

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The Mitchell Ridge Site, 41GV66, is an extensive area of Prehistoric and Early Historic aboriginal occupation and cemeteries located on Galveston Island, at about the mid-point of the island's long axis (Figure 1.1). The site is situated at and above the 8-foot contour line, atop the northeast-southwest trending ridge which parallels the long axis of the island and forms its highest elevation. The northeastern edge of the site overlooks Eckert Bayou, an old tidal pass which was cut off from the Gulf of Mexico by sedimentation associated with wave action and storm surges. Eckert Bayou is now a quiet, shallow inlet of West Bay, and probably was such during the period of prehistoric human occupation. Although traces of prehistoric occupation have been observed over the entire length of the site, by far the greatest concentration of cultural debris is found in the northeastern part of the site, along and within some 200 meters of the Bayou.

Mitchell Ridge has seen several phases of archaeological investigations since 1974. Limited testing and excavation were conducted during the 1970s by groups from Rice University, assisted by members of the Houston Archeological Society. The annual Field School of the Texas Archeological Society (TAS) was held at the site in the summer of 1978 (Atkins n.d.; Richmond et al. 1985:163-165), during which time several hundred 1-meter² units were excavated, resulting in the acquisition of large artifact and faunal samples. Also discovered and excavated during the 1970s were two small prehistoric burial groups.

Additional testing and excavation were carried out by Coastal Archaeological Research, Inc. between January and July of 1992. This work resulted in the exposure and excavation of numerous aboriginal occupational features such as hearths and pits, possible prehistoric house floors, activity areas, and aboriginal burials pertaining to the Late Prehistoric, Protohistoric and Early Historic periods.

These efforts have produced a remarkably extensive and varied archaeological data base. Radiocarbon dates obtained on hearths and human burials indicate that intermittent occupation of the site spanned at least 1,500 years, beginning nearly 2,000 years ago and extending into the eighteenth century. The dates and the kinds of artifacts recovered show that intensive use of the locale began by ca. A.D. 700/800, and suggest a peak of site use after ca. A.D. 1250.

The artifact sample is the largest and most varied from any prehistoric site in the Galveston Bay area. Over 25,000 ceramic fragments and hundreds of items of stone, shell and bone offer unusual opportunities to examine the technological and stylistic dimensions of aboriginal material culture. Large numbers of faunal specimens from several different parts of the site provide important information on the human ecology of aboriginal barrier island occupation, showing a major reliance on fish and game, and only a supplemental dietary significance for shellfish. Analyses of fish remains and oyster shells suggest a seasonal emphasis in the use of the site, with occupation mainly during the fall and winter.

The findings from four groups of aboriginal burials are particularly significant in providing insights into demographic and cultural patterns which would otherwise be inaccessible to archaeological investigation. Inferences concerning prehistoric demography, diet, social patterns, and mortuary ritual are all possible through analyses of grave contents. Furthermore, findings in Early Historic graves provide a rare opportunity to examine how these patterns changed through time, particularly during the eighteenth century, when native populations and cultures were experiencing-- and responding to-- the impacts and influences of Euroamerican colonization of the Gulf coast and adjacent interior.

The varied data from the site are discussed in this report along the following lines:

1. In order to place the site-specific findings in meaningful environmental and historical contexts, discussions of the environmental context of the Mitchell Ridge Site and the background information provided by previous archaeological work in the Galveston Bay area precede presentation of the site-specific findings. A third important background discussion presents a ethnohistorical overview of the Galveston Bay area and adjacent regions; available information on native groups and the nature of European-Indian interactions is crucial to interpreting the findings at the site which pertain to the period of Euroamerican colonization.

The nature of the local and regional environmental mosaic, presented in Chapter 2, provides a contextual framework (*sensu* Butzer 1982) for examining occupation at Mitchell Ridge within a the human ecology of a larger and inclusive adaptive pattern. While the existing data do not permit confident

