ROCK SHELTERS AS WOMEN'S RETREATS: UNDERSTANDING NEWT KASH

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This paper provides a cultural context for the cache of early domesticated seeds found in Newt Kash Shelter in eastern Kentucky. Based on the abundant fibers, bedding, nuts, cradleboard, bedrock mortar, shell spoons, abundance of potential medicinal plants, infrequent fauna, and arrangement of pits, Newt Kash may have been a women's retreat place during menstruation, birthing, and sickness, and possibly the meeting place of a medicine society. There are other possible retreat shelters in this region and elsewhere.

Esta trabajo ofrece una interpretación de las semillas domesticadas que se encontraban en la cuevita Newt Kash en Kentucky, EEUU. Porque hay fibras y plantas medicinales en abundancia, cosas para niños, cucharas en concha, no muchos huesos, y porque del arreglos de hoyos, expongo que este lugar estaba una lugar por mujeres durante menstruación, pariendo, enfermedad, y otros rituales. Hay otra lugares semejantes.

Newt Kash Shelter of eastern Kentucky is famous for its very early domesticated goosefoot (Chenopodium berlandieri jonesianum), sumpweed (Iva annua), and sunflower (Helianthus annuus) seeds recovered during excavations in 1935 and perhaps left by an individual visiting sometime around 4,000 years ago (e.g., Cowan 1985; Gremillion 1996; Smith and Cowan 1987; Watson 1985). Similar seed finds have also been recovered from other rock shelters in eastern Kentucky, Ohio, and the Ozarks and, so far, have offered us the best source of information on early domesticated starchy and oily seeds and cushaw squashes (Cowan 1985; Fritz 1994; Gremillion 1997; Watson 1985). Explanations for why seeds were cached in rock shelters or found to be oldest in rock shelters have specified local gardens with processing at rock shelter homes (Ison 2004), stores for the provisioning of hunters (Wills 1988), or specialized storage and processing of plant foods (Fritz 1994:285).

In this paper,1 I will take a closer look at the other biological remains and features found in the Newt Kash Shelter, which have been overshadowed by the seed discovery but which suggest particular uses for this rock shelter. Of particular interest are the recovered fibers, the suite of plants, the nuts, the arrangement of features and roof fall, the mortar hole, and the infant burial. Clusters of rock shelters in Kentucky with mortar holes further suggest that Newt Kash Shelter was neither an anomaly nor a habitation site but was one member of a set of rock shelters that may have had special uses.

Newt Kash Shelter

The Newt Kash Shelter (15Mf1), near Frenchburg, Kentucky, was one of several sandstone rock shelters excavated by a team overseen by Webb and Funkhouser and published in Rock Shelters of Menifee County Kentucky in 1936. It is now included in the Red River Gorge section of the Daniel Boone National Forest. This shelter faces due south and is at the head of a deep sandstone ravine drained by a small creek flowing into Beaver Creek. "The shelter is large, high and dry, about fifty feet above the floor of the valley. It is subarcuate, 225 feet long, 55 feet deep at its maximum depth with the roof sloping very gradually
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to the top of the cliff 150 feet above” (Webb and Funkhouser 1936:109). The floor of the shelter is level and consists of rock fall, sand, and ashes.

The findings of seeds and plant fibers have overshadowed all other remains. Goosefoot seeds (*Chenopodium berlandieri*), sumpweed (*Iva annua*), sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*), flint corn, gourd (*Lagenaria vulgaris*), squash (*Cucurbita pepo* var *melopepo*), tobacco (*Nicotiana rustica*), giant ragweed (*Ambrosia trifida*), and many parts of honey locust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*) were recovered. Nuts (acorns, hickory, walnuts, chestnuts) in great quantity had been pulverized and two mortar holes were found in one boulder in the shelter. Wood charcoal was found as pieces of trunks and limbs, as well as smaller branch pieces. Canary grass or maygrass (*Phalaris caroliniana*) was found as masses of seed heads tied into sheaves, as leaves, and as loose seeds. Compass plant (*Silphium laciniatum*) occurred frequently as quids.

Along with the seeds, wood, and nuts, the crew encountered hundreds of pieces of fabric, string, and cordage. Caches of textiles were found in several places. Several beds made of woven paw-paw fibers as well as matted big blue stem grass and leaves were found just below the floor surface in the shelter. When they were unfolded, moccasins, leaves, nuts, bone, antler, wooden items, strips of leather, strings, cords, and bags fell out and handfuls of grasses and bark bundles were disturbed. These beds lay on a surface of leaves and grass. Some of these fabric pieces were as large as .91m x 1.22m (3 ft x 4 ft) when recovered.

Griffin has said that Jones’s report of the Newt Kash plant matter that was incorporated in the 1936 report, “formed the basis for much of the subsequent ethnobotanical work done on Eastern United States archaeological specimens” (Griffin 1978:12). Gremillion (1996, 1997) has indicated that Newt Kash plant material and paleofeces give us a unique look at the initial period of native plant domestication. But perhaps the strongest reason for restudy of the Newt Kash material is the abundant cultural materials that have elicited only assumptions about their uses and the rock shelter context.

