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The hallmark of Middle to Late Holocene occupation of the St. Johns River Valley in Northeast Florida are mounds composed primarily of freshwater shellfish remains. Our traditional understanding of the origins and significance of these places can be traced back to the morning of February 8, 1871, which Jeffries Wyman spent examining the eroded profile of such a mound. As the first curator of Harvard’s Peabody Museum, Wyman’s goal was to determine whether human or natural agents were responsible for these geomorphologically anomalous, yet regionally widespread, topographic features. The complex he examined on this particular morning was arguably the largest on the river, consisting of three shell ridges in a U-shape, each ridge rising upwards of 8 m above the floodplain and extending over 300 m inland or along the waterfront. He had observed similar facades at scores of isolated linear or crescent-shaped shell ridges, typically 150 m long and 6 m high, throughout the middle and upper reaches of the river (Figure 1). No doubt struck by the scale of this particular facade, Wyman retired that afternoon to an orange grove and contemplated the apparent contradiction between the structure and overwhelming size of the shell mounds on one hand, and their apparently mundane content (i.e., shellfish and other materials) on the other. His resolution? Although the mounds were indeed anthropogenic and monumental in scale, they solely represented accumulated refuse (Wyman 1875:11).

Over one hundred years later, we certainly know more empirically than Wyman. Basal deposits at mounds signal the emergence of intensive freshwater shellfishing around 7300 cal B.P. by hunter-gatherer communities at the onset of the Preceramic Archaic Mount Taylor period (ca. 7300–4700 cal B.P.) (Wheeler et al. 2000), while the appearance of fiber-tempered pottery registers occupation during the Ceramic Archaic Orange period (4700–3600 cal B.P.). Finally, superimposed upon many shell mounds are the output of post-Archaic St. Johns tradition horticulturalists (3600–500 cal B.P.). Yet Wyman and his contemporaries (e.g., C.B. Moore [1999]) still shape the contours of regional archaeological investigations. Their descriptions and excavated collections remain irreplaceable documentation of places that have mostly been destroyed by twentieth-century mining operations. Moreover, Wyman’s resolution to the shell mound contradiction has been tacitly accepted and welded to a model of progressive social evolution (e.g., Goggin 1952; Milanich 1994). As a consequence, the scale, distribution, composition, and development of Archaic shell mounds registers little more than long-term demographic processes and unreflexive refuse deposition by socially simple hunter-gatherers. However, a new round of investigation has identified numerous practices and institutions unanticipated by evolutionary models, and these demonstrate that shell mounds were truly monumental in scale and significance. As I briefly review here, an examination of how shell mounds emerged as a long-term historical process reveals that Archaic communities actively reproduced and transformed their own histories through daily and commemorative acts at sacred and mundane places. Such acts are evident as depositional practices that variously referenced, altered, politicized, or avoided past places on the landscape in the context of complex social interactions and dynamic ecologies.

The incipient exploitation of shellfish at the onset of the Mount Taylor period 7,000 years ago is traditionally modeled as a response to the establishment of productive wetlands and near-modern hydrological regimes (Miller 1998:65). In contrast to their final configurations and significance, the origins of shell mounds are decidedly mundane and unimposing in character. However, the particulars of these new practices indicate that Archaic communities created new social and ancestral geographies along St. Johns through the construction of structured settlements and integrative mortuaries. Early settlements have proven difficult to detail because many were either inundated or were obscured by meters of later deposition (Wheeler et al. 2000). However, the Hontoon Dead Creek Complex (8VO214/215) provides a rare opportunity to delimit the structure and organizational principles of such localities. Today, the complex is located some 200 m from channeled water, and is composed of a large Archaic mound (Figure 1, right), a now-inundated 7,000-year-old shell midden, and a low-lying terrestrial shell midden to the south of the mound. Excavation within the mound demonstrated that it is principally a non-habitation Mount Taylor platform that postdates early settlement (Randall and...
Sassaman 2005). Topographic mapping, close-interval coring, and test unit excavations within the shell midden to the south documented five regularly spaced shell nodes oriented in a linear array along the terrace edge (Randall 2007). These elongated nodes average roughly 20 m long, 10 m wide, and 50 cm high. The two heaps closest to the mound date between 7300 and 6400 cal B.P., and are characterized by multiple crushed shell surfaces. Whether the nodes were the foundations of houses or communal middens is unknown, but the depositional sequence within the shell nodes demonstrates numerous periods of occupation. Reconstruction of the site has established that 7,000 years ago communities created and reproduced linear settlements characterized by multiple domestic middens, some possibly cotemporaneous.

As early as a century after the first settlements were established, some preexisting places were transformed into mortuary mounds in a process that both referenced earlier settlements and integrated diverse regional communities. The presence of mortuaries at the base of mounds throughout the region was established by Moore (1999) in the late nineteenth century. However, it was only after Aten (1999) reconstructed Ripley Bullen's salvage excavation of the Harris Creek mound (8VO24) on Tick Island that the details and antiquity of this practice became apparent. Excavations in the basal portion of the mound exposed by shell mining identified at least 175 individuals, although many more were likely removed prior to observation. As detailed by Aten, these interments were emplaced into two successive mortuaries dating sometime between 7,000 and 5,600 years ago. The foundation of the mortuary was a low-lying shell ridge, the equivalent of a domestic midden identified at the Hontoon Dead Creek complex, which was capped with mounded clean shell. Over the course of several generations, individual and multiple interments were then emplaced into deposits of allochthonous white sand or shell upon this ridge or in grave pits. Contrary to the widespread notion that monuments were constructed for territorial purposes, recent skeletal stable isotope analysis by Quinn and colleagues (2008) indicates that those individuals buried within the mound originated throughout the St. Johns Valley, and in some cases came from communities as far away as southern Florida and even Virginia or Tennessee. These points of origin may be represented in differential burial treatment as well (Tucker and Krigbaum 2007). The temporality and politics of internment suggest that diverse identities were incorporated through commemorative events at mounds that reproduced the spatiality of earlier settlements.

