

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Feasting with Shellfish in the Southern Ohio Valley: Archaic Sacred Sites and Rituals. By Cheryl Claassen.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/96n4641d>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 36(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Greber, Nomi B.

Publication Date

2012-09-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Texas and Mexico Seminole Maroons adds a further fascinating complexity to their naming system—and her discussion of religious beliefs and practices as subjects for further analysis.

Students of Seminole Maroon history and culture, along with the Seminole Maroons themselves, will benefit from Mock's work in preserving the wisdom, courage, perseverance, and knowledge of Maroon women, and she deserves to be commended. From a scholarly perspective, however, this could have been a more insightful and useful book.

Rebecca B. Bateman

Simon Fraser University

Feasting with Shellfish in the Southern Ohio Valley: Archaic Sacred Sites and Rituals. By Cheryl Claassen. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2010. 264 pages. \$49.00 cloth.

The introductory chapter clearly states the author's goal, that of "elucidating the spiritual life of Archaic peoples in the southern Ohio Valley" (5). The main part of the book consists of much data, in both text and table form. The information was primarily compiled from the many references, with additions from the author's many contacts with colleagues, who are all acknowledged, as well as her personal examination of some collections. Tables present radiocarbon dates, statistics on modern mussel fisheries, the amount of fill contained in shell heaps and earthen mounds, and site descriptions, including counts of tool types and fauna recovered and details of human and dog burials, including evidence for ritual violence. This data is integral to the author's reinterpretations of previously published accounts of the activities associated with shell heaps that are found along some southern tributaries of the Ohio River, and the shell heaps' cultural meaning. The author ends the volume with a list of testable hypotheses that she recommends for future research, research that may bolster or refute her interpretations.

Claassen states her view with admirable clarity and gives data that can be checked, making the few missteps she takes in presenting her worthwhile opinions more easily apparent. The following comments will offer several such examples from the author's set of reinterpretations, and do not necessarily follow the order of their appearance in the book itself.

In reinterpreting aspects of mortuary behavior, Claassen characterizes objects accompanying individual internments neither as prestige items, gifts to an individual, evidence of the social status in life of the individual interred, nor of his or her occupation, but rather as signifying a particular god. She

adds that this “circumvents the standard theoretical discussions of mortuary behavior and even contradicts them,” in particular as discussed in the early 1970s work of Lewis Binford and Arthur Saxe (206), which assert that the placing of internments do reflect the social position of the individual and their physical attributes, such as age and sex. However, they also write that the circumstances of an individual’s death can take precedence over their social status in determining the manner of burial, so to the extent that Claassen’s “abnormal” burials reflect particular circumstances of each death, such as when, where, and how, rather than being at odds with the author’s proposed reinterpretation of particular burials, the Binford and Saxe view is consistent with her thesis.

One of Claassen’s major points is a continuity of ritual practices from the Archaic time period into the Adena and Hopewell eras (216). In order to demonstrate the large size of the Archaic monuments for comparisons with later constructions, she calculates volumes of shell heaps and earthen mounds. In general, the volume of the basin-shaped model she uses is obtained by multiplying the area of the base (πab) by a representative height, that is, by multiplying three lengths together. However, the formula Claassen uses for the calculation contains four variables that are multiplied together, yet the variable “d” is not defined (88). Possibly a typo, I can only guess at the basis for this formula: if “d” is a length, then the formula gives a number that is in four dimensions.

The choice of sites represented in the table of results is of more concern. Usually considered to be later than Archaic sites, “Adena/Hopewell” mounds are listed separately from “Later Earthen Mounds.” The sites chosen for this listing do not adequately represent the range in the volume of either known Ohio Hopewell mounds, or those commonly assigned to Adena. For example, Hopewell Site Mound 25 was not as large as Cahokia Monks Mound included in the table, but it was equal in size to others that are listed as later mounds. Additionally, the most volume contained in monumental earthen Ohio Hopewell constructions is found in the great enclosures such as those at Fort Ancient and Turner in the Miami Valley. Numerous other enclosure sites exist in the southern flowing tributaries of the Middle Ohio from the Great Miami eastward to the Muskingum, with the exception of the Hocking. Here only smaller enclosures, usually attributed to “Adena,” are found.

This dichotomy raises the same theoretical question Claassen poses concerning possible continuity in the cultural activities of Archaic times into “Adena/Hopewell,” that is, their cultural relationship: is one the descent of the other? It is difficult to judge the continuity between the Archaic rituals described by Claassen and the rituals associated with “Adena/Hopewell” mounds. According to recent studies by R. Berle and Nomi Greber, the

relationship between these two later phenomena varies geographically both north and south of the Ohio River. I suspect that a similar situation likely existed in the history of shell heaps. One needs to consider local cultural and environmental factors in each valley to understand what happened after additions were no longer being made to the shell heaps Claassen studied.

Claassen also poses another long-term anthropological question concerning the relationship between the construction of large monuments and the size and duration of everyday living settlements. In the case of Ohio Hopewell, interpretations began in the nineteenth century with writers assuming that the builders of great monuments had to have built great cities. While today the question is more usually phrased in terms of a mobile or permanent settlement pattern, as Claassen notes, nonetheless research questions are continuous, and persistently indicate that more data are needed. The present tenor of anthropological thinking and publications does allow emphasis upon social factors as a prime mover for cultural change; that is, environmental conditions or available physical resources need not be considered as the only major factors. Claassen attributes evidence of violent deaths at the shell heaps to ritual sacrifices performed to ensure world order, rather than deeming them lives lost in defense of home or resources. Such ritual sacrifices develop as particular places became sacred locations for feasting, and religious officials organized larger feasting over time. The authority of these officials did not lead to the establishment of a complex social organization, variously defined.

With new types of data that come from technological inventions such as carbon-14 dating and DNA genome mapping, both of concern in the present volume, a shift in theoretical frameworks will come automatically. More interesting, perhaps, are the shifts caused by inventive human minds. Over millennia humans have sacrificed other humans to supernatural powers in many places on earth; it will be up to the reader to decide if the evidence presented in this volume adds weight to such rituals as part of the primary social forces that fostered building, maintaining, and then abandoning sacred spaces marked by shell heaps in southern tributaries of the Ohio.

Nomi B. Greber

Cleveland Museum of Natural History