

Following is a news release from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. Releases also can be found online at www.georgiawildlife.com and www.gashpo.org.

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

ISLAND BURIAL SITE SHEDS LIGHT ON PREHISTORIC INDIAN CULTURE

ATLANTA (Dec. 17, 2008) – The recent excavation of a prehistoric American Indian burial site on Ossabaw Island revealed cremated remains, an unexpected find that offers a glimpse into ancient Indian culture along Georgia’s coast.

State archaeologist David Crass of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources said prehistoric cremations were rare, particularly during the early time in which preliminary evidence suggests this one occurred, possibly 1000 B.C. to A.D. 350. The remains also mark the first cremation uncovered on Ossabaw, a state-owned Heritage Preserve about 20 miles south of Savannah.

“This interment broadens our knowledge about ... the kinds of belief (involving) death within the Woodland Period,” Crass said. “This is not something we have seen before on Ossabaw Island. Similar cremations on St. Catherine’s Island may point to this practice being more widespread than we have believed up to now.”

Crass said during this time American Indians in Georgia moved to the coast in the winter for shellfish, then inland in the spring for deer hunting and into uplands in the fall for gathering nuts. “This site may have been a winter season camp,” he said.

Erosion from natural causes exposed the burial on an Ossabaw bluff earlier this year. Scientists from the DNR Office of the State Archaeologist, the non-profit Lamar Institute and the Georgia Council on American Indian Concerns worked under the council’s direction to excavate the roughly 6- by 6-foot pit. As required by state law, Crass informed the council about the situation and organized the excavation at the group’s request.

The work on Georgia’s third-largest barrier island revealed a cremation pit that had been lined with wood and oyster shells. The body had been placed on top of the wood and the contents of the pit burned. The human remains recovered were primarily from extremities, indicating that the deceased had been disinterred after cremation, possibly to be reburied elsewhere.

The charcoal will be submitted for carbon 14 dating, but preliminary analysis of the pottery recovered from the pit suggests the cremation may date to the Refuge-Deptford Phases in the Woodland Period, c.a. 1000 B.C. to A.D. 350. A ground-penetrating radar survey showed many prehistoric American Indian features in the general area, Crass said. The bluff apparently had long been a focal point of prehistoric Indian life.

After analysis, the remains will be reinterred in a secure location under the auspices of the Council on American Indian Concerns. Crass expects the carbon 14 dating results and details on the radar survey by early next year.

Human history runs deep on Ossabaw. Shell mounds and other artifacts here date to 2000 B.C. More than 230 archaeological sites have been recorded. Spanish records indicate the island probably had an early Guale Indian village, according to The New Georgia Encyclopedia. But long before the first European contact on Ossabaw, possibly through the Spanish in 1568, small pox and other diseases unwittingly introduced by the Spanish in Mexico and South America had swept north, devastating populations of native Americans.

Crass said it's not known what Indians were on the island when the cremation pit was used. But because of its discovery thousands of years later, more will be learned.

Access to Ossabaw is limited to approved research projects and hunts managed by the DNR's Georgia Wildlife Resources Division. Details at www.georgiawildlife.com. Information on visiting the island for research and educational purposes is also available from The Ossabaw Island Foundation's Jim Bitler, jim@ossabawisland.org.

The Wildlife Resources Division works to protect, conserve, manage and improve Georgia's wildlife and freshwater fishery resources. The division's mission also includes managing and conserving protected wildlife and plants, administering and conducting the mandatory hunter safety program, regulating the possession and sale of wild animals, and administering and enforcing the Georgia Boat Safety Act.

The Historic Preservation Division of the Georgia DNR serves as Georgia's state historic preservation office. The Historic Preservation Division's mission is to promote the preservation and use of historic places for a better Georgia. Programs include archaeology protection and education, environmental review, grants, historic resource surveys, tax incentives, the National Register of Historic Places, community planning and technical assistance. For more information, call (404) 656-2840 or visit www.gashpo.org.

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Photo available from Helen Talley-McRae (helen.talley-mcrae@dnr.state.ga.us) or Rick Lavender (rick.lavender@gadnr.org). Caption information: DNR staff archaeologist Jenn Bedell and Council on American Indian Concerns archaeologist Tom Gresham examine artifacts from the cremation excavation on Ossabaw. (Credit: Ga. DNR)

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