



# Tales of Ancient Worlds

## The World of the Mississippi



Nine hundred years ago in North America, the Mississippian culture was thriving. Towns and cities sprang up along rivers, in particular the Mississippi. The corn-loving, game-playing, arrowhead-making Mississippians were an absolutely fascinating bunch. Let's see what makes their civilization so interesting and try to decipher the ancient riddles they've left us.





## Sense of Community

The Mississippian world was never centred around the city of Cahokia, though the civilization would probably not be controlled by Cahokia but made up of different communities (the different coloured bits on the map) that all shared a common culture.



## Water Taxis

Canoes were an absolutely essential part of life for the Mississippians. In a world without roads, they were the fastest way to get around.





## Female Farmers

We can tell from figurines excavated at Cahokia that women played an important role as the farmers of society. Beans, maize (corn), squash and nuts were the staples of this society and the farmers grew enough to support thousands of people.



# Chunkey

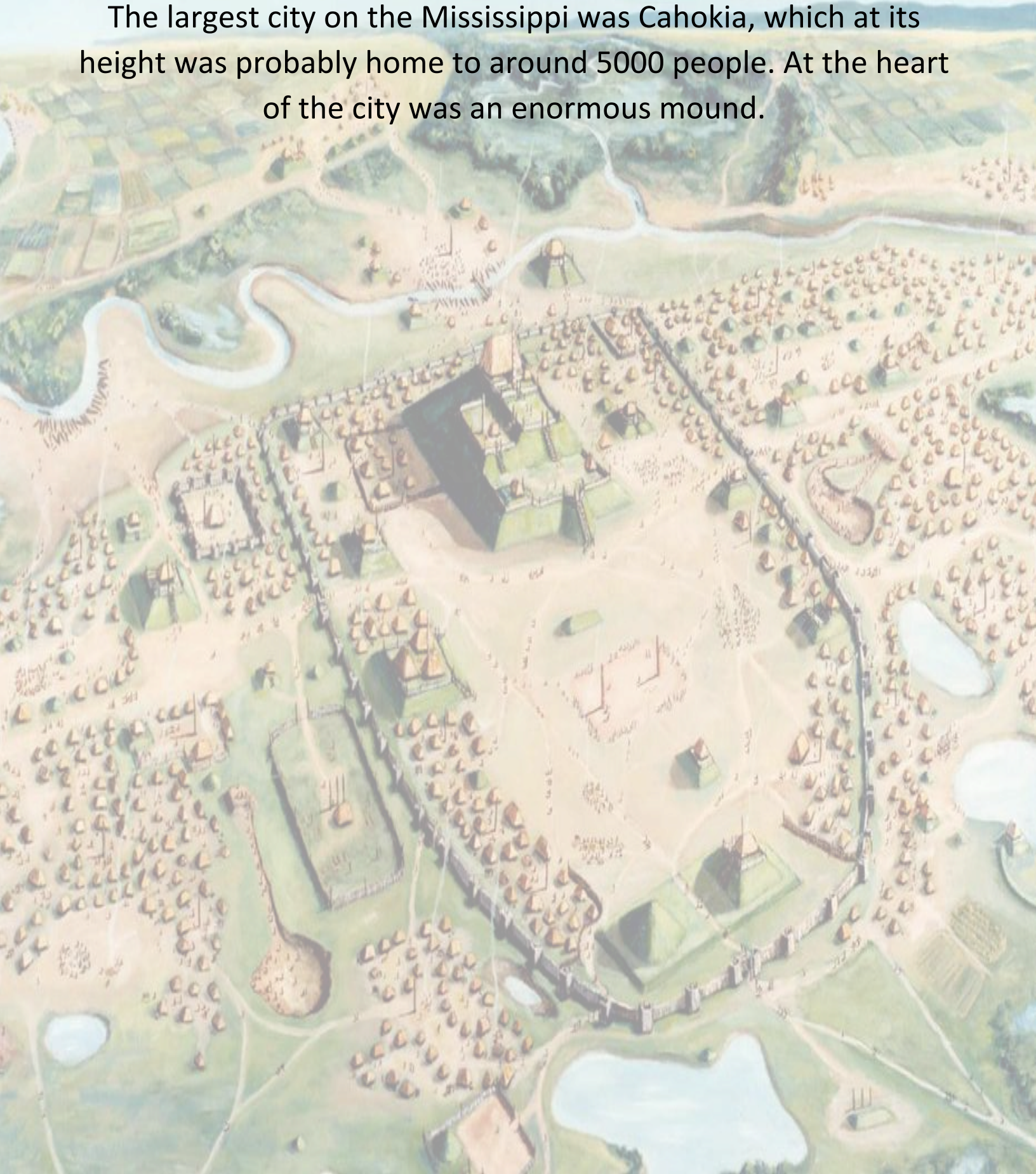
The people of the Mississippi loved to play a game called chunkey. One player would roll a ceramic disc and other players would throw spears at it. Whoever got their spears closest to the disc was the winner!





