

Gumbo Balls and Earth Divers: Contagious Magic in Mound Construction at a Coles Creek Site

Garrett B. Cummings (UNC-Chapel Hill)

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There is a famous myth from the native Southeast. A myth concerned with the creation of the Earth – who, how, and why. According to George Lankford, this myth is “one of the most widely known of all myths” in ancient North America and “is found throughout the Eastern Woodlands.” This myth is the story of the Earth Diver.

I know that this opening was dramatic but it is a myth of creation. And what could be more dramatic than the beginning of the world? Though there are many stories and varying details, the story of the Earth Diver is essentially this:

In the beginning, there was only water. A council of creatures from the air and water meets and decides that there should be land. The Creek story has it that a dove first attempted and failed to find land, the Yuchi that the beaver and the otter failed. But all traditions agree that the crawfish was successful. The crawfish dove down beneath the water and came up after a long time with dirt in his claws. According to the Creek text, a ball was made from this dirt. The Earth was made of this ball of wet dirt.

It seems bizarre at first that the creature responsible for all of the middle world would be a crawfish. Like so many foreign myths and stories of creation the choice seems arbitrary and maybe even anti-intuitive. But, with anything more than a cursory investigation, the choice appears to have been made for rather obvious naturalistic reasons.

This is very exciting for me. I’m fascinated by this line of reasoning. And although it is a small part of my overall paper it might actually be my favorite part. I can’t really take credit for it though – I never made the connection; my dad reminded me in a conversation we had earlier this year.

Although treated as a creature of the water, crawfish can and do live in earth if the water table is high enough. They burrow underground and mate as if in a major water source. When they surface, they build mounds made of wet balls of dirt. And here is one of them (Slides 2 and 3).

It is relevant that the Earth creation story and moundbuilding would become entangled so early on in a discussion or investigation of either subject.

Of course, this is because the mound in the pre-Columbian Southeast was a representation of the Earth (Slide 4). It follows then that the building of a mound was a building of the Earth, a reenactment of the creation.

As Vernon J. Knight has said, “It can be shown that artificial mounds among the historic southeastern Indians operated as conventional world symbols.” Interestingly, and more relevant for the current topic, Knight – as well as others – have extended this symbolic model into pre-Columbian times. In fact, since at least the Middle Woodland Period, Knight concludes: “The entire history of platform mound building in the Southeast may be seen as a conservative, long-term complex of world-renewal ritual.”

To summarize what exactly the rest of this paper hinges on: “Mississippian mounds were icons, [...] they symbolized the earth island and related concepts, [...] their construction can be considered as a ritual practice, [...] this ritual was communal in scale, and [...] these practices were a form of world-renewal ceremony.”

Now, why does this have particular relevance here, in a symposium on Coles Creek? Like many others here, this paper has to do with the recent excavations at the Feltus Mounds, a Coles Creek site near Natchez, Mississippi.

The reason for the discussion of Earth creation in both myth and moundbuilding is simple. If moundbuilding is a “ritual practice,” a “world-renewal ceremony” then one would expect there to be evidence in the construction; not just in the overall and complete form (four steep sides, flat top, and, of course, the material, etc) but in the elements of construction as well.

At Feltus, I believe there is evidence of exactly this (Slide 5). The wet ball of earth, the wet dirt of the crawfish-creation myth, I believe, can be shown in the construction of at least two of the three extant mounds at Feltus. In the fall of 2006 and 2007 multiple excavations turned up multiple clusters of what have come to be called “gumbo balls” in Mound A. They are clearly balls of wet earth placed in the mounds. The dirt appears to be from the gumbo clay found below the bluffs where the Feltus Mounds were constructed. No structural purpose accounts for their presence.

In Mound C the construction method was different but still significant in largely the same way, but we’ll come back to this shortly. This is a trench profile made with a backhoe on the east side of Mound A in 2007 (Slide 6). The gumbo balls are the features marked “N” and “O” on the key. The most prominent, representative gumbo balls are in gray (Slide 7). Here’s a close-up (Slide 8).

And these are some shots of the Mound A profile from the 2006 flank trench (Slide 9). This trench was located at the north end of the backhoe trench, perpendicular to it. You can see two gumbo balls of grey clay. And here it is closer (Slide 10). They were clearly brought up from the bottoms, the bed of the Mississippi which ran below Feltus at the times of occupation. Now Coles Creek runs below in the former river channel. They were also deposited while wet. This is clear since the gumbo balls retained their round shape after being placed, something they would only do if wet.

