Preliminary Archaeological Investigations at Betty’s Hope, Antigua: The Plantation as System and Socioenvironmental Change in the English Caribbean and Atlantic World

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Abstract: This paper will focus on recent archaeological investigations at Betty’s Hope, Antigua, a former sugar plantation which operated from 1651 until 1944. The objective of my research is to link two theoretical approaches to the archaeological data. The first approach is to gain a further understanding of the relationship between the World Systems paradigm and the impact of agriculture and land use in the English Caribbean, whereas the second approach focuses on recent research in landscape archaeology studies. In this regard, as an island plantation with maritime linkages, Betty’s Hope serves as an ideal laboratory to research the sugar plantation as a constructed system of people, power dynamics, landscape ecology, and technology at both the local and regional levels, as well as connecting to the greater Atlantic world.

Résumé: Ce document portera sur les récentes investigations archéologiques à Betty's Hope, Antigua, une ancienne plantation de sucre qui a fonctionné de 1651 jusqu'en 1944. L'objectif de ma recherche est de lier les deux approches théoriques aux données archéologiques. La première approche est d'acquérir une meilleure compréhension de la relation entre le paradigme des systèmes du monde, et l'impact de l'agriculture et l'utilisation des terres dans les Caraïbes anglophones, tandis que la deuxième approche se concentrera sur les recherches récentes en études de paysage archéologie. À cet égard, comme une plantation de l'île avec des liens maritimes, Betty's Hope constitue un laboratoire idéal pour étudier la plantation de sucre comme un système constitué de personnes, la dynamique du pouvoir, de l'écologie du paysage, et de la technologie, tant au niveau local et régional, ainsi que connexion à une plus grande du monde atlantique.

Resumen: Este documento se centrará en los recientes investigaciones arqueológicas en Betty's Hope, Antigua, una antigua plantación de azúcar que funcionó desde 1651 hasta 1944. El objetivo de mi investigación es relacionar dos enfoques teóricos con los datos arqueológicos. El primer enfoque es obtener una mayor comprensión de la relación entre el paradigma de los sistemas mundiales y el impacto de la agricultura y el uso de la tierra en el Caribe Inglés, mientras que el segundo enfoque se centra en investigaciones recientes en los estudios de arqueología del paisaje. En este sentido, como una plantación de la isla con los vínculos marítimos, Betty's Hope sirve como un laboratorio ideal para la investigación de la plantación de azúcar como un sistema construido de personas, la dinámica del poder, la ecología del paisaje, y la tecnología, tanto a nivel local y regional, así como conectarse con el mundo una mayor Atlántico.
Introduction

This paper will focus on recent archaeological investigations at Betty’s Hope, Antigua, a former sugar plantation which operated from 1651 until 1944. The objective of my research is to link two theoretical approaches to the archaeological data. The first approach is to gain a further understanding of the relationship between the World Systems paradigm and the impact of agriculture and land use in the English Caribbean, drawing on Crumley (1994) and Hornborg and Crumley (2007). The second approach is based on recent research in landscape archaeology studies as proposed by Ucko and Layton (1999), Ashmore and Knapp (1999), Gosden (1994; 2004), and others. In this regard, as an island plantation with maritime linkages, Betty’s Hope serves as an ideal laboratory to research the sugar plantation as a constructed system of people, power dynamics, landscape ecology, and technology at both the local and regional levels, as well as connecting to the greater Atlantic world. This paper is an effort toward developing ideas for an eventual book; any suggestions and ideas by colleagues are certainly welcome at this juncture.

Brief Background

As a summer field school that I direct through the Department of Anthropology at California State University, Chico, the Betty’s Hope Project had its first two field seasons during the summers of 2007 and 2008, with a planned field season for the summer of 2009. Located on Antigua, Betty’s Hope is currently managed as a nonprofit organization, the Betty’s Hope Trust, and is currently on a list for consideration as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

The site has had a long occupation history. Betty’s Hope was founded by Colonel Chris Keynell in 1651, but was granted to Christopher Codrington I in 1668 by the English Crown. Until its sale by the Codrington family in 1944, the plantation operated continuously for almost 300 years, pre- and post-emancipation, thus allowing for a long-term, albeit, complex, historical continuity in one place, within the purview of the Codrington “dynasty,” mostly as typically absentee landlords.

Although the English plantation system on Antigua is a significant part of its history, Antigua’s archaeological past extends far back into prehistory to the Archaic (3000-200 B.C.) and Ceramic (500 B.C.-A.D.1493) periods. The Historical Period (1493 to 1925), began with the first English colonists arriving in 1632, lead by Captain Edward Warner.

Betty’s Hope lies at the heart of the Central Plain region of the island, which is known for its fertile soils, and ringed by a coastline of eroded volcanic rock. Although Betty’s Hope was the largest sugar estate on the island, its size was not the determining factor to investigate its archaeological potential, but rather, the longevity of the plantation’s existence, its good preservation, and the availability of the Codrington Papers housed in the National Archives of Antigua and Barbuda makes Betty’s Hope an ideal site in which to study culture change in greater detail from a broad anthropological perspective.

