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AN INDIAN BURIAL SITE  
AT CRYSTAL RIVER, FLORIDA

By F. G. RAINEY

*Peabody Museum, Yale University*

Crystal river rises in a group of large springs a few miles south of the Withlacoochee river on the west coast of Florida and flows westward for eight miles to the Gulf of Mexico. Fish are abundant in the river and the small town of Crystal River situated at the source owes its existence to an extensive fishing industry carried on in the region. Large oyster beds lie just off the mouth of the river and supply oysters to many cities in Florida.

In 1903, Crystal river was visited by Mr. Clarence B. Moore while engaged in his extensive archaeological excavations throughout the state. At this time he located and partly excavated a large sand mound near what is now known as "Spanish mound." Three years later he returned to finish the same site. Results of this interesting and productive site are published in the *Journal of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia*, Volume XII, 1903, and Volume XIII, 1907. As is often true in Florida, the sand mound proved to be a burial site containing numerous artifacts in association with skeletons, while the accompanying shell heaps were quite sterile. There are numerous shell deposits along the river but Mr. Moore's party located only the one cemetery.

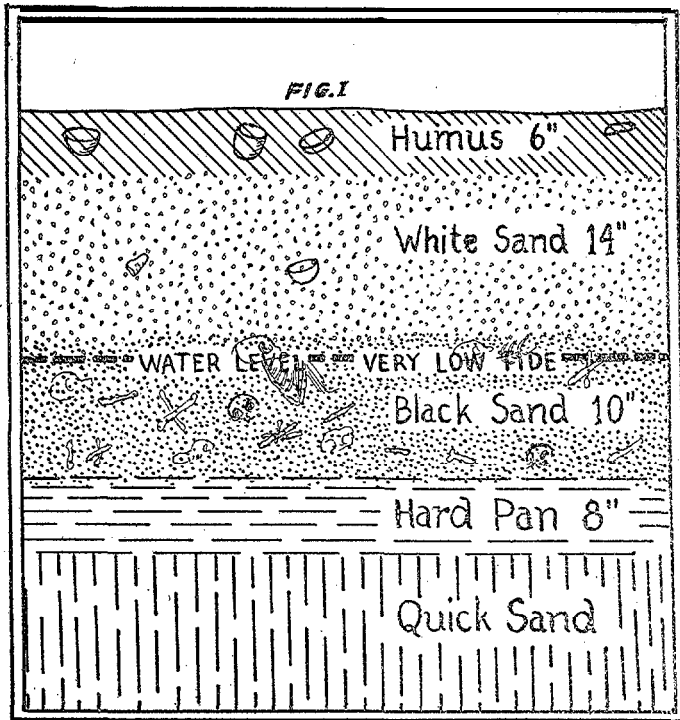
In the late summer of 1933 the writer, on an expedition constituting part of the anthropological research program of the Peabody Museum of Yale University, after numerous inquiries among local fishermen and guides, located another burial site situated on Buzzard's Island, one mile below the town of Crystal River. The island is one of three small

islands lying in a group and is not over forty acres in extent. When the tide is in, the river backs up and submerges all but a small central area about fifty yards in diameter. No part of the island is more than two feet above the water level. The burial site, which occupies the highest, central portion of the island, was said to have been discovered some thirty years ago, but was thought by local theorists to be the result of a slave massacre or the end of an attempt to smuggle aliens. Consequently, the place had a bad name which was contributed to by the presence of an unusually large number of buzzards and an extremely bad odor, due undoubtedly to its low marshy character. These factors saved the spot from Indian relic hunters and only an occasional curious person carried away a skull or two.

No mound marks the presence of the cemetery and the rise from the water level to the central dry area is barely perceptible. When the writer began excavation a shallow swale marked what proved to be the center of the cemetery.

Fortunately, in the first part of October a gale from the northeast blew steadily for several days which forced the water out of the bay and caused the river to drop to an unusually low point. This reduced the water level on the island some eight or ten inches and made excavation more practicable.

