Initial Feasibility and Reconnaissance at the Cabrits Garrison, Dominica

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Abstract: Historical archaeologies of Caribbean colonial history have focused predominately on the economic, social and cultural aspects of the plantation system, while the military sites integral to the defense and maintenance of the Caribbean plantocracy have received far less attention. The Cabrits Garrison, located on the Caribbean island of Dominica, was occupied by the British between 1765 and 1854. The goals of the following paper are 1) to describe my ongoing dissertation research at the Cabrits, 2) to consider the important role material culture and spatial relationships played in the daily practices of European and African groups occupying this site between the 18th and 19th centuries, and 3) to provide a comparative approach investigating the material lives and interaction patterns of these groups in a changing Atlantic World.

Résumé: Les archéologies historiques d'histoire coloniale des Antilles ont convergé précédemment sur les aspects économiques, sociaux et culturels du système de plantation, pendant que l'armée place intégral dans la défense et l'entretien du plantocracy des Antilles a reçu loin moins d'attention. La Garnison de Cabrits, localisée sur la petite antille de Dominique, a été occupé par les Britanniques entre 1765 et 1853. Les objectifs du papier suivant sont 1) décrire mon sur-aller recherche de traité au Cabrits, 2) considérer le rôle l'important culture matérielle et les relations spatiales jouées dans les pratiques quotidiennes de groupes d'Européen et Africain occupant ce site entre les 18e et dix-neuvièmes siècles, et 3) fournir une approche comparative examinant les vies de matériel et les modèles d'interaction de ces groupes dans un changer le Monde atlantique.

Resumen: La arqueología histórica de la historia colonial del Caribe se ha enfocado predominantemente en los aspectos económicos, sociales y culturales del sistema de plantación, mientras los emplazamientos militares que eran integrales para la defensa y el mantenimiento de la plantación del Caribe no han recibido la atención que se merecen. La Guarnición de Cabrits, ubicada en la isla del Caribe llamada Dominica, fue ocupada por los ingleses entre los 1765 y 1853. Los objetivos de este ensayo son los siguientes: 1) describir mis investigaciones progresivas para mi disertación en La Guarnición de Cabrits 2) considerar el rol importante que la cultura y las relaciones espaciales jugaban en las prácticas diarias entre los grupos de Europeos y Africanos cuando ambos ocupaban y compartían el mismo hábitat durante el siglo dieciocho y diecinueve, y por último 3)prover un enfoque comparativo que investiga las vidas materiales y el patrón de interacciones de estos dos grupos en el Mundo Atlántico en plena evolución.
Introduction

Too solid to be unmarked, too conspicuous to be candid, they embody the ambiguities of history. They give us the power to touch it, but not that to hold it firmly in our hands—hence the mystery of their battered walls. We suspect that their concreteness hides secrets so deep that no revelation may fully dissipate their silences. We imagine the lives under the mortar, but how do we recognize the end of a bottomless silence?

(Trouillot 1995:30)

Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s treatment of the apparent “silences” involved in the production of history is a useful way of conceptualizing the colonial fortification. Fortifications are dominant features on the landscape harkening back to a period of militarization throughout the Caribbean. They are most often considered in relation to their architectural accomplishments, the famous generals, admirals, and pirates who spent brief periods of time in these settings, or in terms of their role in phenomenal outbreaks of war. Missing from this history is the role of colonial fortifications in the development of Caribbean societies. While representative of global defense projects, these structures have given rise to numerous local histories. Surprisingly, historical archaeologies of these contexts have been primarily absent (Watters 2001) besides for a few noted examples (Alleyne and Sheppard 1990; Crips 2003; Jane 1982; Klippel 2001; Schroedl and Ahlman 2002; Smith 1994). I recount my own archaeological efforts at The Cabrits Garrison, Dominica, occupied by the British between 1765 and 1854, with the intention of providing potential avenues of interpretation on these types of sites as well as illuminating their significance in the creation of more representational narratives of Caribbean history and development.

