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## Gathering in the Late Woodland

### Plazas and Gathering Places as Everyday Space

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The practice of enclosing open spaces with earthen mounds begins in the Lower Mississippi Valley around 3500 B.C. As the earliest recognized monumentalized landscapes in eastern North America, these locations are thought to have provided periodic bases for the exploitation of natural resources and maintenance of social relationships. Archaeological work at these early plaza sites has focused on establishing the age and stratigraphy of the associated mounds, leaving little known about the everyday activities that occurred around or between them (Saunders 2012:26) and how their inclusion in the broader landscape structured communities, relationships, and movements. On the other end of the pre-Columbian temporal spectrum, Mississippian mound-and-plaza centers throughout the Eastern Woodlands are more heavily studied through excavation and survey. Archaeological work at these centers has likewise tended to focus on the mounds themselves, although studies of off-mound areas have become more common. The tendency to privilege earthworks, and particularly platform mounds understood to support elite or special-purpose structures, has created a mound-centric view that emphasizes a limited number of activities assumed to take place on their summits (but see Kidder and Sherwood, Chapter 12; Sherwood and Kidder 2011).

With that said, many researchers have recognized the importance of studying and understanding the plazas so often associated with earthen mounds (Alt et al. 2010; Boudreaux 2013; Cobb and Butler 2016; Dalan 1997; Dalan et al. 2003; Davis et al. 2015; Holley et al. 1993; Kidder 2004; Lewis et al. 1998; Nelson 2014; Rogers et al. 1982). We echo Kidder's (2004:515) sentiment that "plazas are not just empty spaces that developed because architecture enclosed an open area; they must be understood as one of the central design elements of community planning and intrasite spatial organization." Like others, we suggest that focusing on plazas can help balance the emphasis on discussions

about social interactions taking place at mound-and-plaza centers with considerations of the everyday outcomes of communal social behavior, whether the interactions themselves occurred every day or only periodically. We also propose that a focus upon gathering places more generally (including those marked by means other than mounding) gives archaeologists a window into how groups constructed their various identities, institutions, and communities. The social practices that were conducted within open spaces were meant to be seen and experienced by others. The built environment—accessible to archaeologists—can provide evidence about what actions took place, who could have been present or seen, and the scales and tempos of interactions and events.

The archaeological record of the southeastern United States is replete with plazas and other gathering spaces. Herein we detail the use of such places from two areas within this region with particular focus on two sites dating to the Late Woodland period (A.D. 400–1000). Feltus (22JE500) in the Lower Mississippi Valley and Range (11S47) in the American Bottom portion of the Central Mississippi Valley have both been extensively surveyed and excavated (Kassabaum 2014; Kelly 1990a; Steponaitis et al. 2015). Both sites were locations of human activity over several centuries, but we focus on the use of their plazas and courtyards between the years A.D. 750 and 1000. Although the gathering places at these sites and the individuals that utilized them were contemporaries, we show that the open spaces at Feltus and Range were active in organizing different scales of communities, all of which had profound implications for the everyday lives of their members.

Price and Carr (Chapter 1) state that an archaeology of “everyday matters” can be a study of daily tasks or the seemingly ordinary concerns and actions of individuals, while also suggesting that it can be more than that. In this chapter we draw upon discussions of performance and its spatiality to address how the various actions and activities that took place in gathering places affected matters of daily life in the past. According to Monica Smith: “The human past is the collective story of individuals . . . using tools, acquiring resources, and discarding waste” as they operate “within a social context framed by family, community, and ideology.” It is “the generative quality of individuals’ decisions and actions” and the “relationship among people, material objects, and space” that produce the cultural patterns of the past and present that we detect as archaeologists (Smith 2010:1).

Influenced by theories of practice and materiality, archaeologists have variously considered how practices (from the ordinary to the extraordinary) and the co-mingling of humans and their material worlds affect cultural fields. In

this chapter we emphasize that reconstructing the actions of individuals and understanding the social milieu in which they operate are both essential steps in evaluating the archaeology of everyday matters. More specifically, we approach the “everyday” by reference to how performance in places of gathering would have influenced how people perceived themselves and others as members of various communities (Hodder 2006; Inomata 2006; Inomata and Coben 2006). The spaces of plazas and courtyards at Feltus and Range were built forms that would have served to delimit and guide physical experiences through actions, the seeing, hearing, and feeling of others and the temporal rhythms of these occurrences (Smith 2003). Various institutions, from family to polity, were shaped over time through spatialized behaviors in a cultural landscape as “aggregate[s] of practices and representations of people orchestrated to continuously regenerate the perception of those institutions” (Pauketat 2007:40). Some practices occurred daily while others occurred sporadically, but all were uniquely shaped by the places in which they occurred and the built-up meanings attached to those places. Moreover, these institutions were undoubtedly a structuring component of identities that would have been perceivable every day, even while those identities were being played out in other places (Smith 2003:32).

This approach also allows us to link our consideration of spatialized practices and identities to other archaeologies of the everyday that focus more on the use of particular sets of artifacts (e.g., Carr and Bradbury, Chapter 10; Randall and Gilmore, Chapter 8) or certain routine tasks (e.g., Hollenbach and Carmody, Chapter 5; Pluckhahn et al., Chapter 9). Scholars using performance theory often deal with large-scale public spectacles or political theater (Holt 2009; Inomata 2006; Inomata and Coben 2006), but ordinary encounters, daily interactions, and the use and display of material things also can take on measures of performativity (DeMarrais 2014:157–158, 161; see also Christophersen 2015; Hodder 2006). Thus, although we do reference some of the material objects recovered at Feltus and Range and discuss a subset of the activities known to have taken place in their plazas and courtyards, our primary focus is how these spaces were active in shaping landscapes of community.

