

STANDING POSTS AND SPECIAL SUBSTANCES: GATHERING AND RITUAL DEPOSITION AT FELTUS (22JE500), JEFFERSON COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI

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Because it immediately precedes the Mississippi period, Coles Creek (A.D. 700–1200) culture is often viewed through the lens of Mississippian social organization. In particular, early platform mound-and-plaza complexes have long been understood as elite compounds due to their physical similarities with later sites. However, evidence regarding the construction and use of the monumental landscape at the Feltus site (22JE500) in Jefferson County, MS, suggests that platform mound construction was but one aspect of a broader ritual sequence aimed at gathering the dispersed Coles Creek community. In addition to mound building, this sequence included the setting and removal of freestanding posts, ritual feasting, and burial of the dead and focused on explicit deposition of meaningful objects and substances. Archaeological, ethnohistoric, and ethnographic analyses of the objects and substances included in the ritual deposits at Feltus suggest that they helped forge relationships between an extended kin network, including non-human fictive kin and non-living human kin. In this context, we find a metaphor of gathering to be useful in understanding the archaeological remains of a ritual sequence focused on bringing together social, cosmological, and temporal domains. This provides a distinctly different take on the meaning and use of platform mounds based on a review of Native beliefs and practices that looks beyond the traditionally relied upon sources.

KEYWORDS: *Lower Mississippi Valley, Coles Creek, Ritual deposition, Post ceremonialism, Cosmology*

The Late Woodland-period Coles Creek culture flourished in the Lower Mississippi Valley from A.D. 700 to 1200 and is often thought to contain the incipient stages of Mississippian social organization. Despite a lack of corroborating evidence, the ubiquity of platform mound-and-plaza complexes has been used to support an argument for sociopolitical hierarchy. We propose an alternative view that emphasizes building platform mounds as one aspect of a broader ritual sequence. Using our work at the Feltus site (22JE500) in Jefferson County, MS, we identify a repeated sequence of feasting, post-setting, mound building, and burial of the dead that we believe was aimed at gathering the dispersed Coles Creek community. Our focus is on the process of deposition, as well as the patterned contents of deposits associated with the ritual cycle, particularly the setting and removal of freestanding posts. By focusing on these assemblages, we emphasize that individuals build relationships

not only through their engagement with people, but also through their interactions with material culture, namely structures, sediments, artifacts, and animals (Mills and Walker 2008:13; Pauketat and Alt 2005; Skousen 2012). Using ethnohistoric and ethnographic sources to explore the connections that objects and substances included in the ritual deposits at Feltus might have forged, we argue that standing posts, objects with fire and water associations, and bear and human remains relate to Coles Creek peoples' beliefs about kinship, the geography of the cosmos, and the nature of connections between people, places, and things.

DEBATING THE FUNCTION OF COLES CREEK PLATFORM MOUNDS

Archaeologists are accustomed to relying on incomplete or fragmentary data. In the absence of systematic survey or excavation, our

interpretations of the past often draw heavily upon two lines of evidence: (1) the presence and form of monumental architecture; and (2) analogy with better-known archaeological or ethnohistoric cases. Following these trends, archaeologists' understandings of Coles Creek societies in the Lower Mississippi Valley have historically relied on interpretations of platform mounds, and more specifically on site plans consisting of mounds arranged symmetrically around open plazas. In their final form, these sites closely resemble Mississippian-period mound centers and are frequently assumed to function in similar ways. That is, the appearance of large platform mounds at Coles Creek sites is commonly thought to mark a shift from egalitarian to hierarchical social structure dominated by chiefly lineages (e.g., Hudson 1976; Kidder 1992; Steponaitis 1986). This status-focused interpretation is based on archaeological understandings of Mississippian society and sixteenth- and eighteenth-century European accounts that describe powerful leaders presiding over their subjects from mound-top residences and temples (Clayton et al. 1993; Swanton 1911).

Although these interpretations have led to the belief that Coles Creek sites contain the incipient stages of chiefdom-type social organization, recent work shows that they lack other characteristics commonly used to support arguments for institutionalized hierarchy, such as elaborate burials, long-distance trade, status goods, and large-scale agriculture (Kassabaum 2011; Kidder and Fritz 1993). Moreover, evidence for mound summit use is variable, with some Coles Creek mound summits showing evidence of formal buildings (e.g., Mound A at Greenhouse [Ford 1951]), others showing evidence of periodic use with temporary structures (e.g., Mound B at Raffman [Roe 2010]), and others showing no evidence of buildings at all (e.g., Mound A at Feltus [Kassabaum 2014; Steponaitis et al. 2012, 2014]). In addition, Coles Creek mound centers did not develop out of villages like many Mississippian centers, but were conceived and built as central gathering places. Many never had resident populations, even in the off-mound areas. Although we are still working to understand the distribution of Coles Creek people across the landscape, we infer that the settlement pattern at this time was dispersed with people living in scattered farmsteads surrounding mound centers (Kidder 2004b; Steponaitis et al. 2014). Because these characteristics are decidedly un-Mississippian, archaeologists

recognize the need for research programs focusing on the function of Coles Creek platform mounds. Steponaitis and O'Hear have addressed this problem recently at Feltus (Kassabaum 2014; Kassabaum et al. 2014; O'Hear et al. 2012; Steponaitis et al. 2012, 2014). Others have asked similar questions at sites such as Bayou Grande Cheniere, Graveline, Mott, Osceola, Raffman, and Reno Brake (Downs and Blitz 2011; Kidder 1993; Kidder and Fritz 1993; Roe 2010; Schilling 2004).

These projects, along with those conducted on mound sites dating to other time periods, demonstrate the variety of circumstances under which mounds were constructed, used, and experienced. Mound function and meaning shifted over the *longue durée*, as evidenced by changes in their form and use as well as the religious, economic, and political systems in which they were enmeshed. Mound function and meaning was likely also variable within any given period or culture (e.g., Carr and McCord 2013:36–37). For instance, Coles Creek people built visually similar but functionally distinct mounds at the same site (Steponaitis et al. 2012, 2014). Moreover, function and meaning likely shifted throughout the use-life of any single monument in at least two ways. First, during their construction, large numbers of people would have played a part in the creation and interpretation of monuments, leading some archaeologists to characterize the process of mound building as communal in nature (Ashmore 2004; Bradley 1991; Pauketat 2007; Pauketat and Alt 2005; Phear 2007). In some cases, this clearly differs from the social relationships fostered by the exclusive use of mound summits by a more selective group of individuals (e.g., Knight 1986). Second, many mounds were built in multiple stages, with building episodes potentially separated by a generation or more. Consequently, each episode of mound building can be seen as a new and different process of negotiation, involving different sets of people and dependent upon the unique social circumstances surrounding the decision to build (see Pauketat and Alt [2005] for an application of this idea to post-setting). Finally, function and meaning of a single monument would vary in any given moment based on the social position of the individual interacting with it (Bradley 1998; Brück 2001; Pauketat and Alt 2003). Because it is clear that a single earthen mound could be interpreted in a variety of ways, our discussion is not meant to suggest that the mounds at Feltus were static in their use; rather, it is

meant to draw attention to some of the likely meanings and functions that are not emphasized in the current literature.

Although recent research has broadened our understanding of early platform mounds, our research at Feltus initially led us *away* from our original focus on mounds. Excavations from 2006 to 2012 have shown that most activity at the site, including large-scale feasting events, took place before the mounds were built. Additionally, a series of freestanding post features in the southern plaza has come to figure prominently in our interpretations of Coles Creek ritual life, as discussed elsewhere (Nelson and Kasabaum 2014). In this article, we expand our earlier discussion, connecting their function and use to a broader ritual sequence that ultimately suggests an alternative interpretation of the Feltus platform mounds. We find that interpreting non-mound features tells us as much or more about the meaning of mounds than the mound excavations themselves, a finding perhaps foreshadowed by Kidder's (2004a) work on plaza architecture and Pauketat and Alt's (2005) work on posts.

