

General Problems of Florida Archaeology

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THE flat limestone peninsula of Florida has been thrust upward from the sea, leaving the southeastern portion slightly higher than the southwestern.¹ Of all the states in the Union, Florida is geologically the youngest² and is the only state whose Flora³ and Fauna⁴ are related both to the West Indies and to North America. This relationship is particularly evident in southern Florida.

Skirting this limestone peninsula, from Biscayne Key practically into Tampa Bay, are a host of small islands known popularly as reefs and keys. Technically, however, the only coral reefs are in the northeast. The southwestern maze of keys, namely those forming the Ten Thousand Islands, is what remains of an ancient, large island.⁵

Archaeological sites in Florida can be divided roughly into three categories: mounds, keys, and shell heaps. Taken as a whole, they suggest rather distinct periods of Florida occupation, each type in a measure revealing the culture of the people who built it. Yet over and through practically the entire area, sites have been used and reused, thereby making obvious the penetration of cultural thrusts from divers regions and at different times. This leaves a confusing, not-so-clearly-defined picture.

Florida mounds, as apart from the shell heaps and the keys, are found in quantity throughout the northern portion of the state. Although con-

1. Charles Schuchert, *Historical Geology of the Antillean-Caribbean Region* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1935), p. 243.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

3. Robert Francis Scharff, *Distribution and Origin of Life in America* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), p. 167; see also Charles T. Simpson. In *Lower Florida Wilds* (New York: Putnam, 1920).

4. Simpson, *op. cit.* and *Florida Plant Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1932).

5. Schuchert, p. 256.

tinuing southward, they are fewer in number and appear to be confined to the relatively scarcer sections of high ground. The mounds are of earth, and of sand and earth, and come under two classifications, burial and domiciliary. The domiciliary mound primarily was a foundation mound to support a building of wood or canes. It is a type commonly called "pyramidal." They are related in purpose and often in plan to the Mexican pyramidal mounds, and are held by some to have been built by the Muskogvian tribes in Florida, and by others to be the result of an Ohio culture group, the Hopewell. The culture of both the historic Muskogvian and the extinct Hopewell was more or less an inland one, what might be classed here as a "highland" culture. This is in contrast with the culture associated with the low, flat, marshy lands and their essential waterways which are characteristic of the Gulf coast and peninsula Florida. The apparent preference of the mound-builders for the highest available locations is what we might expect to find true of an inland people, whether or not they were the Hopewell or even the Marksville builders of the Mississippi valley, or the Muskogvian tribes which were living in Florida at the time of the Spanish conquest. Pyramidal mounds similar to the Florida mounds are found also in the rest of the southeastern area of the United States.⁶ The presence of this type of house mound in Florida leads inevitably, regardless of Hopewell or Muskogvian relationship, to the question of Mexican influence. Because the whole archaeological picture of the upper Mississippi or Hopewell culture and of the Muskogvian peoples is bound up also with the question of whether these cultures are indigenous to northern United States or to Mexico.⁷

The burial mounds show, more than any particular archaeological group, a complexity of influences. There are many types of burials in Florida, from the rare urn burial⁸ which shows a relationship to the eastern woodlands, to the Antillean custom⁹ of removing the flesh from the bones and then burying the bones. In addition to this, mounds, including shell heaps, have been used by people later than the actual builders

6. Concerning the mound-building complex in the southeast, see Henry Clyde Shetrone, *The Mound-Builders* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1936), pp. 477-79; and J. A. Ford and Gordon Willey, *Crooks Site, A Marksville Period Burial Mound in LaSalle Parish, Louisiana* (Louisiana Department of Conservation, Geological Survey, Anthropological Study, No. 3, 1940), p. 139.

7. See Shetrone, pp. 484-88.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 449, fig. 286; also p. 452.

9. David I. Bushnell, Jr., *Native Cemeteries and Forms of Burial East of the Mississippi* (Smithsonian Institute. Bureau of American Ethnology, Bull. 71, 1920), pp. 95 and 97; and J. Walter Fewkes, *Preliminary Archaeological Explorations at Weeden Island, Florida* (Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, vol. 76, no. 13, 1924), p. 11 ftm. 1.

of the mounds as a place for interment. This, in itself upsets, or at least makes difficult, the problem of stratigraphy and of chronology.

