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The Forgotten Floridians

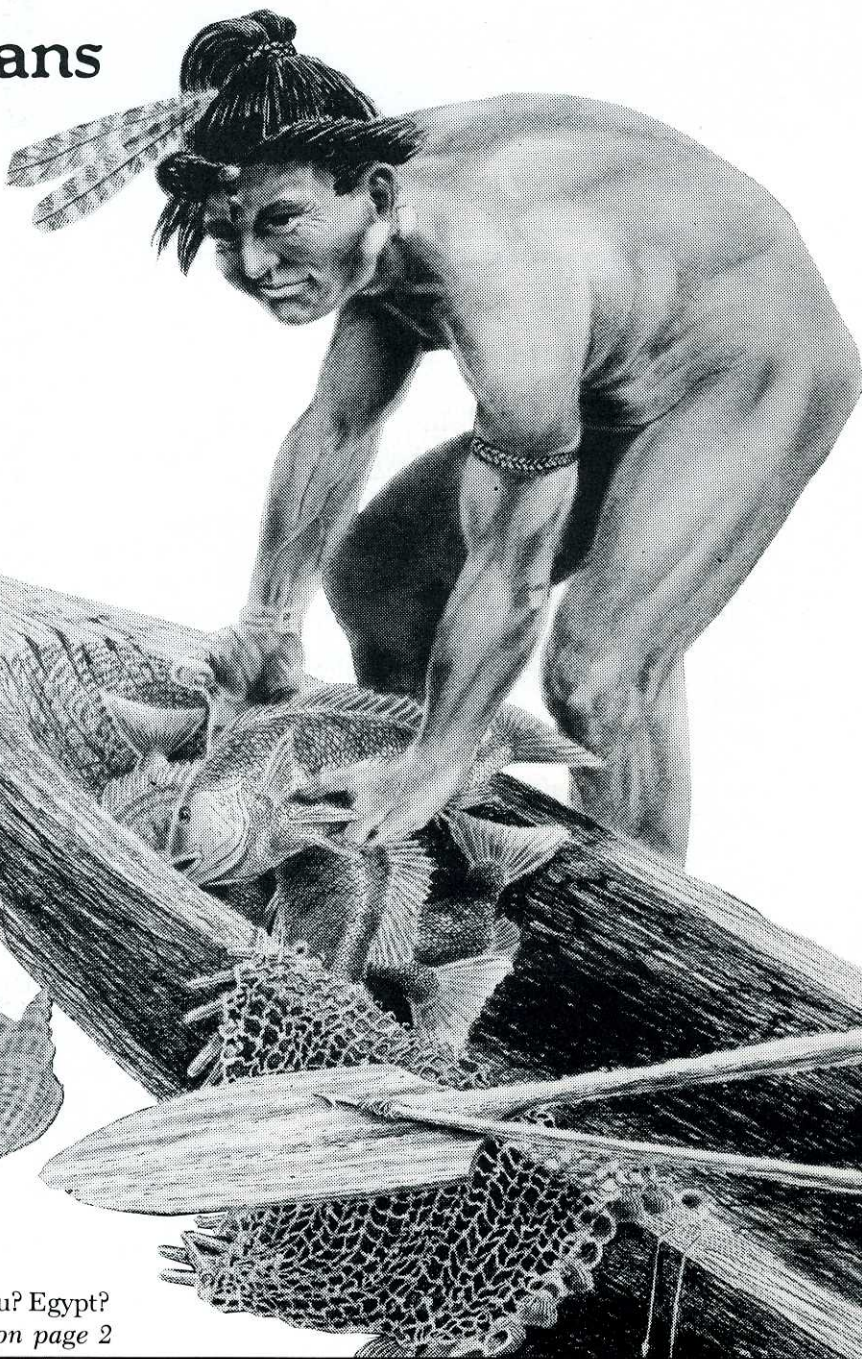
Imagine a seaside kingdom of thousands of people. Approaching by canoe, you can see villages on islands near and far. On the mainland are ceremonial mounds and thatched temples. The sweet smoke of buttonwood rises from cooking fires, and from across the flat, calm waters comes the clatter of shell hammers at work at another nearby settlement. A big mullet jumps — once, twice — before your silent craft. Perched in a dappled green and yellow mangrove tree, a glossy black cormorant regards your approach as it dries its outstretched wings.

Remarkable is this kingdom. Its capital town lies on the coast, but the king knows what is happening 500 miles away. Powerful and influential, he is believed to communicate with the spirits of the dead, and can sentence a citizen to death or execute a captive at will. His wishes are enforced by an elite corps of soldiers armed with spears and arrows; when needed, they can travel to faraway places in canoes that hold 50 people. The house where the king and his wives dwell is so large that two thousand people can stand inside without being crowded. He and his fellow nobles do not work — food and other material necessities are provided by commoners, and tribute in the form of hides, mats, feathers, and captives is brought to the king from towns over a hundred miles away.

Skillful and hardworking are his people. Artists carve, paint, and engrave, their handiwork especially visible during ceremonies and feasts. At such times there are singers and dancers, and processions of masked priests. No crops are raised here, for the kingdom has no need of corn: these people are fortunate to live in one of the world's most productive environments, and their natural surroundings provide all that they need for food, tools, clothing, and shelter.

Where is this kingdom of high artistic achievement, sophistication, and political power? Mexico? Guatemala? Peru? Egypt?

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