## Theorizing Gathering

When the night appears to have really mattered was for the extension of cultural institutions over time and space to link individuals . . . into larger “imagined communities” . . . In most hunter-gatherer societies, firelight hours drew aggregations of individuals . . . for ventures into such virtual communities . . . Stories conveyed unifying cosmologies and charters for rules

and rites governing behavior . . . Stories told by firelight put listeners on the same emotional wavelength, elicited understanding, trust, and sympathy . . . and built positive reputations for qualities like humor, congeniality, and innovation.

Wiessner (2014:14033)

The area directly in front of the White House was a mob scene. Women sat on shoulders waving flags. Everyone held their cameras aloft and tried to capture the magic. A man next to me said, “It’s like a Who concert or something.” But there was no band, no focal point to the celebration. No one had anything to wait for, and yet, it seemed like everyone was waiting for something.

Madrigal (2011)

Gathering spaces are ubiquitous. From athletic stadiums to places of religious practice to living-room sofas in front of flat-screen televisions, we create spaces for the formation of both permanent and momentary groups. Some of these gatherings have only fleeting effects on participants’ interpersonal relationships—individuals may register some sense of groupness only because of their temporary shared spatial proximity or common experiences. Other gatherings, however, may have durable and persistent effects on perceptions of shared identity, from the co-residing family to the spiritual congregation to a “nation” of fans rooting for their favorite team. Regardless of the variable frequency and duration of gatherings, we suggest that the effects of both daily and periodic events can have consequences relating to the creation of imagined communities.

The quotations that begin this section highlight momentary gatherings from the last few decades. Although both reference contemporary societies, the events described reflect different scales of aggregation that have defined human sociality for millennia. The second quotation captures a scene that took place outside the White House during the midnight hours following Barack Obama’s announcement of the death of Osama bin Laden. This large gathering was an unplanned and one-off event. The crowd was large and diverse, and thousands more watched the live televised broadcast or kept up with the news through social media. In many ways, this spontaneous gathering (and the gathering of thousands of others via modern technology) gets at the heart of Benedict Anderson’s (1991) notion of an “imagined community.” The plaza in front of the White House is a place traversed daily by many visitors and one permanently fixed among the institutional architecture of the American state. The events of the early morning hours of May 2, 2011, however, created a potent space (*sensu* Soja 2000) for the workings, if uneasy, of mixed emotions, nationalism, and

tempered celebrations, memories of which continue to influence the daily lives of the broader American community.

The other opening quotation likewise allows us to consider the formative essence of human gatherings, small or large, urban or otherwise. Polly Wiessner (2014) describes nightly gatherings within the camps of Ju/'hoan (!Kung) foragers. Whereas daytime communication involved economic matters, airing of complaints, or discussion of conflicts, nighttime talk around central campfires shifted to the telling of stories, singing, dancing, and ceremony. For those gathered around the fire, these stories brought to life individuals in distant camps and from different bands, recounted long-distance journeys and social contracts, and illuminated memories of important events from earlier generations. The telling and reliving of these stories helped to reproduce (or create) expectations for social behaviors within the minds of those listening larger cultural institutions and fictive kinship networks. In these situations, acts of storytelling and subsequent discussion “keep cultural institutions alive, explicate relations between people, create *imaginary communities* . . . and trace networks for great distances” (Wiessner 2014:14032; emphasis added).

These recent gatherings let us consider some of the many ways that humans create imaginings of community and identity (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Inomata and Coben 2006; Yaeger and Canuto 2000). Lest we be guilty of claiming that gatherings work only to produce congruity or shared isomorphic identities, we also acknowledge that places, technologies, material culture, and communicative and performative acts also serve to create distinction and divisions (Brumfiel 1992; Inomata and Coben 2006:24; Sassaman and Heckenberger 2004; Smith 2003:280; Wobst 1977). Social interactions create communities while also allowing groups and individuals to contest arrangements, reach temporary consensus, or induce innovations that shape and alter everyday lives through both time and space (Henry and Barrier 2016).

The built environment plays a role in determining who will participate in gatherings, who will be the spectators of events, and who will be excluded from seeing or knowing of certain undertakings (Inomata 2006). The arrangements of walls, buildings, mounds, or other monuments can serve to create more open and public or more closed-off and private venues for various activities, including feasts, ceremonies, religious rites, political maneuverings, or even daily domestic practices (Brown 2006; Dietler 2001; Knight 2004; Kurjack 1994; LeCount 2001; Pauketat and Alt 2005). Moreover, points on the landscape used for gatherings may shift purpose through time, serve numerous functions, or host diverse populations, with or without concomitant alterations to associated architecture or surroundings (Moore 2014; Nair 2015:65–87; Pluckhahn 2010; Smith

2008; Zucker 1959:5). Human modifications (intentional or unintentional) to the landscape can influence subsequent movements through these spaces and dictate future use to a specific range of activities with associated meanings (Nair 2015; Snead et al. 2011).