In this article, we focus on the nature of deposits associated with freestanding posts located in the south plaza and elsewhere at Feltus. We refer to these deposits throughout the paper as *ritual* in nature because we consider the actions that produced them to exhibit many attributes considered by anthropologists to indicate ritual activity. Specifically, the deposits and the actions that created them are "symbolic, non-technical, formal, prescribed, structured, and repetitive" (Brück 1999:314; see also Bell 1992). Although a complete review of the literature on ritual and structured deposits is beyond our scope (see Garrow [2012] and comments for a recent summary), we consider the Feltus post deposits to more closely resemble *odd deposits* than *material culture patterning* (*sensu* Garrow 2012). As they appear to be "consciously made 'different'" (Garrow 2012:95) through human action, we view them as the result of meaningful, ritualized practice (Bell 1992).

Using this general set of defining characteristics, we identify a variety of materials in the Feltus post deposits that can be interpreted as evidence for ritual. In addition to the posts themselves, we found that the post deposits consist of zones of specially procured sediments such as ash and clay (see also Kimball et al. 2010:47). Within these sediments, Coles Creek people interred an

array of meaningful materials including bear and human remains, pipe fragments, and feasting debris. In order to interpret these unusual inclusions and begin to think about the nature of the rituals with which they were associated, we draw on deep-seated Native American beliefs about the world and the nature of things in it as well as ideas from the archaeological literature on ritual deposition. Specifically, we find that recent theoretical contributions focusing on the symmetrical and relational aspects of human/non-human interactions (e.g., Bennett 2010; Fowler 2013; Latour 2005; Pauketat 2008; Pauketat and Alt 2005; Skousen 2012; Watts 2013) resonate with Native American understandings of the ways that humans and non-humans coexist in the world. This is especially true of approaches that consider the meaningful nature of *assemblages* deposited together, as opposed to individual objects or object classes (e.g., Bennett 2010; Chapman 2008; Fowler 2013; Harris 2013, 2014; Mills 2008; Pauketat 2013; Pollard 2008).

At its most basic, an assemblage is a grouping of materials found together in a given location. Recent work recognizes that as material groupings, assemblages are important "in that their ability to make something happen... is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone" (Bennett 2010:24). Although many archaeological assemblages consist of *ad hoc* groupings of discarded objects, we follow others in using the term to refer specifically to objects and substances intentionally deposited together. In essence, we recognize that an assemblage can be created in order to achieve a form of agency that exceeds that of its constituent parts. This phenomenon has been discussed in the archaeological literature of North America as *bundling* (Brown 2010; Pauketat 2013). In the narrowest sense, bundles have been defined as "two or more items intentionally held together by wrapping so that they may influence one another and act in concert as needed in ritual activities" (Zedeño 2013:122; see also Wissler [1912:92] and examples cited in Pauketat [2013:44-45]). However, some archaeological features may serve the same function as traditional bundles by drawing powerful objects together and concentrating their power in a specific location or container (e.g., a cache, mound, or pit; see Pauketat 2013). We suggest that the Feltus post deposits provide a compelling example of this practice. In what follows, we evaluate the properties of the individual objects and materials included in the

post deposits as well as the properties that emerge when they are placed in combination.

In their volume investigating memory and depositional practice, Mills and Walker (2008:8) write, “[f]or those who use them, the value of objects may be derived from their intrinsic qualities, such as their color or brilliance, ... their place of origin, ... and/or the networks they have passed through” (see also Pauketat 2013:32–34). We have found much of this statement to apply to the contents of the post deposits at Feltus. However, we also found that many of the objects and materials associated with post ritual have properties that are not necessarily intrinsic, but *culturally situated*. Drawing upon the ethnohistoric literature on a variety of American Indian groups and contemporary oral traditions of Native practitioners, we argue that many materials used in post ritual are associated with broadly shared ideas regarding kinship, the geography of the cosmos, and the nature of connections between people, places, and things.

Moreover, we argue that many of the inclusions in the Feltus ritual deposits likely had a certain agency, albeit a non-human kind. Within many Native American belief systems, certain objects and substances have the ability to do things that most humans cannot, allowing for social action that differs from that of humans but is nonetheless part of human sociality. For example, archaeologists working with Indian groups in North America will be familiar with the idea that smoke is often considered sentient, having the ability to “bear witness” or communicate between the human and spirit worlds (e.g., Brown 1953; Carr 2008a:54, 2008b:157, 165 and references therein; Jackson 2003; Paper 1987, 1988; Pauketat 2013; Zedeño 2013). These powers of connection and communication are of such importance to ritual life at Feltus that many materials included in post deposits share these attributes. Moreover, we believe that their connective function may have been the primary reason for their inclusion.

ANALOGY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Because archaeologists have employed analogy in many ways, and particularly because we believe it is so commonly misapplied in explanations of Coles Creek platform mounds (Kassabaum et al. 2011), an explanation of our own use is in order. Ethnographic analogy suffers from a variety of pitfalls, including but not limited to

bias introduced by the ethnographer, bias introduced by the choice of analogy, corruption of information over time, and assumptions about cultural continuity (e.g., Gould and Watson 1982; Wylie 1982, 1985). For that reason, we apply both source-side and subject-side (*sensu* Stahl 1993) criteria to evaluate and justify our choice of analogies. First, we remain open to instances of negative correspondence in our analogies (Wylie 1985:107) and have, in fact, relied heavily upon them in the interpretation presented here. By critically interrogating the various applications of both archaeological and ethnohistoric analogy to questions of Coles Creek social life (see Kassabaum et al. 2011), we find analogies regarding worldview to be much more compelling than those regarding mound function. Second, though not explicitly discussing every instance of negative correspondence, in making our decisions about what to include we rely heavily on the criterion of ubiquity, or the idea that “the widespread distribution of a practice attests its antiquity ... [and] evidential value for analogical insight” (Stahl 1993:249). The primary critique of this criterion is that shared recent history as well as shared deep history may cause this ubiquity (Stahl 1993). Given the range of cultures from which the descriptions of the general belief systems we are discussing are pulled, we do not believe that this critique applies here. Finally, we rely on the convergence of multiple lines of evidence (Carr and McCord 2013:58; Wylie 1985:105–107) in our overall interpretation of the Feltus events. Independent investigations into the meaning of items such as posts, ash, bear, etc. led us independently to similar conclusions.

Our ethnographic sources range from written accounts of the earliest European contact with Indian groups (see Mooney 1900; Swanton 1911, 1929 for syntheses), to contemporary ethnographic descriptions of Native belief systems (e.g., Jackson 2003; Riggs 2012). Although details vary among Indian groups and much has changed since the early contact period, we follow others in noting strong continuities in generalized beliefs among Native peoples of the southeastern and midwestern United States regarding the structure of the cosmos and the place of humans, non-humans, and material objects within it (e.g., Carr and McCord 2013; Pauketat 2013; Townsend 2004). Some of these general beliefs are also broadly shared among indigenous people of the Americas and Eurasia, regardless of sociopolitical, economic, or subsistence systems (Bradley 2000;

Eliade 1961; Lankford 2007; Schele and Freidel 1990). As mentioned above, the geographic extent of these common understandings implies great time depth (Hudson 1976; Lankford 2007; Townsend and Sharp 2004) and allows us to apply such analogies carefully to archaeological remains at prehistoric American Indian sites (Berres et al. 2004; Kelly 2003; Townsend 2004:20–21).

While we draw on the same corpus of literature available to others, our arguments about the nature of Coles Creek society result in a different emphasis than interpretations that view it through a Mississippian lens (e.g., Kidder 2002, 2004b; Knight 1990, 2001; Steponaitis 1986). As outlined above, researchers have tended to ask: how does Coles Creek society encapsulate the beginnings of Mississippian cultural patterns? Mississippian patterns, however, are also understood through later groups. In a previous article, we argued that this ethnographically derived model of platform mound use becomes inappropriate when it is relied upon without evaluation of its applicability to the given case (Kassabaum et al. 2011). We believe these models have had an overwhelming and sometimes misleading effect on our understanding of prehistoric mound building because archaeologists have focused too heavily on the more recent, best preserved, and most highly resolved exemplars of mound building, a phenomenon referred to by Bailey (2007) as time perspectivism.

