Bear Ceremonialism at the Feltus Site
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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.

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 they were ceremonial in function. After the post was inserted, each post was then removed and the post (e.g., tobacco pipes and bear bone) imply that it was likely a meaningful substance. Each post was then removed and the post hole was used as a trash deposit containing 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 moved to 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.

Bears as food providers. Bears are important game animals to many cultures. 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.

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 food production. Bears are often depicted 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.

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 powerful, 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 children. Before being taken up with her brothers to be part her family, the woman conducts ceremonies to bring the bear back to life.

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 birth and rebirth. These abilities are further highlighted in the marriage story told above and the hunting stories described below.

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