If the built environment plays a role in structuring the nature of social interactions between individuals and groups, then the systematic examination of places of gathering can provide for the study of social transformations associated with the use of space and the nature of interactions that spaces allow or encourage (Inomata and Tsukamoto 2014:5). Places intended for or repeatedly utilized for gatherings are often accessible to the archaeologist. When accompanied by monumental architecture these places are regularly theorized as important locations for community and identity construction. Here, however, we consider gathering spaces more broadly to examine how communities and identities can be crafted at varying spatial and temporal scales. From the sitting areas and dance grounds surrounding Ju/'hoansi central fires to the state's monumental public spaces like those in Washington, D.C., we are aware of the role that gathering places—and the performances that take place within them—play in structuring both daily life and the workings of variously scaled communities and institutions. Although gatherings can take many forms and do occur inside domestic structures or other buildings (e.g., Bowser 2000; McAnany 2002; Rodning 2009a), our focus in this chapter is on the open plaza, one of the primary gathering spaces at many prehistoric sites.

## Living through Plazas

The domain of the plaza is an arena for encounters.

Da Matta (1984:210)

As gathering spaces, plazas are ubiquitous in the archaeological record. They are present at sites produced by ancient hunter-gatherers, were common components of the first villages and cities around the globe, and served prominently in the political machinations of the earliest states. Despite their use within many different social contexts and their various forms, scholars have demonstrated that a study of plazas can provide useful insights into the lives of the people who built and used them (Alt et al. 2010; Cobb and Butler 2016; Dalan 1997; Dalan et al. 2003; Holley et al. 1993; Kidder 2004; Lewis et al. 1998; Low 2000; Moore 1996; Nair 2015; Nelson 2014; Rogers et al. 1982; Sassaman and Heckenberger 2004; Smith 2008; Zucker 1959). Here we propose that plazas may be particularly useful in understanding the creation and maintenance

of the imagined communities that form the day-to-day social environments in which people live.

The plaza is not always explicitly defined in archaeological literature. Plazas are usually considered spaces that remain free of substantial numbers of buildings, monuments, or other constructions but are often surrounded by and thus defined by their presence (Kidder 2004:515). Plazas often delineate public or communal spaces in which large segments of one or more communities can gather (Lewis et al. 1998:11). Archaeologists are aware that not all plazas were free of features, but their relative scarcity within a plaza (as opposed to around a plaza's boundaries) effectively allows the archaeologist to know a plaza when they see one.

In more general terms, a plaza "is nothing more than cultural meaning assigned to a defined space within a site" (Lewis et al. 1998:16). Although a looser concept, this more inclusive description captures the fact that plaza use can change from moment to moment, allowing for the congregation of various populations of different social composition through time (Nair 2015; Smith 2008). Plazas can thus host private and exclusive ceremonies and later shift to being spaces for large public and inclusive events. This flexibility is key to understanding how plazas form an integral part of the everyday lives of people (Low 2000).

The largest plazas can be viewed as spaces where entire communities could gather. However, it is equally important to note that multiple plazas within villages and urban centers may have had separate functions or served distinct populations or institutions. At these sites, effectual plaza spaces can be thought of as organizing the built environment into differentiated groups, including household groups around courtyards and patios, neighborhoods, and locations serving sodalities or specific interest groups (Nelson 2014; Smith 2008; Wilson 2008). The physicality of the smallest places of gathering would also have been part of the recursive structuring of interpersonal relationships, meanings, and perceptions (Smith 2008). As William Ringle (2014:169) points out, the Central American Nahuatl term *cemithualtin* means "those of a single patio" but is also defined as "family." "It is interesting that [the patio], rather than the house, was the architectural metaphor of choice, suggesting that the open common space between houses, the locus of daily socializing, visual contact, and task performance, was thought to better reflect the social bonds holding a household together" (Ringle 2014:169).

By emphasizing both the places wherein people interact and the acts themselves, we may productively consider the interplay of social spaces (the built environment), social interactions, and social organization (Moore 1996). Be-

cause “human sociality and identity are rooted in our sensory perceptions of the presence and actions of others” (Inomata 2006:805), the built environment can be an effective tool for considering how actions, and by extension institutions and communities, were structured through practice across various scales. The size and form of plazas, and their locations within sites relative to other components of the physical landscape, would have affected where people performed particular actions, who witnessed these actions, and even *how* those actions were perceived by others (Moore 1996). While acts are often considered political if conducted in monumental plazas in front of masses, they can take on “domestic” qualities if performed in the courtyard spaces in front of co-residing or visiting kin. But in terms of inscribing notions of groupness upon those who act, are seen, and do the seeing, even the institution of the co-residing family can be considered “imagined”—a community born of daily and routine, if not also politicized, performances (Hodder 2006; Sahlins 2011:2–3; see also Christophersen 2015).

We draw upon these ideas in framing how constructed gathering places in the southeastern United States were active components of the cultural act of community and identity construction. We consider contexts ranging from public to private and how various scales of community identities were likely enacted. The tempo, periodicity, and spatial scales at which individuals and groups interacted would have been important for community organization and social transformation, along with the actual events that took place within the physically constructed spaces that we examine. In this way, space and landscape are as much a part of the “everyday” archaeological record as the material items that we recover as artifacts. Plazas and courtyards, as places where people gather and interact, are one entryway into studying these everyday processes.

## Plazas as Gathering Spaces in the Greater Southeastern United States

Plazas . . . represent the social relations of the people who build, maintain, or simply appear in them. They are fixed, or marked, points that not only reflect social relations but also perpetuate or “sediment” these relations in place.

