ARCHAEOLOGY IN JAMAICA: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Jamaica has a long tradition of archaeological research. Although much of the earliest efforts were undertaken mainly by non-professional archaeologists, a considerable amount of information exists on sites although much of the artifacts from these sites remain in private hands and collections. The past decade has seen a very high increase in archaeological research and many more systematic approaches, the utilization of improved standards of archaeological techniques and organized themes. Research projects centered on Port Royal, Drax Hall, New Seville as well as the search for caravels of Columbus which are very well known, have not only expanded considerably, but also taken on additional thematic dimensions.

The establishment of a research and teaching programme in Archaeology on the Mona Campus of the University of the West Indies, and the consequent development of the University of the West Indies Archaeological Research Project (UMARP), have recently opened an additional chapter on an important area: The archaeology of Maroon heritage in Jamaica. Aspects of these new developments constitute the subject of this paper. A brief discussion of the significance of Maroon heritage for an objective interpretation of the cultural history of Jamaica concludes the paper.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Archaeological research in Jamaica has taken many forms and covered varied themes since the earliest efforts were made as far back as the eighteenth century. In the past two decades, however, many more new approaches and themes have emerged which, put together, surpass all that the previous century and a half has witnessed. The reconstruction of the early migrations in the Caribbean, their routes and cultural development of the earliest inhabitants of different parts of the area, as well as the mystery surrounding their ways of life have, in the past, constituted the main subjects of interest.

The history of archaeological research in Jamaica clearly indicates that the earliest archaeological activities began from the period of English occupation of the island. By 1870 several studies that were archaeology-related had been conducted mainly by amateurs (Agorsah 1989) but activities became more intensive between that time and 1940. It was during the period, beginning 1940, that further increase in the intensity of research was realized and with several new dimensions. Consequently, the need for redefinition of the periods of Jamaica's history featured quite prominently in that period. Deliberate attempts to carry out archaeological research using improved standard techniques of archaeological investigation and dating which archaeology generally faced during the time generated the need for improved chronological schemes (Rouse and Allaire 1978).

The past of Jamaica, like those of other parts of the Caribbean may be divided into periods as follows (Agorsah 1990):

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(1) Prehistoric  
(a) Early prehistoric  
(b) Late prehistoric

(2) Historical  
(a) Early historical  
   (Pre-Columbus historical)  
(b) Late historical  
   (i) Spanish period Jamaica  
   (ii) English period Jamaica  
      - Early English period (1655-1838)  
      - Late English period I: (1838-1957)  
      - Late English period II: (1957-Now)

This chronological framework is a generalized one, and somehow different from some earlier schemes proposed by Kozlowski (1974) and Rouse and Allaire (1978). The arguments for an objective chronological framework for Caribbean Archaeology has been put together and hopefully when published (Agorsah forthcoming 1992) should open up a serious consideration of the matter among Caribbeanist as well as Americanist archaeologists.

Considerable work has been done to locate and document many sites of both the prehistoric and historic period although much more interest seems to have been taken to identify and discuss sites of the prehistoric period. The Archaeological Society of Jamaica has been mainly responsible for the information on many of the prehistoric sites (Agorsah, 1989). Recently, however, Historical Archaeology has taken over prominence with the site of Port Royal as the focus of much of what has been done so far (Aarons 1979, Bryce 1952; Buisséret 1966, 1967; Hamilton 1984; 1987; 1988) and later and until recently Drax Hall and New Seville (Aarons, 1983, 1984; Alberga 1983; Armstrong 1990) and the Archaeology of Maroon heritage (Agorsah 1990, 1991). Much of the “research” on the prehistoric period Jamaica has within the past ten years been relegated to the background with much of the collection of material centred in private hands. Not much is heard of such individual endeavours as there is the tendency to keep such explorations at a low profile. The reason for this situation is that more and more attention is being drawn to the laws regarding artifacts which require that they are placed under the control of the Jamaica National Heritage Trust.

Currently, research on the prehistoric period in Jamaica organized on a formal basis includes the Bellevue Estate archaeological excavations in St. Ann (Derring and Southerland 1991), analysis of ceramic artifacts from the site of Harbour View in St. Andrew (Wallace 1990) and a study of prehistoric subsistence by Fandrich at the Upton site in the Parish of St. Ann (Fandrich 1990), and on the southeast of Jamaica by Scudder (Scudder 1990). These are all strictly research undertaken for student projects and research papers.

