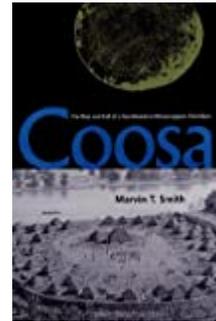




Marvin T. Smith. *Coosa: The Rise and Fall of a Southeastern Mississippian Chiefdom.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000. xix + 146 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-1811-9.



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Continuing the Process: Fusing Archaeology and History in Native American Studies

Continuing the Process: Fusing Archaeology and History in Native American Studies

Few regions of North America have been subject to more research on pre-modern Native American societies than the Southeast. Particularly during the last thirty years, archaeologists, anthropologists, and ethnohistorians have attempted to integrate the methodologies of each other's disciplines hoping to bridge differences in perspectives and correct earlier misinterpretations of the region's pre-colonial peoples. The result has been the publication of numerous works highlighting the fruits of their labors and presenting a more thoroughly researched and theoretically consistent depiction of indigenous communities. Charles Hudson, Patricia Galloway, John Hann, and Greg Waselkov, to name but a few, have set the standard for deciphering the South's distant past, at the same time publishing their evaluations in such a manner as to appeal to a broader (non-specialist) audience. In *Coosa: The Rise and Fall of a Southeastern Mississippian Chiefdom*, Marvin Smith continues this process and contributes a significant work to a vibrant field.

Coosa, a pre-colonial chiefdom comprised of between

18,000 and 34,000 people scattered throughout what is today Tennessee, Alabama, and northwestern Georgia, flourished between the tenth and sixteenth centuries. According to Smith, in terms of power and influence it may have equaled the chiefdoms linked to Etowah in Georgia, Moundville in Alabama, and Cahokia in Illinois. Contrary to traditional scholarly opinion, he notes that Coosa was not a "conquest paramount chiefdom" but a "mutual nonaggression pact" among regional inhabitants who shared common subsistence patterns and societal structures. Smith concludes that descendants of Coosa persisted as significant players in the Southeast until the early-nineteenth-century U.S. Removal policy.

The author's perspective on Coosa is established in the book's initial pages and influences the structural divisions of his work. Smith contends that he approaches the polity from an archaeological point of view but utilizes an "indirect historical approach" in order to weave together information on the more documented sixteenth century peoples and populations of prehistoric and later periods (p. xiv). Limiting his coverage to the years between 900 and 1775 (C.E.), he treats his subject chronologically dur-

ing the first portion of the book. Chapter 1 presents an overview of Mississippian society prior to European arrival in North America with heavy emphasis on archaeological sites pertinent to the era. Subsequent sections concentrate on Spanish interaction with the Coosa, specific information about native societies obtained by researchers through these encounters, the fragmentation of Coosa society, and subsequent emergence of its members as Creeks in the eighteenth century. Deviating from his initial pattern, Smith focuses on specific topics in chapters 5 and 6. In these sections, he presents an overview of the processes by which twentieth-century archeologists determined geographic locations of Coosa communities and minutely details how scholars have deciphered "The Lost Years," a time between 1568 and 1700 when historical records of Coosa are largely non-existent. In conclusion, the author summarizes the ample amount of information now known about his subject but admits, "there is need for much research on the Coosa people" (p. 121).

Despite the relatively short length of the work (fewer than 121 pages devoted to content), a great deal of information concerning the Coosa is offered. Smith's coverage of Spanish interaction with the Indians is sound as is his analysis of European chroniclers of these contacts. The author provides the most convincing assessment to date of Coosa's Muskogean connections and the early development of Creek peoples. Certain sections effectively highlight the benefits of interdisciplinary research techniques. Specifically, the chapter titled "Coosa in the

Eighteenth Century" presents a superb model for scholars on how to integrate archeological and historical evidence in a convincing and readable form.

Problems do exist, however. Turgid prose and repeated introduction of new time designations, excavation sites, and theoretical paradigms may prove mind-numbing to intended audiences. Detailed evaluation of archaeological techniques and processes are juxtaposed against general readings of primary documents. Moreover, the author relies on the writings of only a few historians familiar with the subject for interpretation of historic events and encounters. Treatment of topics such as native warfare, religion, and marriage practices is hurried and haphazard, with many of the historical documents that could have been informative in this regard apparently not being consulted.

Any of the above criticisms must be tempered in light of the book's stated purpose. Rather than "a theoretical treatise," Smith originally intended his effort to be "a popular work" used primarily as a supplementary reading for the classroom (pp. xiii, xix). For the most part, he has succeeded in his endeavor. This monograph provides a good overview of Coosa society and will be a valuable addition to courses primarily concerned with Native Americans and the Southeast. Perhaps more important, Smith has provided a revealing example of the promise and problems that continue to be inherent in interdisciplinary investigations.

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