



Coles Creek Summit Architecture at the Feltus Mounds

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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.^[1,3]

Six field seasons have taken place at the site since 2006.^[6,13,14] During the summers of 2017 and 2018, we conducted excavations on the summit of Mound B (Fig. 2) which provided the first definitive evidence of mound-top buildings. At least one of these buildings was a rectangular, wall-trench structure, definitively measuring more than 8 m wide (E-W) and possibly up to 14 m long (N-S). This building dates to late Coles Creek times, ca. AD 1050-1100. Associated ceramics are consistent with the Balmoral phase.

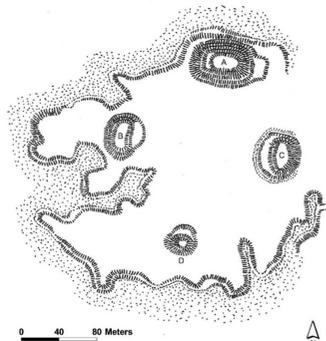


Figure 1. Map of Feltus Mounds, showing Mound D.

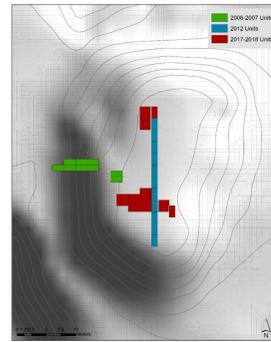


Figure 2. Topographic map of Mound B with excavation units.

Mound B: Recent Investigations

Mound B is a rectangular earthwork 6 m tall, which was built in five stages (Fig. 2-3). The surfaces of Stages 3 and 4 were heavily burned. The top of Stage 5, the last constructional deposit, is heavily disturbed by bioturbation, weathering, and erosion.

In 2012 we excavated a 1 x 22 m trench oriented N-S along the center of the summit (Fig. 2). It encountered the Stage 4 surface, on which we found the remains of two wooden posts, set 1 m apart, which had been burned in place immediately before being covered with the Stage 5 fill (Fig. 8). 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.

In 2017 we opened a 2 x 4 m block off the west side of the 2012 trench, directly above the charred posts on Stage 4 (Fig. 2). Based on previous work, we believed it unlikely that structural features associated with Stage 5 survived. We were therefore surprised to find a massive wall trench that must have originated at the Stage 5 surface. A second 2 x 3 m block opened off the north end of the trench also revealed evidence of wall trenches.

Because of weathering and disturbance, features originating at the uppermost mound surface are very difficult to see until one reaches a depth of about 40 cm. Armed with that knowledge, we returned with a larger crew in 2018 and followed out these wall trenches with an additional 24 sq m of excavation.

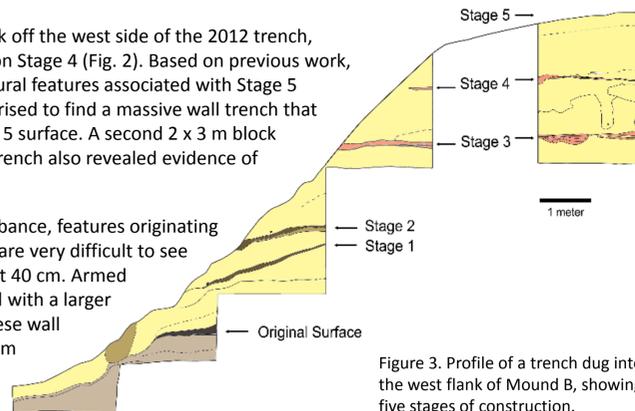


Figure 3. Profile of a trench dug into the west flank of Mound B, showing five stages of construction.

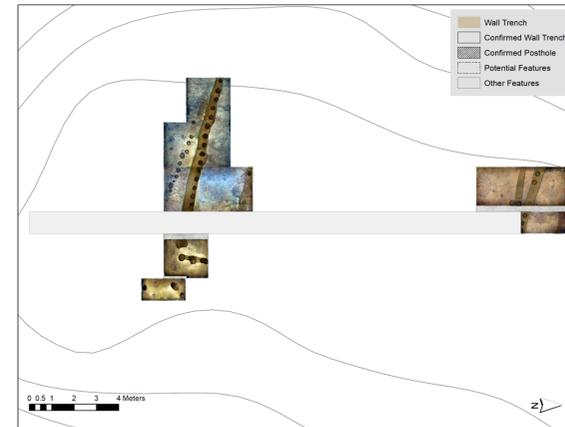


Figure 4. Map of Mound B summit with features delineated.