Our strategy here is not to avoid analogy altogether, but to employ *ethnographic* analogy to a Coles Creek case without resorting to an *archaeological* analogy with later Mississippian groups. We do, however, recognize the influence of Mississippian societies on the early historic records and employ Mississippian iconographic examples to illustrate how ethnographic ideas might manifest archaeologically. This approach resonates with Walker's (2008) views regarding the usefulness of oral tradition in archaeological interpretations. Walker claims we can think of oral tradition as a process occurring in the past that "contributes to the making of history" rather than something that simply records it, or worse, "fails to reveal it" (Walker 2008:144). In avoiding inappropriate analogies based on archaeological cases, our strategy has two prongs. First, we begin with archaeological deposits (in our case, post deposits containing intriguing material inclusions), and then seek ethnographic evidence to inform our interpretations of these deposits

(see also Pauketat 2013). This inductive approach differs from strategies that seek archaeological evidence to back up prior assumptions based on analogy. Second, we focus on the act and *process* of creating meaningful deposits rather than on the final forms they take.

Based on similar employments of analogy, Charles et al. (2004), Lankford (2007), and Pauketat (2008) have suggested that there are esthetic qualities associated with various types of sediments, materials, and objects that Indian people used (and continue to use) that reference particular places, supernatural beings, and cosmological realms. Increasingly, it is clear that past people regularly inscribed this worldview onto landscapes as well as artifacts (Carr 2008a:53–72, 2012; Carr and McCord 2013; Charles et al. 2004; Lankford et al. 2011; Pauketat 2008, 2013; Pauketat and Emerson 1991; Sugiyama 1993; Townsend 2004). We suggest here that the gathering together of meaningful objects and materials in *features* such as postholes and pits at Feltus is analogous to the native concept of bundling in the sense that the combination of inclusions is more powerful when contained or concentrated in a single location.

In the rest of this article, we focus on the setting, removal, and capping of freestanding posts. This complex depositional sequence ultimately informs our interpretations of a repeated ritual cycle that also involves feasting, mound building, and burial of the dead. By considering ritual deposition in this way, our interpretation of Coles Creek social groups avoids an unnecessary dependence on assumptions based on Mississippian social organization and recognizes important differences between Coles Creek and later Mississippian platform mounds. Moreover, by focusing on features that are too often relegated "to the background of interpretations" (Pauketat and Alt 2005:215), we present a less mound-centric view of this particular culture. Ultimately, we argue that Coles Creek ritual at Feltus can be understood through a metaphor of "gathering." Disparate elements with particular cultural associations were gathered and deposited together as assemblages or bundles in an effort to gather the full range of social actors in Coles Creek society. We argue that this range would have included living, non-living, and non-human kin, as well as objects and beings from other cosmological and temporal domains (see also Harris 2014; Pauketat 2013; Skousen 2012). This gathering of disparate elements of the Coles Creek social whole at a specific place and time

perhaps resulted in the increased potency of the ritual events at Feltus. In other words, much like bundles, the gathering together of the dispersed Coles Creek population as well as non-living and non-human social actors resulted in an increased effectiveness in accomplishing the ritual goals of Coles Creek people.

ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE FELTUS MOUNDS

Situated on the edge of high loess bluffs overlooking the Mississippi Alluvial Valley, Feltus consists of four mounds symmetrically arranged around a plaza (Figure 1). Three mounds (A, B, and C) stand today while the smallest (D) was destroyed between 1932 and 1947. Using the current locations of Mounds A, B, and C and compass bearings recorded by Wailes (1852), Steponaitis (2008) has reconstructed the missing earthwork's location.

The bluffs on which the earthworks were built formed during the Pleistocene, as strong winds

deposited fine silt sediments in thick layers along the eastern edge of the Mississippi River. Naturally fertile, this loess provided prehistoric people with a wealth of animal and plant resources. However, their wind-blown nature means these sediments are devoid of stone, sand, and clay deposits. As the bluffs near Feltus are over 30 m high, procurement and transport of these materials from the river valley would have required substantial effort.

As part of the Feltus Archaeological Project run through the University of the North Carolina, Chapel Hill, we have excavated in each extant mound and in the southern end of the plaza, near the former location of Mound D (Figure 2). Radiocarbon dates from these excavations form three distinct clusters, which align closely with Coles Creek phase designations (Figure 3). Initial use of the site was during the Sundown phase (A. D. 700–850) and is represented archaeologically by post and pit features located in the south plaza. Mound construction followed during the

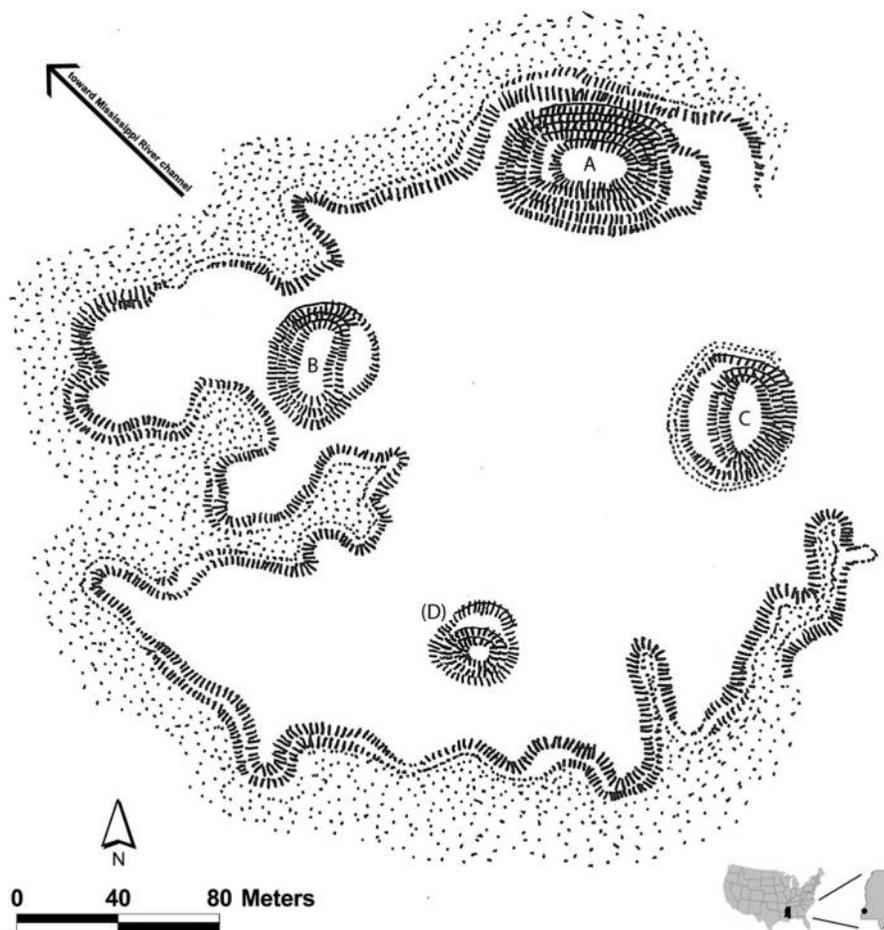


FIGURE 1. Map of Feltus showing the locations of the four original mounds and the site's position on the edge of the steep Mississippi River bluffs (indicated by stippling). Drawing by Doug Kassabaum.

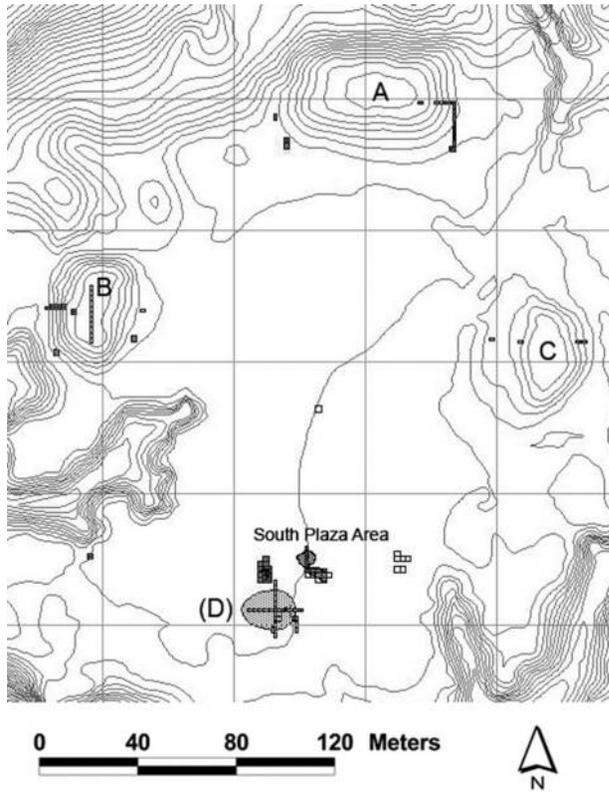


FIGURE 2. Topographic map of Feltus showing the location of excavations at Mounds A, B, C and D (from Kassabaum 2014:Figure 2.7).

