A (Fort) Ancient Commonwealth: Local History in a Premodern World History Survey

By Timothy Smit, Ph.D., Eastern Kentucky University

Abstract: This article discusses the process of adding a local history component to a premodern world history undergraduate survey through the creation of module focused on the Commonwealth of Kentucky between 1000 and 1400 CE in order to introduce students to the rich and long history of where they live.

Key Words: pedagogy, world history survey, Kentucky, local history, online teaching

Despite its rich premodern history, I have been guilty of ignoring North America, my home and where I work, in my teaching. This is despite its clear application to one of the courses I regularly teach: a premodern world history survey ranging from some varying distant past to somewhere around 1500 CE. Part of this is likely due to my training as a historian of Europe and the Mediterranean in the Middle Ages, but another culprit may be the traditional focus of the world history survey on Africa, Asia, and Europe. When I have addressed the Americas, I have usually discussed Mesoamerican and South American empires such as the Aztecs and Incas and often in the context of their contact and interactions with Europeans. Designing any premodern world history course is an exercise in omission given the sheer scope of material, but in my past choices I have passed over a great tool for engaging students with the practice of history: the personal connections offered by local history. To change this, I have revised one section of my world history survey to address the Commonwealth of Kentucky and its surroundings in the period between 1000 and 1400 CE, focusing on the Fort Ancient communities of the period and their neighbors. My hope was that this would create a confluence between my scholarly expertise and the service region of the university where I teach.

I work at Eastern Kentucky University, a mid-sized regional university that, despite its name, is located at more or less the geographical center of Kentucky (its original title was Central University). The name is still accurate, however, in that its service region includes eastern Kentucky. Given the broad area the institution draws its students from I teach my world history survey as an asynchronous online course taught in eight one-week modules. Each module is self-contained, though I do refer to previous material as we move through them, and each module deals with a specific topic. For example, Module Two is centered on the formation of early empires, and we examine that topic through materials that discuss complexity and organization. I have taught the course and the module under discussion in this article with and without a narrative textbook, namely, *A Concise History of the World* by Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks.[1] The only required book I have used consistently is *A History of the World in 100 Objects* by Neil MacGregor. The required

[1] Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *A Concise History of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

texts are supplemented with news articles, journal articles, book chapters, and various online resources.[2] The course has a heavy focus on the use and interpretation of material evidence, given its prominence in premodern history. The choice of providing a variety of readings for each module is to introduce students to the range of materials used in the practice of history, including challenging readings assigned to allow students to dip their toes into unfamiliar materials and become acquainted with them.[3] There is one formal paper assigned, required by my department for internal assessment of teaching effectiveness, and a final exam due at the end of the course. There are smaller assignments in each module, such as short exercises in the geography of the region at the center of that particular module. I have two primary learning objectives for the course, one methodological and one content based. First, I want students to leave the course with a foundation in how archaeologists and historians analyze non-written evidence in order to understand the past. Second, I want students to develop an understanding of how connected the premodern world was and the extent of its networks of contact and exchange.

As described above, the course is divided into eight modules, each of which deals with a different large topic and usually focuses on a specific region. I attempt to shift my focus between regions while keeping attention on common themes to draw the course material together. The schedule of course modules is:

Module One: The Agricultural Revolution and Collections of Population
Module Two: Empires: Complexity and Organization
Module Three: The Collapse of Early Empires
Module Four: Medieval Connections and Exchange
Module Five: Premodern Kentucky
Module Six: Global Connections in the Late Middle Ages: Mesoamerica to the Pacific
Module Seven: The Black Death and the Breakdown of Global Connections
Module Eight: The Columbian Exchange and a Connected Globe

In lieu of short papers, each module (except the eighth module that includes the final exam) has two discussion questions that students are required to address. The first discussion question asks students to provide a short reaction to a portion of that module's materials. There are few formal guidelines for the response, and the hope is that students will react to the reading with ideas about what the rest of the module will focus on or ask questions that lead to further inquiry. In essence, it is designed to give students a relatively small and bounded opportunity to develop the habits of thinking like a historian. The Discussion Question One is completed early in the week of the module allowing student to then focus on the remainder of the module materials and the Discussion

[2] Neil MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (London: Penguin Books, 2012).
[3] The general format for the course is modeled heavily on an online world history syllabus shared by Monica Green. My use of *A History of the World in 100 Objects* and varied and challenging course materials, along with the use of two discussion questions to orient work in each module discussed below, are drawn from the course materials generously shared by Dr. Green.

