Social Subsistence

Integrating Analyses of Ceramic, Plant, and Animal Remains from Feltus

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[To appear in *Baking, Bourbon, and Black Drink: Foodways Archaeology in the American Southeast*.]

The Mississippi River played a defining role in the prehistory of the eastern United States. In particular, the Lower Mississippi Valley (LMV) is among the richest archaeological regions on the continent. Due in part to the natural abundance of the river and its associated floodplains (Smith 1978), the region was a focal point for precontact Native American settlement and is home to thousands of earthen mounds (Steponaitis 1998). These mounds vary in form, size, and elaboration across time and space and include both the earliest and some of the largest earthen constructions in North America. Research on mounds in the LMV has generally focused on how changes in mound construction practices and ceramic decorative styles align with shifts in sociopolitical organization. Food has most commonly been brought into the discussion when clear changes in subsistence practices accompany these transformations. This chapter focuses on one such period of transition, Coles Creek (AD 750–1200), when shifts from conical to platform mound construction, from broadly egalitarian to more hierarchical social order, and from hunting and gathering to agricultural foodways are often thought to coincide.

Anthropologists and archaeologists actively recognize that food not only is eaten to sustain the body but also affects and is affected by the social, economic, and political world in which it is eaten (e.g., Appadurai 1981; Bourdieu 1984). The consumption of food in particular plays an active role in the creation and negotiation of social identities and relationships. Despite this recognition, studies of Coles Creek foodways have focused mainly on questions of domestication and the origins of agriculture and have largely ignored questions about the social uses of food (Fritz and Kidder 1993; Kidder and Fritz 1993; Roberts 2006; Rose et al. 1984).

Recent research in the American Southeast has demonstrated the importance of analyses that integrate ceramic, floral, and faunal data sets (e.g., Jackson and Scott 2003; Kelly 2001; Pauketat et al. 2002). Though it has become increasingly common to combine plant and animal remains in studies of diet (see Peres and VanDerwarker 2010), detailed analysis of contextual information and consideration of other materials included in midden deposits, particularly ceramics, allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the social context in which the food was selected, prepared, consumed, and discarded. In this chapter I augment current understandings of Coles Creek subsistence with ceramic, floral, and faunal data from recent excavations at Feltus (22Je500) in Jefferson County, Mississippi.[1] My assessment emphasizes the importance of more fully considering the *social* uses of food in our discussions of Coles Creek foodways and has implications for understanding the relationships among changes in subsistence practices, monumental architecture, and sociopolitical structure in the late prehistoric Southeast.

The Feltus Mounds

Coles Creek culture spans the Late Woodland and Mississippian periods in the LMV. Coles Creek mound centers are characterized by two or more flat-topped mounds arranged around open plazas. With the possible exception of ritual specialists, mound centers were vacant, with the surrounding population living in small, nonmound hamlets or villages. The question of where Coles Creek falls along the shift from egalitarian to hierarchical forms of social organization has been the focus of much recent research (e.g., Barker 1999; Kidder 1992; Roe 2010; Wells 1998); however, the material evidence remains ambiguous. While formalized mound-and-plaza complexes have been taken as a sign of social differentiation (Barker 1999; Kidder 1992; Steponaitis 1986; Wells 1998), Coles Creek sites lack evidence for large-scale consumption of

maize or other cultigens, making it unclear whether emerging elites could have controlled and distributed surplus provisions (Fritz and Kidder 1993; Listi 2008; Roberts 2006). Likewise, the mortuary program implies a more egalitarian social structure, consisting of mass burials that do not contain artifacts (Kassabaum 2011; cf. Barker 1999). Use of mound summits is variable, with some showing formal buildings, others showing periodic use of temporary structures, and still others showing no evidence of buildings at all (see Roe and Schilling 2010:163–164).