Sassaman and Heckenberger (2004:229)

Central open areas at camps and aggregation sites have been used by Native American groups since Paleolithic times (Anderson 2012b; Kidder 2004:516). The act of enclosing a plaza with earthworks started in the Lower South during the Middle Archaic period. Mound building (and presumably plaza enclosure)



was subsequently practiced in different subregions until the point of European contact, leaving a nearly unabated legacy of monumentalism that lasted roughly five millennia (Kassabaum 2015; Kidder and Sherwood, Chapter 12; Milner 2004b). Thus, since the initial “peopling” of the Eastern Woodlands through the moment of European contact and even up to the present, central spaces and plazas were and are utilized by communities as arenas for “activities that . . . served to promote group and cultural identity” (Anderson 2012b:80).

If relatively little is understood of Late Pleistocene and early Holocene gathering spaces, much more is known about later pre-Columbian plazas (Anderson 2012b:80–81). The mound-and-plaza site plan has a long history in the greater Southeast. “Plaza construction as a purposeful and planned element of site architecture is generally considered a diagnostic feature of the Mississippi period” (Kidder 2004:526; see also Holley et al. 1993:306; Lewis and Stout 1998). In the ethnohistoric record of southeastern Native American groups, plazas were publicly administered places dedicated to community celebrations, games, religious ceremonies, and diplomatic events (Black 1967:514–522; Knight 1989; Rogers et al. 1982:Tables 1 and 2). Prehistoric plazas have been interpreted through these accounts as well as through archaeological data, with a focus on what we know about plazas at Mississippian sites.

Though many accounts still focus on the role that mounds, as foundations for elite and special-purpose structures and thus stages for the exhibition of social status, played in determining plaza function, plazas are now commonly recognized to have served diverse social, economic, and political purposes. Many of these interpretations focus on the plaza’s ability to hold large gatherings. For example, Cahokia’s numerous open spaces, including its massive Grand Plaza, were locations where diverse populations, corporate kin groups and their followers, and members of various sodalities hosted public feasts, crafted and displayed ritually significant items, and likely hosted important ceremonies and games, among other things (Brown and Kelly 2015; Byers 2006; DeBoer 1993; Kelly 2001; Kelly 2006; Pauketat et al. 2002).

In the Midwest and Ohio River Valley, Middle Woodland Hopewell sites are known for their intricate patterning of mounds and geometric ditch-and-embankment earthworks and enclosures. Whether specific Hopewell centers served as “vacant” ceremonial centers or as aggregation sites for dispersed forager-farmers (see Bernardini 2004; Lynott 2015:72–25; Wright and Henry 2013:12), they are assumed to have hosted temporary gatherings where regional populations participated in the construction and maintenance of monuments, crafting, ceremonies, mate exchange, burial rite, and gifting (Charles and Buikstra 2002; Henry and Barrier 2016; Lynott 2015:40). Although Hopewell scholars

rarely talk of formal plazas, this range of activities is similar to that posited for plaza sites throughout the American South. While mound-and-plaza settlements were places of residence for many sedentary groups in the Southeast, the pathways to village life differed across various subregions. We believe that it is important to take a temporally and spatially inclusive look at plazas.

In the last few decades, pre-Mississippian monumental spaces of the Southeast have received increased scholarly attention. Work at Archaic mound sites, shell rings, and ring middens in the lower South has provided a rich literature from which to consider the function and meaning of the earliest plazas in North America. The practice of creating monumental landscapes (including plazas) begins during the Middle Archaic period in the Lower Mississippi Valley at sites such as Watson Brake (Saunders et al. 1997), Hedgepeth (Saunders et al. 2006), Caney (Saunders et al. 2000), and possibly Frenchmen's Bend and Insley (Sassaman and Heckenberger 2004:225). We know very little about the use of early central spaces at these sites, but Kenneth Sassaman and Michael Heckenberger (2004) argue for their purposeful construction as part of the monumental process.

Evidence of activities was concentrated around the perimeter of a clean, central space at these earliest mound-and-plaza sites (Saunders 2012:37), meaning either that activity was not taking place within the plaza or that plazas were being actively swept free of debris. The latter explanation fits well with Vernon Knight's (1989:283–284) suggestion that mounds may have first developed due to the piling up of debris associated with periodic cleaning and purification of a central space, similar to the Muskogean term *tadjo*, referring to mounds or ridges formed during the cleaning of square grounds. Thus, everyday social practices that would have taken place during communal gatherings before or coincident with the advent of earthworks were likely constitutive of emergent monumentality (see Joyce 2004).

Late Archaic coastal shell rings provide evidence for other early monumental landscapes that developed around central spaces. Shell rings consist of curvilinear arrangements of shell-bearing sediment surrounding areas of little to no shell (Russo 2006). These sites have been variously interpreted as relating to feasting behavior (e.g., Russo 2004), purposeful monumentality (e.g., Saunders and Russo 2002), burial ceremonialism (e.g., Elliott and Sassaman 1995), identity signaling (e.g., Russo 2006), domestic habitation (e.g., Trinkley 1985), and water management (e.g., Marquardt 2010). Many recent analyses of shell rings accept a middle-of-the-road approach that emphasizes the various and dynamic functions that these locations may have served (e.g., Thompson and Andrus 2011).

Some attention has also been given to early nonshell ring middens in the Lower Southeast (Belmont 1967; Phillips 1970; Pluckhahn 2010; Russo et al. 2014; Stephenson et al. 2002). As curvilinear arrangements of organically stained soils intermixed with uneven amounts of shell and other cultural material, these ring middens also surround open and relatively clean plazas (Russo et al. 2014:127). Although these middens are sometimes interpreted as villages throughout both the Archaic and Woodland periods, archaeologists have considered the function and use of these middens' central plazas. Pluckhahn (2010) argues that plazas would have been necessary to early village groups because, as corporately organized ritual spaces, they served to reduce tensions in growing communities and provide locations for symbolic bonding that strengthened social ties (cf. Sassaman and Heckenberger 2004). While some plazas could have served village communities, large ring middens may also have served integrative purposes for dispersed regional populations.

