. These creation stories, and their continued importance in the twenty-first century, help us understand the diverse history of the peopling of the Americas and women's roles in shaping their nations. Differences in women's labor and trade in the Northwest, Northeast, Southwest, and Mississippian areas of what is now the United States illustrate the vast diversity of Indigenous women's experience in areas of ancient North America. These examples have been chosen to illustrate the way that gender roles changed in response to and parallel with economic changes, environmental conditions, territorial politics, and national histories. What the history of many Indigenous nations share is an emphasis on gender balance, sovereignty as part of an original and gendered connection to land, and cultural constructions of women as central to the economic, cultural, and spiritual lives of their nations. Gender, gender roles, and the way they are defined are important organizing features of all societies, and the way gender is defined and changes depend on complex and culturally specific histories. In the ancient Americas as in the rest of the world, gender and gender roles changed for a wide variety of reasons well before contact with Europeans and set the stage for contact in important ways.

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Studying the Past

The study of women in the past has been central to the historical profession for more than 70 years, and gender has always been part of how humans understand the world around us. The study of women and the study of gender are related but different. Who is or is not considered a woman has changed over time. In this book, we include trans women in our consideration of women, and we also examine the experiences of people who were assumed female at birth who may not have considered themselves women in order to analyze who was and was not considered part of the category of “woman” at different points in time, and why. The inclusion or exclusion of certain groups from the category of woman is part of the way gender has been used to enforce hierarchies of power.

Gender is the changing, unstable, and culturally specific system of meanings that communities attach to human bodies. *Sex* is a spectrum of physical traits such as chromosomes, genitals, and the presence or absence of breasts and facial hair, and these physical traits can change or have ambiguous expression. Humans have a wide range of natural variations in the expression of physical sexual characteristics that do not relate to their gender identity. *Gender* is the categorization of bodies based on a set of associated ideas that change over time and may differ between communities – the gender category of woman defined as someone who is sexually and financially independent in twenty-first century America is different than how the gender category of woman was defined as sexually chaste and financially dependent in early nineteenth-century America, for example. To say that something is *gendered* means that an idea is arbitrarily associated with a particular gender, like the color pink is commonly gendered feminine. Gender is therefore a *social construct*, meaning that a gender category is specific to the time, place, and community where it is used, and changes over time even within the same community.

The category of woman is a gender category, but it is not the only gender category. In many societies, gender is considered *binary*, or mutually exclusive between two separate categories such as men and women in which an individual person cannot occupy one category and have traits from the other. A *gendered binary* is the association of a set of traits that are understood as mutually exclusive such as black/white, active/passive, scientific/natural, and civilized/savage with gender categories. Not all cultures have two genders, and not all cultures understand gender categories as binary and mutually exclusive. Different understandings of gender are often a major part of the conflict between cultural groups because people often view their own gender system as natural.

As the historian Joan Wallach Scott argued in an article foundational to the scholarly study of gender, “gender is a primary way of signifying power” for many cultures. Gender has often been used by human societies in both literal and metaphorical ways to structure hierarchies of power. Defining another group’s gender roles and categories as wrong or unnatural has often been used as a tool of colonization and domination because it dehumanizes the group defined as unnatural. Gender is therefore foundational to defining other systems of hierarchy like race.

Scholars debate when exactly the system of race we have become familiar with began. Like gender, race is a social construct and the arbitrary association of ideas with physical traits. A person’s physical traits like hair color and texture, eye color and shape, skin color, and facial features are their *phenotype*, while *race* is the association of culturally specific ideas like perceived intelligence and personality with

those physical traits. Although race is a social construct with no biological reality, it has often been perceived as inherited from parent to child as an inherent difference, and racial categories have been perceived as mutually exclusive. As a social construct, systems of race and racial categories have varied over time and space and had to be created and defined by people. Gender has been central to the way race and racial categories are defined. As the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw has argued, the way race, gender, class, sexuality, and other hierarchies are experienced together are best understood as *intersectional*. Overlapping hierarchies create systems in which not all women have the same experience of gender or womanhood because of their race, class, sexuality, gender identity, physical embodiment, or religion. Understanding these intersectional experiences and how they have changed over time is a central focus of this book.