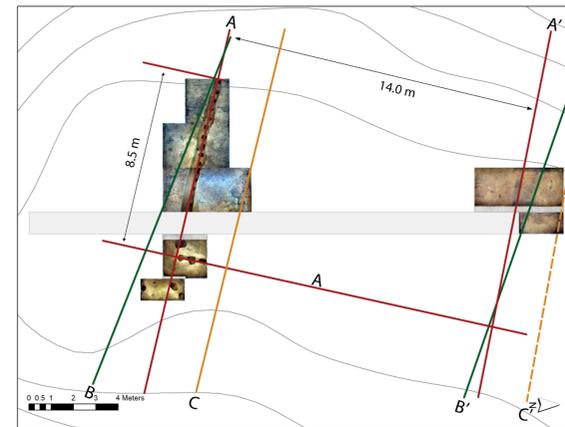


Figure 5. Proposed architectural delineations.

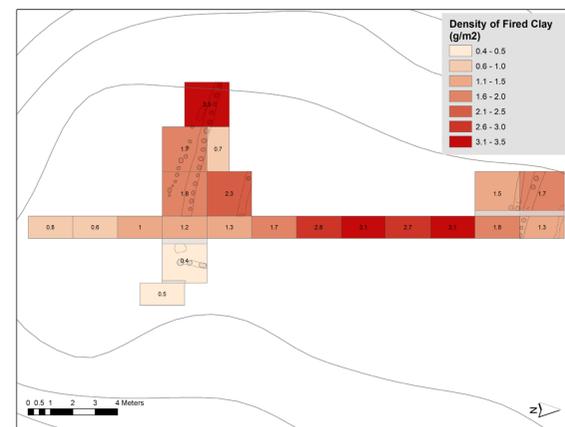


Figure 6. Map of Mound B summit showing fired clay densities per unit.

Stage 5 Summit Architecture

The clearest evidence of a building was found in the south block of the 2017-18 excavations (Figs. 4-5), with a wall trench at least 8 m long and 40 to 50 cm wide (A in Fig. 5). It contained posts set at intervals of about 40 cm. The fact that these posts were not centered in the trench, but rather placed along its northern margin suggests that this wall belonged to a bent-pole structure, i.e., that the extra space along the trench’s southern margin accommodated a horizontal “wedge” that prevented the posts from kicking out due to the tension placed on them. At the eastern end of this trench, a corner was found, with a companion wall trench heading north. Two other walls, also oriented E-W, were also discovered. The one to the south (B in Fig. 5) appears to consist of single posts, but an elongated stain observed at its western end suggests that the posts were actually set in a trench that was indistinct for most of its length. Another wall to the north (C in Fig. 5), consisted of posts definitively set in a trench.

Three wall trenches were also found in the north block (Figs. 4-5). We strongly suspect, but as yet cannot prove, that these walls are the counterparts to those found in the south block. Based on their orientations, walls A’ and A are likely counterparts, as are B’ and B. By process of elimination, we also suggest that C’ may pair with C. All of these pairings remain to be tested, but if even one of them holds true, then a building on this summit would have been 14 m long. It should be noted that only one possible intervening wall can be seen in the R395 profile between the two blocks (Fig. 8), which is not enough to pair with all the trenches thus far observed.

The uppermost levels of our 2012 and 2017-18 units also produced large amounts of fired-clay daub, which at Feltus is generally rare. The daub is concentrated in the areas between the north and south wall trenches (Fig. 6), which suggests that at least one of the summit buildings burned. Many of the pieces show impressions of split cane, indicative of wattle-and-daub construction (Fig. 7).



Figure 7. Examples of fired clay with cane impressions.

