Mortuary Spaces as Social Power: Ceramic Exchange and Burial Practice at Safford Mound (8PI3)

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Introduction

Archaeologists now commonly associate the Late Woodland-Mississippian transition on the Florida Gulf Coast with prominent civic-ceremonial centers and mortuary complexes. Communities in the region often signaled the residence of specific locations by placing sand caps atop burial mounds, and by depositing large quantities of Weeden Island mortuary pottery in the eastern peripheries of these structures. While this trend seems widespread, some burial mounds, including Safford Mound (8PI3), were revisited for several centuries after these events took place. We use petrographic data from ceramic vessels to investigate how people’s investment in mortuary practice fed collective memories of specific places. We surmise that the embeddedness of mortuary ritual within the daily lives of Saffron’s visitors contributed to the persistence and growth of the mound through times of immense turmoil and social change.

Methods

- 23 petrographic thin sections from Safford Mound (8PI3), located in Tarpon, springs, Florida
- 11 samples associated with the Late Woodland/Weeden Island Period (AD 500-1000) and 10 with the Mississippian/Safety Harbor Period (AD 1000-1500)
- The goal of this study is to compare provenance, paste composition, and technological information to assess potential changes in social interaction and potting techniques between the two timeframes.

Site Background

- Excavated in 3 distinct “strata” by Frank Hamilton Cushing in 1896.
- Cushing’s excavations were poorly recorded, but what the assemblage lacks in contextual detail, it makes up for in sheer size and completeness.
- Isolated burial mound, probably used by multiple communities

Bulk composition

These data show some overlap of Weeden Island and Safety Harbor samples, but mostly pinpoint separation between the two

- The high incidence of greg tempering in Mississippian samples mostly explains the separation
- Matrix percentages are roughly similar, and very fine-to-fine micaceous quartz sands are common in both sample populations

Gross temper/textural variation

- We find no definitive evidence of non-local manufacture within the Safety Harbor samples
- The high prevalence of petrofabric D (40% of the overall sample) indicates that many Safety Harbor vessels were produced locally
- Petrofabric D is well represented in local (Tampa Bay) clay samples, but is also sporadically distributed across the Florida Panhandle and SW Georgia.
- Ongoing research with matching NAA data should provide better resolution of the ceramic ecology associated with these vessels

Petrofabric A (nonlocal): Weeden Island sample 8NJW1108 at 10X magnification

A total of 7 petrofabrics have been identified within the region (Cordell et al. 2013)
- Petrofabrics A, C, and E are micaceous:
- Micaeous matrices generally pinpoint non-local production (relative to Saffron’s location)
- Unlike A, fabrics C and E contain siliceous microfossils
- Petrofabric D, B, and E lack mica inclusions, and are differentiated by microfossil content
- Petrofabric F is spotty-rich, and G is calcareous

Multigenational greg (sherd) temper. Safety Harbor sample 8NJW1116 at 4X magnification

- The presence of multigenational greg—sherd with greg tempered greg—further points to local production of some Safety Harbor vessels
- Sample 8NJW1107 was manufactured on petrofabric D, but contains spiculate-rich (F) greg temper
- Sample 8NJW1108 was manufactured on petrofabric B, but contains fossiliferous (G) greg temper
- Considering that petrofabrics B, D, and F all cluster together in the central peninsula, it is possible that vessels tempered with multigenational greg in these specific combinations signal local production

Discussion and conclusion

- We see similarity and overlap in percentages of matrix, silt, and very fine sand (all presumably “natural” to the clay) between the two sample groups
- If much of these matrices are local, our data demonstrate is possible the case, the patterning in these ternary plots indicates that local potters may have harvested similar clays through time
- The sand composition diagram also points to a high degree of overlap between sample populations
- The two non-local Weeden Island vessels can be easily distinguished in the sand composition diagram. This separation is explained by higher quantities of stines (relative to the sample) of mica and polycrystalline quartz in these samples

Safford thus seems to have been in close proximity to potters whom were capable of mobilizing the technical and esthetics resources necessary to manufacture critical mortuary accoutrements. Yet, we do not assume that it was the potters themselves who imbued Safford with significance through time. Instead, we attribute Safford’s persistence and growth to the roles that mortuary ritual played in the daily lives of its visitors. Mortuary rituals did much more than communicate information about the dead; they organize kinship ties, renegotiate social relations in times of loss and uncertainty, and create lasting place-based memories which blur “quotidian” and “ceremonial” distinctions. Safford seems to have been a venue through which these phenomena operated during the Late Woodland and Mississippian Periods in the Tampa Bay region.

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