In addition to the materials annotated above, freshwater mussel shells, antler points, awls, needles, pottery, gourds, nutting stones, a large number of fecal specimens, small pits, and postholes and a small number of animal bones were found. Other items recovered were a cradleboard and three objects dangling from twine—a foetal fawn’s leg with hoof, a piece of bracket fungi, and a deer tooth. Volney Jones suspected that these latter items were probably attached to the cradleboard to entertain the baby, as was done by Indians in historic times. Perhaps this was the cradleboard for the infant found between two large rocks whose bones were partially burned. Webb and Funkhouser commented on the few hunting tools and several wood shaving tools.

Unfortunately, restudy of the Newt Kash materials is compromised by the lack of field notes (Nancy O’Malley, personal communication 2010) and virtually no documentation of context in the published report. The greatest detail about the remains from Newt Kash in the published report is that on the fibrous materials authored by Jones (1936), yet he was not working with the complete collection and was apparently unaware of the missing material, particularly the rather abundant corn (Griffin 1978:13) and goosefoot seeds (Gremillion 1997). There are also details of relevance found in other reports by these authors on other rock shelter excavations in nearby Lee, Powell, and Wolfe counties (e.g., Cowan et al. 1981; Funkhouser and Webb 1929, 1930; Gremillion 1996). Newt Kash appears to be one of several dozen rock shelters with multiple repeating layers of ash, sand, and leaves.

Dates of the utilization of Newt Kash can be approximated with plant remains, artifacts, features, the regional database, and several radiocarbon dates. Webb and Funkhouser repeatedly commented in this and their other rock shelter reports that lower levels of sediments in eastern Kentucky ash “caves” had gourds, shell spoons, rough flints, and bone implements associated with hominy holes and burials. Upper levels had gourds, shell spoons, turtle carapace spoons, fabrics, and sherds. As further evidence of this stratigraphy they noted that sherds had never been found with burials (e.g., Funkhouser and Webb 1930:300). Fabrics, sherds, and carapace spoons then provide some temporal information suggesting probable Woodland Period visits.

Artifacts give a few more clues. The 16 sherds in the superficial layers have been identified as
limestone-tempered plain and cord-marked (Gremillion 1996:524), which may be Early Woodland (3,200 to 1,000 years ago) in age. The variety of stone projectiles and bifaces included Early Woodland Adena points as well as stemmed and side-notched points (Gremillion 1996:524).

The regional database indicates that several features found at Newt Kash are Terminal Archaic and Early Woodland in age. Ash layers, which were present in Newt Kash, began in Early Woodland times in Cloudsplitter Rock Shelter (15MF36, Cowan 1985). Storage pits seem to appear first during the Early Woodland (Gremillion 1997:39). Jay Franklin (2002) concluded that mortar holes in the (nearby) northern Tennessee segment of the Cumberland Plateau first appeared in the Late Archaic (5000 to 3000 ya). Ison has indicated a Terminal Archaic (3500 to 2200 ya) beginning for intensive use of rock shelters in eastern Kentucky. From the Cloudsplitter Rock Shelter in the same county came a date on squash of 4700 ± 250 rcy, hinting that the squash in Newt Kash could be Late Archaic in age.

Several radiocarbon dates have also been run on Newt Kash items but are of variable utility. Two dates reported by Crane (1956) based on solid carbon were 2650 ± 300 rcy and 2600 ± 300 rcy indicating an Early Woodland component. An AMS date from Chenopodium berlandieri jonesiannum seeds removed from a Newt Kash fecal specimen was 3400 ± 150 rcy (Smith and Cowen 1987) that I have calibrated to 4076–3372 cal B.P. (using the atmospheric 2009 curve offered by BCal at 2sd). Gremillion (1996:523) dated material from a fecal specimen as well with a result of 3358–3024 cal B.P., putting both dates into the era of Late Archaic/Terminal Archaic/Early Woodland. The suite of domesticates found in Newt Kash—sumpweed, goosefoot, giant ragweed, and sunflower—are known from evidence elsewhere to have been grown in combination during Early Woodland times (Watson 1985:133).

The collection of features and artifacts found in Newt Kash coalesce into an interpretation by Webb and Funkhouser (1936), Cowan (1985:239), Ison (2004) and most modern archaeologists of a residential camp used primarily in Terminal Archaic through Early Woodland times. Ison (2004:179) assumes that increased rock shelter use in the Late Archaic of Kentucky indicated that rock shelters had become “central places” for communities of people “where the stored foods from the cultivated crops could prolong the length of time a group could stay at a particular site.” The bedding, bags, campfires, cradleboard, and discarded clothing are perhaps the most vivid elements of the residential camp formula.

