

Prehistoric settlements in the Caribbean

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Mesoamerican archaeology has focused mainly on the ancient civilizations of the mainland, but knowledge of early settlement, society and economy in the Caribbean islands is essential for our understanding of the prehistory of the region as a whole. Institute staff and students are currently working in three islands: Puerto Rico, Tortola and Barbados.

communities economically self-sufficient villages or rural farmsteads? Where did the proto-Taino elite reside, and what are the indicators of socioeconomic wealth and prestige? What was, indeed, the basis of the wealth of the elite?

Research conducted to date suggests low population density and a settlement pattern of dispersed rural farmsteads. These were locally articulated with a single, often vacant, ceremonial batey (plaza or ball-court) precinct, such as site U-53 (Figs 3

The Institute of Archaeology's field projects studying the nature of prehistoric settlements in the Caribbean are concentrated on Barbados, the British Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, and thus span both the Greater and Lesser Antilles. Extensive surveys of individual islands such as Barbados and Tortola allow cultural dynamics to be examined through changing settlement patterns and settlement morphology, whereas the study of discrete landscape blocks and individual sites, as in Puerto Rico, provides details of prehistoric lifeways. Three projects are currently under way: the Utuado-Caguana Archaeological Project, Puerto Rico; the Belmont Archaeological Project, Tortola; and the Heywoods (Port St Charles) Project on Barbados, together with the continuing Barbados Archaeological Survey.

Puerto Rico

The Utuado-Caguana Archaeological Project was initiated in 1996 and is directed by José R. Oliver together with Lee A. Newsum (University of Illinois-Carbondale) and J. Rivera Fontán (Division of Archaeology, Institute of Puerto Rican Culture). Its overall aim is to elucidate the political and economic organization that sustained the first-tier civic ceremonial centre of Caguana (AD 1100–1500). Located at the ecological junction or ecotone between the interior mountains, which consist of igneous rocks, and the northern belt of karst limestone, Caguana and its hinterland provide an advantageous setting in which to study the organization and settlement pattern of a pristine Taino chiefdom immediately prior to its conquest by the Spanish in AD 1508–11.¹ The investigation focuses on the sites and communities surrounding Caguana in an attempt to understand the organization of the civic ceremonial core, site U-10 (Figs 1 and 2). It is also exploring the impact of agricultural and other land-use practices on the long-term sustainability of political and economic systems in Puerto Rico.² The project is asking a series of related questions: How did Caguana arise and why, and when was it abandoned and why? How did the satellite communities respond to Caguana's collapse? How were the peripheral communities linked to each other and integrated with Caguana? Were these satellite



Figure 1 Aerial view of site U-10 showing (a) a large plaza used for ritual dances (*areito*), (b) a rectangular area used for the Antillean ball game (*batey*), (c) a small oval plaza, and (d) an area where evidence of houses has been found.



Figure 2 Iconography at the site U-10, Caguana ceremonial centre: the *cacique* or chief (head only) is flanked by pairs of high-ranking ancestors (left) and low-ranking figures (right).

