

JAMAICAN REDWARE

By James W. Lee

Previous Literature

The earliest recognition of Jamaican Redware as a separate style of pottery was recorded by Marian DeWolf (1953) when she described material excavated from three sites in the Parish of St. Ann during 1933. Two of the digs produced typical Meillac or Sub-Taino pottery that today would be classified as White Marl style but the third site at Little River (now coded A-15) contained earthenware sherds distinctly different from the usual Indian wares of Jamaica.

DeWolf refers to Rouse (1951: 256) who had stated that sherds of the early Ostiones style of Puerto Rico 'retain (from still earlier Cuevas) such characteristics as painting or polishing of restricted surfaces but bowls are straight-sided instead of bell-shaped and handles looped rather than D-shaped'. She then described the Little River style as between Cuevas and Ostiones based on the following features:

curvature of the surface; simplicity of decoration; ware, medium fine grained but poorly fired; color, reds, tans, and greys; average thickness 0.5 cm; shape, open bowls with some flat bottoms; shoulder, straight or incurving; rim, tapered to the lip; lip, rounded or flat; D-shaped handles, amorphous and tab lugs; some painting and rubbing of restricted areas.

Rarity of incised decoration helps link this style to Cuevas but most other evidence favors early Ostiones. The resemblance to Cuevas-Ostiones is said to be subtle yet unmistakable.

The other six sites lie between Luana Point and Alligator Pond on the south coast. Two are of small extent, shallow and much disturbed—A-6 and A-8; two others—Great Bay (E-4) and Alligator Pond (E-5) have been adversely affected by sand excavators and the last pair, Calabash Bay (E-11) and Bottom Bay (M-4), which are the most extensive and least disturbed sites are both liable to future damage through housing development schemes.

Earlier writers have described the graceful, simple, and artistic qualities which set Redware apart from the brusque, sturdy White Marl style. It should be stated that, in site selection too, these primitive peoples had different tastes. Every Jamaican Redware site is located right at the high water mark, adjacent to a sandy beach, and the settlements built on sand soil. The midden deposits are rarely undisturbed, whether by man or nature. Sherds at the E-5 site appear to have been scattered by storm waves, (a hurricane, perhaps) and similar evidence is seen at E-6 and E-8. By contrast, the later Arawaks almost always chose raised ground or even hill-tops for their villages and preferred marl subsoil for its firmness and good drainage.

Red Pottery

By far the most conspicuous feature is a red slip or paint applied to the shoulders of vessels. These bowls had flattish to gently rounded bottoms and nearly vertical or slightly incurving sides. Once the angle is turned from side to bottom, no more red slip. Not all rim sherds exhibit the red color and this may mean either that some bowls were originally unpainted or that the red has worn off. Certainly the red pigment rubs off or washes away easily from some freshly excavated sherds.

Well formed zoöomorphic handles were popular, especially the turtle motif but 'D' handles were by far the most common (see Fig. 1). Other decorations depicted fish, birds, snakes, lizards, and crocodiles. Incised lines were used to give extra clarity to the sculpture as in fish gills, eyes, mouths, turtle flippers and even a few abstract designs. In one specimen, the incision seems to have been filled by white pigment. Cassava griddle fragments are common, particularly in the south coast sites. A nearly spherical earthenware spindle whorl was found at E-5, indicating the use of cotton from very early times. A few larger dishes apparently had feet but the massive water bottle handles, so plentiful in White Marl sites, are absent. Elongate or boat-shaped bowls in the turtle design would have head and 'tail' handles at each end flanked by pairs of 'flipper' lugs.

Associated Artifacts

Brother Michael, an amateur who excavated a small part of E-6, found pieces of greenstone petaloid celts and one complete specimen about 9 inches long. The author collected a 2 inch greenstone celt at E-5 and polished stone beads have been found at E-4, E-5, E-11 and M-4. Most of these are the usual dirty white to pale grey chalcedony, cylindrical, pierced longitudinally, and usually $\frac{1}{2}$ inch by $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in size. However, at least two beads are known to have been found at E-11 which are made from an exceptionally distinctive rock; coarsely crystalline and pure white with just occasional flecks of a jet black mineral. What must surely be the identical rock is much prized for small sculptures such as beads, three-pointer stones and other trinkets in the south-east Antilles. Were the Jamaican beads family treasures brought here from the travellers' homeland? Or were they trade pieces? The rarity of this rock found here as artifacts and its relative abundance in Trinidad lead to the inference that the source is far from Jamaica.

