Coles Creek Earthworks and Ritual at the Feltus Mounds in Southwest Mississippi, AD 700-1100

Vincas Steponaitis, Megan Kassabaum (University of North Carolina), and John O'Hear (University of Mississippi)

INTRODUCTION

The Coles Creek period represents a time (ca. AD 700-1000) when platform mounds first become common in the Lower Mississippi Valley. Indeed, the civic-ceremonial centers of this period — consisting of multiple flat-topped mounds arranged around plazas — look very much like their later Mississippian counterparts, and can be seen as an architectural prototype for these later sites. This, in turn, raises some interesting questions: Does the similarity in form also imply a similarity in function? Were Coles Creek mounds used in the same way as Mississippian mounds? If not, then how were they used? Our ongoing research at the Feltus site is designed to find the answers.

The Feltus mound group (22Je500) is a well-preserved Coles Creek period site in Jefferson County, Mississippi. It is situated on the edge of the 30-m-high loess bluffs, with a spectacular view of the Mississippi alluvial valley to the west. It originally had four platform mounds symmetrically arranged around a plaza. Three mounds (A, B, C) stand today while the smallest (D), at the south end of the plaza, was destroyed sometime between 1932 and 1947. These mounds were built on an oval midden that surrounds the plaza (Figure 1). Formerly called the Ferguson or Truly mounds, this site has a very long history of investigations, dating back to the 1840s (Figure 2) (Culin 1900: 122-123; Ford 1936: 198-201; Moorehead 1932: 163-164; Steponaitis 2008).

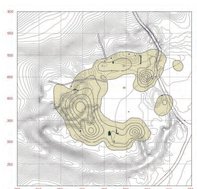


Figure 1: Ceramic density map revealing the oval, premound midden.



Figure 2: Panel from the Egan Panorama (c. 1850) showing an exaggerated depiction of Feltus.

Three field seasons totaling seven months of fieldwork have been completed at the site since 2006. Our focus has been on investigating the constructional history and use of the mounds, in order to shed light on the nature of Coles Creek ceremonial centers and the activities conducted there.

Ceramics and radiocarbon dates show three phases of occupation. Initial use of the site was during the Sundown phase (AD 700-850) and is represented archaeologically by a series of large posts and pits in the southern plaza. Mound construction followed during the Ballina phase (AD 850-1000), making Feltus one of the earliest plaza-and-platform-mound sites in the region. Finally, some occupation occurred in the Balmoral phase, just prior to the site's abandonment by approximately AD 1100. Interestingly, the radiocarbon dates form three distinct temporal clusters, suggesting that the site's occupation may have been episodic, rather than continuous (Figures 3 and 4).

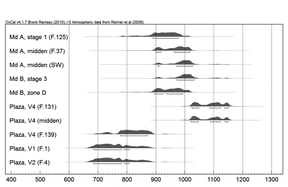


Figure 3: Radiocarbon dates from Feltus showing three distinct phases of occupation.

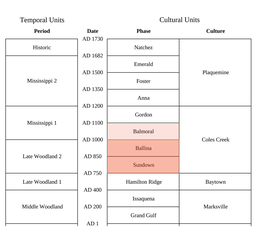


Figure 4: Chronology of the Natchez Bluffs region, highlighting the Feltus occupations.

Excavations have revealed that each of the four mounds was used differently, although many aspects of their constructional history and function remain unclear.

MOUND A: The "Clean" Platform Mound

Mound A, the largest, is 7 m tall and stands on the north side of the plaza. It was investigated in 2006 and 2007 with a flank trench, limited testing, and coring (Figure 5). We know from this evidence that the mound was built in at least two stages: an initial construction 2 m high, capped by what appears to be a single massive fill deposit that raised the mound an additional 5 m (Figure 6). Although the mound was built atop an extremely rich and dense midden, the mound itself has thus far yielded virtually no evidence of wooden buildings or occupational debris on its summits. It is possible that such occupations or buildings exist, but are buried too deeply under the massive final fill to be easily accessible with conventional excavations.

At least two portions of the sub-mound midden, at the southwestern corner and along the eastern edge of the mound, appear to be the result of one or more rapid dumping episodes. These deposits are over 20 cm thick and full of broken pottery, charcoal, and animal bones. Microstratigraphic analyses indicate no breaks during the midden's formation and it was covered by mound fill immediately after its deposition. With large amounts of food remains and exceptionally large ceramic vessels (numerous pots have rim diameters over 40 cm and nearly half have diameters larger than 20 cm), the midden looks very much like feasting debris.

