3-2005

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Publication Info

Published in Legacy, Volume 9, Issue 1-2, 2005, pages 18-18.

http://www.cas.sc.edu/sciaa/

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Survey of Marsh Middens, Georgetown County, South Carolina
By Chester DePratter

Jim Legg and I are currently conducting a survey of an unusual set of midden heaps located in the marshes surrounding Club House Creek to the west of Litchfield Beach. I first learned about these middens in August 2004, when Fred Edgerton called me after he had read an article in the Charleston paper concerning shell rings. The article described the typical open-centered form of such rings, and Fred called me to say that he thought there was a shell ring in the marshes near his vacation home on Litchfield Beach. After rescheduling several times due to hurricanes, I finally got to see the site just before New Years 2004.

The site Fred took me to is a large midden located in the marsh between Litchfield Beach and the mainland (Fig. 1). It is about 125 feet (38 meters) long and 3.3 feet (1.0 meters) high. On one side it does have an open, circular depression with marsh grass growing in it. This depression is approximately 23 feet (7 meters) across. This may be a shell ring of the same age as the others that have been recorded so far, but so far we have neither associated pottery nor dates to support such identification.

On the same day that I visited the possible shell ring, we visited nine other sites in the marshes along Club House Creek. I found these sites to be intriguing, since all but one of them was composed of hard shell clam (Mercenaria mercenaria) instead of oyster as most other coastal middens are.

Once I was back at SCIAA, I looked at aerial photographs at the SCDNR Data Clearinghouse website, and I found that there were additional shell midden sites in the same area. Intrigued by this complex of clamshell middens, I immediately began working to find funds to support a research project on these intriguing sites. Within weeks I had enough funding to begin this work. On January 28, Jim Legg and I began a six-week field project to map and test these sites.

To date we have mapped ten sites and excavated test pits into nine of those. The sites we have worked on so far (we still have two more weeks of fieldwork) have provided exciting new information about the occupation of this part of the coast by prehistoric populations. With one exception (an oyster shell midden) all of the sites are composed of hard shell clam with abundant remains of Atlantic ribbed mussel (Geukensia demissa) and stout razor clam (Tagelus plebeius) also present. We have found that pottery sherds are very rare inclusions in these middens, and we suspect that at least some of them may be pre-ceramic in age (i.e., more than 4,500 years old).

These sites will provide important information in the position of sea level along the coast at the time these middens were occupied, since all of them have basal levels that are below the present high tide line. In fact, one of them extends at least 8 feet (2.43 meters) below present high tide, meaning that when it was occupied, sea level must have been at least 10 feet (more than 3 meters) lower than it is today (Fig. 2). We have taken numerous shell samples for radiocarbon dating, but so far none of them has been processed, so we do not know the age of the sites or the date of the sea level low stand.

We continue to work on this interesting group of sites in the marsh. We will map and test several more sites in the remaining two weeks of fieldwork. I have initiated a clam study in conjunction with Irvy Quitmeyer of the University of Florida that will allow determination of the season in which the clams were collected, and I will be working with Fred Andrus of the University of Alabama on seasonality in oyster collecting as well. I am still seeking funds to support this work, particularly for the radiocarbon dates that will be so important to determining the age of the sites. If you would like to help fund this research, please contact me at SCIAA. Earmark your donation to the Coastal Marsh Survey, and make checks payable to the USC Educational Foundation.