Historically Archaeology in Jamaica has always been considered in the context of its broad definitions applicable in the context of the New World (South 1977, Schuyler 1978). Recent redefinition of the sub-discipline (Posnansky and Decorse 1986) has more clearly identified its scope and cross-cultural context as applicable particularly to sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean. The two-way contact implication, with both sides of the Atlantic given attention on an equal basis, and the availability of supporting documentary evidence are given consideration in the new definition. Posnansky and Decorse place special emphasis on the trend towards the study of the archaeology of the Diaspora that takes not only the colonial or Europeans involved as the major elements but also all other groups that have been connected in one way or another to the encounter of the Historical period. Consequently new
considerations, (themes and topics) in the historical Archaeology of the Caribbean have emerged that appear to confirm the completeness, at least more than previous ones, of the new definition.

Currently the New Seville project being directed by Douglas Armstrong (Armstrong and Kelly 1990) continues to bring to light. Armstrong and Kelly contend that spatial restrictions imposed on the adapted to the social background and needs of those groups of communities, to provide specific spatial patterns that define the socio-economic lifestyle of the slaves. The result, according to the research, is the emergence of distinctive house-yard compounds whose characteristics, the researchers think, were rooted in African cultural traditions. One of the interesting aspects of this particular study is the support that it gives to the model of the “local rule of spatial behaviour” advanced on the basis of an ethnographic study of typical traditional societies in Ghana, West Africa (Agorsah 1983, 1985, 1986, 1988, 1991). The most important aspect of the New Seville study is the Afro-Jamaican connections that the data accruing so far appears to demonstrate.

The search for African technological continuities in the Caribbean has engaged the attention of Candice Goucher, of Portland State University, for several years, (Goucher 1983, 1990). One of the sites in eastern Jamaica that has been well studied is Reeder’s Pen located in the Parish of St. Thomas. It occupied a considerable portion of the Parish of St. Thomas of the town of Morant Bay. Archaeological investigations started in October 1989 as part of an ongoing project being conducted by Goucher. A survey and a brief excavation at two main portions of the site of what remains today of the site, have been undertaken mainly to assess the nature of the operation of the iron and brass foundry established at the site in the dying years of the 18th century. The study of this site attempted to identify the technology used during the factory’s operation. It was hoped to eventually explain the contribution of the different categories of the labour force that operated and maintained the factory for few years of its survival, and to identify African technological continuities involved in the operations of the foundary.

Another major project of note is the Underwater Archaeology which Don Hamilton and the Jamaica National Heritage Trust have conducting for several years mainly at Port Royal and at St. Ann’s Bay, in search for the caravels of Columbus (Hamilton 1984, 1987, 1988). Although much is known from this research, the controversy surrounding the caravels of Columbus remain unsolved.

A very important area of study, clearly neglected in the Archaeology of Jamaica has been the archaeology of the heritage of Maroon societies in Jamaica (Agorsah 1990). Several reasons advanced for this omission cannot be discussed at this time. The neglect of the heritage of the Maroons is not limited to Jamaica, although it is more serious in Jamaica than in many other Caribbean countries. Fortunately, the problem appears to be receiving some attention in recent studies, and much of what follows will discuss additional dimensions arising from these studies.

One of the most significant developments in the archaeology of Jamaica is the introduction of Archaeology into the teaching and research programmes of the University of the West Indies (U.W.I.) at Mona in 1987. It was after a review of the state of Archaeological research in Jamaica that the U.W.I. Mona Archaeological Research Project (UMARP) consequently identified Archaeology of the heritage of the Maroons as the area that has been neglected in total during the entire history of the development of archaeological research in Jamaica. It was noted (Agorsah 1989) that even though many researchers have attempted to write the history of the past of Maroon societies in Jamaica, archaeological consideration has been almost zero. Also, although there is a considerable amount of documentary material on Maroon societies of Jamaica, almost all come down to us only in the context of their military encounter with colonial forces.
Archaeologists and historians have, over the years concentrated on the elaboration of the encounter and placed little attention on the history of the development of the cultural traditions of the Maroons in Jamaica. It is, therefore, hardly possible to talk about a “cultural history” of the Maroons although one could almost do so for other Maroon societies in other parts of the New World such as those in Suriname and the Guianas in South America. It is important that the character of Maroon adaptation in Jamaica be clearly understood not only of themselves but also for comparison with Maroons of other places.