There are several ways, however, in which the vision of a group of women, children, and men encamped here does not meet typical expectations. The high meat variety, few individual animals, and few projectile points do not meet expectations for a family or band camping for an extended stay. The low variety and numbers of artifacts suggest a special use locus and the great quantity of cordage and fabrics implicate fabric and cordage production as those special activities. The large pieces of fiber bedding represent a considerable temporal investment in making cordage and twinning and would have been too cumbersome to haul around for short stays, suggesting that this rock shelter was a designated place where individuals came frequently and spent the night. The fibers, cordage, low meat consumption, cradle, pacifiers, and some particular species of plants give strong indication that Newt Kash Shelter was a place where women passed short periods of time during the Early Woodland period. The cradleboard and pacifiers are the most obvious gender-linked artifacts and the strongest evidence that living infants were present here as were their mothers.

Newt Kash Shelter: A Woman’s Place

The remains occurring in greatest quantity at this rock shelter are textiles and cordage. All stages of string and cord making were recovered in Newt Kash Shelter, from bundles of bark strips to twisted and knotted string. Jones (1936:157) said of the materials, “textile fragments, cordage, thongs, textile waste and refuse occur in profusion throughout the . . . remains.” He counted over 500 items, most commonly of pawpaw fibers followed by Indian hemp and milkweed. It is beyond doubt that the production of string and cord occurred here.

Throughout North, Central, and South America twining, braiding, and weaving were predominately women’s work (e.g., Franke 1999; Hamann 1997; Hill 1997; Swanton 1966:140–141). Why
these activities would be associated with women more so than with men is contained in understandings about the creation of the world: either spinning in the beginning, an image captured by the spindle whorl, or interlacing as in a weaving or web. The drop spindle and the back strap loom both impart sexual symbolism. For a number of groups, a female deity or the first woman spun and wove in the beginning of time (e.g., Navajo, Wixarika, Aztecs), an act of (re)production/fertility.

Because assimilation was so successful in the Eastern United States, today, the explanation for the association of women with weaving is best documented among Mexican and Southwestern groups. Among Nahua speakers of northern and central Mexico, not only was the goddess Tlazolteotl the goddess of weaving, but she was also the goddess of childbirth, women who die in childbirth, and sexuality (Anders et al. 1993:115). The Wixarika of north central Mexico who use the back strap loom note that the weaving begins at the crotch of the woman and ends in the sky. When it is finished, it is harvested, much like a plant or a baby is harvested, when the umbilical cord is cut. Weavings, miniature looms, and weaving equipment are frequently deposited in designated cave and rock shelter homes of various Wixarika deities (Schaefer 2002).

These ideas are evident in Cherokee women’s weaving of baskets and textiles. “The meaning of Cherokee basketry, evident in legend, custom, and history, relates to the role and work of women as the source of food and life, as providers and sustainers for their families” (Hill 1997:xxix). This earth is suspended from the sky by woven cords, “like umbilical cords, lifelines that fastened the homeland at four corners, tied it to the sky vault and held it secure. Like a basket, the Cherokee earth was supported by woven strands that connected it to another world...where the past and ancestral beings dwelled” (Hill 1997:2). Several Mississippian era (2000–500 ya) stone figurines found in the American Bottom have been interpreted as at least two goddesses with weaving equipment who are integrating human communities through the activity of weaving (Kehoe 1997). Spider, the natural weaver, appears on marine shell gorgets in several Mississippian culture settings, the only gorget style to be specifically associated with women (Franke 1999). “Spider was the symbol of an earth clan among the Osage” among whom “certain women were honored by having the spider symbol tattooed on the back of both hands” (Franke 1999:6–7).

There is also reason to believe that nut oil processing was undertaken in this rock shelter, another task associated with women in historic times (Battle 1922). Nut oils are rendered by boiling pulverized nutmeat and skimming the oil off the water’s surface. Nut oils are used for polishing bone and antler items, as a binder for pigments, and for softening leather. Their primary use, however, is for oiling human skin and hair (Battle 1922). Oils make the skin soft and healthy and the hair shiny. Often Indians anointed themselves with oils and then sat in the sun (Battle 1922). There are copious quantities of pulverized nuts and two mortar holes usable for nut smashing. That nutmeats were also eaten here is indicated by nutshells in some of the fecal remains.

So, it seems that we can make the case for women coming to this rock shelter to make cordage and nut oils. Why not do these activities back in the camp? Why stay overnight? Other activities must have occurred here that required postholes, spoons, gourd containers, stashed foodstuffs, antler tines, beds, pits, and arrowheads. What were these activities? As an answer to these questions, I propose that Newt Kash was used as a women’s retreat space, for removing from a larger community during menstruation, birthing, and healing. Again, our clearest explanation for this cultural practice comes from Mexican sources but was no doubt similarly explained by people living in the Eastern United States.

