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E. KOFI AGORSAH

EVIDENCE AND INTERPRETATION IN THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF JAMAICA

One of the most challenging statements in the Archaeology of the New World is the one made by James Deetz, an eminent Archaeologist, that: "The personalities of prehistory will remain forever nameless and without faces", (Deetz 1977). Any one with background training in prehistoric Archaeology of the Old World would at first glance at the statement view it with scorn. I was no exception to this reaction. But when I started updating myself on archaeological studies in the Caribbean I started giving the statement a serious thought especially having come across Clinton Black's description of the first Jamaicans as "a peaceful, primitive people, still in the Stone Age state of development as the fifteenth century A.D. drew to its close" (Black 1958, 1973). Much more frightening were statements made in the literature on the history of Jamaica that categorically claim that the first Jamaicans were all exterminated. If this did happen then the statement that "the personalities" (the first Jamaicans and probably others) "may forever remain nameless and without faces" seemed a most serious one.

Jamaica had provided a special attraction for anthropological studies by numerous scholar, professional and amateurs, and institution owing to its central role in the development of the West Indian society, as well as its geographical connections in the general Caribbean area. In this context and archaeologically the earlier part of Jamaica's past may be referred to as the Prehistoric period generally and considered to have given way to the Historical period when the Spaniards landed in Jamaica about five centuries ago. For the reconstruction of both prehistoric/historical periods, except for isolated examples, (Armstrong 1985, Higman 1974, Marx 1968, Hamilton 1987, Aaron 1979, Medhurst 1976) for substantial portions, both geographical and chronological, there is a critical lack of data from systematically organized archaeological research or controlled excavations. Secondly owing to the variety of subject areas covered by different scholars and in different areas, it is not possible to review the early archaeological research efforts in a strict chronological order that shows uniform approaches, methodologies, ideologies or theoretical orientations within set periods. This is a difficulty that is also apparent in previous similar reviews (Vanderwal 1965, Lee 1978, Aaron n.d.). Thirdly, although not much analysis can be conducted at this stage of the social history the context in which the archaeological efforts developed in Jamaica and needs to be made to events that may be considered significant for the research efforts at various periods even if the connections were indirect. The difficulty here is the subjective determination of which event was or was not significant, as well as determining the sense of proportion of the impact, if there was any.

Within the above-mentioned parameters and the restrictions of presentations of the conference, this paper will only attempt in a summary fashion to identify some of the significant archaeological research efforts, particularly those which link evidence to interpretations of the past of Jamaica. Secondly the paper will examine some of the issues emerging from these early developments in the study of Jamaica's past in attempt to relate these issues to the Archaeology of the Caribbean

generally. Problems of research approaches, interpretation as well as those of cross-cultural application of generalizations are also briefly mentioned. These, it is hoped will open a forum for a reassessment of the evidence available for a meaningful interpretation of the past of Jamaica.

Four historical periods each with varying socio-historical events, are proposed to facilitate contexts for the discussions of the early research efforts some of which may relate directly or indirectly to those events.

PERIOD I (A.D. 1493 - 1655)

The dearth of data on the earliest history of Jamaica signalled by the arrival of the Spanish in A.D. 1493 is one of the main challenges facing scholars of the history of Jamaica. For archaeologists the situation is even more serious as it appears almost no archaeological research activity took place until after the English had taken over the island in 1655. The accounts of the encounter of Columbus with inhabitants of the island of Jamaica, referred to as the Arawak as they recorded at the time of their arrival have become significant elements in historical and archaeological reconstruction of the life of the earliest Jamaicans. This period was one of the rising tide of international competition and frantic efforts of European adventurers, churchmen and traders to colonize various parts of the unknown world, and an ardent desire to have firm hold over the island of Jamaica was the preoccupation of the Spanish when they landed in the Caribbean, especially because of the persistent threats from the English, French, Dutch and Italian, as well as from pirates of various derivation.