RECENT INVESTIGATIONS

Seventeenth to nineteenth century maps exist that indicate the approximate territories occupied by the Maroons at different times, and it is with the aid of these maps that archaeological reconnaissance and surveys can identify evidence such as dwelling sites, guerrilla war camps, hideouts, burial and battlegrounds and military tracks as well. Several examples of these maps indicate the limits as well as the changing nature of the settlements. From other maps can be gleaned information on the manner in which the Maroons distributed themselves within the individual settlements. For example a 1757 map of Accompong in western Jamaica and an 1842 sketch map of what was formerly known as Trelawny Town (Maroon Town), are useful for a study of the pattern of distribution of families within those individual settlements. A study of the social relationships and the development of the families in those settlements over time are issues that are crucial for the explanation of the nature and mechanisms by which Maroon cultural practices have maintained continuity until the present day. It would, therefore, be possible to trace the evolution of the modern social networks, families, roles, gender and behaviour patterns of Maroon societies on which information is very minimal in colonial documentation, which unfortunately is the only main source of Maroon history.

Names of places in areas inhabited by Maroons at one time or another, like those of other groups of people elsewhere, are of considerable use for archaeological research and reconstruction. Such names as Parade, Gun Hill, Look-out Point, Kindah, Bathing Place, Pette River Bottom, Watch Hill, Gun Barrel, Nanny Town and Killdead are a few examples of such useful names. In some of the modern Maroon towns such as Accompong in the West of Jamaica there are sections or divisions that appear to have associations with family groupings over time. In Accompong, for example, family names can be associated with specific areas in the town, although it is claimed that there is no formal arrangement for such a pattern of distribution or association (Francis 1991).

DISTRIBUTION OF SITES (Figure 1)

Spanish Maroon Sites:

Maroon sites have been identified in the Juan de Bolas area of the Guanaboa Vale and in the hills above it. These sites are referred to in historical documents as the earliest of the runaway hideouts and areas of resistance. These settlements, more than any others, are most likely to provide evidence for the Maroon settlements that link the prehistoric period with the historical. In this same area is located the important prehistoric site of Mountain River Cave with its evidence of rock art which has been studied in some detail (Watson 1988). Evidence exists that indicates that by 1601 the Spanish Government was already sending troops as far afield as the Blue Mountains to flush out groups of people who had escaped from their control.
**The Cockpit Country Sites:**

The Accompong area in the Cockpit country of St. Elizabeth parish abounds in sites. Some of them are the Peace Cave, Gun Hill, Pette River Bottom, Big Ground Grass, Parade and Kindah, to the north of Accompong, passing through a modern cattle pen to the north from Kindah one descends very rugged hill down to the location of the burial ground of Kojo, the popular Maroon leader who organized the Maroons in a series of guerrilla warfare in the early eighteenth century. Located to the east of this burial area is Big Ground Grass. One of the main features of the area is a stream, to the south of Big Ground Grass, which flows into the Black River in the direction of Aberdeen. The famous cave where the peace treaty of 1739 was signed between the English and the Maroons is located at an entry point on a route linking Accompong to Aberdeen. The Peace Cave overlooks the Pette River Bottom where the last battle between the two parties may have taken place. To the north of Accompong, and near Maroon Town, formerly Trelawny Town, are burials apparently of members of the colonial administration.

**The Blue Mountain Sites:**

In eastern Jamaica in the Blue Mountain region, many sites have been identified, some with building foundations. Brownsfield, Gun Barrel, Watch Hill, Marshall’s Hall, Killdead and Nanny Town are but a few of these. These and other similar sites are located in inaccessible areas around Windsor, Seaman’s Valley, Moore Town and Comfort Castle, all in the parish of Portland. Generally the environment of the sites is fragmented because of the mountainous features and the deep gullies on the Rio Grande, Negro River, Dry River, Stony River and their tributaries which cut through the territory. Owing to the thick vegetation growth in the area of the location of many of these sites, considerable floralturbation occurs although such a situation has also sheltered some of the sites. Landslides and other turbatious activities such as by gravitational pull down the slopes of the mountains and hills, as well as disturbances from the war activities during the period of Maroon resistance, appear to have changed the face of many of the sites.

