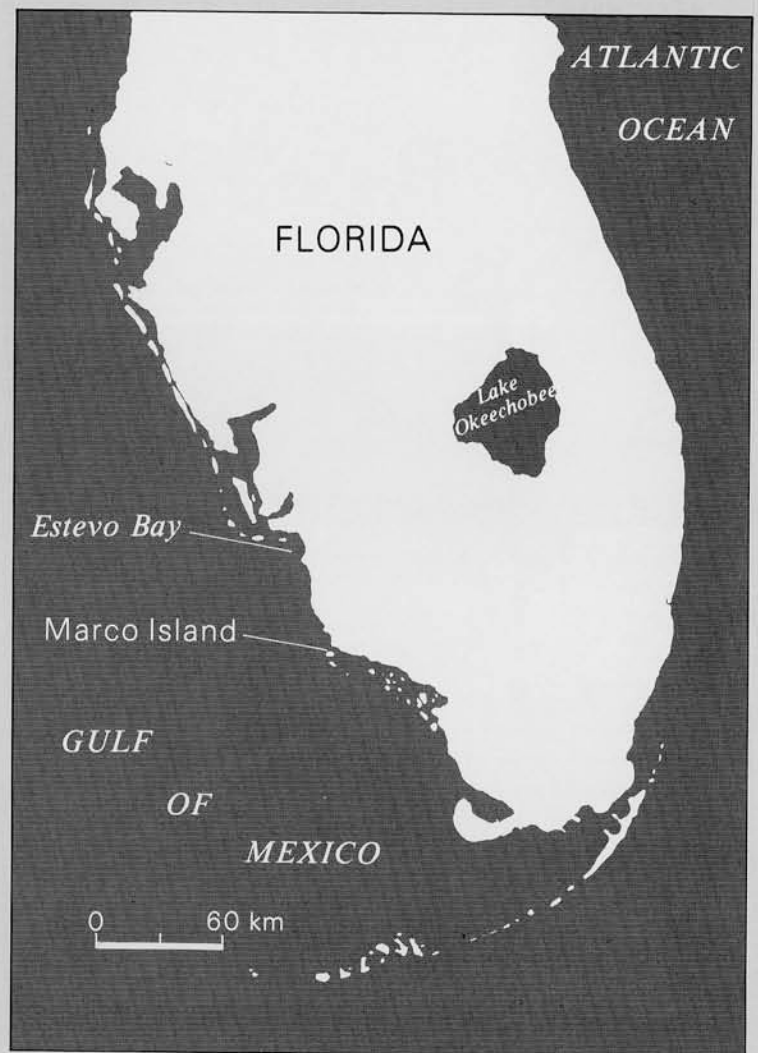


## The Calusa Indians: Maritime Peoples of Florida in the Age of Columbus

*The University Museum has an exceptional collection of artifacts from the Calusa site at Key Marco, Florida. The pelican, wolf, and deer figureheads mentioned here (Figs. 5,8,4) traveled this year, in an unprecedented loan of the Key Marco material, to the National Gallery of Art where they were exhibited as part of the Columbian Quincentenary exhibition, "Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration." These figureheads will be on display in Philadelphia through 1992 in the Main Entrance of The University Museum. Lucy Fowler Williams is Keeper of Collections for the American Section.*

In 1513 Spanish conquistador Juan Ponce de Leon sailed northwest from the island of Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic) with a three-year royal contract to discover rich lands thought to lie in that direction. In April of that year he made landfall and, calling this new territory La Florida, claimed it for the Spanish Crown. On that trip, Juan and his mates are said to have been attacked by the Calusa Indians, a large and fearsome group of natives who made their living from the sea. While the Calusa managed to survive that encounter, the 250 years that followed brought intermittent contact with other conquistadors, Christian missionaries, and in later years, English and French explorer-traders who vied for the territory, often with the help of native allies. In the wake of conflict and European-borne disease, the Calusa were extinguished by the second half of the 18th century.

