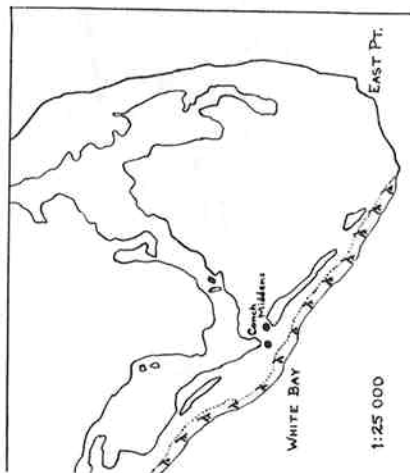
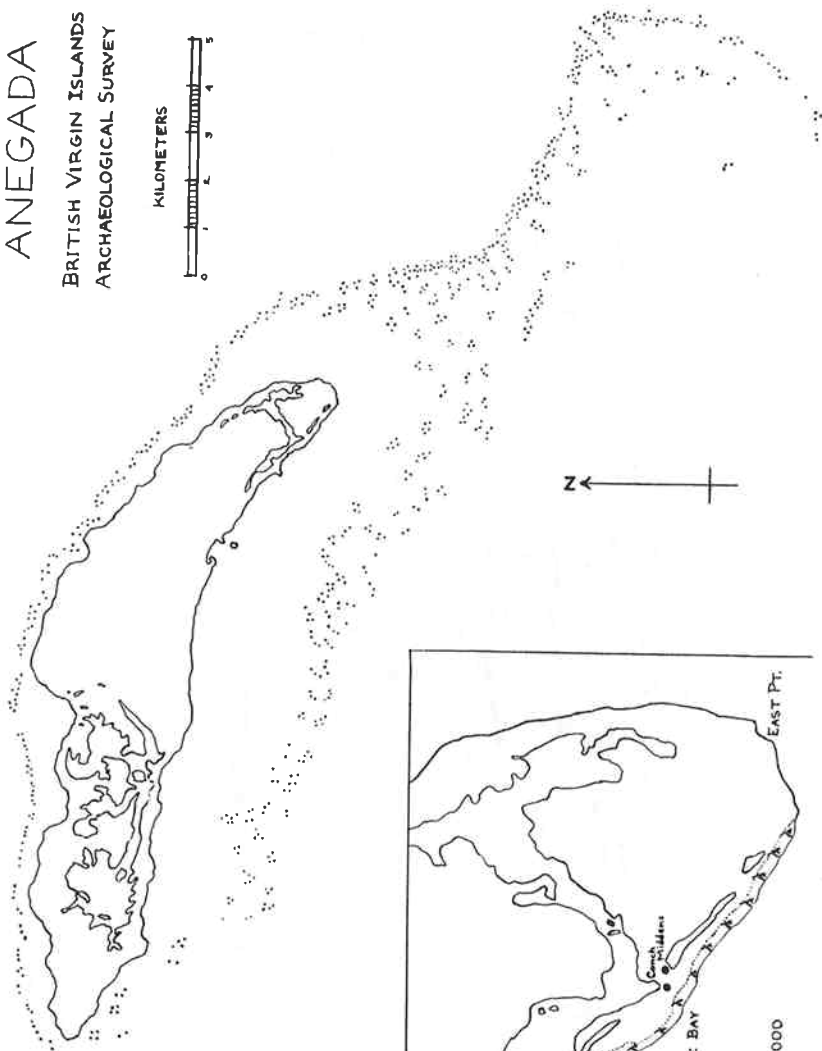
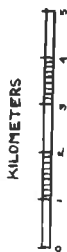


ANEGADA

BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY



THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF ANEGADA ISLAND

By Jeffrey M. Gross

Introduction:

In August 1974 a field party of the British Virgin Islands Archaeological Survey (Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation), consisting of Survey Director Alfredo E. Figueredo and the author, conducted a three day general reconnaissance of the island of Anegada. The following is a report of this expedition's findings and a review of previous archaeological work; a brief discussion of geography, geology, and the environmental setting has been included as added background to the archaeology of this unfamiliar region.