Physical Context

Dominica is located between the French islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe in the most northerly of the Windward Islands Groups in the Lesser Antilles of the Caribbean (Burra 1953). It is situated near the center of the arc of the Lesser Antilles and is 29 miles long, 16 miles wide, and under 300 square miles (Honychurch 1995). Out of all the islands in the Lesser Antilles, Dominica has the most extensive undisturbed forests, while its rainforest is considered the finest in the Caribbean (Caribbean Conservation Association 1991: 15). Dominica is also the most mountainous island in the Caribbean, with an altitude reaching 5,000 ft. above sea level. This rugged landscape is composed of virtually all volcanic material with deep to shallow clay soils covering this parent material (Lang 1967: 20) (Figure 1).

The Cabrits Garrison is located along the drier, highly seasonal northeastern coast of the island. The twin hills of the Cabrits are the cones of extinct volcanoes. This area was once a separate island but was connected over time by the movement of sand, coral and stone through currents and tides (Honychurch 1983). These hills are now covered with dry scub-Woodlands and surrounded to the east by mangrove swamps. There is less chemical weathering of the volcanic parent material here than in the wetter zones. Weathering along this coast has produced a “montmorillonitic, smectoid clay,” a soil type comprising about 9% of Dominica’s total soil composition and one characterized by its shallow depth and silica pan (Lang 1967).
Historical Context

Beginning in the 16th century, a revolution introducing new military methods and strategies spread from the land of the Hapsburgs and westward into England. As outlined by Geoffrey Parker (1996), this military revolution entailed four changes: (1) the widespread transformation of tactics, (2) a marked growth in army size, (3) the adoption of more ambitious and complex strategies designed to bring these armies into action, and (4) the overall accentuation of the impact of war on society. In addition, Parker adds to this picture the creation of specialized military education, the articulation of the positive laws of war, and the creation of an enormous amount of literature on the operations of war. These revolutionary changes in the military complex were inevitably spread to a variety of regions around the world through the colonizing efforts of European nations.

By the time the Spanish stumbled into the Caribbean in 1492 a new art of war had emerged—one characterized by the development of an administrative structure dedicated to the protection and expansion of political and economic interests through force, typically in the form of warships, standing armies, and fortifications. It is through these changes in European military thinking and practices that the role of government was transformed, resulting in the formation of the modern state by the eighteenth century (Parker 1996:4). Thus, a practical starting point for a clearer understanding of modernization in the Caribbean is through the analysis of the many fortifications dotting the landscape.

In accordance with the treaty of Paris in 1763, marking the end of the Seven Years War, Dominica was transferred to the British (Honychurch 1982:11, 1995:61; Niddrie 1966:67). It was the last Caribbean island to be colonized. Even though Dominica remained largely unsettled and thus unproductive economically throughout the eighteenth century (Atwood 1971), the island’s potential plantation profits and, more importantly, its strategic location became points of recurring contention between the French and the British (Boromé 1969:36). As a result of mounting pressures from abroad and within, the British began concentrating troops in Dominica and constructing a series of strategic military outposts. Northern areas along the Leeward coast, including Portsmouth and Prince Rupert’s Bay, were initially considered to be the first and most important areas to be secured by fortifications on the island (Honychurch 1995: 68) (Figure 2). The development of Fort Shirley began in 1765 at Prince Rupert’s Bay, but these plans were disrupted as a result of the poor environmental conditions (Honychurch 1983).

The Fort Shirley battery is situated between the twin peaks of the Cabrits where the rest of the garrison complex is distributed. It overlooks Prince Rupert’s Bay, a natural seaport located near the town of Portsmouth and the best access to sea on the island (Honychurch 1983). Portsmouth was initially planned as the site for the colony’s capital following Dominica’s exchange to the British in the 1763 treaty. But the swampy area surrounding Portsmouth was teeming with malaria and yellow fever, forcing the location of the capital to be moved to Roseau, located in the southeast of the island. As a result of this transition, construction of the fort was halted and not resumed until the 1770s.