Summary

It is apparent that the Indians who made the Redware pottery were the

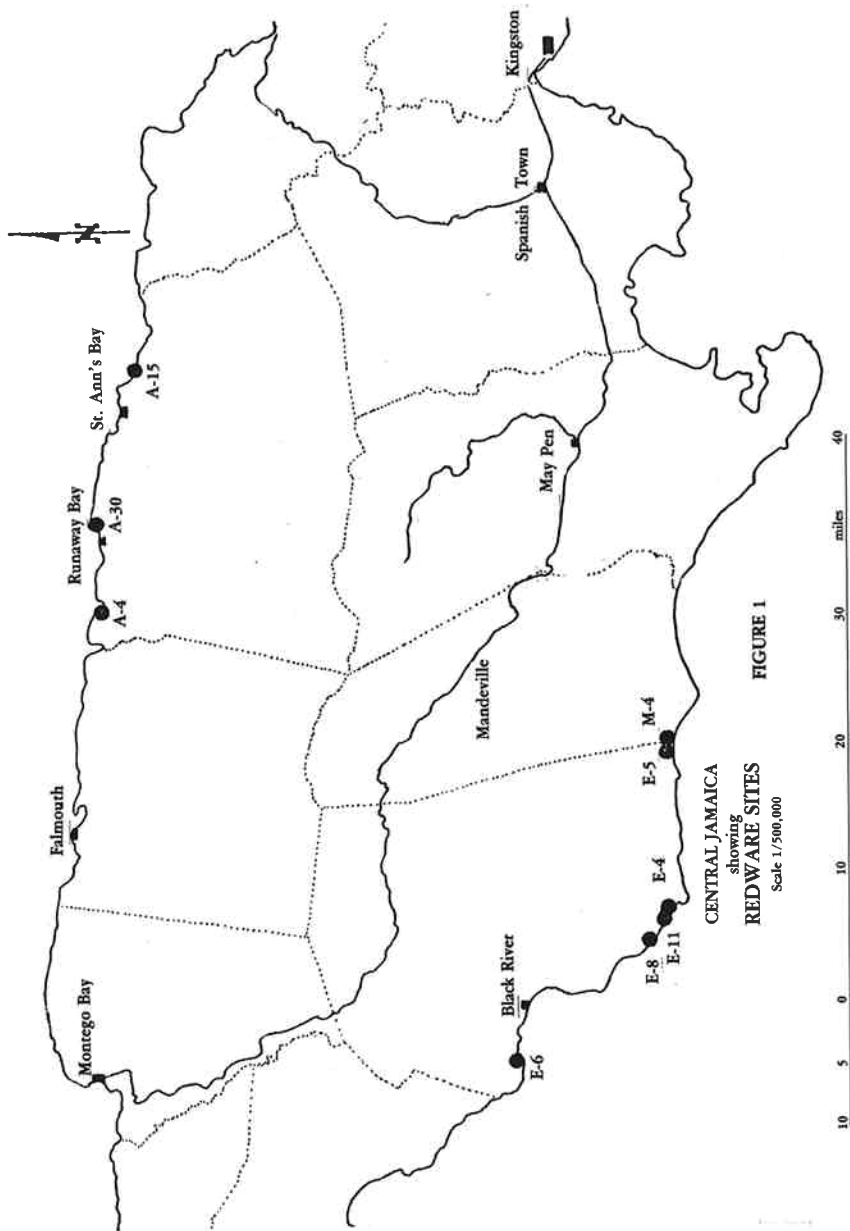


FIGURE 1

earliest people to live in Jamaica. They settled here about 650 A.D. and the shallowness of the few examples of undisturbed midden accumulations is evidence of a relatively short occupation period, possibly only for about 50 years. Indeed, it is unlikely that the White Marl and Redware peoples co-existed in Jamaica. At least three burial caves in St. Elizabeth contained Redware style pottery, a custom common also to the White Marl style.

Similar pottery, both in style and age, occurs in Puerto Rico (Ostiones) Dominican Republic (Anadel) and in Haiti (Macady). None has been described from Cuba.

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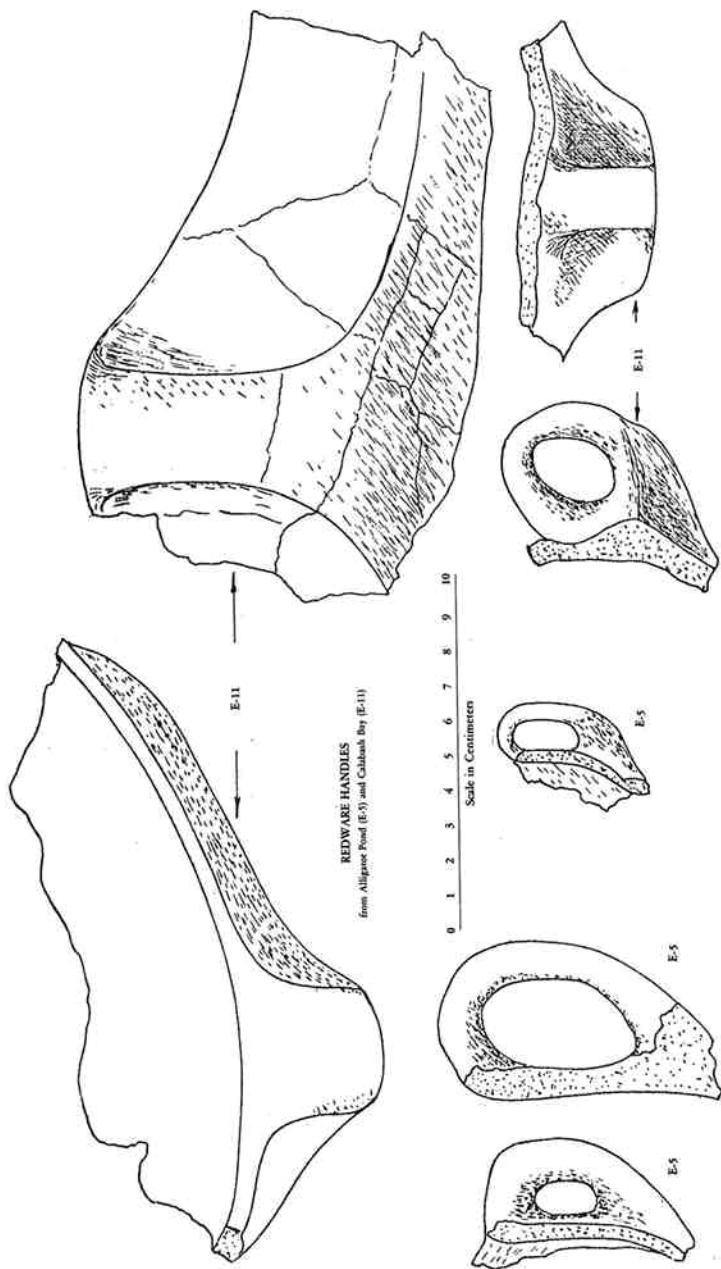


FIGURE 2