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## The Taylor Mound

## Evidence of Early Spanish Contact on the Georgia Coast

## ABSTRACT

Excavations at the Taylor Mound, a late Savannah phase burial mound on St. Simons Island, Georgia, resulted in the discovery of several intrusive burials containing material of European origin. These artifacts produce specific 16th Century dates and represent what are among the earliest historic remains recovered from coastal Georgia.

The Taylor Mound (9GN 55) is located on northeastern St. Simons Island, Georgia, on a tract of land known as Lawrence Plantation (Figure 1). The site is situated on sloping ground at the head of a shallow fresh water slough which drains into the salt marsh about 150 m to the southeast. The areas to the north, west, and south of the mound have been under cultivation for a considerable period of time and are presently in pasture. The mound itself

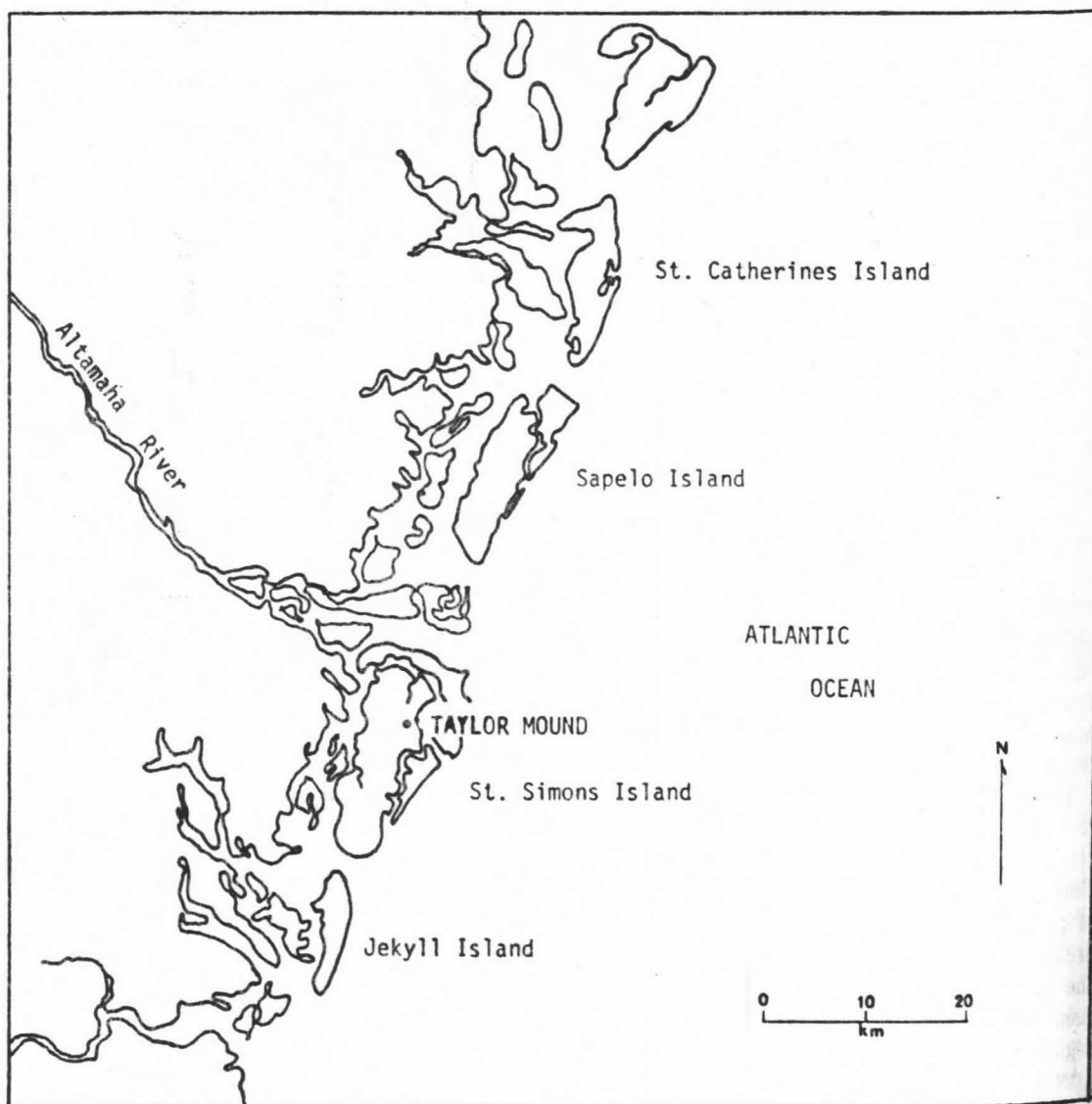


FIGURE 1. Coastal region of Georgia and location of Taylor Mound.