We identified a large number of post holes at the base of the midden (Figure 7). While potential alignments exist, further excavation in this location will be necessary to determine if these posts represent structures and/or more ephemeral constructions such as screens, drying racks, etc.



Figure 5: Trench along the east side of Mound A.

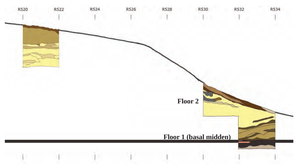


Figure 6: Mound A flank trench profile showing two large construction episodes, a possible floor separating them, and the continuous submound midden.

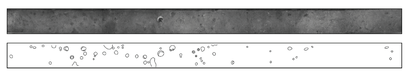


Figure 7: Photomosaic and sketch map of the postholes beneath the midden.

MOUND B: The "Burned" Platform Mound

Mound B, the second-largest earthwork with a height of 6 m, was also explored with a flank trench and coring in 2006 and 2007. The structure of this mound was found to be radically different from that of Mound A. Five stages of construction were clearly evident, each (except the last) capped with a clearly-defined floor (Figure 8). The first two stages were topped with yellow clay veneers; the next two stages showed evidence of postholes and fire-reddened surfaces, strongly suggestive of burned wooden buildings on the summits (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Profile showing burned floors in Mound B.

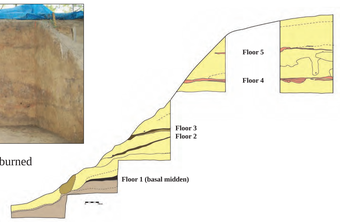
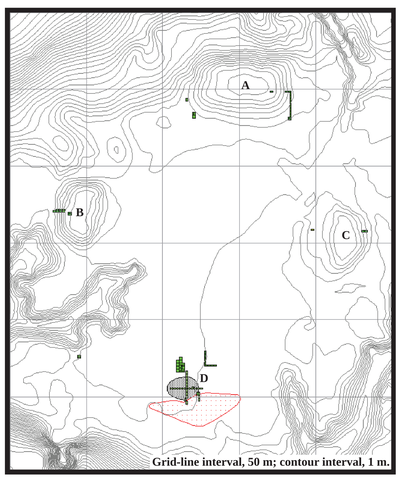


Figure 8: Mound B trench profile showing five clear floors.



MOUND C: The Large Burial Mound

Located on the eastern side of the plaza and 4 m high, Mound C was excavated by Warren King Moorehead in 1924 (Moorehead 1932). Here he found more than 40 sets of disarticulated human remains and bundle burials with virtually no grave goods — a typical Coles Creek pattern (Kassabaum 2011). Moorehead's "shafts" were quite deep, yet all of the burials occurred in the uppermost 60 cm. Our flank test in 2006 revealed two stages of construction. Presumably, Moorehead's burials were associated with the second of these stages.

Mound C is not a typical, rectangular platform mound. It has a low terrace or "apron," 1 m high, that extends toward the plaza. (There is mounting evidence that each of the mounds at Feltus was built on such a platform, bearing a marked similarity to the big mound at Troyville.) Mound C is also surrounded on at least three sides by a ditch (Figure 10). It may have supported as charnel house, or served as a repository for human remains when a charnel facility was decommissioned or cleaned.

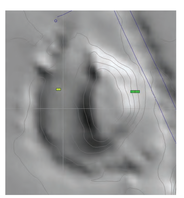


Figure 10: Relief map of Mound C showing both the "apron" and the surrounding ditch.

MOUND D : The Small Burial Mound (and vicinity)

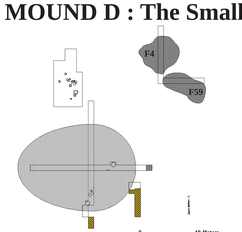


Figure 11:Map of the southern plaza showing our excavation units, the former location of Mound D, the refilled borrow pit, massive refuse pits, and large post holes.

As noted previously, this mound was destroyed in the mid 20th century. In 1852, B.L.C. Wailes described it as dome-shaped mound, 8 ft high, sitting atop a rise that was 4 ft higher than the plaza. We believe the latter was an artificial terrace like the one at Mound C. In 1924, Moorehead excavated Mound D and found several bundle burials within it. Thus, all the evidence we have suggests that this was a burial mound similar in form and function to Mound C.

Immediately south of this mound was a massive borrow pit that was dug and refilled in the 11th century AD (Figure 11). We clipped the edge of this borrow pit with a trench in 2010, and determined its depth and extent with a series of auger tests. This feature is some 3 m deep, 60 m long, and 20 m wide! We believe it was connected to the construction and use of Mound D, but the nature and timing of their relationship is still unclear.