Question Two. The second discussion question is a more substantive assignment that requires students to provide the equivalent of one-page essay, roughly 300 words. Students are expected to respond to one another in this forum over the course of the module, but they are unable to see other responses until they have submitted their own. Almost all activities and discussion for each module take place within the forums of these two discussion questions. Our survey courses are capped at thirty students, so conversations can sometimes be unwieldy, but in my experience, students still access and comment on the contributions of their classmates.

In order to redesign a module to focus on premodern Kentucky, my first step was to compile the materials my students would be drawing on. Given the rough chronological range of 1000-1400 CE the module would be centered on, the materials would have to deal with Mississippian and Fort Ancient communities in and around Kentucky. My initial inclination was to have students begin by examining and discussing an archaeological site within or nearly within the borders of Kentucky proper, such as the Mississippian site of Kincaid Mounds, which is located in Illinois right across the border from Paducah. Useable materials were difficult to come by, however, particularly for the visual focus I was interested in for the first discussion question. Because of that, I shifted to the most prominent Mississippian site in the larger region, Cahokia. It is still close enough to Kentucky to draw local connections, and offers more available materials, particularly online resources. It also fits well in with the rest of the course as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization World Heritage Site. I use UNESCO sites as a focal point in other modules, such as the site of Angkor Wat in Southeast Asia. Shifting to Cahokia allows students to draw on two online resources: the UNESCO website for Cahokia and a digital exhibit from the Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site.[4] Both websites provide general information about Mississippian culture and images of the site, including artifacts and reconstructions of what it might have looked like. Students use these materials in their response to the first discussion question:

> In what ways did Cahokia serve as a center for the surrounding region?

This sets the stage for more detailed discussions over the course of the module.

There is a challenge in addressing a topic as large as Cahokia and its attendant historiography in such a brief fashion, as the design of the module allows students to only give a first impression without delving more deeply into the questions raised. Student responses tend to focus on how Cahokia would have created connections in the surrounding landscape, which allows us to dodge disputed questions of the scale of the settlement, its level of complexity, or the reach of its authority. Our focus has been on how the site might communicate the influence of Mississippian culture, which is engaged with in detail in our fuller discussions of Fort Ancient communities with

[4] "Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site," United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, accessed May 7, 2021, whc.unesco.org/en/list/198. "Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site," Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site and Alton Regional Convention & Visitors Bureau, accessed May 7, 2021, artsandculture.google.com/story/cahokia-mounds-state-historic-site/vwJCxvgQvymhIQ.

specific topics like the spread of Mississippian cultural objects. A general history of Cahokia, geared more to a popular audience, is made available to students through the electronic collections of our library, but our scholarly engagement with the historiography of the site tends to be limited.[5] This is primarily due to the constrained time available within the module; the focus on the local context of Kentucky requires that our engagement with other areas like Cahokia be short, despite the rich scholarship attached to it and debate and lack of consensus surrounding its interpretation.

As students will be working with familiar terrain, this module does not include any geography exercises, though a map of Mississippian and Fort Ancient sites is provided. Students examine three objects in *A History of the World in 100 Objects* that provide a broader picture of material culture in the Americas in this period: a Taino ritual seat from Hispaniola in what is today the Dominican Republic, a statue of a Huastec goddess from Mexico, and an Inca gold Llama from Peru.[6] Like my previous world history surveys, *A History of the World in 100 Objects* also lacks North American material from this period, but our discussion of networks and exchange in the module allows students to connect these objects. In addition to the objects and the digital materials about Cahokia students are asked to engage with three additional readings.[7] The first is a brief excerpt from a chapter in an edited book about trade routes that provides a general introduction to networks of exchange in the Americas in the period under study.[8] The second is an excerpt from a book about the Shawnee that covers their roots in the Fort Ancient culture that was prevalent in northeastern Kentucky.[9] The final source is an article discussing the archaeology of contact between Mississippian and Fort Ancient communities in Kentucky. This article, and the work of Warren, is written for experts, so I ask students to begin by reading the summary at the end of the article and to then proceed to skim the rest to see what information they can glean from it.[10] As with other modules in the course, the readings are designed to provide both a range of information about the topic under study and to introduce students to the range of materials that historians work with. The article in particular is chosen to continue grounding students in the analysis of material evidence.

