

Feasting with Shellfish in the Southern Ohio Valley

Archaic Sacred Sites and Rituals

Cheryl Claassen



CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

xi

1. Thinking about Archaic Hunter-Gatherers

i

2. Archaic Shell-bearing Sites of the Southern Ohio Valley

ii

3. Locations of Shell-bearing Sites

35

4. Overexploitation of Mollusks

51

5. The Demise of the Hypsithermal

69

6. Ohio River Valley Shell-bearing Sites: Villages?

85

7. Ceremonial Districts of the Southern Ohio Valley

135

8. Archaic Rituals at Shell-bearing Sites

169

9. From Archaic Villages to Ritual Camps: The Theoretical Landscape

195

Appendix: Site Data

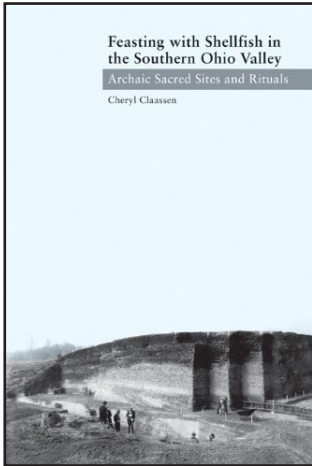
228

References Cited

235

Index

265



Feasting with Shellfish in the Southern Ohio Valley: Archaic Sites and Rituals

Cheryl Claassen. 2010. The University of Tennessee Press, 275 pp., 15 figures, 16 tables, 1 appendix, bibliography, index. \$49.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Patrick D. Trader, Gray and Pape, Inc., Cincinnati.

Archaic shell heaps of the Ohio River Valley, dating between 8000 and 4000 years ago, have been subject to archeological investigations for several decades. Many theories and hypotheses have been developed by researchers to explain the rise and demise of these shell heaps. Current theories suggest that Archaic hunters and gatherers responsible for the shell heaps or mounds were socially complex sedentary villagers who gathered on river banks to harvest and process freshwater shellfish. The size of these mounds is testament to significance of freshwater shellfishing among Archaic peoples of the southern Ohio Valley. The most popular reason given for their presence is subsistence to supplement stressed food resources because of population pressure; while the demise of Archaic shellfishing has been blamed on over exploitation, which impacted the availability of shellfish populations. The Hypsithermal climatic period has been cited as being both the cause and death of Archaic shellfishing. In her book *Feasting with Shellfish in the Southern Ohio Valley: Archaic Sacred Sites and Rituals*, Cheryl Claassen challenges current archaeological thought concerning Archaic shell heaps and carefully provides compelling archaeological, biological, historical, climatic, and ethnographic evidence on why these previous theories are fundamentally invalid. Claassen's main focus is to convince the reader that the shell heaps were sacred places where Archaic peoples gathered to perform ritual feasting, as well as renewal and mortuary rites.

Claassen begins Chapter 8 stating "Archaic rituals and beliefs are the frontier in the study of the past in North America" (p. 169). In her current study, Claassen certainly pushes the envelope and takes a pioneering role in expanding the frontiers in the study of Archaic ritual behavior. Her premise that Archaic shell heaps are evidence of ritualized behavior is based on observations and comparative data gathered from 58 shell-bearing sites and 11 shell-free mortuary sites distributed along the tributaries of the Ohio River.

Claassen's ideas were first developed during investigations she conducted on the Green River at the DeWeese site in 1982 and at the Dogan Point oyster heap on the Atlantic coast between 1986 and 1992. Key components of her theory are based on the presence of mussel shells, lithic artifacts, and objects manufactured from shell; the prevalence of dog burials; the evidence of violent death and mortuary behavior, as well as the actual geographical location of the sites themselves.

p. 148

In Chapter 1, Claassen sets the stage that shell mounds and associated sites were sacred sites and ceremonial centers where Archaic peoples gathered to perform renewal rites, human sacrifice, and engage in public feasting. Unlike previous researchers, Claassen argues that there were no significant food shortages during the Archaic period, rather it was quite the opposite. The rise of shellfishing was not driven by population pressure or an outcome of climatic change; instead, it was motivated by social behavior in order to satisfy the need for sacred rites. Likewise, the demise of shellfishing was not caused by overharvesting of shellfish, but was the result of changing ritual practices which brought an end to ceremonial centers and public feasting in the Ohio Valley during the Archaic period. Chapter by chapter, Claassen meticulously deconstructs previous theories and provides tantalizing evidence in favor of her hypothesis.

