

# Caribbean Archaeology

At the Florida Museum of Natural History



## PARADISE PARK, JAMAICA



Aerial view of Paradise Park. (Photo © Tony Clarke)

Deep in a Royal Palm grove in one of the West Indies last remaining coastal tropical forests, Dr. William Keegan and his assistants recently searched for evidence of Taino (formerly known as Arawak) Indian occupation. Mr. Roderick Ebanks, Director of Archaeology at the Jamaica National Heritage Trust (JNHT), had identified the area as a Taino archaeological site in 1991 at Paradise Park,

Westmoreland, Jamaica, W.I. Keegan's expedition, October 3-18, 1998, picked up where Ebanks left off.

The main objective of this two-week project was to more completely define the boundaries of the archaeological materials. To accomplish this goal a total of 76 small test units were dug at 20-meter intervals along a 1 and ½ km track on which the site had been identified. The pits were dug with shovels and all of the soil was sieved through 5 mm (¼ inch) mesh screens. Position fixes were marked with a Garmin III Global Positioning System (GPS). Mr. Tony Clarke, Managing Director of Paradise Park, Ltd., provided aerial photography, soil survey, and topographic maps tied to the national grid for the study area.



Dr. Bill Keegan recording notes next to a test unit. (Photo © Bob Gezon)



Peter Harris excavates a test unit with Ben Castricone, Patti Yamane and two students from the University of the West Indies. (Photo © Betsy Carlson)

As a result of this testing program it has been determined that there are in fact two Indian sites on the Paradise Park property. One is an Ostionan site, known as redware sites in Jamaica, which dates to between AD 650 and 850. The other is a Meillacan site (called White Marl in Jamaica), which dates to between AD 950 and 1500. By comparing the materials excavated from these adjacent sites, we expect to gain significant insights into how the pre-Columbian cultures of Jamaica changed over time.

Ostionan sites are recognized by the very thin, well-made, and often red-painted clay bowls used by the earliest known inhabitants of Jamaica. These people probably immigrated to Jamaica from southern Hispaniola. Ostionan pottery was first made in Puerto Rico about AD 500 and spread westward through the islands. It arrived in Jamaica by AD 650. About AD 800, a new kind of pottery originated in north central Hispaniola (Haiti and the Dominican Republic) and also spread west. This Meillacan style is recognized by the applique and incised designs that decorate the upper part of the bowls. The style reached Jamaica by AD 950 and, as also happened elsewhere, it replaced the earlier Ostionan style.



Ms. Audene Brooks of the JNHT. (Photo © Bob Gezon)

The expedition was a cooperative venture between the JNHT and the Florida Museum of Natural History (FLMNH). Keegan, Assistant Director for Research and Collections and Curator of Caribbean Archaeology at the FLMNH, University of Florida, Gainesville, was assisted by three researchers from the JNHT (Audene Brooks, Dorothy Griffith, and Ricardo Tyndall), two researchers from the University of Florida (Betsy Carlson and Peter O'B. Harris), and by five volunteers (Dr. Ben Castricone,

Patti Yamane, Bob Gezon, Carole Haan, and Rebecca Graves).

Mr. Clarke graciously accommodated the team in the 17<sup>th</sup> century great house at Paradise Park. In addition, Dr. Philip Allsworth-Jones, Senior Lecturer in Archaeology at the University of the West Indies, Mona, and five of his students, and Mr. Burland of the

West Indies College (Northern Caribbean University), Mandeville, and four of his students each spent one day working on the project.

The test units and a search for artifacts on the surface revealed that the Ostonian and Meillacan sites are each about 300 meters long by about 60-100 meters wide. The sites have their long axis parallel to the shoreline facing onto



Tony Clarke (left) and Busha Clarke (right) describe the local environments. (Photo © Bob Gezon)

Bluefields Bay. The sites are separated by a 500-meter long area in which no artifacts were found. In addition to the 76 test units, Betsy Carlson directed the excavation of a one-by-two-meter unit in the Meillacan site, while Keegan did the same in the Ostonian site. The deposits in both areas were about 50-cm deep, and contained substantial quantities of broken pieces of clay pots (pottery sherds), flint tools, animal bones, and a variety of snails and clams. Olive shell pendants, which are common in West Indian sites, were also recovered.

October being the rainy season made it necessary to return from the field every afternoon by 1:00 p.m., after which the materials recovered each morning were washed and sorted. This work schedule allowed for the analysis and initial cataloguing of the shell, stone, and coral objects that were recovered. At the Florida Museum of Natural History, Dr. Elizabeth Wing is now studying the animal bones, and Mr. Basil Reid, a doctoral student from Jamaica, is analyzing the pottery.

Working on a tropical dairy farm was a unique experience. Every morning the team would climb aboard a 4x4 tractor pulled cattle cart for the 1-km ride to the sites. The 4x4 tractor was needed to navigate the muddy banks of the rain-swelled Deans Valley River. Chief tractor driver Bob Gezon expertly guided the vehicle and its cargo into the "palm jungle" each morning.

Excavating beside an 8-foot diameter silk cotton tree whose huge



Our field crew preparing to leave for the site. (Photo © Bob Gezon)

trunk rose out of sight, and working under a tree canopy whose upper story reached above 100 feet, the team experienced conditions similar to those when the Tainos lived there. Most mornings it was too dark to take photographs, the GPS could not fix on satellites, and the humidity fogged our eyeglasses.

In addition, the area is surrounded by water. The sites were strategically located on the only "high" ground (about 1 meter above sea level) in the area. The former dune ridge on which both sites are located is sandwiched between a mangrove swamp to the south and a morass to the north. In some areas the water table was only 20-cm below ground surface. One morning Ben Castricone found himself pulling pottery and bone from underwater in a muddy test unit.



Pottery foot from a broken Meillacan bowl. (Photo © Betsy Carlson)

It is already clear that there are important differences between the two sites. In addition to differences in the pottery, the Ostionan site has mostly conch shells and turtle bones. In contrast, the Meillacan site is loaded with clams and the bones of small fishes. These findings may relate to global climate changes that recently have been identified at other sites in the circum-Caribbean.

Based on work at Ostionan period sites in Florida and the Turks and Caicos Islands, archaeologists have demonstrated that sea level may have been at least a meter lower when the Ostionan sites were established. Between about AD 800 to 1000, sea level rose until it was about 60 cm higher than today. Even such relatively minor fluctuations in sea level probably had substantial consequences for people living on the edge of the sea. This and other questions will be the focus of future work.



Olive shell pendant.  
(Photo © Ben Castricone)

Keegan plans to return to Paradise Park with another team in the coming year. With the continued support of Paradise Park,



Jamaican redware. (Photo © Ben Castricone)

Ltd. (the landowner) and in concert with the JNHT, this project will hopefully be used to help train Jamaica's next generation of

archaeologists.



Paradise Park



Location of Paradise Park.

Special thanks to Tony and Busha Clarke for all of their assistance. The project would not have been possible without them. Roderick Ebanks visited the site and provided details concerning the excavations he conducted in 1991. Ainsley Henriques, Chairman of the JNHT, also visited the project. Permission to conduct this research was provided by the Jamaica National Heritage Trust.