To illustrate, this image (Slide 11) shows some gumbo balls that were inadvertently created at Feltus 1300 years after the originals. This is a picture of wet soil coming out of plastic bags that were used as tarp weights during the 2006 excavation. The soil came out of these bags wet

during backfilling. It is, of course, of note that they retained their globular shape when they were dropped on the ground.

Now this is the difference between the wet earth on Mound A's construction and Mound C's (Slide 12). Mound A was constructed with wet balls of clay from the river bottoms. Mound C was constructed with layers of wet earth as well. But this time it was dirt from the bluffs, made up of the area's typical loess. These are several images of the gray and black basket-loading from the 2006 flank trench on the east of Mound C. These layers appear to be "gleyed" soils – probably from the loess on the surrounding bluffs – that formed in a waterlogged environment. (This identification was made in the field by Thurman Allen, based on visual examination; obviously it still needs to be confirmed and refined by more detailed analysis.) These are obviously not exactly gumbo balls but still they are layers of soils obtained from a wet environment. This is a shot with a bit more scale (Slide 13).

If one were to reenact earth creation, something we believe was a primary purpose in moundbuilding, then wouldn't it be quite obvious to include wet earth? Dirt from under the water? And the Mississippi seems a particularly relevant source from which to obtain the makings of the earth; southeastern Indians saw that body of water as the center, the navel of the world. According to Knight, "They thought that the Mississippi was the center of the Earth, and those mounds were as the navel of a man in the center of his body."

Of course, this could all be local to Feltus. That is not an optimal situation – my proposal would probably best suit a widespread use of wet earth in mound construction. It is easy to understand that a site report could overlook such a small detail or the pits and trenches dug might have missed the water-soaked deposits. I looked through field report after field report of sites from Coles Creek times in the Lower Mississippi Valley: Lake George and Thornton in Mississippi, St. Agnes and Winslow Walker's Troyville Mounds in Louisiana, and many, many more.

I found nothing. Nothing that seemed even remotely similar to what I was searching for. But then Dr. Vin Steponaitis sent me Martha Ann Rolingson's article on the Plum Bayou culture in Arkansas (Slide 14). Focusing largely on the Toltec mound site, this paper details the investigations at Toltec, both recent and previous. This article is especially relevant for this paper for a couple of reasons, not the least of which can best be summarized by a quote of Philip Phillips's: "the great Toltec site will inevitable become the type site for a phase of Coles Creek [...] in the Lower Arkansas Region."

As the subject of the paper suggests, this mound site is now considered Plum Bayou culture. But the dates of mound construction are in the 700s AD, perfectly concurrent with Feltus's, and, in the words of Rolingson, "The boundary between Plum Bayou and Coles Creek may have fluctuated through time in this section of the Mississippi Alluvial Valley."

So, this site, current with Coles Creek and in Plum Bayou, a culture that clearly had ties with Coles Creek, did have something I was searching for. Conveniently, Toltec is on the edge of an oxbow lake. And Mound C, an accretional burial mound 4.2 meters in height, was partially constructed with clay from the bottom of this lake. As Rolingson wrote, "Some of the soil used

for fill is a clay obtained from the lake bed.”

This is quite suggestive. First, it shows explicitly that what the inhabitants, the builders of Feltus were doing was not random or by accident – a pattern demonstrates purpose. Secondly, a pattern of such specific attributes used in the construction of such a charged symbol in the religion of the Native Southeast would imply that it too was a part of the system. Remember, it seems apparent that the “construction [of Southeastern mounds] can be considered a ritual practice.” So any pattern in their construction would necessarily be part of this ritual. And if the ritual is one concerned with world renewal and a massive symbol of the “earth island” then this pattern would most likely be associated with the creation of the earth.

The fact that there are not more examples right now is unfortunate. But they may be in literature I have not yet thoroughly investigated or this dearth of examples could be explained by the simple fact that these features would be easy to miss or exclude from documentation for an assumed lack of importance. But there are two sites with verified examples of this ritual construction technique. I find it reasonably safe to assume that there are more of these sites.

This would all be meaningless if there was no precedent in Southeastern Indian thinking. As my title suggests, I think the parallels can be found through the concept of Contagious Magic (Slide 15). Having invented the term, James Frazer explained that Contagious Magic “proceeds upon the notion that things which have once been conjoined must remain ever afterwards, even when quite disserved from each other, in such a sympathetic relation that whatever is done to the one must similarly affect the other.” Although Frazer tends to focus more on hair and fingernail clippings, the relevance here is that many cultures, the Native Southeast included, saw the origin of a thing as extremely important – Things, objects are powerful because of where they are from, what they are composed of.

