

DEALING WITH DEACCESSIONING • PREHISTORIC ECOLOGISTS • A MYSTERIOUS MOUND-BUILDING CULTURE

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EXAMINING A MYSTERIOUS MOUND-BUILDING CULTURE



It was once thought that the Feltus Mounds were too large to have been built by the Coles Creek people. But an investigation of these mounds is giving archaeologists new insights into this little known culture.

By Craig Guillot

Vin Steponaitis standing in the trench on the flank of Mound B.



Lauren Downs, a graduate student from the University of Alabama, takes measurements while mapping a profile wall at Mound C.

For thousands of years Native Americans built earthen mounds in what is now the southeastern United States. Home to dozens of mound sites, the Lower Mississippi Valley has been a hotbed of research and archaeological excavations since the late 1800s. But little is known about one of those mound-building cultures, the Coles Creek, that lived in this region between A.D. 700 and 1200.

In late 2006, a team of researchers from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Mississippi State University investigated the Feltus Mounds, a site featuring four mounds arranged around a large plaza. The Feltus Mounds were first excavated in the 1840s by Montroville W. Dickeson, a physician from Philadelphia who had an interest in archaeology, coins, and collectibles. In 1852, B.L.C. Wailes, a naturalist who lived in the area and who became the first state geologist for Mississippi, visited the site and described it in greater detail. More work was done in 1924, and in 1971, when Harvard researchers conducted two test excavations.

The 2006 excavation was led by Vin Steponaitis, the director of the Research Laboratories of Archaeology at the University of North Carolina, and John W. O’Hear of the Cobb Institute of Archaeology at Mississippi State. “The site has sustained some damage, but it is still very well preserved for a site of its age, especially given how much damage other sites have sustained over the years,” said Steponaitis.



Tyler Thomas, a University of North Carolina student, and Nan Yang, a Fulbright scholar from China, excavate a midden near the mounds.



BARIN VON FOREGGER / VON IMAGES

University of North Carolina student Daniel LaDu digs an exploratory unit in the summit of Mound B. This unit produced evidence of two early mound stages with burned buildings on top.

The Feltus Mounds sit on privately owned land just off a gravel road in a secluded location. During the 1971 excavation, pottery from two cultures—the Coles Creek and the Plaquemine, which dates from A.D. 1200—was found on the surface, sparking debates about which people built the mounds. Most of the pottery was from the Coles Creek period; however, the conventional wisdom was that mounds of this size weren't built until after A.D. 1200. The largest mound, known as Mound A, covers about one acre and is 23 feet high. Mound B is about $\frac{1}{3}$ acre at the base and roughly 20 feet high.

"We originally thought that this was a Plaquemine mound site," Steponaitis said, "but later we came to suspect that it was earlier, built before A.D. 1200. So our first objective has been to try to get evidence to document when these mounds were built, what the constructional history of the mounds is, and when the constructional episodes date to." Steponaitis and his team have found a considerable number of artifacts in middens. Based on the pottery style, they estimate that most of the sherds they recovered date between A.D. 700 and 1000.

It's thought that these platform mounds were once crowned by wooden buildings. The archaeologists dug trenches into the mounds, revealing a layer cake-like composition that indicated they were built in stages over time. "Based on the pottery you find associated with each of the layers, you can date when the layers were built," Steponaitis said. "Based on what we've found so far, it looks like these mounds were built in the Coles Creek period."

Mounds A and B are very well preserved, which makes

Feltus one of the few Coles Creek sites with two intact mounds, according to O'Hear. "You always start digging by making a best guess on where you're going to find the evidence you need. At both mounds, we started just above where we thought the original ground surface was on which the mound was built," said University of North Carolina graduate student Megan Kassabaum, who oversaw the excavations at Mound A. "When it comes to the actual artifacts, the ceramics certainly tell us the most [about when the mounds were constructed] but we have found a lot of animal bone and a lot of lithic debris. That [should] tell us what the general use of the site was."

First identified by James A. Ford in 1936, the Coles Creek culture is noted for its distinctive pottery as well as its mound building. Their pottery is often characterized by a band of parallel lines around the rim and elaborate designs with curved lines and stamping. Evidence of their settlements has been found in northeastern Louisiana, south-eastern Arkansas, and in west-central Mississippi.

Their mounds are thought to be a form of social expression, according to T.R. Kidder, an archaeologist at Washington University in St. Louis and a Coles Creek authority. Their construction required the mobilization of mass labor, which suggests a hierarchical society. "We know that they are building the big flat-top mounds early on by A.D. 700. Somebody is living on top of these mounds. Whether those are the rich and elite, or chiefs, for lack of a better term, we really don't know yet," he said.

Kidder said that the classic model of a mound-building

society features a chief or powerful leader who directs the laborers. During the course of his research, however, he has found no evidence of such leaders either in the form of ceremonial burials or in the form of a higher quality of trash in the middens around the mounds. “If you look at the garbage that is being tossed around the edges of the mounds, it looks like it’s pretty much the same garbage you would find anywhere else,” Kidder said. “On the other hand, we certainly have evidence of the mobilization and expenditure of labor. The settlement pattern and distribution of people on the landscape seems to be hierarchical.”

One hypothesis is that they were more of what Kidder called a “corporate level society” in which, in lieu of a powerful ruler, a number of individuals formed a ruling class.

“These people were extremely sophisticated. I would look at them as earthen engineers. They were building these sites in a very sophisticated way,” he said.