Ancient Mexicans believed that the human body grew hotter with age, as well as temporarily during work, fasting (from food or sex), menstruation, and pregnancy (Chevalier and Bain 2003; Fürst 1995). The buildup of heat was potentially dangerous for both the individual experiencing one of those conditions (e.g., a fertile woman, a priest, a warrior, an elder, a widow) and any human, animal, or crop that the person gazed upon since the excessive heat escaped through the eyes. In order to protect humans (particularly the sick), animals, and plants from sickness caused by the gaze of a hot person and the intensified power of a menstruating woman (and other heated individuals such as priests, warriors, and ballplayers),
women retreated from their communities during menstruation and in some cases the postpartum period. Cherokees understood menstruating women to have power so great during this time that a cannibalistic monster could be slain by them, but this power was taboo among mortals (Hill 1997:6). Creek Indian women of Georgia and Alabama retreated for four days to a menstrual hut where they used unique utensils for food preparation and consumption, ate no meat from large animals, and bathed and changed clothing before leaving seclusion (Galloway 1997).

The Alabama ... say that when a woman's monthly sickness (holoci'taye'ha) came on she took a blanket and went away to a small house near some stream or spring to live until it was over. . . . When the time was passed she bathed and washed all of her clothes thoroughly before returning home [Swanton 1928:360].

Retreat was also practiced during late pregnancy and birth for the same excessive power had developed. Where menstrual practices are mentioned—for example, for the Delaware, Timucua, Creek, Chickasaw, and Choctaw—the seclusion structure was also used for birthing. “The child must be born out of the house, winter or summer. The mother must not enter the house for 10 days and must not sleep in it for two months, and if she is taken sick in giving birth to a child she is not allowed to sleep in the house for four months” (Swanton 1928:360). Where did she stay during that time?

Birth itself occurred in the small hut which was also used during menstrual periods. The child was immediately immersed in water, then wrapped in a skin and bound to a cradle board. This was softened with a moss covering and had curved side pieces. The child stayed in the cradleboard most of the time until it could walk [Herman (1950:56), Miller (1991:19) about the Lenape].

**Menstrual and Birth Seclusion Evidence at Newt Kash Shelter**

Although 3,500 years or more separate the activities at Newt Kash shelter in Kentucky and those of historic Indian women in the nineteenth century, the few historic observations are highly suggestive of a use for this rock shelter as a menstrual retreat and birthing location. The beds, the cached edible seeds, the buried and discarded textiles, and the feces with evidence of nuts, seeds, and small mammal consumption, and the production of nut oils answer directly to the test implications of a historic women’s menstrual retreat where meat consumption was lower and clothing and body washed. So do the numerous pieces of bottle gourd, the shell spoons, and the pottery (the special containers and utensils) used and broken in the rock shelter, all of which kept the heat of the menstruating or postpartum woman apart from the larger community. Shell has a strong association with fertility (see Claassen 2009), and the use of shell spoons is highly fitting in this setting.

The evidence for birthing at Newt Kash is circumstantial, based on the items to entertain an infant, the cradleboard, and the beds. But given the proposed association of this rock shelter with menstrual blood and its promise of fertility, it makes sense that at least some infants would be born here as well and that the postpartum pair would remain here for the duration of their seclusion period.

Plants with medicinal properties abound in the debris of this shelter and the taking of medicine would surely have been associated with all the possible activities associated with menstruation, pregnancy, and “female trouble.” The seclusion shelter may also have been a pharmacy, the place where stores of potentially important medicines that were both collected in the vicinity and deployed herein were kept.

There are, of course, numerous different uses for plants. Various barks were present for fiber needs, but many also are useful in treating numerous types of maladies. In fact, separation of these uses may be pointless. “Cherokees believed that every tree, shrub and herb, down even to the grasses and mosses, agreed to furnish a cure for some one of the diseases” (Hill 1997:13). Furthermore, “women, wood, medicine, and healing all interwove in [Cherokee] ritual to express and implore power” (Hill 1997:14).

The wood, seeds, florets, roots, quids, leaves, and mosses recovered from excavating half of this rock shelter amounted to two potential abortivatives (red cedar, Indian hemp); 10 potential gynecolog-
ical and venereal disease aids (ash, grape, compass plant, scrub pine, milkweed, poplar, oaks, sumac, chestnut, and moss [Usnea florida]); 12 gastrointestinal aids; 10 kidney and urine aids; 10 skin and burn aids; one sedative and several disinfectants among numerous other categories of medicines (Boone 2000; Gillespie 1986; Jones 1936; Krochmal 1984; Westbrooks 1989). Moss may have been used as a menstrual sponge, as a diaper (Wallace 1972:34, referring to Iroquois), and as cushioning in the cradleboard (Miller 1991) and in moccasins (Jones 1936). Even the rattles of a rattlesnake found here have gynecologically useful properties (Denig 1930; Miller 1991) and fertility associations as argued, for example, for the Mississippian earth/weaving goddess known as the Birger figurine (Emerson 1989).

There are no indications given in the site report of the relative importance by quantity of any of these species with two exceptions: may grass—as sheaves, useful for bedding, warmth, or padding—and Iva seeds, useful for food/medicine, were the most common species found. Quids of compass plant root were extremely common, which Jones believed served medicinal needs.

