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Preserving America's Heritage: Material Culture, Interpretation and Repatriation

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L98 (AMCS) 479 - June 4 through June 23, 2012

Preservation evokes a sense of setting aside something for the future. Those involved in the process often have a strong emotional bond with the material items, persons, or places that are being preserved. When enacted on behalf of society, such preservation transcends the acts of any individual, and is often accomplished by the public at large rather than a professional community. More recently, however, we have seen a concern on the part of some archaeologists to set aside the physical and cultural remains of "the ancestors," ours and theirs, rather than to dig.

In this course, we will ask why those of European or African or Asian descent wish to preserve the remnants of American Indian societies that once and still live here today – and how those who once inhabited this landscape see that past and relate to it. Why do so in the face of political opposition and fiscal crisis? Exploring Cahokia Mounds World Heritage site and a series of related locales, we will study preservation historically, and look at how it has evolved into a complex process that must accommodate many different stakeholders and a rapidly-changing landscape. More specifically, we will examine the politics of repatriation and the economics of obtaining and maintaining heritage sites. Ultimately, we will seek to understand preservation's powerful place in the cultural imagination.



Plans include:

Trips to the Illinois State Museum in Springfield, IL, the Dickson Mounds Museum near Peoria, IL and various sites in Oklahoma where many Cahokia descendents now live.

Participation in and observation of excavations in progress.

Visits to museums that preserve and interpret the ancient past of the American Indian.

Consultation with field experts and others involved in preservation.

A visit to the Osage and Cherokee nations in Oklahoma.



This 3-week course is highly interactive, bringing students (both graduate and undergraduate) from a wide range of fields together to explore the complex issues and contexts of cultural preservation. For AMCS majors, it can fulfill the Multidisciplinary Fieldwork requirement OR count as a multidisciplinary (MD) course.