

Communal versus Competitive Feasting: Comment on Kassabaum

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Megan Kassabaum has developed a useful approach for interpreting feasting remains, but its application to the Feltus site demonstrates that modifications need to be made. In particular, the characterization of competitive feasting is too simplistic, and her model does not include work types of feasts, which may be responsible for the remains at the Feltus site. The interpretation of feasting at the Feltus site as resulting from social solidarity needs of a dispersed egalitarian society appear questionable on the basis of a high incidence of special meat, the occurrence of smoking pipes, monumental architecture, and indications of possible human sacrifices.

Keywords: feasts, archaeology, transegalitarian, competition, mounds

Megan Kassabaum ha desarrollado una propuesta útil para interpretar los restos de banquetes, sin embargo su aplicación hacia el sitio Feltus demuestra que modificaciones serán necesarias. En particular, su caracterización de banquetes competitivos es demasiado simplista y su modelo no incluye banquetes asociados con labor, lo cual podría ser responsable por los restos de el sitio Feltus. La interpretación de un banquete en el sitio Feltus como resultado de una preocupación por la solidaridad social de una sociedad igualitaria dispersa parece cuestionable a base de una prevalencia alta de carne especial, la ocurrencia de pipas para fumar, arquitectura monumental, e indicaciones de posibles sacrificios humanos.

Palabras clave: banquetes, arqueología, transigalitaría, competición, montículos

I would like to commend Megan Kassabaum on developing a new way of conceptualizing and graphing feasting remains. The two-dimensional plot is a useful way of summarizing archaeological observations, although as she acknowledges, other dimensions may also be important. It is also nice to see another well-documented example of feasting. I would, however, like to add a few caveats.

One is that many large feasts in her large-scale, competitive events quadrant in Figure 2 (Kassabaum 2019) do not just involve well-off individuals with the best foods and accoutrements. A few large elite feasts may be like that, but most large competitive feasts involve two distinct groups of participants: (1) a small core group of the most important people, who eat

the best foods, use the finest serving vessels, and occupy the best facilities; and (2) a much larger number of general attendees, who assemble outside or in shelters, eat off of leaves or cheap materials, and are given less desirable, more common kinds of foods. Marriage and funeral feasts typify this second pattern in most transegalitarian societies. As a result, the feasting remains of large competitive feasts are not all high-quality remains, as Kassabaum characterizes them. At the Feltus site, would it not be possible for the smaller amounts of feasting refuse (e.g., bear bones, pipes) from competitive higher-ranking participants to have been overwhelmed by the more copious refuse from the general participants? Alternatively, the smaller elite refuse could have been destroyed by modern

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disturbances or missed by the very limited excavations of archaeologists. In short, I think there is room for equivocation in interpreting the Feltus remains and assigning them to the low competitive sector in Kassabaum's system.

I do not mean to imply that solidarity and identity were not part of the feasts at Feltus. Certainly, there is a strong cooperative and identity element even in many transegalitarian competitive feasts such as marriages and funerals, especially among the members of sponsoring lineages or kin groups. Solidarity, however, is an aspect of all feasts sponsored by more than one person. Jon Haidt's (2012) analogy of rowing teams shows that despite intense competition to achieve higher positions within organizations, if teams are to outcompete rivals, they must also cooperate and create team solidarity. The same is true of lineage groups, rival secret societies (including Pueblo kachina sodalities), and community factions. Unfortunately, many ethnographers (and archaeologists) focus exclusively on the solidarity aspects of feasts but ignore their wider competitive contexts.

On the other hand, I certainly agree that there are feasts held primarily to maintain or increase group solidarity, and consequentially, group identity. Contra Kassabaum's assertions (2019:612, 617), I have never excluded such instances from feasting consideration (check the many index entries for "solidarity" in Hayden 2014, 2017:109–111). Solidarity feasts are important for maintaining lineages, family, or other social groups, whether on smaller scales (including our Christmas dinners) or community-wide scales. But solidarity feasts usually pale in comparison to competitive feasts. Moreover, maintaining groups must serve some purpose. I would suggest that factionalism is normally endemic in transegalitarian societies and that group solidarity only becomes an important concern where competitive pressures are strong between groups or where reciprocal aid among members of a group is essential for survival.