Also near Mound D, were several massive pits full of animal bone and ceramic refuse (Figure 12). One of these pits was 6 m in diameter and 1.6 m deep. The character of this refuse suggests rapid dumping, with pot breaks and partly articulated deer bones. We also recovered three figurine fragments from this feature indicating the inclusion of ritual refuse in at least two of these dumping episodes (Figure 13).

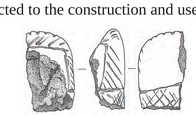


Figure 13: Figurine head fragment from Feature 4.



Figure 12: Profile photomosaics of two massive pits excavated in 2006 and 2007 to the northeast of Mound D. Feature 4 is a Coles Creek pit while Feature 59 dates to the Baytown period.

LARGE-POST RITUAL

The area beneath and around Mound D also contained a number of large, free-standing posts (Figure 14). The fill packed around many of these posts was unusually rich in charcoal and ash — as though hearth scrapings were deliberately included. These fills also contained other offerings: broken ceramic pipes, bear and deer bones (Figure 15), and in one case the bones of several infants. The posts appear to have been planted, then pulled, and the hole immediately filled. Similar post pits were found under Mound A; in one case, the post was pulled immediately before mound construction began, leaving behind a void where the post once stood — quite literally a post hole (Figure 16). Interestingly, the post pit containing bear bones and infant remains produced a radiocarbon date identical to that of one of the large refuse pits— dating to the late 8th century AD. We believe that the post pits and nearby refuse pits may be linked to ceremonies that involved placing and removing these posts, with attendant feasting.

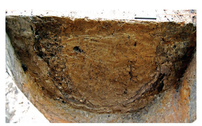


Figure 14: Example profile of a large, ash-lined post in the southern plaza.



Figure 15: Deer pelvis, bear calcaneous and ceramic pipe from a large post hole.

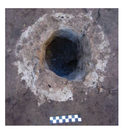


Figure 16: Hollow post hole beneath Mound A.

CONCLUSIONS

- The mounds at Feltus show dramatic functional differences: Mound A shows little evidence of floors and no evidence of buildings; Mound B shows multiple, clearly defined floors with prepared surfaces and buildings; and Mounds C and D were connected with mortuary activities.
- Public events took place at the site that involved the erection of large wooden posts with dedicatory offerings in the fill; such posts were repeatedly pulled and re-set. Our evidence suggests these events were accompanied by feasts.
- The large-post ritual connected with feasting and platform mounds is in many ways reminiscent of the Middle Woodland ritual pattern described by Knight (2001), which is found across the American South. One can also draw connections to the post rituals found at Emergent Mississippian sites to the north, and later still at Cahokia.
- We see many parallels with contemporary sites (Greenhouse, Raffman, Toltec, etc.) in the way the mounds were built and the sites were used. Much of the midden at these sites appears to be connected with public events, rather than domestic refuse. Our current impression is that Coles Creek mound sites may have been places of gathering and commemoration, with few, if any, permanent residents.

WORKS CITED

Culin, Stewart
1900 The Dickeson Collection of American Antiquities. *Bulletin of the Free Museum of Science and Art of the University of Pennsylvania* 2(3): 113-168.

Ford, James A
1936 *Analysis of Indian Village Site Collections from Louisiana and Mississippi*. Anthropological Study 2. Department of Conservation, Louisiana Geological Survey, New Orleans.

Kassabaum, Megan C.
2011 Looking Beyond the Obvious: Identifying Patterns in Coles Creek Mortuary Data. *Southeastern Archaeology* 30(2): 215-225.

Knight, Vernon James
2001 Feasting and the Emergence of Platform Mound Ceremonialism in Eastern North America. In *Feasts: Archaeological and Ethnographic Perspectives on Food, Politics, and Power*, edited by Michael Dietler and Brian Hayden, pp. 311-333. Smithsonian Institution Press: Washington, DC.

Moorehead, Warren K.
1932 Explorations near Natchez, Mississippi. In *Exploration of the Etowah Site in Georgia: The Etowah Papers*, edited by Warren K. Moorehead, pp. 158-165. Publications 3. Department of Archaeology, Phillips Academy, Andover. Yale University Press, New Haven.

Steponaitis, Vincas P.
2008 Notes on B. L. C. Wailes's Survey of the Feltus Mounds in 1852. Manuscript on file, Research Laboratories of Archaeology, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [http://rla.unc.edu/feltus/History/Wailes mapping.pdf]