

# The Uses of Platform-Mound Summits at a Coles Creek Site in Southwest Mississippi

Vincas P. Steponaitis (U.N.C.-Chapel Hill), Megan C. Kassabaum (U. of Pennsylvania), John W. O’Hear (U. of Mississippi)



MISSISSIPPI Department of  
**MDAH**  
ARCHIVES & HISTORY

## Introduction and Summary

The Feltus mound group (22Je500) is a well-preserved Coles Creek period site in Jefferson County, Mississippi. It originally consisted of four mounds, three of which still survive today (Fig. 1). Ceramics and radiocarbon dates bracket its occupation between AD 700 and 1100, with mound construction starting after AD 900.

Four field seasons totaling nine months of excavation have taken place at the site since 2006.<sup>3,5</sup> During the summer of 2012, we conducted geophysical work and excavations in mounds A and B which provided considerable information on the construction and use of mound summits during middle Coles Creek times, i.e., the Ballina and Balmoral phases.<sup>1</sup>

These summits showed multiple veneers of black and yellow sediments, portions of which were heavily burned. Also present were posts, small pits containing distinctively colored clays or charred plant materials that may have been votive deposits, as well as large, bathtub-shaped fire pits that were probably used for cooking. The summits themselves were kept clean, but dense middens associated with summit activities were found on their flanks. All in all, these summits reveal complex histories of ritual use, and show commonalities with ritual practices at both earlier Woodland and later Mississippian sites.

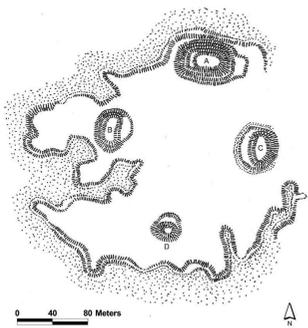


Figure 1. Map of the Feltus mounds. Mound D no longer exists.



Figure 2. Features on Stage 4 summit, Mound B: (top) profile of votive pit with white clay, beneath yellow silt veneer; (bottom) profile of wall complex, with burned post and charred cane.

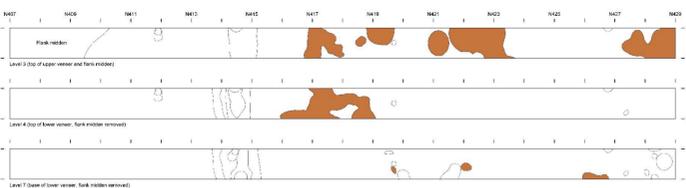


Figure 3. Plans of the stacked floors that made up the Stage 4 summit, with features outlined in black and burned areas shaded in orange. The upper two floors consisted of distinctively colored silt veneers. The pattern of burning on each floor is different, suggesting that each had a distinct history of use.

## Notes

1. The 2012 investigations were funded jointly by the U.N.C.-Chapel Hill and the Mississippi Department of Archives and History.
2. Ford, James A. (1951). *Greenhouse: a Troyville-Coles Creek Period Site in Avoyelles Parish, Louisiana*. Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, v. 44, pt. 1.
3. Kassabaum, Megan Crandal (2014). *Feasting and Communal Ritual in the Lower Mississippi Valley, AD 700–1000*. PhD dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
4. Kassabaum, Megan C., Edward R. Henry, Vincas P. Steponaitis, and John W. O’Hear (2014). “Between Surface and Summit: The Process of Mound Construction at Feltus.” *Archaeological Prospection* 14: 27–37.
5. Steponaitis, Vincas P., Megan C. Kassabaum, and John W. O’Hear (2015). “Cahokia’s Coles Creek Predecessors.” In *Medieval Mississippians: The Cahokian World*, edited by Susan M. Alt and Timothy R. Pauketat, pp. 12–19. SAR Press, Santa Fe.

## Mound B: Stage 4 Summit

Mound B is a rectangular earthwork 6 m tall, which was built in five stages (Figs. 4, 5). The surfaces atop the third and fourth stages were burned. In 2012 we explored the mound’s structure using electrical resistivity tomography (ERT) and opened a trench oriented N-S along the center of the summit. This trench was 1 m wide and 22 m long. It encountered the Stage 4 surface and provided an extraordinary glimpse of the activities that took place atop this mound.

This summit was covered with multiple veneers of silt, some black, others yellow or cream-colored, each about 2–3 cm thick (Fig. 7). Each of these veneers, and the top of the fill immediately beneath them, showed areas that had been heavily fired. The fact that each of these surfaces had a different pattern of firing suggests that the veneers were not laid down at once, but accumulated over time as part of a complex history of summit use and renewal (Fig. 6).

Beneath the veneers were a number of small pits, filled with either distinctively-colored clays or charred plants (Figs. 2, 7). They originated at various depths, some immediately below a veneer, others seemingly in the mound fill itself. We call these features “votive pits” and suspect they were related to ceremonies connected with mound construction.