Table 1. Selected buildings from neighboring regions with walls more than 10 m long.^[3,8,12,16]

Site, Loc.	Designation	Side 1 (m)	Side 2 (m)	Floor Area (m ²)
Bessemer, Ala.	Structure 1	10.1	8.5	85.8
Moundville, Ala.	House 9	10.8	3.6	39.0
Bessemer, Ala.	Structure 2	10.8	7.8	84.1
Moundville, Ala.	Structure 93	11.0	4.0	47.0
Bessemer, Ala.	Structure 7	11.3	5.3	60.2
Bessemer, Ala.	Structure 6	11.9	9.1	108.7
Bessemer, Ala.	Structure 11	12.8	9.0	115.1
Feltus, Miss.	Structure A	14.0	8.5	119.0
Bessemer, Ala.	Structure 3	15.2	12.2	185.8
Moundville, Ala.	Structure 2	15.5	13.8	213.9
Bessemer, Ala.	Structure 4	16.5	10.7	175.6
Nick Farm, Lou.	Feature 10	18.3	18.3	334.5
Bessemer, Ala.	Structure 1	18.6	11.9	221.0
Bessemer, Ala.	Structure 5	19.5	6.4	124.9

Comparisons to Other Coles Creek and Mississippian Architecture

Previous buildings excavated on Coles Creek mounds have been circular, usually with singly-set posts.^[1,2,3,5,15] It is therefore of interest that the buildings on Mound B were rectangular with wall-trench construction. The latter form is usually associated with Mississippian cultures. However, given that late Coles Creek is contemporary with early Mississippian, the presence of this type of building at Feltus should not be surprising.

The size of these buildings is also noteworthy. The fact that one summit structure had a wall more than 8 m long is not out of line with other examples, as circular Coles Creek buildings are known to have diameters of 9-10 m. A 14-m span, if it proves true, would be unusual, but not implausible, as evidenced by the sample of roughly contemporary buildings from mound sites in Louisiana and Alabama with long dimensions ranging from 10 m to just under 20 m (Table 1). The Mound B structure falls right in the center of this range.

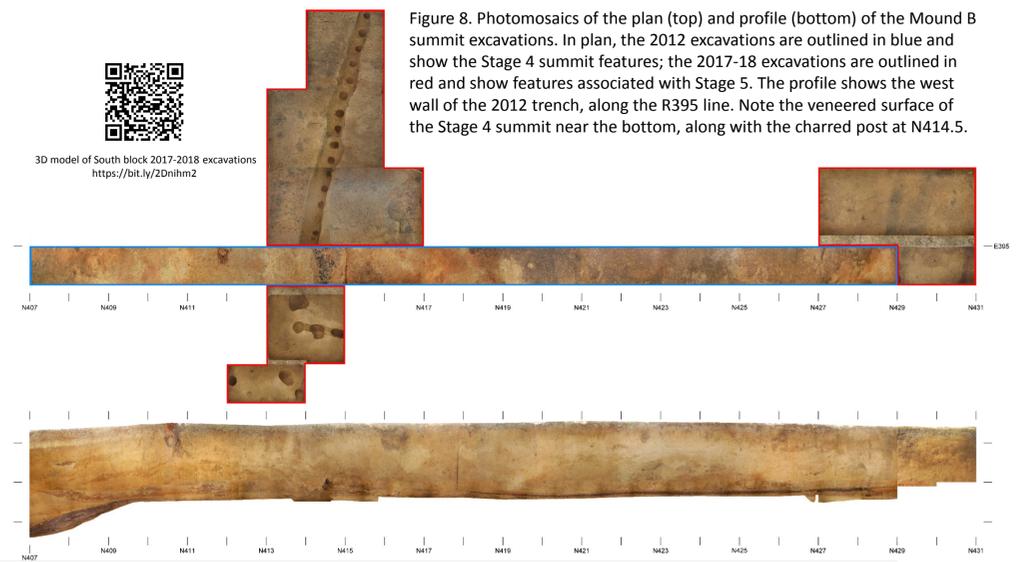


Figure 8. Photomosaics of the plan (top) and profile (bottom) of the Mound B summit excavations. In plan, the 2012 excavations are outlined in blue and show the Stage 4 summit features; the 2017-18 excavations are outlined in red and show features associated with Stage 5. The profile shows the west wall of the 2012 trench, along the R395 line. Note the veneered surface of the Stage 4 summit near the bottom, along with the charred post at N414.5.

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