Lesson 5 Reading

What Is History?

What is history? This question may seem really easy, even silly. Most people would say that history is the study of the important people, dates, and events of the past. This answer is true as far as it goes. But who decides what people, dates, and events are important? And why should we bother learning about them in the first place?

Let's dig a little deeper into the question "What is history?" First of all, history is an important way of thinking about the world. To see what this means, imagine waking up tomorrow and not being able to remember a single thing about your past. You can't remember your name, who your parents or family members are, the rules to your favorite game, or anything you ever learned in school.

Without a knowledge of your own past, you might feel lost and lonely. You wouldn't even know who you are. And you would have a difficult time making good decisions about what to do next.

In a similar way, history helps us make sense of the world. It is the memory of communities, peoples, and nations. Without history, individuals and whole countries

would lose their sense of direction. The next time you watch the news on TV, notice how often reporters, politicians, and others mention something about the past. Humans constantly use their knowledge of the past to make sense of what is happening today.

History is not just important to understanding what happened. It also allows us to understand why something happened. Events can be connected in several different ways. Cause and effect is a main tool used.

Historians look at history like this, too. They must ask themselves what caused something to happen, what might just be a correlation of events, and were there a series, or sequence, of events that led from one event to another? Sometimes, it is hard to tell how one event affects another. The answer might not be immediately clear because it takes a long time to come to an understanding.

History, then, is much more than a listing of "facts." Some people have even described history as an ongoing argument about the past. Why does the argument go on? Sometimes historians chance upon new evidence, such as a forgotten document or a new archaeological discovery. The new evidence may lead them to challenge old interpretations. Sometimes historians reconsider existing evidence and see things that others have overlooked. Historians are always considering evidence from new angles. As they do so, they

may correct an earlier historian's error or explain events in a different way.

Conclusion

We started with a simple question: What is history? As you have seen, this question has many answers. History is a study of the past. It is a way of making sense of the world. It is an academic discipline. It is a combination of facts and interpretations of facts. It is also an ongoing argument that changes as new evidence is uncovered. And that is the most exciting thing of all, because it means that history is very much alive.

Digging Up the Past

As a boy growing up in southern Illinois in the 1960s, Tim Pauketat loved to explore and to collect the ancient arrowheads that he found. One day, as he rode in his father's delivery truck, he saw a great, flat-topped pyramid. To Tim, it looked 100 feet tall, all built of earth. He was instantly captivated by the mysterious mounds of Cahokia.

Many mysteries surround the mounds of Cahokia (kuh- HO-key-uh). As an adult, Tim Pauketat would devote his time to solving some of them.

The first mystery was who built the mounds. Tens of thousands of mounds, some shaped as tremendous snakes, birds, or cones, have been discovered in the nation's interior. The most enormous of these mounds is the great mound of Cahokia, which is more massive than the pyramids of Egypt, rises 10 stories high, and contains 25 million cubic feet of earth.

Early settlers pushing west in the 1700s first discovered the mounds. The settlers believed that the American Indians who lived in the area could never have been capable of building such awesome earthworks. Instead, the settlers believed that a lost race of superior beings had built the magnificent mounds.

Popular books and poems were written about the "lost race" that had built a great civilization and then vanished. The mystery gripped the public as they looked to Europe, Asia, and Africa for ancient mound builders. Some claimed that the mound builders were Vikings, while others were sure they were Phoenicians. Hindus, Greeks, Romans, Persians, and the lost tribes of Israel were each "proven," incorrectly, to be the lost race of mound builders.

The first American to answer the question scientifically was the third president, Thomas Jefferson. Based on the skeletons and artifacts he found when he dug into a mound, Jefferson was certain that American Indians were the builders. People claimed, however, that

Jefferson was wrong, and 100 years later, the battle over who built the mysterious mounds still raged.

Finally, in 1881, the Smithsonian Institution hired archaeologist Cyrus Thomas to find out who the mound builders really were. Like most people, Thomas thought the mounds were built by a long-lost race. Over seven years, Thomas and his team unearthed thousands of artifacts. In the end, he disproved his own theory, declaring that the mound builders were indeed early American Indians.

But many mysteries remained that Tim Pauketat, the young boy from Illinois, became interested in solving. What culture had built the monumental works, and why had that culture vanished?

Cahokia Uncovered

At dawn, the Great Chief might have stood atop what was the greatest earth mound in the Americas. As he raised his arms to welcome the sun, its first rays would have hit his tall-feathered headdress. Slowly, the sun would have lit his jewelry, made from carved shells and

copper, and the cape of feathers that hung from his shoulders. The sun was sacred to the people of Cahokia for it made the corn grow.