# Cahokia

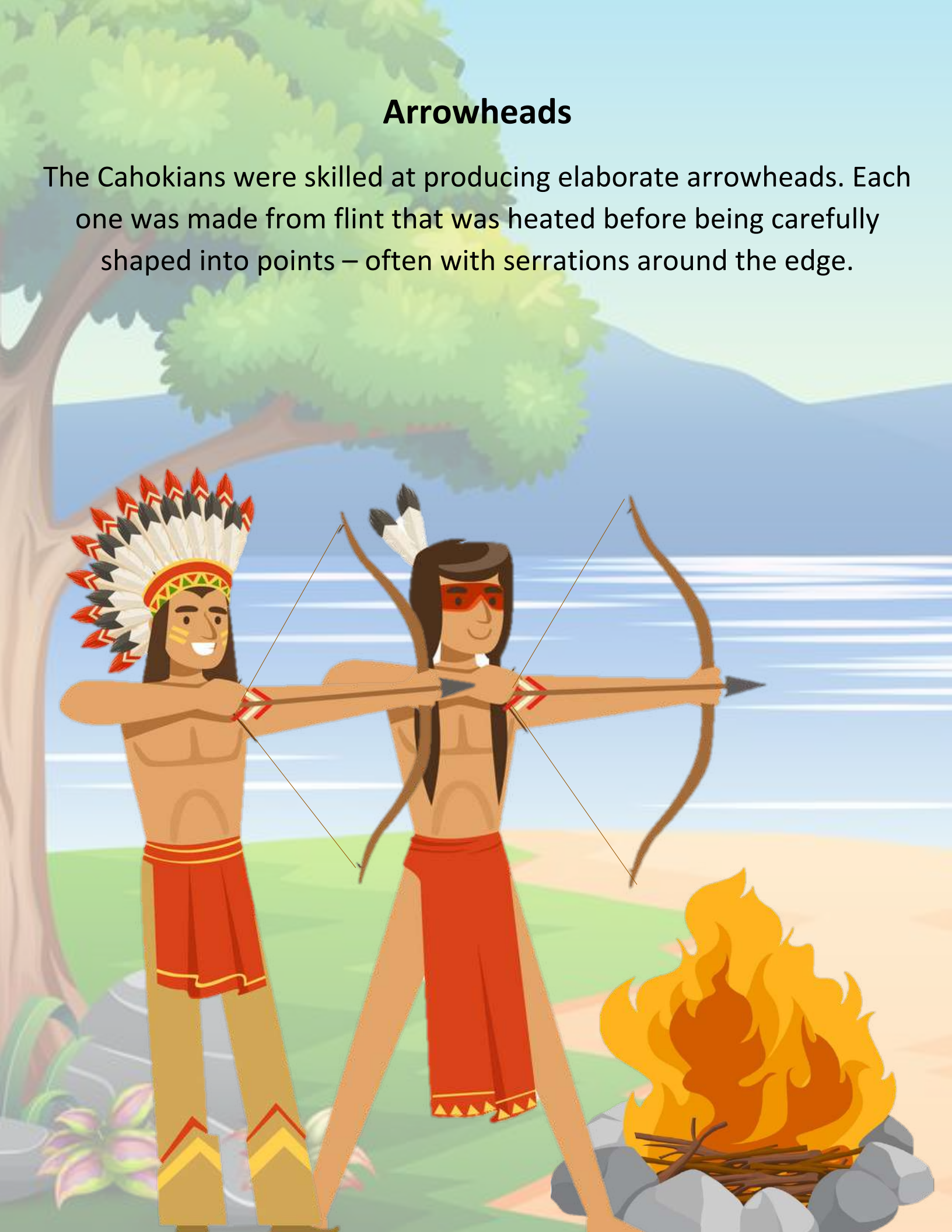
The largest city on the Mississippi was Cahokia, which at its height was probably home to around 5000 people. At the heart of the city was an enormous mound.





