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IN SOUTHEAST FLORIDA

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Robert S. Carr and John F. Reiger

Strombus shell celts are artifacts typical of southeast Florida, an area defined by Goggin as the Tequesta subarea of the Glades Culture Area (1949: n.p.). Despite it being a relatively common artifact type in southeast Florida, it has rarely been reported in caches or in association with human interments. It is thus of particular interest that two caches of Strombus celts were discovered by author John Reiger in 1979 while he was conducting a surface collection at 8Da93, also called the Lehigh site.

The Lehigh site is a prehistoric midden situated on the north end of what was once an Everglades tree island. Situated 14 miles west of Biscayne Bay (Fig. 1), and during prehistoric times, easily accessible to the Bay through the Miami River, the site is presently endangered by encroaching development and has already had its natural environment altered by drainage and the spread of exotic flora. The hardwood hammock community that once dominated the midden has been fire-damaged, and Brazilian Pepper (Florida Holly) grows profusely, dominating the secondary hardwood forest that has attempted to make a comeback. Australian Pines dominate what was once a low sawgrass slough directly east of the tree island, and within other parts of the sawgrass communities east, west and north of the site, there are expanding intrusions of Melaleuca. Much of the peat deposition associated with the lowlands adjacent to the site has been subjected to fires, and an unknown quantity of this soil has been burned away, exposing in many places the oolitic limestone basal rock.

The Lehigh site was previously investigated by Dan Laxson who excavated six test pits there in 1957 (Laxson 1959: 2). The site is roughly oval and has a diameter of approximately 40 meters. Laxson's tabulation of pottery types suggest a range of occupation dating from as early as Glades I (Late) Period to the Glades III Period (Laxson 1959: 7). A later Seminole component is indicated by his recovery of 8 blue faceted glass beads. Laxson also uncovered at least two human burials in the four to eight inch level of Pit Two.

Archeologists with the Dade County Historic Survey examined the site in June, 1979 and observed that the midden, though disturbed, was generally intact. Large quantities of faunal bone and pottery sherds were visible on the surface. Soil depth appeared to vary from negligible amounts upon exposed limestone basal rock to depths of about 75 cm.

The two celt caches were discovered approximately 15 meters from one another along the northeast quadrant of the site. The first cache of 12 celts and a Busyon shell tool (Fig. 3) was discovered in June 1979. Author John Reiger observed a single celt partially exposed through the top soil and subsequently uncovered 11 more celts lying horizontally, all but one touching each other. The cache alignment was basically along an east-west axis, and the celts were apparently lying on or near the basal limestone, as the soil was only about 13 cm. in depth from the surface down to bedrock.

The second cache was discovered in a similar fashion in September, 1979. This time, author Robert Carr was notified, and the cache was photographed while being uncovered (Fig. 2). This 10-celt cache lay along a north-south axis and included a calcitic sandstone abrader, consisting of medium to coarse grained shell hash. This cache was uncovered from a similar depth as the first and was observed to have been placed directly on the oolitic limestone bedrock.

Previously Reported Celt Caches

The authors have collected the following accounts of other celt caches uncovered by previous investigators. Dan Laxson reports that on June 12, 1951, he recovered a cache of three or four celts from 8Da57, a site that was situated 11 miles almost due east of the Lehigh site and which has since been destroyed (personal communication, February 12, 1980). Laxson observed that the celts were "stacked up like rifles," in a pyramid or "tepee" arrangement and appeared to be associated with two bundle burials.

A similar "tepee" of three celts was uncovered by Wesley Coleman working with the Miami-West India Archeological Society in December, 1969, near 8Da34, a tree island site about two miles southeast of the Lehigh site (Coleman field notes, 1969). Coleman noted that the celts were located on a small rise near the sawgrass prairie. Two additional celts were uncovered 60 cm. north of the cache of three, and the fragments of a human skull were recovered an undisclosed distance southeast of the celts.

Between 1971 and 1972, Wilma Williams recovered a cache of six celts "stacked like pancakes" at the Markham Park #1 site (8Bd182) that were in association with burial #5. The celts were at a distance of about six inches from the back of a skull at a depth of 12 to 18 inches below the surface (personal communication, April 2, 1980). One of the authors has seen an excellent photograph of the celts and the skull in situ, which is in the possession of Mrs. Williams.

