The Thornhill Lake Archaeological Research Project: Mount Taylor Mortuary Mounds and Monumental Architecture in the St. Johns River Valley

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Since 2004 the Thornhill Lake Archaeological Research Project, through the Laboratory of Southeastern Archaeology at the University of Florida, has been investigating sites within the Lake Monroe Conservation Area (LMCA) along the St. Johns River in southwest Volusia County. Research at the Thornhill Lake Complex (8VO58, 8VO59, and 8VO60) has produced important new data related to the emergence of monumental architecture and mortuary mound construction during the Mount Taylor period. Clarence Moore (1894a, 1894b) is the only archaeologist prior to the current research to have worked at the Thornhill Lake Complex. He noted the virtual absence of ceramics in the mounds and the unusual nature of the artifacts he found associated with the burials in them - namely bannerstones, stone pendants, and polished stone beads (Figure 1). John Goggin (1952) would later wrestle with the apparent Archaic age of the artifacts in the mounds but ultimately concluded that they were "holdovers" and attributed the mounds the St. Johns I period. The prevailing cultural evolutionary paradigm effectively precluded the possibility that the mounds could be Archaic and thus they were not recognized as such. Not until the early 1990s with the growth of Archaic mound research in the southeast did archaeologists come to suspect their antiquity (Russo 1994). The work presented here confirms those suspicions and firmly establishes Thornhill Lake as a Mount Taylor period mortuary mound complex.

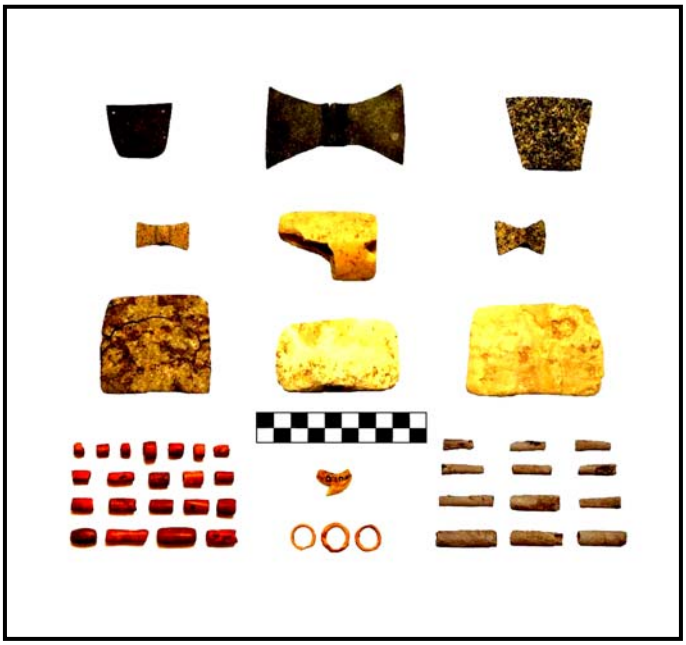

Figure 1. Bannerstones, pendants, and beads from the Thornhill Lake Mounds. Scale in cm.

Beginning in 2005 a program of topographic mapping and excavation at the Thornhill Lake Complex and survey within the LMCA was undertaken. Topographic mapping provided for the first time a detailed rendering of an Archaic mound complex in northeast Florida (Figure 2). Principal among the site's architectural features are two mounds composed primarily of sand built atop mounded shell, two sand and shell ridges that converge at Mound B, a ridge connecting Mounds A and B, a borrow pit due north of Mound A, several small mounded shell deposits, and what appears to be a ring-shaped