Creation

The histories of many Indigenous nations begin with women and their relationships to land. Gender is central to the way all cultures understand the world and human relationships, but in many Indigenous cultures women are central actors in both creation stories and everyday life. Indigenous creation stories are frameworks for understanding the world, not myths or legends. One of the main functions of Indigenous creation stories is understanding women's economic, cultural, and spiritual value within their societies. Unlike the Christian European cultures that eventually dominated North American societies, in many Indigenous cultures, women's economic, cultural, and spiritual work was valued as much or more than men's, which would become a major point of conflict between Europeans and Indigenous groups after contact. Just like Indigenous nations and cultures, Indigenous creation stories vary widely. The three creation stories shared here were selected to give examples of the way Indigenous nations relate to land in different geographic areas and the way women's roles in creation stories shaped women's spiritual and social roles in their communities.

In the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) story of creation as told by elders Jacob Thomas Jadajigerenhtah and Jacob Swamp Tekaronieneken to Brian Rice in 1992, Sky Woman was cast out of the world above this one by her husband, who believed she had been unfaithful to him because she was pregnant. When she fell through the sky, she brought with her seeds of corn, beans, squash, tobacco, and strawberries, the most important crops for Haudenosaunee people. Sky Woman was rescued by birds, who created a place for her by placing soil from the bottom of the world on the back of a turtle where she later gave birth to a daughter. As soil built up on the back of this turtle, it became Turtle Island and the continent of North America. When Sky Woman's daughter later became pregnant, she gave birth to two boys, Sapling and Flint, who balanced the good and evil in the world, but the birth of Flint killed their mother. After Sky Woman buried her daughter, her grave grew the corn, beans, squash, tobacco, and strawberries that Sky Woman had brought into the world, and the good twin Sapling created *onkwe:honwe*, or Indigenous people, from the red clay covering his mother's body. Based in this creation narrative, Haudenosaunee women are responsible for the land and its crops and appoint male leaders who are of a good mind like Sapling.

In the Diné Bahane' (Navajo creation story) as told by Martin Vigil, Roseann Sandoval Willink, Arthur Sandoval, Mescalito, and Harry Bilagody to Paul Zolbrod in 1985, First Man and First Woman formed from the air of the First World at the creation of the universe. As they journeyed up through the Second and Third worlds, they met the animals and were given plants until they emerged into the Fourth, current world, where their daughter Changing Woman was born. Changing Woman gave birth to twin boys who were fathered by the sun. These twins hunted and destroyed the monsters who devoured the people descended from First Man and First Woman. The twins did not kill Cold Woman, without whom the seasons could not change; or Old Age Woman, without whom the people could not have children and a reason to pass on their knowledge; or Poverty Woman, without whom the people would not invent new things; or Hunger Man, without whom the people would not plant and grow crops. After the monsters were killed, Changing Woman and the twins left the people to live in a house in the west, where Changing Woman keeps the changing earth balanced with the hot disc of her husband the sun. The Diné Bahane' emphasizes a balance between male and female and the importance of caring for the constantly changing female-gendered world.

In the Haida story of creation as told by Bill Reid to Dell Hymes in 1990, humans were created when Raven was cast out of the Cloud Kingdom into this world, and beat his wings so hard that the ocean receded and created the land. When Raven grew bored of being all alone, he broke open clams and mollusks to bring the first human men and women into the world. Later, Eagle Woman joined the first humans and had daughters with them, and these daughters stayed with their mother and founded the Eagle clans, while the other humans formed the Raven clans. Clan membership was thus passed down from mothers to children, who share a connection to both land and sea.

Creation stories vary between nations and cultures. There is no one single "Native American creation story." There are some common threads among Indigenous North American creation stories, but not all nations and cultures share all of these common features. Creation stories often explain gendered spiritual and social responsibilities, relationships between humans and the natural and spiritual world, and ongoing duties of care toward tribal lands and sacred sites. Gender parallels between spiritual beings like Sky Woman, Changing Woman, or Eagle Woman and human women help explain women and men's roles and obligations to one another, their communities, and nonhuman beings like animals and rivers. Many Indigenous creation stories compare the emergence of humans from the soil or a hole in the ground to birth from a womb, explicitly connecting the Earth to sacred powers of female reproduction. For many modern Indigenous people, knowing one's identity and place in the world is impossible to separate from sacred stories of creation and traditional gender roles laid out in those stories.