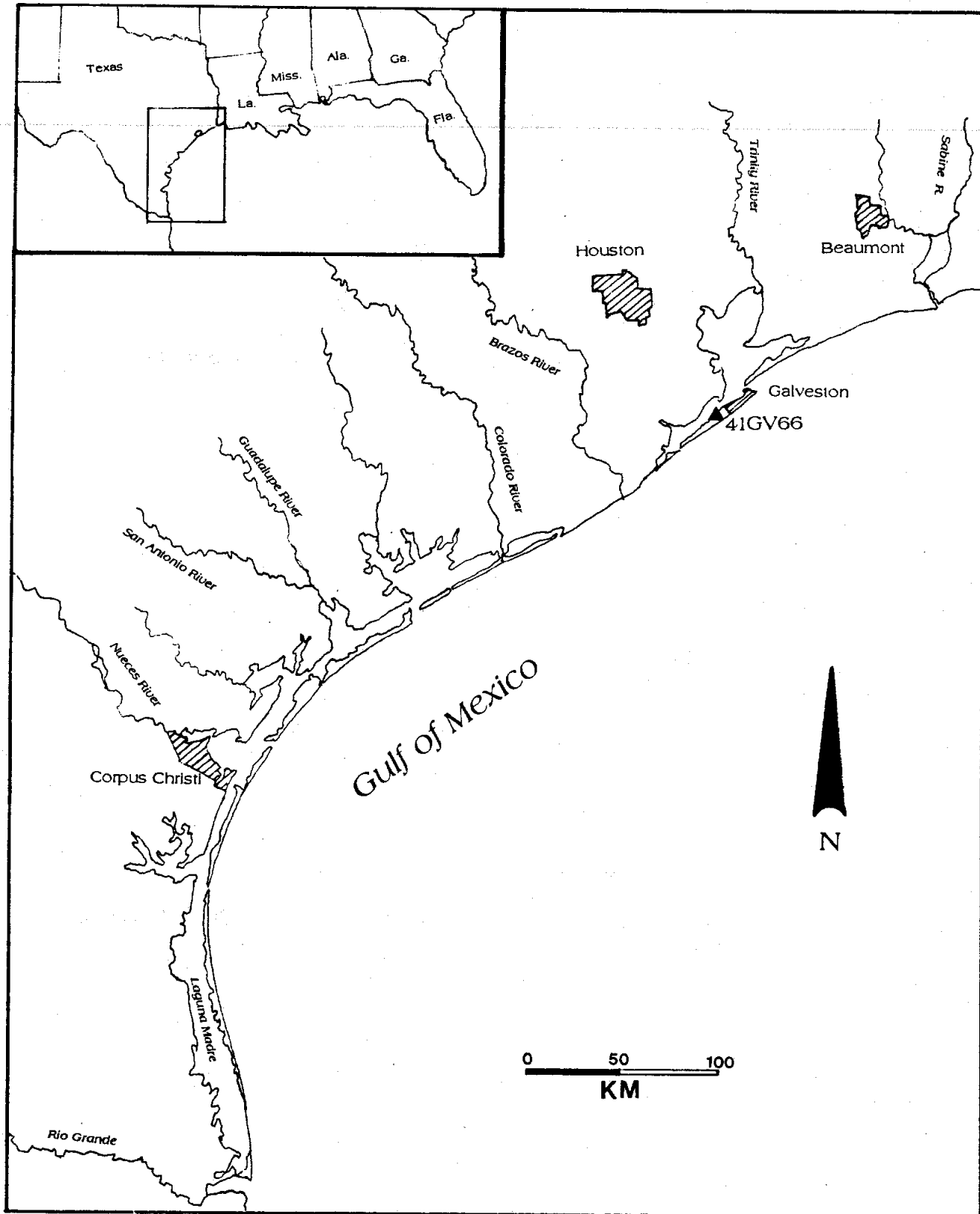


Figure 1.1. Map of the Texas coast showing location of the Mitchell Ridge Site, 41GV66.

reconstruction of the details of the Late Prehistoric adaptive pattern of which occupation at Mitchell Ridge was a part, it is possible to draw certain inferences concerning basic seasonal and spatial patterns of resource use. Chapter 3 presents, first, a brief overview of archaeological knowledge of the Galveston Bay area, thus providing a basis for assessing the role of island occupation in the diachronic and synchronic patterns of regional prehistory. Chapter 3 concludes with an examination of the existing regional culture chronology and a presentation of an alternative chronological framework which is believed to better fit the data from Mitchell Ridge. Chapter 4 deals with historical/ethnohistorical background information relevant to the native inhabitants of the Galveston Bay area and the larger surrounding region, providing information which complements the archaeological data, and which is crucial for interpreting the findings at Mitchell Ridge which date to the Protohistoric and Early Historic periods.

