



# Bear Ceremonialism at the Feltus Site



Megan C. Kassabaum, Department of Anthropology

During the Coles Creek period (AD 700–1200), people constructed four earthen mounds at the Feltus site in Jefferson County, Mississippi (Figures 1 and 2). Before, during, and after the construction of these earthworks, Feltus was a location for ritual gatherings characterized by communal feasts. During ceremonies associated with these feasts, standing posts were repeatedly set, pulled, and re-set. Archaeological investigations of these posts and related deposits have produced an astonishing amount of bear bone. Because of their association with ritual gatherings and the seemingly special treatment of their remains, it is hypothesized that bears were particularly important to the people who gathered at Feltus. This research strives to understand the origins and meaning of these beliefs and activities by exploring the breadth and depth of bear ceremonialism in North America and beyond.



Figure 1: Panel from the Egan Panorama (c. 1850) showing an exaggerated depiction of Feltus's four mounds and central plaza overlooking the Mississippi River.

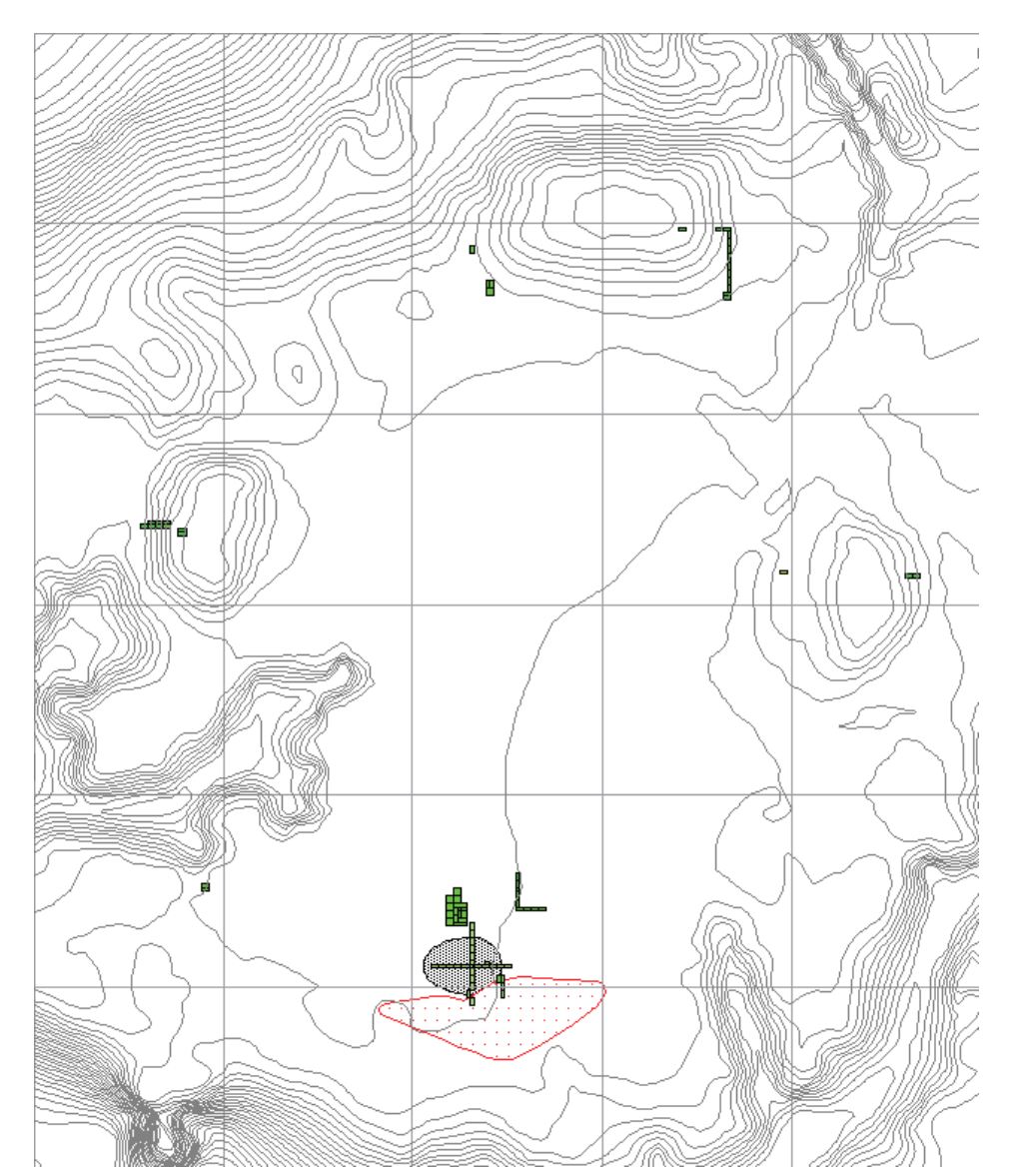


Figure 2: Modern topographic map of Feltus showing excavation locations.

## Archaeology at the Feltus Mounds

Four field seasons totaling nine months of fieldwork have been completed at Feltus since 2006. Ceramics and radiocarbon dates show three distinct phases of occupation (Figure 3). During the initial occupation of Feltus, Coles Creek people repeatedly set, pulled, and re-set large, standing posts in the southern end of the plaza. Though the exact use of these posts remains elusive, their unusual depositional process and artifactual contents indicate that they were ceremonial in function. After the post was inserted, each posthole was packed with ash; the artifacts associated with this ash (e.g., tobacco pipes and bear bone) imply that it was likely a meaningful substance. Each post was then removed and the post mold packed with clean brown clay (Figure 4). Near these posts, Coles Creek people dug large pits, which they rapidly filled with ceramics and food remains (including bear bone which is rare or absent in many prehistoric faunal assemblages). The exceptional size of the vessels and sheer abundance of food remains suggest that a large-scale eating event, or feast, took place at Feltus between AD 700 and 800.