Newt Kash as a Sodality Meeting Place

In addition to the evidence that New Kash was a seclusion shelter, there is also evidence that Newt Kash was used for group ritual activities. The floor of the shelter is 15.2 m (50 ft) above the floor of the ravine, making it somewhat secluded. The shelter is dry and very large with 1150 sq m of covered floor giving ample space for a group to assemble. It is set in a bowl-shaped yellow-tan sandstone cliff face that is streaked with vertical lines of reddish iron precipitate with obvious blood associations, and thick horizontal bands of limonite (Figure 1). Huge concretions of hydrated iron oxide have eroded out of this cliff face leaving large potholes in the face of the cliff where birds of prey nest today, including eagles. Perhaps not incidentally, eagles are often associated with healing by Native Americans (e.g., Irwin 1994). Inside of the shelter, much of the rock fall from the roof is found at the dripline edge, providing seating in a natural theater that faces inward (Figure 2). This roof fall as mapped appears to have been moved to the dripline, an activity the authors claimed had taken place in the past at another shelter in Lee Co. (Funkhouser and Webb 1929:71).
Perhaps the best evidence for regulated/ritualized activities can be found in the three groups of pits and the 15 postholes uncovered (Figure 2). The first grouping of pits consists of eight pits, nearly equally spaced against the back wall of the shelter. Their volumes range from 1248 liters to 60 liters with uniform spacing of the larger pit subset and of the smaller pit subset. The attention given to pit spacing is suggestive of regulated, ritualized activities for as Lincoln (1981:2) asserts, "people's actions are most structured, habitual, and bound by rules in the course of ritual."

A second group of pits form a quincunx approximately in the center back of the shelter. The quincunx is associated with earth creation and earth renewal at least by 1,700 years ago (Hall 1997). Equally pertinent to my argument and to the understanding of the significance of the quincunx is that the days with the number "5" in the Aztec calendar are associated with handicrafts and with women dying in childbirth (Anders et al. 1993:250)! The volume of these pits was on average smaller, ranging from the 281 liters of the central pit to the 50 liters of an ancillary pit. Pits 1 and 5 have essentially the same volume as do Pits 2 and 4. Again, we see rather formulaic behavior being expressed in the internal arrangement and centralized placement of these pits.

A third group of three pits and numerous postholes are to be found in the back center of the shelter. The pits in this third group are smaller still, with Pit 3 having 54 liter capacity and Pit 2 only 16 liters. They are separated from the quincunx pits by two boulders. These boulders could have served well as altars or benches for offerings, ritual objects, idols, or individuals staging a ritual. It was between these two stones that the partially calcined infant skeleton was found seemingly "tossed" into position. That this burial might have been part of ritualized behavior is suggested by a similar description of burial in Sampson Spencer Shelter where the only burial was an infant placed between two slabs also in the middle back of the shelter (Funkhouser and Webb 1930).

Just what these rituals were related to is conjecture on my part, of course, but the initiation of
girls may not be among them. While van Gennep (1960) has argued that initiations involve a separation from social and physical space, and a liminal time, which would be accomplished with a trek to a rock shelter, Lincoln (1981) found in a study of girls’ initiations worldwide that seclusion of the girl happened within the borders of the community, and thus did not separate her from social space, and did not involve liminality. Although not entirely convinced by Lincoln’s limited sample, I have come to entertain the idea that a medicine society or other sodality may have utilized this space if girls’ initiations did not.

I have proposed in this paper that Newt Kash Shelter was used as a menstrual seclusion and birthing locus for women who removed themselves from a larger group for four days to numerous weeks at a time. The domesticated plant species found here were present as food or medicine. While women were secluded they produced nut oils, cordage, and fabrics, slept, and ate, and probably combed the surrounding area for medicinal plants, bark, and grasses. At the end of their stay, a ritual bath was taken, old clothing was discarded in the shelter, and hair and body were oiled. Babies were born in the shelter and also bathed and oiled. Furthermore, I also propose that this shelter was a staging place for rites important to a medicine society and that that society/sodality oversaw the retreating and birthing uses of the shelter.

Newt Kash Shelter gives us a good look at what tools women used and what they were eating while in seclusion. For tools we see projectile points, celts, adzes, axes, scrapers, hoes, awls of deer ulna and turkey tarsometatarsus, needles, antler tines (hammers?), discoids, whetstones, portable nutting stones, shell spoons, and mortars. Women’s seclusion diet is evident in fecal specimens and hinted at by floral and faunal remains. Jones said that the most common elements in the fecal specimens were Iva annua, in first place, and maygrass in second, and that other fecal inclusions were hickory nut shell and Chenopodium. Gremillion (1996:525) analyzed a specimen that contained primarily sunflower achenes. Possible meat sources were deer, bear, elk, ground hog, bobcat, fox, squirrel, rat, terrapin, and mussels, but these bones and shells may well have had ritual or industrial uses and not be food refuse.
(15Po1), Hooton Hollow (15Mf10), and Cold Oak (15Le50). These shelters share with Newt Kash the presence of bedrock mortars, bedding, fabrics, and shell spoons.