Today, there are more than 560 federally recognized Indigenous nations in the United States and more than 600 First Nations in Canada, and the Indigenous peoples of North America speak more than 300 different languages. This is a small fraction of the number of languages and cultures that were present in North America before contact with Europeans, and the handful of creation stories related here are just a few of the wide diversity of Indigenous histories. The names of the elders who shared these creation stories in the twentieth century are included here because creation stories continue to live in the present and continue to guide Indigenous people and nations in the present. Indigenous people are the keepers of their own communities' knowledge, and elders in those communities continue to keep and share that

knowledge. Creation stories shape how people understand the world, the relationship between men and women, gendered responsibilities, and the relationship between humans and nonhuman people such as animals, plants, and spirits. Creation stories are frameworks for understanding, not myths or legends, and specific understanding of gendered roles and obligations are a foundational part of these frameworks.

Peopling of the Americas

Many of these Indigenous histories are compatible with archeological, linguistic, and genetic evidence of how humans arrived in North and South America. Arikara creation stories tell of a long journey through darkness, the timing and direction of which align with archeological and genetic evidence of human migration across the Bering Land Bridge. Haudenosaunee narratives of the founding of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy describe a historical solar eclipse that can be dated precisely. Indigenous ways of knowing the past, which are often connected to Indigenous ways of knowing the land and defining gender, have often been dismissed as myths or legends by non-Indigenous writers. However, these Indigenous epistemologies (or systems of knowing) are often compatible with European and American traditions of scientific epistemologies.

Current academic understanding of the distant past is filtered through the gendered politics of the present. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, academic and popular understanding of the peopling of the Americas focused on stories of the male hunter following herds of big game across the Bering Land Bridge because this fit American and European ideals of gender roles at the time. Women very rarely appeared in these migration narratives because they were seen as passive followers by earlier academic researchers. This reflected then-current ideas of women and women's work as unimportant economically and socially.

New evidence suggests that early groups that migrated into North America – and indeed, many hunter-gatherer groups across the globe throughout time – relied on plants and small animals gathered and trapped by women and men for the majority of their daily calories. Large game hunting accounted for only a small amount of any group's calories. Men's and women's labor was often seasonal, with hunting providing more calories in winter and early spring and foraging and trapping providing more calories in summer and fall. In many hunter-gatherer societies, gathering and foraging activities directed by women determine how often and where the group moves, suggesting that early migrations into North America were also driven by women's foraging and gathering activities. The importance of women's labor in acquiring food for their communities suggests that these early foraging societies likely valued women's work much more than previous stories of male big-game hunters would suggest.

Ideas about gender continue to affect the way the past is studied. As research techniques evolve, we must continue to evaluate how our own ideas about gender have been shaped by the past and how our own ideas about gender affect what we think we know about the past. DNA research on the peopling of the Americas has the potential to vastly increase what we know about the past, but these research techniques are shaped by modern interpretations of gender in the same way Bering Land Bridge narratives were in the past.

Mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) and Y-chromosome markers have been used in recent years to research these ancient population movements. mtDNA is

passed down from mother to both male and female children, often with very little mutation. Y-chromosome markers are passed from father to son with little variation. This makes both mtDNA and Y-chromosome markers useful to trace back the relationships within large populations to ancestral women in a founding population. Genetic research in the Americas suggests that Indigenous people in North and South America descend from a relatively small population of women and men who originated in East Asia and Siberia via several waves of migration. Coast Salish creation stories describe a long journey across an ocean, while Blackfeet, Cherokee, and other creation stories describe emerging from a long, dark tunnel or a hole in the ground, possibly describing ancestral journeys to North America. These stories align with new archeological and genetic evidence that small groups of women and men crossed the Bering Land Bridge, migrated down the coast in small kayaks or canoes, or crossed the ocean.

Genetic research on the peopling of the Americas has some ethical issues. Many of these issues are gendered by the politics of the present. First, not all Indigenous people carry mtDNA, Y-chromosome markers, or other genetic markers commonly found among Indigenous people, and some people who have mtDNA or other genetic markers common among Indigenous people are not Indigenous. There are many reasons for this. Children do not inherit all genetic markers from their parents: an Indigenous child whose mother is not Indigenous might not have mtDNA markers common to Indigenous people. Inheritance of some genetic markers like the Y-chromosome is sex-dependent, and populations move and change over time. A person living right now could have two Indigenous grandparents – a maternal grandfather and a paternal grandfather – without inheriting mtDNA or a Y-chromosome with markers commonly found in Indigenous populations because the inheritance of these markers is sex-dependent.

