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A complex people lived here 7,000 years ago

A study of ancient human remains and artifacts found in the Guadalupe River floodplain of south Victoria County shows that a relatively advanced people who had contacts with others living hundreds of miles away populated the area.

"We did not know this culture existed. Period," said Bob Ricklis, the lead archaeologist studying the items. "We didn't know anything about it."

He said not only did it exist, but it apparently did well. He said the people had lifespans comparable to modern-day people and had contacts with others as far away as what later became the Southeast and Midwest United States.

"They are more advanced than we would have expected," Ricklis said.

Ricklis is director of the Corpus Christi office of Coastal Environments Inc., which conducted the archaeological dig to unearth and study the human remains and artifacts discovered at the Buckeye Knoll site near the Invista plant.

The excavation was done for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as part the project to widen and deepen the Victoria Barge Canal. While the canal improvements affected only a small portion of the site that contained no human remains, a corps official has said it's standard procedure to examine the entire site.

Daniel Castro Romero Jr., general council chairman for the Lipan Apache Band of Texas Inc., said the find is an important one. He said he believes Native Americans originated here and this cemetery confirms that.

"We're rewriting history because of what's been found out here," he said. "This is of great importance."

He said not only does it rewrite the history of the region, but of the nation.

The excavation produced a large collection of artifacts dating back from 500 to 10,000 years, Ricklis said. A prehistoric cemetery thought to date back at least 7,000 years was also discovered.

"It's one of only three of that magnitude in North America," Ricklis said. He noted that the other known cemeteries older than 5,000 years are Carrier Mills in Southern Illinois and Windover on the east coast of Florida. He also said archaeologists didn't even suspect that people in Texas had major cemeteries 7,000 years ago.

"It's a sizeable cemetery," Ricklis said. "We excavated about 80 burials, but there are a lot more than that in the site."

He estimated there could be as many as 200 burials there that date back 7,000 years. Based on radiocarbon dating, he said, the oldest of the human remains tested dates back 8,500 years.

Ricklis said researchers are confident the site was occupied as far back as 10,000 years ago because of flint points found there that are known to be from that period. "Specifically, we found dart points of the Golondrina, St. Mary's Hall and Wilson types, all known to date to before 9,000 years ago."

Ricklis said he has no idea where the predecessors of these Native Americans originated, but there is nothing to indicate a European connection. He said they could be part of an early population that may have come from northeast Asia.

But he added some in the field question that and believe there may have been immigrants from Europe or the Pacific region who contributed to early American populations.

"Probably the most interesting thing we have regarding the cemetery is a lot of artifacts found with the burials and placed in the graves as offerings," Ricklis said.

He said those artifacts are evidence of links to the Mississippi River Valley, the Southeast United States and possibly even Mexico.

Examples include bannerstones, flint projectile points, beads, shell pendants, and bone and antler tools for working flint. A bannerstone is a piece of stone that was worked by pecking and grinding into an oblong shape. It was typically 4 to 6 inches long, carefully crafted and usually smoothed, sometimes to a polish.

"The bannerstones are not typical of Texas," Ricklis said. "The ones we have are of a certain type much more common in the Mississippi Valley and the Midwest."

Also found were plummets, or teardrop-shaped stones, that have been drilled and are more typical of the Southeast for this time period.

Ricklis said he still doesn't have the final report on the physical anthropology showing the sex and age of the people. But the study showed there were several individuals who lived to be 70 years old and still had their teeth, indicating they led relatively healthy lives.

"We do see that these people are quite healthy and some of the diseases we see in later populations of Native Americans were not present," Ricklis said.

He said he's not sure what the typical lifespan would have been for these people. But he said he would expect hunter-gatherers to have had a lifespan of 45 to 50 years.

"There is nothing indicating death from other than natural causes," Ricklis said. "Old age is just one of the natural causes. There are many children and young- to middle-aged adults in the cemetery, as well."

It appears they had a diet that was a mix of plants and animals they got from the local river floodplain and the prairie environment. There were also indications they brought food from the coast.

Their meals from the floodplain and prairie consisted of things like deer, river fish, local plants and possibly buffalo. The coastal meals included saltwater fish and oysters.

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