

Prehistoric Dugout Canoe Found in Cooper River

By Douglas Boehme

Earlier this year two sport divers discovered the remains of a prehistoric dugout in the East Branch of the Cooper River. This is an exciting find, as very few prehistoric dugouts have been recorded in the state. This discovery will undoubtedly help to fill a sparsely written chapter of South Carolina prehistory.

When Mike Lucas and Doug Boehme were diving this January in the chilly waters of the Cooper, they were surprised to discover a hollowed-out log protruding from the mud. Upon closer inspection they noticed that the thickness was consistent and one of the sides was uniform. Further investigation revealed the inside of the log bore evidence of having been burned and scraped. At this point they decided to surface and fix the location with landmarks on the surface. The next day they notified Lynn Harris, the head of the Institute's sport diver program, who confirmed that a canoe had not been previously reported at that location. Sport divers George Pledger and Sue Kane volunteered to join Mike, Doug, Lynn and Carl Naylor on several dives to the site. They recorded their observations, took preliminary measurements and secured a wood sample for carbon 14 dating.

The canoe is embedded in the mud of the bank near the edge of the river channel. Approximately 6 meters are exposed, and the canoe's width is relatively constant at 1/2 meter. The exposed end is eroded as well as most of one gunnel. The other gunnel, the sides and bottom of the canoe are well preserved. The preservation of the vessel improves closer to the bank. The wood is quite thick, 7 or 8 centimeters, and charring is evident on much of the bottom. The consistency of the wood is strongly reminiscent of cooked carrots. The carbon 14 test results put the date at 4120 BP +/- 60 years thus placing it in the Archaic period.

What's next? Ideas are currently being explored to excavate the covered portion of the canoe to record the shape of the finished end of the vessel and to determine the overall length. A detailed set of measurements would allow an accurate drawing of the canoe to be made. A set of underwater photos would also be taken, visibility permitting. The canoe would then be carefully stabilized and covered to protect it from the ravages of river currents and boat anchors.

There are currently only 19 dugout canoes in the South Carolina site files. Of these, most are historic, and only three have been carbon dated. Two pre-historic canoes discovered in Hilton Head area and on Kiawah Island were carbon-14 dated to 930+/- 90 years BP and 740+/-200 BP respectively. Another canoe, recovered from the Cooper River illegally by a diver, was confiscated by the Department of Natural Resources Enforcement Division last year. It was dated to 3700+/-60BP. There have been numerous reports in the past of prehistoric canoes having been found; however most cannot be substantiated and fewer still can be visited today. As one of the oldest known watercraft in the state, this discovery has the potential to fill a gap in our knowledge of prehistoric peoples in South Carolina.