

Ceramics and Chiefdom Organization in St. Mary Parish, Jamaica  
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Abstract

The Green Castle, Newry, Wentworth and Coleraine sites in Jamaica yielded radiocarbon dates indicating that the occupations form a sequence from approximately AD 900 to 1500. Green Castle probably was occupied as late as the Spanish entrada, and may belong to a Taino province that the Spanish called Guaiguata. Ceramic assemblages show patterned changes in decorative and rim features and an increase in the carinated form. Seriation of a key sub-assemblage from Newry suggests that the site may have hosted a minor occupation at the same time as later Green Castle, implying that Guaiguata incorporated more than one village.

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/In 1998, Philip Allsworth-Jones and I began a project of test excavations of village sites of the Jamaican Taino. Our major goal was to explore variation within and among villages towards a better understanding of the organization of Jamaican chiefdoms. Spanish accounts of the Taino suggest a system of paramount chiefdoms, with district chiefs and commoners comprising a three-tier hierarchy of authority and status. The descriptions refer mainly to Hispaniola, but the sketchier accounts of Jamaica indicate some form of chiefdom there also.

We chose the Annotto Bay area as the focus of our efforts, and excavated in three sites over five summers, from 1999 through 2003. We also made a quick side foray to the Wentworth site, above Port Maria, west of our primary area.

/There are four recorded Taino village sites around Annotto Bay. All occupy high hills overlooking the sea. The Green Castle and Newry sites are separated by a small river valley, and Coleraine is an isolated hill within the coastal plain around the bay. Iter Boreale is just around the corner, somewhat separated from the first three. We conducted testing at Green Castle for three years, and put one season each into Newry and Coleraine.

One of the things that attracted us to this study area was the proximity of these sites to each other, and what their relationships might tell us about chiefdom organization. / The

sites are almost within hailing distance of each other. This view shows the Green Castle site on the hill to the north, and Newry hill on the south. / Turning around from the same point, here is Coleraine, just east. Given studies of chiefdom size, it seems unlikely that these villages were independent political units—if they were occupied contemporaneously.

/This view shows Annotto Bay and the mouth of the Wagwater River from the slope of the Coleraine site. The name Wagwater is thought to be an English corruption of Guaiguata, a Spanish name for this area that they, in turn, apparently took from the local Taino. When James Lee recorded the Coleraine site in the 1960s, he suggested that Coleraine was the village that the Spanish called Guaiguata. Lee had no datable materials from the site. We wondered, then, whether Coleraine was in fact Guaiguata, or perhaps a component of a multi-village chiefly district that incorporated several sites around the bay. Only a good set of dates on these sites would answer that question.

/We excavated six test units on the Green Castle site. Four of them found limestone bedrock at very shallow levels. Two, however, yielded deeper middens. This deepest unit provided a cultural stratigraphy of occupation layers separated by limestone zones displaced by landslides from farther up the slope. The detritus soils of Jamaica have a tendency to slip when they are saturated by heavy rains, especially when they've

been disturbed by human activity. Based on radiocarbon dates, the two lower middens cannot be distinguished chronologically, and we treat the Green Castle sequence as an early and a late occupation separated by an effective abandonment.

/Besides good samples of ceramics, debitage, shell and faunal remains, two significant finds of the Green Castle project were human burials. Burial one is an adult, in a pit dug into the bedrock, with a large ceramic vessel beside his legs. Burial two is a child. Both were buried in a flexed position, and both belong to the later occupation.

/We excavated eight units at the Newry site, of which two provided deep middens. We can see another probable landslide zone in the profile on the left. These deposits also provided very good cultural assemblages, and several samples for radiocarbon dating.

/We finished the series with Coleraine, in 2003. Here again, most of the units were shallow, but we found one area with substantial midden. Unfortunately three of our four dating samples betrayed contamination from historic activities. The fourth sample came from the base of the midden, in a deposit of lighter soils.

/The basal deposit contained some very interesting artifacts, and the ceramics were indistinguishable from those of

the darker-colored midden above. The Coleraine date, then, can be considered a base date for this occupation.

/We also added a quick test excavation at the Wentworth site to our itinerary. A previous excavator, Basil Reid, had dug two test units and reported that he found both late prehistoric ceramics and an earlier ceramic type known as redware. Redware is characteristic of the Little River period, roughly AD 600 to 900, the earliest identified period of Jamaican prehistory. Redware is defined on the basis of a red slip on the surface of vessels. Redware has yet to be found in a stratified context underneath deposits of the later, White Marl period, to which our Annotto Bay sites belong. We therefore wanted to confirm this situation at Wentworth.

/We had time to excavate only a single small unit to bedrock at Wentworth, which was an extension from one of Reid's original profiles. We found no sign of redware. There are sherds of a reddish paste, but they lack the slip that defines redware. This is only a small test in a large and complex site, but the portion of the site that we tested belongs to the White Marl period, and fits right in with our Annotto Bay sites.

/The radiocarbon chronology, ignoring historically-contaminated dates, suggests that we have a sequence of sites. These dates are calibrated using the most recent version of the Stuiver and Reimer CALIB program. In the Annotto Bay area, the

early and late levels of Newry form the base of the sequence. Early Green Castle followed in the thirteenth century. The 1-sigma limits of the date from Coleraine overlap the early Green Castle date range, but recalling that the single Coleraine sample came from a visually distinct deposit at the base of the midden, I think we can fit the bulk of the Coleraine deposit between the early and late Green Castle occupations.

This sequence has two implications for our original questions. First, only late Green Castle is likely to have been occupied recently enough to have been or have been part of the Spanish Guaiguata. Second, we have no indication that more than one site was occupied substantially at any one time. It does not appear that the Annotto Bay sites formed a multi-village chiefdom at any time between about AD 900 and 1500. There was a single center for the Annotto Bay people at any given period.

