

# HISTORY OF VIRGIN ISLANDS ARCHAEOLOGY

By Alfredo E. Figueredo

This is a historical account of the research done at prehistoric archaeological sites; it does not concern itself with work related to the time period after A.D. 1625 in St. Croix, and A.D. 1666 in the Virgin Islands proper, as these dates are the beginning of European settlement and written records. The 'protohistoric' period, that from A.D. 1493 (the Discovery) to the dates above, falls within the scope of this article due to a scarcity of testimony.

Since archaeological work has never been coincident in more than one island at a time, a strictly temporal organization has been adopted for this paper. Such an arrangement has the shortcoming that it obscures present or former political and cultural jurisdictions; however, it brings together all activity into a comprehensive sequence, thus demonstrating parallel development and emphasizing the distinct nature of archaeology in this Archipelago.

By 'archaeological work' we shall consider all reports, collections, and excavations of which notice has been taken. No distinction other than critical will be made between the work of scientists and that of amateurs, so that this is not a history only of the activities of competent field workers, but will include also the work done by untrained persons whose contributions, though below the standards of their day, were nonetheless significant.

The first report of archaeological remains occurs in 1587, still within the protohistoric period, when John White 'discovered pottery fragments made of the clay of that island' wherein he landed. This has been dubbed 'the last ethnographic and the first archaeological account of St. Croix' (Vescelius 1952: frontispiece).

Pere Labat (1722) observed the great conch shell heaps in eastern Anegada, and is so credited by Schomburgk (1832: 153), who adds some commentary. There are no more reports of Anegada for over a century. Both Labat and Schomburgk regard these mounds as the evidence of seasonal conch-harvesting by Indians, and do not feel that they represent permanent settlements. Schomburgk records the destruction of several such heaps as they were burnt for lime.

From at least the early part of the XIX Century, the petroglyphs at Reef Bay, St. John, were recognized as aboriginal (e.g., Knox 1852:17-18). Frederik von Scholten drew a romanticized sketch of them in 1833 (Danish West Indian Society 1967).

In 1854, a Danish antiquarian named Rafn published a note entitled *Caraibske Odsager*, describing, among other artifacts, a stone axe from St. Croix (Vescelius n.d.:2)

Captain H.U. Ramsing of the Danish Engineers undertook the earliest recorded field work (Vescelius n.d.:2); in 1899, he conducted limited excavations at the Salt River Point midden, St. Croix, and donated his collections to the Danish National Museum (Hatt 1924:30, note2).

Slightly after Ramsing, Alphonse Pinart and Christian Branch effected additional excavations at Salt River (Fewkes 1922:167). In 1912, Jesse Walter Fewkes of the Bureau of American Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution undertook a survey of St. Croix, and collected a few hundred artifacts from the surface of several sites. This survey, as the work of Pinart and Branch, was never published.

Fewkes was the first archaeologist to categorically assign the prehistoric cultures of the Virgin Islands to the Puerto Rican, or Taino, area, and to note furthermore that the local assemblages were quite distinct from those of the Lesser Antilles (Fewkes 1922: 168). His concern, however, was of the type labelled 'museological' (Tabio and Rey 1966: 5), and isolated artifacts, largely taken out of context, were the subject given treatment. Field work at this time must be suspected of being unsystematic in general and, in the case of workers such as Fewkes, systematically antiquarian; the actual accounts of prehistory, however, are fuller and better reasoned than anything done before, and for this Fewkes may be considered 'the father of West Indian archaeology'.

In an earlier work, Fewkes (1914:667) defined the word 'Arawak' in cultural terms following Brinton's (1871:427) etymology; this definition is still of wide currency, and explains the use of that word in Virgin Islands prehistory. 'Arawak' has a broader and less precise cultural definition than 'Taino' (*cf.* Rouse 1952: 359-362).

Theodoor de Booy carried out the first systematic archaeological survey of the then Danish Virgin Islands for the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation; he began this work in 1916, and located some of the most important sites on those islands (de Booy 1917a); the first detailed report of the petroglyphs at Reef Bay, St. John, and Congo Cay, date from this survey (de Booy 1917b). Published posthumously (de Booy 1919), the New York archaeologist's monograph of this research was not complete; his exposition of field methods, however, allows us to trace the beginnings of a professional development (de Booy 1917a; de Booy and Faris 1918; de Booy 1919); his techniques are clearly obsolete today, and largely betray, as in Fewkes' case, the museological concern alluded to above.