George Lankford, in discussing shell gorgets of the Cox style, makes it clear that Southeastern Indians did indeed hold these beliefs (Slide 16). “It is instructive to note that copper, like shell (and therefore probably functionally equivalent to it), also “belongs” to Mishebeshu, the underwater panther. Copper and shell are thus substances which participate in the Underwater world and have connotative meanings related to that world. Further, “a shell disk like the gorget was not just a display area for engraving, but was itself an object of power.”

If this is the case for the materials composing a shell gorget then I believe the same amount of care would be taken with the building materials of a mound. It is at least certain that the gumbo balls are not there by accident. Special care was taken to ensure their presence. In fact, these balls of gumbo clay would have had to have been carried, while wet no less, a good ways from the flood plain and then up from the base of the bluff, which is more than 100 feet high. Also making the case that they were not accidental is the fact that in two of the three existing mounds at Feltus and in at least one at Toltec, wet earth was used in some way to build the mounds or was put in place while the community was building the mounds. It is also clear that mounds in particular were paid special attention to in finding appropriate building materials. As Knight has said (Slide 17), “While this may sound far-fetched, there is little doubt that the use of village middens in mound construction as opposed to 'clean' mined earth is deliberate in most cases [...] Sometimes the effort to use compromised earth seems exaggerated.”

And what reason would one expect there to be for the conscious use of wet earth in the construction of a massive symbol of the earth, especially given the power that material from specific locations holds? One would probably look to the ethnography for a creation story – how the Earth was created. Then are there any parallels? Any wet balls of dirt for example? In this case we are extremely fortunate that just such ethnographic accounts exist. The Indians of the Southeast did indeed believe the earth was born of dirt from the bottom of a body of water. And if the mound in this religion represents the Earth then the obvious conclusion is that these wet soils are representations of the most fundamental myth in Southeastern Indian religion.

Moundbuilding might now be seen as a reenactment of the Earth's creation. It also seems likely that this construction, these gumbo balls, were seen as having very real power in the world.

[See Slide 18 for acknowledgments.]

[revised 12/11/08]

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[Slide 1]



[Slide 2]



[Slide 3]