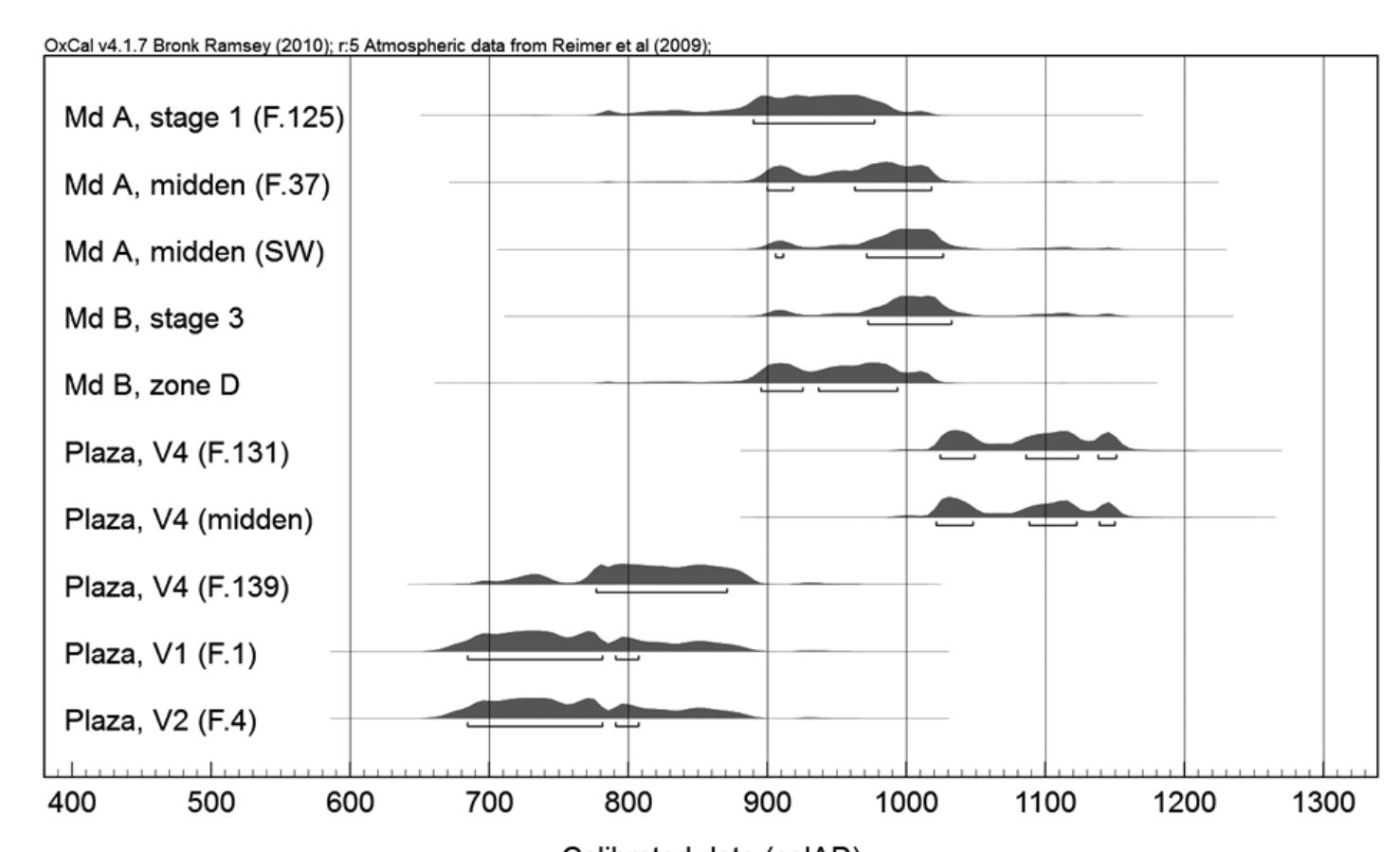


Figure 3: Radiocarbon dates from Feltus showing three distinct phases of occupation.

