

Feasting at the ball game: the Belmont project, Tortola, British Virgin Islands

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Six years ago, the first issue of Archaeology International included an article describing surveys and excavations carried out on the Caribbean islands of Puerto Rico, Barbados and Tortola by two teams from the Institute. Here one of the authors of that article brings the story of his research on Tortola up to date.

Tortola is part of the British Virgin Islands, one of Britain's remaining Overseas Territories. It lies at the point where the prehistoric chiefdom's of the Greater Antilles met the smaller communities of the Lesser Antilles (Fig. 1). Christopher Columbus found the Virgin Islands during his second voyage in 1493¹ and named the whole group after St Ursula the Virgin. Today they are divided between the USA and Britain. As part of a larger Caribbean research project,² the British Virgin Islands archaeological project was established in 1994. Following a detailed survey of Tortola (Fig. 1), our work has concentrated on five seasons of excavation at Belmont at the western end of the island.³

The site

The prehistoric settlement at Belmont is in what is today an overgrown plantation of coconut palms with a storm beach and the sea to the north, Belmont pond and hill to the west, and a degraded cliff line to the southeast (Fig. 2). In prehistoric times, Belmont pond was probably open to the sea on its western side, on what would have been a mangrove-fringed marine inlet. The northern storm beach appears to have been formed in historical times, and when the site was occupied in prehistoric times there would have been a beach shelving gently from it into Belmont bay. Dense tropical rainforest would have grown on the high land above the degraded cliff line.

By the end of the 2002 field season, we had excavated 800 m² of the site (approximately one fifth of the area occupied) and had found evidence of activity dating to

the Pre-ceramic Age (c. 1000–200 BC), the Ceramic (pottery) Age (mainly c. AD 600–1400) and the Historic Period (c. AD 1700 to the present). This record of long-term activity on the site is not only providing details of prehistoric lifeways, but also evidence of changing cultural dynamics as the site shifts from its initial role as a small settlement to become a regionally significant ceremonial site where feasting accompanied the playing of the ritual ball game (see below).

The first settlers

The first settlement at Belmont took place between about 600 and 1000 BC. Although humans had settled larger islands to the west (Cuba, Haiti and the Dominican Republic) from Central America as early as 5000 BC, the people who first settled most of the rest of the Caribbean, including the Virgin Islands, came from the northern coast of South America and moved north from Trinidad through the Lesser Antilles. These people were fisher-foragers who made multipurpose tools of shell and stone (Fig. 3), but, as at Belmont, they have left little trace other than hearths (Fig. 4), or, on other islands, shell middens (heaps of discarded shells) and lithic production sites (where stone tools were made).

Soon after 400 BC, permanent settlements, pottery and horticulture (small-scale crop cultivation) appear rapidly in the archaeological record throughout the Lesser and Greater Antilles as far west as the Dominican Republic. These innovations were introduced by new settlers who produced finely made red- and white-painted and cross-hatched pottery known as Saladoid ware, made thin pottery griddles for the cooking of cassava (unleavened bread made from manioc tubers), constructed large communal roundhouses, and probably introduced the symbolic system present in much of the Caribbean up to the time of arrival of Europeans.⁴ Although not precisely of Saladoid type, the pottery from the earliest Ceramic Age settlement at Belmont shows clear Saladoid traits, so a date around AD 600 appears likely for the first permanent settlement of Belmont.

A village is built

The village at Belmont consisted of roundhouses built around an open courtyard used for public and ceremonial activities. So far, only some of the western houses have been excavated. The earliest consisted of a large communal roundhouse some 15 m in diameter, the evidence for which consists of two concentric circles of post-holes, and which was later replaced by two smaller roundhouses 8 m and 10 m in diameter. The economy of the village was based on the cultivation of manioc, evidence for which survives in the form of the pottery griddles used to cook the flat bread made from flour processed from the manioc tubers. There were few terrestrial animals on prehistoric Tortola and most of