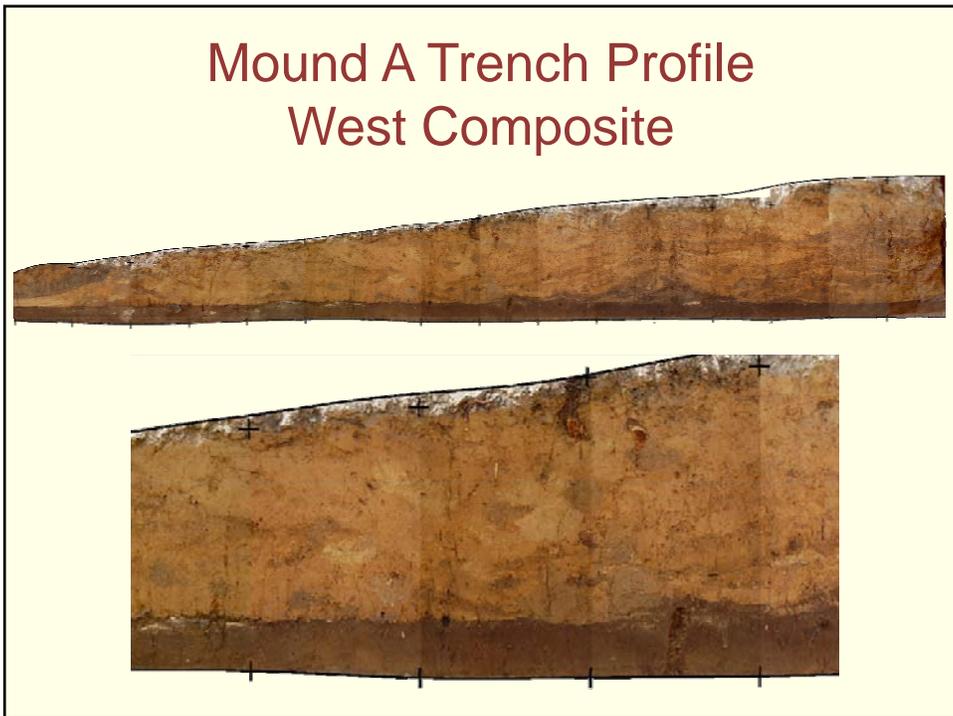
Mound Symbolism

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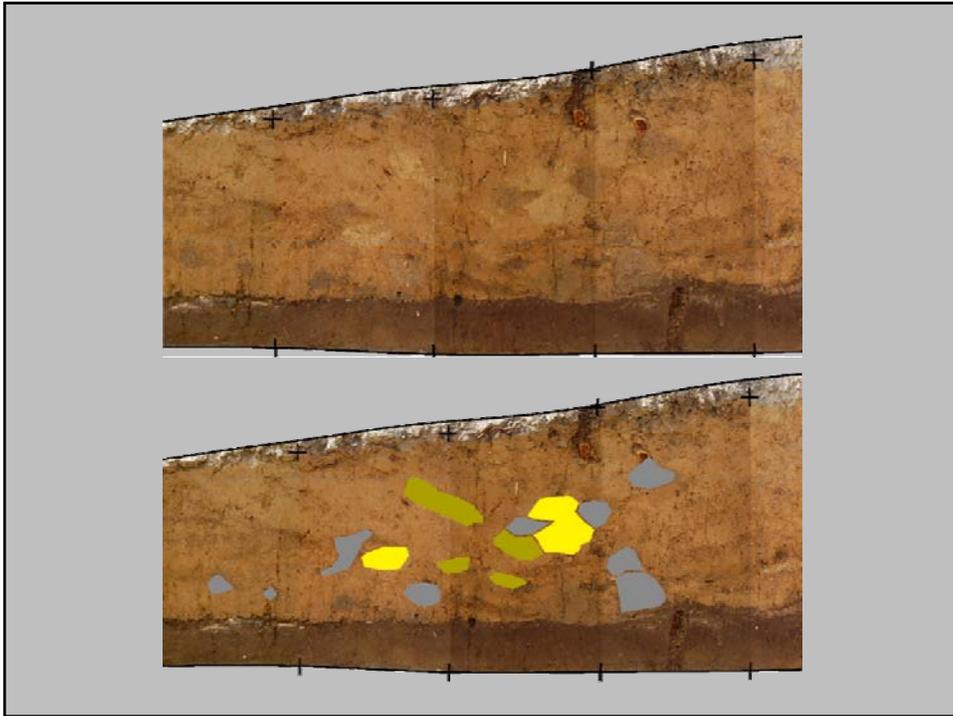
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[Slide 5]



[Slide 6]



[Slide 7]



[Slide 8]



Mound A, East

[Slide 9]



[Slide 10]



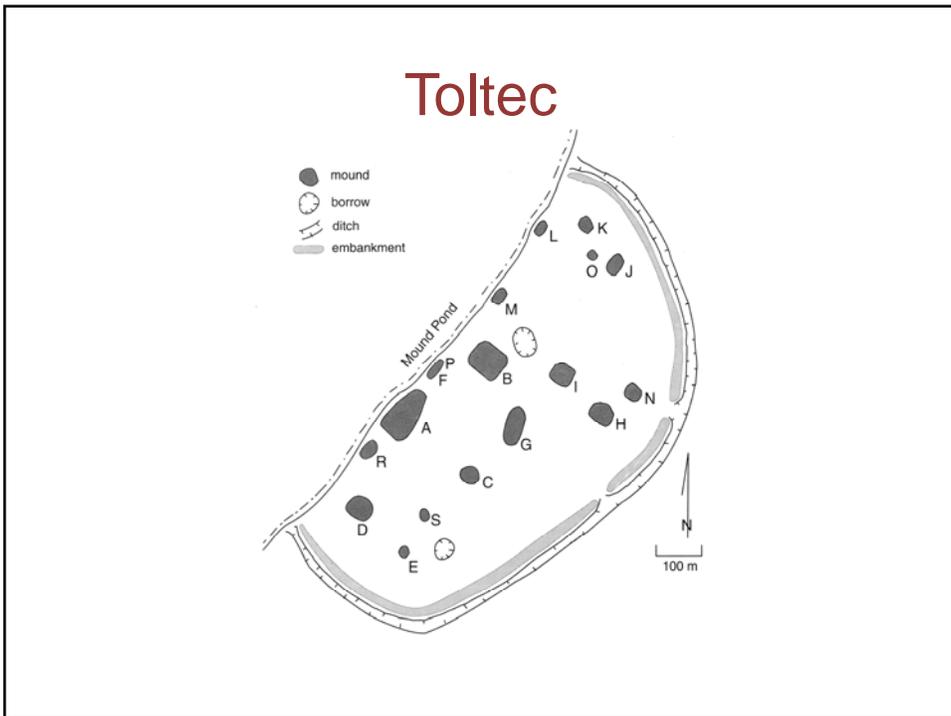
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[Slide 12]



[Slide 13]



[Slide 14]

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-James Frazer

[Slide 15]

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[Slide 17]

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