Some of the larger ring middens of the later Middle to Late Woodland period have associated monuments, including platform mounds at Late Woodland sites such as Kolomoki (Pluckhahn 2003) and McKeithen (Milanich et al. 1984). These mounds, while closely resembling Mississippian platforms in final form, differ in dramatic ways, such as lacking structures on the summits and having unrestricted visual access from plazas (Knight 2001). Pluckhahn (2010) argues that the separation between sacred and profane (or public and private) space that took place early in the development of sites like these is key to understanding the social dynamics that eventually develop at later Mississippian mound-and-plaza centers.

## Living through Gatherings in the Late Woodland

In this section we discuss two case studies from separate areas of the Late Woodland Southeast. Through these case studies, we hope to highlight how gathering spaces were actively used to organize different scales of pre-Columbian Native American communities. Due to the rise in popularity in the lower South of site layouts consisting of large platform mounds surrounding open plazas, the Late Woodland has recently garnered increasing attention as a time of changing community organization (Anderson and Sassaman 2012; Nassaney 2000). Though these early platform mounds and their associated plazas are often discussed as precursors to Mississippian mounds, their functions were variable and undoubtedly included both the continuation of long-standing traditions and the development of new ones.

## Late Woodland Plazas in the Lower Mississippi Valley

Throughout the Late Woodland, flat-topped mounds become increasingly common in the Lower Mississippi Valley, culminating in the Coles Creek tradition of building two or more large platform mounds arranged around open plazas. These sites do not appear to have been permanently occupied. Instead, it appears that people lived in dispersed hamlets and used mound sites as central gathering places. Like earlier groups, they hunted, fished, and gathered wild plant and animal resources and eventually adopted a number of domesticated indigenous seed crops, though corn agriculture was not adopted until later (Fritz 2000; Fritz and Kidder 1993; Kidder and Fritz 1993; Listi 2008). Evidence concerning mound summit use is variable: some show formal buildings, others show periodic use of temporary structures, and still others show no evidence of buildings at all (e.g., Belmont 1967; Ford 1951; Fuller and Fuller 1987; Kassabaum 2014; Roe 2010; Williams and Brain 1983). While it is possible that some individuals in these societies earned status through their participation in activities associated with these mounds, it is likely that this power was impermanent and not inherited, ascribed, or made visible in the mortuary program (Kassabaum 2011).

Despite the now-common recognition that plazas are not just empty spaces but rather meaningful and purposefully constructed locations of activity, discussions of them still rely heavily on the presence of mounds. That is, without mounds, we do not often talk about plazas. However, a great deal of evidence from Late Woodland sites in the Lower Mississippi Valley suggests that plazas predate mounds at many sites. For example, John Belmont (1967) identified the “Black River site plan” at Greenhouse, and Philip Phillips (1970) identified the Tchula Lake pattern in his study of the Lower Yazoo Basin. These site plans consist of oval plazas flanked by midden accumulations. This general layout was common throughout the Lower Mississippi Valley during the Baytown period (A.D. 400–750). Only later were mounds constructed atop the ring of midden at some of these sites.

The Feltus site (22JE500), located in southwestern Mississippi, is a prime example of this pattern. Excavations were undertaken at Feltus from 2006 to 2012 under the direction of Vincas Steponaitis and John O’Hear. The site shows a traditional mound-and-plaza arrangement with four mounds surrounding a central open space (Steponaitis et al. 2015:Figure 2.4).

Surface collections suggested that the mounds were built on top of a midden similar to that identified by Belmont (1967:Figure 1) at Greenhouse. Shovel tests confirmed the presence of this oval midden, and artifact density maps indi-

cated the plaza's extent relative to the midden (Kassabaum 2014:Figure 2.6; Steponaitis and O'Hear 2008). Geophysical survey of the off-mound areas further supported this pattern by showing features along the edges of the plaza with the center entirely clear of suggestive anomalies (Haley and Johnson 2008). The pattern of features and debris at Feltus indicates that the site was not used haphazardly before the construction of the mounds but rather that the premound occupation was a planned use of space, which already included the purposeful creation of the central plaza. Research at other Coles Creek sites such as Goldmine (Belmont 1982), Fredericks (Girard 2000), and Mazique (LaDu 2013) suggests that the presence of distinct, ring-shaped, premound middens might represent a broader Coles Creek pattern.

Five seasons of excavation at Feltus have provided a great deal of information about the activities that took place at the site both before and after mounds were constructed and hint at how periodic activities were active in structuring the daily lives of Coles Creek people. In general, Coles Creek plazas were carefully curated, being kept free of debris and at times artificially leveled or otherwise modified to form the desired size, shape, and grade (Kidder 2004). With the possible exception of ritual specialists, mound centers themselves were vacant, with the surrounding populations gathering at them only periodically. If central gathering places are not viewed as material components of peoples' cultural landscapes, then these sites might be considered of little value for understanding the everyday lives of Coles Creek people. However, the social relationships and imagined communities that were forged at these gathering places determined the everyday experiences of those involved, even, we argue, while groups were dispersed across the landscape (see Hollenbach and Carmody, Chapter 5, for a similar view of hunting-gathering communities; and Kidder and Sherwood, Chapter 12, for a similar view of mounds and earthworks).