Although I am not entirely conversant with the Coles Creek culture, I hesitate to accept Kassabaum's assessment of it and the Feltus site as representing an egalitarian group that created mounds and large feasts simply to reinforce social cohesion. The mere construction of *four*

mounds in a planned plaza raises several important questions. Who promoted the construction of mounds and the gathering of dispersed homesteads, and why was this important? How did the promoters convince other community members to undertake such constructions? Who used the tops of these mounds (hardly conceivable for use by the general populace)? From my perspective, mounds are, above all, constructed as displays of group power. Whom were the mounds meant to impress? One does not need such constructions to bind together people with mutual interests. Feasting and gift giving are adequate for that. Despite the references cited, the notion that monumental constructions were undertaken "without status-seeking behavior" is not credible to me.

Of greater import, however, is that some or perhaps all of the Feltus feasting remains may simply be from work feasts associated with mound construction. Work feasts do not fit into Kassabaum's two-dimensional framework. Work feasts have very different dynamics and material characteristics from communal or competitive feasts. Work feasts, however, would be similar to the feasting remains that were recovered from Feltus—that is, they involved large numbers of people for a short time at a construction site but consisted of fairly routine foods for the most part, and perhaps some specially prized items such as bear. Of comparative interest, the feasting remains at Caral and Lampay—the earliest (Archaic) mounds in Peru—have been interpreted as work feasts for constructing mounds (Haas and Creamer 2006; Vega-Centeno 2007).

For Kassabaum, the pottery assemblages at Feltus do not differ dramatically from other Coles Creek sites, and Feltus pottery was therefore for quotidian food. But what if all the pottery at all these sites was for specialty food preparation or serving at feasts meant to competitively impress guests? This has been argued for early pottery in many other places (e.g., Barnett and Hoopes 1995; Taché 2011). It would be extraordinarily unusual if competitive feasts had not also taken place at the Coles Creek residential sites where pottery has been found. Most transegalitarian competitive kinship-sponsored feasts, in fact, take place in and around private residences or lineage houses.

Kassabaum also emphasized “the creation and maintenance of social ties” in which bear worship facilitated drawing together “an extended social network of nonliving and fictive kin” (2019:626) to create social cohesion and identity for dispersed communities. Ethnographically, however, bear ideology and impersonations were often used to *create* inequalities. Bears were power animals widely adopted by secret societies in North America in concept and costume to intimidate, punish, or kill individuals who challenged secret society hegemony. Members imitating bears sometimes killed at whim and even hungered for human flesh (see Hayden 2018:48, 70–71, 104–105, 133, 138, 166, 171, 184, 187). The association of five children’s remains with bear bones would seem to bear out such a role. Bears were also used by wealthy Siberian and Japanese hunter-gatherers (e.g., the Ainu) to create potlatch-like reciprocal debts between kinship heads as is evident in documentary films such as *Iyomande: Ainu Bear Festival* (see also Watanabe 1973:75). They were not used as a means of creating social cohesion for entire communities, although this was undoubtedly an auxiliary aspect.

Similarly, smoking pipes did indeed serve to enhance personal and social relationships but probably not for “community bonds.” Pipes were typically smoked by a select group of important people. In the Pacific Northwest, these individuals were usually kinship heads, chiefs, and shamans (Spier and Sapir 1930:269; Teit 1906:250). I suspect the situation was not very different in the Southeast. Kassabaum’s claims that bears and pipe smoking “are rarely included in rituals associated with status negotiation” and that their presence “does not support a political or competitive focus” (2019:626) are simply not true. Additionally, the recovery of four or five children’s remains in a post pit at Feltus raises the question of whether these individuals were sacrificed. Sacrifices hardly imply egalitarian societies. Instead, human sacrifices signify displays of power, and it is difficult to imagine so many children dying coincidentally at the same time.

Finally, the argument that a lack of maize agriculture somehow prevented Coles Creek groups from creating surpluses that would

support transegalitarian or more complex sociopolitical systems (Kassabaum 2019:620, 626) is simply not supported by Late Archaic manifestations in the eastern United States (Sanger et al. 2019)—not to mention the many ethnographic accounts of complex hunter-gatherer groups such as the Calusa as well as groups from California to Alaska, some of which had hereditary elites and slaves and performed human sacrifices (e.g., Donald 1997).

In summary, I would suggest that the framework established by Kassabaum for analyzing feasts is laudable, but it needs some important modifications, and the attempt to apply it to the Feltus site poses a number of problems, not the least of which is the failure to consider work feasts. Even with the data provided by Kassabaum, I would suggest that the interpretation of feasting remains as generated by egalitarian solidarity feasts is unwarranted. In contrast, there are many reasons for viewing Feltus as being at least a transegalitarian type of sociopolitical organization, very possibly structured in competitive heterarchical ways (e.g., based on kin groups or factions).

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