Sometime after 6,000 years ago, Archaic communities reconfigured mounds and mortuaries into three overlapping and mutually constitutive spheres of practice. This transformation occurs in the context of river stage fluctuation as well as increasing scales of social interaction in which objects were imported from throughout the lower Southeastern United States (McGee and Wheeler 1994; Wheeler et al. 2000). Some places remained loci of daily practice. At the Silver Glen Run Complex (8LA1), an early settlement was capped by tan sand,
upon which new household clusters were emplaced (Figure 2, left). These events are evident as crushed shell surfaces that appear to represent house floors, while refuse including shellfish, vertebrate fauna, tool debris, and paleofeces register ongoing daily affairs. We currently do not know how these new settlements were structured, but based on the organization of the mound it appears they were similarly oriented as a linear array. Other similarly configured mounds, however, were the locus of routinized deposition without evidence for daily habitation. At the Hontoon Dead Creek Mound, Archaic communities used clean shell and materials mined from a preexisting shell midden to create a platform mound (Randall and Sassaman 2005). This platform was repeatedly renewed through the alternating deposition of clean shell and burned shell (Figure 2, right). Such practices have analogues in settlements, but apparently did not include the deposition of diverse mundane assemblages. Arguably, the platforms were created through commemorative events that referenced the structure and organization of daily practice. Communities also constructed burial mounds of sand and shell in several locations within the St. Johns valley and on the associated Atlantic Coast. Endonino’s (2008) ongoing investigation of the Thornhill Lake Complex (8VO58-60) is revealing key details on these transformations. This complex is composed of a low-lying shell ridge upon which two conical sand and shell mounds were constructed sometime between 5600–4500 cal B.P. The mounds were grafted upon a preexisting shell midden settlement, a practice seen at other sand mound complexes in the region. Linking such complexes are nonlocal objects such as bannerstones from South Carolina and Georgia that were interred either in caches or as grave goods. While the precise chronologies and temporalities of mortuary monument construction are being worked out, it is evident that such places provided a space for recognizing and subverting increasingly diverse and potentially dissonant social histories.

The alliances that were maintained through bannerstone exchange likely facilitated the introduction of either potters or pottery production from coastal communities beginning 4,600 years ago at the onset of the Orange period (Sassaman 2004). The appearance of Orange fiber-tempered pottery was not simply an addition to traditional subsistence technologies, but instead represents a “new world order” in the organization of regional ritual and domestic practice (Randall and Sassaman 2007). New patterns of settlement and monumental construction, in which sacred and secular places were spatially segregated, emerged from the coalescence of once-separated coastal and interior populations. Circular villages, apparently modeled on coastal spatial models and characterized by plain pottery production, are present throughout the valley. Along the St. Johns, such places were frequently emplaced adjacent to, but notably not on top of, preexisting Mount Taylor platform mounds. In contrast to the widespread distribution of plain wares, abundant assemblages of decorated and technologically distinct vessels are restricted to only four locations on the river, spaced roughly 20–30 km apart. While the organization of all these locations is poorly known, recent investigations at the Silver Glen Complex by the University of Florida Archaeological Field School suggests that they were large U-shaped mound complexes (Figure 3). It was this very place that inspired Jeffries...
Wyman to ponder the significance of shell mounds. These Orange-period monuments recall the spatial organization of Orange-period coastal shell rings, but on a much grander scale. Current results from excavations in the remnants of this now-mined locality indicate that the U-shaped construction was built on top of a Mount Taylor shell ridge that may have contained a dedicated mortuary mound, and sited across from an extant Mount Taylor settlement. The abundance of decorated Orange vessels in near-shore contexts suggests that the deposition of vessels into the water was part of a larger commemorative event. Other details emerging from investigations hint at differences in pottery production between ridges. Continued testing will address the chronology and organization of these different practices. Regardless, the new traditions that emerged during the Orange period variously drew from coastal and interior worldviews in a way that referenced a landscape already sedimented with enduring significance.

Florida's Archaic investigations have come full circle. Like Wyman, we are still pursuing the origins and significance of shell mounds and the practices through which they were produced. However, Wyman's pragmatic rationality is being replaced with a recognition that diverse hunter-gatherer communities and social histories were created and transformed through inscriptive practices at shell mounds. Contemporary research is just now providing the context to investigate such processes in depth through detailed site histories and innovative analyses. It is an exciting time to be involved in this research, which has implications beyond Florida. As demonstrated by other contributions in this issue, the archaeological record of hunter-gatherers (Archaic or not) is relevant to audiences beyond specialists. Processes of social memory, ethnogenesis, and monumental construction are not restricted to non-hunter-gatherers. The culture-histories encased in the St. Johns provide yet another reason to rethink the long-reproduced structural linkage between subsistence and social process that has obscured hunter-gatherer histories.

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