In Chapter 2, Claassen provides a regional overview of shell-bearing sites found along the Tennessee, Duck, Harpeth, Cumberland, Green Wabash, and Upper Ohio rivers. Also included in this discussion are sites found along the Falls of the Ohio River. While shell-bearing sites in these regions are well-known, they are poorly dated. Table 2.1, provides all of the known ¹⁴C dates from these sites. The listing of these ¹⁴C dates in one location will be a beneficial tool to future researchers working in the southern Ohio Valley. We learn that the accumulation of shell heaps began some 6500 years ago in the Green River Valley and first appeared along the Wabash and Cumberland rivers between 4500 and 4000 years ago. Claassen notes that the accumulation of shell heaps is a "...slow-moving phenomenon..." (p.11) that first started in western and central Tennessee, spreading to the Green River, traveling to the lower Ohio River, moving up the Ohio and then finally reaching the Wabash and Cumberland rivers. In particular, why are shell heaps found along these specific river systems, when hundreds of other rivers would have provided similar access to molluscan fauna? Why did shell accumulating suddenly stop in most regions at the close of the Archaic period? Claassen opines that the presence of shell-bearing sites "...on so few rivers suggests that neither environmental change, population pressure, optimal foraging strategies, nor overexploitation account for either the beginning or end of the phenomenon under study" (p. 32). In the following four

p. 149

chapters (3, 4, 5, and 6), Claassen examines each of these issues in greater detail and offers an alternate explanation.

In Chapter 3, Claassen examines the geographic location of the shell heap sites, focusing on their topographic setting and distribution along a few select rivers. Claassen posits that the distribution of Archaic shell heaps "...indicates great selectivity of place" (p.36). The majority of these sites are found on the Ohio River or tributaries of the Ohio with a preference for north- or north-west flowing rivers. These sites are often situated on or near islands, near caves, or on knolls or bluffs; areas that Claassen considers as spiritually charged. One of the more interesting phenomena that Claassen discusses is the clustering of sites. Not only are these sites clustered, but they occur in pairs on alternate banks; she is not the first researcher to note this distinction. However, Claassen suggests the rivers served as "symbolic boundaries" (p. 42) between the physical world and the underworld; clustering of sites on alternate banks reflects sociality (e.g. clans and sodalities) and the presence of ritualized behavior.

Chapter 4 explores the hypothesis that overexploitation of molluscan resources (a supposedly restricted resource) by Archaic peoples ended shellfishing after 5000 B.P. Using data generated by the historical shellfishing industry, Claassen reports that shellfish were ubiquitous throughout the historic period and human predation had no significant impact on the availability of shellfish. Rather, shellfish populations regenerated quite quickly. Thus, the demise of shellfishing at the close of the Archaic period was not a result of natural causes but was instead a social phenomenon.

In Chapter 5, Claassen refutes the notion that the Hypsithermal climatic episode was responsible for the beginning and end of Archaic shellfishing. Using available ¹⁴C and archaeological evidence, she provides evidence that shellfishing occurred prior to the Middle Archaic period and the onset of the Hypsithermal, as well as afterwards. Additionally, shellfish were available in thousands of rivers and streams; however, the shell heaps were limited geographically and highly clustered, suggesting that social rather than environmental factors were responsible.

Claassen debunks the idea that shell heaps are villages in Chapter 6. She uses several lines of evidence to support her notion that they were special activity areas whose main function was one of world renewal. Evidence against shell heaps as villages includes the high incidence of dog burials, accumulations of shells on bluff tops, the occurrence of paired valves, types of grave goods, the presence of death/rebirth symbolism, the quantity and density of human burials, including the number of violent deaths and the placement and positioning of burials. The absence of gnawed bones (de-

magnifying glass. While some of these figures provide great detail, legibility is sacrificed. Some figures are also rather simple in comparison to others.

Claassen's book is nothing short of provocative. It is certain to elicit controversy and heated debate among archaeologists working along the main stem of the Ohio River and its tributaries. A good friend of mine often describes particularly thought-provoking and compelling articles or books as "tasty". Claassen's *Feasting with Shellfish in the Southern Ohio Valley: Archaic Sacred Sites and Rituals* is rather tasty and offers much food for thought. *Bon appétit!*