Feltus consisted of four mounds arranged around an open plaza (Figure 1.1). Excavations near the base and on the summit of each extant mound and in the southern end of the plaza near the former location of Mound D revealed a history of use spanning more than 400 years, with little evidence for permanent occupation. Rather, the data suggest episodic use by a dispersed population, resulting in large, dense middens that accumulated rapidly in certain site areas during different times.

<fig1.1>

Fifteen radiocarbon dates from these excavations cluster in three groups, roughly aligned with the three earliest Coles Creek phases; the first two primary groups can be split into five secondary clusters that indicate repeated reuse within these phases (Figure 1.2). Combined, these dates suggest that much of the activity at the site occurred prior to the construction of the mounds, allowing for a less mound-centric view of Coles Creek life. Heavy use of the site began during the Sundown phase (AD 700–850) and focused on a series of post and pit features under and around the former position of Mound D. During the subsequent Ballina phase (AD 850–1000), activity shifted to the northern end of the plaza, where an expansive pre-mound midden developed. Soon after, the mounds were constructed. Activities continued on the summit of Mound B and in the southern plaza until the site's abandonment around AD 1100. Four deposits

at the site are of particular interest here due to their abundant ceramic, plant, and animal remains (see Figure 1.2).

<fig1.2>

The first context, Feature 4, dates to the Sundown phase. Located in the southern end of the plaza, this midden pit is 6 m in diameter and over 1.5 m deep. A 1-m-wide trench through Feature 4 uncovered more than 2,000 ceramic sherds, 100 animal bones, and 200 lithics, along with charcoal and fired clay. The character of the fill suggested rapid primary deposition, with in situ pot breaks and partly articulated deer bones. Three human figurine fragments may indicate inclusion of ritual refuse. This pit is associated with a series of postholes to its southwest. Interpretations of standing posts that were not part of structures are often based on Native American belief systems that perceive the layered cosmos of the Upper, Middle, and Beneath Worlds as connected by an axis represented by a pole or a tree (Lankford 2007; Reilly 2004). By serving as portals between the worlds, standing posts may have helped to build community and expand the social network by linking living people, ancestors, and supernatural powers (Kassabaum and Nelson 2016; Nelson and Kassabaum 2014; Skousen 2012). A 50-cm-thick sheet midden overlays Feature 4 and provides our second context (D2 Midden). This midden also consists of rapidly deposited primary refuse and numerous pipe fragments, which may again suggest that ritual activity contributed to its formation (Springer 1981).

We located similarly rich deposits dating to the Ballina phase under and around Mound A. The first episode of mound construction sits upon a dense midden, which serves as the third context (A1.S0). The surface of this midden was covered in a thin but exceptionally rich deposit of fish scales, animal bones, and charcoal. It is likely that this was deposited immediately before mound construction began, as it showed no signs of weathering or trampling and displayed

remarkable preservation. Beneath this trash layer was a 15-cm-thick midden including ceramics, animal bone, fish scales, lithics, broken shell, charcoal, pigment, and fired clay.

The fourth context is a midden located southwest of Mound A (A2.S0), which included an unusually high occurrence of pipe fragments, again indicating possible inclusion of ritual refuse. Unlike A1.S0, A2.S0 showed no internal differentiation and sherds from the surface and base of the midden refit, indicating deposition as a single event. Also, no features were present at the base of A2.S0, suggesting that the area was not heavily used prior to midden deposition. A2.S0 postdates at least the first construction stage of Mound A, suggesting that A2.S0 is a flank midden associated with activities taking place on the mound summits.

These four contexts share many apparent similarities, especially in terms of their material assemblages, but also differ from one another in important ways. In the remainder of this chapter I examine the similarities and differences in the assemblages, focusing on the ceramic, plant, and animal remains that shed light on the types of eating events that occurred at Feltus.