Just south of N415 we found the remains of two wooden posts, set 1 m apart (one in each profile), which had been burned in place immediately before being covered with the Stage 5 fill (Figs. 2, 7). Between the posts was a mass of charred cane. If these posts were part of a circular building like those found on other Coles Creek mounds, there should have been a corresponding wall 9–10 m to the north, but no such feature was evident.

At the southern end of the trench we found a flank midden with refuse from mound-top meals and other activities that was swept over the edge (Fig. 7). This midden was visible in the ERT profile, which also revealed a similar deposit on the north flank (Fig. 6). Whether this refuse came from periodic ceremonies or a residential occupation on the summit is still unclear.

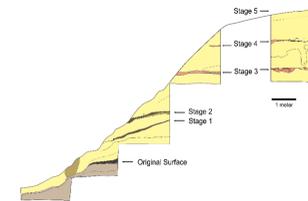


Figure 4. Profile of a trench dug into the west flank of Mound B, showing five stages of construction. The summits of the first two stages were marked by silt veneers. The summits of the third and fourth stages were burned and contained postholes, possibly from wooden buildings. Any prepared floors or features that once existed on the final summit (Stage 5) have been obliterated by erosion.

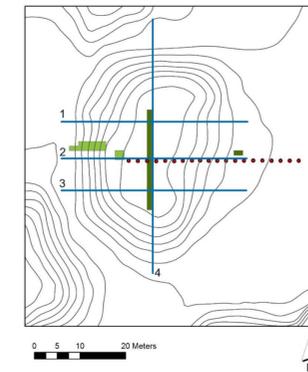


Figure 5. Map of Mound B, showing electrical resistivity tomography (ERT) transects in blue and excavations in green. Contour interval, 1 m.<sup>4</sup>

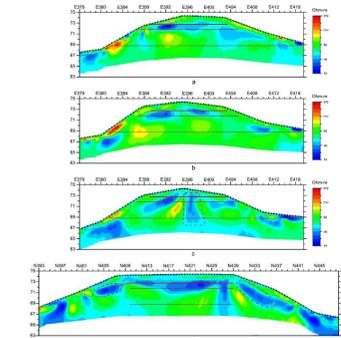


Figure 6. ERT pseudosections of Mound B: (a) transect 1, (b) transect 2, (c) transect 3; (d) transect 4. Solid red lines indicate elevations of surfaces; from bottom: basal midden, Stage 3, and Stage 4. Dotted lines surround confirmed and possible flank middens.<sup>4</sup>

## Mound A: Stage 1 and 2 Summits

Mound A is a rectangular platform 7 m high (Fig. 8). It was built in four stages. We have yet to find evidence of wooden structures on any of its summits, although our excavations are not extensive enough to definitively preclude their existence. The 2012 investigations entailed extending a 1-m-wide trench into the east flank of the mound, as well as two transects of down-hole magnetic susceptibility (DMS) readings, one on the east flank and another on the south flank.

The Stage 1 summit on the east flank was covered with thin sediment veneers, similar to those in Mound B. Below the veneers were at least two, small votive pits filled with charcoal (Fig. 10).

On the Stage 2 summit our trench encountered a large pit feature, approximately 1 x 2 m in extent and 1 m deep, with heavily burned walls and a thick layer of ash at the bottom (Fig. 10). A second, similar feature was detected in the DMS readings just outside our trench (Fig. 9). These features are identical to the “bathtub shaped fire pits” that Ford excavated in the off-mound areas of the contemporary Greenhouse site near Marksville, Louisiana.<sup>2</sup> There can be little doubt that these are cooking features, which indicates that foods were prepared on this mound, perhaps in the context of public feasts.

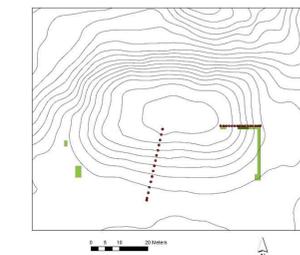


Figure 8. Map of Mound A, showing down-hole magnetic susceptibility (DMS) transects in red and excavation units in green. Contour interval, 1 m.<sup>4</sup>

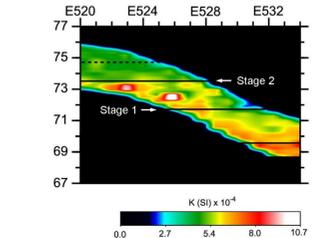


Figure 9. DMS profile of Mound A, east flank. Solid lines indicate elevations of surfaces; from bottom: Basal midden, Stage 1, and Stage 2. Two areas of high magnetic susceptibility below the Stage 2 surface represent bathtub-shaped fire pits.<sup>4</sup>