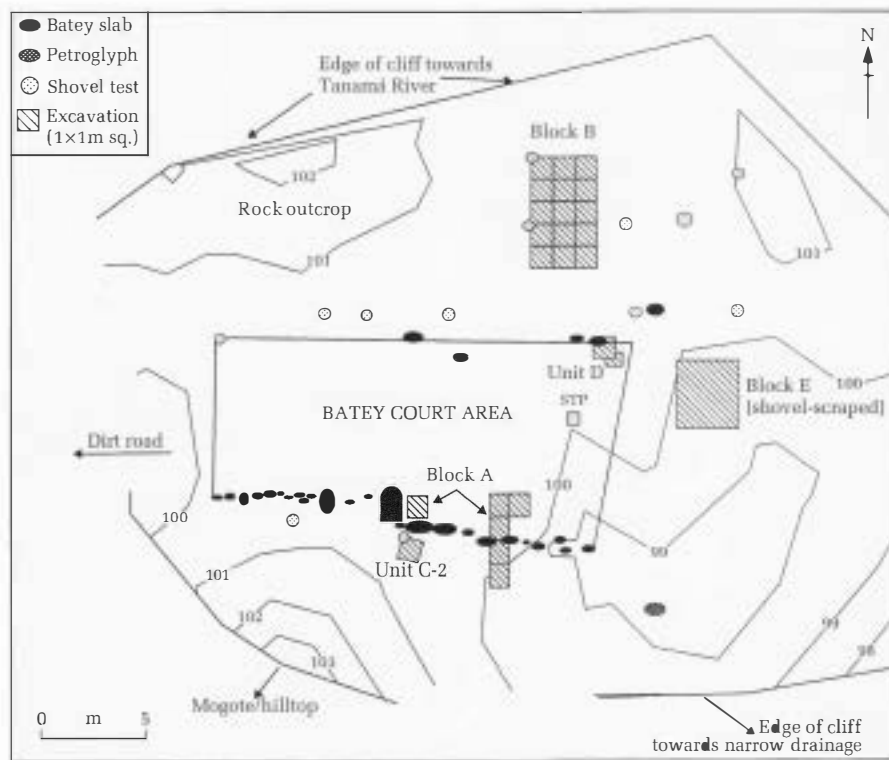


Figure 3 Utuado-Caguana Project, Puerto Rico. Topographic map of the local civic-ceremonial site U-53, showing the typical rectangular precinct with stone alignments. No domestic middens or habitation structures were detected, suggesting that it was a vacant locus that served as a public meeting place for the dispersed small habitation sites in the immediate area. The probable function of the precinct was as a place for conduct of the batey or Antillean rubber ball game (similar to those of Mesoamerica). The prehistoric component is estimated to date c. AD 1200-1500. (Contours at 1m intervals.)

and 4), with no known village-size agglomerations or second-tier civic ceremonial centres detected within a 3km radius of Caguana. Known second-tier civic ceremonial centres occur beyond a distance of 9-10 km. The farmsteads are also linked to special-function sites in the karst zone: some cave localities exhibit rock carvings (petroglyphs) and served as burial grounds for selected members of the community. Perhaps most tantalizing, the region also includes artificial agricultural terraces that suggest an intensification of agricultural production, beyond the postulated requirements of the local population (surplus, staple wealth?). The investigations also suggest that, at the edges of the civic core of Caguana, there is evidence for domestic middens accompanied by high-status materials that thus far are not found, or rarely so, in the rural settlements. Caguana is not, as was thought, a "vacant" or "pilgrimage" centre, but may still yield the residential sectors of the proto-Taino elite of the region.

Future work on the project will focus on conducting horizontal excavations in an open habitation site (rural farmstead) found about 400m northeast of the "uninhabited" batey site (U-53) in order to gather data on the household economy and the social

status of the occupants (e.g. prestige/exotic items); on determining the date of the nearby agricultural terraces and recovering plant remains, in order eventually to estimate agricultural production levels; and on completing excavations at a burial cave site, also located in the vicinity.³

Tortola

The British Virgin Islands Archaeological Project was initiated in 1994 and is directed by Peter L. Drewett, together with Brian D. Bates (Longwood College, Virginia). Following a detailed survey of Tortola,⁴ work is concentrating on the Belmont Archaeological Project and on a survey of the island of Jost Van Dyke directed by Brian Bates. The Tortola survey located 33 small village or farmstead sites dated to the period about AD 600-1500 and situated in the bays around the island. Five larger, perhaps village, sites, were found on the northern coast and one of these, at Belmont, was selected for intensive study. The interior of the island appears to have been largely unsettled, with no evidence of ceremonial batey courts, petroglyphs or caves suitable for burial.