PERIOD II (A.D. 1655 - 1838)

The publication of a description of the island of Jamaica in 1672 by Blome should be considered as an important mark in the provision of material of major significance to historical archaeology although no major specific projects attempted to use the material provided by the descriptions. But the period as a whole saw the introduction into the island of missionaries, engineers, plantation of Estate owners and other similar people into the island serve with background interest in antique particularly outside the world they have been accustomed to.

The earliest study of relevance to Archaeology in Jamaica comes from Sir Hans Sloane, a natural scientist whose publication in 1696 made the earliest reference to Arawak potsherds. Sloane made reference to a burial cave in the Red Hills area of modern St. Andrew Parish. Of much interest was his provision of glimpses of the natural history of Jamaica in relation to the occupation and possible subsistence practices of the early inhabitants of the island going back into periods predating the arrival of the Spanish in the West Indies. Although Sloane's data were not specifically archaeological they drew attention to the existence of a traditional society living and exploiting the rich environment of the island.

The first century of the almost two covered by Period II saw several events most of which may have affected not only interest in the cultural past of Jamaica but also research activities generally. Right at the initial stages of British control of the island began slave and Maroon resistance resulting in Maroon wars 1734 and

1795, the increase in bucaneeing activities the headquarters of which was Port Royal, and a general period of settling-in by the British. Although there were indications of some prosperity such as the widespread sugar-producing plantations and development of missionary activities Anglican (1655), Moravian (1754), Baptists (1784) and Methodists (1789), not much attention seemed to have been drawn to archaeological research, not even antiquarianism that was characteristic of the same period in Europe. However, on record is Long's History of Jamaica (1774) reference to the Riverhead Grand Cave in the Parish of St. Catherine as a one time occupation base for the earliest Jamaicans. About twenty years later at the meeting of the British Society of Antiquaries in 1799 one Issac Alves Rebello is said to have drawn attention to Arawak clay figurines. As may be observed from the initial references to Jamaica, the interest in its past concerned the life ways of the early inhabitants, who they were, how they lived, their religion, what they ate and their general behavior towards other people. Within the Jamaican society itself the slave rebellions and Maroon activities constituted an awareness of the history and origins of the societies that inhabited the island. Consequently by the end of the period there still had not been any systematic archaeological investigation and interpretation.

PERIOD III (A.D. 1939 -1940)

This is the period immediately following the abolition of the slave trade in Jamaica and was marked by influx of European, Chinese, East Indian and Free African immigrants and significant changes in the political structure of the island. The most relevant significant development was the formation of the Institute of Jamaica in 1879. Initially aimed at promoting the Arts and Sciences of Jamaica, the Institute was first a research center and a center for providing cultural education for the youth. The Institute has since its inception provided shelter and encouragement for research into the past, and has carried, in its publications, feature articles and reports on Archaeology and Archaeology-related subjects. The Institute has literally created an avenue for promoting archaeological research and the dissemination of some aspects of the results.

Several research efforts of relevance to Archaeology are also noted to have occurred in this period. These included Blake's record of excavations carried out at the site of Norbrook near Kingston (Blake 1890, 1895), Duerden's study and discussion of 14 caves and 17 midden sites (Duerden 1897) and McCormack's examination of Arawak remains from the Brazilleto hills of the Parish of Clarendon which he discussed in relation to early migrations in the island (McCormack 1898). Other scholars who contributed to research during the period include Cundall (1909), DeBooy (1913), Longley (1914), Miller (1932) and Loven (1932, 1935). Generally these pioneers studies concerned the pre-Columbian period and were carried out mainly by non-professional archaeologists with diverse backgrounds and interest which cannot be discussed here owing to lack of space. By the turn of the 19th century almost 37 prehistoric occupation sites had been reported, partially surveyed or mapped (Lee 1978) (Figure 1 and 2).