The area immediately surrounding the Feltus plaza hosted periodic large-scale ritual events focused on communal food consumption, a repeated process of setting and removing large standing posts, and burial of the dead (Kassabaum 2014; Kassabaum and Nelson 2016; Nelson and Kassabaum 2014). While mound building eventually became part of these events, much of the activity at Feltus took place before mounds were constructed. This provides the important opportunity to take a less mound-centric view of the activities occurring at Coles Creek sites.

In evaluating the nature of the premound eating events at Feltus, Kassabaum (2014) concludes that the open communal location, large size of vessels, and sheer amount of food found at Feltus all imply the involvement of large groups of people drawn from throughout the surrounding region. Work at Feltus has

also shown little to no evidence of high-quality vessels, prestige items, or any of the other traditional markers for competitive feasting. There are, however, large amounts of bear bone and pipe fragments, both materials used by Native American groups in rituals associated with community building through establishing, maintaining, and strengthening relationships (Bieder 2006; Black 1998; Brown 1953; Paper 1988; Rockwell 1991).

Combined, this evidence suggests that the primary function of the pre-mound events was to gather the scattered Coles Creek population and provide an opportunity for communal reinforcement of social bonds. In other words, the Feltus events fostered the creation of an imagined community that persisted and structured relationships even when people returned to their daily lives in rural scattered homesteads. While we are merely speculating, we can imagine dispersed groups throughout the year at hamlets or camp sites sharing memories of past gatherings or envisioning and preparing for future festivities and sharing stories about those that they are likely to meet again.

The conclusion that the pre-mound activities at Feltus centered on social integration is further supported by the repeated cycle of setting and removing nonstructural posts associated with the feasting events (Kassabaum and Nelson 2016; Nelson and Kassabaum 2014). Nonstructural standing posts were common on Woodland period sites (Milanich et al. 1984; Knight 1990, 2001; Kimball et al. 2010), including those in the American Bottom that are discussed below (Kelly 1990b). The interpretations of such posts are largely based on traditional Native American beliefs regarding the structure of the world as consisting of multiple layers connected by an axis mundi, commonly represented as a pole or a tree (Lankford 2007; Reilly 2004). This axis is seen as a “portal” through which certain beings can travel. The idea of opening lines of communication with the spirit world is further supported by the material inclusions in the Feltus postholes, which represent substances commonly associated with the upper and lower worlds (see also Kelly 1990b).

Megan Kassabaum and Erin Nelson (2016; see also Nelson and Kassabaum 2014) have argued that the standing posts at Feltus may therefore represent locations where beings could move and communicate between the worlds, thereby extending the social network being created at the Feltus events beyond the people physically attending to those who inhabited different spatial and temporal domains. The inclusion of the act of human burial within the ritual cycle further supports this conclusion, as previous generations of individuals were actively included in the Feltus gatherings. The spatial and temporal breadth of the imagined community formed during the events at Feltus quite literally created the social world inhabited by Coles Creek people every day, allowing individuals to

structure their mundane decisions and day-to-day tasks around the knowledge that they were a part of something much larger than their co-habiting group (see also Hollenbach and Carmody, Chapter 5).

Importantly, after mound construction began, the nature of the activities taking place at Feltus shows remarkable stability (Kassabaum 2014; Kassabaum and Nelson 2016; Nelson and Kassabaum 2014). Continuity between the pre-mound and post-mound uses of the site suggests that the act of constructing and using platform mounds did not in and of itself change the nature of the social relationships being negotiated in and around the Feltus plaza and enacted in the daily lives of Coles Creek people. To the contrary, a strong focus on gathering and an ethos of communalism characterized the activities taking place during both the pre-mound and mounded phases of Feltus's occupation.

### Late Woodland Plazas and Courtyards in the American Bottom

The American Bottom portion of the Central Mississippi Valley is well known for its plazas. The roughly 20-hectare Grand Plaza at the Mississippian site of Cahokia is one of the largest constructed plazas in pre-Columbian North America (Alt et al. 2010; Dalan 1997; Dalan et al. 2003; Holley et al. 1993; see Cobb and Butler 2016:Table 1). The Grand Plaza, together with several other expansive plazas, dozens of mounds, and numerous neighborhoods, formed the central core of an urban settlement that stretched more than 15 km<sup>2</sup> (Kelly and Brown 2014; Pauketat 2004).

The construction of monumental plazas at Mississippian Cahokia points to a precocious history of plaza use and enlargement in the American Bottom (Kelly and Brown 2014). Unlike those in the Lower South, communities here did not construct earthen mounds or mound-and-plaza centers for much of the Late Woodland (Pauketat 2004:53). Small plazas were incorporated into early village settlements only during a few centuries before the start of the Mississippian period. These gathering places initially were not adjoined by mounds.

In general, the Late Woodland in the Upper South/Midwest is a time of steady population growth, reduced zones of resource acquisition, commitments toward sedentism (although not large villages until rather late), increased inter-group violence, the introduction and spread of bow-and-arrow technologies, and intensified use of indigenous seed crops (Anderson and Sassaman 2012; Blitz and Porth 2013; Buikstra et al. 1986; Emerson et al. 2000; Gremillion 2002; McElrath et al. 2000; Nassaney and Cobb 1991; Simon 2000). Maize, although present in small amounts throughout much of the period, becomes abundant in the American Bottom after A.D. 900 (Simon and Parker 2006). Settlement pat-

terns suggest small groups were gradually “filling in” the region by increasingly utilizing upland and prairie zones.

