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The Dead Must be Fed: Symbolic Meanings of the Shellmounds of the San Francisco Bay Area

Edward M. Luby & Mark F. Gruber

Long viewed as 'kitchen middens', the shellmounds of the San Francisco Bay Area have provided archaeologists of coastal California insight into the subsistence and ecology of precontact native groups. In this article, the authors develop a framework for understanding the cultural significance of these shellmounds which regards them as intentional cultural features, incorporates social context, and builds on earlier subsistence-focused studies of the shellmounds in order to better appreciate the meaning of the numerous human remains interred therein. A structural analysis is then used to show that the concepts of food and ancestors joined together at shellmounds, so much so that ritual attention to the ancestors was very likely regarded as essential to ensuring a continuing supply of food.

Archaeological sites which contain the remains of shellfish as their primary constituent are common in several coastal areas of the world. Usually called 'shellmiddens' or 'shellmounds', sites of this kind are found in Australia and New Zealand (Bailey 1975; Bailey *et al.* 1994; Jones 1968; Lourandos 1997; Shawcross 1967; Stratham 1892; Sullivan 1984), South Africa (Buchanan 1988; Henshilwood *et al.* 1994; Jerardino & Yates 1997; Parkington 1991), and Japan (Aikens & Higuchi 1982; Aikens & Rhee 1992; Akazawa 1986). The best known examples of shellmounds in the world are perhaps those of coastal Western Europe which date to the late Mesolithic (c. 4500 to 3200 BC). They range from those associated with the classic Ertebolle culture in southern Scandinavia (Albrethsen & Petersen 1976; Andersen & Johansen 1986; Andersen 1991; Brinch Petersen 1989; Madsen *et al.* 1900; Madsen 1900), through to Brittany in western France (Hibbs 1983; Pequart *et al.* 1937; Pequart & Pequart 1954) and south to Portugal (Ferreira 1994; Roche 1972). Shellmounds are also found along both coasts of North America (Bernstein 1993; Stein 1992), and are particularly common in the protected bays, and lagoons, and on the coastal islands of California (Erlandson & Glassow 1997; Moratto 1984).

In central California, the coastal shores and bays

are lined with hundreds of oval shellmounds composed of a complex matrix of architectural features, animal bones, and artefacts. In the San Francisco Bay area in particular, these shellmounds sometimes contain thousands of burials in large, deep sites. In California archaeology, as in many other areas of the world where ecologically-focused research has been predominant, the emphasis on culture history and subsistence has guided theoretical interpretation of these shellmounds. We believe that shellmounds, as places of habitation and burial, may offer a key, in and of themselves, for understanding the early inhabitants of the San Francisco Bay area and other central California coastal peoples. By considering the shellmounds to be intentional cultural features rather than accidental aggregates of shell refuge that happen to contain artefacts, we believe we can offer a more comprehensive view of these shellmounds and begin to examine their social context by developing symbolic and cosmological analyses.

In this article, we develop an interpretive framework for understanding the cultural significance of the shellmounds which incorporates social context, as well as cultural historical and subsistence information. We begin by conducting a detailed review of the archaeological setting, chronology, and nature of the San Francisco Bay area shellmounds. We then