While archaeologists in Florida have recovered several village sites of Calusa habitation, including burial mounds, shell ridges, canals, and plazas, The University Museum's 1896 excavations at Key Marco provided extraordinary clues to our understanding of Calusa ceremonialism and daily life. Those excavations revealed rarely preserved objects of wood, such as masks, figureheads, bowls, and tools, which survived because of the wet environment. Though questions about the Calusa and the use of some of these artifacts remain unanswered, early eyewitness accounts and ethnohistorical research, together with new archaeological developments in Florida, enhance our understanding of the cultural context within which these objects were made and used.



*Figure 1. The Calusa lived within the Glades archaeological culture area located at the southern end of the Florida peninsula. Fishing folk who lived among low-lying coastal mangrove swamps and grassy marshes rich in flora and fauna, the Calusa did not practice agriculture. Though elements of Calusa art, architecture, and what we know of Calusa religion may have been similar to those of Mississippian traditions to the north, Calusa culture was distinct.*

Drawn by Jon Snyder after Marquardt 1986: Fig. 1



Figure 2. The Key Marco site in 1896 during excavation.

Photograph by Wells M. Sawyer

## The Excavations

In the winter of 1896, Frank Hamilton Cushing began archaeological excavations in southwest Florida. (Cushing was an anthropologist with the Bureau of American Ethnology, and was well known for his pioneering work at Zuni Pueblo.) The expedition was sponsored jointly by The University Museum (then the Free Museum of Science and Art) and the Bureau of American Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institution.

Cushing's excavations took place along the coast. On Key Marco, among numerous mounds and ridges of earth and shell, he discovered a courtyard submerged in mud and bound by walls of conch shells. The courtyard was drained and cleared, exposing house posts, fishing nets, shell tools, bowls and drinking vessels, weapons, canoes, pottery, and extraordinary wooden masks and animal figureheads (Fig. 2). Archaeological techniques were not very well defined in Cushing's day, and though he took detailed notes of his findings, information on the stratigraphy of the site was not recorded.

One of Cushing's crew members, Wells M. Sawyer, was an artist and photographer; he painted life-like

watercolors and took field photos of many of the specimens as they came from the mud. The watercolors illustrate the blue, black, gray, and brownish-red pigments found on many of the wooden specimens. In several cases where the waterlogged objects dried and disintegrated into unrecognizable forms, the paintings and photographs provide the only surviving record (see Fig. 9).

At the time of the excavations Cushing did not know the name or precise age of the Indians whose world he had discovered. He was aware, however, of the magnitude of his findings: the remains of a highly organized maritime society whose members performed elaborate rituals and whose artists possessed remarkable abilities in wood carving. Cushing's knowledge of American Indian culture, and specifically his experiences at Zuni Pueblo, helped him make rapid judgments about objects which in many cases were disintegrating before him. And, although some of Cushing's ideas about the Indians he had discovered and their relationship to tribes in the Caribbean and South America have not remained popular among scholars, his descriptive notes and insights are of unquestionable value.

## The Calusa People

The Calusa lived from at least A.D. 1000 up to the middle of the 18th century in what are now southwest Florida's Lee, Charlotte, and Collier counties. While estimates vary, their population probably numbered between 4,000 and 10,000. Historic sources reveal that they were a warlike people who economically and politically dominated most of southern Florida (Fig. 1).

Archaeological and historical evidence indicates the Calusa's primary source of food was the sea, and virtually all evidence suggests they did not practice agriculture. The rich and relatively stable coastal ecology of southwest Florida provided an abundance of marine life—numerous kinds of fish, shellfish, and sea mammals—that was capable of supporting a large human population. As noted in an early 1566 account, Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, a Jesuit missionary in charge of an early and unsuccessful attempt to convert the tribe to Christianity, was welcomed by the principal leader of the Calusa with a large meal consisting only of many kinds of boiled, roasted, and raw fish (Goggin and Sturtevant 1964). Fruit and roots were gathered, and deer, bear, and raccoon were probably eaten as well.