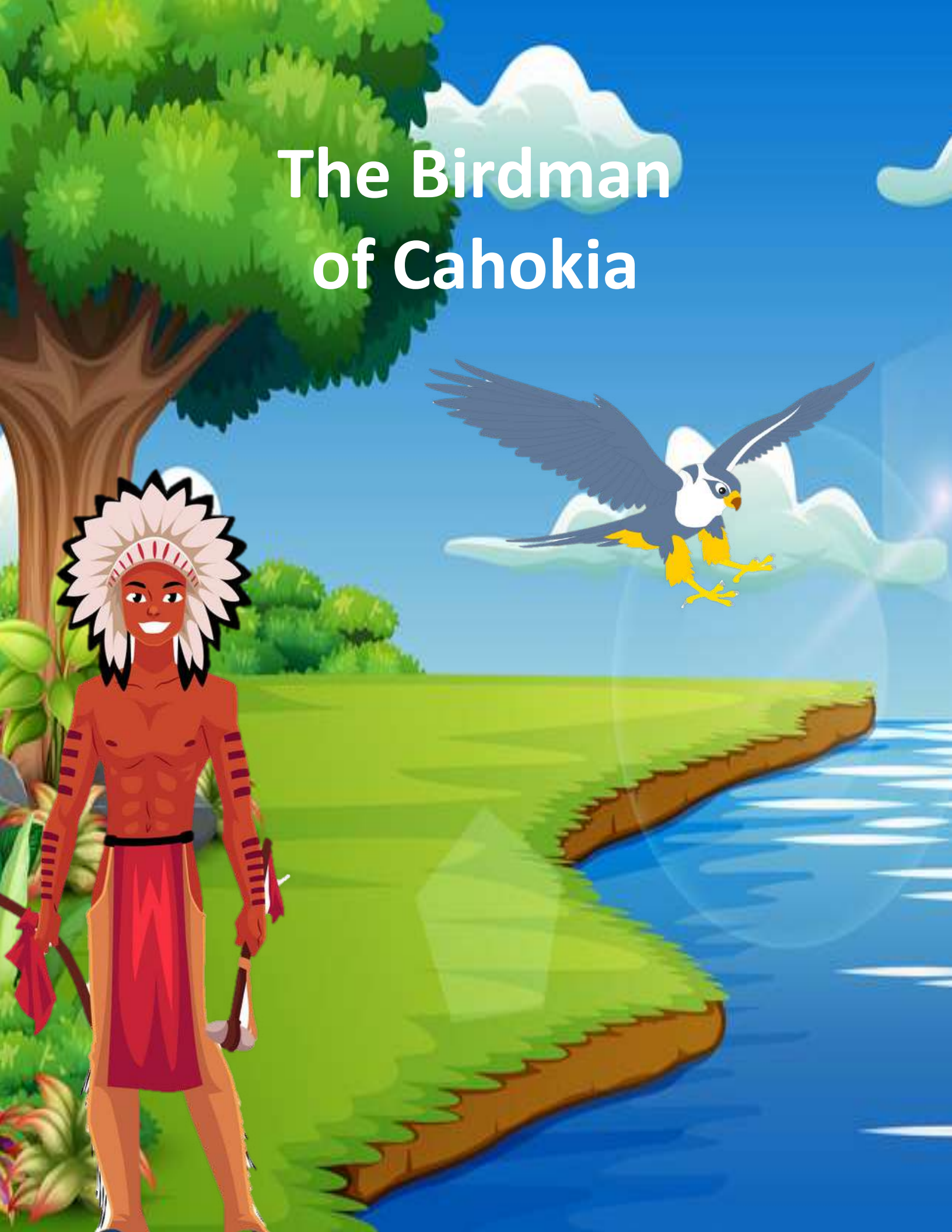
## Arrowheads

The Cahokians were skilled at producing elaborate arrowheads. Each one was made from flint that was heated before being carefully shaped into points – often with serrations around the edge.





# The Birdman of Cahokia



In 1967, Melvin Fowler was examining mounds in the ancient North American city of Cahokia, just outside the city of St Louis in Missouri. As he was driving along one day, one of the mounds in particular caught his eye.