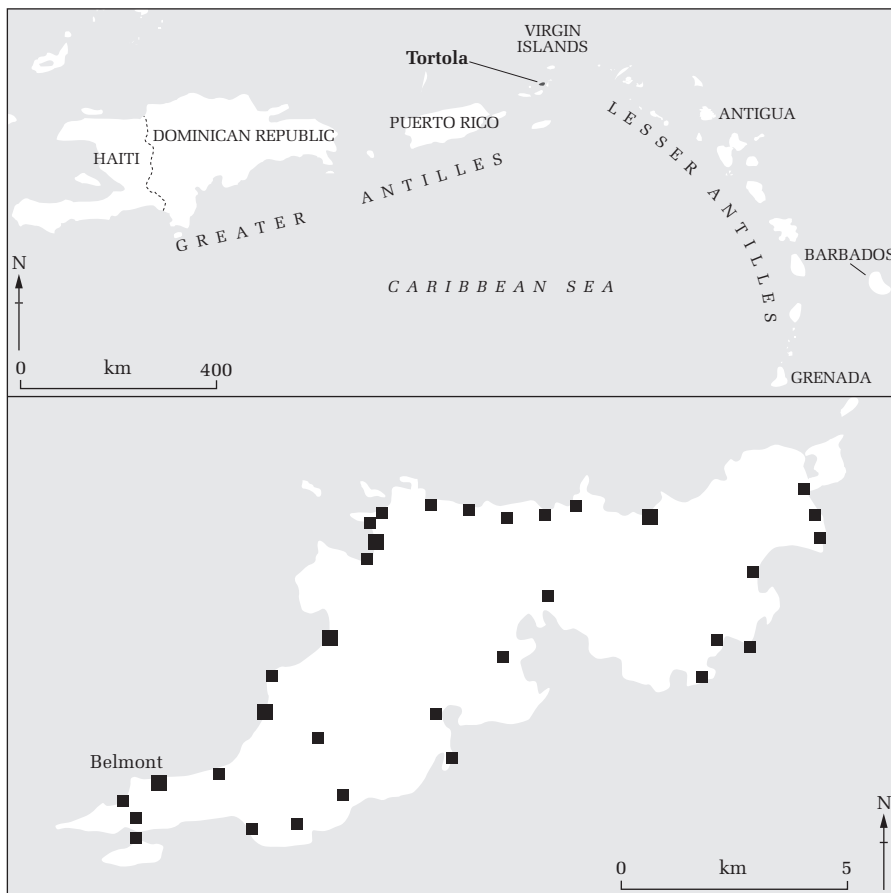


Figure 1 The location of Tortola in the eastern Caribbean and (below) the distribution of known prehistoric settlement sites on the island; large squares represent major sites.

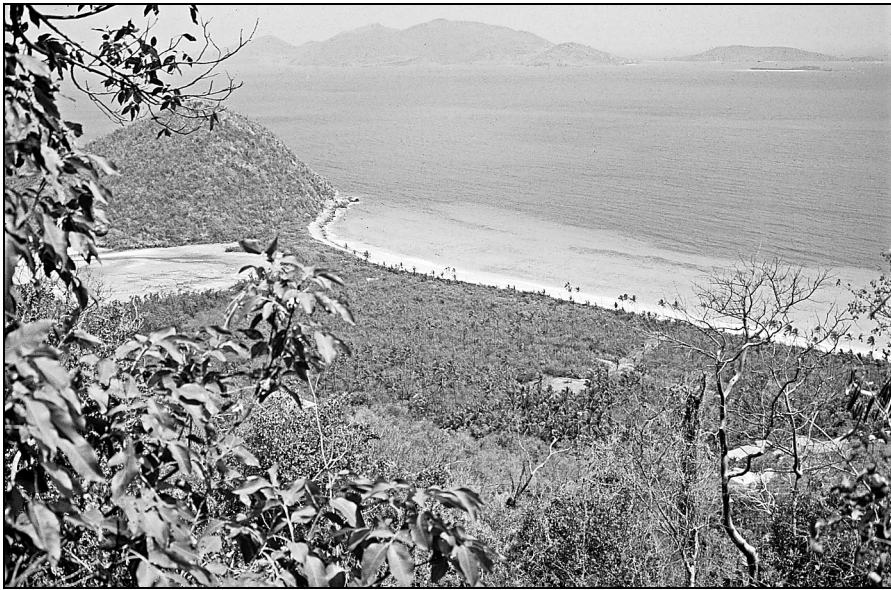


Figure 2 The Belmont settlement and ball-court site seen from the south; Belmont Hill and pond on the left.



Figure 3 A deliberately buried Pre-ceramic ovate, multipurpose stone tool used for cutting and digging, c. 600 BC (c. 20 cm in length).

the protein eaten by the villagers came from the sea. Animal remains were recovered at Belmont by means of fine-mesh sieving and they are being studied by Elizabeth Wing of the University of Florida. They show that a wide range of fish were eaten, including sting rays, needlefish, squirrelfish, coney, jack, grunt, wrasses and parrotfish, as well as snakes, sea urchins and crabs. The dominant shellfish eaten was the West Indian top shell (*Cittarium pica*), known today locally as the whelk. It is still the most commonly found local shellfish – we counted 146 specimens in one of 13 1×1 m squares recorded at the base of Belmont Hill. In addition a further 64 species of shellfish were recorded from the excavation.