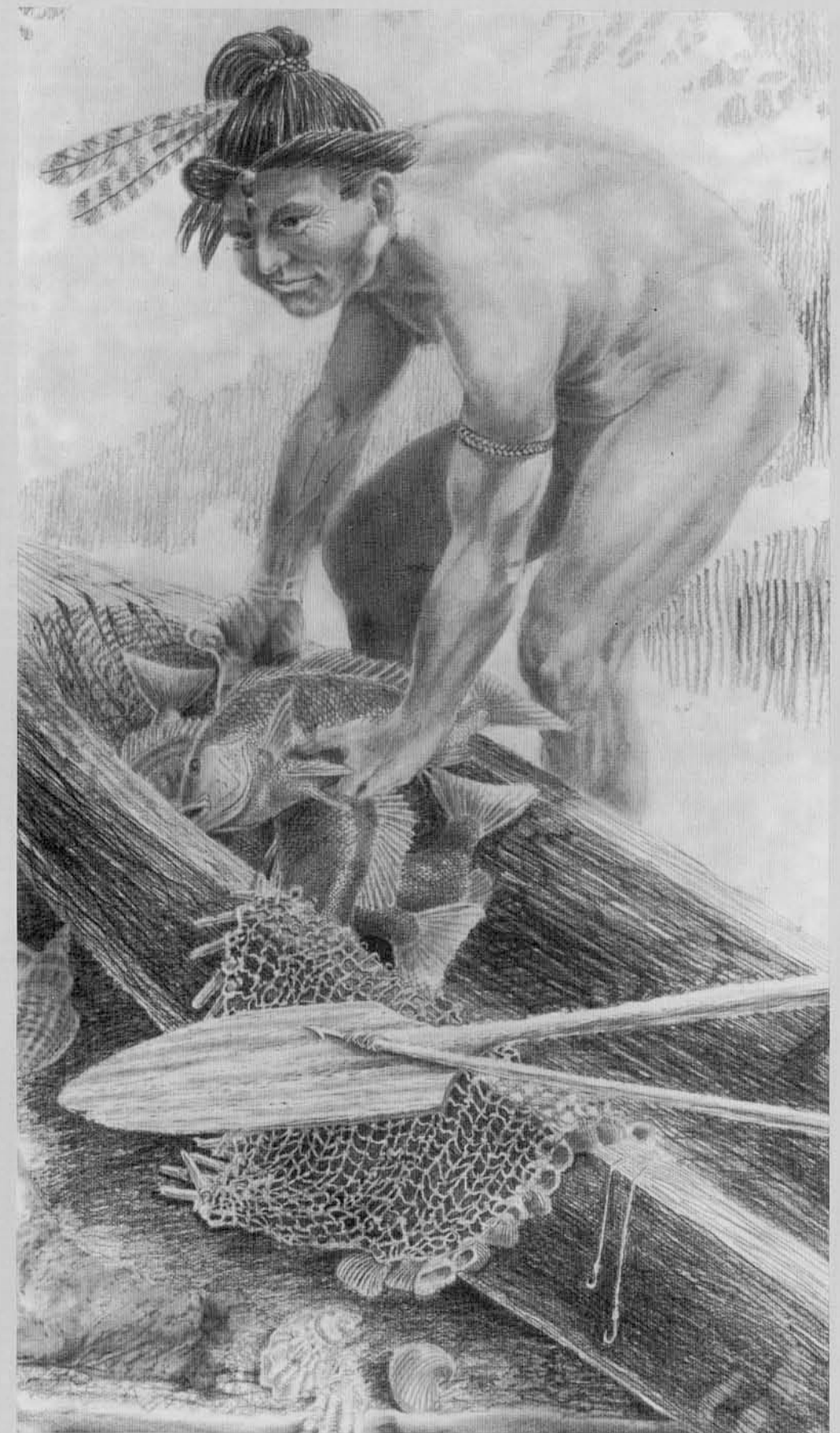


Figure 3. A Calusa fisherman returning from a day's work. His tools include a wooden dug-out canoe, a fishnet made of plant material and weighted with wood and shell, shell fish hooks, a wooden paddle, and a wooden harpoon shaft with a bone point.

Drawing by Hermann Trappman; reproduced courtesy of the artist



Figure 4. This deer figurehead was originally painted blue, black, and white, with inlaid eyes of tortoise shell. Its ears were attached with a cord. Several holes around the edge of the face suggest that the figurehead may have been worn on top of the head and attached to a deerskin or some other soft material which covered the wearer, perhaps a dancer (Cushing 1896).

