



Friends of the Randell Research Center

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The Belle Glade Monumental Landscape

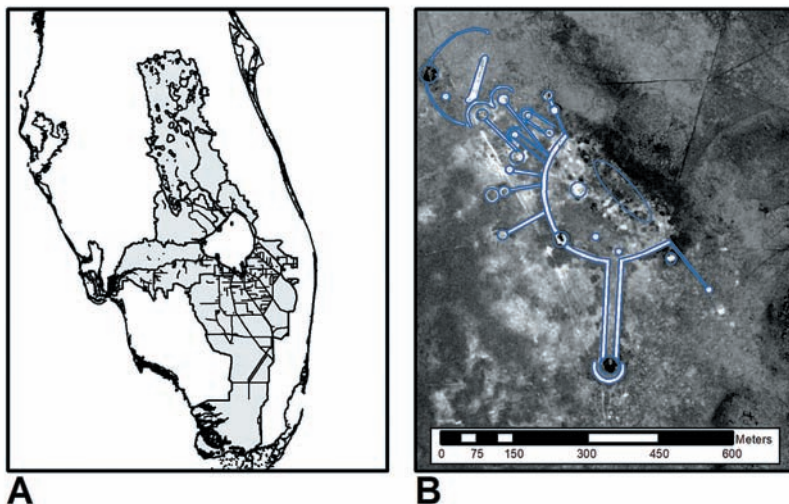
Okeechobee area and Calusa coastal peoples shared knowledge, history, beliefs

by Nathan Lawres

As readers of this newsletter know, the Calusa who lived on the southwest Florida coast were accomplished engineers and builders who had a rich social, political, and spiritual life. But what if I were to ask you about their equally awe-inspiring neighbors to the east, the Mayaimi or Belle Glade archaeological culture – the people who lived in the Kissimmee River Valley and around Lake Okeechobee? Some folks might respond, “Oh! The people that lived at Fort Center!” This is partly because the only widely publicized work on Belle Glade area archaeology is about Fort Center; but it is also because not much work has been focused on this part of Florida.

The Belle Glade culture lived in a vast, wet landscape. The Kissimmee-Okeechobee-Everglades watershed was once full of flowing water for six to nine months of the year, with tree-island hammocks providing the only dry ground. However, during the dry season the water receded in many areas, leaving the landscape muddy and dotted with ponds. The Belle Glade people lived on the tree islands and depended for food on the plentiful fish (primarily catfish, gar, and bowfin) and turtles. They also hunted deer and other mammals, and used their strong mammalian bones to make tools. This was necessary due to a lack of local stone. They also imported marine shells and shark teeth for making tools, and made a pottery known to archaeologists as Belle Glade Plain.

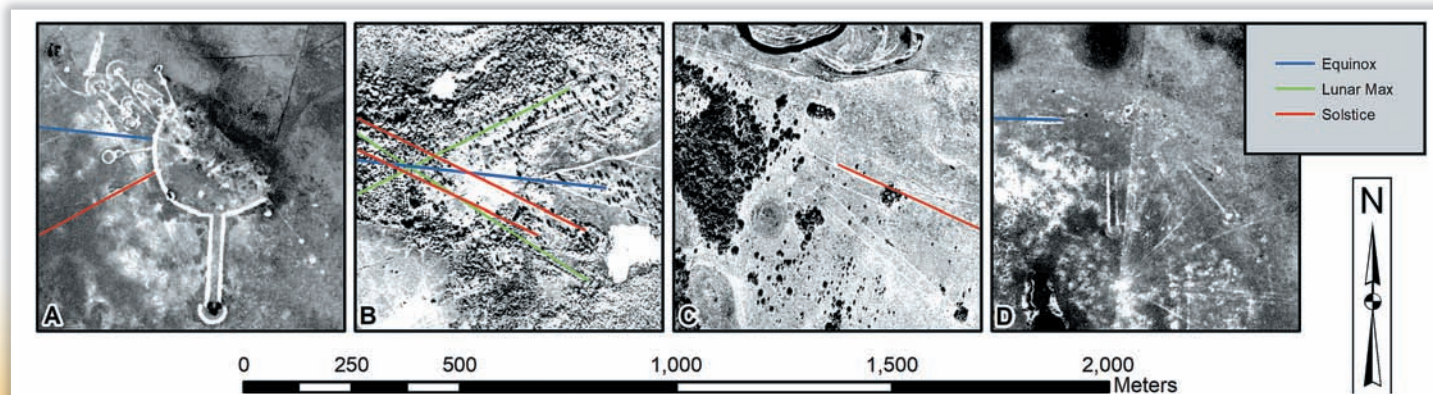
Celestial alignments at select Type B circular-linear earthworks. A) Tony's Mound; B) Big Mound City; C) Fort Center; D) Hendry Earthworks.



