EXCAVATIONS AT GREEN CASTLE ESTATE, JAMAICA, 1999-2000

Kit W. Wesler and Phillip Allsworth-Jones

In 1999, the University of the West Indies, Mona, and the Wickliffe Mounds Research Center, Murray State University, began a collaborative study of Taino chiefdom organization on the north coast of Jamaica. We have completed two seasons of excavations at the Green Castle site, STM25, on the west side of Annotto Bay. Radiocarbon and oxidizable carbon ratio dates indicate an occupation of ca. AD 1350-1500+. Annotto Bay was marked on early historic maps as Guaiguata, apparently from a Taino word or name. We are beginning to address the question of whether the Green Castle site may have been Guaiguata, or part of a district or multi-village chiefdom known to the Spanish as Guaiguata.


In 1999 Philip Allsworth-Jones and I began what we hope will be a five-year project to investigate Taino chiefdom organization in an area of the north coast of Jamaica. This is a joint project of the Archaeology Program of the University of the West Indies and the Wickliffe Mounds Research Center, Murray State University, and we conduct it through a field school for UWI and a few American students. We’ve completed two seasons of excavation at the Green Castle site, St. Mary Parish, and today I’d like to give you a preliminary report on how the project is going.

By way of brief background, Jamaican prehistory has seen a dearth of study for nearly four decades. Cultural resource managers of the Jamaica National Heritage Trust and amateur archaeologists have made valuable efforts to record sites, but the last major excavations were those of Robert Howard at the White Marl site in the early 1960s. Howard, unfortunately, died before he could report the project, and the report that was turned in by colleagues is somewhat sketchy. Howard’s student, Ronald Vanderwal, described the ceramics for his master’s thesis and then conducted additional testing of several sites, but disappeared before he filed any
reports. Our effort, and a current study by William Keegan at Paradise Park on Jamaica’s south coast, should provide some much-needed new perspective.

The current view of the Jamaican prehistoric sequence is rather schematic and has little time depth. There are two periods: the Little River period, A.D. 600-900, and the White Marl period, A.D. 900-1500. The periods are based on generalized ceramic characteristics, partly by analogy to the broadly-known ceramic traditions of the Greater Antilles. By all indications, Taino settlement of Jamaica did not begin until quite late, and ended abruptly about a generation after the arrival of the Spanish.

Our simplest goal with the current project, then, is to add a modern perspective to the archaeological characterization of the Taino in our study area.

We chose the Green Castle site, overlooking Annotto Bay, partly because of a very hospitable reception by the owner and management of Green Castle Estate, and partly because the site was cleared and appeared relatively intact. Eroding road cuts revealed marine shell and pottery, marking a substantial Taino site.

We began excavations in 1999 with three test units. The first, placed near the summit of the northern rise, showed a deflated profile. It produced ceramics, shell, and stone artifacts, but also left us a bit worried that there would not be much midden to work with.

Our next two units were much more productive. This was our second unit, placed in the saddle between the two rises of the hill summit. Underneath a shallow cattle-pulverized topsoil, we encountered a very promising midden. We reached a red-stained decayed bedrock in the west side at about 40 cm, but in the east, middeny soil continued.

We took five Oxidizable Carbon Ratio samples from a column in the east profile. The uppermost date was AD 1742, and reflects continued soil development and bioturbation in the
topsoil, thus is too late to date the occupation of the site. The lower four dates, ranging from AD 1377 to 1502, represent good contexts and can be considered to belong to the Taino occupation of the site. A sample of small fragments of charcoal gathered from Level 2 produced a calibrated radiocarbon date of 1675-1955+. This sample evidently contains modern charcoal, perhaps from burned roots.

We returned to this unit in 2000. As we excavated the middeny east end further, we came to a what we thought was a very large sherd, which we mapped and removed. It became clear that we were in a circular or oval feature cut into the bedrock, rather than in a midden following the slope downward. We started thinking that it might be a burial pit, and at the end of the season, we confirmed that hypothesis.

Continuing the OCR column, we got a bit of a surprise from the lower samples. The dates indicate a lower occupation zone, to which the burial belongs, dating to about A.D. 900-1100. I believe there is a stratigraphic change that matches the discontinuity in dates and defines the earlier occupation zone. Philip Allsworth-Jones is less convinced of this, and we will have to study it very closely when we reopen the unit.

Besides the burial and pot, one notable find from this unit included an undecorated shell disc.

The third test in 1999 was on the east side of the site’s southern rise. This unit was very rich in ceramics. Notable finds included large griddle fragments, two matching fragments of an eyed bone needle, a fragment of a greenstone petaloid celt, a potsherd disc, a carved bone bird effigy, and a large fragment of a ground stone artifact.

In 1999 we completed only five excavation levels to a depth of about 40 cm. We removed four OCR samples from the south profile for dating. The upper two samples, dating to
AD 1915 and 1738, reflect modern topsoil and deflation due to erosion. The lower two dates, AD 1366 and 1465, were obtained from samples in good context, and accord well with the upper-level dates from the previous unit. A sample of charcoal from Level 2 yielded a calibrated radiocarbon date of AD 1440-1665, which overlaps well with the OCR dates.

OCR and 14C dates from 1999 samples suggest that the site’s occupation may be assigned to the period AD 1350-1500+. The late dates suggest that the site may have been occupied at the time of the first Spanish contact with Jamaica, although we have found no artifacts of the Spanish contact period.