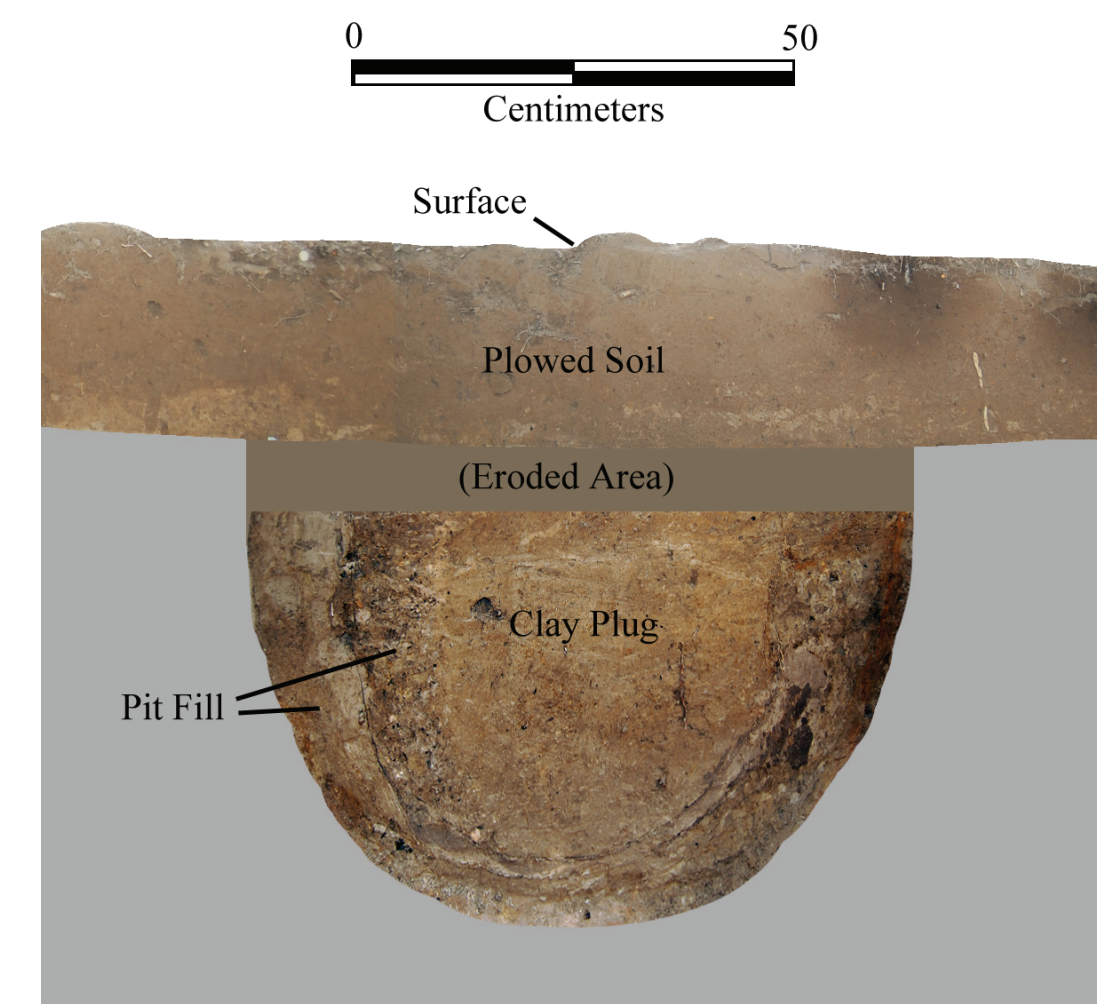


Figure 4: Example profile of large, ash-lined post in the southern plaza.

After a hiatus of nearly a century, another feast occurred at the north end of the plaza, leaving behind a large midden. Again, this trash deposit contained an astonishing amount of bear bone. Moreover, an ash-lined post much like the ones in the south plaza was uncovered (Figures 5 and 6). It too was pulled and immediately after, the first stage of Mound A was built atop its empty hole. Once it began, moundbuilding