A trench four feet wide and approximately three feet deep was begun well outside the area in which human bones had been found and continued across this area to sterile soil beyond. By extending the walls of the initial trench the bulk of the skeletal material was removed. Various test pits made it possible to localize the cemetery to an area forty feet in diameter and the extension of the trench disclosed a central area ten feet in diameter which contained a mass of bones. From this central mass



Cross section - Buzzards Island Site

burial the deposit of bones thinned out toward the edge of the cemetery.

As seen in the cross-section of the site (Fig. 1), all skeletal material lay in one plane eighteen to twenty-four inches below the surface of the ground and upon a sand hardpan, forming a stratum of blackened bones and blackened sand. At the center of the greatest deposit this stratum measured about one foot in thickness and narrowed with the thinning out of the bone deposit. Above the skeletal material was a level of clear white sand twelve to eighteen inches thick, and above this a six inch deposit of rich humus.

A large cabbage palm tree had grown in the center of the site extending its mass of roots well through the greatest deposit of bones, making it very difficult to cut the skeletons free, and impossible to ascertain their original positions. Furthermore, even with an extremely low water level most of the bones lay below it and when cleared were still concealed by blackish water which rapidly filled the trenches.

*Skeletal material.* As far as could be determined, all the bones had been buried, without the flesh and most interments were of the bunched burial type, although it was possible in some cases to isolate an individual skeleton which was apparently extended or flexed. The most common form of interment was a pile of bones surmounted by the skull, often with the jaw missing. Occasionally only a skull alone would be found, or two or three long bones apparently in no relation to other bones. At the center of the burial the bones lay in a mass so compactly that it was impossible to isolate individual burials. It is possible that the roots of the cabbage palm had disturbed the bones to a great extent, but the number of fragmentary skulls and isolated parts probably indicate that the skeletons were originally disarticulated and strewn about. Evidently some of the bones had been burned as there were many charred fragments and bits of charcoal were often encountered in association. All bones were very black in color, but this was evidently due to the marshy ground in which they lay. Bones were in all stages of preservation, some no more than a black paste and others so hard they withstood sharp blows from the workmen's shovels. Those which were the best preserved were directly under the palm tree and entirely surrounded by an almost solid mass of small roots.

*Stone Implements.* Two polished stone celts, a rough flaked axe or club head, a pestle, a quartz pendant, spearheads, arrowheads, and knives or scrapers were found associated with skeletons in the central area (Fig. 2). All were found at the same level and within a radius of ten feet which was approximately in the center of the greatest deposit of bones. Every object with the exception of one spearhead and the pestle was intact. As a whole there appeared to be no definite relation with the skeletons, although one spearhead lay beside a skull, and the pestle lay immediately below a bunched burial. Three large sandstone boulders were found at the same level as the bones.

Several pieces of fossilized mammoth bone were found in the massed burial. One piece was identified as part of the zygomatic arch. All the fragments had been cut or ground down by hand.

*Pottery.* Potsherds were encountered throughout the site but always above the level of the skeletal remains. One complete pot (Fig. 3), was found in the layer of white sand, six inches above the skeletal deposit. This pot is 3 1-2 inches in height and 5 in diameter. Potsherds were most numerous in or just below the six inch layer of humus on the surface. Directly above the massed burial and not more than three or four inches below the surface of the ground were the remains of what appeared to be three different pots. They were evidently intact when placed over the burial as their outline could be traced in the sand. Only fragments were rigid enough to be removed. One fragment, was the effigy bird-head handle shown in (Fig. 4).

The quality of the clay used in the various types of pottery varied considerably. Some of the sherds were sandy and crumbled away on exposure, others were hard and brittle. Sherds indicate that vessels

were decorated with impressed checks, broad, deep incised lines, and pinched vertical ribs about the rim. These types appear as (Figs. 5-7). One clay pipe bowl was found associated with a skull in the central section (Fig. 8).