Investigating Feltus Foodways

During the recent florescence of feasting literature in both archaeology and ethnography, a variety of definitions have been provided for the term *feast* (e.g., see chapters in Bray 2003; Dietler and Hayden 2001; Mills 2004; Twiss, ed. 2007; Wiessner and Schiefenhövel 1996). While most researchers assert that there is a difference between feasts and everyday food consumption, what constitutes this difference is rarely agreed on. In acknowledgment of this, and following Twiss (2008:419), I define feasts broadly as "occasions consciously distinguished from everyday meals." In light of this definition as well as the trait lists compiled by Twiss (2007a:53–54; 2008:Table 1), certain flamboyant events are obviously feasts, due to large quantities of special foods shared between large groups at special places and using special tools

and materials in special ways. Other events are everyday affairs, as characterized by moderation in food type and quantity, people involved, and all aspects of preparation, consumption, and disposal. Due to the material nature of these traits, they are likely to provide archaeological signatures related to the quantity, size, and types of food remains, the nature of depositional events, the quantity and types of preparation and serving implements or facilities, and ritual paraphernalia (Twiss 2008:Table 2). These traits further suggest that everyday meals have certain social outcomes, whereas feasts have others. Most discussions focus on the political and economic roles of feasts in creating power and/or status differences among the people participating. While many also acknowledge that increasing solidarity among a community is a likely effect of feasting, primacy is generally given to the competitive function.

In reviewing the various trait lists associated with definitions of feasting in the aforementioned volumes, the distinguishing characteristics of feasting relate to two distinct dimensions that do not always vary in tandem: group size and degree of sociopolitical competition. Likewise, the associated material correlates may also be divided, with some relating to the size of the group involved (e.g., abundance of food remains, number and size of vessels, magnitude of dining locations) and others to the level of sociopolitical competition taking place (e.g., presence of rare or exotic foods and vessels, restricted locations, differential consumption, and resultant material differences in wealth and status) (Kassabaum 2014:314–325). By recognizing these two dimensions and giving each of them an equal role in defining an eating event as a feast, this scheme eliminates confusion about events that are excluded from the category of feasting by some researchers and included by others. More importantly, this scheme acknowledges the importance of the less frequently theorized subset of feasts—those with a purpose to build community and increase solidarity within a group.

Overall, the size and nature of the midden deposits at Feltus suggest feasting of some sort, especially considering the lack of evidence for domestic structures at the site (except for those potentially associated with A1.S0) (Wallis and Blessing 2015). All four contexts appear to have been laid down in a small number of large, uninterrupted depositional episodes. The relatively large size of artifacts, excellent state of preservation, and presence of in situ pot breaks and articulated faunal remains suggest limited exposure to the elements (Wallis and Blessing 2015:8), and in some cases, we know that overlying deposits immediately sealed the trash deposits (Sherwood 2008). The ceramic, floral, and faunal remains collected from the four midden contexts at Feltus support a feasting interpretation, and by so doing help clarify the nature of Coles Creek society and draw attention to the important social uses of food. Integrating the analysis of these three data sets allows for further investigation into the type of feasting that took place at Feltus and what it may tell us about Coles Creek society more broadly.

Ceramics

The decorative types and varieties of ceramics represented in these four contexts at Feltus do not differ dramatically from what is found on any early Coles Creek site. Feltus has expected levels of plain versus decorated wares, and the vessels show no consistent difference in quality of manufacture when compared with those of other mound and nonmound sites (Kassabaum 2014:90–186). All recovered vessels were fragmentary, and between 1 percent (in Feature 4) and 13 percent (in A2.S0) of the sherds could be refit to form partial vessels. Variation in vessel shape and size was used to help interpret how the events that created the various deposits differed from one another. When possible, sherds were identified as coming from bowls, restricted bowls, jars, beakers, and pipes. As height-to-width ratios could not be determined from

most sherds, orifice diameter was used as an indicator of vessel size. Combined, the shape and size data from these collections hint at differences among the various midden deposits at Feltus.