The key sites are confined to the coast of western Florida. As we have noted earlier, this region was broken geologically into a maze of small rises, some scarcely above the encroaching sea even during low tide. The inhabitants then were forced to build up low terraces and platforms of conch shells, and to dig shallow canal pathways for essential dugout canoes. These key sites, dependant as they were on water traffic, the consequent rise and fall of the sea, the currents, and the winds, may be supposed quite logically to present a distinct picture from the mainland, and of necessity to have been used by a people familiar with the sea. This does not hinder a relationship of such a people with a highland, basically agricultural group, but it presupposes a coastal unit primarily fishermen and traders, not dependant upon agriculture for a livelihood.

In truth, the key sites offer a variety of influences, much as at Key Marco, pointing to Mexico, while some have parallels in the Antilles. This mixture of traits points to a trader community as distinct from the shell heap people of simple fisher culture, whom we shall examine later. It must be borne in mind also that the pre-Columbian Mexicans were far-famed as traders, and that the coastal region of much of southern Mexico and Central America had a wide-spread traffic of trading canoes.¹⁰

There is nothing to lead us to believe that Nahua-speaking people may not also have carried on a similar traffic in the north, whether it be the result of an actual migration,¹¹ of a unit which had broken away from a larger group (for example, in Georgia,¹² the direct outcome of pre-Columbian trade routes via Mexico. or a basic widespread culture which centered in Mexico. It should also be remembered that at the time of the advent of the Spanish to the New World there was active trade between Florida and the West Indies.¹³

The third type of archaeological site in Florida is the shell heap. Shell heaps are found along the coast, and sometimes continue a little way up

10. Ferdinand Columbus, *The History of the Life and Actions of Adm. Christopher Columbus, and of His Discovery of the West Indies* (London: Churchill, 1732), II, 605; Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (Mexico. Genaro Garcia edition, 1904), II, 306; and Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdés, *Historia General y Natural de las Indias* (Madrid, 1853), libr. XXXII, cap. viii; vol. III, p. 253; see also Diego de Landa, *Relation des Choses de Yucatan* (Paris, 1864), p. 9.

11. Zelia Nuttall, "Comparison between Etowah, Mexican and Mayan Designs," *Etowah Papers* (New Haven: pub. for Phillips Academy by Yale University Press, 1932), p. 144.

12. Doris Stone, "The Relationship of Florida Archaeology to That of Middle America," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XVII, 3 (January, 1939).

13. Heinrich Berlin, "Relaciones Precolombinas entre Cuba y Yucatán," *Revista Mexicana de Estudios Antropológicos*, IV, 1-2 (January-August, 1940), p. 145.

the rivers, clinging for the most part to the available water systems. They vary in size, and show stratification in that they give evidence of abandonment and reoccupation. The heavy growth on top of many of these heaps has led to the belief¹⁴ in the great antiquity of these sites. On the other hand, the fact that these shell mounds are constructed from all available shells, not alone the refuse, and that these shells often show signs of freshness, make the age of the heaps questionable, with a consequently controversial answer.¹⁵ It is most probable, as we shall see later, that these shell heaps continued to be erected over a long period, and thus represent, as a whole, the oldest cultural attribute to be found in Florida.

Unlike the mounds and even the somewhat controversial key sites, the shell heaps call our attention from the cultural centers of the Mississippi region, and of Mexico, and point southeastward to the island groups of the Caribbean. South of Florida lies the sea and the neighboring land-link of the Antilles, all forming a broken land chain between North and South America.

The oldest people of the West Indies are known as the Ciboney. Originally associated by scientists with Cuba, they have since been discovered to have extended throughout the Antillean area, and to have been the people responsible for the so-called "archaic" culture of the islands. Shell heaps, conch-shell tools, principally conch-shell cups, and minute amounts of very crude pottery characterize the Ciboney.¹⁶ This type of culture extends furthermore on the Caribbean coast of Central America as far west at least as Trujillo in Spanish Honduras.¹⁷ Ciboney culture is known in Florida as the Cautian culture,¹⁸ and is a basic Caribbean complex. It is associated with the shell sites of Florida and continues northeastward up the Georgia coast¹⁹ and westward into Louisiana. The presence of this Cautian complex, whose age is backed by the age of the Ciboney in Cuba, indicates a longer period of Florida pre-history than has sometimes been supposed.²⁰ General opinion points also

14. See "Antiquities of Florida." Extract from the Journal of John Bartram of Philadelphia. London, 1769, *Annual Report, Smithsonian Institution* (1874), p. 393.