Despite the epidemiological conditions at Portsmouth the strategic value of the neighboring Cabrits headland was unquestionable (Clyde 1980). The first military post was established in this area in 1771, beginning a long process of intermittent construction until around 1813. By the late eighteenth-century Fort Shirley was one of the most substantial garrisons in all of the Caribbean (Figure 3). Encompassing an area of 200 acres stood “one fort, seven batteries, six cisterns, powder magazines, ordinance storehouses, barracks and officers’
quarters to house and provide for 500 men and a company of artillery with officers” (Honychurch 1983: 15). This period also marked the introduction of the West India Regiment into the British colonial military complex (Buckley 1979, 1998; Dyde 1997; O’Shaughnessy 1996).

Having invested a large amount of resources and manpower in the war in America the British Caribbean was now vulnerable to an attack from France, who was eager to regain a dominant stance in the region. The British were also met with internal problems in Dominica. Their troops were dying off faster than they could be replaced. The harsh climate, formidable terrain, attacks from maroons, and epidemics were too much for a land force suited for warfare in different environmental conditions to handle (Buckley 1979:7; Honychurch 1983:21). This stress is indicated by the fact that the entire British army numbered fewer than 40,000 men in 1793 (Buckley 1979:3). Thus, the political and economic necessity to incorporate black troops into the British army was clear. In Dominica, the 8th West India Regiment was first garrisoned at Fort Shirley from 1795 to 1802, numbering some 500 men by 1801.

On April 9th, 1802, enslaved African soldiers in the British 8th West India Regiment garrisoned at The Cabrits mutinied. During this brief episode, seven Europeans were killed, while others were captured and subsequently freed unharmed. The British response left 100 mutineers dead or injured and an additional seven more black soldiers were sentenced to death when found guilty of participating in this act (Buckley 1980). This historic event, limited in duration but meaningful in breadth, contributed to the 1807 Mutiny Act; a law that freed some 10,000 slave soldiers and one of the first acts of mass emancipation in the British Empire (Buckley 1979). The composition of this mutiny also reveals the shortage of white recruits for regular British military service due to high mortality among European troops in the area and the enormous scope of wars with the French. In addition, this act of resistance draws attention to another dimension of slavery—one outside the normal scope of plantation labor and rooted in the dynamics of military strategy and culture. This important window into the internal dynamics of British colonial society provokes an investigation of the factors contributing to the variability in experience of the distinct groups occupying the Cabrits Garrison.

**The Cabrits Garrison: Approaching the Fortified Caribbean Landscape**

To investigate this internal dimension of British colonial history in the Caribbean I will concentrate on the daily practices of British officers, African slave laborers, and African slave soldiers at Fort Shirley, Dominica between circa 1765 and 1856. Practice theory is a fundamental perspective to my study as it connects the everyday strategies of individuals operating within material and spatial domains to collective processes of history (Bourdieu 1977; Orser 2007; Pauketat 2001). Investigations have offered insights into the manner material cultures and spatial organizations affect patterns of human behaviors and social networks central in the creation and reification of group identities. While these studies are important, they routinely separate social and cultural contexts from their natural environments, creating a dichotomy emphasizing the power of the social in the study of human history and detaching the biological from social reality (Mrzowsk 2006: 17). My continuing research combines historical, archaeological and environmental approaches to reconstruct the day-to-day material and social interactions linked to individual survival and group maintenance in the total context within which the history of the Cabrits unfolded.
I have spent three field seasons (2006-2008) investigating areas of archaeological significance at the fort. The Cabrits Garrison is spread out across 200 acres. Three areas within this zone will be targeted: the slave village located in a low area in the southeast between the Inner and Outer Cabrits, the officer’s quarters located in the Fort Shirley battery, and the soldier’s barracks located in the northwest of the Outer Cabrits. Archaeological investigations will focus on locating domestic or household deposits through surface survey and subsurface testing to provide evidence of daily practice and social interaction.

