

Stones & Bones

The Newsletter of the Alabama Archaeological Society • Volume 51, Issue 1 • January 2009

Greenwood Island Pottery Dated to 1,000 BC

By Carey L. Geiger

An age of 1,000 to 800 BC was recently obtained on a charcoal sample recovered in a 1997 archaeological excavation on Big Greenwood Island site, 22Ja516, on the Mississippi Gulf coast. Current research links this charcoal to the first use of indigenous ceramic vessels on the east Mississippi coast. Bonnie Gums, staff archaeologist of the Center for Archaeological Studies at the University of South Alabama, and a team of volunteers performed the field excavation.

These vessels, known as Norwood Pottery Series, are distinctive. Their clay paste contained plant fibers to strengthen the vessel during firing and for use. Their broken sherds are easily identified by the impressions left by these fibers. Twenty-five fiber-temper sherds and one clay ball were found with the charcoal. A second feature was also found. It contained 17 fiber-tempered sherds and 3 cooking balls. These clay balls were used to heat earth ovens before and after the use of pottery. Both features were reported by the field crew as “undisturbed” in their original field notes.

Laboratory examination identified these fiber-temper sherds as being Norwood Plain pottery (Phelps 1965:65-69) of West Florida. Phelps describes the range of Norwood Plain pottery as being along the Gulf coast of Florida from Charlotte County to Santa Rosa County. His stated range inland is to the Georgia state line in the north and Alachua County in the east. We can now say that this cultural marker also extends to the gulf coast of Jackson County Mississippi.

The charcoal sample was AMS-dated to a radiocarbon age of 2750 ±

40 BP for a corrected calibrated date of 1000 to 810 BC. (Testing and dates were provided by Beta Analytic Inc., December 4, 2008). This date gives us an accurate date for the transition period when earth ovens were being replaced by fiber tempered pottery on the Mississippi coast.

Preparation of a manuscript describing the 1997 excavation is in progress and will provide many additional details. It should be completed in 2009.

Reference Cited

Phelps, David

1965 The Norwood Series of Fiber-Tempered Ceramics. Southeastern Archaeological Conference, Bulletin 2.



A clay “cooking” ball from the Big Greenwood Island site (22Ja516).



The exterior surface of a fiber-tempered Norwood Plain potsherd recently dated to 1000 to 810 BC (corrected calibrated date).



The interior surface of a Norwood Plain potsherd.

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