Braun (1980) uses experimental and ethnographic data to determine that functional associations with different vessel forms are based on measures of degree of containment security and frequency of access. "Degree of containment security" refers to the ability of a vessel to hold its contents without spilling, due to either depth or rim angle. "Frequency of access" refers to the volume of material that may pass through the vessel orifice at any given time (Braun 1980:172). Storage vessels generally have low frequency of access and high containment security values, meaning they are deep vessels with restricted orifices. Serving vessels will have high frequency of access and low containment security values, meaning they are shallow, unrestricted vessels. Finally, food preparation or cooking vessels will have high frequency of access and high containment security values, exhibiting moderate depths and orifice sizes (Braun 1980; Henrickson and McDonald 1983). Based on this understanding, at Feltus jar forms were classified as storage vessels, restricted bowls and beakers as cooking vessels, and bowls as serving vessels (Kassabaum 2014:201–204).

In terms of vessel shape, bowls account for half or more of the assemblages from Feature 4 (61 percent), the D2 Midden (50 percent), and A2.S0 (67 percent). A1.S0 stands out as having a much lower quantity of bowls (42 percent) (Table 1.1). At Coles Creek sites cooking pots typically "dominate domestic vessel refuse because, subjected to rapid heating and cooling and moved around often, they frequently break" (Roe 2010:132). The unusual predominance of the bowl form in three of the analyzed contexts indicates an emphasis on serving, rather than preparing or storing, food. With respect to the ratio of cooking to storage vessels, A1.S0 (0.95) once again stands out, along with Feature 4 (0.70), as compared with A2.S0 (1.50) and the D2

Midden (2.05), indicating a secondary focus on cooking food in two of the four contexts. Within the two contexts where jars were more common, most were slightly restricted, round-bodied jars that may also have served cooking functions. When compared with assemblages from other Coles Creek sites, Feltus has an exceptionally low incidence of necked and lugged vessels most commonly associated with food and liquid storage (Kassabaum 2014:221).

<tbl1.1>

Vessel size data add some support to this conclusion. Rim diameter measurements from Feltus show that most vessels are normally distributed with rim diameters from 3 to 36 cm, which fits well with the distributions at Coles Creek domestic and single-mound sites. However, there are also a substantial number of sherds representing large vessels with diameters between 40 and 53 cm, which fall outside the normal range for a domestic site and likely indicate communal eating. Again, A1.S0 (along with Feature 4) stands out as having the smallest average vessel size.

Plant Remains

While ceramic analyses have the potential to reveal interesting patterns that speak to the variety of activities taking place at Feltus, looking at the organic remains helps to clarify these patterns and to be more specific about the role that food may have played in those activities. Current understandings of Coles Creek subsistence suggest communities of fisher-hunter-gatherer-gardeners that subsisted primarily on wild plants and animals (Fritz and Kidder 1993). Though it was originally assumed that the construction of platform-mound-and-plaza complexes necessitated an agricultural resource base, it is now generally accepted that domesticated plants were not common until the end of Coles Creek. Even then, it is not likely that these plants were the majority of the Coles Creek diet (Fritz and Kidder 1993; Kidder and Fritz 1993; Roberts

2006:17). The data from Feltus therefore provide an opportunity to test these interpretations and explore variation within Coles Creek by illuminating what was happening east of the Mississippi, where very little discussion of foodways has taken place. Moreover, these data, particularly because they come from potential feasting contexts, allow us to look beyond subsistence at the social uses of plants during a dynamic period in LMV prehistory.