PERIOD IV (1941 - 1988)

The 1940's ushered in many archaeological research efforts with far-reaching results. During the period deliberately organized projects were undertaken, interest in historical archaeology began and attempts were made to develop an overall chronological scheme. Jamaica was experiencing recovery from the economic depression, the urban and rural discontent as well as the dissatisfaction with the crown colony government. Also political stability established in the island following the introduction of adult suffrage and internal self-government probably permitted much interest in research generally. But the background and interest of these who made various efforts continued to be varied and included colonial officials, missionaries, tourists, travellers, engineers, plantation owners and the like. Again these varied backgrounds and interest cannot be discussed here and only the names and references are noted. Of considerable significance during the period were attempts to develop chronological schemes for the Caribbean that includes the use of material from Jamaica (Rouse 1951, 1964). Goodwin's study of Spanish and English ruins (Goodwin 1946), and various studies by Cotter (1946, 1953, 1970), De Wolf's excavations (De Wolf 1953) and Harper's study of Amerindian skulls recovered from Jamaican sites are among some of the studies of this period. Also significant to this period were the report of Lester (1953) of Jamaican treasures in London, Howard's doctoral study on the Archaeology of Jamaica (Howard 1950) and those of Medhurst (1976) of the Arawaks of Jamaica. The contributions of Lee (1962, 1964, 1978) and Vanderwal (1965, 1967) to archaeological research during this period are too numerous to discuss here. From the study of the pre-Columbian sites, for example, we notice a clear rise in activity (Figure 1). For the period after 1960, however, we have on record more intensive study of historical sites such as at Port Royal (Marx 1968, Mathewson 1972, Hamilton 1987, Buisseret 1966, 1967, 1973, Mayes 1972), at Drax Hall (Armstrong 1985), Montpelier (Higman 1974) the Hillshire area and Auchindown (Aaron 1983, 1984) as well as excavations at New Seville (Lopez n.d.). The Institute of Nautical Archaeology in Texas, (INA), The British Museum, London, the University of California, Los Angeles and various British Caving expeditions from Leeds and Liverpool as well as the Spanish Government's commissioned excavations at New Seville continued to contribute significantly, some of them especially INA in a greater dimension (Hamilton 1987).

Much of our knowledge of caves and rockshelter sites started in the 1920s and comes mainly from activities of geologists and geographers (Zans 1951-3, Clarke 1929, Miller 1932), caving clubs and the Archaeological Society of Jamaica as well as expeditions conducted by the Universities of Leeds and Liverpool in Britain. Many of the caves seem to have been disturbed because of commercial exploitation of bat droppings popularly referred to as *bat guano* (Sweeting 1952, Fincham 1977, King-Websher and Kenny 1958, Wadge, Fincham and Draper 1979). Ashcroft (1969) has observed such disturbances in various caves in the Parishes of Trelawny and Hanover. Cave art has been observed in some of these caves, such as the Mountain River Cave in the Parish of St. Catherine which has been comparatively examined in some detail (Watson 1988).

Sporadic and uncoordinated though the early research ventures may have been, the review clearly indicates that there had been a long-standing interest in archaeological research in Jamaica. In October 1987, for the first time in the history of the University of the West Indies, Archaeology was introduced into the academic

courses with the Department of History at Mona. A benefaction from Mr. Edward Moulton-Barrett, a British lawyer with a long-standing family connection in Jamaica made this development possible. Although the program's main initial goal was to emphasize Historical Archaeology the introductory course work provides a broad general background to the principles of archaeology and a review of World Prehistory. More practical and Historical Archaeology will then constitute the major aspects thereafter. At all levels, there are options in other disciplines in the Arts and Social Sciences with Archaeology. As may have been observed, although there has been no one specific trend of development one appreciates the fact that these early efforts indicate a long-standing attempt to reconstruct the past life ways of the early inhabitants of the island.

EMERGING ISSUES

The main issues emerging from the early archaeological efforts relate to nature of the evidence covered, terminology, chronology and periodization, interpretation and cross-cultural application of generalizations, and finally methodology. The question to be considered is to what extent do these efforts unfold and explain the true nature of human history and development on the island and how far do these issues individually or collectively justify our conclusions on the question?