Ballina phase (A.D. 850–1000), and additional occupation occurred in the Balmoral phase, prior to the site’s abandonment around A.D. 1100 (Stponaitis et al. 2012). Though Coles Creek people

utilized the Feltus site for some 400 years, the occupation was episodic and like most other Coles Creek mound sites, no evidence for permanent habitation exists. Instead, the Coles Creek population was dispersed throughout much of the year. Because our excavations determined that the majority of activity at the site took place *before* the mounds were constructed, Feltus provides an opportunity to take a less mound-centric view of the activities occurring there.

SOUTH PLAZA POSTS

Our starting point for this analysis is an unusual feature (Feature 1) located in the south plaza, just north of Mound D’s former location (Figure 4). Consisting of three zones—a post mold surrounded by an ashy zone with a dark, clayey deposit underneath—this feature follows a clear depositional trajectory (Figure 5). First, Coles Creek people dug a large hole and lined the bottom with clay-rich sediment. Because of the eolian nature of the bluffs, this sediment must have been procured from elsewhere, perhaps excavated from deep within the loess deposits or transported from the river bottom. With this clay-rich lining, they deposited cranial and post-cranial bones belonging to four or five children under the age of five.¹ After depositing these remains, they lined the pit with ash and inserted a large post, nearly 40 cm in diameter. As the ash deposit completely surrounds the post mold, we assume the ash and the post were

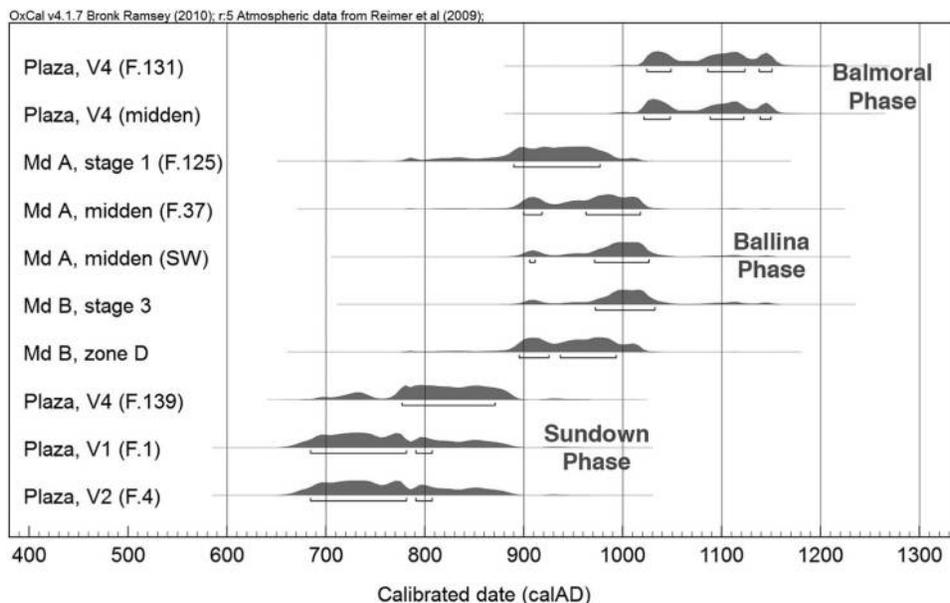


FIGURE 3. Feltus chronology showing radiocarbon dates in three distinct clusters (from Nelson and Kassabaum 2014:Figure 3).

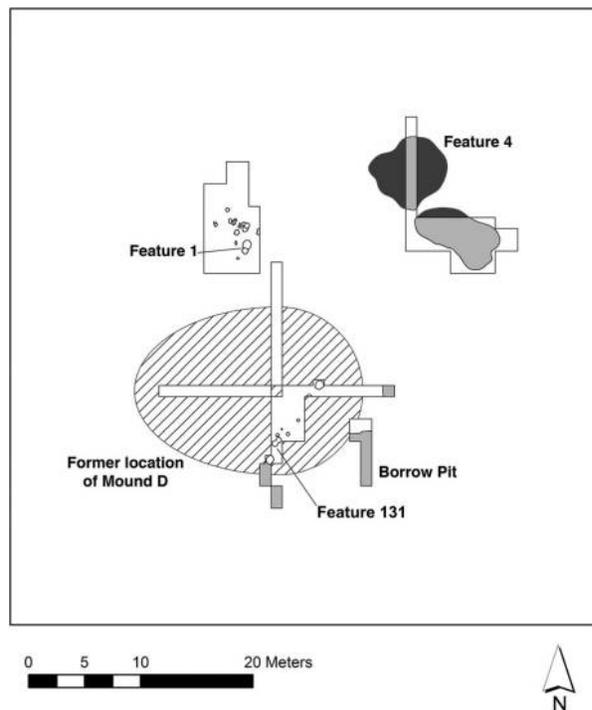


FIGURE 4. Map of Feltus south plaza excavations showing post field, feasting pit, former location of Mound D, and borrow pit (adapted from Steponaitis et al. 2012). Posts are shaded white and outlined in black while other features are shaded gray. Light gray represents excavated portions of features while dark gray represents the limits of features as identified in magnetic gradiometer survey (Haley and Johnson 2008).

deposited as part of a single step. The ash presumably represents the remains of one or more eating events, as it contains fragmentary ceramic vessels, faunal remains including deer, turkey, squirrel, rabbit, opossum, and at least eight species of fish, and a typical Late Woodland assemblage of starchy and oily seeds. Additionally, the ashy lining contains an intact bear femur and metacarpal and additional human bone. After the post was set some form of post ritual presumably took place. Though we have no way of knowing the exact nature of this ritual, we suggest an underlying purpose in a later section of this article. Upon removal of the post, Coles Creek people promptly filled the void with a deposit of clean, clayey soil such that no weathering of the ash lining occurred and a crisp line is visible between the two fill zones.

Additional excavations in the south plaza revealed 23 additional post features, both in front of and underneath Mound D (see Figure 4). Although none approach Feature 1 in size, they are similar in structure, depositional sequence,

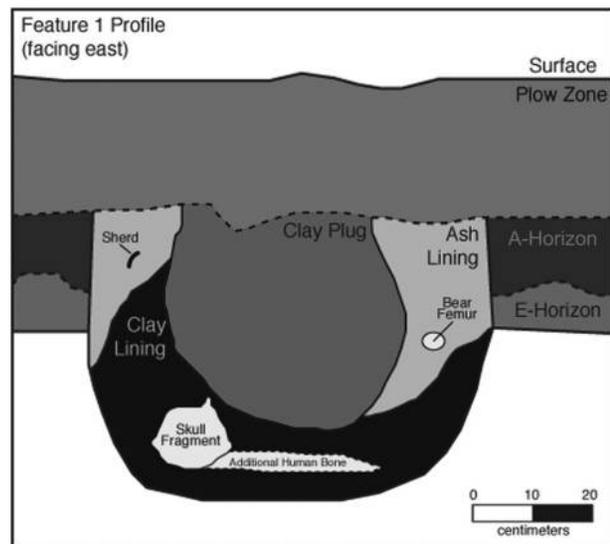


FIGURE 5. Line drawing of Feature 1 profile, south plaza, near the former location of Mound D (adapted from Nelson and Kassabaum 2014:Figure 5).

and inclusions, suggesting that their construction was based on a similar template. Assuming that such a number of posts were part of a large structure, we tried chasing the pattern out, but were unsuccessful. The lack of a structural pattern, significant differential in size and depth, and the fact that only some posts were repeatedly reset suggest that they were freestanding. Eight of these 24 postholes are less than 10 cm deep and likely originated from a platform described by Wailes (1852) as a distinct rise surrounding Mound D. As plowing has largely destroyed these shallow postholes, they are not included in our comparison. The remaining 16 postholes range from 13 to 77 cm in depth and from 28 to 90 cm in diameter. Three of the posts are exceptionally large.