Permanent and nucleated villages were present in the American Bottom by the end of the ninth century (Kelly 1990a; Koldehoff and Galloy 2006; Pauketat 1994:48–52). Numerous sites dating just prior to the start of the Mississippian period (circa A.D. 1050) have been studied, many of these under the auspices of the FAI-270 project (see Emerson et al. 2006). One of the better-known sites with pre-Mississippian occupations is Range (11S47) (Kelly 1990a:Figure 59). John Kelly directed year-round excavations there from 1978 to 1981. The resulting reports and publications provide the information used here (e.g., Kelly 1990b, 2000; Kelly et al. 2007).

From the Late Woodland through early Mississippi periods Range was the center of intense and repeated activities. More than 5,000 features dating to this time were delineated during excavations, including approximately 600 structures (Kelly 1990b:73–74). The initial structures at Range, built between A.D. 650 and 850, consist of dozens of rectilinear and keyhole-shaped structures (Kelly 1990b:Figure 20). Temporally distributed clusters of features bespeak occupations ranging from short-term encampments to small hamlets and larger clusters of buildings. The first “semisedentary” villages at Range may have developed at this time (cf. Kelly 1990b, 2000; Koldehoff and Galloy 2006), and occupations were likely short-term bases for pre-maize forager-farmer groups.

Between roughly A.D. 850 and 1050, Late Woodland (or emergent Mississippian) occupations consisted of multiple villages that formed and morphed through the fission and fusion of co-resident groups. These groups constructed their permanent domiciles around small, open courtyards. Together, each handful of structures ringing a central space is called a “courtyard group.” Courtyard groups and their central places appear as built forms that would have increasingly focused the everyday activities of household members around a shared intimate space.

But everyday activities apparently involved more than subsistence-related tasks or a group of concerns that are often glossed as the domestic sphere. Excavations of courtyard groups reveal practices relating to both domestic and ceremonial activities (Kelly 1990b; Kelly et al. 2007). At villages like Range, courtyard groups were becoming the locus of daily life for individuals increasingly tethered to new domestic (and politicized) spaces, interpersonal relations with kin and corporate group members, and the emerging demands of the maize agricultural cycle (see Barrier 2011:215; Beck and Brown 2012; Brown and Kelly 2015; Cobb and Nassaney 2002:537–538; Koldehoff and Galloy 2006:278).

Analyses of materials recovered from courtyard groups at Range show that



the importance of both deer and nut resources declines through time and that the frequency of projectile points (likely used for hunting) also decreases. There is evidence for increasing utilization of maize as well as indigenous starchy seed crops. Also increasing is the presence of Mill Creek chert hoes, which were used as digging and agricultural implements (Cobb 2000), and polished flakes. Changes seen in ceramic assemblages include substantial increases in the numbers of jars having restricted and plain necks, handles, and limestone tempering (instead of grog or grit), among other things. These ceramic attributes may have been associated with maize processing (Kelly 1990a:76; see also Briggs 2016).

In addition to the residential structures surrounding them, courtyards were typically marked by the placement of central features of probable ceremonial significance. These include four pits in a quadrilateral arrangement, a central post, or the occasional rectangular structure (Kelly 2000:Figure 7.3; Kelly and Brown 2014:Figure 9.3; Kelly et al. 2007). Kelly (1990a, 2007b) discusses the potential symbolic importance of these courtyard facilities, linking the courtyards with four pits (and the often associated gourd effigy vessels) to notions of the earth and fertility; and courtyards with central posts (and the sometimes associated chunky stones) to the upper world.

The actual relationships that reproduced (and were reproduced by) courtyard groups are not fully understood, but many archaeologists believe they represent the spatial and material expression of corporate kin groups, potentially akin to matrilineages (Kelly 2000:167; Pauketat 2003:43; see also Wilson 2008:136). The occurrence of daily domestic activities within courtyard spaces that also housed important ceremonial facilities signals the ritual proclivities of the emerging corporate entity. The range of practices taking place within these enclosed “domestic” spaces was seemingly as important to the coherence of the local family/corporate group as large plazas were for the creation of larger imagined communities (*sensu* Hodder 2006).

Between A.D. 950 and 1000 the village at Range was occupied by at least nine courtyard groups (Kelly 1990b:Figure 40, 2007c). With an estimated 105 individuals living within about 1.2 hectares (Barrier and Horsley 2014:Figure 6), this occupation marked the largest population that would be seen at the site. For the first time at Range, villagers also built formal plazas, around which they organized their courtyard groups that still contained internal ritual facilities. Two separate plazas, each covering about 0.04 hectares, created another scale of public space for the local village community (Kelly 2007a). It has been argued that, as the Range village’s population grew, the shared public spaces would have been active in integrating the numerous courtyard groups into a larger

and more nucleated community (Barrier and Horsley 2014; Kelly 1990a, 1990b, 1992, 2007b). Several courtyard groups were abandoned after about A.D. 1000, and the villagers at Range reorganized their courtyard groups now around one public plaza (Kelly 1990b:Figure 42).

Throughout the approximately two centuries of village life at Range, inhabitants made gathering places central components of their settlements. By viewing these places as part of the material record of their everyday lives, we could likewise say that these spaces also “made” the individuals and social groups that lived and moved through them. At least two types of central spaces are recognized: courtyards and public plazas. These spaces were stages for daily practices that would have brought these new communities and identities to life. The activities taking place within these spaces would also have served to integrate at least two scales of community: the co-residential corporate group and the local village.