There is no single Indigenous genetic marker. Indigeneity in North America is a political identity of belonging to a specific Indigenous nation, and there is no genetic test for national belonging. The idea that an Indigenous person can be “full blood” or less than “full blood” is an invention of nineteenth-century colonial governments that had a vested interest in denying Indigenous nations’ claims to sovereignty. As will be discussed in later chapters, American and European colonial governments attempted to impose gendered rules for Indigenous citizenship that excluded many women and their descendants from Indigenous status, further complicating the genetic politics of Indigenous identity in the present.

With the commercialization of genetic testing, there have been some cases in which researchers obtained blood and other genetic material from Indigenous people under false pretenses. Colonial possession of Indigenous bodies and settler attempts to prevent Indigenous women’s reproduction have been closely tied to settler claims to land from the earliest settlement of European colonies in North America. *Settler* is a term used by modern scholars to describe non-Indigenous people in North America and elsewhere who occupy lands formerly held by Indigenous people as part of the process of settler colonialism. *Settler colonialism* is the attempt to establish permanent colonies with populations that replace the original, or Indigenous, inhabitants of an area. Settler colonialism is distinct from extractive colonialism, in which colonial powers seek to extract resources and wealth from an area without displacing the original inhabitants. The presence of women among colonizers is often a defining feature of settler colonialism in contrast to extractive colonialism because the presence of women and the birth of children in the colony helps legitimize settler claims to territory and replace the Indigenous population. Preventing the reproduction of

Indigenous groups by abducting Indigenous children, sexual assault of Indigenous women, or denial of Indigenous families' right to have children is another major feature of settler colonialism that furthers the replacement of Indigenous populations with settler populations.

Direct-to-consumer genetic testing that promises to identify an individual's racial heritage reinforces the idea of heritable, biological racial differences and emphasizes heritable race over political belonging to a specific Indigenous nation. This idea first emerged in the seventeenth century, as will be discussed in the next chapter, and began as a justification for enslaving children born to enslaved mothers. Genetic and archeological research are important parts of understanding the shared human history of North America, but the practice of that research in the present must be understood within the historical context of colonialism.

The Spread of Maize

As humans migrated and spread throughout North and South America, they adapted to a vast array of ecosystems and seasonal patterns. By about 14,500 years ago, human communities spread as far south as modern Chile at the far southern tip of South America and the Florida panhandle in what is now the eastern United States. Archeological evidence suggests that between nine thousand and five thousand years ago, communities across North and South America began to practice agriculture with many different types of plants suited to their local environments. This rise of agriculture across the Americas occurred at roughly the same time – and completely separate from – the advent of agriculture in what is now Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran in Southwest Asia, China in East Asia, and the Ethiopian highlands and Sahel in Africa.

The spread of maize agriculture radically changed settlement and gendered labor patterns for many Indigenous groups in the Americas. In many areas of North America, archeological evidence suggests that a strong division of labor by gender only emerged with the adoption of maize agriculture as some tasks like hunting and house construction became solely men's responsibilities and agriculture, ceramics, and textile production became women's work. When Europeans first encountered Indigenous groups, they were often shocked that women were equal partners with men in agriculture or even the primary farmers and landowners in their communities. For many Indigenous nations, this was because of the spiritual association between women, land, and its crops that feature in many Indigenous creation stories. For most Indigenous groups who cultivated maize, its planting, care, harvest, and distribution were the domain of women, giving women an effective veto over warfare by denying warriors the supplies necessary to travel. Many Indigenous creation stories emphasize the need for balance between men and women, and balance between men's work and women's work, reflected in the division of labor in everyday life.

Maize is one of the most calorie-dense crops in the world, and its spread from what is now southern Mexico through the rest of North America radically changed gendered labor from hunting, trapping, and gathering to gendered agriculture. Maize was originally domesticated from wild teosinte, an inedible grass, meaning that Indigenous farmers around 4300 BCE bred a long-lasting, calorie-dense food from an inedible plant (BCE stands for "Before Common Era" and is used as a neutral alternative to BC or "Before Christ").