The basic depositional process followed in Feature 1 was repeated in nearly all of the south plaza posts (Table 1), suggesting that the practices involved in post-setting were culturally determined and important (see also Pauketat and Alt 2005). Of the 16 analyzed postholes, 14 were filled in or plugged with clean fill; the two that were not plugged were reset with new posts. In total, seven (possibly eight) of the posts were reset. Seven postholes are lined with ash and as many as seven are lined with clay-rich soil. Ten posts are surrounded by a dark mottled zone and in one instance a large lump of clay was included in this surrounding fill. This totals six postholes where both ash and clay were intentionally included. Fourteen postholes contained ceramics

TABLE 1. MATERIAL INCLUSIONS IN SOUTH PLAZA POSTS AT FELTUS. SPECIAL INCLUSIONS INCLUDED HUMAN AND BEAR REMAINS (F1), PIPE FRAGMENTS (F131 AND F135), AN EGG-SHAPED CONCRETION (F131), A FRAGMENT OF A CONTAINER FILLED WITH SOIL (F132), AND A LUMP OF CLAY (F139).

Post attribute	1	2	3	5	6	7	8	13	17	124	131	132	135	139	159	160
Plugged with clean fill	X		X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Reset with another post	X	X			X			X		X			X	X		?
Ash-lined	X		X	X	X					X	X			X	X	
Clay-lined	X		X	X					?		?	X	X		?	
Mottled zone		X			X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X		X
Ceramics	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Faunal	X	X		X						X	X		X			
Special	X										X	X	X	X		

and at least seven contained faunal remains. In addition to Feature 1, which contained bear and human remains, a small number of postholes contained unusual artifacts, including pipe fragments, an egg-shaped concretion, and fragment of a container holding a distinct, clean fill.

Radiocarbon dates indicate that some of these posts were contemporaneous with a nearby pit full of animal bone and ceramic refuse dating to the late eighth century A.D., the earliest occupation period at Feltus. This midden pit (Feature 4) was 6 m in diameter, 1.6 m deep, and covered with a similarly rich sheet midden. The character of the refuse suggests rapid dumping, with large, uninterrupted fill episodes, pot breaks, and articulated deer bones. The large size of ceramic vessels and greater frequency of serving vessels to cooking or storage vessels implies a scale beyond domestic consumption, especially when combined with the exceptional size of certain faunal specimens.

Vessel forms from the Feature 4 deposit include bowls, jars, beakers, plates, and pipes—all common forms on Coles Creek sites. Vessel form could be identified for 169 vessels from the Feature 4 collections; of these, 106 (63 percent) were bowls and plates. Rim diameter measurements of vessels within the deposit show that 87 of 97 measurable vessels range from 3 to 33 cm, which fits well with the distributions at Coles Creek domestic and single mound sites (Ryan 2004:151–157). However, the midden also has a substantial number ($n = 10$) of sherds representing large vessels with diameters between 40 and 52 cm. These vessels fall outside the typical range for a domestic site and likely indicate communal eating. When we combine vessel form and vessel size data, we see that all 10 examples of vessels

with rim diameters larger than 40 cm are bowls. While jars and beakers are cooking or storage vessels, bowls and plates are primarily serving vessels. Their abundance and large size indicates an emphasis on communal food consumption rather than on food production or storage (Braun 1980).

As for the food prepared and served in these pots, flotation recovered an abundance of plant remains. When compared to other Coles Creek sites, the Feltus assemblage is similarly rich in acorns, thick-shelled hickory, and starchy and oily seeds, while fruits are underrepresented (Roberts 2006; Williams 2008). Perhaps the seasonality or storability of nuts and seeds made them particularly appropriate foods to bring to feasting events at Feltus (Kassabaum 2014:354). Though the seeds look morphologically like wild varieties, scanning electron microscopy of chenopodium revealed seed-coat thicknesses consistent with domesticated varieties (Kassabaum 2014:250–252). There is no evidence of maize, but the degree to which the Feltus assemblage is made up of wild versus cultivated plants remains unclear.

Though sizable, the faunal assemblage is considerably less diverse than most Lower Mississippi Valley sites (Funkhouser 2013). Moreover, the minimum number of individual specimens for medium-sized mammals is remarkably low, while the identified number of large mammals, primarily bear and deer, is quite high (Kassabaum 2014:336). Outside of these large mammals, very large fish dominate the assemblage, including one gar over 2 m long. This overrepresentation of large animals and low diversity of other classes again suggests communal feasting (Knight 1990:160, 2001:325). This interpretation is

supported by low overall utilization of deer resources, meaning that meat extraction was the primary goal, not marrow or grease extraction or bone tool production. Element distribution ratios suggest that larger cuts of meat were favored (Funkhouser 2013; Kassabaum 2014:336).

These data support the interpretation of Feature 4 as communal feasting debris.² The rapid nature of its deposition further suggests that it represents the remains of a small number of events—perhaps only one or two. In addition to overlapping radiocarbon dates, striking similarities in material inclusions such as bear bone and pipe fragments further connect the Feature 4 deposits to the postholes just to their west. We thus believe that the post pits and nearby refuse deposits are linked through ceremonies that involved placing and removing posts and attendant feasting.

THE CONTINUATION OF POST RITUAL

The connection between post-setting and feasting is strengthened by evidence for both activities under Mound A during the second period of Feltus's occupation in the mid-tenth century A.D. (see Figures 1 and 3). Mound A sits upon a dense midden deposit similar in character to Feature 4. Microstratigraphic analyses of the deposit indicate no breaks during its formation and potsherds from the top and bottom of the midden refit, indicating rapid deposition that likely resulted from a large-scale feasting event (Kassabaum 2014:232).

While removing the mound fill from atop this midden, we uncovered a circular void, indicating a post pulled immediately before mound construction began (Figure 6). This posthole (Feature 37) was lined with ash in a manner similar to Feature 1 and several other postholes located in the south plaza and described above. Analysis of Feature 37's contents revealed that pipe fragments from the posthole and the surrounding midden refit, confirming that they were likely part of a single event. In addition to these pipe fragments, the ash zone included unusual materials such as a crawfish claw, clam shells, and river-worn pebbles. After its erection, debris accumulated rapidly around the post as a result of the large feasting event. Before this debris had weathered, the post was pulled and the first 2.5 m of Mound A were immediately constructed on top of the remaining void. Unlike those in the south plaza, this posthole was not plugged. However, we

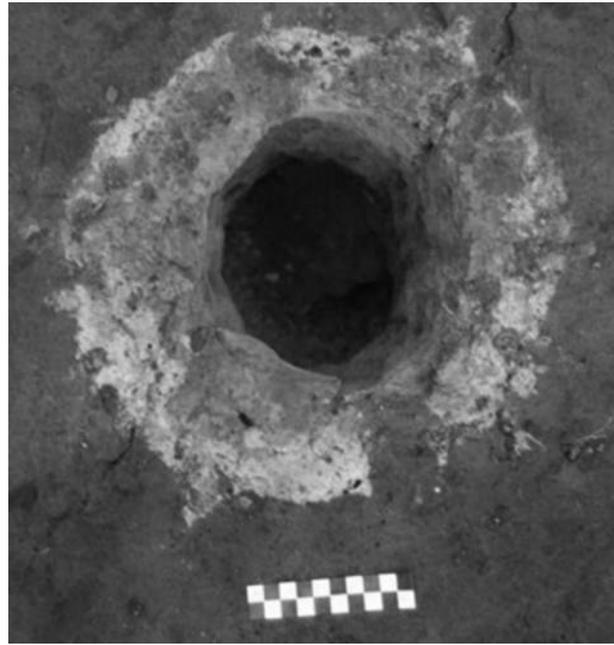


FIGURE 6. Feature 37, an ash-lined posthole capped by construction of Mound A (from Kassabaum 2014:Figure 2.16).

argue that the act of constructing a mound atop the void is an instance of plugging writ-large. Here, post-setting and feasting are tied to a third type of ritual activity: mound building.