The Island:

Anegada (latitude 18°47'N, longitude 64°20'W) is the northeasternmost of the Virgin Islands; its closest neighbor is Virgin Gorda, some 22 km. to the south; north, the Atlantic Ocean, and east, more than 150 km., lie the Lesser Antilles.

Approximately 33 square km. in area, Anegada is a rough crescent 12 km. southeast to northwest, 3½ km. north to south at its widest point. Geologically, the island has been described as a recently emergent (*i.e.* late Cenozoic, probably Pleistocene) barrier reef platform and reef front on the northeastern edge of the Virgin Bank (Howard 1970). Bedrock is exclusively limestone, in contrast to the predominantly igneous and metamorphic formations that compose the other Virgin Islands. The island is surrounded by reefs, ranging from a fringing reef on the north shore to a more extensive reef platform on the south shore dominated by relatively small patch reefs; a projection of the fringing reef extends southeast for a distance of some 16 km. along the edge of the Virgin Bank (*Ibid.*: 1).

Anegada attains a maximum elevation of approximately 7.5 m. above sea level along the northeast coast; elsewhere the average elevation does not exceed 4.5 m. The limestone bedrock is exposed over a large part of the island, soils tending to be thin and patchy (though adequately suited to the provision crops, such as sorghum and sweet potato, grown by the modern inhabitants). Average annual rainfall has been estimated at 30 inches, or 76 cm. (Bowden, *et al.* 1970: 15); there are no known permanent streams, although large pools of standing water have been observed after heavy rains. Sinkholes or natural wells are abundant however, providing fresh or only slightly brackish water. The western portion of Anegada is occupied by extensive salt or brackish water ponds, as is to a lesser extent the eastern end of the island.

Outside of the Settlement area, which is severely overgrazed, vegetative cover consists mainly of open scrub and thorn forest. The original vegetation must have been considerably more developed, especially prior to clearing of land for cultivation and pasture, and charcoaling operations. There is also a fairly extensive area of mangrove swamp along the sheltered southeast coast. In general, much of the island's flora is of widespread West Indian species, though necessarily limited to those capable of growing on limestone, in the presence of varying amounts of salt spray, and on a small, hot, dry and windblown land mass (D'Arcy 1971: 3). Anegada is remarkable for having one endemic genus and five endemic species of flora (quite a large number for such a small West Indian island) and some twenty nonendemic species not reported from the other Virgins (*Ibid.*: 3-4).

Archaeological Investigations:

Botanist Robert H. Schomburgk makes mention of Indian relics in what is the earliest general account of the natural history of Anegada. His interesting remarks on the subject are quoted in full below:

Pere Labat, the only early writer who speaks of the lesser West India islands, observes, that the aborigines used it [*i.e.* Anegada] as an occasional rendezvous, where they procured great quantities of conchs (*Strombus gigas*); and large piles of these shells are still to be seen at the east end of the island, but nowhere else; which seems to prove decidedly that it was not permanently occupied, but merely resorted to from time to time. These conchs are still found in great numbers in the shallow waters at the east end, chiefly in the months of May and November; and the dry shells piled up have all a hole in the lower end of the spire, for which the most probable reason is, that the animal is thus most easily extracted. It appears surprising that so much care should have been taken to pile them up, and it has been surmised, in consequence, that these heaps were burialplaces; but several have been taken down, and burnt for lime (the quality of which is excellent), without any trace having been found of human bones or other extraneous substance. And it is more probable that they were merely piled up to be out of the way, the current not being strong enough to carry them off had they been thrown into the sea; where, had they remained, they would have embarrassed the fishing for the living animal. [1832: 153]

The "hole in the lower end of the spire," which Schomburgk notes as characteristic of these conch shells from Anegada (see plate), has been taken (in the West Indies at least) to represent a distinctively aboriginal technique for extracting the animal from its shell. Theodoor de Booy, for instance, concluded that "if the aperture is a small round one..., it is certain that the conch was opened and used by an Indian." (1915: 80). Such a practice, indeed, differs substantially from that of modern West Indian conch fishermen, and there is still some question as to how such small perforations served to allow an Indian to extract the conch. Perhaps observing this distinction, or even through an oral tradition from the time of the first European settlers, the modern natives of Anegada preserve a knowledge of the aboriginal origin of those shell heaps at the east end of their island, and are careful to distinguish them from ones left by "our own generation" (which latter are to be seen on shore or in the shallows just south of the Settlement, or as scattered collections of conch along the south-east coast).