became the primary focus of activity at Feltus from AD 900 to 1000 (Figure 7). Although most mound construction ceased around AD 1000, the south plaza continued to be utilized until AD 1150. During this time, additional large posts were set and pulled in a continuation of the ritual activity that took place there during Feltus's early occupation.



Figure 5: Deer pelvis, bear calcaneus, and ceramic pipe from one large post hole.

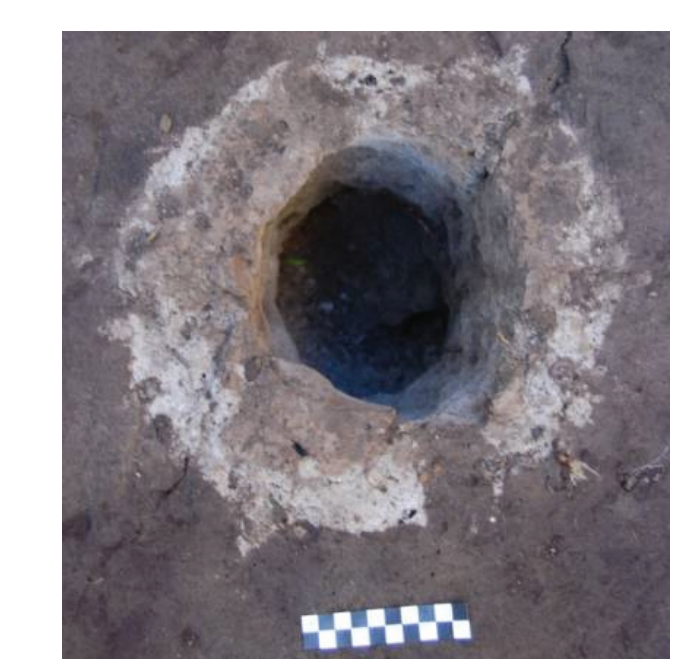


Figure 6: Hollow, ash-lined post hole under Mound A.