In the 30 rock shelters investigated in the four counties by Funkhouser and Webb, there are five shelters with shell spoons, 13 with bedrock mortars, five with beds of leaves, four with fabrics, and six with pits. Eight of the shelters have only bedrock mortars of the four key criteria. Of course many of the shelters had been disturbed and in some cases the published account is less than a page in length.

It is also interesting that there are 12 shelters with burials numbering 1, 2, 5, or 14 bodies. It is possible that people who died in the shelter were buried in the shelter and predictably, based on the scenario proposed here, the bodies found are predominantly one or two infants and women. This proposal, however, seemingly contradicts Webb and Funkhouser’s impression that burials were related to the earlier stratum and not to the later stratum. Surely women and infants died in shelters during Woodland times. If their observation is wrong and Woodland burials do exist, it would mean that pottery could have been but was not placed with these burials contradicting what has been observed in open air sites. Burial at the place of death (the rock shelter) also does not accommodate the occasional secondary burial and cremation unless those individuals were, for instance, the doctors. There is intriguing ritual information in some of the shelters with multiple bodies that lead me to suspect that multiple burials have to do with activities other than retreat and birth, possibly those of the medicine societies.

There are two geographic clusters of utilized rock shelters with bedrock mortars in Kentucky, one in eastern Kentucky around Newt Kash, and one in the Green River area in central Kentucky, in Hardin, Meade, and Breckenridge counties (Ison 2004:109). In both mortar clusters, there is also evidence of the earliest domesticated plants. Furthermore, these are the same areas where rock art is found, often on the same boulder as the bedrock mortar, with neither feature overlapping. This rock art frequently depicts tracks, fertility symbols among Plains Indians (Sundstrom 2004). Ison (2004) points out that the co-occurrences of cultigens, domesticates, rock shelters, bedrock mortars, and rock art in Kentucky shelters strongly suggest that women produced the rock art. He stops short of calling the rock shelters “women’s places.” Rock art, then, becomes a key identifier for a place of importance to women but it may pertain to behaviors other than those related to retreat.

Newt Kash, with mortar holes, appears to have served multiple functions from private to public, yet has no rock art suggesting several possible differences with other shelters in the region: temporal, functional, and cultural. In eastern Kentucky, there are seven rock shelters with bedrock mortars and petroglyphs and 18 with mortars only (Ison 2004:183). At least eight shelters in the Green River area have both bedrock mortars and petroglyphs (Ison 2004:182). Further complicating the picture are rock shelters in these two areas with rock art and no bedrock mortars. We have here a rich database for the study of the use of the landscape by women.

Women’s Rock Shelter Retreats Outside of Kentucky

Jones (1936) repeatedly compared the plant remains from Newt Kash to the plant remains reported from the Ozark mountain rock shelters (e.g., Gilmore 1931), commenting on the great similarity between the two regions in plant species and fabrics. Baskets, sieves, mats, hangings, coverings, bags, mantles, skirts, moccasins, and nets along with the bast, hemp, nettles, grasses, hair, sinew, thread, and cord in “bunches and hanks” used to make them were found in dozens of shelters on the White River such as Brown Bluff, Gibson Shelter, and Pine Hollow (Lasiter 1946:275; Scholtz 1975). Among the shared species of plants in the two data sets were sumpweed, maygrass, honey locust, compass plant, pawpaw fibers, rattlesnake master, bluestem grass, and canes (Jones 1936). Furthermore, women also apparently used these shelters for birthing. At least 12 cradles from 10 sites have been found in northern Arkansas (Dellinger 1936), most of which were holding bodies when found. It would seem that numerous Ozark rock shelters were places where women prepared fibers and discarded old clothing just as it seems that they did in eastern Kentucky, and I believe that they did so while in retreat.
Newt Kash is located on the Cumberland Plateau that runs southward into Tennessee and Alabama. One hundred and ten utilized rock shelters and balds were recently visited by Jay Franklin on the Upper Cumberland Plateau of Tennessee, north of Interstate 40 (Franklin 2002). While no nonperishable materials were encountered, seven of the shelters had bedrock mortars. One shelter (SPI) reportedly once had petroglyphs. These seven shelters ranged in size from “enormous” to 100 m². Three of these shelters had artifacts indicating Early Archaic and all Woodland periods and the other four lacked diagnostics. In addition, 13 “balds” or sandstone bedrock outcrops also had multiple mortar holes. Based just on the one criterion of mortar holes, 21 percent of the places visited may have been women’s places.

Mortar holes found on the Cumberland Plateau of northern Alabama (Tennessee River Valley) are also associated with rock shelters and frequently with rock art (Henson and Martz 1979). Bedrock mortars are also present in northwestern Alabama at Stanfield-Worley Rock Shelter (Hollenbach 2009). Hollenbach’s review of four rock shelters in northwestern Alabama as places for short-term stays with grinding equipment and abundant nut remains provides fuel for suspecting that two or more of those shelters may have been used as retreats.