The mound the Great Chief called home, which we know as Monks Mound, rose 100 feet from the vast, flat plain of what is now southern Illinois. From its top, the Great Chief could look down upon a city of some 20,000 subjects. In addition, thousands lived in villages beyond the city. Consequently, the chief ruled what was probably the largest urban area in the world at the time. He could have seen more than 120 other mounds nearby, and more in the distance (toward what is now St. Louis, Missouri).

A towering wall surrounded the city's center. To the west was a great circle of upright logs—a kind of giant solar calendar that priests used to mark the beginning of spring and fall (the equinoxes) and winter and summer (the solstices).

A huge plaza stretched out over 50 acres from the base of Monks Mound where hundreds or maybe thousands of people gathered for feasts, ceremonies, or a wild game of *chunkey*. This game of skill, daring, and high-stakes gambling involved two spear-throwing players and a wheel-shaped stone that was rolled across the hardened, flat court. The object was to land a spear closer to the chunkey disk than an opponent did.

The Great Chief ruled all this and more. Cahokia was not only a cultural and spiritual center, it was a trade

center for an area stretching a thousand miles in all directions. Cahokia's sphere of influence was enormous, and the Great Chief was its most powerful ruler.

The Archaeologist's Toolkit

How did archaeologists figure all this out even though the people of Cahokia had no system of writing and left no written records? How do we know about the Great Chief and his welcoming of the sun in 1150 C.E.?

People who have no written histories have oral histories—stories that are passed from one generation to the next. Scholars searched for such a story to explain Cahokia but, strangely, never found one. In 1539, however, Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto (ehr-NAN-do day SOH-toh) led an expedition through the Southeast looking for treasure. He didn't find gold or silver, but he did find mound builders much like the people of Cahokia. Written accounts of the expedition describe the mounds and the powerful sun-worshiping rulers who lived atop them.

To discover what life in Cahokia was like, archaeologists search for artifacts. When they carefully dug into one small mound at Cahokia, archaeologists discovered the remains of a chief along with a wealth of artifacts, including thousands of shell beads, fine carvings, copper, and all the things a chief might need in the next life. Based on these artifacts, we know what the Great Chief wore.

In the mound were fine circular stones called chunkey disks, too. But if it were not for witnesses, no one would know what the disks were used for. French explorers later came through the area and saw tribes of farmers playing the last version of the game. They described it in their journals.

Determining the population of Cahokia is harder. One estimate was made by counting the number of laborers it took to build the homes, walls, and especially the mounds of Cahokia. Monks Mound alone required some 14 million baskets of earth dug by hand, carried, deposited, and pounded firmly in place. This number led to an

estimate of as many as 43,000 people who had lived in the local region.

How did archaeologists figure out there was a solar calendar given that the logs had rotted away hundreds of years ago? As wood rots, it turns the soil a darker color, so the archaeologists carefully searched for these wood stains in the soil.

Today, we know all this about Cahokia and a great deal more. However, a great many mysteries still remain to be discovered.

Cahokia Abandoned

When the first explorers reached Cahokia, the mighty city was completely gone. Only the silent mounds remained. Tim Pauketat says radiocarbon-dating evidence shows that Cahokia was abandoned in the 1300s. He wants to find out why.

Several theories exist about why Cahokia was abandoned. Many of these focus on the important relationship between people and their environment. Some scholars say a drought or a change in climate caused crop

failure. Since it took 25,000 to 30,000 pounds of corn a day to feed the Cahokians, a lack of crops would cause a lot of people to leave the area.

Others suggest that with so many people packed together in a place without a sewage system, the water became contaminated, causing disease. Still others think that local resources such as wood and game must have grown scarce, forcing the Cahokians to abandon their homes.

Pauketat agrees that these factors would have caused some people to move away. However, since every last person had fled by 1350, Pauketat believes a great power struggle that led to the failure of the government caused people to leave.

He and his students are finding evidence of protective walls surrounding the homes of the powerful, which show that the occupants were afraid and felt they needed protection. Pauketat also found several such homes that were burned. Strangely, no one returned to these homes after the fire to gather up the fine tools and baskets of

stored food, which suggests that the occupants had to flee the area.

Tim Pauketat has not discovered all the answers yet. However, he is optimistic that young people will continue to unravel the mysteries that surround Cahokia.