Unlike many wild foods, maize can be stored for long periods, and its calorie density means that small groups can grow large amounts to support others or store as surplus. This surplus maize production likely helped develop the complex gendered labor system of the Maya, in which both male and female farmers grew maize and other crops, while women were responsible for processing, cooking, and storing food. Maya women's social and religious labor came to include brewing and serving the diplomatically and religiously important *chicha*, a maize-based beer that continues to be made in Mexico. The spread of calorie-dense maize allowed a small number of farmers to produce surplus food to support a growing number of artisans, scholars, and religious leaders in many groups.

The study of maize's history and spread is another case of nineteenth- and twentieth-century researchers sometimes projecting their own gender roles backward into the past. Until recently, most accounts of Mayan and other Indigenous groups' early history asserted that only men farmed. This was in part because American and European researchers believed that male farming and female housekeeping was a "natural" arrangement of European gendered labor norms, and in part because many Indigenous groups in Mexico in the twentieth century did follow the practice of male farming and female housekeeping. Many twentieth-century researchers believed that these groups had not changed their labor patterns for thousands of years. However, Maya and other groups' labor arrangements not only changed before contact with Europeans with the spread of maize but also changed because Spanish and other colonizers enforced what they believed to be the more "natural" or "proper" gendered division of labor on Indigenous communities, which will be discussed further in the next chapter. In studying history, it is always important to acknowledge that our own ideas of gender roles and gendered differences can color our understanding of the past.

Around 2000 BCE, maize cultivation spread north of the Rio Grande into what is now the United States, and by about 900 CE reached the Atlantic coast (CE or "Common Era" is used here as a neutral alternative to AD or "Anno Domini"/"Year of our Lord"). Throughout most of North America, maize cultivation was the responsibility of women, and as maize cultivation spread, Indigenous women bred many subspecies adapted to their particular environment. Maize cultivation coexisted alongside other forms of food gathering including foraging, fishing, and hunting, and women were often responsible for trading and distributing these foodstuffs. Early Dutch settlers in the seventeenth century described encounters with Haudenosaunee and Mahican women who traveled long distances carrying maple sugar, dried fish, and maize to trade with other Indigenous groups. Women often combined these trading trips with seasonal foraging rounds that included visits to family fishing and trapping camps and visits to family in other communities. Maize cultivation likely spread through these Indigenous women's trade and familial networks.

For many North American groups, maize cultivation was a collaborative activity that needed both men's and women's labor. Not all North American Indigenous groups cultivated maize, but among those that did, men typically cleared new fields by carefully controlling burns of underbrush and by girdling trees to kill them. Women were responsible for planting fields, but both men and women as well as children and the elderly often took turns guarding the fields from birds and other animals. During the summers as the maize grew, small mixed-gender family groups traveled for fishing and seasonal plant gathering and came back to the maize fields in the late summer so both men and women could harvest. Fields were often intercropped with beans and squash, which return important nutrients to the soil that maize needs to grow.

This practice kept fields productive for longer than monocropping and increased the calories it was possible to grow in a smaller, denser area. To maintain the productivity of the soil, many Indigenous groups allowed maize fields to lay fallow (or unplanted) after several harvests and managed these fallow fields and the surrounding landscape with occasional controlled burns. These managed burns created landscapes rich in new growth that attracted animals for hunting and trapping and created ideal conditions for fruiting bushes and other foraged plants to grow. This reduced the distance both men and women had to travel to hunt, trap, and forage, and early European settlers marveled at the rich, park-like landscapes that surrounded many Indigenous communities. Indigenous women's agricultural practices and landscape management literally remade the lands surrounding their communities.

The first harvest of green maize in late summer or fall is a significant event for many Indigenous nations in eastern North America and is often associated with gendered celebrations. Among the Haudenosaunee, the Green Corn Ceremony days are when clan mothers appoint chiefs and spiritual leaders and bestow clan names on children who become adults. Among the Mvscogee, the Green Corn Ceremony is a time of renewal and repair. Men fast and undergo ritual purification, while women sweep out the old year's fire and rekindle their home fires with coals from a central fire. The Seminole separate into women's and men's camps for part of the Green Corn Ceremony and come back together for the spiritually significant Stomp Dance. Many Indigenous nations and individuals continue to observe green corn ceremonies and other rituals in the twenty-first century.