Figure 7: Mound B at Feltus as viewed from the plaza.

## Bear Symbolism around the World

Archaeologists often focus on animals' utilitarian and economic roles; however, the bear remains at Feltus beg a more symbolic interpretation. Since Paleolithic times, bears have been potent ritual symbols for peoples throughout Eurasia and North America. While stories always change based on context, the meaning of bear has stayed remarkably constant. Preagriculturalists saw bears as people, albeit different-from-human people, who possessed great spiritual power. This is likely because they share a great number of physical (e.g., bipedal gait, reproduction, binocular vision) and behavioral (e.g., omnivory, dwelling, maternal relationship) traits with humans. As human-like animals, bears are thought to have the ability to link the human and spirit worlds; they are thus commonly seen as *kin*, as *healers*, and as *food providers*.

**Bear as kin.** Perhaps because of the similarities mentioned above, many traditional origin myths claim descent from bears. Bears are often referred to as “grandmother”, “brother”, or “cousin” out of respect for that kinship. Even if direct descent is not claimed, humans often share family relationships with bears. In one common story, a woman marries a bear and gives birth to twins (Figure 8). When her brothers find them, the bear allows himself to be killed to save the cubs. Before she and her children return with her brothers to be part her family, the woman conducts ceremonies to bring the bear back to life.



Figure 8: Contemporary native artists depict bear-human kin relationships.

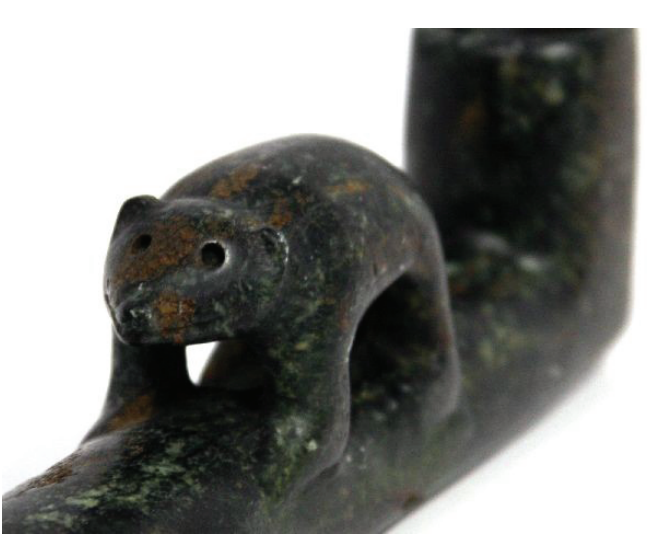


Figure 9: Hopewell period stone pipe depicting a bear.

**Bear as healers.** Bear doctors are common in many Native cultures; bears are often depicted on pipes used in ceremonies (Figure 9), or healers wear bear skin (Figure 10) This is likely because humans learned traditional medicine from watching bears self-medicate with gathered plants, many of which are now known by names including the word bear.

Furthermore, bears are seen as having life-renewing ability because their hibernation is seen as a yearly pattern of death and rebirth. These abilities are further highlighted in the marriage story told above and the hunting stories described below.

**Bears as food providers.** Bears are important game animals throughout their territory. That said, groups that hunt them see bears as very different from other prey. They are seen as giving themselves willingly to hunters because they do not cease to exist if treated appropriately after death (i.e., they are immediately reborn). It is imperative for hunters to follow all prescriptions about respectful treatment because bear spirits are thought to control all game animals and thus the success of subsequent hunts. Some such rituals include killing the animal using only the most primitive tools, pleading forgiveness upon death, making offerings of tobacco, consuming the meat at ceremonial feasts, and being attentive to the treatment of the blood and bones of the animal (Figure 11). In addition to providing themselves and other game as meat, bears guided humans in the collection of edible plants. Finally, stories often depict bears as producing food from their very bodies by rubbing their stomachs and producing nuts and berries, or by extracting grease from their fat without being harmed.