The site at Belmont is today in an overgrown coconut palm plantation with a storm beach to the north, Belmont Pond and Hill

to the west, and a degraded cliff line to the southeast. In the prehistoric period, Belmont pond may have been open to the sea in the west and was almost certainly fringed with mangrove. A storm beach to the north is post-prehistoric, so during the occupation of the site there would have been a gently shelving beach from the site into Belmont Bay. The high land to the south would have supported dense tropical rainforest. Shovel testing of the site indicated activity covering an area some 120x80m along a degraded sand bar.

The major aim of the project is to excavate the whole site in order to determine the economic, social and ceremonial activities that may have taken place on sites of this size on small Caribbean islands. To do this, the site, having been defined by shovel testing and some machine digging, is being hand dug in open-area blocks (Fig. 5) with detailed plotting of artefact distributions as well as features. Clear patterns in artefact, ecofact and deliberately deposited natural stone distributions are emerging.

Excavations so far have been located towards the centre of the settlement. Apart from the remains of one small round building, most of the area excavated was probably open space within the centre of an oval or round village. Ceremonial activities took place within this space. Two pairs of stones were found set on edge and aligned with the summit of Belmont Hill, the conical hill that dominates the site. Around the stones were carefully placed whole pots (Fig. 6), a carved conch vomit spatula, a triton shell "trumpet", and food refuse dominated by top shells (*Cittarium pica*), together with a



Figure 4 Excavation in progress at Trench A on the southern side of the batey court, site U-53, Caguana.



Figure 5 Belmont Archaeological Project, Tortola, British Virgin Islands. Area excavation in 1997.

wide range of other mollusc shells and fish bones. Preliminary identifications of the fish bones by Dr Elizabeth Wing (University of Florida) include jack, grunt and ray. All the evidence suggests that Belmont Hill was itself a zemi⁵ or the residence of a zemi, and that the area excavated was where the village shaman communed with the zemi, using hallucinogenic drugs following ritual cleansing using the vomit spatula. Offerings were made to the zemi using the pots and are represented in the archaeological record by fish and shellfish remains. It is hoped that future excavations will put these ceremonial activities into their domestic context.

Barbados

The Barbados Archaeological Survey was established in 1984 as a joint project between the Institute of Archaeology and the Barbados Museum, and is directed by Peter L. Drewett. An initial field survey in 1985–86 located 64 prehistoric sites⁶ and continuing survey has added an additional 16 sites. The main aim of the project is to examine how settlement sites and land use changed over time (currently from about 2000 BC to AD 1400) and how settlement areas articulated with each other. Currently, most known sites have a coastal distribution, with inland settlements being restricted to river valleys, as at Greenland and Three Houses. Research has concentrated on three main coastal areas: central southern Barbados from Maxwell to Chancery Lane, the east coast promontory at Hillcrest, Bathsheba,⁷ and the west coast site of Heywoods (Fig. 7). All three areas have shown extensive and changing settlement and landscape use over time.

Recently, work has concentrated on the Heywoodssite north of Speightstown, where an entire prehistoric landscape is being revealed during the construction of a marina at Port St Charles.⁸ Preliminary test-pit survey has indicated three major phases of occupation. First, the marine inlet was the focus of activity by a pre-ceramic fishing and foraging community around 2000 BC. Secondly, a small village represented by round houses of the late Saladoid–Troumassoid ceramic periods (c. AD 600–1100) was established, and finally a substantial Suazoid midden represents prehistoric activity from about AD 1100 to 1400. It is likely that the pre-ceramic material,



Figure 6 Belmont Archaeological Project, Tortola, British Virgin Islands. Pot deposited in ceremonial area towards the centre of the Amerindian settlement site.

mainly conch-lip adzes and mollusc shells, indicates small mobile groups moving among the islands of the Lesser Antilles. They adapted to local resources, making cutting and scraping tools on islands with stone, but on stoneless Barbados the queen conch was used instead. The first permanent settlements are represented by people using pottery of the Saladoid tradition, which stylistically can be linked back to mainland South America, particularly the northeastern Venezuelan coast and Orinoco Basin. Once settled by pottery-using peoples, Barbados developed its own insular traditions, although it kept close links with neighbouring islands and perhaps even with the mainland.