The second discussion question that anchors the module after students have familiarized themselves with its broad themes is:

[5] Timothy R. Pauketat, *Cahokia: Ancient America's Great City on the Mississippi* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014). This is also shaped by the materials available in our library's collections.
[6] MacGregor, *History of the World*, 416-421, 443-448, 470-475.
[7] I am grateful to my colleague at Eastern Kentucky University, John Bowes, for sharing his expertise in American Indian history and helping me compile these readings.
[8] David M. Carballo, "Trade Routes in the Americas before Columbus," in *The Great Trade Routes: A History of Cargos and Commerce over Land and Sea*, ed. Phillip Parker (London: Conway Publishing, 2012), 166-170.
[9] Stephen Warren, *The Worlds the Shawnees Made: Migration and Violence in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 9-22.
[10] David Pollack, A. Gwynn Henderson, and Christopher T. Begley, "Fort Ancient/Mississippian Interaction on the Northeastern Periphery," *Southeastern Archaeology* 21 (2002): 206-220. The summary is located on pages 215-217.

> What influence did neighboring societies have on one another in Kentucky between 1000 and 1400 CE? Consider both positive and negative factors such as trade, conflict, cultural exchange, etc.

As stated above, students begin with a roughly 300-word response to this question. I encourage students to feel comfortable submitting a response that focuses on just one example or factor in detail so we can begin our discussion with something specific. Because students cannot access one another's responses until they have posted their own, there is usually a decent variety of topics in the initial responses that I and the students can work with.

In moderating the discussion boards for both questions assigned in a module I work to ensure that every response of substance has a response of its own (i.e., I am willing to leave comments demonstrating general agreement alone). Students are also required to respond to other posts, and usually once they are familiar with the structure and expectations of the course, they create interesting dialogue on their own. My experience has been that not allowing students to access other responses until they have submitted one of their own contributes to this, as they have novel points of overlap or disagreement they can build on. As moderator I will ask questions of responses that have not garnered a response of their own or pose follow-up questions to points students have raised. As with any online discussion board, it does not always click, but I have been satisfied in general with this structure.

For each module, I tend to have two or three learning outcomes I really work to emphasize in our discussion that relate to the main learning objectives for the course. For this module on premodern Kentucky, I first want students to engage with the evidence we have available to study it. This is accomplished primarily through a discussion of the journal article on Fort Ancient and Mississippian interaction. The module on Premodern Kentucky is the fifth of eight, and by this point in the course we have already dealt with a variety of objects, human remains, middens, and other forms of archaeological evidence, so students should have the necessary foundation to draw good information from the reading. Second of all, I want to impress upon students how prevalent and extensive premodern networks of exchange were in North America. In the module students examine a broad range of routes and the beginning exercise examining Cahokia provides a foundation for this. The topic of the second discussion question requires students to address at least one point of exchange in detail and they are exposed to more in the forum over the course of the module. I remember learning as a secondary school student that copper from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan traveled as far south along the Mississippi river as the Gulf of Mexico. That information really flipped a switch for me in how I perceived the history of the region I grew up in. This is the third thing I want students to take away from the module: an awareness of the longer history of where they live. In my moderation of the module forums, I stress local connections for students as much as possible. The goal is to broaden their sense of how much rich premodern history Kentucky has prior to the colonial and later periods they are more familiar with.

In my two previous sections of the course this module has been well-received by my students. As a starting point for assessing its effectiveness, I provided students with a very brief

survey regarding their familiarity with the material under study. The survey consists of only two questions:

> Question One: Prior to this Module, were you aware of the societies in Kentucky and surrounding states in this period?
>
> Question Two: Prior to this Module, were you aware of the networks and connections that reached Kentucky and surrounding states in this period?