The date from Wentworth fits comfortably between the early and late Green Castle dates. This has no significance for our investigation of settlement systems around Annotto Bay, but is very handy for one of our other goals, which is to document a ceramic sequence for this area of the Jamaican north coast.

/The ceramics from our sites belong to the White Marl ceramic style, originally defined through the work of Robert Howard and Ronald Vanderwal at the White Marl site on the south coast. The characteristic decoration was made by incising,

generally on the body of the vessel above the carination. I call the major variations open-triangle and filled triangle. Many, of course, are undecorated.

/Rims are sometimes decorated as well. Some rims are set off as a design field with solid, dashed or punctated lines parallel to the lip. Other rims have a fillet strip, which may or may not have the same rim decorations on them. There are also a few shallow vessels with flaring rims, as in the lower right, and a few boat-shaped vessel spouts. Simple effigies occur but are rare in our samples.

/The White Marl style is distinct from the Montego Bay or Fairfield style, found on the northwestern coast. In the Montego Bay style, the decorations are similar, but the design field is almost entirely restricted to a very wide rim fillet. These sherds are from collections excavated by Vanderwal in the 1960s and curated by the Jamaica National Heritage Trust. I recorded only a couple of sherds in these collections on which the incising could have been on the body of the vessel, and in those cases, I think it's likely that I was looking at filleted rims with the tops and bottoms broken away, and not body sherds.

/Graphing the frequencies of the major groups of sherds in our Annotto Bay sites (and Wentworth) in the order suggested by the radiocarbon dates, we do seem to have a bit of a sequence developing. Incising in general, and the filled triangle type

in particular, clearly increase in the late part of the sequence. There is some indication that the open triangle decoration also increases slightly with time. Here I've arbitrarily placed Coleraine later than Wentworth because the pattern makes more sense.

The slight perturbation in the sequence appears to be the Newry site. A closer look at the distribution of the sherds, though, shows that the decorated specimens concentrate in the uppermost levels of one of the deep tests.

/If I separate out those levels, and also the early from late middens, I can seriate the Newry deposit with decorated sherds into a position between Coleraine and late Green Castle. This sequence makes very good sense. The interesting implication here is that there indeed may have been a small late period occupation at Newry, even though our radiocarbon samples, which came from lower in the midden, did not catch it. If so, we can raise the possibility that Green Castle was the seat of Guaiguata, but that some settlement was dispersed away from the main village.

/I defined five rim shapes in the Annotto Bay sites. Rims 1-3 really are just variations, and probably should be merged for analytical purposes. Rim 4 is the filleted rim, and offers some suggestion of a battleship curve.

/Rim decorations also show some signs of a sequence. Plain rims diminish in the late period. A couple of decorations either increase or appear late, and noded rims have only a brief moment in the sequence.

/There is also some indication that carination increases in frequency with time. The column I have listed here as "shoulder" refers to sherds with carination angles. Base sherds, lugs and boat-shaped rims also look patterned, but there are few enough of them that I would not have much confidence in those sequences.

These sequences appear promising, but must be tested before they can be applied uncritically or to regions beyond our study area.

/The data from our project suggest a couple of preliminary conclusions. First, we have a sequence of occupations spanning the last five to six hundred years of Taino occupation around Annotto Bay. Ceramic frequency distributions through time suggest that the development of a fairly fine-scaled chronological sequence is possible. Further study of other classes of materials, notably dietary remains, may give us new insight into changing adaptations in the region.

Second, only the late occupation of Green Castle potentially reaches into the period of Spanish contact, and thus

may belong to what the Spanish called Guaiguata. I note that we recovered no sign of Spanish contact in the site.

Third, we have no indication that more than one large village was occupied here at any time. Assuming a chiefdom level of organization, we see no sign that several villages may have come under the control of a single chief. On the other hand, ceramic seriation raises the possibility that there was a small occupation at the Newry site in the late period. Also, Jo Stokes's data, which you just heard about, indicate that large villages were not the only locus of Taino habitation. It is possible that the large Annotto Bay villages were centers for a dispersed hinterland, and that we may have a two-tier settlement hierarchy. Only systematic survey efforts in the area can answer that question.

I also have to note that we were not able to test Iter Boreale, and we don't know how it might fit into the picture. Too, there is at least one other topographic situation, about where the O in ANNOTTO BAY is, that matches the three sites we tested, and it would be well worth finding out if there is a site on top of that hill.

Finally, it is also possible that Annotto Bay or Guaiguata was a subsidiary unit in a larger regional system comparable in scale to the complex chiefdoms described for Hispaniola. Our data cannot address that possibility.

So, clearly, there is a great deal more work to be done in this area of Jamaica before we can fully characterize the settlement system and its sociopolitical complexity.

Nonetheless, we have been able to show that the three sites we tested form a sequence rather than a contemporaneous group, and that there is good potential for studying change through time within the White Marl period in this area. At least that's a start.

I'd like to end by acknowledging a number of people and agencies who were important to supporting this project: Mr. and Mrs. W. Duncan MacMillan, for permission to work at Green Castle Estate and funding assistance; Mr. Robin Crum-Ewing and staff at Green Castle Estate for five years of invaluable logistical support; Mrs. Dahlia Kelly of the Jamaica Producers Group, Kingston, for conveying permission to work on the Coleraine site, and Mr. Horace Stewart for facilitating local arrangements; funding from the National Geographic Society, the Reed Foundation, the Murray State University Committee for Institutional Studies and Research, the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus, Committee for Research & Publications and Graduate Awards, and the U. S. Fulbright Scholar program; and the Jamaica National Heritage Trust for permits and other facilitations.

Thank you.