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ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT THE ORTONA EARTHWORKS AND MOUNDS

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This paper presents results of an archaeological project conducted in 1990-1991 by the Archaeological and Historical Conservancy (AHC) of Miami, Florida, at the Ortona site in Glades County, southern Florida (Figure 1). The work was funded by a Special Category Grant from the Florida Department of State, Division of Historical Resources. In addition to archaeological field work and analysis, the grant provided for public education such as the production of on-site exhibits and signage as well as preparation of this publication about Ortona.

The Ortona site is located in rural Glades County at the northwestern edge of the Everglades near the Caloosahatchee River and Lake Okeechobee. Although the existence of large American Indian earthworks at Ortona has been known for many years, they have remained very poorly documented until now. Indeed, this project represents the first comprehensive archaeological work ever conducted at Ortona. As such, the project attempts to furnish baseline data for future research.

First, we explain the goals of the Ortona project. Then we introduce the site's natural setting and previous archaeological research. Next, we describe Ortona's major site components and give detailed accounts of excavations. We then analyze the recovered cultural materials and interpret them and the site. Finally, we briefly describe public displays and education at Ortona.

Project Goals

The Ortona archaeological project was conducted with two principal goals and several secondary ones. A primary goal was to identify, locate, and determine boundaries of the extensive mounds and other earthworks at the Ortona site. This project's emphasis was on site components located in Ortona Indian Mound Park owned by Glades County. However, other adjacent site components also were studied.

Unfortunately, the rural Ortona area has been hard hit in the last 50 years by numerous alterations, such as sand mining and land clearing. Consequently, much of the Ortona site has been destroyed or altered severely. Thus, an important part of this project was a review of archival documents, especially maps and accounts by previous scholars who visited the site, as well as interpretation of historic aerial photographs of the area dating back to 1948. The use of these aerial photographs along with field checks produced data for determining the location and form of Ortona's site components. Although some interpretations are weakened by the subjectivity of our judgement (because various components are altered or gone and could not be verified in the field), the resulting site maps (Figures 2 and 3) are the best representations, to date, of the Ortona site.

The project's second principal goal was to determine intra-site variability in terms of function and chronology of the various Ortona site components. Existing components were tested to recover evidence of cultural activity and to assess changes through time at each tested component. Also, variations between site components in terms of the material record were assessed.

Testing was limited to those recognized site components and adjacent areas as determined by archival evidence, informant data, and field observations. A major challenge was that most of Ortona's site components, with the exception of the Large Mound (8GL5) and Mound A (8GL80), are not easily recognized because of prior disturbance and a thick growth of vegetation that covers most of the Ortona site. It was with the aid of archival aerial photographs (U.S.D.A. 1948, 1949) that most of the tested components were identified and located.

A secondary research goal was to recover sufficient data to provide some basic interpretations of Ortona's ceramic assemblage. Another goal was to recover sufficient faunal bone and floral materials to provide an understanding of environmental adaptation and the relationship of Ortona subsistence with that of other sites in the region.

Figure 1: Location of the Ortona site in Florida.