Currently a stopover on the island’s tourist route, the good preservation of Betty’s Hope allows visitors to possibly imagine what life may have been like on a British sugar plantation, and incidentally, has great potential for research on the archaeology of tourism. Existing structures comprise two windmills, one which is restored, the Cistern complex, a former storeroom that now serves as the Visitor’s Center and on-site museum, the Still House, and Manager’s House. Placards are placed throughout the site with tourist information, and the site is regularly maintained and supervised by my colleague Dr. Reginald Murphy, Antigua’s
archaeologist, and with whom this project owes a debt of gratitude.

The 2007 and 2008 Field Seasons

The main goals and objectives of the last two field seasons were to fully map the site and to begin full-scale excavations in the area of the former Great House. Although remains of the sugar-producing complex, such as the windmills and Still House are still extant, the Great House complex was chosen for three key reasons. First, little is known about the house and its associated complex of buildings. Second, the house served as the seat of English government in the Caribbean from 1688 to 1704, when Christopher Codrington I and II, father and son, both served as Governors General for the English Crown for the Leeward Islands. Finally, this complex of buildings also served as the heart of the plantation’s dynamics.

Using a Nikon Total Station and AutoCAD, the site was mapped in 2007 and 2008, resulting in a new detailed site plan; artifact plotting and spatial patterning for the 2008 field season is still in progress, as database entry continues. Interestingly, mapping and surveying of the site revealed the precise and careful placement of buildings by its English architects and surveyors, which is also evident at the 18th-century British forts throughout the island.

Excavation units were laid out in 2 x 2 m squares, with teams of two students per unit, with a total of 25 units excavated in three arbitrary levels, which comprised Level 1 as surface/subsurface soil, Level 2 as mainly fill, and Level 3, which includes the walls and foundations of the Great House and its adjacent outside area. A mystery feature, believed to be an outdoor meat hanger, was also discovered and excavated in 2008. At the end of the 2008 field season, the excavation units remained exposed, but protected, as part of the Antiguan Government’s efforts to educate the public about archaeology at Betty’s Hope.

Data Collection and Analysis

Because Betty’s Hope spanned three centuries of occupation, consequently, in two field seasons, we uncovered stone walls, foundations, and floors, as well as materials spanning the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. Artifacts comprise a multitude of English ceramics, such as Pearlware, stone and print transfer wares, Chinese porcelain, and English and Dutch Delftwares. Other artifacts included Afro-Antiguan earthenware, sugar pot remains, glass wine bottle and stemware fragments, numerous iron nails, musket balls, window glass, slate roof tiles, and plaster elements. During the 2008 field season, a number of sewing notions were recovered, as well as children’s toys, including a marble, parts of a chess set, and a toy gentleman with a top hat! Hundreds of faunal remains consisted mainly of goat, cow, and fish vertebra.

Relative dating derived from English clay pipe stems and ceramics, provide a date range consistent with the site’s long occupation, with some recent debris. Samples of the window glass, wine bottles, and stemware were sent to the Corning Museum of Glass to be analyzed by Dr. Robert Brill, results of which are pending.

Spatial distribution of artifacts yielded general patterns rather than specific clusters or concentrations of particular artifacts. At this juncture, the preliminary data can be interpreted as typical for English occupation, consistent with other sites on the island and in the Eastern Caribbean region.

Historical archaeology on Antigua continues to have exciting prospects. Most historical period archaeology has been conducted at Nelson’s Dockyard by Dr. Murphy, as well as sections
of the former Warner plantation site, Green Castle Estate, and various fort sites excavated by my colleagues, Drs. Tamara Varney, Christy de Mille, and Beau Cripps, who have been working on the island for over the last 12 years, and, more recently, Samantha Rebovich, a doctoral student at Syracuse University.

The goals of the coming 2009 field season are to extend excavation units to the east and north of last year’s units, and to conduct shovel test pits in other areas around the site.

Theoretical Framework for Betty’s Hope

Ever since Gordon Willey’s groundbreaking research on settlement patterns in the Virú Valley, Peru, the meaning of landscape in archaeology has changed as the winds of processual and post-processual archaeology have shifted. In this regard, past and current scholarship in plantation studies, beginning with Sidney’s Mintz’s powerful anthropological assessment of the introduction of sugar in his *Sweetness and Power* (1985), have focused on a number of important research areas. In contemporary scholarship, plantations have come to symbolize European expansion and domination, through the conduits of colonization and trade, and the grim exploitation of enslaved Africans. Cumulatively, this body of research, some of which has focused on social relations and differentiation through power dynamics, the use of space, ethnicity and creolization, and material culture studies, has contributed valuable insights into plantation life in terms of slave societies, planters, and colonial encounters and economies.

This cumulative research to date, has been immensely valuable in helping me formulate my own research questions that address the English sugar plantation as a complex system of people, technology, and ecosystems that were linked to a wider global Atlantic world. As many of us know, the alteration of the landscape through reliance on sugar has had a critical impact on both colonial and post-colonial Caribbean societies.