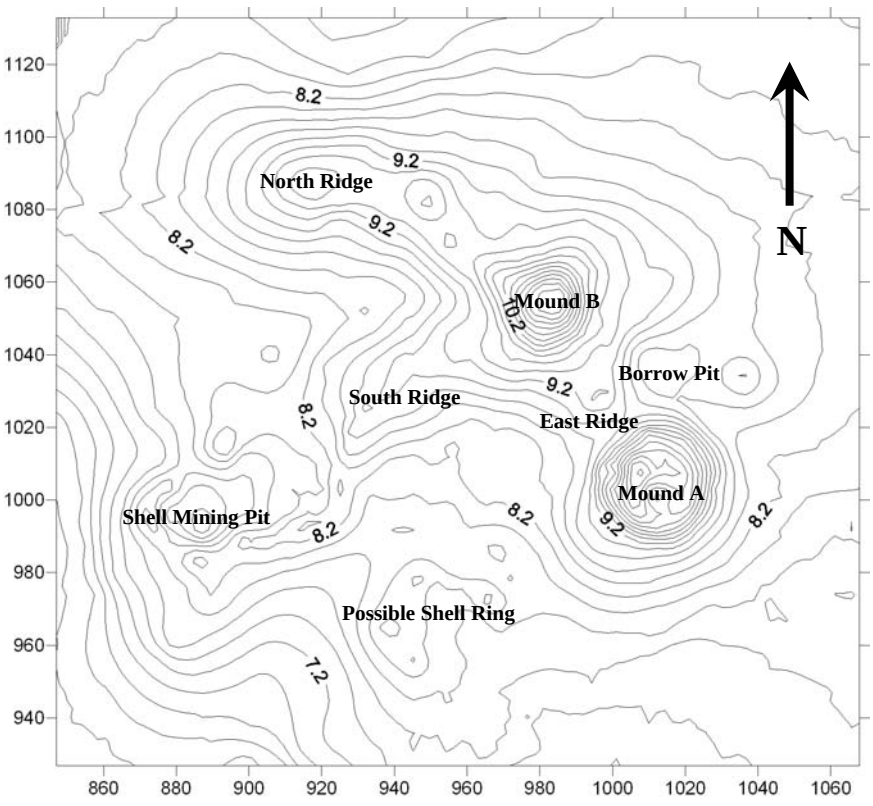

Figure 2. Topographic map of the Thornhill Lake Complex. Scale in meters, contour interval 20 cm.

shell feature at the site's southern end. Whether or not this latter feature is a purposeful construction or the result of twentieth century shell mining activities is not yet known.

Excavations at the Thornhill Lake Complex produced stratigraphic and radiometric data that demonstrate purposeful construction of the mounds and ridges during Mount Taylor times. Site-wide excavations have demonstrated that 4200 years of ceramic-making cultural deposits are confined to within 30-50 cm of the ground surface. All underlying deposits, as much as 1.5 m in thickness, are preceramic. The most compelling evidence for preceramic mound construction comes from Mound B. A test unit in the ramp-like feature on the northwest side of the mound revealed stratigraphic profiles indicating three mounded sand strata (Strata II, III, IV) extending from shortly beneath the ground surface down to the top of the shell deposits (Strata IV, V) at the base of the mound (Figure 3). St. Johns ceramics were sparingly recovered in the upper 30 cm of the unit, the remaining 60 cm of sand deposits and 42 cm of midden at the base of the mound are aceramic. An AMS date of 4970 +/- 40 radiocarbon years before present (rcybp) (5860-5600 cal. B.P.) was obtained from charcoal in the shell deposits at the base of Mound B. Based on this radiocarbon date and the absence of fiber-tempered pottery, a conservative estimate for mound construction between 5600-4500 cal. B.P. is suggested. An AMS date on charcoal from shell deposits immediately beneath mounded sand in the lower southern slope of Mound A produced a date of 4170 +/- 50 rcybp (4840-4530 cal. B.P.) and falls within the suggested date range for the construction of Mound B. Such a large window

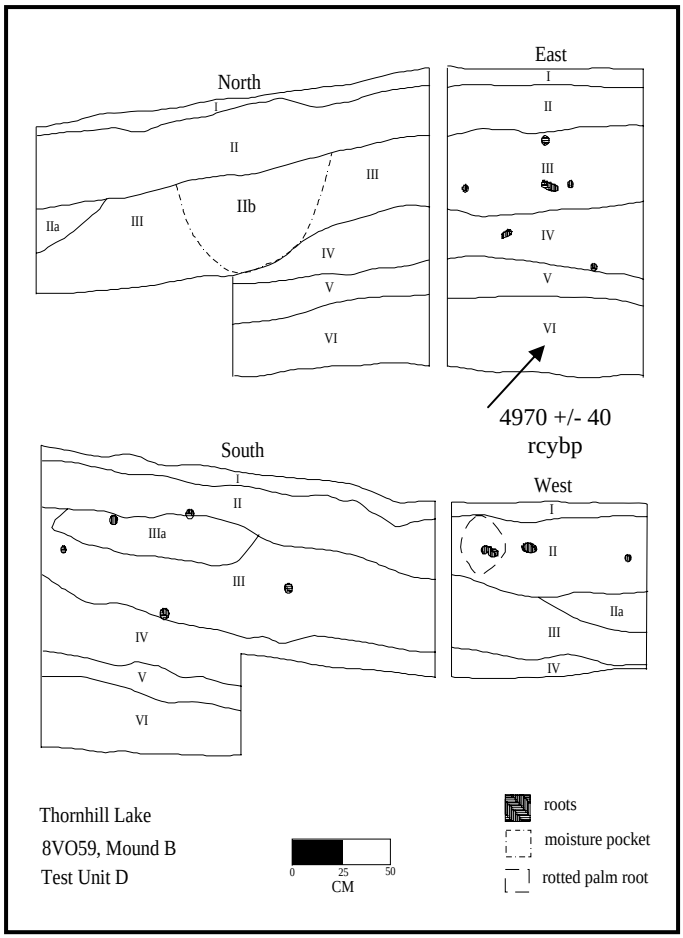

Figure 3. Test Unit D wall profiles, Mound B, 8VO59.