The responses to both questions indicate that this module is their first introduction to the pre-modern history of Kentucky. To briefly break down the survey data, I received seventeen responses out of twenty-two students who completed the course in Fall 2021 and twenty-two responses from twenty-three students who completed the course in Spring 2022. For the first question on the premodern societies of Kentucky the responses were as follows:

> Question One: Prior to this Module, were you aware of the societies in Kentucky and surrounding states in this period?
>
> Fall 2021: 2 yes (11.76%) and 15 no (88.24%)
> Spring 2022: 4 yes (18.18%) and 18 no (81.82%)
> Combined: 6 yes (15.39%) and 33 no (84.61%)

For the second question on the networks linked to the premodern societies of Kentucky the responses were as follows:

> Question Two: Prior to this Module, were you aware of the networks and connections that reached Kentucky and surrounding states in this period?
>
> Fall 2021: 2 yes (11.76%) and 15 no (88.24%)
> Spring 2022: 2 yes (9.09%) and 20 no (90.91%)
> Combined: 4 yes (10.26%) and 35 no (89.74%)

A large proportion of students responded that the module was their first introduction to the local history of Kentucky in a more distant past, with a slightly higher proportion of students having had familiarity beforehand in Spring 2022 than in Fall 2021. Students were even less familiar with the broader connections Kentucky had in that period, with around 10% having prior knowledge and around 90% being introduced to the topic through the module. I found this very satisfying, as the module addressed the anticipated gap in their prior history coursework as it was designed to do.

In more qualitative terms, I was also impressed with the contributions my students were able to produce on the topic. First, they were able to ground their initial discussion of Cahokia in

the surrounding geography (having St. Louis as a reference point was very helpful in that regard) and begin with a strong sense of the connections that bound the region together. The written materials were a little more challenging, especially the archaeology, but students were able to consistently find specific examples to tie their responses together. Their use of key pieces of material evidence, such as marine shells from the Gulf Coast that were brought up to Kentucky and used for luxury and ritual objects, to ground their discussion of regional connections was impressive, and addressed key objectives for the module. Given that they were dealing with a subject without written evidence they did very well to find evidence to build on and to demonstrate how essential archaeological evidence is for this history. As one student stated:

> As there was not much to work with in terms of written evidence, the full story of ancient Native American society may never see the light of day. However, though the examination of important physical artifacts and the areas they are found [in] can give us an idea of what life might have been like before Europeans arrived in the Americas.

In addition to the ubiquitous marine shells, students also drew on the spread of particular styles of decoration referenced, and the analysis of those ceramic remains provided another good connection to previous discussions about pottery sherds and how useful they can be. On the whole, I was satisfied with how I saw students engaging with the longer history of the region.
It was by no means a typical response, but one student did write the following in the Spring 2022 course: "It has been so interesting to learn about specific aspects of life in our state of Kentucky during this period and I can't wait to see what else we get into in the next several weeks."

While this module was designed to address the premodern history of Kentucky specifically, in its rough parameters it could be revised for other regions in North America. Should I find myself in another academic position, or should other faculty be interested in adding a local component to their own world history survey, I believe it would prove effective in other settings. The starting point of Cahokia with its easily accessible online resources would work as an introductory assignment for course based in any region of the Midwest. From there, it would require changing materials, but given the broad reach of Mississippian culture readings could be found that either deal with it in more depth or with points of contact between it and neighboring societies. Were I to redesign this module after returning to the institution where I earned my doctorate, the University of Minnesota, for example, I could replace the readings on the early Shawnee and on Fort Ancient and Mississippian interaction with material that centers Oneota communities and their contact with the Mississippian world.[11] In other words, I would anticipate being able to effectively replace my module on premodern Kentucky with one on premodern Minnesota (or pre-

[11] For example, the journal article on North American archaeology I use as an introduction for students could be replaced by the following: Joshua R. Lieto and Jodie A. O'Gorman, "A Preliminary Analysis of Oneota and Mississippian Serving Vessels at the Morton Village Site, West-Central Illinois," *North American Archaeologist* 35 (2014): 243-255.

modern Wisconsin or premodern Michigan if necessary). I would hope that this would allow me to replicate the three main learning outcomes for the module, in particular instilling an awareness of the long local history of a university's service region, in a variety of settings.

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