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rounded all of the shell core, it was most extensive on the eastern side. Much of this eastern flanking sand may represent a later addition.

Approximately 30% of the mound was excavated and 13 burials were recovered. All of the burials were intrusive into the flanking sand on the eastern side of the mound or into the shell core. Types of inhumation represented were flexed, cremation, and bundle burials. Prehistoric artifacts were associated with eight of the burials and included shell beads, shell earpins, and stone celts. Historic artifacts were found in association with three burials, all located on the eastern margin of the shell core.

Few cultural remains were recovered in the mound fill. A total of 74 sherds were found, with the majority of these coming from the shell core. The types of pottery recovered are identified as: Savannah Check Stamped, Savannah Complicated Stamped, and Savannah Burnished Plain (Caldwell and Waring 1939).

The ceramics, the mode of burial, the artifactual content of the prehistoric burials and the type of mound construction are most similar to those described for the Savannah II phase (A.D. 1150–A.D. 1300) of the north and central Georgia coast (Caldwell and McCann 1941; Caldwell and Waring 1939; Cook 1971; Cook and Pearson 1972; Larson 1957). The major portion of the mound appears to have been constructed and used during the Savannah II phase. The three burials containing historic artifacts are assumed to have been placed into the mound after its initial Savannah II phase period of use.

### The Historic Burials

Burial 2 (the burial numbers employed herein are those given in the report on the Taylor Mound excavations, Cook and Pearson 1972) was placed in a shallow pit scooped out of the shell core near its eastern margin (Figure 2). The burial was encountered 2 cm below the mound surface and the grave pit had a depth of 12 cm. The skeleton, that of an adult male, lay

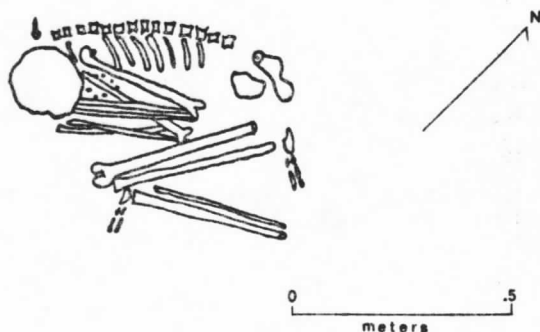


FIGURE 3. Burial 2.

on its right side in a flexed position (Figure 3). The body was oriented with the head to the south and the face to the east. The left half of the skull had been destroyed, probably by surface disturbances due to the shallowness of the burial. The left femur was missing and the lower left leg was inverted with the foot in the knee position. Some metatarsals and metacarpals were missing. This disarrangement and the missing bones could be the result of partial decomposition before burial resulting from charnel house activity which is known to have been practiced in the Southeast during the early historic period (Swanton 1922). Burial 2 had been made directly over an earlier prehistoric burial (Burial 3) and had partially intruded into the burial disturbing the burial pit but not the skeleton itself.

A small shell ear pin made from the columella of a species of *Busycon* lay under the skull (Figure 5). Ten perforated pearls, 22 discoidal shell beads measuring 3–10 mm in diameter, and 6 tubular glass beads were found scattered under the skull and in front of the chest.

Three of the glass beads have been identified as Nueva Cadiz Plain and three as Nueva Cadiz Twisted (Charles Fairbanks 1967). All of these beads are constructed of three layers of glass. The inner layer is translucent black, the middle layer is opaque white, and the outer layer is translucent turquoise. On several of the beads the outer layer has a cracked surface possibly due to weathering. The beads are square in cross section and

