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Eagle Burials on Red River Caddo Sites

Timothy K. Perttula

A wide variety of birds are found in faunal assemblages from Caddo sites in southwest Arkansas, northwest Louisiana, eastern Oklahoma, and East Texas, particularly turkey as well as ducks and geese. One of the rarest avifauna recovered on Caddo sites of any age is that of the eagle, including bald eagles (Figure 1) and golden eagles.



Figure 1. Painting of a bald eagle. Plate 14 in Vol. I, *The Birds of America from Drawings made in the United States and their Territories* by John James Audubon. V. G. Audubon, New York, 1856. Image provided courtesy of Bob D. Skiles.

Feature 23, a small pit northwest of Feature 18 (Figure 2) in a ca. 16th century Zone H structure zone in the platform mound at the Hatchel site (41BW3) (Perttula 2014), contains the buried remains of an adult male bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) (TARL n.d.289, 361–362), a unique discovery on an East Texas Caddo site. These remains were identified by noted avifaunal expert Dr. Lyndon Hargrave in June 1974. The bald eagle remains lay folded at the bottom of the pit (Figure 3), ca. 33 cm below the surface of Zone H.

Bald eagle remains were found in two burials at the late 17th–early 18th century Cedar Grove site (3LA97) on the Red River, including a mostly complete bald eagle in Burial 2 (Trubowitz 1984:Figure 10–2) and a humerus fragment in Burial 3 (Styles and Purdue 1984:218). Finally, Webb (1959:36) noted the “articulated skeleton of a large bird, hawk or eagle” on the House 3 floor in Bossier phase (ca. A.D. 1200–1500) contexts at the Belcher Mound site (16CD13). It has subsequently been identified as a golden eagle (Jeffrey S. Girard, December 2013 personal communication).

The rarity of bald eagle and golden eagle skeletal remains on Caddo sites, and their known occurrence only in burial feature contexts (in both mound and habitation sites), suggests that eagle remains do not represent subsistence refuse. Rather, these remains are very likely the product of the use of captured eagles as sacra in feasting and ritual or religious ceremonies by the Caddo religious and political elite (the *Xinesi*

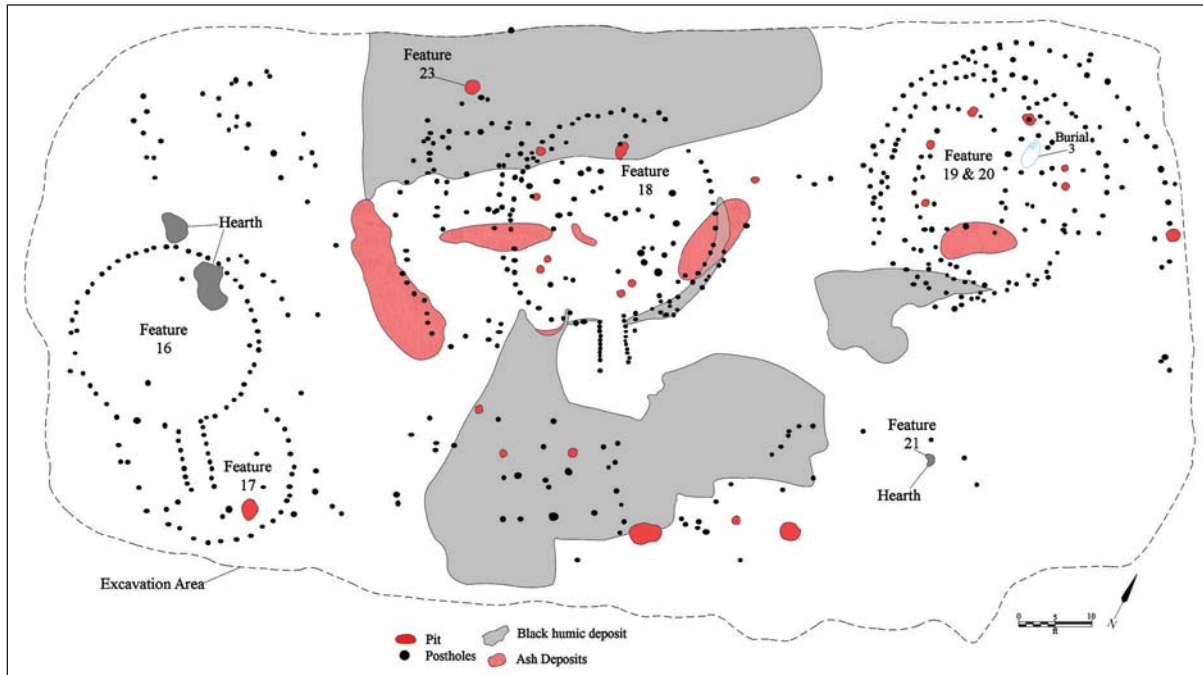


Figure 2. Structure zone H features, including Feature 23, in the platform mound at the Hatchel site. Figure prepared by Lance Trask.



Figure 3. Bald eagle burial (Feature 23) in Structure Zone H at the Hatchel site. Image courtesy of the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory, The University of Texas at Austin.

and *Caddi*) that lived in different Red River communities. These majestic birds were fearsome hunters, with an awesome wing span, and were probably revered by Caddo peoples, but their use was likely reserved for the elite.

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