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By J. Christopher Gillam

Like the greater field of North American archaeology, researchers at SCIAA have witnessed many changes in method, theory, and interpretation in recent decades. On the horizon, I believe the rise of global perspectives on the past will be one of the more promising developments. There is much to be learned from distant shores, cultures, and colleagues. Cross-cultural comparisons and international collaborations will lead to a better understanding of past cultures, our ultimate goal as archaeologists.

So it was with great pleasure in February of 2007, that SCIAA/USC, and the many other local, state, and federal agencies involved, hosted the visit of Dr. Kobayashi-sensai, Nishida-san, Miyao-san, and Miyauchi-san from Japan. Along with Becky Saunders of the Louisiana State University Museum of Natural Sciences, we explored the early pottery and shell mound sites of native cultures here in South Carolina. During the visit, we examined pottery and other artifacts from coastal shell ring and interior sites dating to approximately 3,200 to 4,200 years before present and toured several shell ring archaeological sites along the South Carolina coast including the Sewee, Fig Island, and Spanish Mount Shell Ring sites in Charleston County and the Sea Pines Shell Ring site in Beaufort County.

The greatest benefit of international collaboration is that learning is never one-sided. I am certain that I learned as much about Jomon period archaeology in Japan, as well as gained a fresh perspective on our own prehistory from our discussions, as our friends and colleagues from Tokyo and Niigata did about the Late Archaic here in South Carolina. The idea that many of these shell ring sites may be simple extraction locations where shellfish were processed is an intriguing hypothesis. The large shell mound and linked hexagonal rings at Fig Island may be an exception, as noted in Nishida-san’s article. (Pages 4-5)

The circular (or hexagonal) rings of shell may therefore be a reflection of how space is organized for roasting the oysters, rather than being of some great symbolic meaning related to the cosmology of these ancient folk. I think it is likely related to both of these cultural systems, as organized space and cosmology are often found to correlate in prehistory, as well as modern cultures. It is clear that the ritual feasting hypothesis common in the Southeast needs greater scrutiny in future research. With certainty, our discussions highlighted the dire need for additional research at these sites.

A sense of urgency regarding research at coastal sites is furthered by the fact that many of them will be submerged in the decades ahead due to global warming and the corresponding rise of sea levels worldwide. This fact should be particularly helpful in seeking grants from funding agencies, such as National Science Foundation and the National Geographic Society, that are particularly keen on playing a role in site preservation and salvage archaeology. Regardless of the source of funding, I hope that future research will involve not only new hypotheses, but new colleagues from abroad to strengthen our breadth of interpretation.

The site visits in February 2007 were coordinated with the aid of the SC Department of Natural Resources, USDA. Forest Service, Office of the State Archaeologist (OSA), Savannah River Archaeological Research Program (SRARP), and Hilton Head Island’s Sea Pines Plantation and Community Services Associates, Inc. I would like to reiterate Nishida-san’s thanks to everyone involved that made their visit such a great success!

We hope that our friends from Japan will return to contribute to a greater understanding of the Southeast’s past as many questions remain open: Do southeastern shell rings reflect cosmology? Territory? Kinship? Are the shell rings really hexagons, or is this a unique feature at Fig Island? Are shell rings simply shell processing sites? Are interior shell middens and Stalling’s Island related to coastal sites? Are interior sites territorial boundaries? There are many…

A typical Late Archaic shell mound is dominated by oyster, but also contains crab, clam, and other aquatic, avian, and terrestrial species’ remains. (Photo courtesy of J. Christopher Gillam)