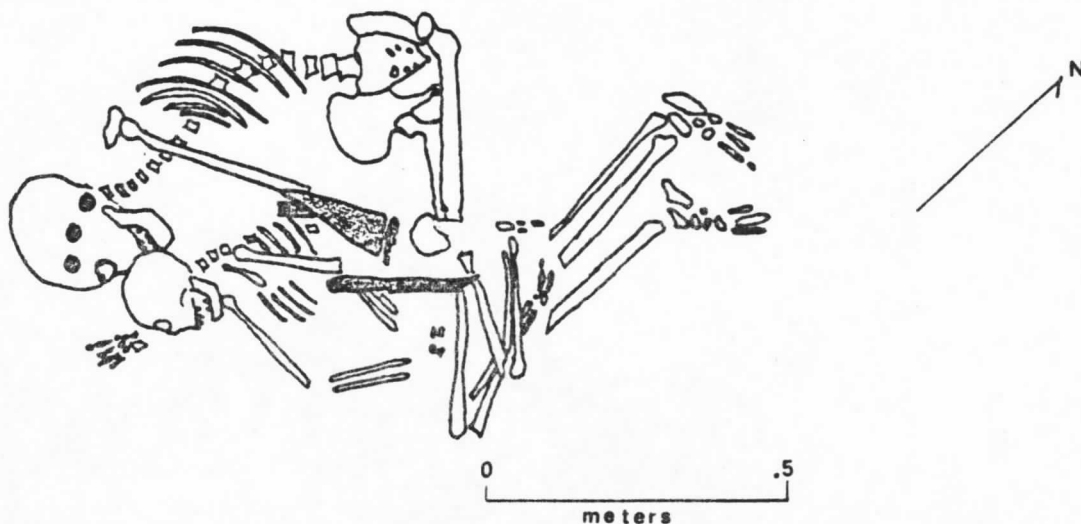


FIGURE 4. Burial 10.

have irregularly ground or worn ends. The end grinding is at oblique angles to expose the alternating layers of glass. Bead widths range from 5 to 6 mm and lengths from 13 to 21 mm. Nueva Cadiz Plain and Nueva Cadiz Twisted are usually quite long beads, ranging in length from 40 to 60 mm (Fairbanks 1967). It is likely that the Taylor Mound beads represent 2 or 3 complete beads that have been broken.

Beads of this type have been found in several Circum-Caribbean sites and can be accurately dated to the 16th century, with only rare occurrences after 1600 (Fairbanks 1967). Although most commonly found in Central and South America, a few specimens of Nueva Cadiz beads have been reported from the Southeastern United States. A single specimen is known from Ogiltree Island, Alabama (Morrell 1964). Fairbanks, in his discussion of Nueva Cadiz beads, mentions four sites in Florida where these beads have been found (Fairbanks 1967). These are the Grantham Mound, the Ortona Mound, one of the mounds on Murphy Island excavated by C. B. Moore (Moore 1896b), and a mound at Lake Butler. All of these mounds have been assigned 16th century dates.

The two other burials with associated historic artifacts were found in a single circular

burial pit dug into the eastern margin of the shell core (Figure 2). Both individuals in this pit were designated with a single number, Burial 10, in the original report (Cook and Pearson 1972).

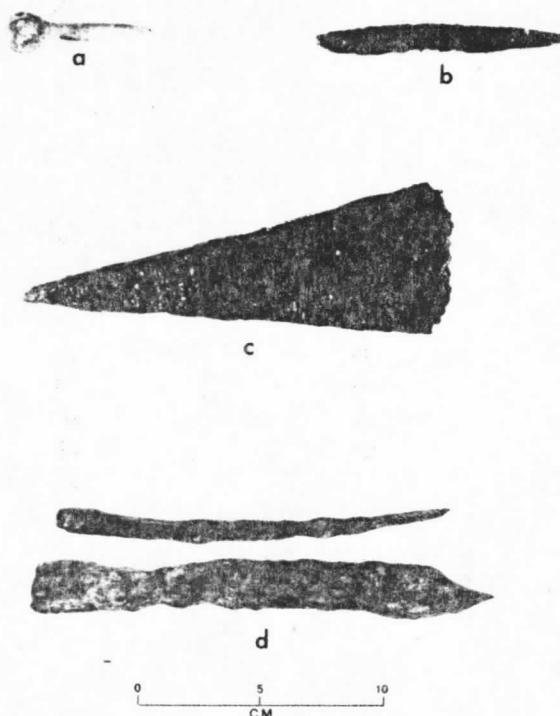


FIGURE 5. a, shell ear pin, Burial 2; b, iron awl, Burial 10; c, iron celt, Burial 10; d, iron spikes.

it is impossible to determine whether they were minted in Spain or the New World.