A) Kissimmee-Okeechobee-Everglades (KOE) watershed; B) Tony's Mound, a Type B circular-linear earthwork).

The most conspicuous part of the Belle Glade culture was the monumental architecture they built across the landscape. Over the course of nearly 2,000 years, these people built a variety of complex earthworks ranging from circular ditches to vast arrays of geometrically shaped sand ridges. The later forms are particularly fascinating. Known as “Type B circular-linear earthworks,” each consists of a large semi-circular sand ridge that partially surrounds a midden-mound. From the semi-circle, multiple linear sand ridges radiate outwards like the spokes of a wheel or the rays of the sun, and the ridges end in large conical sand mounds.

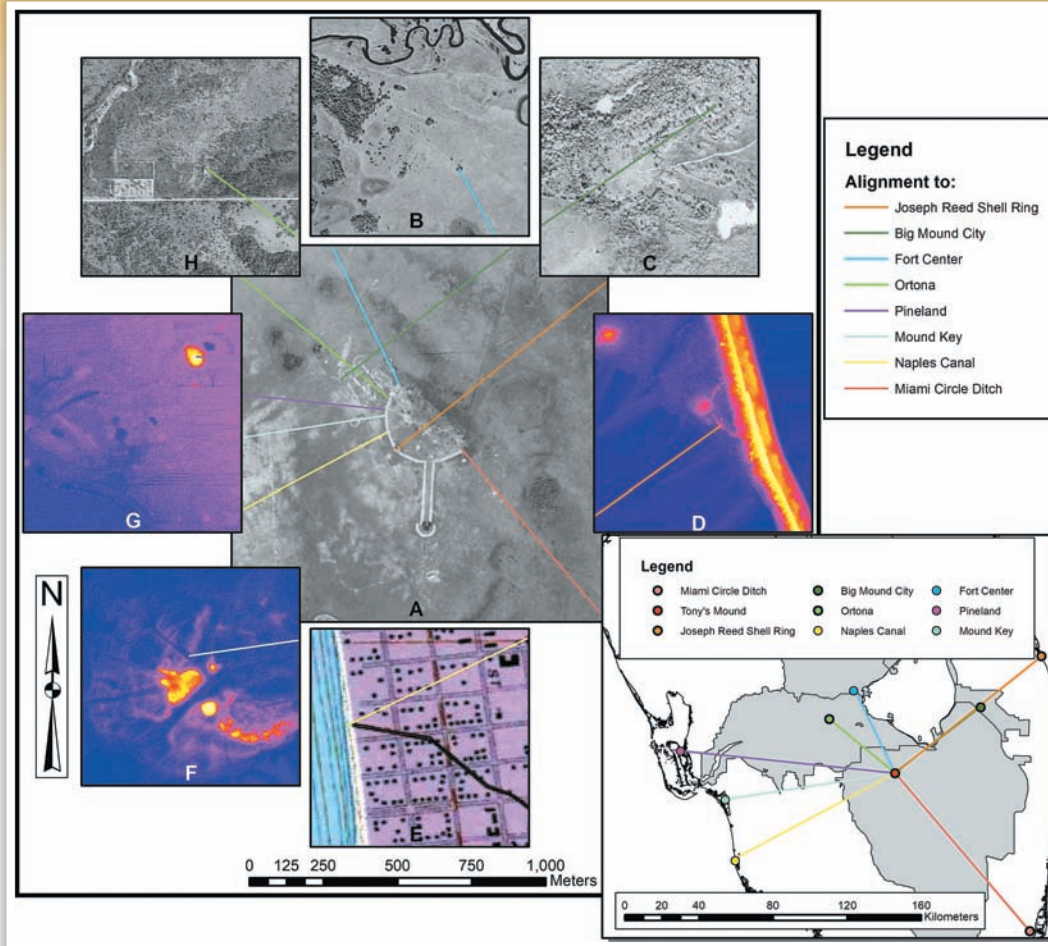
Over the past few years I have been thinking about these earthworks in terms of the way Belle Glade peoples understood their



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Site alignments from Tony's Mound. A) Tony's Mound; B) Fort Center; C) Big Mound City; D) Joseph Reed Shell Ring; E) Naples Canal; F) Mound Key; G) Pineland; H) Ortona Earthworks.

world. Like other Native groups, they would have understood the importance of relationships, not only between people but also between different elements of their landscape and between important places on the landscape. I have been able to identify several of these important relationships, each of which is embodied in the architecture.