Systematic flotation samples were taken from all midden contexts at Feltus and standardized using a basic ratio of count per gram of plant weight, allowing for more effective comparison of samples of unequal size (Table 1.2). By standardized count, acorn (*Quercus* spp.) is the most abundant plant resource at Feltus, followed closely by hickory (*Carya* spp.). Combined, these resources make up 56 percent of the identifiable assemblage from the site. Three additional resources—chenopod (*Chenopodium* sp.), maygrass (*Phalaris caroliniana),* and purslane (*Portulaca* sp.)—make up an additional 22 percent, and every other individual taxon accounts for 3 percent or less. Thus, it appears Feltus subsistence relied heavily on nuts for carbohydrates, protein, and fat, supplemented by certain intensively utilized starchy seeds. Oily seeds may also have been heavily used, but preservation factors often prevent them from appearing in flotation samples (B. Smith 1992:127). The high incidence of purslane likely indicates a reliance on greens over fruit for essential vitamins and minerals.

<tbl1.2>

While predominantly wild resources are represented across the four midden contexts, the data from Feltus do provide evidence regarding Coles Creek reliance on agriculture. No corn (*Zea mays*) was recovered from Feltus; however, high quantities of Eastern Agricultural Complex plants were identified in all contexts. While domesticated chenopod (as well as potentially domesticated knotweed *Polygonum erectum*], little barley [*Hordeum pusillum*],

sunflower [*Helianthus annuus*], and cultivated maygrass) has been documented at Baytown period sites (Kidder 2004:552), Fritz and Kidder (1993) report no domesticated chenopod from Baytown or early Coles Creek sites south of Vicksburg. Scanning electron microscopy identified both wild and domesticated morphs of *Chenopodium berlandieri* in the Feltus assemblage. The earliest clearly domesticated morphs were from Ballina phase deposits and were identified on the basis of the wavy, convoluted appearance of the testa, its thinness, and the presence of a flattened side away from the beak (Kassabaum 2014:250–252).

Though maygrass is certainly another important subsistence food that may have been cultivated by Feltus people, Gayle Fritz (2014) has argued that this plant may also have had significant ritual importance. Maygrass may have provided an essential ingredient at Late Woodland and Mississippian feasting events in the American Bottom, where it is frequently associated with tobacco. Likewise, James Schoenwetter (2001) suggests that a form of beer may have been made from maygrass with the addition of various fruits. Based on the current evidence, it is impossible to tell how maygrass was being utilized during Coles Creek times, but it appears in 70 percent of the Feltus botanical samples, suggesting that it was a highly important part of the food-related activities.

In addition to maygrass, a variety of other preserved plant remains at Feltus suggests resources that were used either infrequently as food or in medicinal or ritual contexts. Specifically ritual use of plants is indicated by the presence of nightshade and morning glory, which have no known dietary uses (Williams 2000:168; 208–213). The presence of pokeweed seeds may also represent a nonfood use such as dye or medicine (Williams 2000:153–156). While no tobacco seeds have been confidently identified from the Feltus botanical samples, we collected fragments of over 20 ceramic pipes, and initial residue analysis of these sherds suggests

that both tobacco and other plants were being smoked in the context of the Feltus feasts (Carmody et al. 2017).

Beyond the basic identification and interpretation of the plant species at Feltus, diversity and correspondence analyses allow for the comparison of the plant assemblages across site contexts. Diversity combines two measures—richness and evenness—where richness relates to the number of taxa in an assemblage, and evenness relates to how uniformly those taxa are spread across the samples (VanDerwarker 2010:67–68). Because neither of these measures directly deals with differences in sample size, I utilized DIVERS, a statistical program that simulates a large number of hypothetical assemblages and then plots the richness and evenness of the actual assemblage as compared with the predicted values (Kintigh 1984, 1989). Using the resulting plot, it is possible to compare various assemblages and to determine whether they are more or less diverse than expected. Overall, the Mound A middens are more diverse than the plaza deposits. A1.S0 shows the highest diversity, while the D2 midden shows the lowest (Figure 1.3). In general, the high diversity of plant remains in A1.S0 supports the interpretation that it differs from the other midden deposits on the site and may have been laid down more gradually and in association with the use of numerous small structures. The lack of diversity in the other three contexts aligns well the interpretation that these are rapidly deposited materials resulting from one or two concentrated episodes of feasting activity (see Wallis and Blessing 2015:4).