Fewkes and de Booy disagreed over key points of Virgin Islands prehistory, particularly the ties Fewkes saw with the Puerto Rican area (de Booy 1919: 20-24; Fewkes 1922: 169, note 18); this argument has been resolved in favor of such ties (Vescelius n.d.:3).

A Dano-Dutch Archaeological Expedition came to St. Thomas in 1922: its two investigators were J.P.B. de Josselin de Jong of the Netherlands and Gudmund Hatt of Denmark (Hatt 1924: 29). After a brief stay, de Jong left for the Lesser Antilles, and Hatt continued the work on St. Thomas, expanding it into 1923 to include St. John, Tortola, and St. Croix. Both of these European archaeologists recognized stratigraphy and the seriation of pottery, so that their work is a decided improvement upon that of their predecessors. Modern archaeological work could be said to date from this time.

Gudmund Hatt (1924:31) divided Virgin Islands prehistory into three periods: I) a postulated preceramic culture, II) an early ceramic culture derived from the Lesser Antilles, and, III) a late ceramic culture derived from the Greater Antilles; these complexes he named Krum Bay, Coral Bay-Longford, and Magens Bay-Salt River, respectively; this scheme is the same later elaborated for wider areas by Loven (1935), Rainey (1940), and Rouse (1952), and in a refined form is still basic to our local sequence of cultures.

The subject of a 'Carib' occupation in the Virgin Islands was first approached ethnohistorically by Gudmund Hatt (1924: 40-42), who considered it in terms of influence and not settlement; according to Hatt, the last inhabitants of this Archipelago were clearly Taino. This point of view has been upheld ever since then.

Amateur archaeologists have been present in St. Croix for a relatively long time; most of their work is roughly equivalent to pillage, with no catalogues or notes kept of their collections. During the twenties and thirties, however, two amateurs of diligence and intelligence won for themselves particular renown through their carefully recorded collections; these were Louise Bingham-Hark and Folmer Andersen.

Mrs. Hark collected artifacts from several Cruzan sites, some of which were reported on by professionals (Skinner 1925). Folmer Andersen, on the other hand, kept notes himself and corresponded with other archaeologists as a serious student of the subject. His very extensive collection forms the bulk of the National Park Museum in Christiansted.

Andersen's main contribution to the interpretation of local prehistory was his assessment that the lack of Carib artifacts may not disprove a Carib occupation, since women were the potters and it would be in keeping with historical sources to consider the women 'Arawak' and the men 'Carib' (Andersen 1954: 17-18). This view is unacceptable to anthropologists (*cf.* Vescelius n.d.: 7), and ethnohistorians may point to the testimony that Carib women were the preferred wives of Carib men (*cf.* Dr. Chanca's letter).

In 1933, J.R. Montalvo Guenard published the first reference to sites in Vieques; he did not excavate them, but interprets one as being Carib (Rouse 1952: 556).

During the middle thirties Willard V. King, a trustee of the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, sponsored an archaeological expedition to St. Croix under Lewis J. Korn (Anonymous 1964:17). Nothing was published, but the collections obtained, including a few artifacts from Tortola, are kept at the mentioned Museum.

J.C. Trevor, an English anthropologist who was doing ethnological research among the Negroes of the Eastern Caribbean in 1936, discovered that same year that some burials had been found in Water Island; some excavation was done, and a report on the skeletal remains (Buxton, Trevor, and Julien 1938) and artifacts (Hatt 1938) followed. The English researchers thought the skeletons Negroid but Indian (Buxton, Trevor, and Julien 1938: 51), while, in a follow-up article, American anthropologist T. Dale Stewart (1939) thought them wholly Negro.

In 1937, Herbert W. Krieger of the United States National Museum, Smithsonian Institution, was sent to Anegada in order to verify reports of a large Indian shell heap; for this he was allotted a budget of \$1,000 and instructed to examine the other islands as well. Krieger (1938) surveyed Anegada and excavated in Tortola, St. Thomas, and St. Croix. His field techniques were substandard (he did not recognize stratigraphy or take field notes), and his conclusions were a cruder version of Gudmund Hatt's.

Irving Rouse of Yale University conducted a week-long survey of Vieques with some excavations in 1938 (Rouse 1952: 556); his research in the Virgin Islands, coupled with Hatt's earlier work, helped him to establish a very refined ceramic chronology for Puerto Rico. In Vieques, however, he only found preceramic and late ceramic sites.