15. Compare "Antiquities of Florida" with Ales Hrdlička, *The Anthropology of Florida* (Deland; Florida State Historical Society, 1922), p. 69.

16. M. R. Harrington, *Cuba before Columbus* (Indian Notes and Monographs, New York: Museum of the American Indian, Miscellaneous, No. 17, 1921).

17. Doris Stone, "A Mound and a House-Site," *Maya Research*, I, 2 (October, 1934), p. 129, and "The Relationship of Florida Archaeology," pp. 215-16.

18. Fewkes, p. 12; and Hrdlička, p. 50. Dr. Hrdlička does not use the term "Cautian," but prefers to follow the accounts of the historic Indians and uses the name "Caloos-
as" (or "Calusas").

19. Shetrone, pp. 467-68; and Berlin, p. 144.

20. See Hrdlička, pp. 68-80.

21. Fewkes, p. 25.

to the Cautians as the underlying peoples of the Florida area.²¹ The theory has even been advanced that the Ciboney culture spread from Florida to Cuba, and not from Cuba to the peninsula. The peoples responsible for the Mississippi valley traits and the Muskogvian tribes all belong to a later period of Florida pre-history.

On top of this primary Cautian culture level have come further contacts with the West Indies. Definite examples of Antillean influence are found, particularly in eastern Florida among the Yuchi, themselves strangers in this area.²² The Arawak, a late Antillean people, have traits appearing in many of the peninsula shell mounds.²³

Perhaps the most confusing number of traits in Florida, however, is to be found in the pottery. Pottery after all might be expected to follow a set pattern within a given area, but here it shows a great variability in design and in form. Pottery distribution in Florida tells a story which is both complex and penetrating. Recent work by Louisiana archaeologists, for example, shows that the ceramics of the Florida west coast belong to the later period of Mississippi valley culture. In addition to this, they have a relationship with the cultural center of Marksville, Louisiana.²⁴ This brings another element into the Florida picture. This is the question of Marksville, Louisiana, as an influencing culture center, radiating its own traits, as distinct from upper Mississippi or Hopewell traits.

Weeden Island, on the northwest Florida coast, has yielded, for example, specimens which might belong either to Marksville or to Hopewell culture. Again we are faced with the question of the degree of relationship between the Louisiana and the Ohio culture center, and the question of priority or age.

More completely under the classification of ceramics is the similarity existing between the pottery of the northwest Florida coast and that known as Coles Creek, Louisiana.²⁵ The Coles Creek ware is younger than that from Marksville. Yet pottery of both types is found in Florida. This, of course, points to various periods of aboriginal movement, leaving open the question of the original homesite of each type of ware, and the region responsible for the whole culture complex. For it is important to remember, throughout this discussion, that the Mississippi culture centers are not entirely free of controversial elements themselves. Always the

22. Charlotte D. Gower, "The Northern and Southern Affiliations of Antillean Culture," *Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association* (1927), p. 47.

23. Stone, "The Relationship of Florida Archaeology," p. 216.

24. Ford and Willey, p. 143.

25. J. A. Ford, *Ceramic Decoration Sequence at an Old Indian Village Site near Sicily Island, Louisiana* (Louisiana Department of Conservation, Geological Survey, Anthropological Study, No. 1, 1935), p. 31.

problem of Middle America raises the question of how much of the Mississippi valley civilization was indigenous, and how much came from where, over what routes, and whether or not by trade or actual migration. So, in the final analysis, Florida archaeology forces us to turn southward to Middle America. In fact, Middle American traits are scattered over much of the Florida area, and consist, for the most part—in addition to the mound complex—of ceremonially broken funerary pots, and caches, and cranial deformation. Curiously enough, despite the single location of Key Marco, most of these Middle American traits are particularly absent from the Florida west coast.²⁶

Why the varying influences, the actual source from whence each came, and the subsequent routes and methods of the coming? All of this, coupled with the important element of time, remain concrete, vital problems in Florida archaeology. They are problems which can be solved only through careful, scientific excavation, the establishment of stratigraphy, the delimitation on Florida ceramic areas, and the tying in of these areas or pottery groups with existing related centers outside of Florida.

26. Shetrone, p. 455.