La. archaeological find may date to 3,300 B.C.

The oldest human remains ever found in Louisiana, dating back as far as 3,300 B.C., have been discovered by LSU archaeologists near Lake Larto in Catahoula Parish.

Radio-carbon dating of the site suggests the buried remains may be some of the earliest found in the lower Mississippi Valley, said Dr. Ann F. Ramenofsky of the LSU department of geography and anthropology. Ramenofsky said that因为她发现的 site at Cowpen Slough, some 26 miles southeast of Lutcher, last summer.

The discovery indicates that primitive Indians probably existed in Louisiana when picture writing first appeared in ancient Mesopotamia (Iraq) and the calendar and plow were first used in Egypt, according to Ms. Ramenofsky.

"Artifacts found in the area suggest that these people lived during the Late Archaic cultural period of eastern North America," she said. In this archaeological time-frame for the lower Mississippi Valley, the Late Archaic period ranges from approximately 3,200 B.C. to 1,000 B.C., a period in which human populations were hunting and gathering their food off the land.

Although the human remains excavated are very old — probably older than the better known Poverty Point culture — the archaeologist said the newly discovered remains do not represent the first people in Louisiana. Preservation of any archaeological material is a problem in Louisiana's subtropical climate, but through an unusual combination of circumstances, the remains at Cowpen Slough have been preserved, the LSU archaeologist said.

About 3,800 years ago, Cowpen Slough was the main channel of the Arkansas River. Archaic peoples lived along the banks of the Arkansas, and, when the river diverted itself, the people abandoned the area. Subsequently, the area was capped with ever-present clay deposits of the Mississippi River. Because the clays were so fine-grained, the remains below the clay were sealed and preserved.

"In effect, the clay, approximately nine feet deep, formed an impermeable layer that prevented water and microorganisms from penetrating the cultural levels," Ms. Ramenofsky said.

Thus far, the Cowpen Slough excavation has yielded 16 individuals buried in two different patterns. One group of five Indians, each buried singly in deliberately excavated pits, was found at a lower level that dates to approximately 3,300 B.C. The second and larger group, found directly above the single burials and dating to 2,600 B.C., had been cremated.

"Because the second group of individuals were cremated, the skeletal remains are less complete," the archaeologist said. These discoveries are exciting, and although our analyses are still incomplete, it may be that these burial patterns represent one of the earliest examples of burial ceremonialism in the Southeast," she said.

The LSU archaeologist found arrowheads and grinding stones at the site, but the most abundant artifacts were numerous pieces of baked clay that were probably used as cooking stones, indicating the area was used daily by the Indians. In addition, because of the excellent state of preservation, charred fish bones and a significant number of plant remains such as nutshell seeds have been found.

"We may be able not only to reconstruct the diet of these people who lived at Cowpen Slough, but also to study the effects of that diet on the people," Ms. Ramenofsky said.

Cowpen Slough is part of some 67,000 acres of land owned and farmed by a large agricultural firm, Louisiana Delta Plantation. Farmers managers William Baker and Norman Haigh, who discovered the site in 1975 when an artificial drainage channel was cut through part of the area, are enthusiastic amateur archaeologists.

Baker is a past president of the Louisiana Archaeological Society. Cowpen Slough is now registered as an official archaeological site at both the state and federal levels.

Ms. Ramenofsky will return to Cowpen Slough June 8 to direct an eight-week field course, accompanied by a technical staff of four and some 15 students from LSU and other universities. Funding for the project is being provided by the Louisiana Office of Historic Preservation, Division of Archaeology, and a non-profit foundation in California.

Managers of the Louisiana Delta Plantation, who have already provided a variety of equipment, and the U.S. Soil Conservation Service in helping to obtain core samples at the site and the surrounding area.