In the area around the adult's wrists were found 677 small discoidal shell beads and 4 perforated pearls. The beads average 2 mm in length and 4 mm in diameter. These beads lay directly under the child's neck and head and may have been associated with the child rather than with the adult.

On the chest and midsection of the child lay a tapered celt-form iron axe, a rectangular celt-form iron axe, an iron awl or punch, and an iron knife (Figure 4). All of these items were heavily encrusted with rust.

The tapered celt-form axe measures 18.7 cm in length and has a cutting blade 6.9 cm wide (Figure 5). Portions of wood were preserved at the poll end of the axe and probably represent the remains of a handle. Under the poll end of the axe lay a rectangular piece of iron which also appears to be a celt-like axe. This axe measures 13.7 cm in length, 3.1 cm wide, and 1.6 cm thick. One end has been ground or hammered to a cutting edge.

The iron awl lay at the blade end of the tapered axe. The awl consists of a tapered piece of iron inserted into a wooden handle, fragments of which have been preserved (Figure 5). The awl is badly corroded but appears to have been round in cross section. The awl tip has been broken off.

An iron sheath knife lay in the stomach area of the child. The blade has a "hunting knife" shape with an angular point. Portions of a two piece wooden handle with three brass rivets are preserved. Total length of the knife is 23 cm; blade length is 15 cm.

A small amount of fibrous material was preserved under the celts and may represent the remains of a bag or container for the iron objects.

Two iron spikes were found in the sand fill of the mound 1 m southeast of Burial pit 10. These spikes were not associated with any burials. The larger spike is 19 cm long, circular in cross-section with a diameter of 2.4 cm (Figure 5). The other spike is square in cross-section and measures 17.8 cm in length and is

1.2 cm wide at the head (Figure 5). Both of these spikes appear to be hand forged.

## Discussion

The rather precise dating for the coins and the Nueva Cadiz beads indicates the possibility of a pre-1600 date for the burials. Although the iron items from the Taylor Mound do not lend themselves to such precise dating, there is considerable historical and archaeological evidence indicating that similar items were in use in the Southeast during the middle and late 1500s (Smith 1956).

During the early 1500s the majority of European goods in Florida and Georgia were likely salvaged from shipwrecks rather than obtained through direct contact with Europeans (Smith 1956: 10-11). The Spanish were sailing along the Georgia and east Florida coast by the 1520s and shipwrecks frequently occurred. Although St. Simons Island lies north of the area where most wrecks are known to have occurred, European items could have been obtained indirectly from shipwrecks by way of aboriginal exchange networks. The most common types of tools traded or in use during this early contact period appear to have been the celt-form axe, hafted axes, hunting knives, iron chisels, iron spikes, and iron fish spears (Smith 1956).

One of the earliest accounts indicating the presence of iron tools among Indians of the Southeast occurred in A.D. 1540 at the town of Cofitachique, presumably on the Savannah River in the vicinity of Augusta, Georgia, where DeSoto's party found buried "two wood axes of Castillian make, a rosary of jet beads, and some false pearls, such as are taken from this country to traffic with the Indians, all of which were supposed they got in exchange made with those who followed the Licentiate Ayllon (Smith 1968: 240)." Ayllon, in A.D. 1526, had unsuccessfully attempted to establish a colony on the South Carolina coast. His expedition would have been one of the earliest sources of European items in the Georgia coastal area.

A review of archaeological sites in the Southeast which have produced early contact material reveals a number of items similar to those from the Taylor Mound. Two celt-form iron axes are reported from the Goodnow Mound in south-central Florida along with a large number of other historic artifacts (Griffin and Smith 1948). These included three "copper discs" which had central perforations. These discs resemble the copper coins from the Taylor Mound, but the authors do not indicate if the discs may, in fact, be worn or hammered copper coins. An iron knife was also found in this mound. The Goodnow Mound has been assigned a date of mid to late 1500s.

At the Phillip Mound in Polk County, Florida, Carl Benson (1967) reports finding an iron knife, a celt-form iron axe and several copper beads apparently made from hammered copper coins. Benson estimates the date of the mound as 1600 to 1700, though Karklins (1974) suggests a 16th century date.