Pottery, fired in open fires, was made on site, and polished stone axes were made from a local volcanic rock (a form of tuff). The axes may have been a valuable item of exchange, particularly with the coral islands of the Caribbean, which have no robust toolmaking rocks. We also found many spindle whorls (Fig. 5), which suggest considerable local production of cotton – the essential raw material required

for the making of hammocks and one of the items later offered to Columbus (valuable, but not quite the gold he was hoping for).

Predicting the seasons

Whether the village at Belmont was built because of the astronomical significance of Belmont Hill, or whether the significance of the hill became apparent after the village was built, is uncertain, but it almost certainly brought great power and prestige to the village because it can be used to predict the seasons. From the village, on midsummer's day, the Sun appears to hover directly over the apex of the hill (Fig. 6), and at different locations in the village it then appears to roll down the northern side of the hill. We have observed this phenomenon today and it must also have been clearly evident to the prehistoric inhabitants. Indeed, they not only marked lines of view to the apex of the hill with stones but also recorded the event on pottery (Fig. 7). Midsummer's day marks the change from the dry season to the wet season, when hurricanes occur and the crops are planted (recent hurricanes have totally flooded the Belmont site), so to be able to predict the arrival of the hurricane season would confer power and prestige on the village, and more specifically on the village's shaman, who was endowed with special spiritual powers.

Midsummer's day was probably marked by a ceremony, which appears to have left clear archaeological traces at Belmont. Near the centre of the village, a group of whole unbroken pots was found carefully buried around a vomit spatula⁵ and a triton shell modified to be blown as a trumpet. This suggests the cohoba ritual in which the shaman can commune with zemis; in this case the zemi objectified in Belmont Hill.⁶



Figure 4 A Pre-ceramic hearth excavated at Belmont, c. 600 BC (arrow scale 10 cm).



Figure 5 Ceramic Age spindle whorls used in the processing of cotton, c. AD 1000 (scale-bar intervals 1 cm).

Feasting and playing the ball game

At some stage after about AD 1200 the roundhouses, and perhaps the entire village, was replaced by one or more ball and dance courts. The one we have so far excavated is 10–12 m wide and of as yet uncertain length (Fig. 8). It is aligned directly on Belmont Hill, and that the Sun is again significant is shown by a petroglyph of the Sun's disc cut into one of the stones that edged the ball court (Fig. 9). The ball game was played by teams of 10 to 30 players, both men and women, although they played in separate games. Opposing teams occupied each end of the court and the aim was to keep the ball in motion by bouncing it off the ground using any part of their body other than hands or feet. Both intra- and inter-village games took place. They were often associated with dances and other ceremonies and were occasionally played before public decisions were made.⁷

Around the ball court were heaps of broken pots and dumps of shells and fish bones, suggesting feasting during or after ball games. The breaking of pots may even suggest a potlatch type of ceremony involving the conspicuous disposal of wealth to gain prestige.⁸ Also, exotic items were deliberately discarded, such as a whale rib and an unused polished stone axe with unique pelican-head carvings



Figure 6 The Sun setting over Belmont Hill viewed from house 1 on midsummer's day.

(Fig. 10). Two children were carefully buried, one in the ball court and the other beside it, perhaps as part of the ceremony, although these burials may date to the earlier village period.

Columbus arrives

It is uncertain whether the Belmont site was still occupied when Columbus blundered around the Caribbean during his four voyages between 1492 and 1504. Our excavations have not unearthed any European goods of the period, so it is likely that the spread of European diseases wiped out the population without any direct contact taking place. European settlement of Tortola dates back to the 1620s, when a small Dutch trading station was established, but

there is little archaeological or historical evidence for European use of the Belmont area until the latter half of the eighteenth century, when part of it was used for sugar production on a small plantation owned by a Mr Dan Donavan.⁹ This activity damaged part of the ball court, but otherwise left little more in the area excavated than a gun flint made locally from volcanic tuff, a few eighteenth-century pot-sherds, and a burial of a young woman apparently flung into a shallow grave, perhaps indicating that she was a cholera victim, one of several recorded as having been buried in the area.

A continuing research project

After five seasons of excavation, the Belmont archaeological project is still at an early stage, with less than one fifth of the site excavated. It is a difficult site to excavate rapidly. It is almost impossible to use machinery (as we attempted to do in the first season) because the site is very shallow and on loose sand that is regularly moved about by land crabs and washed away by tropical rain. The government of the British Virgin Islands has now recognized the importance of the site and has incorporated its preservation in a Belmont Management Plan – the first archaeological site to be so recognized in the Territory. This will enable the joint Institute of

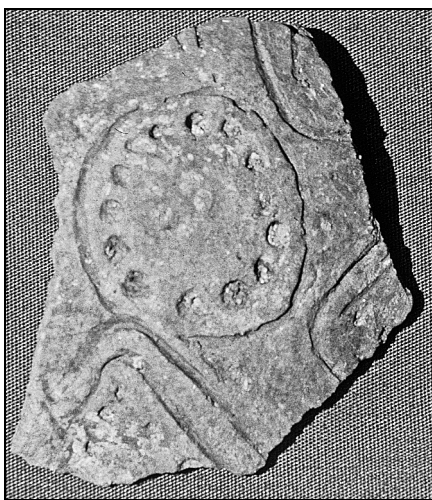


Figure 7 A pot-sherd with a representation of the Sun setting over Belmont Hill, c. AD 1000.