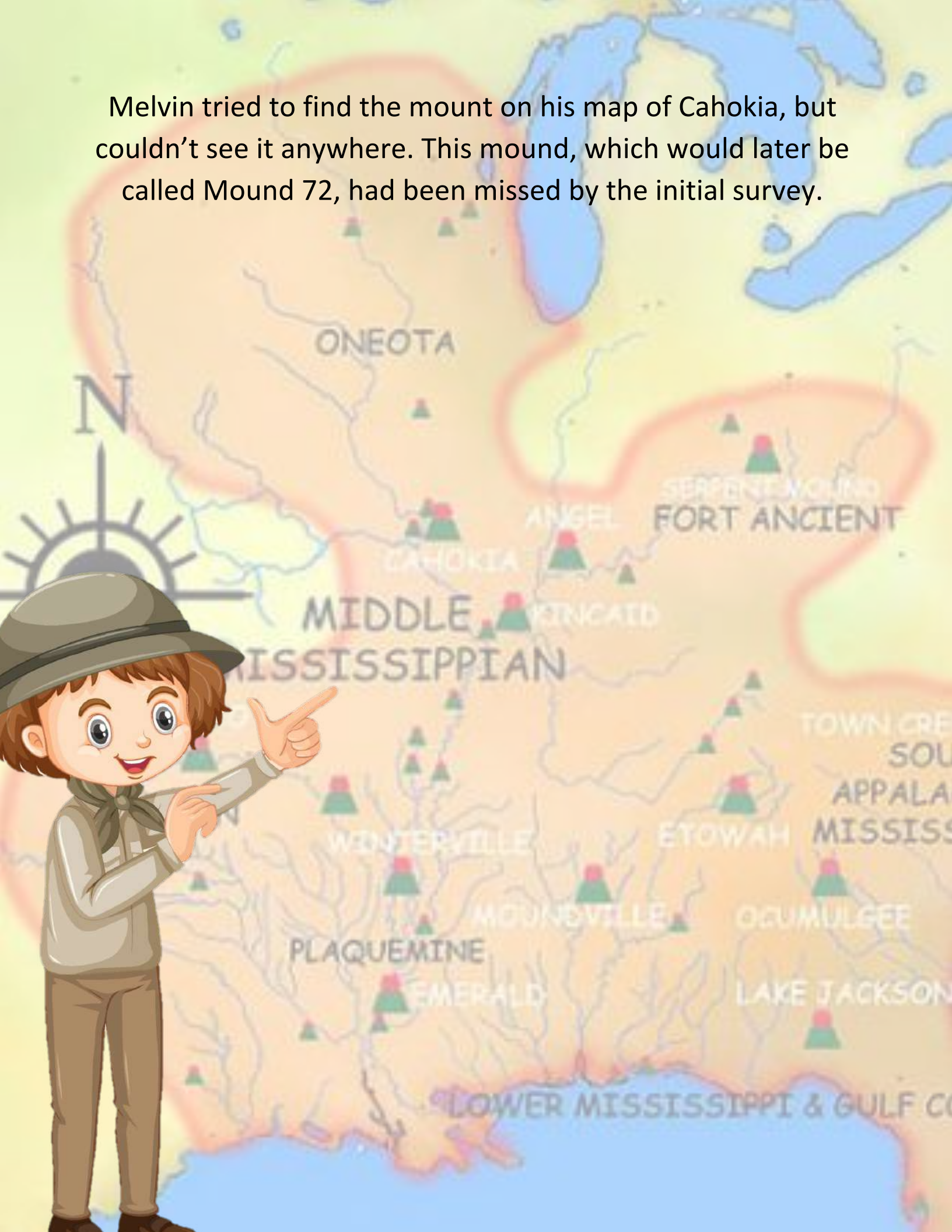




Unlike all the other mounds at Cahokia, it wasn't square but a rectangle, and it didn't face north to south, but was offset at a slight angle. How odd, he thought. Melvin parked his car and pulled out his compass. He soon realized the mound was aligned to the summer and winter solstice, which was significant to ancient farmers.



Melvin tried to find the mound on his map of Cahokia, but couldn't see it anywhere. This mound, which would later be called Mound 72, had been missed by the initial survey.





Melvin decided that his team of archaeologists needed to excavate as soon as possible. Many earlier mounds from Cahokia had been totally destroyed to make way for St Louis and Melvin knew it was a race against time to find any ancient artefacts. He could not have anticipated what he would find though. Underneath the strange but unassuming Mound 72 was the most elaborate burial ever found in the history of North America ...



Melvin and his tram started digging. As they reached the centre of the mound they found two burials, but there was something unusual about them – the two people were buried one on top of the other!





Nestled between the bodies were ancient Cahokian beads. Not just one or two, but 20 000! Melvin knew right away, whoever was buried here was extremely important. This wasn't the only thing that stood out though. The beads were arranged in the shape of a large falcon. The archaeologists dubbed it the birdman burial.



Melvin and his team then uncovered another pit that had been lined with large timbers. Inside, underneath 1000 years of Mississippi mud, were the remains of 53 women. And that wasn't the only pit containing bodies – they found roughly 250 people buried alongside Mound 72.





All of this begs the question, who was Mound 72 and why were there so many people next to them? Modern archaeology is uncovering some of the answers, but much remains shrouded by the mists of time.



The first clue is the age of Mound 72. Melvin was able to send some of the artefacts away to be dated. It seems the people were buried here around the year 1050 CE.