2. Following these background discussions is presentation of the findings which bear directly upon interpretation of the daily life at the site. Chapter 5 provides descriptions and functional interpretations of the various occupational features such as hearths and pits investigated in 1992, and to the limited extent possible, examines the spatial organization of domestic activity at the site. Also included here is analysis and interpretation of faunal samples which, in conjunction with the kinds and quantities of tools found, permit inferences concerning the local subsistence economy. Chapter 6 presents a summary and discussion of the excavations carried out in habitation areas during the 1970s. Chapter 7 focuses on analyses of the artifact assemblage from the site, with particular emphasis on lithic technology and the stylistic patterns discernable in the large ceramic sample.

Because the data from the 1992 excavations are more detailed and complete than those from the 1970s investigations, the 1992 findings are discussed first. Incomplete proveniences on the collections from the 1970s excavations, along with generally cursory field notes, limit the interpretive potential of the extant data from those investigations. The 1992 findings provide a much more complete basis for interpretation, permitting development of a site-specific interpretive framework within which some important aspects of the 1970s findings can be placed.

3. The second part of the data presentation deals with the burials and mortuary patterns at the site. Once again, the information from the 1970s excavations is quite limited. However, significant biophysical and dietary information is derived from analysis of skeletal materials. Additionally, radiocarbon dates on human bone allow for chronological placement of the two burial groups excavated in the 1970s. Much greater detail can be presented for the burials excavated in 1992. Chapter 8 describes the burials and associated grave goods. Chapter 9, by Joseph F. Powell, presents in detail the results of bioarchaeological analyses of the Mitchell Ridge human skeletal material. Chapter 10, by Jeffery A. Huebner, deals with stable isotope analysis of human bone samples from the site, and presents interpretations relevant to the diet and human ecology of the aboriginal inhabitants of the site. Chapter 11 contains interpretive discussions of major categories of grave goods, including analyses of shell ornaments by Meredith Dreiss and an exploration of the chronological significance of European trade goods, with particular focus on the relatively large sample of glass beads from the Early Historic burials.

Chapter 12 is an interpretive discussion of the sociocultural, demographic and human-ecological implications of the burials. The fact that most of the grave goods accompany adult males and children is suggested to indicate status ascription along lines of age and sex. Additionally, differential amounts of wealth in separate cemetery areas are interpreted to reflect some degree of heretofore unrecognized social ranking in aboriginal society. The findings in burials of the Early Historic period present a regionally unique record of demographic, ecological and cultural change. During this period, local native people were actively engaged in trade with the French, exchanging native products (mainly deer skins) for items of European manufacture such as glass beads, mirrors, cloth and clothing, brass bells and iron tools. At the same time, the data suggest a marked increase in mortality rates as intensified contact with Europeans resulted in frequent and devastating epidemics of smallpox and other Old World diseases. Biophysical analysis and new mortuary patterns strongly suggest influx of remnant populations of outsiders, probably from the east, where indigenous societies and cultures were experiencing disruption and dislocation due to the effects of conflict between French and British colonials and their various Indian allies. Moreover, Powell's bioarchaeological analyses of skeletal materials strongly suggest that some of the newcomers were of mixed European and Indian blood, possibly reflecting the intermarriages between colonists and native individuals documented for the Mississippi valley during the early eighteenth century. Finally, both stable isotope analysis of human bone and microscopic examination of tooth wear suggest dietary change which may relate to an introduction of maize and vegetable horticulture into a previously non-agricultural

economy during the second quarter of the eighteenth century, a change in lifeway which may have accompanied newcomers from the Southeast.

4. Finally, Chapter 13 summarizes the findings in terms of basic patterns of cultural continuity and change represented at the site. Based on both artifacts and mortuary patterns, it is concluded that the Mitchell Ridge Site is closely related to other sites in the Galveston Bay area. At the same time, it is apparent that the native people(s) who occupied the site were participating in broad cultural patterns with links to both the interior and to coastal peoples living to the east toward the Mississippi River delta area. While the prehistoric mortuary patterns at the site are strongly reminiscent of those identified for the Galveston Bay area (Aten et al. 1976), significant differences are also discernable. Viewed in broader ecological and cultural-historical context, the archaeological findings at the Mitchell Ridge Site present a picture of indigenous culture rooted in local tradition but susceptible and amenable to influences and changes coming from beyond the Galveston Bay area and the immediately surrounding region of the upper Texas coast.