UM no. 40707; H. 20.0 cm



Figure 5. This gracefully carved pelican, originally painted white, black, and gray, was found with fragments of wing pieces. It probably functioned as an architectural element.

UM no. 40708; H. 11.2 cm

The Calusa used wooden dug-out canoes to aid them in fishing and for transport. As Cushing noted and as more recent studies have revealed, they dug extensive waterways or canals (sometimes as large as 4 feet deep, 20 feet wide, and 3 miles long) that crossed Key Marco and the rest of the region. When used for fishing or travel from one point to another, these canals must have provided protection from the wind (Blanchard 1989). Tools for fishing were made of shell, wood, and plant materials and included hooks and spears, nets, net floats and sinkers, cord, and anchors (Fig. 3).

Archaeological and historical documentation reveal that Calusa society was highly structured, with individuals living in fixed settlements surrounding a large central town. Descriptions of the principal town of "Calos," probably located on Mound Island in Estero Bay (roughly 50 kms north of Key Marco), were first recorded by Spanish missionaries in 1566. According to these accounts, the Calusa had a head chief named Carlos who lived in Calos and received tribute from surrounding villages. Tribute was offered in the form of prestige goods, such as feathers, mats, deerskins, food, and metals and captives recovered from Spanish shipwrecks (Hudson 1976). The chief had many wives: one principal wife and others given to him by surrounding villages. His status was reflected by his personal adornments, which included a golden headdress and beaded leg bands (Goggin and Sturtevant 1964).

The chief organized warfare and possessed special and traditional religious knowledge. He had a council which may have included one or more head priests and one or two high-ranking individuals involved in political and religious decision-making. The surrounding villages had local headmen who answered to the chief. The Jesuit Menéndez noted that in the early hours of the morning, Carlos would sit on a stool with his people around him to discuss the ideas presented by the missionaries.

Large earthen mounds and ridges, accessed by canals, are believed to have been associated with Calusa ritual. The temple mounds, built by what must have been a well-organized work force, measured up to 30 feet high and were often topped with buildings of wood and

thatch entered only by the elite. According to Menéndez, in 1566 the town of Calos contained a central mound where special masks were kept and where human sacrifices were made. One ritual was witnessed in which a large procession of masked men came down from a mound accompanied by hundreds of singing women (Goggin and Sturtevant 1964). An anonymous account mentions an autumn ceremony in which dancers wore animal masks (Goggin and Sturtevant 1964). Franciscan friar Fray López, director of the unsuccessful 1697 mission attempt, described the Calusa's temples as very tall and wide, with a mound in the middle and a structure on the mound enclosed with reed mats and containing benches around the walls. The walls were covered entirely with masks colored red, white, and black (Hann 1991).

Cushing's excavations brought to light at least 23 wooden masks and figureheads. Most spectacular are 9 carved and painted animal heads, some of which were probably worn as masks or headdresses on ceremonial occasions; others probably functioned as architectural elements. Though not all have survived, carvings included a sea turtle, alligator, pelican, fish-hawk, owl, bear, crab, wolf, wildcat, mountain lion, and a deer, many of which were painted black, white, gray-blue, and brownish-red. A variety of carving tools were also recovered. Illustrated here, the deer, pelican, wolf, alligator, and sea turtle reveal extraordinary realism, delicacy, and gracefulness of form—artistic qualities characteristic of Mississippian Period and earlier ceramic, stone, and wood sculpture excavated in the area and at sites further north (Figs. 4-8).

At least three of the animal figureheads were found in close association with wooden human-like masks which Cushing understood to represent the human form of that animal. Perhaps a dancer wore the mask and carried the figurehead of the particular animal he was emulating (Cushing 1896). The two forms together may have indicated his transformation (Figs. 8, 9). One is left only to imagine how life-like these wooden figureheads must have appeared when used on ceremonial occasions.



Figure 6. Painted originally in black, white, blue, and red, this sea turtle, like the other figureheads, is probably made of cypress wood. Radiocarbon dating of a number of wooden specimens and other evidence suggests the site of Cushing's excavations was occupied between A.D. 1000 and 1400.