EVIDENCE

A striking feature of these early efforts on the evidence is its variety and geographical coverage. Natural science evidence and facilities those relating to underwater archaeology at Port Royal (Hamilton 1987, Aaron 1979, 1983) and for examining cave evidence (Ashcroft 1977, Sweeting 1956, Fincham 1977). The recorded prehistoric sites are many and a few systematically examined. However, the majority of the sites have not been clearly defined to the extent that one is tempted to consider some of them as merely find spots.

The evidence for the historical period is equally varied and plentiful and obviously is in a much better position with documentary support, such as maps, travellers and explorers accounts, estate and plantation data (Higman 1988) and statistics, trade records as well as artifactual material and structural features such as forts and castles, shipwrecks and monumental buildings. Recently attempts have been made to identify West African and other connections with Jamaica in terms of evidence emanating from them. Much of the evidence for both periods have suffered much from earthquakes and hurricane. The prehistoric sites and evidence have also suffered losses as historic sites have been built over them, not to mention recent impact of industrial development.

TERMINOLOGY

The issue of terminology is another one that needs serious consideration. The use of technical or specialized jargon such as Paleo-Indian, Palaeo/Meso Indian, Neo-Indian, Mailacoid, etc. are used indiscriminately and in a muddled fashion. What one realizes is that terminology employed by some scholars have one meaning for them and another for the layman. What is a cultural tradition or phase in Jamaican Archaeology? The tendency to look at the Archaeology of Jamaica through the mirror of interpretation used for material in other Caribbean areas is the cause of this problem. One understands the causes better if it is realized that the early researchers were mostly non-professionals. Excess of cumbersome writing and poor choice of unsuitable technical terms can obscure what may be first class presentation of data.

CHRONOLOGY AND CONTEXT

The placement of prehistoric traditions of Jamaica in chronological contexts relating to the whole Caribbean following the schemes developed by Rouse (1978, 1985) and Kozlowski (1974), remains questionable unless we assume that ceramic stylistic homogeneity or similarity of certain attributes of certain types and forms can be considered to show common historical origins. The problem lies in the use of ceramic types only as a basis for the chronological schemes. Lack of dates also has contributed to the problem.

MIGRATION

The issue of migration has two sides (a) migration into the island of Jamaica and (b) migration within the island itself. The problem in both cases lies again in the use of ceramic types to signal exclusive group membership and maintenance of social boundaries between interacting populations. Experiences of Old World Archaeology indicate that classification of data into successive phases of cultural traditions can give a false impression of what was in fact continuous variation in time and space. It is also now well known that parameters of material culture distribution may not necessarily coincide with those of human socio-political, linguistic or other modes of behavior. It is important not to ignore the massive cultural penetration of the island from surrounding areas. However, the possibility of independent local development of cultural traditions in response to the peculiar environmental factors of the island, should not be ruled out. Even for the historical period this is an important issue to be considered.

METHODOLOGY

The first impression one gets after indepth examination of reports of archaeological work indicates with very few exceptions, that many of the studies have been artifact-oriented. Much attention was given to the fascination of the finds rather than the process of retrieval within any preconceived theoretical and

methodological framework. The rigor required in archaeological research ventures is concentrated mostly on ceramic analysis even for the historical period. As remarked earlier, one question that cannot be completely answered at this time is the extent to which the archaeological efforts and their related results stand the test of recent advances in the archaeological enterprise.

This paper has been an attempt to demonstrate the long-standing interest that archaeological research has seen in Jamaica and to propose for the discussion of this forum the issues that relate to the use of the material accumulated over the centuries to present the true picture of human cultural history and development on the island of Jamaica. It is not an exhaustive presentation of all that is known but certainly points to the inadequacy of the utilization of the available data. It is not only the accumulation of facts and material, but also systematic analysis and knowledge of concrete historical phenomena and events relating to the material that can serve the archaeologist and historian as a basis for scientific generalizations, for determining the particular of general regularity in the past of peoples. The story about man's past is a complex one and that of Jamaica is not an exception although one can imagine it as unique.