Schomburgk also records that in the hardened ground by one of the sink-holes on the north shore of Anegada he was shown "the marks of feet..., which, from their form and the outward turn of the toes, are considered to be those of Indians." His account continues: "Mr. John Vanterpool, who has passed the the great climacteric, recollects having seen them on his first visit to the island, when the oldest inhabitants remembered them from their infancy; and there is therefore little doubt that they have been left by the aborigines..." (*Op.cit.*: 160). In the course of this most recent expedition no attempt was made to locate these "marks," but one elderly native did report having seen them, and basically confirmed Schomburgk's description.

Herbert Krieger, then Curator of Ethnology at the U.S. National Museum, Smithsonian Institution, went to Anegada in 1937, to investigate the report of a

single large aboriginal shell mound, and to obtain Indian relics for comparison with Smithsonian collections from elsewhere in the West Indies (Krieger 1938: 95). He does not seem to have read Schomburgk's account. Krieger spent several days on the island, photographing and measuring the mound--which he reported to be "a very large one built up almost entirely of conch shells, *Strombus gigas*." (*Ibid.*: 98) -- and conducted a brief survey of the island for other aboriginal sites, randomly surface sampling pottery, shell, and polished stone (*Ibid.*). Krieger's collection from Anegada, still in the Smithsonian Institution, is scheduled to be examined in the near future by Alfredo E. Figueredo.

No reported archaeological research was conducted on Anegada following Krieger's prior to the arrival of the British Virgin Islands Archaeological Survey team. The aim of this team's brief reconnaissance was chiefly to locate and examine the previously reported aboriginal site or sites, and assess problems involved in extending the full activities of the Survey to Anegada. Two of the above-discussed shell heaps were found at the east end of the island (see Map), and a third reported in the vicinity of these two by a native guide. Due to limitations in time and resources no systematic attempt was made to locate or study other aboriginal sites, beyond reconnoitering as much of the island as was accessible by car or on foot.

Of the two shell heaps examined, the first proved to be a very large bare heap of whitened conch, just on the western shore of a salt pond; it covered an area of approximately 200 square meters, varying from 2 to 3 meters in height. Judging from his report and an accompanying photograph, this was the mound investigated by Krieger; though somewhat obscured by brush at the margins, it rises very conspicuously above the flat surrounding terrain. The second shell heap was lower, perhaps no more than 1 to 1½ meters in height, and though a scattering of old conch appeared on the surface this mound was largely covered by sandy soil and sparse vegetation. Shallow test pitting here revealed a mixed midden deposit, consisting principally of *Strombus gigas*, but with substantial admixture of *Codakia orbicularis*. Considering the proximity of both these sites to a mangrove swamp (see Map) the absence of oyster (*Crassostrea rhizophora*) is conspicuous.

No pottery, nor any aboriginal remains other than heaped shell, were present on the surface of either mound or in the surrounding area. Several sherds were recovered from the test excavation however; of these, none were especially diagnostic, although two rim sherds as well as the general thickness, crudeness, and poor paste quality of most of the pottery bear some comparison with pottery of the Elenoid Series, as defined from sites in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. Two conch shells from the subsurface midden deposit (both within "aboriginal perforation") were taken as radiocarbon samples; these produced a date of A.D. 1245±80 (I-8216). This may be compared to radiocarbon dates of A.D. 1310±120 and A.D. 1220±110 (RL-409 and RL-411 respectively) from the site at Hull Bay, St. Thomas, which has produced pottery of the Elenoid Series (Ensomhed Style).

Though suggestive, the partial archaeological evidence recovered from Anegada to date can hardly serve as a basis for the most preliminary conclusions. This most recent archaeological expedition enables us now to frame the scope of previous investigations, providing a starting point for future research. It is to be hoped that a fuller reconnaissance may be undertaken soon by the British Virgin Islands Archaeological Survey, followed by controlled excavations; at such a point we can begin to clarify the scientific issues now at hand, and gain a more

accurate understanding of Anegada's archaeology and its relationships with the rest of the Virgin Islands.

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