for the timing of mound construction is lamentable but, in lieu of dating human remains or marine shell beads associated with burials from the mounds, it is nonetheless sufficient to demonstrate that these monuments are Mount Taylor period constructions. Corroborating evidence for the timing of mound construction is provided by Sassaman and Randall's (2008) bannerstone chronology for the Savannah River Valley in Georgia – the likely source of these artifacts. Based on their chronology, the bannerstones from these mounds and thus the mounds themselves date between 5200-4700 cal. B.P., confirming the general time frame for mound construction indicated by the radiocarbon dates and absence of fiber-tempered pottery.

Excavation in the South Ridge produced unequivocal evidence for intentional construction in the form of alternating strata composed of sand and shell which was later capped by, and subsumed within, a homogenous gray sand and shell matrix that expanded the ridge vertically and horizontally (Figure 4). Orange and St. Johns period ceramics were found in trace amounts within 50 cm of the ground surface. Several features, primarily hearths and shallow pits, were encountered at this locus. A hearth (Feature 7) at the base of the mounded sand and shell contained remnants of a charred log and produced a radiocarbon date of 4950 +/- 90 rcybp (5910-5480 cal. B.P.) and may mark the initiation of construction on the southern ridge. An auger test in the floor of the unit revealed over a meter of additional midden deposits and produced a Newnan point 168-185 cmbs. Work in the North Ridge provided two AMS dates: one from the top of the demonstrably preceramic midden and one from the sub-midden deposits and are 5170 +/- 40 and 5420 +/- 40 rcybp (5990-5900 and 6290-6180 cal. B.P.) respectively. The latter date from the sub-midden deposits provides a timeframe for the beginning of shell deposition at the site. Additional AMS dates from midden deposits across the site range from 5190 +/- 40 to 4430 +/- 40 rcybp (6000-4870 cal. B.P.) with the younger deposits tending to be closest to the shoreline of Thornhill Lake.

As a result of research at the Thornhill Lake Complex it can be confidently stated that the initiation of construction at Mound B and shell mounding on the South Ridge are essentially contemporaneous and point to the emergence of monumental architecture associated with mortuary ritual in the St. Johns River Valley 5600-4500 years ago. The work completed thus far at the Thornhill Lake Complex has pushed the origins of mortuary mound construction back 3100-2000 years, from the Early Woodland at around 2500 B.P. into the Mount Taylor period. Presently the St. Johns River Valley has produced evidence for the earliest tradition of mortuary mound construction and use yet documented in the southeastern United States. Research at Thornhill Lake and other similar sites within the St. Johns River Valley and Atlantic coast of northeast Florida are in a position to make substantive contributions to understanding the emergence of social complexity, monumental architecture, and the great diversity that existed among Holocene hunting and gathering societies locally, regionally, and globally.

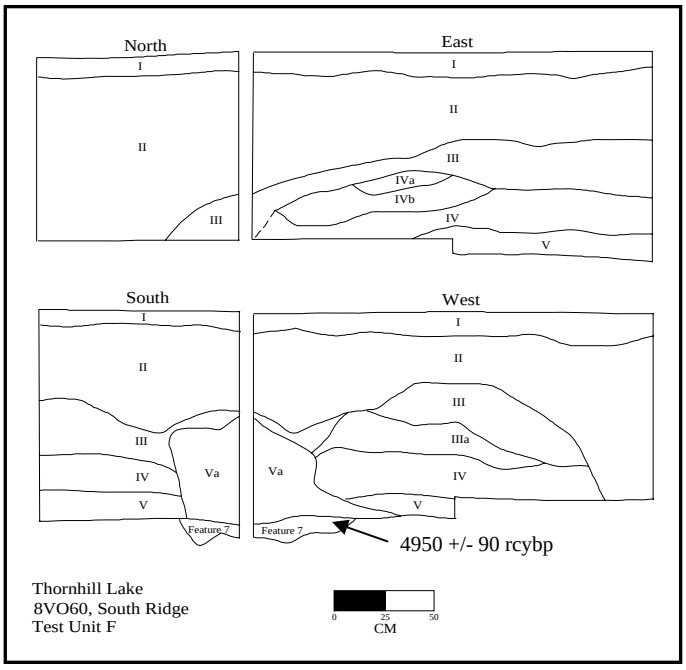

Figure 4. Test Unit F wall profiles, South Ridge, 8VO60.

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Figure 5. Volunteers excavating trench in orange grove east of Mound B.

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