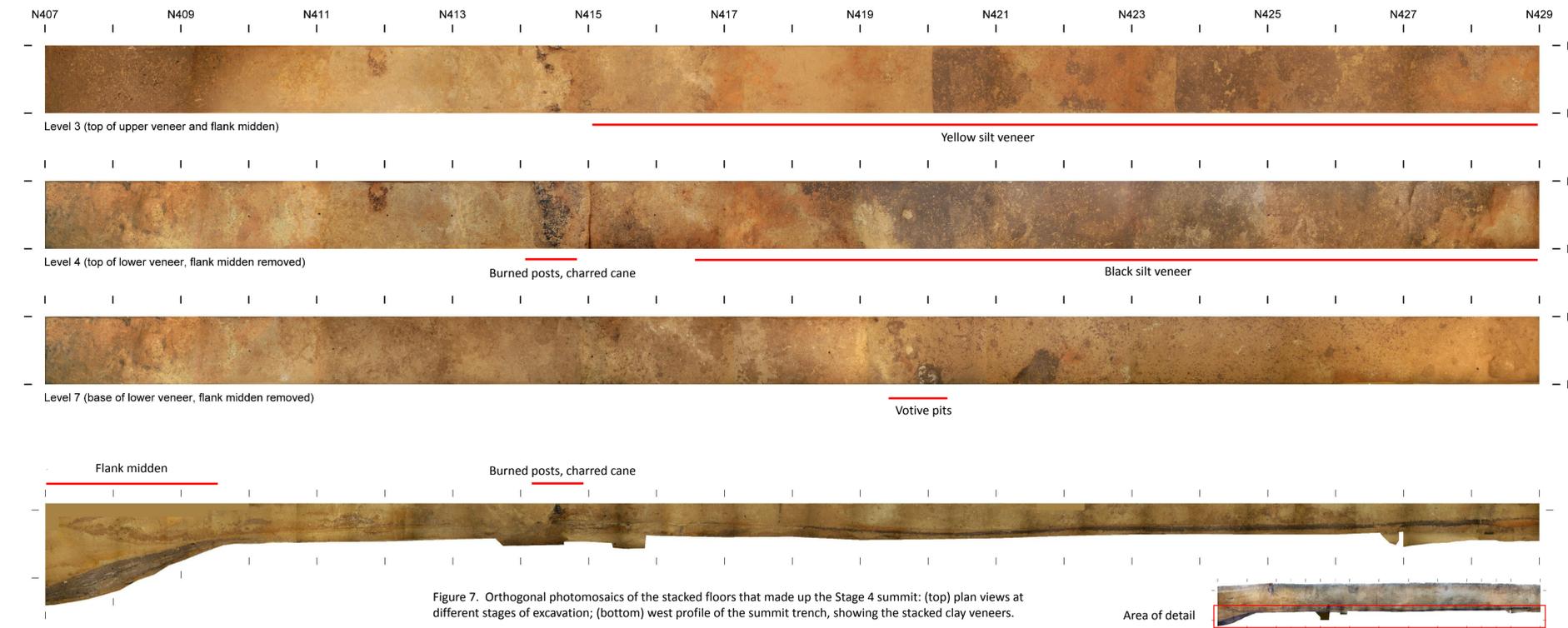


Figure 7. Orthogonal photomosaics of the stacked floors that made up the Stage 4 summit: (top) plan views at different stages of excavation; (bottom) west profile of the summit trench, showing the stacked clay veneers.

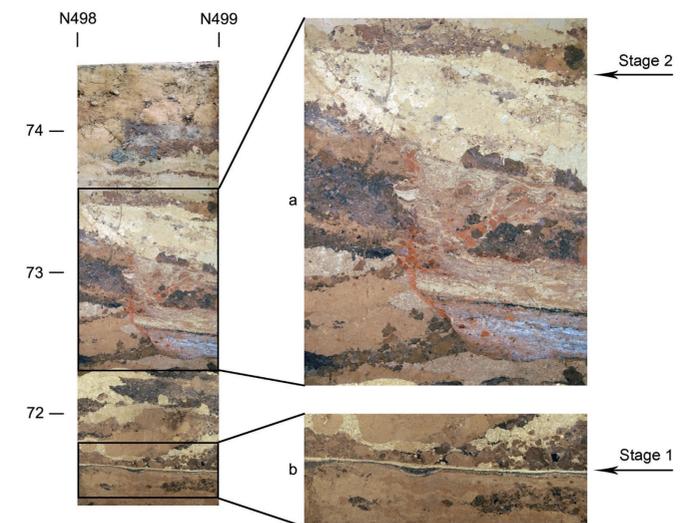


Figure 10. Features on east flank of Mound A: (a) Stage 2 surface, with a bathtub-shaped fire pit below; (b) Stage 1 surface, floored with a white silt veneer. Note the charcoal-filled votive pit beneath the veneer, just left of center.<sup>4</sup>