The excavation of the Great House area at Betty’s Hope has been aided by archival research that I conducted in 2007 and 2008 at the National Archives of Antigua and Barbuda and the Museum of Antigua and Barbuda, mainly through the Codrington Papers. In my research, I have examined agricultural productivity and daily operations at the Betty’s Hope plantation, as well as crop and climate information that I would like to compare to the soil core samples taken on Antigua by Dr. Jones, a palynologist from Washington State University.

In this respect, I hope to develop a narrative reconstruction of the island’s Pre-Columbian environment as it relates to plantation systems like Betty’s Hope, which takes into account human impact, carrying capacity, and political economy. This information will then be compared to regional systems that link to the greater Atlantic world.

In these efforts, my research design links together two compatible theoretical approaches. The first is the World-Earth Systems Model, as recently addressed by Hornborg and Crumley (2007), and the other approach draws upon the growing area of landscape studies in archaeology. Within these two respective frameworks, the plantation is viewed as a constructed system of human power and natural resources, where the island’s indigenous forest was destroyed to make way for the sugar cane trade, with devastating consequences for the island’s rainfall, ecology, and inhabitants, as well as for the greater Caribbean region. Watts (1987:75) notes that although Amerindian activities altered the landscapes of Caribbean islands in prehistory, this was minimal in impact compared to the deforestation of Caribbean islands by English planters, as discussed by Richardson (1997).

In this regard, the English plantation is presented as a well-oiled machine, dependent
upon an “idealized model of production,” as noted by Watts (1987:383). In reality, the sugar plantation was only a slim margin away from disaster in an agricultural system dependent upon human slave labor, annual precipitation, and various technologies to maximize cane yields, particularly after 1720 (Watts 1987: 423).

At the heart of these endeavors lies the intricate web of dependent relationships that bound Britain, the American colonies, the Caribbean, and Africa together not only through trade and colonization and a developing English hegemony, but especially through what André Gunder Frank refers to as an “ecological exchange,” where Europeans were able to consume at great cost to island populations, ecosystems, and natural resources. Here, landscape is seen as a complex web of systems, power, and experience (2007: 304).

Sluyter (2001) argues that a comprehensive theory of colonialism and landscape is long overdue. In this respect, I propose that archaeologists, especially those working in the historic period, and studying plantation sites are well qualified to address this current state of affairs. Crumley (2007:16-18) suggests that research on complex systems that involve human agents and the environment on a global scale offers the opportunity to integrate the biophysical and social aspects of human cultures.

Although the study of human interaction with the environment is nothing new in anthropology, as several decades have passed since the introduction of Stewardian human ecology, Oldfield (2007:30) suggests that by providing a narrative reconstruction of the past sequence of events, we can better access the bridge between biophysical and cultural processes, as shown in the recent and exciting work of the Mannahatta Project by Eric Sanderson, a landscape ecologist, who has been documenting changes in the landscape in New York City over a three-hundred-year period.

In this regard, by examining the plantation system operating within a greater system, as noted by Hall and Turchin (2007:74), we allow ourselves to view the development of the early modern world as a series of interlocking dynamic systems of local, regional, and global spatial influences that interact with various social factors across great distances. According to Frank (2007: 315), this series of interlocking systems reflect an increasing complexity, with relative stability at the core and increasing socio-ecological disorder and eventual disaster at the periphery.

In the World-Earth Systems Model, a second approach, landscape archaeology, can be integrated. Cosgrove (1989) and Darvill (1999:108-109) both argue that landscapes are all about ecology and semiosis, whereby landscape as context, provides imbedded meanings of social processes juxtaposed with the actual physical geography of a place in both time and space. McGlade (1999:460-461) notes that landscapes are essentially multi-dimensional constructions that involve the interplay between historically determined structures and contingent processes, both human and natural. The more symbolic aspects of landscape studies, as proposed by Ashmore and Knapp (1999) and Gosden (1994; 2004), play an especially important role in British colonial attitudes toward land ownership and the metal template and semiotics of place, also recently examined by Palang at al. (2004) in their edited volume on European rural landscapes.

Applying a landscape studies framework that incorporates a systemic model such as the World-Earth Systems Model, advocates for a multidisciplinary and integrated approach. This approach draws upon all the tools available to historical archaeologists, and embraces both the ephemeral ideational aspects as well as the scientific body of evidence.
In conclusion, McGlade (1999:458-461) and Widgren (1999: 94-95) observe that this interpretive approach allows archaeologists the opportunity to contribute to critical contemporary concerns about environmental issues. By studying the dynamics of land, ecology, human agency, and social processes, we, as archaeologists, can offer the benefits of having both diachronic and synchronic perspectives which can help contribute to the current dialogue on the environment and global warming. In this regard, as we forge our way into the twenty-first century, and tackle serious issues about our planet’s wellbeing, archaeology’s contribution is one where landscape and history matter. It is my hope that through our individual and collective pursuits, our research into the past can help lead us into the future. In my research at Betty’s Hope, I hope to be a part of this effort.
Bibliography


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