UM no. 40715; L. 17.0 cm

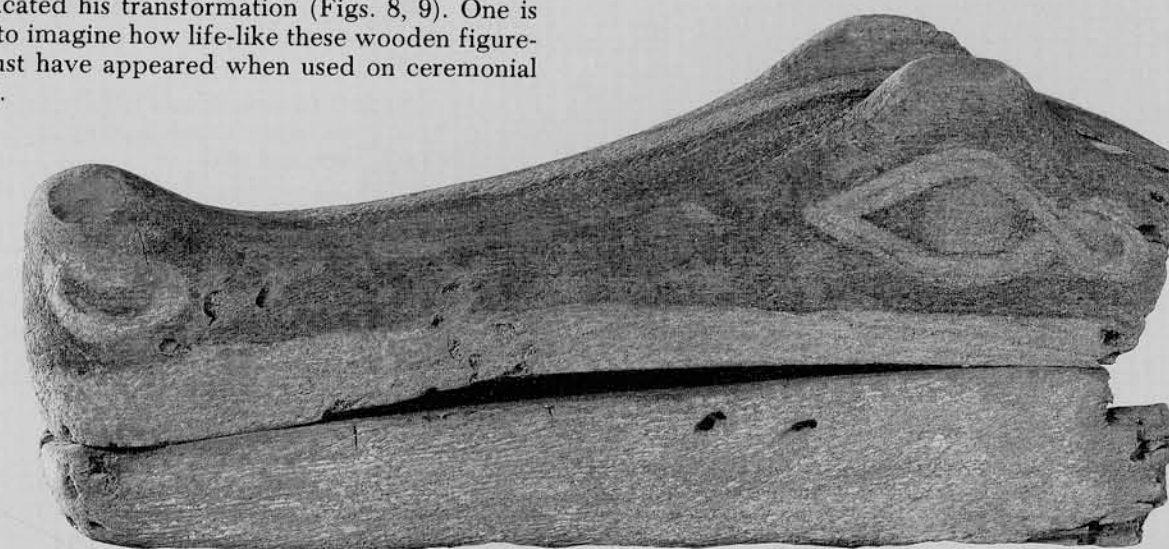


Figure 7. Alligator figurehead originally painted white, black, and blue.

UM no. 40718; L. 24.5 cm

## Conclusion

When combined with historical and archaeological documentation, Cushing's finds from Key Marco teach us about the Calusa Indians around the time of contact. The site of the excavation appears to be linked with Calusa ceremonialism and was one location at which wooden carvings, probably used in ritual, were housed. Although we cannot be sure what values the masks and animal figureheads held for the Calusa, they may have been markers of clan affiliation, and the animals represented most likely played important roles in Calusa mythology and religion. It is clear the Calusa possessed an extraordinary understanding of and sensitivity to their natural environment. The finds tell us of Calusa fishing techniques, of the tools used to produce their wooden carvings, of architecture, ceremonialism, and daily life.

From the time of European contact until their ultimate demise from conflict and illness around 1770, the Calusa successfully resisted, albeit with considerable bloodshed, intermittent efforts by Spanish missionaries to convert them to Christianity. Upon learning that the Spaniards did not intend to provide food, clothing, and other gifts, the Calusa rebelled, tenaciously holding to their own beliefs and practices. It seems clear that while the Spaniards wanted strategic control of the region, the Calusa territory provided them with little economic incentive for serious pursuit; they and other Europeans explored more promising regions to the north. Eventually, in the 18th century, slave raids by English from the north, aided by Creek Indians, destroyed what was left of the already declining Calusa population.

Lucy Fowler Williams



Figure 9. Though the original specimen did not survive, Cushing's records reveal that, when found, this human-wolf mask was situated next to the wolf figurehead (Fig. 8) and, like the latter, was painted blue, black, and white. Cushing suggested that the jagged or zigzag lines on the mask, extending from the corners of the mouth, symbolized the gnashing teeth of the wolf, while the dark areas above the eyebrows represented the dark and well-defined openings of the wolf's erect ears. Had Cushing excavated today, preservation techniques now popular, such as freeze-drying, would have enabled this specimen to survive.

Watercolor by Wells M. Sawyer



Figure 8. This wolf figurehead was found wrapped once in palmetto leaves and again in bark matting. It was originally painted black, white, and pink.

UM no. 40700; H. 32.5 cm

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