**Locus A: Slave Village**

The slave village is present on a number of War Office maps of the fort. The six houses are labeled as “negro huts” or “pioneer huts”. During the summers of 2007 and 2008 I carried out mapping and testing of the area. Extensive artifactual evidence is distributed across the surface of this area, indicative of past occupation as well as disruptive formation processes, including erosion from the above slope. Shovel test pits have indicated that cultural deposits extended to 60 cm where a thick layer of volcanic tuff is then encountered. To date, no materials have been found within this stratum. All the material culture excavated from this locus has been cleaned and cataloged. Preliminary results reveal a high concentration of bottle glass, ceramics, and tobacco related objects. So far, a low concentration of architectural materials and food remains has been recovered (Figure 4). More adequate conclusions await further material analysis and excavations.

Extant architectural evidence is concentrated in a few areas across the site. These piles of stones were perhaps used for cabin foundations, the remains of yardscapes, or even mounds marking burials. Thus far, no stone foundations or post molds have been identified. Additional mapping and testing will aid in the interpretation of these features as well as assist in determining whether there is a relationship between this form of architecture and other vernacular forms present in surrounding villages.

**Locus B: Officer’s Quarters**

The Officer’s Quarters have received a substantial amount of attention. Renovations began in the 1980s under the direction of Dr. Lennox Honychurch and the building is now restored for public use. Unsystematic excavations of the site was conducted in the 1980s by a group from the Boys Brigade and revealed a substantial amount of artifactual evidence. These materials were left in a wheelbarrow unwashed and not cataloged until I “rediscovered” them in 2006 (Figure 5). While lacking provenience I intend on using these materials, along with archaeological reports on British Officer material life (Crips 2003), as a comparative data set to contrast enslaved laborer and enslaved British soldier assemblages. These materials await further analysis upon my return.

**Locus C: Soldier’s Barracks**

In 2008 I began initial clearing and mapping of the soldier’s barracks in the Outer Cabrits. Like the slave village, this context is incredibly overgrown, but in contrast to locus A, the soldier’s barracks appear to be relatively undisturbed. This complex exists on a part of the site not accessible to tourists. Extant foundations separated by platforms indicate the presence of
4 barracks. Work in 2009 and beyond will focus on revealing walls and floor surfaces as well as collecting materials associated with the lives of soldiers at Fort Shirley.

**Significance**

Limited historical archaeological work in either Dominica or on Caribbean colonial military complexes has been done and few historical archaeologists have investigated the material lives of both African slaves and soldiers at these sites, especially in relation to their positions in the political and cultural economies of the British colonial structure. The Caribbean fortification provides a variety of windows into the organization and conditions under which a diverse set of people lived, interacted, and usually died. Military sites like the Cabrits Garrison have typically evaded scholarly attention due to their seemingly “backwater” location and lack of economic contribution. This hierarchy of investigation favors tangible achievement and creation, which has resulted in framing Caribbean social development in relation to the economic contributions of plantation slavery.

My work at the Cabrits depicts, compares, and interprets the material lives and interaction patterns of these three groups in a changing Atlantic World. This comparative, object-centered approach scrutinizes the daily practices of these colonial subjects to best expose contradictions and potentialities hidden in rigid models of institutional life. My ongoing dissertation research addresses a key question pertaining to this complex period of continuous military conflict and economic volatility across the Atlantic World: How were the social and material networks of British soldiers, African slave laborers, and African slave soldiers at this site differently conditioned by a harsh environment and a British Empire that was changing politically and economically? This work will contribute new insights into the interdisciplinary field of transatlantic and colonial studies and will benefit African descendant communities who desire to know this complicated history. The time is now to lift these sites out of relative obscurity through research programs dedicated to their study and preservation for future generations.
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Figures

Figure 1
1991 Ordnance Map

Figure 2
“Dominica 24th Sept. 1832”

Figure 3
MPH 1/18 “General Plan of Prince Rupert’s Head-1800”

Figure 4
Photos taken by author
Figure 5

Photo taken by author