Figure 8 Institute of Archaeology and Longwood University (Virginia, USA) students excavating in the ball court at Belmont, July 1999.

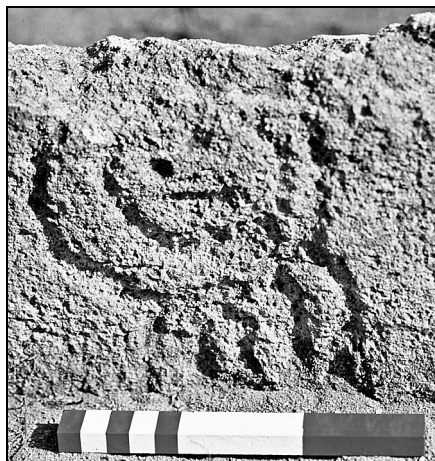


Figure 9 A stone from the edge of the ball court with a carving of the Sun's disc, c. AD 1200–1400 (scale bar 15 cm).

Archaeology and Longwood University project to proceed for several more years, and so for the first time in this part of the Caribbean we expect to be able to document in detail the processes of change from a village settlement to a ritual centre of regional significance.

Notes

1. See p. 87 in S. E. Morrison, *Admiral of the ocean sea: a life of Christopher Columbus* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1942).
2. See P. L. Drewett & J. R. Oliver, "Pre-historic settlement in the Caribbean",

- Archaeology International*, 1997/98, 43–6; P. L. Drewett *Prehistoric settlements in the Caribbean* (London: Archetype Publications, 2000); P. L. Drewett *Amerindian stories: an archaeology of early Barbados* (Bridgetown: Barbados Museum and Historical Society, 2002).
3. The Belmont archaeological project is a joint endeavour between the Institute of Archaeology (P. L. Drewett) and Longwood University, Virginia, USA (B. Bates), supported by the government of the British Virgin Islands and sponsored by the H. Lavity Stoutt Community College (Dr M. O'Neal, Vice-Principal) and the Ministry of Education and Culture (Hon. Andrew Fahie, Minister of Education and Culture).
 4. See S. M. Wilson, *Hispaniola: Caribbean chiefdoms in the Age of Columbus*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990).
 5. A spatula, in this case made of shell, used to induce vomiting in ritual purification before taking hallucinogens. An empty stomach increases the effect of many types of hallucinogenic drug.
 6. Cohoba is a hallucinogen derived from the ground seeds of the leguminous tree *Piptadenia peregrina*, mixed with an alkaline substance such as lime or burnt shell. It was used in ceremonies by indigenous peoples in the Caribbean and S. America. Zemis refer to numinous powers that were often represented in artefacts or objectified in features of the landscape.
 7. See pp. 14–15 in I. Rouse, *The Tainos* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1992).
 8. The potlatch ceremony of the indigenous peoples of the North American West Coast involved the conspicuous destruction of wealth and the generous provision of feasts in order to demonstrate wealth and prestige.
 9. See the land-division map of 1797 in the National Archives, Road Town, Tortola, British Virgin Islands.

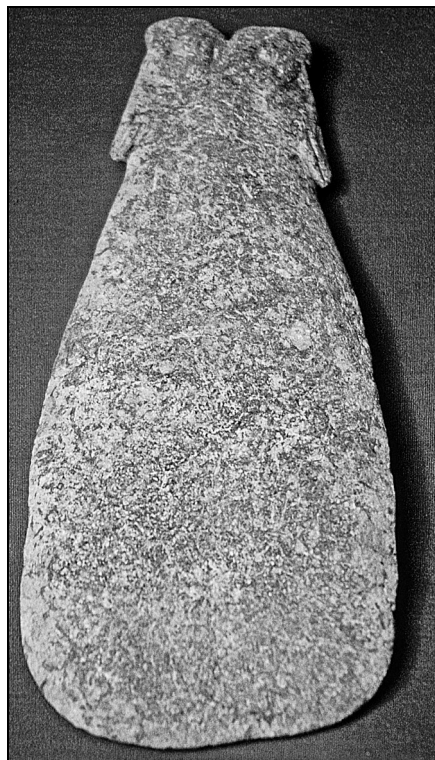


Figure 10 A polished stone axe with carved pelican heads, made out of local volcanic tuff, c. AD 1200–1400.