The very small Charles Cheek shelter in Watauga Co, northwestern North Carolina, contained fabrics and the bodies of one woman approximately 24 years old and an infant. It, too, has been interpreted as a women’s menstrual and birthing retreat place (Whyte 2005). Dozens of other rock shelters with the burial of a woman or infant are to be found in the archaeological literature of the Eastern United States suggesting that rock shelters were commonly used by women for retreat and birthing probably beginning in Terminal Archaic or Early Woodland times. I offer that when one woman is buried in a shelter, she may well have died in that shelter during the course of birth or doctoring.

Carey et al. 2010 report bedrock mortars in the Shawnee Hills and Illinois Ozark regions of southern Illinois. Half of the 18 sites identified to date are associated with rock shelters and one has 34 holes. Petroglyphs of the track variety were also associated with bedrock mortars in this area. The most remarkable site in the Shawnee Hills is the Blood of the Ancestors Grotto (11Sa557). Its red slurry offering blood imagery, natural water features including springs and waterfall, circle and line motif, and lady ferns suggest to Stelle a women’s medicine place and place of puberty rites (2006).

Discussion

This interpretation of the Newt Kash remains raises several interesting points for students of Eastern U.S. prehistory. Among these points are the relationship of the gardens to the rock shelters, the motivation for the domestication of native plants, the containers associated with retreats, and the use of landscape by women.

Distance to Gardens and Motivation for Domestication

The location of the gardens wherein were grown the domesticated plants found in these shelters has been assumed to be near these “home” bases. However, historic groups were and still are concerned that the menstruating woman be removed from any gardens and fields, as well as game. The users of the women’s retreats may have come a day’s walk or more given Adair’s (1930:130) comments on the distance between menstrual lodges and communities in historic times, some so far away that the women were easy prey for enemies. This distance would mean that either the seeds discarded in Kentucky and Ozarks shelters were carried to the shelters from distant gardens (see below) or that these plants were grown by women at their retreat locations for uses during retreat and not for consumption by the general population. Given the proposed function of these shelters, we must ask if it were specific medicinal or dietary uses of wild goosefoot, wild sumpweed, wild ragweed, wild sunflower, and wild maygrass by menstruating and nursing women and their doctors that governed their domestication and caching in rock shelters?

Containers

A few words can be said about the containers found in possible retreat shelters. It has already been mentioned that historic accounts indicate that special utensils were used by menstruating women. Franklin spent some time discussing the
uncharacteristic predominance of cord-marked, limestone tempered pottery during Early Woodland and even later in the rock shelters and caves of Tennessee’s Upper Cumberland Plateau. Cowan et al. (1981:73) remarked that Cloud-splitter Shelter’s limestone tempered pottery “seems atypical of Early Woodland forms in the Ohio River drainage” (emphasis added). This is the same pottery found in Newt Kash shelter. Franklin suggested that the pottery may have been manufactured elsewhere and carried into the western Plateau. Likewise, gourd bowls with contents intact were found in some Ozark shelters. “Most of the rind fragments of Cucurbita spp. and Lagenaria siceraria (Mol.) standley in the shelters appear to be pieces of containers used for transporting goods for storage from habitation sites situated on the terraces” (Fritz 1994:285).

While it may be that common containers and utensils were merely kept at a retreat shelter and in that way isolated from community and family, it could also be that unique containers (and shell spoons) were made for retreat locations and ritual locations in general (cord-impressed wares also occur in caves) and cached between uses in the shelters. Just such an interpretation—special menstrual wares kept at retreat locations—has been offered by Galloway (1997) for Ramey pottery found in the American Bottom. I wonder if cord-marked pottery of the Early Woodland in particular may have been preferred for cave and shelter-based ritual uses on the Cumberland Plateau? Researchers should be alert to the possibility of unique wares for ritual loci in general, and women’s places in particular.

Women’s Use of Landscape

It appears that Newt Kash was used as a retreat shelter throughout a 1,500-year period beginning in the Terminal Archaic and continuing through the Early Woodland. The creation of bedrock mortars in this area is slightly older and if these are taken to be prime indicators of women’s retreat, then it could be said that rock shelter use for retreats was underway sometime after 5000 B.P. but possibly long before. Using the criteria that I have here, it may not be possible to identify an older retreat use for rock shelters.

It is also difficult to say whether women continued to use rock shelters in this manner until European contact. There are very few shelters with temporally diagnostic artifacts in the collections from Cumberland Plateau, the Ozarks shelters, or the eastern slope of the Appalachian Mountains (but they do have ample materials for radiocarbon dating), and no others that have been considered for this function except for the Charles Church shelter of North Carolina. Its late prehistoric evidence (Whyte 2005) suggests that women did continue to use retreat shelters until contact as does the historic use of rock shelters to dispose of illegitimate children (Denig 1930).