As an aside, all of this was completed without earthen mounds. Platform mound construction would not begin in the American Bottom until near the transition to the Mississippi period around A.D. 1050 (Barrier and Horsley 2014; Horsley et al. 2014; Kelly 1990a; Milner 1998; Pauketat 2004). Mounds became important monuments for many Mississippian communities, but the history of community alterations at Range (as at Feltus, described above) draws our attention also to the role of gathering places as active spaces for the structuring of everyday lives.

## Discussion

It may be that we should identify ritual not as a separate sphere of practice, but as a distinct *mode of conduct*, which people move into and out of in the course of their day.

Thomas (2011:379; emphasis in the original)

We hope that this chapter demonstrates that gathering spaces have played a significant role in the everyday lives of eastern Native American groups since initial colonization. Certain gathering spaces in the Lower South were monumentalized by the Middle and Late Archaic—literally leaving a more permanent record—by the raising of earth or shell around open plazas. Whether initial mounding happened unintentionally through acts of cleaning and refuse deposition or through purposeful monumentality, mounds and earthworks would go on to become icons of Native American communities (Kidder and Sherwood, Chapter 12). Indeed, mounds at different times and places became repositories

for the ancestors, markers of significant places on the landscape, locations for community building and identity creation, and eventually platforms for important persons, temples, and political institutions.

We have highlighted instances where plazas were created and used before mounds, and where plazas developed as integral parts of the built environment alongside mounds, not coincidentally with them (see also Belmont 1967; Kidder 2004; Pluckhahn 2010; Schilling 2010:285, 2012). The presence of a ring midden at Feltus that only later was capped by mounds indicates an intense history of social gatherings surrounding a plaza where feasting and other important ritual activity occurred. The placement of permanent earthen monuments did not significantly alter the daily lives or organization of the scattered populations that congregated there but instead further memorialized an already important place of gathering, providing permanence to the collective memory inscribed there. A dispersed community was created and maintained through periodic acts of gathering, feasting, setting and pulling ritual posts, and eventually burial and mound building. People lived their daily lives in the context of this imagined community. It is likely that the details that were worked out at events like those at Feltus had effects that endured long after the events had concluded.

Concurrently, at places like Range in the American Bottom we see the transition to permanent and nucleated village life in the centuries leading up to the Mississippian period. These villages contained at least two types of gathering spaces: public plazas that would have served numerous corporate groups and held large public gatherings; and central courtyards that fixed new forms of domestic space and groupings. As at Feltus, these initial villages did not include mounds. Mounds in the American Bottom were not incorporated into towns and urban communities until the Mississippian transition around A.D. 1050 (and they were never built at Range).

There are both distinct similarities and clear differences between the patterns that we have identified at Feltus and Range. Though both represent locations for gathering, and we suggest also for the formation and maintenance of social bonds, the scale of the relationships forged differed between these two sites. The periodic gatherings around the Feltus plaza united a spatially (and perhaps temporally) expansive community. Gatherings in the numerous courtyards at Range emphasized new co-residential (and corporate) kin relations that were reinforced by the everyday rhythms of doing and seeing and the sharing of things and tasks with those often present within the permanent courtyard space. These groups at Range also struck new bonds with others in their village through the literal material gathering of their corporate bodies around more public and formal inclusive plazas.

Charles Cobb and Michael Nassaney (2002:538) note that during the Woodland period “there was very little formalization of domestic space through the use of either substantial houses or planned living communities. Thus, despite the veneer of formality suggested by earthworks . . . the discipline of the domestic world as seen in the Eurasian Neolithic did not seem to take hold during the Woodland era . . . until extremely late.” They discuss the built landscape to consider how individuals would have altered the ways in which they envisioned themselves and their societies. In their view, most Woodland communities were visualized through the ritual world of mounds and earthworks long before they were organized through the domestic household. Our case studies support this assessment, although we wish to highlight that this communal orientation developed initially at many southeastern sites around the built environment of plazas, and gathering spaces more broadly, that served as arenas for the transformation of society.

As should be evident in our review of southeastern plazas, we do not see strong evidence for permanently nucleated settlements throughout most of the Archaic and Woodland Southeast. However, this settlement pattern becomes the norm at Range and other Upper South/Midwestern sites and would soon become what archaeologists consider definitional for most Mississippian societies. Only at occasional and often debated moments in the pre-Mississippian lower South do temporary gatherings appear to have taken on more permanence in residential and village form at monumental settings (see Pluckhahn 2010; Thompson and Moore 2015:252–254; Thompson and Pluckhahn 2010). This reminds us that those historical trajectories involving “settling down” were not singular evolutionary pathways but rather moments of creative response to particular realities (Quinn and Barrier 2014; Yoffee et al. 1999). Complex societies (i.e., societies with many parts) developed in both cases, just at different spatial and temporal scales. Only at Feltus were mounds eventually constructed, yet at both Feltus and Range gathering places were spaces for the active construction of complex communities.

## Conclusion

Despite their apparent differences, our case studies emphasize the roles that open spaces played in creating different scales and temporalities of communities. The gathering places at both Feltus and Range created and housed multiple overlapping imagined communities. No matter what the size or character of these gatherings, the performances enacted in the central spaces created the social worlds in which pre-Columbian people lived. Participants in the large-scale

rituals occurring in the Feltus plaza spent much of their time spatially separated, but the periodic moments of aggregation quite literally created the personal relationships, social structure, and ritual system in which they lived their daily lives. In contrast, participants in the daily activities that occurred in the Range courtyards co-resided, but the particular relationships that they shared with other individuals were negotiated in outside spaces and the very presence and structure of the courtyard itself tied them—every day—into a much larger local community around formal central plazas.

# **Investigating the Ordinary**

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