That is hugely important because that was just after the founding of the city of Cahokia, Melvin may have uncovered the grave of Cahokia's first ever rulers. The people buried alongside them may have sacrificed themselves in honour of their city's founders, or maybe they were captors sacrificed against their will. We can't say for sure.

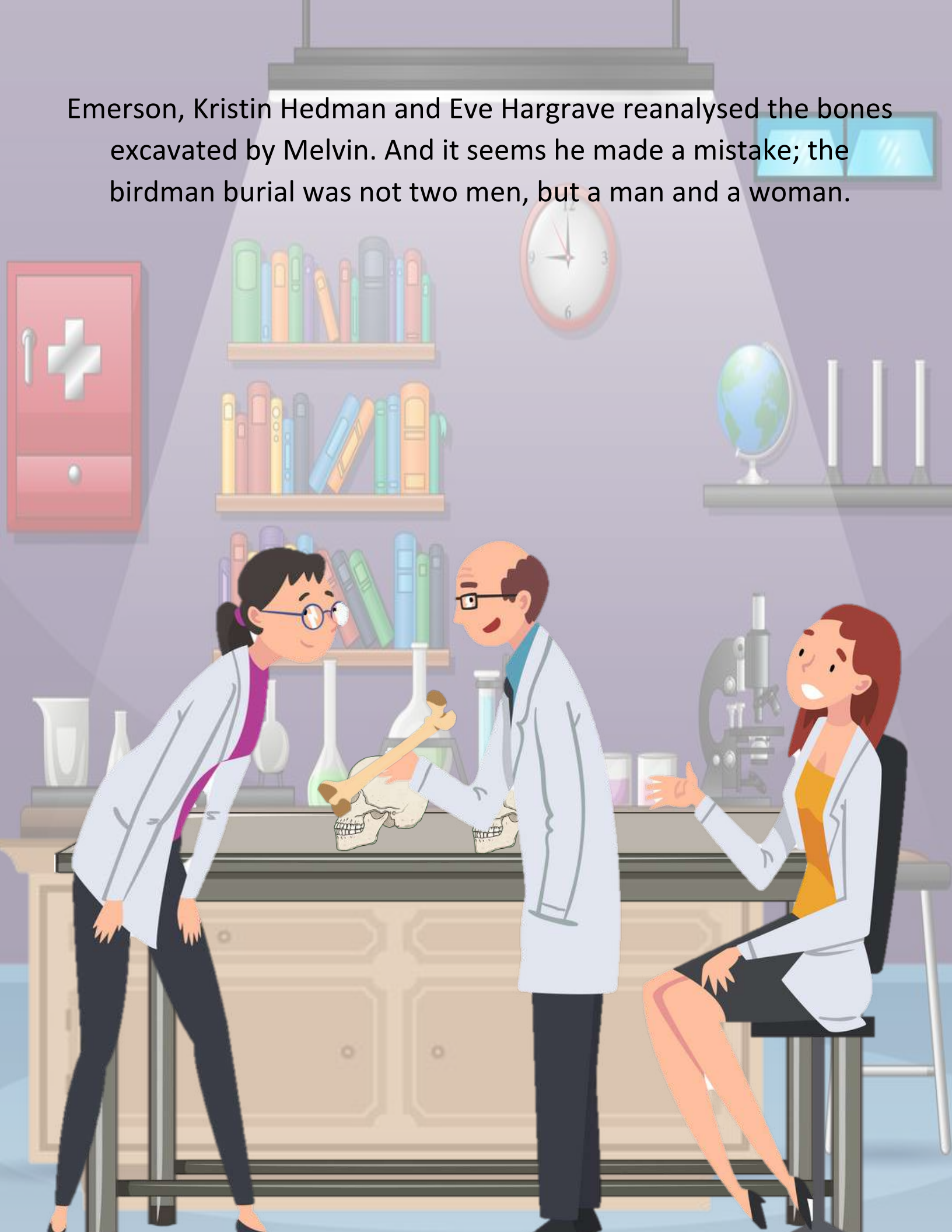


We're not even sure if the birdman ... was even a man!  
Melvin presumed the bodies buried next to the bead bird  
cape were men, but modern archaeologists are questioning  
that assumption.





Emerson, Kristin Hedman and Eve Hargrave reanalysed the bones excavated by Melvin. And it seems he made a mistake; the birdman burial was not two men, but a man and a woman.



Was this couple the original royal family of Cahokia? That's a mystery for future archaeologists to solve. Whoever they were, they were clearly respected enough that Cahokians for generations after would make sacrifices in their honour.







# THINK

DIGITAL ACADEMY