In 2000 we reopened this unit and continued, expecting to encounter bedrock quickly. Instead we excavated four more levels, through a rich midden zone and into a layer that seems to be loose decayed bedrock. This zone contained the occasional artifact or shell, however, so at the end of the season, we cut a half-meter window in the north end to see if we could locate the bedrock level. We continued for nearly another 50 cm, and in the southwest corner, skimmed the top of a buried midden. We had to stop here for the season.

This left us with a fairly defined stratigraphic sequence. The upper midden is the ca. 1350-1500 midden we had excavated in 1999. Then there is a rocky level that’s relatively light in cultural materials. Then there’s a lower occupation zone, with a lens of ash on top and a more organic midden below. Below that is the reddish gravelly decayed bedrock, and finally the deep midden that we barely located at the end of the season.

We got the real surprise when we received the lower-zone OCR dates. The two dates from the middle part of the sequence fit between A.D. 900 and 1100. I think that this confirms the idea from the previous unit that we have two occupations on the site.
The final OCR sample came from the reddish gravelly zone that separates the middle midden from the lowest midden. This sample yielded a date in the late 500s A.D. If this sequence holds up, the lowest midden will represent a third, earliest occupation that may predate A.D. 600. If so, it will be the earliest documented occupation of Jamaica.

Although I have had good results from OCR dating in sites in the Mississippi Valley, we will need additional data to assess this deepest date from Green Castle. We will not know if this potential early date is accurate until we excavate this deposit to bedrock and obtain a completed OCR sample column along with a set of corresponding radiocarbon dates. The possibility is exciting, but remains to be verified.

Another find requiring further attention is an apparent infant burial noted in the west profile of the southern trench. We hope to expand the unit to recover the infant in summer 2001.

So far, analysis of the materials recovered is in the early stages. Jessica Allgood conducted analysis of the faunal remains from our 1999 season, with some interesting results. Fish are well represented, indicating an exploitation strategy that “targeted inshore reef species.” Iguana is present but not significant. Bird bones were too fragmented to be identifiable. Mammals included New World mice in the uppermost level, Jamaican rice rat, hutia, and guinea pig. One specimen of guinea pig was identified in Level 2 of the middle trench, and one from Level 3 of the south trench, both of which appear to be undisturbed Taino deposits. This faunal assemblage belongs to the late occupation of the site, A.D. 1350-1500, and we look forward to analysis of the deeper deposits towards defining trends in subsistence strategies.

In 2000 we also excavated three other test units towards the west side of the site. All revealed deflated soil profiles above limestone bedrock. Only a single ball clay pipe stem
indicated any historic activity on the site, so that we see very little post-Taino contamination of the recovered artifact assemblage.

In conclusion, the Green Castle site contains complex and well-preserved deposits. It is difficult to be certain why the deposits on the east side are so much more productive than those on the west side. Our current hypothesis is that the Taino deliberately concentrated their activities on the sea-side of the hill, whether for the view, the breeze, or some other advantage we cannot suggest. To investigate this hypothesis will require testing on additional sites.

We note that the planned recovery of two burials, one adult and one infant, will be a significant contribution to the bioarchaeology of the Jamaican Taino. Additional OCR and radiocarbon samples will further our understanding of the chronology of the site. A large faunal sample and additional samples of pottery and other artifacts, distributed among six test units across the site, will enhance our knowledge of the cultural and behavioral patterns of the Taino inhabitants of the village. These patterns will be most informative when placed in a context of limited testing of additional sites in the Annotto Bay area.

James Lee, when he reported the nearby Coleraine site, noted that Spanish accounts referred to Annotto Bay as Guaiguata, commemorated in the modern name of the Wagwater River which empties into the bay. Cassidy, a historian, notes that “GUI- is a common first element in many Indian tribal names of the Caribbean and South America,” suggesting that Guaiguata may have meant something like “the people of Guata.”

Impressed by the size of Coleraine, Lee proposed that Coleraine was Guaiguata. Lee, however, had no dates, and our dates from Green Castle suggest that it was Guaiguata or was part of what the Spanish called Guaiguata.
It is possible that Guaiguata was a district rather than a village, or that the Spanish used the name for a set of settlements under the control of a single chief. We hope that our further research will address this possibility. In 1999 Robin Crum-Ewing, manager of Green Castle Estate, showed us another Taino site, the Newry site, on the plantation, and suggested that we might find Taino occupation on all of the high points overlooking the mouth of the Wagwater. Four such sites are known: Green Castle, Newry, Coleraine, and Iter Boreale.

Coleraine, Newry, and Green castle are within sight of each other. Certainly hearth smoke during the day, and open fires at night, would be easily visible among the three sites. It is our hypothesis that, if the three sites were occupied simultaneously in the late prehistoric period, they are unlikely to have been independent chiefdom-villages. Instead, they would have been part of a single chiefdom that the Spanish recognized as Guaiguata. Alternatively, if the sites were not occupied concurrently, we can study local Taino chiefdoms as single-village polities, with the added benefit of having short-term village sites to help construct a detailed archaeological sequence for the area.

Limited test excavations at the Newry site, Coleraine, and Iter Boreale should provide artifact, OCR and 14C samples to help assess their dates of occupation. These data, together with a critical assessment of the historical documentation regarding the Spanish name Guayaguata, will address questions of Taino settlement patterns and regional political organization on the eve of Columbus.

At this time, we are planning further excavations at the Green Castle site this coming summer, and analysis of the 1999-2000 finds is continuing. We look forward to reporting on further developments in the next few years.

In closing, we would like to acknowledge gratefully financial support from the
University of the West Indies, Murray State University, and W. Duncan MacMillan, without which this project would never have gotten in the ground.