Interpreting Cahokia

The fertile floodplains of what is now the American Midwest were ideal for maize agriculture, and it was here that one of the largest cities in North America and the world developed thanks to the surplus food storage of maize agriculture. Women's agricultural production and botanical knowledge created a vast surplus of food that allowed for the rise of Cahokia as a political power and the creation of an elaborate spiritual and cultural system. Women's cultivation of calorie-dense maize made it possible for a relatively small portion of the female population to supply food, freeing other women and men to focus on increasingly specialized artistic, political, and spiritual roles. Sometime between 750 CE and 1000 CE, several smaller nations coalesced into one larger regional power supported by women's maize agriculture. The large food surplus supported a growing population of specialized artisans, and by 1150 CE there were nearly 20,000 people living in the large central city of Cahokia. Small towns and family farms surrounded this central metropolis, and Cahokia remained the largest urban area in North America until 1780.

The large population and abundance of food at Cahokia allowed for the development of complex social roles and specialized professions. However, much of what we know about the religious, political, and social systems at Cahokia have been filtered through the interpretation of later American gender roles. Almost everything that is now known about Cahokia is from archeological excavations, because sometime around 1400 CE, the population of the large central city moved elsewhere and abandoned the city. The rise of Cahokia coincided with the Medieval Warm Period, a phase of globally warmer than average temperatures from about 950 CE to about 1250 CE. This period is also known as the Medieval Climate Optimum because in many parts

of the world it provided ideal growing conditions, and it may have encouraged the spread of maize agriculture in North America.

As Cahokia and its surrounding towns grew in the period between 1150 CE and 1400 CE, its towns, buildings, and homes grew more specialized, with designated areas for specific religious and cultural tasks. Researchers' own ideas about gender color what they are even aware to look for when trying to find patterns in these spaces. As Cahokia and the surrounding towns grew more complex, people began building circular communal buildings in neighborhoods of rectangular homes. The question of what these circular buildings were used for is a gendered one.

There are at least three possibilities that scholars currently debate. Because these circular buildings are so unusual in their neighborhoods of rectangular buildings, researchers believe they have some ritual or ceremonial use. Early written accounts of the area several hundred years later describe sweatlodges as circular buildings that only men were permitted to enter for ritual use, and for much of the twentieth century, researchers believed the circular buildings at Cahokia to be male-only sweatlodges. A second theory is that circular ritual spaces are also used by other descendant groups in the area for religious ceremonies that include both men and women. In the third theory, there are a handful of early written records that describe women in descendant groups using circular menstrual huts. There are very few of these early written descriptions because of European taboos around discussing menstruation. Women around the world at different times have practiced menstrual seclusion, which is the practice of withdrawing to a shared, female-only space for the duration of menstruation for prayer, purification, or rest. Indigenous women in the nations that succeeded Cahokia practiced menstrual seclusion, but until recently there was very little academic interest in determining whether this was practiced at Cahokia or what it might look like archeologically. Our own gendered frameworks can define what kinds of questions we are – or are not – even able to ask.

Cahokia seems to have had a strongly gendered political and religious system that influenced many of the nations around it in what is called the Mississippian culture sphere or the Southeastern ceremonial complex. As Cahokia grew in power in the region, the role of women in their creation story seems to have changed. Many Indigenous nations in the region have creation stories of male sky beings who impregnated the feminine earth or night to create humans. Many of these creation narratives also included an element of female sacrifice, in which a mother figure's body brought forth corn, as in the Haudenosaunee creation story at the opening of this chapter. As Cahokia grew more powerful and waged war on nations around it for control of fertile land, male religious or political figures began to be buried with objects symbolizing a birdman or skybeing. These men were also sometimes buried with women who had been ritually killed as a sacrifice. This suggests that as land became more valuable after 1200 CE, the sacrifice of women's bodies in the creation story shifted from being viewed as metaphorical to literal. This may have affected women's status in everyday life as well. Without direct oral history, however, it is hard to say how the people of Cahokia understood these changes that we see now only in the archeological record.

Cahokia's cultural influence in the Mississippian culture sphere extended throughout much of what is now the eastern United States, but the many cultures and nations within this culture sphere retained their own experiences of gender. Cultures often change as a result of contact, trade, and war with other groups, but that change is not one-directional or complete. Cahokia's smaller neighbors chose to adopt pieces and facets of Cahokian culture while preserving aspects of their own