The picture that emerges from this study and from examinations of Early Woodland and later cave use is that women and men had separate domains in the hilly landscape as well as common ones. I have argued here that some rock shelters were utilized by women for menstrual retreat, birthing, and healing. I have argued elsewhere (Claassen 2001:301, 303) that dark zones of utilized caves were men’s domain (where they mined salts and made glyphs) based on male amino acids in the few fecal remains that have been tested and on the almost exclusively male entradas into caves in Mexico. The medicine society meeting in Newt Kash, however, was probably made up of both women and men although that need not be the case.

Whereas suitable caves are scattered across the landscape and men clearly picked but a few of them to use, rock shelters are ubiquitous and abundant. Nevertheless, it appears that in Kentucky at least, women chose to concentrate their choices of retreat shelters in two areas, one in the eastern Appalachian Mountains and the other along the upper Green River (Ison 2004). This clustering is not a product of inadequate site survey or geology. These types of shelters also appear to be clustered in the Ozarks and possibly along the Tennessee River and in parts of Ohio. Terrain with rock shelters seems too remote from much of the population of the Mississippi valley to have been the only type of retreat place—if retreating was a general practice for all native cultures—so non-shelter retreats are to be expected.

In addition to picking shelters for retreat and birth, women appear to have been manipulating plants and defining for themselves appropriate activities and tools while in retreat. Among these activities were numerous ones that modified the
landscape such as stripping tree bark, cutting pawpaw branches, gardening, harvesting various plants and shellfish, collecting firewood, pecking boulders, and modifying the interior of shelters.

This study also elicits several other comments of relevance to past concerns expressed by some archaeologists. Watson (1985) puzzled over the presence of early cultigens in rock shelters in river valleys where little social complexity later developed such as in the Ozarks and in eastern Kentucky. This puzzle is partially, I think, the result of comparing floral records from rock shelter contexts with those from open, flood plain contexts, resulting in a mixing of functional contexts. As argued in this paper, that mixture is probably that of retreats compared to hamlets.

A second conundrum was raised by Gremillion (2002). The abundant nuts found in Cold Oak Shelter—which is a probable retreat shelter—strain the diet-breadth model says Gremillion, because lots of varieties were found yet only hickory should have been collected according to the model (2002:147). She was particularly puzzled by the use of high-cost acorns. Gremillion also found that the addition of sumpweed and goosefoot did nothing for the diet that the nuts weren’t already doing. I suggest that this conundrum dissolves when nut oils are the motivation for selection, rather than nut meat.

Conclusion

The ethnographic literature from North America indicates that rock shelters were once used for seeking visions (e.g., Irwin 1994; Sundstrom 2004), food storage (e.g. Fritz 1994), and burial (numerous examples from the Aleutian Islands to the Bahamas). To this list can now be added menstrual retreat, birthing, and rituals suggesting medicine societies. Still more uses are suspected given that historic accounts from Mexico tell us that rock shelters and caves were good places also for sweating (e.g., Moyes 2005), training as a weather priest (e.g., Heyden 2005:23–25), or curer (Heyden 2005:26), and as hunting shrines (Brown 2005). Habitation in rock shelters remains a possibility—individual Raramuri families do live in rock shelters in central Chihuahua, Mexico (which I have personally observed during fieldwork in Chihuahua 1991), some year round, reflecting great poverty, others seasonally—but it should not be a default interpretation in light of these many other uses. In the case of the Ozark shelters, archaeologists have abandoned the habitation label in favor of special uses such as “storage of seed stock, storage and preparation of food, tool making, cane cutting, turkey trapping, and occasionally burial of the dead” (Fritz 1994:285). Several of these special uses fit the women’s retreat place as developed here. These alternative uses for rock shelters and the discarded plants and animals, uses that do not center on meeting food needs, cause methodological and interpretive problems when unrecognized, and when recognized, offer alternative hypotheses for many problems wrestled with in the literature.

An example of one such interpretive problem is that of understanding the dietary information contained in paleofeces. The samples from Newt Kash indicate the diet of menstruating or postpartum women, and probably not that of the general population. Elsewhere I have suggested that if caves were ritual places for male priests (Claassen 2001), the paleofecal specimens from those contexts may again give us information about ritual diets, not habitual diets.

In an article entitled “Where Have all the Menstrual Huts Gone?” Patricia Galloway (1997) pointed out that while dozens of southeastern native groups practiced ritual seclusion, no menstrual houses had been identified by archaeologists. Since that publication, Michelle Schohn (2001) has proposed a menstrual lodge at the late Manning Dike Break Site on the coastal plain in South Carolina. I would say now that for cultures living in or near mountainous or karstic regions, rock shelters are where we are to look for many of the seclusion locations as well as staging places for other ritual needs such as burial and hunting shrines. The key criteria for identifying women’s places appear to be the bedrock mortar, evidence of fibers and cordage making, shell spoons, and possibly petroglyphs in combination with any of the other criteria. By reexamining the remains found in rock shelters and their reports, we will be able to uncover specific uses of these rock features that will give us a more nuanced understanding of natural features and a clearer view of a rich, specific, and even gendered ritual landscape.
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Note
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