The third and final reuse of the Feltus landscape in the late eleventh century A.D. included additional post-setting in the south plaza. Radiocarbon dates tie this activity to another episode of large-scale earth moving. Feature 131, an ash-lined posthole including pipe fragments and an unusual, egg-shaped concretion, was dug at approximately the same time as a large borrow pit. This borrow pit is 3 m deep, 60 m long, and 20 m wide, and is likely connected to the construction of Mound D (see Figure 4). In addition to the similarity in date, the shallow remains of the 10 posts inserted into the platform surrounding Mound D supports the conclusion that post-setting and mound building were closely tied. In this case, excavations by Moorehead (1932:163–164) reveal that this mound contained the remains of seven or eight individuals, adding burial of the dead to the established complex of feasting, post-setting, and mound building.

We suggest that the activities that took place in all three periods at Feltus were linked through their role in a ritual sequence that involved the setting and pulling of posts, communal feasting, mound building, and burial of the dead. In the preceding section, we focused on the repeated nature

of this sequence, drawing attention to the similarities among episodes of ritual activity as well as to innovations. In doing so, we purposefully shifted our focus from the end products of depositional activities (such as standing posts or earthen mounds) to the depositional *process* itself (see Garrow 2012:92–93; Pauketat 2013:112; Pauketat and Alt 2005). Now we turn our attention more fully to the objects and materials deposited together as part of this process, with a particular emphasis on the social roles that material inclusions performed.

INTERPRETING MATERIAL INCLUSIONS

In this section, we argue that inclusions in the Feltus ritual deposits made present those members of the social group who were physically absent. The presence of bear and human remains integrated an extended kin network, including non-human “fictive” kin and non-living human kin. Moreover, many inclusions had associations with particular cosmological domains, thereby referencing those places and the spirits and ancestors who inhabit them. Finally, the posts themselves, as well as bears and material correlates of fire, had connective properties that promoted the gathering of large groups of people, living and non-living, human and non-human.

The repeated association of these same elements (bears, humans, posts, fire) in traditional stories suggests that their combination in depositional contexts at Feltus is not accidental. For example, broadly held Native beliefs about bear hunting show that bears were treated differently than other game after their death. Smoking tobacco over the carcass (Berres et al. 2004:10–11; Hallowell 1926:63–72; Rockwell 1991:35–38; Skinner 1914) and disposing of bear remains in ritually prescribed ways such as lighting fires to burn off the blood or scorch the paws and head (Rockwell 1991:116–121), or hanging the head, skin, or paws high on a post (Hallowell 1926:48–51, 63–66, 79, 136–140; Rockwell 1991:40; Skinner 1914:207) were common practices. Moreover, Swanton (1929:122) reports for the Alabama tribe that bears were the original owners of fire, and it was through them that humans first accessed this indispensable tool.

We believe that the gathering or bundling of these and other substances is what made them particularly powerful. In some instances the similar meanings of objects and substances reinforce one another. In others, individual meanings, when

combined, reference a whole that no single inclusion can signify. In both of these ways, combining depositional elements resulted in increased ritual potency. It is through this recognition that we acknowledge the importance of shifting our discussion about ritual deposition from studies of individual objects to studies of assemblages (Bennett 2010; Chapman 2008; Fowler 2013; Harris 2014; Mills 2008; Pauketat 2013; Pollard 2008).

GATHERING THE WORLDS

A posthole is material both in its present physicality, as a pattern of soils of different colors and textures, and as a reference point for inferring past presences: a piece of wood, selected, shaped, and put in place, perhaps replaced, perhaps left to decay or removed to another place ... What concerns us then are not merely presences, but material that we interpret as signs of action (Joyce 2008:27).

Freestanding posts, though seldom recovered archaeologically, were common features on Woodland-period sites and have been ascribed various ritual functions (e.g., Skousen 2012: Table 1). For example, at McKeithen and Cold Springs, large posts were likely used during complex mortuary rituals (Jeffries 1994; Milanich et al. 1984). At Greenhouse, Walling, and Kolumoki, nonstructural posts are associated with mound summits and interpreted as evidence of scaffolding and feasting behavior (Knight 1990, 2001; Warshauer 2015). At Biltmore and Garden Creek, the presence of ritual accessories made from especially meaningful parts of animals as well as mica, copper, crystals, and other ritual paraphernalia suggests that large posts played a role in shamanic ceremonies (Kimball et al. 2010). At Range, central posts are found in the courtyards of village areas, signaling a shared community space and marking its center as symbolically meaningful (Kelly 1990). Skousen (2012) further suggests that standing posts in the American Bottom were key components in human social networks, acting as social persons in certain contexts (see also Pauketat and Alt 2005:217–218). The variable interpretations of such features are largely based on ethnohistoric accounts of the use and meaning of standing posts by southeastern American Indian groups (Hall 1997; Kelly 2003; Skousen 2012).

We now turn to historic period and contemporary Native beliefs regarding the structure of the world to develop an interpretation of post ritual at Feltus.

Multiple sources suggest that beliefs about the geography of the cosmos are broadly shared among the indigenous people of the Americas and Eurasia (Eliade 1961; Hall 1997; Hudson 1976; Lankford 2007; Reilly 2004). Though varying in detail, commonalities include the division of the world into multiple layers that are connected to one another by a central axis. For example, Mississippian iconography typically represents the cosmos as having three realms (Lankford 2004; Pauketat and Emerson 1991). The Above and Beneath Worlds are opposed to one another and each has particular associations with materials, motifs, ideas, and supernatural beings (Hudson 1976:128; see also Jackson 2003). In between the sky and the watery underworld, *this* world—or the Middle World—is home to humans, non-human animals, plants, and fire, the earthly representation of the sun. Carr (2008a:53, 94–95, notes 3, 4) suggests a slightly different Native understanding of the cosmos inhabited by Woodland-period groups in the eastern United States, one that is layered in part, but is multidimensional and relational, consisting of numerous realms whose inhabitants regularly interacted both vertically and horizontally. Rather than having an absolute Middle World stratum, the Woodland cosmos has multiple “centers” defined relative to the position of individuals or groups (Carr 2008a:53). For our purposes, the number of worlds is less important than their deeper structural commonalities.

In all of these conceptions, the worlds are connected at their centers by *axes mundi* and “portals” through which certain people, animals, and supernaturals can travel (Carr 2008a:53; Hall 1997:107–108; Skousen 2012:63–64). Throughout the area where this understanding of the cosmos is prevalent, and most familiarly in southeastern Indian iconography of the Mississippian period, the *axis mundi* is often represented visually as a pole or a tree (Bradley 2000; Kelly 2003; Lankford 2007; Reilly 2004; Schele and Freidel 1990; Waring and Holder 1945). Skousen (2012:58) argues that as nodes in the human social network, upright poles “linked people, communities, places, ancestors, and supernatural powers” (see also Nelson and Kassabaum 2014). In addition to the poles themselves indicating a connection with other worlds, specific

iconographic motifs utilized in the human world, as well as materials and substances associated with fire and water, symbolically represent the Above and Beneath Worlds (Charles et al. 2004; Lankford 2007; Pauketat 2008). The presence of fire- and water-focused materials and substances in post deposits at Feltus suggests that an interpretation of post rituals centered on communication between the worlds may be particularly apt.