But Richard Weinstein, a senior archaeologist with Baton Rouge-based Coastal Environments, Inc., said he has found evidence of hierarchy. Weinstein has worked on a number of excavations at Coles Creek sites throughout the Tensas Basin in northeast Louisiana. In 1997, he spent several months excavating the Lake Providence Mounds, a site with five Coles Creek mounds dating between A.D. 1150 and 1250. Weinstein said he and his colleagues found “exotic trade material” at the top of one mound and in middens around three others. The exotic goods included “very fine shell tempered material from Cahokia,” a major Mississippian settlement near present-day St. Louis. “By the time we get into the late Coles Creek period at Lake Providence around 1150 or 1250 A.D., we do see evidence of some kind of elite hierarchy going on and they are participating in some form of trade going up and down the river valley,” said Weinstein. He added that similar exotic materials have been found during this time at a few other Coles Creek sites as well.

At most Coles Creek sites, the plaza is surrounded by a group of mounds, the largest of which is thought to be a temple or an elite residence. This assumption is based on information obtained by French and Spanish explorers in the 1600s and 1700s from Coles Creek descendants, but there is no significant archaeological evidence to corroborate it.

“If these mounds are residences either for specialized structures or specialized people, the burning of them is assumed to be associated with the end of their life cycle,” said Kidder. The archaeologists found evidence of burned floors at Feltus, which presumably resulted from the burning of structures that once occupied those floors. The mounds grew as new layers were added. Kidder said the idea that the burnings are part of a life cycle is based on their knowledge of historical times: when a chief died, he would be buried and his house would be ritually burned and then covered over. Another explanation is that Southeastern Indians had what was thought to be purification rituals involving temples. This involved the periodic ritual demolition and burning of a temple before covering it with dirt to purify the next layer of the mound that would be built on top of it.



Enjoying American Archaeology

Like the other archaeologists investigating the Feltus Mounds, Nan Yang is very familiar with ancient burial mounds. But unlike his colleagues, most of the mounds Yang has worked on are in China. Yang, a professor at Central University for Nationalities in Beijing who has been doing field work in his native country since 1979, came to the United States last August as a Fulbright research scholar to study ancient mounds. He is in residence at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

He has investigated burial mounds in China, which he says are similar to those in America. Yang specializes in mounds built some 4,000 to 2,400 years ago during China’s Xia, Shang, and Zhou Dynasties. “I’m very interested in doing comparative studies,” he said. He is the first Chinese archaeologist to work in the U.S. on a Fulbright scholarship, which is giving him “opportunities to understand American mound archaeology.”

The field methodology used at Feltus is similar to that used by Chinese archaeologists, Yang said, but he noted some differences in the technologies American archaeologists employ. “I never saw machines like that before,” he said of the remote-sensing equipment—a gradiometer and magnetometer—that was used at Feltus. Yang has used satellite remote sensing in his surface surveys and excavations in China. Yang was also introduced to optically stimulated luminescence, a dating method that determines when soil was last exposed to sunlight.

Yang will remain in America till August of this year, but his time here has already been very rewarding. He said the “American spirits” of the archaeologists and the students have made “an unforgettable impression on me. I’m enjoying being here everyday.” —Michael Baway



These samples of Coles Creek pottery were recovered from the Feltus site. (Top) A crude Coles Creek Incised beaker; (below) intricately decorated French Fork Incised bowl fragments.



University of North Carolina students Jennifer Ringberg and Louise Bruce examine the trench profile in the flank of Mound B.

Steponaitis and O’Hear found multiple burned layers in one of the Feltus mounds, suggesting that such periodic renewals could have occurred. By excavating the burned layers along with the top and bottom floors, they may be able to better date the stages of the site. “Renewal was something that may have been important to ancient people,” said Steponaitis. “Periodically renewing the structures to make them bigger; to make them more impressive; taller; wider. That may have also been important.”

By the time the Europeans arrived, the natives of the Lower Mississippi Valley had become farmers, primarily growing corn. It’s thought that these big mound sites must have been supported by an agricultural economy, according to Kidder. People in Mexico before and during that time period practiced agriculture. Massive sites such as Teotihuacán (200 B.C.–A.D. 200), one of the largest and most populated areas in the New World at that time, had major agricultural economies.

“It takes a lot of energy to build [mounds and temples] and therefore some people think you need agriculture. We just haven’t found any evidence of a significant agricultural investment with the Coles Creek culture,” said Kidder. With the exception of a few small gardens, most of their food was still coming from wild plants and animals. During his investigations of several Coles Creek sites, Kidder found charred corn and squash plant remains dating to about A.D. 1000, but no evidence of agriculture prior to that. He believes that the Coles Creek were then beginning their “gradual shift” from a hunter-gatherer to an agricultural lifestyle. By the end of the Coles

Creek period, Kidder noted, corn production was common.

“[The fact that the Coles Creek people] built large complex mound sites is somewhat unusual for that time period in southeastern North America, particularly fairly early on. They’re not a burial mound culture, and one question we have been asking is ‘why are they building these big mounds and what do they tell us about the nature of their society?’” said Kidder. “We have a lot of theories about the Coles Creek, but we haven’t proved much.”

That may change as more sites are investigated. There are more than 20 mound sites in a 60-mile radius of Feltus, but only a half dozen have been investigated by modern archaeological standards. “From an archaeological point of view, I think Feltus is important because it’s a place where we’re probably going to have exposure of some of these surfaces—such as the tops of these mounds,” said Kidder, adding that it’s more difficult to analyze the surfaces of mounds that aren’t as well preserved.

O’Hear said that test excavations in areas around the mounds suggest heavy concentrations of artifacts. “There haven’t been that many (Coles Creek) period sites opened up like this since the late 1930s. We hope to be able to open up one of those mounds in a much larger way than we have. We’d like to recover the artifacts that are on the mounds’ surface itself and the remains of any buildings that might be down there,” said O’Hear. Now that they know where the occupation surfaces are, they hope to excavate more of the mounds to gain a better understanding of this mysterious culture.

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