Marshall’s Hall, also noted elsewhere as Marches Hall, is located near Comfort Castle in the parish of Portland close to the Dry River. The site is interesting because of its structural features and also for the fact that oral traditions of the Maroon exist that link the site to the modern Maroon capital town Moore Town historically considered as “New Nanny Town”. Surface finds consist of 18th and 19th century European ceramics, house platforms and steps to rooms. The site partly overlooks the valley of the Jackmadooree, a spring which flows into the Dry River. Settlement of the site of Marshall’s Hall is said to have been in family units each family occupying specific quarters of the site. More studies are envisaged in the near future.

The Brownsfield site, is located near the Snake River near Alligator Church Bridge, Portland, high on a hill that overlooks the road that skirts the modern Brownsfield settlement. House structures are the main features with a few fragments of ceramics and green glass bottles scattered here and there on the surface. The locations of Brownsfield and Marshall’s Hall are significant because they appear to support the speculation that their positioning is characteristic of defense needs of Maroon settlements. The choice of such a location was expected owing to the situation in which the Maroons found themselves after they escaped from captivity. A test excavation was conducted in a part of the area. But it turned out to have been one of the most disturbed portions of the site. Brownsfield continues to be disturbed as maroons have started moving back into the area for agricultural purposes.

The site that has attracted much attention is Nanny Town. Since January 1991, the site has seen a series of excavations. Aspects of the preliminary study are now in the sections that follow.
THE NANNY TOWN SITE

Nanny Town site is accessible only by hunters' trails or by air. A preliminary trip was undertaken in the third week of January of 1991 in order to identify the route to the site from the nearest accessible modern town. Mr. Leopold Shelton, Chief Maroon Guide assisted by Garcia and Clinton West guided the trip. Two routes were identified one leading from Windsor and Portland. Beginning from either town would require at least twelve hours. The route (Figure 2) takes one through rugged country and passes by or through other Maroon sites such as Pumpkin Hill, Mammea Hill, Gun Barrel and Killdead. It is rocky, rugged, bushy, muddy and if it rains, wet.

In February 1991 an expedition as part of the second phase of the research was carried out, it was sponsored by the Department of History of the University of the West Indies at Mona and, and the Archaeological Society of Jamaica (ASJ) and fully supported by the Jamaica Defence Force, with contributions from expedition members. A total number of thirty-three persons, some from the United States of America, participated in the expedition. An excavation of the Nanny Town site envisaged for August-September is the next step in this project.

Archaeological investigations initiated since 1988, appears, from the above, to have identified several sites and aspects of Maroon archaeology that could be researched in order to increase not only the quantity of material but also to enhance the quality of interpretation.

A reconstruction of the past of Maroons must also be done in the context of the territories they occupied and the special and changing features of these over time. For example, the Cockpit country in western Jamaica with its remarkable but harsh geomorphology of tropical karst and vegetation was the scene of some of the Maroons wars in which the Maroons are considered to have displayed their extraordinary military and organizational abilities. How did they cope with the environment? What were the mechanisms that enabled them to be able to cope with the harsh conditions at the time, socially, economically, technologically and militarily? It is important to identify the character and mechanism of the functional adaptation through time. This is the ultimate goal of the research.

The strategies of the study of the Maroons is to use evidence from all sources that are accessible to achieve an objective interpretation of the cultural history and behaviour patterns of the Maroons of Jamaica and to determine the factors human and national that contributed to the location and character of their settlements. It is hoped also to be able to obtain material for dating that would provide a chronological framework for the interpretation of Maroon heritage of Jamaica generally. The excavation of ancient Maroon sites that have been identified and located, should, hopefully, go a long way to reveal evidence that would provide a clearer picture of the past of the Maroons, than obtains today.

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THE MAROONS OF JAMAICA

Figure 1

NANNY TOWN (Blue Mountains)

Figure 2