The *axis mundi* is also sometimes described as a column of light or smoke, and is represented iconographically by superimposed fire and sun symbols (Lankford 2007:31; Reilly 2004). Smoke, the product of fire, creates a direct visible connection between the Above World(s) and the fire of this plane and communicates with the spirits about earthly happenings (Hall 1997:35; Jackson 2003:73; Lankford 2007:38). It is common in American Indian ritual to use pipe smoking as a means of making this connection (Brown 1953:7; Paper 1987:300–301). Although we cannot observe fire or smoke archaeologically, material correlates of fire include ash, cooked food, charcoal, and smoking pipes (Nelson 2012)—all found in abundance in the Feltus ritual deposits. We suggest that these substances, particularly the ash surrounding the posts and the smoke implied by the presence of pipes, shared world-linking attributes with the posts themselves and created a strong and repeated connection to the Above World(s).

Connections also exist to the Beneath World(s), often in the form of whirlpools or rough water (Reilly 2004; Riggs 2012). In Mississippian- and southeastern-historic period iconography, portals to the Beneath World(s) are symbolized by clockwise spiral motifs (Lankford 2007). Like fire, water is archaeologically invisible, but may be represented by materials found only in water such as river clay, water-worn pebbles, and the remains of aquatic species. Clay from the river bottom occurs in both posts and mounds at Feltus (Sherwood 2008). The association of sediments from watery environments with Woodland-period burials is recognized throughout the Upper Midwest (Hall 1997:18–22) and Feature 1 at Feltus may represent a similar use of this particular class of materials. Moreover, clay “gumbo balls” placed into Mounds A, B, and C while still wet have been interpreted as evidence of the ritual inclusion of clay in the mound building process (Cummings 2008; see also Hall 1979, 1997:17–23). We believe this interpretation has some merit due to the time and energy involved in collecting and

transporting wet clay from the river to the bluff. Finally, a crawfish claw, clam shells, and river-worn pebbles all occur in Feature 37 and are completely absent from non-post deposits, suggesting a limited but still present connection with a watery Beneath World.

Though the strength of the connection to the Beneath World(s) at Feltus does not appear to be as strong as that with the Above World(s), the site's bluff top location implies that watery materials were intentionally procured from the river and included in the deposits with objects and substances that reference other parts of the cosmos. Iconographic interpretations of Southeastern cosmology show that certain prehistoric sites focused more on connections with the Above World(s) and others more on connections with the Beneath World(s) (Carr 2012; Carr and McCord 2013; Lankford et al. 2011; Pauketat and Emerson 1991; Steponaitis and Knight 2004). This variable focus was also true across the cosmologies of different historic Woodland and Plains Native American tribes (Carr 2008a:95, note 4). At Feltus, objects with water associations (like those included in Feature 37) created an important connection to a Beneath World at a site that otherwise focused on Above World connections. Perhaps the anomalous nature of this connection explains why this feature was “plugged” in a distinctive way.

GATHERING THE KIN NETWORK

Human remains are also included in ritual deposits at Feltus, and we argue that different types of human actors performed different social roles at gatherings there. As inhabitants of this world, living humans traveled significant geographical distances to meet at agreed-upon times. The dispersed nature of Coles Creek settlement patterns suggests that these gatherings would have been the exception rather than the rule for Coles Creek social life. People likely traveled to Feltus for many reasons, some having to do with formal responsibilities towards others (e.g., communication and exchange, finding marriage partners, etc.). The archaeological remains at Feltus suggests that living Coles Creek people would also have been responsible for gathering food for the feasts and for gathering and depositing other materials needed to build and maintain important connections.

The inclusion of human remains in the Feltus deposits draws in non-living people. Coles Creek

burial practices are characterized by mass interments with no grave goods. Until recently, this pattern has been described as disorderly, haphazard, and random (e.g., Ford 1951:106–107; Williams and Brain 1983:45). However, recent research on mortuary practices at the three largest excavated Coles Creek cemeteries shows that burials were made with care and consideration (Kassabaum 2011). Significantly, the remains of adults and children were treated differently. At Feltus, adults are buried in Mounds C and D in the later periods, explicitly drawing past participants or ancestors into the current social network through their deposition in meaningful contexts. The remains of young children, meanwhile, were in at least one instance placed in the outer rings of standing posts. Though we do not know if any children were included in the mound burials, this distinctive burial context for children may reflect their different social role in these gatherings—a role perhaps related to including those who had not reached the full status of community members (Van Gennepe 1960). Both forms of burial deposition drew in those with kinship ties, in this case, non-living people thought to reside in other cosmological realm(s).

One of the most unusual material inclusions at Feltus is bear remains, the quantity of which far outstrips the amount found at any other prehistoric site in the American South (Kassabaum 2014:276, 307). Given the prevalence of bear remains, as well as their depositional context in feasting middens and alongside human remains in Feature 1, we believe that bears played a significant *social* role in the Feltus gatherings. Though hardly unique in this respect, bears have been and are potent ritual symbols for peoples across Eurasia and North America (Bieder 2006; Black 1998; Hallowell 1926; Rockwell 1991; Shepard and Sanders 1985). Their significance is recorded in traditional stories that range in origin from Finland to Siberia and from Alaska to Florida. Details of these stories change based on context, but there are several common themes relevant to our discussion.

First, bears are often viewed as kin to humans in a different way than other animals. A broad range of cultures has viewed the bear as a person, “albeit a different-from-human person who possessed immense spiritual power” (Bieder 2006:163). In addition to striking skeletal and muscular similarities recognized in both traditional and contemporary scientific accounts, bears have many human-like behavioral characteristics. Bears walk

on two feet, construct dwellings, eat the same foods in roughly the same proportions as humans, and have a voracious sweet tooth (Berres et al. 2004:8; Black 1998:345; Hollowell 1926:148–152). Traditional accounts further suggest that bears react emotionally in human-like ways—they cry tears, spank their children, and moan and sigh when worried or upset (Hollowell 1926:148–152; Shepard and Sanders 1985:xi). For these reasons, ethnohistoric accounts and oral tradition repeatedly portray bears as kin or ancestors (Bieder 2006:166; Black 1998:345; Rockwell 1991:107, 264; Swanton 1929:354).

As kin, bears play specific roles in human affairs of this world. Native stories frequently characterize bears as food providers. In stories ranging in origin from the Northwest Territories (Rockwell 1991:26; Skinner 1914) to the Alabama and Cherokee of the American South (Lankford 2011:123; Mooney 1900:327–329), bears are seen as giving themselves willingly to hunters (Black 1998:343). Furthermore, some Native groups see bears as controlling all game animals and thus the success of subsequent hunts (Beider 2006:164; Berres et al. 2004:10, 22; Owen 1904:55). Due to their similar diet, it is likely that bears also guided humans in the collection of edible plants (Shepard and Sanders 1985:72–73). Finally, stories often depict bears producing nuts and berries from their bodies by rubbing their stomachs or extracting grease from their fat without being harmed (Dorsey 1904:189–191; Mooney 1900:273–274, 327–329; Rockwell 1991:71–72). Thus, in Native tradition, bears contribute both materially and figuratively to food production. Due to their overrepresentation in the feasting events at Feltus, it is likely that they shared with humans the social role of food provisioning, which focuses on connecting people to one another through food sharing.

Bears also have the ability to communicate and navigate between the human and spirit worlds (Black 1998:343–345; Rockwell 1991:64–67). For example, bears are seen as having powers from the sun or inhabiting both this world and the sky (Beider 2006:166; Dorsey 1904:189–191, 343–344), their hibernation patterns are believed to show an ability to travel back and forth between the realm of the living and the dead (Mooney 1900:327–329), and shamans are often thought to either be bears or able to turn into bears (Berres et al. 2004:16–17; Rockwell 1991:5, 64–72; Shepard and Sanders 1985:63–69). Moreover, killing a bear is widely considered

“an offering by which humans communicate with the non-human, spiritual domain” (Black 1998:343; see also Berres et al. 2004:10, 24). In short, bears share many human attributes, but also have characteristics and abilities that humans do not have. Including bears in gatherings at Feltus would have allowed Coles Creek people to expand their social network via connection and communication with people and cosmological realms that most humans cannot access (Nelson and Kassabaum 2014).