First, the relationships between the cosmos, landscape, and time are embodied in the linear ridges. Many of the linear ridges that radiate outwards are aligned with celestial events that are recurrent or cyclical, such as the solstices and equinoxes we see each year. Such alignments reveal a knowledge of the relationships among landscape, animal patterns, time, and the all-important water levels across the landscape. The spring equinox marks the

onset of the rainy season, the summer solstice signals the peak of heavy rains, the fall equinox marks the end of the heaviest rains, and the winter solstice signals the beginning of a drying landscape. These differences in water levels are tied to animal distributions, behaviors, and breeding seasons. These are important to fisher-hunter-gatherers, especially given the significance of relationships for Native Americans between people and non-human animals.

Second, the relationships between people and places on the landscape are also embodied in the linear ridges. If you extend the lines of these ridges across the entire landscape, they line up with monumental architecture at other important sites! Many of these alignments are to other Belle Glade earthworks in the

Okeechobee Basin, but some are to important places where large numbers of people were buried in water, such as the charnel pond at Fort Center and the Lake Okeechobee burials at Ritta and Kreamer Islands. There are also examples of alignments to sites on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts.

Particularly intriguing are the alignments to Pineland and Mound Key, which we know to be two of the most important Calusa sites. Both of these sites have multiple alignments converging on them from several different Belle Glade sites. This suggests that these were very important places to the Belle Glade people, and further demonstrates the long-term relationships between coastal and interior peoples.

Archaeologically we know that a relationship began developing between them by at least AD 500. This is known through the presence of Belle Glade pottery at Calusa sites, which by AD 1000 had become the *major* pottery

throughout the Calusa heartland. These alignments help to show that this association was important enough to the Belle Glade people to represent it in their architecture. To me, this suggests that it is a relationship we should explore further in archaeological studies because it will help give us a much richer understanding of the dynamics of the history of South Florida's Native inhabitants.



For more details, see Lawres, Nathan R., 2017, *Materializing Ontology in Monumental Form: Engaging the Ontological in the Okeechobee Basin, Florida*, *Journal of Anthropological Research*, Volume 73, number 4, pp. 647-696. See this paper for sources of all maps and photos used in this article.

To visit Fort Center, go to the Fisheating Creek Wildlife Management Area, which is operated by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. For information and directions, follow this link: <http://myfwc.com/viewing/recreation/wmas/lead/fisheating-creek/planning-your-visit/>



Restored parcel explodes with native plants, wildlife

by Bill Marquardt

As our readers know, five acres of land were added to the Randell Research Center in 2015 thanks to the generous support of Tim and Judith Sear and the Calusa Land Trust. Grants from RRC members and the Felburn Foundation for invasive vegetation removal and from the Florida Humanities Council for public interpretation made it possible to open an extension of the Calusa Heritage Trail in March, 2017 (see RRC Newsletter, June 2015; June 2016; and September 2017).

When we acquired the property, it was dominated by Brazilian pepper (*Schinus terebinthifolia*), earleaf acacia (*Acacia auriculiformis*), and other non-native invasive plants that had obscured the ground and blocked all visual access to the



The native toothpetal orchid (Habaneria odontopetalum) now thrives near the canal surrounding the Smith Mound. (Photo by William Marquardt.)



A Gulf fritillary butterfly (Agraulis vanilla) gathers nectar from a scorpion's-tail plant (Heliotropium angiospermum) growing in the understory of a restored area on the edge of the Smith Mound canal. (Photo by Laura Cogan.)

Smith Mound, its surrounding canal, and the Low Mound. Thanks to the initial clearing and to weekly maintenance work by our volunteers, not only have the invasive non-native plants been controlled, but native plants are emerging throughout the property at an astounding rate.



In 2015, the Calusa-dug canal around the Smith Mound was choked with vegetation and effectively invisible. Native vegetation and wildlife are returning. (Photo by Charles O'Connor.)

Wildlife that depends on these native plants is also returning. If you have not visited the newly added property lately, please do so on your next visit to Pineland. You will be amazed.



Understory native plants, such as American beautyberry (Callicarpa americana), American pokeweed (Phytolacca americana), and rougeplant (Rivina humilis), as well as the native vines possum grape (Cissus sp.) and creeping cucumber (Melothria pendula) are returning in the drier part of the parcel away from the Smith Mound and canal. (Photo by Charles O'Connor.)

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Sincerely,

William H. Marquardt
Director
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