<fig1.3>

Correspondence analysis reveals further differences and helps to explain the results of the diversity analysis. Simply stated, correspondence analysis highlights the degree to which the values of one variable correlate with the values of another. Plotting these associations produces a graphical representation of the relationships among the values, such that points appearing close

together are positively associated, while those that are farther apart are either not associated or are negatively associated (Shennan 1997:308–360). Figure 1.4 shows that A1.S0 is most strongly associated with the suite of starchy and oily seeds. These seeds contribute to its high diversity value, as does the presence of some fruit. In contrast, the D2 midden is strongly associated with acorns and plots farthest from the center of the graph, illustrating its low diversity score. A2.S0 and Feature 4, which have similar diversity scores, plot relatively close together and are most strongly associated with oily nuts and other seeds.

<fig1.4>

Animal Remains

Coles Creek subsistence and social life also relied heavily on a broad suite of animal resources.[2] Current understandings of Coles Creek faunal exploitation emphasize deer but also include fish, small mammals, and aquatic turtles (Kelley 1990). These data come from relatively few excavated sites, all west of the Mississippi River. Thus, Feltus again has the potential to significantly augment our understanding of Coles Creek foodways. Moreover, as a non-habitation site, it has the potential to suggest what animals may have had ritual significance to Coles Creek people.

As demonstrated by the number of identified specimens (NISP) and bone weight (Table 1.3), the Feltus assemblage is dominated by large mammals and fish. Of the large mammals, white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) are most prevalent, but black bear (*Ursus americanus*) occurs in higher-than-expected frequencies (NISP = 91). Of the fish, gar (Lepisosteidae) and catfish (Ictaluridae) families dominate, followed by bowfin (*Amia calva*) and sucker (Catostomidae), but a wide variety of other fish were also relied on. Based on species distributions, it is likely that most of the Feltus fish were caught in oxbow lakes or other

backwater riverine environments near the site, though people were also occasionally fishing in the primary river channel (Kelley 1990:40). Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*), turtle (Testudines), and assorted small mammals such as rabbit (*Sylvilagus* spp.) and squirrel (*Sciurus* spp.) also provided important subsistence resources for the Feltus population.

<tbl1.3>

Though the animals identified at Feltus are common at most Woodland period sites, the assemblage is in no way representative of the high faunal diversity typical of the LMV. Looking at the faunal diversity analysis (Figure 1.5), the Mound A middens display much higher diversity than the plaza contexts. This adds to the suite of evidence suggesting that A1.S0 in particular represents something different from the other analyzed deposits. That stated, the most interesting differences are those between the classes of animals represented in the other three contexts. In Feature 4, the D2 Midden, and A2.S0, the NISP and diversity of medium and small mammals are remarkably low, while the identified number of large mammals is quite high. Outside of these large mammals, very large individuals of gar, buffalo (*Ictiobus* sp.), flathead catfish (*Pylodictus olivaris*), blue catfish (*Ictalurus furcatus*), channel catfish (*Ictalurus punctatus*), and freshwater drum (*Aplodinotus grunniens*) dominate the assemblage, including numerous specimens over 1.5 m long. The smaller animals present at Feltus all represent species that are relatively easy to amass in large quantities (e.g., rabbits, squirrels, turtles, and turkeys) due to relatively high population densities, seasonal aggregation behaviors, and/or likelihood for net-based capture (Hoffman 1982; Kelley 1990).

<fig1.5>

Element representation was determined for the deer remains in the D2 Midden. While parallel analyses of the materials from Feature 4 and A2.S0 have not been completed, visual inspection of the collection shows similar patterning. Overrepresented portions include axial (vertebrae and ribs), forequarter (scapula, humerus, ulna, and radius), and hindquarter (innominate, sacrum, femur, patella, and tibia) elements, while the skull and feet are underrepresented. These ratios suggest that larger cuts of meat were being favored. A focus on meat consumption (over marrow or grease extraction or bone tool production) is further indicated by low overall utilization of the deer carcasses (Funkhouser 2013:3).