Figure 7 Barbados: distribution of prehistoric sites. Sites mentioned in the text are named.

The economy of the ceramic-period settlements of Barbados was based on protein obtained largely from the sea in the form of fish and shellfish, together with introduced manioc and local plants. The island had no indigenous land mammals and the range of birds was always small, although bones of the ring-necked duck, tree duck and purple gallinule have been recovered. Fish, both reef (e.g. parrotfish and surgeonfish) and pelagic (e.g. tuna and flying fish), dominate the bone assemblages. Virtually all shellfish locally available to the sites were collected for food, with the queen conch (*Strombus gigas*) heading the list on the south coast sites, whereas top shells (*Cittarium pica*) and nerites (mainly *Nerita* spp.) dominate on the high-energy east coast.

Barbados clearly did not have powerful elites who, by producing and controlling excess production, were able to divert labour into the construction of prestige sites such as Caguana in Puerto Rico. The large early ceramic-period sites such as Chancery Lane, Maxwell and Heywoods remain relatively small when compared with the settlements of the chiefdoms of the northern coast of mainland South America or the large islands of the Greater Antilles. The archaeological evidence suggests a segmentary society with relatively small autonomous groups, but the ceramic-period people who settled Barbados (originally some time around 200 BC) possibly derived from a society organized into chiefdoms or at least "complex tribes". It is possible therefore that, even if filtered through other islands south of Barbados, the earliest ceramic-period settlers on Barbados may have had at least some status variation. If so, the nature of Barbados clearly led to a fragmentation of the system, with later sites being much smaller and widely scattered around virtually all suitable coastal areas.

One of the major questions currently being addressed in this project is the nature of the end of Amerindian settlement. It has long been assumed that the arrival of Europeans was a key factor in the end of Amerindian settlement on Barbados, as it was elsewhere in the Caribbean. However, little found so far can be dated much later than AD 1300–1400, and the earliest European reference to the island is not until the early 1500s. It is possible that some internal problems may have already led to the collapse of prehistoric Barbados prior to the arrival of Europeans. Future fieldwork there will be geared particularly to examining societal change over the 3000 years of its prehistoric occupation.

Notes

1. J. R. Oliver, "El centro ceremonial de Caguana, Puerto Rico: simbolismo iconográfico, cosmovisión y poderío caciquil taíno de Borinquen." *British*

- Archaeological Reports, International Series* (Oxford: Archaeopress, in press).
2. L. A. Newsom & K. A. Deagan, "Zea mays in the West Indies: the archaeological and early historic record", in *Corn and culture in the prehistoric New World*, S. Johannesen & C. A. Hastorf (eds), 203–217 (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994).
 3. L. A. Curet & J. R. Oliver, "Mortuary practices, social development and ideology in pre-Columbian Puerto Rico", *Latin American Antiquity* 9, in press, 1998.
 4. P. L. Drewett, "Prehistoric Tortola", in *Proceedings of the Sixteenth International Congress for Caribbean Archaeology*, R. G. Richard (ed.) (Guadeloupe: International Association of Caribbean Archaeology, in press).
 5. Zemis refer to numinous powers that were often objectified in the landscape or represented in artefacts.
 6. See pp. 17–19 in *Prehistoric Barbados*, P. L. Drewett (Denbigh: Archetype Publications, 1991).
 7. P. L. Drewett, "A Late Saladoid site at Hillcrest, Bathsheba, Barbados, 1993", *Journal of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society* 42, in press.
 8. P. L. Drewett, "Excavations at Heywoods, Barbados, and the economic basis of the Suazoid Period in the Lesser Antilles", *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 59, 113–37, 1993.