From the Picnic Mound near Tampa Bay, Ripley Bullen (1952: 69) reports an "iron celt-form axe" and glass beads. These items were found in historic burials which were intrusive into an earlier Weeden Island period mound.

At the Spruce Creek Mound, three copper and silver "discs" with central perforations and a slight concavo-convex shape were found in association with several crania (Smith 1956: 20). The Spruce Creek material has been assigned a 16th century date (Smith 1956: 20).

Clarence B. Moore's extensive work on Florida burial mounds yielded a number of historic items resembling those from the Taylor Mound. Several iron tools were recovered from a mound on Murphy Island in northeast Florida. These consisted of an iron knife, 2 narrow bladed iron axes, 2 "chisels," a "triangular chisel or tomahawk," and several other unidentified iron objects (Moore 1896b: 513-514). Moore (1896a: 534) found an iron spike and an iron hunting knife at a mound near Fort Mason, Florida. The knife blade was 22.5 cm in length. In the Thursby Mound, on the St. Johns River, he found an iron axe and several iron celts (Moore 1894a, 1894b). At the

Raulerson Mound, in the same area, were found an iron knife blade, 2 iron chisels, 3 iron fish spears, a chisel of metal with a curved edge, an iron spike, and fragments of iron tools (Moore 1894: 94). Two iron axes and 2 "cold chisels" were found at the Dunn's Creek Mound on the St. Johns River (Moore 1894a: 11).

Hale G. Smith (1956) has reviewed the historical material from the mounds excavated by Moore and assigns them to the 16th or early 17th centuries. It is interesting to note that in all of these mounds the burials containing historic artifacts appear to be intrusive into earlier prehistoric mounds.

At the King site on the Coosa River in north Georgia, several iron objects have been found in association with burials in what appears to be an early historic context (Smith 1975). These items are: 3 celt-form iron axes, 2 iron knife blades, an iron spike, an iron rod with a flattened "chisel-like" end, and an iron "wedge" (Smith 1975: 63-64). No other items of European manufacture were found at the site, and it appears that the burials have a date prior to the massive influx of trade items in the mid 1600s. A possible pre-1600 date is suggested for the material (Smith 1975).

Iron celts have been found at several other sites in the upper Coosa River area of north Georgia. These celts occur alone or with iron spikes or knives and are assumed to date in the mid to late 16th century (Marvin Smith 1976, pers. comm.).

The only other site on the Georgia coast which has produced items similar to those from the Taylor Mound is the Kent Mound located on the south end of St. Simons Island (Cook n.d.). Historic items recovered consist of one chevron bead and an iron knife similar to the one from the Taylor Mound. This knife was found in association with several proto-historic San Marcos ware vessels and probably dates circa 1600.

## Summary

Archaeological and documentary evidence indicates that all of the historic items from the



Taylor Mound had been in use or occurred as trade items during the period from A.D. 1500 to A.D. 1600. Even though these particular items were also in use after A.D. 1600, several lines of evidence would seem to indicate a pre-1600 date. It is suggested that the number and similarity of the coins and beads weighs against heirlooming and that the material was likely buried soon after acquisition, before the items could be lost, broken, or dispersed. The variety of glass beads commonly found at 17th century sites is lacking at the Taylor Mound, suggesting that the burials were made before such items came into the area.

The lack of European ceramics at the mound is also seen as indicative of a date prior to the period of actual Spanish occupation. Spanish ceramics (majolica and olive jars), which occur frequently along the Georgia coast (Caldwell 1971; Goggin 1968; Larson 1958), were not found at the mound. These ceramics were unlikely to have been important as early trade items and probably did not appear in any quantity on the Georgia coast until after substantial Spanish mission establishment in the late 1500s and early 1600s (Lanning 1935). Also indicative of an early contact date is the lack of San Marcos or Altamaha ceramics which were the aboriginal wares in use on the Georgia coast during the period of Spanish occupation (ca. A.D. 1600–1700).

## Conclusions

The historic items from the Taylor Mound have been shown to have been of a type available to and in use among Southeastern Indians during the very earliest period of European contact. The lack of certain other types of trade items which appeared during the 17th century is interpreted as being indicative of a pre-1600 date for the Taylor Mound burials. The data would indicate that a date of around A.D. 1540–1560 is reasonable for the burials. This date represents what appears to be the earliest evidence of the use of European items yet recorded for the Georgia coast.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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