Along with the ubiquity of bear in the Feltus contexts, element representation data from the bear also support a feasting and/or ritual interpretation. Bones from the paws represent 64 percent of the identified elements (Jackson 2016). This is fairly common within archaeological contexts, potentially because such bones were brought back to camp with the hide to be worked out in the process of tanning (McGovern 1985:299; see also Jackson and Scott 1992:334 and Pavao-Zuckerman 2001:98, 100–101 for non-bear examples). Far less commonly recovered are skull fragments, ribs, sternebrae, long-bone fragments, and vertebrae. The presence of these portions of the bear at Feltus may suggest that the animal's death and/or consumption was part of the ceremonialism associated with feasting (Funkhouser 2013:3). This interpretation is further supported by the unusual treatment of bear remains elsewhere on the site (Kassabaum and Nelson 2016).

In ethnographic and ethnohistoric accounts, bears were seen as food providers, kin, healers, and spirit guides (e.g., Dorsey 1904:189–191; Hallowell 1926; Lankford 2011:123; Mooney 1900:273–274; 327–329; Owen 1904:55; Skinner 1914:207; Swanton 1929:354; as summarized in Kassabaum 2016). Due to these special roles and particularly to their status as

humanlike animals, bears were often treated differently from other game after their deaths (Hallowell 1926; Rockwell 1991:26–40, 55–56; Shepard and Sanders 1985:85, 90–91). Only five percent of bear bones at Feltus were burned, while the faunal assemblage overall shows burning rates between 9 and 56 percent, depending on the context (Jackson 2016). In addition to being burned less frequently than those of other species, bear bones were almost always included in the refuse deposits whole, despite high marrow and grease content. In Feature 1, one of the post pits associated with Feature 4, portions of a bear skeleton consisting of one femur and one metacarpal were included with the remains of four or five children under the age of five (though additional, badly preserved bone may indicate more of the bear skeleton was originally present). This unusual method of deposition and combination of materials suggests an ontological relationship between bears and humans that may have moved them beyond typical subsistence resources (Hallowell 1926; Hill 2013).

Discussion

Excavation data, radiocarbon dates, and stylistic ceramic evidence all support the conclusion that Coles Creek people utilized the Feltus landscape episodically for some 400 years. With the possible exception of A1.S0, no evidence for habitation exists at the site. Rather, it appears that Feltus was used for repeated, large-scale ritual events focused on communal food consumption, sometimes occurring alongside other group activities such as setting and removing large posts and constructing mounds.

The rapidity with which the middens at Feltus were deposited implies that the associated depositional events brought together large groups of people for feasting episodes. A large number of vessels fall outside the normal size range for a domestic site and further indicate communal eating. Moreover, the vessel assemblage is dominated by bowls and thus suggests an

emphasis on food consumption, with only some evidence for food preparation and even less for food storage. Combining vessel form and vessel size further clarifies the character of these deposits. When considering rim diameter, bowls make up a fairly consistent percentage of the total vessel count through 30 cm, but after 30 cm, bowls dominate the assemblage. If Coles Creek people were living, storing, and maybe even preparing food in scattered homesteads and gathering at Feltus only occasionally for communal events including feasting, then this assemblage is precisely what one would expect.