MOUND FUNCTION WITHIN THE FELTUS RITUAL CYCLE

The mounds at Feltus played a particularly important role in the ritual cycle enacted there. The between-world connections called upon during this cycle were powerful and potentially dangerous (Riggs 2012). The specific depositional process described above can be interpreted as the ritual opening and prescribed closing or sealing of such powerful portals. In most instances, this closure was brought about through plugging the open posthole with clayey soil. However, in the only example containing Beneath World references, the posthole was not plugged; rather, the first stage of Mound A was constructed atop the void immediately after the post was pulled, effectively sealing its contents, and thus controlling and containing its connective powers. This distinctive way of capping Feature 37 may have had to do with the particular powers associated with Beneath World portals.

We suggest, therefore, that the meaning of the mounds at Feltus was at least partially derived from their role in terminating and memorializing a ritual sequence focused on gathering social, cosmological, and temporal domains through the deposition of meaningful substances (see also Nelson and Kassabaum 2014; Pauketat 2013:66). This does not preclude post-construction uses of the mounds; in fact, we know that the mounds at Feltus were used subsequently as containers for the dead, as platforms for activities, and as foundations for additional mound building. Innovations such as these, as well as variable practices relating to post ritual (e.g., references to the Beneath World(s) in Feature 37, differences in post size and inclusions, etc.) indicate that these traditions were not static, but were the very stuff of social creativity, consistently working within moments of contestation, negotiation, and other processes of community

building. However, we draw attention here to a category of mound usage that is not currently a focus within the broader literature. Additional research at Woodland-period mound sites, and particularly excavation strategies that target pre-mound uses of the landscape, will be necessary to determine if this pattern holds true more broadly.

It should not surprise us that mounded landscapes had different functions during different time periods, even if their final forms are nearly identical. If we focus on the *process* of mound construction, as we have suggested in this article, then Mississippian and Coles Creek platform mounds are not as similar as often assumed. Buildings were consistently constructed on the summits of Mississippian mounds whereas Coles Creek summit use was much more variable (cf., Knight 2001). Moreover, Coles Creek constructions were typically built with each episode increasing the height of the mound without increasing its footprint, whereas Mississippian mounds are characterized by additional mantles that increased both the footprint and height of the mound (Jeffries 1994; Kassabaum et al. 2014). Since the process of construction differs, it follows that the functions and meanings of the mounds also differ.

Though too few Coles Creek mound sites have been satisfactorily excavated to say whether our interpretation represents a broader Coles Creek pattern, our research at Feltus emphasizes the importance of looking beyond traditional interpretations of Mississippian platform mounds when trying to understand their earlier counterparts. Because the mounds at Feltus were part of a larger ritual event focused on drawing the community together, we must consider this context in our interpretations of mound use and meaning. Our analysis therefore suggests that at least some Coles Creek mounds have an *integrative* function not commonly emphasized in the archaeological literature—an interpretation that fits well with our understandings of Coles Creek mortuary programs (Kassabaum 2011).

Monumental constructions such as the mound and plaza complexes associated with Coles Creek and Mississippian sites have two principal defining features—their scale and elaboration exceed the requirements of mere utilitarian function, and their construction necessitates some organization of labor and resources beyond that of the household unit (Bradley 1985:2; Trigger 1990:119). Although these qualities are usually used to support arguments for the necessity of a

coercive elite, a focus on the building *process* reminds us that a large number of people (and we argue, animals, objects, and substances) are involved in the shaping of a landscape's meaning and power. Importantly, this communal production of meaning expands our interpretations of monuments beyond the inscription of political power relationships and into the communal production of group identity, particularly among Coles Creek people, for whom there is little evidence for sociopolitical hierarchy (see also Brown 2003, 2006, 2010).

Recent research on other Woodland platform mound building traditions such as Marksville, Troyville, Swift Creek, Plum Bayou, and Weeden Island also favor interpretations focusing on the integrative functions of platform mound sites (e.g., Boudreaux 2013; Downs and Blitz 2011; Jeffries 1994; Knight 2001; Thompson and Pluckhahn 2012). Communal interpretations are more readily accepted in these cases, perhaps because many of these traditions do not immediately precede a Mississippian mound building culture and their interpretation has not relied as heavily on a Mississippian analogy. These traditions have striking similarities with the Coles Creek tradition, including subsistence, settlement, and burial practices. In addition, ritual at Feltus and other Woodland sites involved a similar suite of activities (e.g., post-setting and feasting on mound summits at Walling [Knight 1990] or post-setting and mortuary activities at McKeithen [Milanich et al. 1984]). Although such sites may provide more appropriate comparisons, we recognize important differences between the way these authors discuss the role of mound building in ritual activity and the development of the ritual sequence at Feltus. Given their late addition to the sequence and their role in its termination, it is worth considering that mound building may not have been the primary goal of the rituals taking place at Feltus. Rather, it was one of a suite of activities within a broader ritual cycle aimed at gathering the social whole.

DISCUSSION: A METAPHOR OF GATHERING

Southeastern archaeologists are accustomed to the idea that the ritual cycles of southern Indian groups are closely tied to maize agriculture. Given that Feltus is a pre-maize site, we argue that the complex components that result in the deposition of bear, posts, ash, and other special things at Feltus can be better understood through

a metaphor of gathering (*sensu* Carr 2005:468–473). We further suggest that such a conception might be usefully applied to many ritual phenomena involving the bundling of multiple materials, the purposeful creation of assemblages, or the coming together of dispersed populations. Feltus is a place where Coles Creek people gathered at particular times to reinforce and renegotiate social relationships by eating together, setting ritual posts, building mounds, and burying their dead. Such gatherings would have allowed an otherwise dispersed population to come together to perform important social activities. Bears, who gather their food as humans do, are important to these rituals. For many historic Woodland Indian and circumpolar groups, they are food providers and have the ability to connect the human and spirit worlds. Additionally, within these contexts, bears are considered kin to humans—reinforcing the idea of a gathering of extended kin networks, including both non-living and non-human kin. The combination of substances in posts also represents a gathering together of worlds. The act of gathering these worlds together would have required the opening of especially powerful ritual portals. The end of the ritual cycle is marked by the closure of these portals through plugging or capping the void left by the pulled posts. In many cases, this closure was achieved by plugging the hole with clean fill. Significantly, it could also be achieved with an episode of mound construction. This suggests both an alternative function for mound building, and importantly, demonstrates that mound building was added to a pre-existing suite of ritual activities that involved the use of freestanding posts to gather community members in the context of communal feasting.

Others have offered alternative interpretations of platform mounds, notably Knight (1989), who has interpreted Mississippian mounds as earth symbols and mound building as related to communal rituals focused on agriculture and world renewal. He has also interpreted Woodland platform mounds as locations for feasting and other activities focused on world renewal and community integration (Knight 2001). Our argument demonstrates the need to further broaden our thinking about the use of ethnographic analogy, and more particularly, to let archaeological deposits lead the way in deciding which analogies are appropriate. This is especially true with regard to the Coles Creek culture where, until recently, our assumptions have relied heavily on the

mound-and-plaza arrangement that superficially looks so Mississippian. Like that proposed by Knight, our interpretation does not preclude the notion that Coles Creek platform mounds became entangled with ideas about politics, privilege, and inequality. In fact, the addition of mound building to the ritual cycle in the first place indicates that innovations and the social negotiations that precede them were an important part of community building. However, by emphasizing mound building as part of a ritual cycle focused on bringing people together, we draw specific attention to the integrative functions of mounds. Moreover, by examining numerous iterations of the Feltus ritual cycle, we decentralize mounds in our discussion of Woodland ritual, opening the door for interpretations that are more equally based on mound building, burial of the dead, feasting, and post-setting.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The materials excavated from Feltus, original field records, and digital data are curated by the Research Laboratories of Archaeology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

NOTES

- 1 Although it is not possible to tell whether these remains represent a formal burial, both formal burials and fragmented

human remains have been found in post pits on Mississippian sites in the American Bottom (Skousen 2012:Table 2).

2 Clusters of posts associated with large refuse pits are common features in ethnohistoric accounts of feasting, particularly the Feasts of the Dead celebrated by Huron and Algonquian groups (Hall 1997:35–39; Kidd 1953). In these cases human remains are important inclusions in the pits. Although no human remains were recovered from Feature 4 at Feltus, there are human remains in one of the early post pits and, during later periods of the site's use, in at least one of the mounds.

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