he ancient people that once inhabited the area around Lake Okeechobee and up the Kissimmee River Valley (Okeechobee Basin) had, until recent years, remained somewhat of a mystery. Many prehistoric sites of the Belle Glade Culture, named after two mounds excavated in Belle Glade, have been reported in south Florida but only a few have been excavated. Many of these sites are located around the dominant topographical feature, Lake Okeechobee, an 1,825 square kilometer (704 square miles) freshwater lake located in south-central Florida. The surrounding landscape is flat and often covered with water during the rainy season (May through September). This prehistoric culture constructed extraordinary earthworks that included mounds, ponds, ditches, embankments, and canals, indicating their adaptation to their watery environment, and they may have influenced the people living in the adjacent coastal areas.

One of the major archaeological sites in the Okeechobee Basin is Fort Center, named after a Second Seminole War (1835-1842) fort built at this ancient location. Occupying 944 hectares, Fort Center is located 7 kilometers (4.3 miles), west of Lake Okeechobee on Fisheating Creek in present-day Glades County. The large earthwork sites constructed by the ancient inhabitants may have reinforced social structure, and may have been symbols for the surrounding landscape. The

A panorama of the Fort Center site on Fisheating Creek in Glades County. The archaeological site is located in the Fisheating Creek Wildlife Management Area and it is open to the public. Courtesy Chris Davenport.
focus of this article is the people of the Fort Center site, and in particular their physical and health characteristics.

The Fort Center site was excavated over several field seasons from 1966 to 1971 by Dr. William H. Sears and field teams from Florida Atlantic University, Colgate University, and the University of Florida. According to Sears, the first occupation of the site was some centuries prior to 450 B.C. and continued until Spanish contact. Sears divided the occupation of the site into four periods:

- Period I    several centuries earlier than 450 B.C.
- Period II  A.D. 200 to A.D.600-800
- Period III  A.D. 600-800 to A.D.1200-1400
- Period IV  A.D. 1200-1400 to A.D. 1700

During the first period the site appears to have had one or more single family dwellings on house mounds. There was no evidence of class differentiation.

The second period was the focus of Sears’ research. During this time, activity at Fort Center was ceremonial in nature, and the site consisted of the following features: a pond, a platform with carved wooden animals, and a small brown platform that included a bathtub-shaped pit, a living complex, and low earth wall. The brown platform served as a morgue, where the dead were macerated and then bundled for internment on the platform in the pond. The charnel platform collapsed after a portion of it burned, causing the structure with the remains of approximately 300 individuals to rest on the bottom of the pond. The collapse of the platform led to an earth building program. During this operation some of the human remains from the pond and other skeletonized individuals were placed in a mound with the fill being deposited over the area.

The third and fourth periods are relatively similar to each other. In the third period there are minimal changes; for example, attached linear garden plots emerge and there is a shift in pottery style. In the fourth period there is evidence of Spanish contact with the presence of Spanish artifacts and items containing metal.

Sears concluded that the site represented a high-status community. However, he did not specify whether all of the individuals whose remains were recovered actually resided there throughout their lifetimes or were brought there for mortuary care because of their high status.
Studying the Human Remains

The recovered (human remains) specimens were studied both metrically and morphologically, and consist of a sample from the site. In particular, specimens were evaluated for age, sex, stature, and disease. The purpose of the study was to see if the Fort Center population was indeed an elite population compared to other prehistoric Florida population samples.

In spite of the difficulties involved working with the fragmentary remains from Fort Center, it was possible to obtain selected information on physical characteristics and health. The sample consisted mainly of mature adults aged twenty-one to fifty years; this disproportionate representation may reflect differential preservation, burial and/or archaeological recovery. Females outnumbered males in the youngest adult age category, but this trend was reversed in later years.

Osteometrically, the Fort Center population was generally similar to the other prehistoric Florida samples available for comparison. The Fort Center population was somewhat more gracile but approximately as tall as other populations, with the exception of one other population.

In terms of skeletal pathology, specimens displayed anomalies in growth and development, trauma, inflammatory response, and hematological disorders. These conditions were not unique to this site, but have been reported from other Florida sites as well.

Generalized bone inflammation was observed in several individuals, suggesting an infectious origin, and one individual displayed lesions typical of treponemal disease (syphilis). These lesions have been reported in other Florida sites. Taken together, this evidence for treponemal disease in the Florida peninsula spans several centuries.

Some of the pseudopathological alterations on bones may reflect the mortuary maceration processes suggested by Sears, for example, defleshing of skeletons prior to curation. These marks were observed on one specimen, but macerating tools commonly in use may not have regularly scored the surface of the bones if, for example, the fingernails of the morticians were employed for this task, as described elsewhere for the historic Choctaw.

The analysis of the dental pathology suggested gum problems and a low incidence of caries. The low incidence of caries suggests that the people of Fort Center practiced a mixed subsistence economy.

Hematologic disease is a good indicator of health status, as it reflects poor nutrition, other diseases, and parasites. A small number of Fort Center crania indicated that these individuals suffered from severe chronic iron-deficiency anemia from bacterial and parasitic infections and/or iron-deficient diets.

Evidence of skeletal trauma may provide inferences about physical activities and stresses. Traumatic injuries at Fort Center include both skull and long-bone fractures. Several bones of the spine and extremities display osteoarthritic changes.

It would be impossible to discuss the Fort Center site without mentioning the presence or non presence of corn cultivation. Sears believed that pollen found at the site during the second cultural period (A.D. 209 to A.D. 600) indicated that the inhabitants were involved in corn cultivation. If Sears was correct, Fort Center would be one of the earliest examples of agriculture in the eastern United States. The major questions surrounding this issue still exist, for example, how the knowledge to grow corn arrived first in Florida before other areas. The controversy ranges from acceptance of Sears’ findings, for example by McGown, based on the presence of corn pollen in the pigment on an artifact and in coprolites, to the non acceptance by Thompson, et al. based on microbotanical and macrobotanical data as well as radiocarbon dates.
Conclusion
From the analysis of the human remains from Fort Center the following can be concluded. The Fort Center population might have enjoyed superior health, compared to other populations in the region, because of a better diet and freedom from the typical round of arduous physical activities. The gracility of their long bones does suggest lower levels of strenuous physical activity. The outstanding feature of the inhabitants was their involvement with ceremonialism, and therefore they must have occupied a high social status. Given the small sample size and the disarticulated and commingled nature of the skeletal remains, these conclusions must be tentative at best. Further research at other major and minor sites in the Okeechobee Basin is essential for a better understanding of the lives of the prehistoric inhabitants of this rich and complex region.

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