During the summer of 1951, Gary Vescelius, Allan Croft, and Colin Eisler, then undergraduate students of Yale and Harvard Universities, conducted an exhaustive survey and some excavations on St. Croix (Rouse 1952:309). This work, done under the joint auspices of the Yale Peabody Museum and the St. Croix Museum, was reported by Gary Vescelius (1952), who is presently preparing an updated revision of it.

That same year, a Cuban Scientific Expedition visited St. Thomas and St. Croix, excavating briefly at Magens Bay and Salt River Point. A comprehensive report was published in Spanish (Morales Patino and others 1952).

Monica Flaherty, an amateur archaeologist attached to the former Virgin Islands Museum Inc., excavated extensively in St. Thomas during the early and middle fifties, and did considerable research on the Reef Bay, St. John, petroglyphs (Frassetto 1960). Her collection has fairly adequate provenience data and is very useful.

In 1958, the William L. Bryant Foundation of Orlando, Florida, commissioned Mr. and Mrs. Hugh N. Davis of Charlotte Amalie to do an archaeological survey of St. Thomas (Bullen 1962: 1). This work has not been published in full.

Ripley P. Bullen and Frederick W. Sleight did a modest amount of work for the William L. Bryant Foundation and the National Park Service in 1960; this resulted in some influential publications (Sleight 1962; Bullen 1962; Bullen and Sleight 1963) and the first radiocarbon dates obtained from the Virgin Islands (Bullen and Sleight 1963: 41). Technically, the work of these two gentlemen in St. Thomas and St. John is not up to the standards of the Dano-Dutch Archaeological Expedition thirty eight years before: gross artificial levels were used, and the presentation of data was largely inadequate and hopelessly confusing.

During the winter months of 1969-1970, Edward S. Rutsch of Fairleigh Dickinson University conducted salvage excavations at Cinnamon Bay, St. John, under a National Park Service contract. Rutsch has not yet submitted a final report on his very meticulous field work.

The Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, established a British Virgin Islands Archaeological Survey in 1972, and that same year conducted an exhaustive reconnaissance of Virgin Gorda (Figueredo 1972). Excavations were undertaken by this team during that and the following summer, refining thereby the local chronology.

At some point in the early seventies, Diana Lopez, a graduate student from the University of Mexico, conducted excavations in Vieques in order to obtain data for an academic thesis (Ricardo E. Alegria: personal communication).

In August of 1972, and largely through the efforts of Mr. Charles S. Rotenberg, the Department of Conservation and Cultural Affairs of the United States Virgin Islands contracted Alfredo E. Figueredo, Jeffrey M. Gross, and Jonathan R. Stone to effect salvage excavations at Magens Bay, St. Thomas, and do a cursory survey of St. Croix. This work is partially reported (Figueredo 1974). In December of that same year, Figueredo and Theodore E. Bradstreet conducted a site register for St. Thomas (Figueredo and Bradstreet 1973).

The Virgin Islands Museum has conducted several excavations in St. Thomas during 1973 and 1974 under its former curator; these have been the first strictly stratigraphic excavations in the Virgin Islands.

The Virgin Islands Archaeological Society was founded 30 January 1974 by a group of professionals, amateurs, students, and other interested persons; its object is to further the cause of archaeological research in the Virgin Islands. Later that same year, an Office of the Territorial Archaeologist was created for the United States Virgin Islands inaugurated with a staff of three (Alfredo E. Figueredo, Katherine B. Kay, and Bruce E. Tilden), and a British Virgin Islands Archaeological Survey team surveyed Anegada and located two of the mounds originally reported by Labat (Schomburgk 1832:153).

In summary, then, Virgin Islands archaeology could be said to be three quarters of a century old: excavations began in 1899, modern research techniques in 1922, and official involvement in 1972; as a result, the prehistory of the Virgin Islands is among the best known in the world. The outstanding research collections are those of the Virgin Islands Territorial Museum, the National Park Service museums in Christiansted and Cruz Bay, the Smithsonian Institution, the Museum of the American Indian, the Danish National Museum, and the Yale Peabody Museum, with smaller collections present at the British Museum, the Goteborg Museum, the French Museum of Man, the Archaeological Museum of the University of Puerto Rico, the Anthropological Museum of Havana University, and the Florida State Museum. Through normal scientific exchange, the Territorial Museum hopes to increase the study collections abroad and negotiate the return of unique art objects and neglected collections to the Virgin Islands; this will be of great benefit to both local and foreign scholars.

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