Figure 10: A 1908 Catlin photograph of an Arikara healer in bear skin.



Figure 11: An 1856 engraving of Indians bear hunting with spears and dogs.

## Bear Ceremonialism at Feltus

Strong recurring themes connect the various roles played by bears and they may all stem from a small number of original stories. The iteration of bear as food provider fits the evidence from Feltus particularly well. Foremost, Feltus is a site of feasting and the consumption of bear appears to have been more prevalent there than at other prehistoric sites (as evidenced by bear bone in trash deposits). The rituals connected with these feasts are echoed in many of stories uncovered by this research: (1) pipes are consistently found in association with bear remains at Feltus suggesting tobacco smoking rituals like those in the literature (Figure 12); (2) fire, indicated by the ash lining the Feltus post holes, is essential to traditional postmortem prescriptions for bear blood and bones; and (3) tall, standing posts like those in the southern plaza and under Mound A are used to protect the bones of slain bears in recorded ceremonies (Figure 13). Together these material remains—feasting debris including bear bone, ceramic pipes, and ash-lined post holes—align remarkably well with traditional bear rituals practiced throughout Eurasia and North America. These findings not only help us to understand the origins and meaning of the activities taking place at Feltus, but also expand our understanding of the geographic and temporal extent of bear ceremonialism.

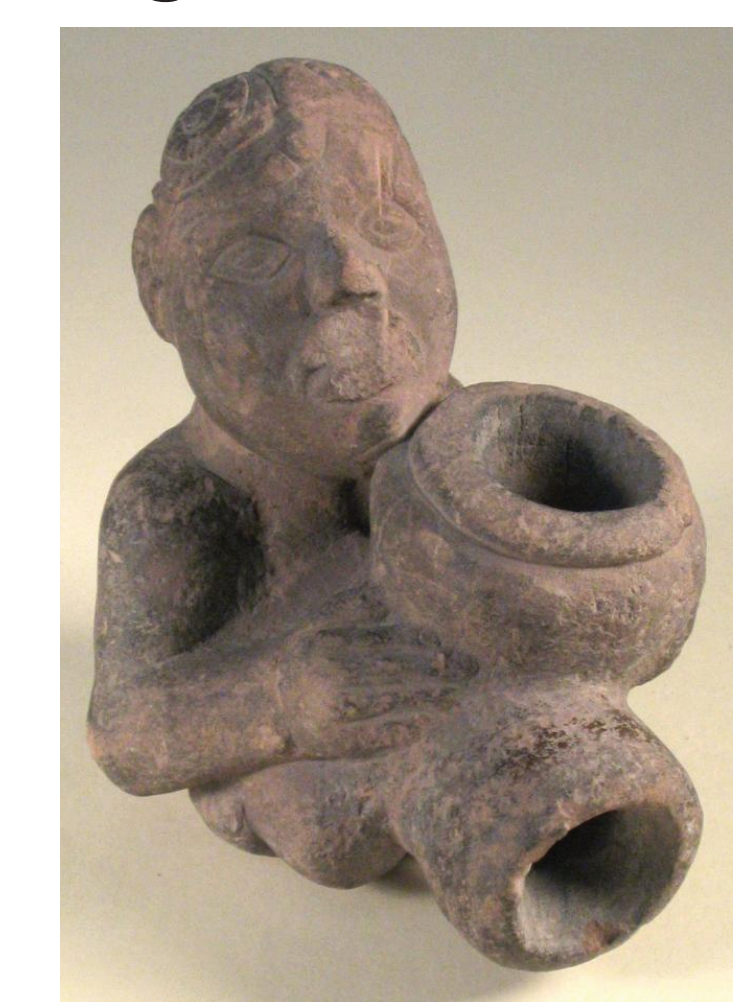


Figure 12: A tobacco pipe from Feltus.



Figure 13: Cree bear pole decorated with offerings.