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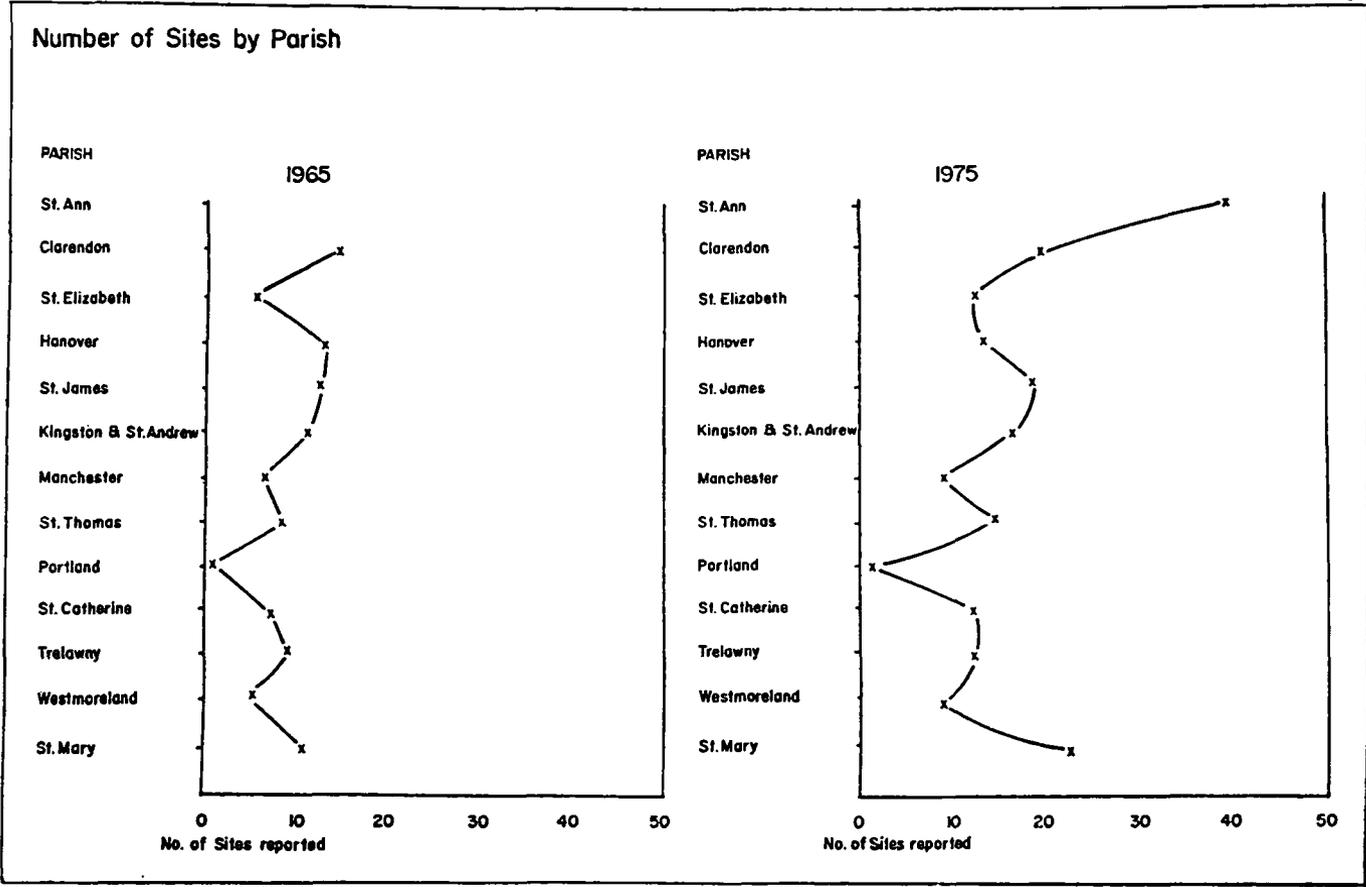


Fig. 2