

Colonial Latin American Historical Review

Volume 3

Issue 3 *Volume 3, Issue 3 (Summer 1994)*

Article 7

6-1-1994

Jerald T. Milanich, *Archaeology of Precolombian Florida*

David M. Brugge

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr>

Recommended Citation

Brugge, David M.. "Jerald T. Milanich, *Archaeology of Precolombian Florida*." *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* 3, 3 (1994): 350. <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr/vol3/iss3/7>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colonial Latin American Historical Review by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

Archaeology of Precolumbian Florida. By Jerald T. Milanich. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994. xxi + 476 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. \$49.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.)

When first visited by Europeans, Florida was home to numerous Native American nations. None of the original peoples have survived as sociopolitical entities today. Only cursory accounts by early explorers and colonists, and archaeological remains provide a view of several millennia of cultural development.

Jerald T. Milanich has written an up-to-date, semi-popular account that manages to cover twelve thousand years of human prehistory in 418 pages of text (not including the bibliography and index), maps, and illustrations—a monumental synthesis for a state with a great variety of cultural traditions. It is a story that begins with the Paleoindians, hunters of the Pleistocene fauna at the end of the last Ice Age, and ends with the arrival of the first Spanish and French explorers in the sixteenth century. Milanich plans to write another book to follow up this work. Certainly, even within the limitations that archaeological data imposes, he found ample material to fill this volume.

Water was a major factor in the adaptations of the succession of cultures in Florida, in its presence or absence, its quality in terms of salinity, its relation to the landscape, and, ultimately, in the kinds of life forms it supported. Before the glaciers melted, the Florida peninsula was a much larger landmass and since then there have been subsequent fluctuations of sea level. There are repeated references to underwater sites offshore that, when better known, may well change many of the views currently held, especially with regard to the earliest periods.

Aquatic resources were long a mainstay for many of the peoples of Florida's past. The coastline, with its barrier islands, lagoons, bays, salt marshes, and estuaries, sustained communities dependent on shellfish, fish, seabirds, and aquatic mammals. Even inland, the rivers, lakes, and wetlands were often more significant for the support of human society than were the upland fields and forests. The result was growing populations with increasing cultural complexity long based on hunter-gatherer-fisher economies. Agriculture appeared late, and in some cases not at all, as societies developed from bands to villages to, in a few places, true chiefdoms. Fiber-tempered ceramics began in the late Archaic period, about 2000 B.C. Villages with a formal site plan encircling a plaza, sedentary settlements, and the beginnings of an elaborate mortuary complex involving burial mounds can also be traced to the late Archaic period. The abundance of aquatic resources permitted unusual complexity for societies lacking agriculture; nevertheless, the most complex culture, a Mississippian development called Fort Walton, arose in the Florida Panhandle and based its economy on maize agriculture.

The reader who lacks an archaeological background should be warned to expect something quite different from history in a work such as *Archaeology of Precolumbian Florida*. Dates are far less precise than they seem in the narrative, since radiocarbon dating, upon which most of this chronology is based, has a wide margin of error. This becomes especially significant in the younger cultures, for except where historic materials have been found in the deposits, we cannot know exactly how close to 1492, or even if before or after, some of the remains might date.

In addition, individuals do not appear by name, but as representatives of status and role, leaving even the more impressive burials with an impersonal quality. We will never know the personalities of prehistory in the same way we can know those who wrote and were written about in historic times. We can, however, gain an understanding of their humanity as we consider the challenges they faced in creating ways of life adapted to the varied environments and appreciate their skill as we view the fragments of their art that have survived the attrition of the centuries.

David M. Brugge
Albuquerque, NM