*Correlation with the burial mound excavated  
by Moore at Crystal river*

The method of interment in the Buzzard's Island site was essentially the same as that discovered by Moore, although he reports a larger percentage of extended burials, and does not mention any evidence of charred bones. Numerous burials in a small area, bunched burials, scattered and fragmentary bones are common to both sites.

Arrowheads, knives, spearheads, and celts associated with the burials are also common to both sites. Potsherds strewn throughout the site and vessels found singly are another common feature. Neither site contained the large deposits of earthenware, apparently placed for the dead in common, which are found along the northwest Florida coast. The methods of pottery decoration observed on sherds from the Buzzard's Island site are all found on sherds from Moore's excavation, with one exception which will be discussed later. A clay pipe and a quartz pendant found at Buzzard's Island resemble similar artifacts from Moore's site.

Opposed to these common features are a number of notable dissimilarities. In the first place, the Buzzard's Island site is not a mound and although there is some possibility that a former mound structure has been leveled in recent times, it is not likely as there is no evidence of such a leveling and the site at present is covered with a six inch layer of humus which is apparently the original surface.

A striking distinction between the two sites lies in the fact that Moore's site was associated with a shell mound and contained a large amount of shell refuse, burials commonly being found beneath deposits of oyster shells, while in the Buzzard's Island site not one bit of shell was discovered, and no shell heaps of any kind are found on the island nor on the two associated islands. Furthermore, numerous shell cups, gouges and ornaments were discovered by Moore while not a single piece of worked shell was found in the Buzzard's Island site.

Many celts and spearheads found by Moore were broken which he suggests may be evidence that they were ceremonially "killed" in the manner of pottery which was generally perforated at the bottom. Only one spearhead found at Buzzard's Island was broken and the one complete pot was intact.

*Further correlations of the Buzzard's Island site*

From Mr. Moore's extensive researches in Florida archaeology it may be seen that there is a noticeable difference between remains from the northwest coast of Florida and the central west coast. The line demarcating these two areas apparently falls somewhere between the Warrior river and the Suwannee. Distinguishing features of the northwest coast are large pottery caches placed in mounds as if in common for the dead, the finest mortuary pottery in Florida often decorated with effigy figures of which a frequent form is the crested bird head with bulging eyes; a comparative absence of shell tools and ornaments; and an abundance of stone implements. The central west coast region differs in that no pottery caches are found, effigy figures are extremely



rare,\* while pottery is less common and not generally as well made ; shell tools, such as, adzes and conch shell cups are abundant; while stone tools are comparatively few.

In the site excavated by Mr. Moore at Crystal river, no pottery cache was found and no effigy figures, while both stone and shell tools were numerous. In the Buzzard's Island site no pottery cache was present, but a fragment of a bowl containing a crested bird head effigy with protruding eyes was discovered. No shell tools of any kind appeared in the site. Stone tools, including celts, scrapers, spearheads, and arrowheads, were numerous in proportion to the size of the deposit.

Of the two sites at Crystal river, which are not over three miles apart, one, "Spanish mound," resembles the central coast region area in one characteristic, while the other, Buzzard's Island, resembles the northwest coast area in three respects and the central area in one.

Crystal river is approximately one hundred miles south of the Warrior river which is the southernmost site definitely affiliated with the northwest coast area and seventy-five miles north of Tampa bay, which is in the center of the central coast region. From the character of the two sites on the river it appears that there is an overlapping of two distinct archaeological provinces at this point with one site definitely affiliated with the northern area and the other with the southern. As might be expected, elements of both areas are found in each site.

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\*Drs. Sterling and Fewkes found four human heads in low relief on potsherds at Weeden Island, St. Petersburg. (Sm. Misc. Coll., vol. 76, no. 13). Mr. Moore found two clay bird heads at Goodland Point Marce Island. (*Jour. Acad. Nat. Sci. of Phil.*, vol. XI, p. 376).