Description

Cache #1 from the Lehigh Site contained 12 Strombus celts ranging in size from a length of 16.9 cm. to 10.6 cm. The width varied from 6.4 cm. to 4.7 cm. Cache #2 had a length range of 13.3 cm. to 9.7 cm., and a width range of 7 cm. to 4.9 cm. The specific dimensions and weight of each specimen are indicated in Table 1. It should be noted that the weight of these specimens has probably been affected by chemical replacement and the leaching of certain carbonates from the tools during their history of burial.

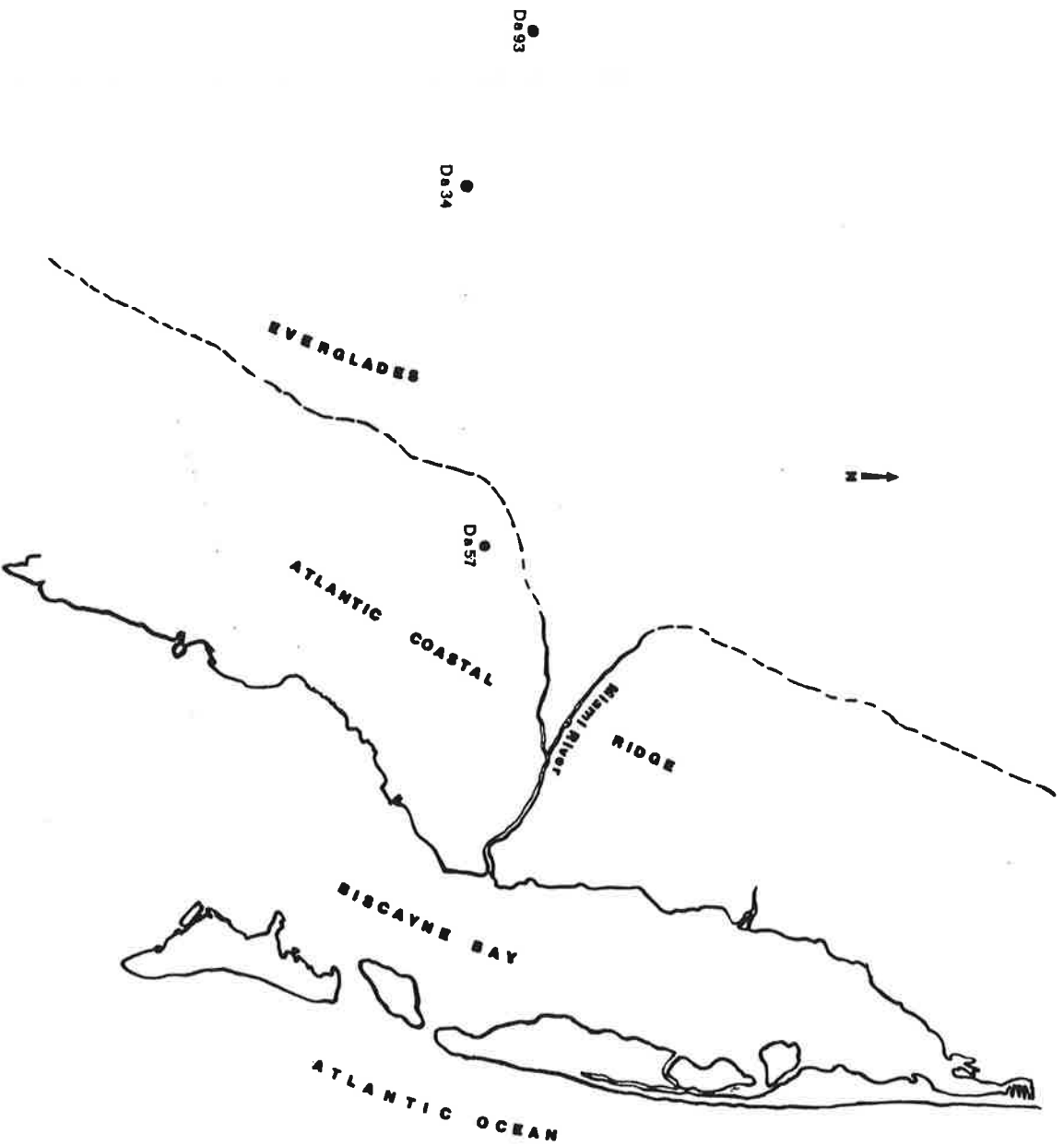


Figure 1. Map of area of Biscayne Bay and adjacent coast showing three celt-cache site locations (8Da34, 8Da57, and 8Da93). One inch = three miles.