Evidence from food remains further supports these conclusions. Plant remains from the midden contexts at Feltus suggest a generalized fisher-hunter-gatherer pattern that aligns well with current understandings of Coles Creek subsistence. The presence of domesticated chenopod in Ballina phase deposits implies that cultivation of Eastern Agricultural Complex plants was likely under way earlier in the period, but much more work on the topic of early domesticates at Feltus is warranted. When compared with Coles Creek domestic sites, the Feltus midden assemblages show a heavy reliance on easily amassed resources such as acorn, hickory, and weedy plants and those resources high in protein and fat (i.e., oily nuts and seeds), as well as a low reliance on fruit. Perhaps the storability of nuts and some seeds made them particularly attractive foods to bring to a feast at a central location. Smokable plants and other potentially ritual resources suggest that flora also played an important role in the social lives of the Feltus people. In most accounts of Native groups in the Eastern Woodlands, the act of smoking together (particularly in association with food consumption) signifies or creates an important bond among a community of people (Paper 1987).

Like the plant remains, animal remains from the midden contexts at Feltus also suggest a generalized fisher-hunter-gatherer pattern in line with current understandings of Coles Creek

subsistence. However, when compared with nonmound sites, the contexts discussed here suggest nondomestic consumption (with the possible exception of A1.S0). Low diversity overall, a focus on easily amassed resources, emphasis on consumption of large animals and high-yield cuts of meat, and little secondary use of the faunal materials all suggest feasting (Wallis and Blessing 2015). The inclusion of bear remains in high quantities and special contexts hints at the nature of this feasting.

The ceramic, floral, and faunal data from the Feltus site thus support a model of feasting that focuses on the bringing together of lots of more or less everyday resources at a central location. The foodways data presented here indicate that the menu at the Feltus eating events consisted mainly of large mammals, fish, nuts, and wild seeds. An emphasis on exceptionally large animals and easily amassed plant resources supports the conclusions drawn from the stratigraphic and ceramic data that large, communal eating events took place at the site.

The assemblage does not include particularly rare, exotic, or labor-intensive foods, especially high-quality vessels shaped or decorated in distinctive ways, or overt prestige items. In others words, it is the sheer amount and size, rather than the nature, of the materials at Feltus that indicate feasting. That stated, the presence of ritually important plants, smoking pipes, and bear remains suggests that the meals that occurred during these events included at least some ceremonial activity. In this case, both unusual inclusions are common players in rituals associated with community building through establishing and maintaining relationships between participants and are rarely included in rituals explicitly associated with status negotiation.

Most archaeological and ethnographic accounts of feasting focus on the political and economic roles of feasts in creating power and status differences among participants. In a feast characterized by large quantities of everyday things, however, one may expect that the social

outcomes would not be drastically different from those negotiated in everyday life. Recent research has led away from hierarchal interpretations of Coles Creek sociopolitical structure. The absence of large-scale agriculture (Fritz and Kidder 1993), a mortuary pattern consisting of mass burials without burial objects (Kassabaum 2011), and lack of evidence for long-distance trade or accumulation of status items all suggest relatively low levels of status differentiation.

Although large platform-mound-and-plaza complexes are commonly used to argue for the necessity of powerful leaders during Coles Creek times, many archaeologists have moved away from reading hierarchy into monumental constructions, and it is now generally accepted that elite control of labor is not a prerequisite for the construction of large-scale public architecture (e.g., Adler and Wilshusen 1990; Brown 2006; Lindauer and Blitz 1997). Use of Coles Creek mound summits was variable, and only some mounds show evidence of structures that may have served as elite residences. It has become clear that many platform mounds, especially *early* platform mounds, instead provided locations for communal ritual activities such as feasts, acts of commemoration, and the performance of social roles (Kassabaum et al. 2011; Lindauer and Blitz 1997; Roe and Schilling 2010:163–164). The nature of the feasting events at Feltus and their direct association with other ritual activity suggests that one purpose of platform mound sites was to stimulate group cohesion and a sense of community with those participating in their construction, maintenance, and use.

Notes

1. This chapter draws on data from investigations undertaken by the Feltus Archaeological Project from 2006 to 2012 (Kassabaum 2014; Steponaitis et al. 2012, 2014).

2. Zooarchaeological analysis was completed by H. Edwin Jackson and Lynn Funkhouser.