

2002
AWARD WINNER

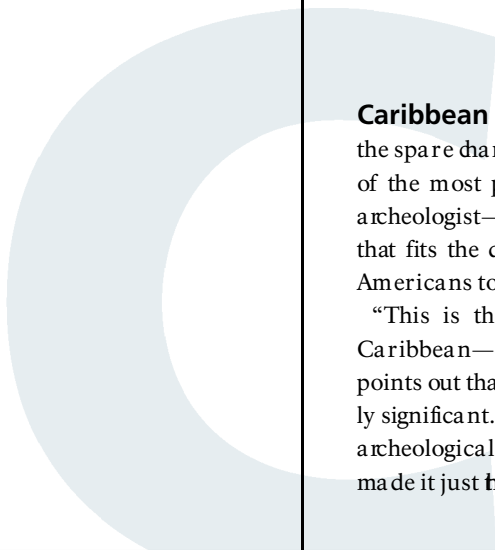
JOHN COTTER AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN NATIONAL PARK SERVICE ARCHEOLOGY

HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS

UNCOVERING A PRE-COLUMBIAN TEMPLE ON A CARIBBEAN BEACH

MOST EXCAVATION SITES are not much to look at, and archeologist Ken Wild's is no exception. Just an L-shaped hole, crisscrossed with stakes and string, barricaded to protect the public and keep the wild donkeys out. But within the hole there lies a mass of articulated pre-Columbian materials just a few feet away from a postcard-perfect crescent of pure white sand that fades into the turquoise and cobalt of the Caribbean Sea. The workers scrubbing artifacts, screening dirt, and excavating objects are not exclusively archeologists, graduate students, and community volunteers but also visitors, like me, who arrive on a daily basis for a languid day at the beach and seize the chance to excavate history instead of sand castles.

BY PAMELA S. TURNER



Caribbean archeology? Most of us imagine a ~~downed~~ galleon's treasure, the spare change that fell from Spain's pockets on the way home. But right on one of the most popular beaches of Virgin Islands National Park, Wild—the park archeologist—found something far rarer: a pre-Columbian Taino ceremonial area that fits the description of a church or temple area. The Taino were the first Americans to meet Columbus, and the first to find that encounter catastrophic.

“This is the first time we’ve recognized a Taino ceremonial area in the Caribbean—described by the Spanish as their temple or church,” says Wild, who points out that the site on Cinnamon Bay is not only regionally but internationally significant. “Many of the offerings were shellfish, which preserved well in the archeological record. Their particular articulation, context, and deposition have made it just that much easier to discern that these were most probably offerings.”



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Above: Ken Wild, archeologist at Virgin Islands National Park. **Opposite:** Caribbean shoreline where the sites are located, with one of the oldest standing structures in the Virgin Islands—dating back to possibly the 1680s—which today houses the archeology lab and museum. **Previous page:** Taino vessel as it was found.

EXCAVATING THROUGH HIS BEACHFRONT METER OF TAINO HISTORY, WILD DISCOVERED UNUSUALLY DISCRETE LAYERS OF ARTIFACT ASSEMBLAGES. BY PURE LUCK, PLANTERS IN THE EARLY 18TH CENTURY BUILT A ROAD RIGHT OVER THE SITE, PROTECTING IT FOR NEARLY 300 YEARS FROM THE DISTURBANCES OF TREE ROOTS, ANIMALS, AND MAN.

HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS

“All their kings . . . have a house . . . in which there is nothing other than images of wood, carved in relief, that they call zemis,” wrote Christopher Columbus in 1496. “Nor in that house is work done for any other purpose or service than for these zemis, with a certain ceremony and prayer, which they go there to make, as we go to church. In this house they have a well-carved table . . . on which there are some powders they put on the head of the aforesaid zemis, making a certain ceremony; afterward they inhale this powder with a forked tube they put into the nose.”

Most of what we know about the Taino comes from early Spanish visitors, including Columbus and his son Ferdinand. Columbus made his first landing on a Bahamian beach in front of a Taino village. He called them “very gentle.” When asked by the Spanish who they were, they replied “Taino” which means “good” or “noble,” possibly to distinguish themselves from the fiercer Island-Caribs who occupied the Lesser Antilles. (For many years, the Taino were referred to as “Arawaks” because their language is in the Arawakan family, but true Arawaks live on the South American mainland.) Taino served Columbus as guides and interpreters; six became the first Americans to visit Europe. Unfortunately, the attentions of Spain would bring the Taino nothing but disaster.

The Cinnamon Bay site was first identified nearly 80 years ago, but a 1995 storm prompted the excavation. “From some testing in 1992, we knew it was a very important site,” says Wild. “But after Hurricane Marilyn we lost our beach zone.” The excavation was begun in July 1998 in an effort to recover as much data as possible before the site is lost to the Caribbean Sea.

KEN WILD/NPS



ABOVE AND RIGHT: KEN WILD/NPS

Until Wild's investigation, little research had been done on the pre-Columbian residents of the northern Virgin Islands who were here just before European contact. Although Taino inhabited the Bahamas, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Hispaniola, Jamaica, and the Leeward Islands, most information on them (documentary and archeological) came from Hispaniola and Puerto Rico. The culture of the Virgin Islands, called Eastern Taino, was believed to have a lower level of cultural development.

By the 15th century, the Classic Taino culture of Hispaniola and Puerto Rico had developed into a complex society with large villages of 1,000 to 2,000 people governed by a cacique (chief). The Taino raised crops of cassava, maize, and sweet potatoes using mound farming. They fished, harvested shellfish, and ate manatees, reptiles, and dogs.

Families lived in round thatched huts and slept in woven cotton hammocks. Dugout canoes—some large enough to carry a hundred people—were used to travel between the islands.

The Taino also constructed petroglyph-decorated plazas and ball courts. Their game—which was both recreational and ceremonial—involved hitting a rubber ball with any part of

the body except the hands or feet. In matrilineal Taino society, women played as well as men.

Taino pottery was decorated with incised lines or with elaborate animal or human-animal forms. Zemis (spirits of gods or ancestors) were made of wood, bone, shell, coral, cotton, or stone. Some were carved in an unusual "three-pointed" shape. Zemis, considered to have great power, were placed in special temples (cañeys).

The Taino also crafted elaborate ceremonial stools (duhos) from wood or stone. When Columbus visited a Cuban cacique, he was seated on a gold-decorated duho—no doubt to his great delight.

TIDY LAYERS TELL A STORY

"If they had been allowed a few centuries of reprieve from Spanish rule they might well have . . . developed the kind of commercial linkage with civilized peoples of Middle America that . . . would have made it possible for them to acquire writing, statehood, and other elements of the mainland civilizations, as their fellow islanders, the British and the Japanese, had already done in Europe and Asia," wrote Irving

WILD BELIEVES THE UNUSUALLY NEAT, SEQUENTIAL LAYERS OF POTTERY, SHELL-FISH, AND ANIMAL REMAINS REPRESENT THE ACCUMULATION OF CENTURIES OF OFFERINGS.



Above left:
Fragments of
offering
vessels
helped map
Caribbean
natives'
religious
development.
Above right:
Shells found
at the site.

The Caribbean's Human Currents

Six thousand years ago, groups of semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers—known as the Casimiroids—were the first humans to settle the islands of the Caribbean. Most scholars believe that they originated in the Yucatan, but migrants may also have traveled from North America via Florida or the Bahamas or from South America via the Lesser Antilles. Around 2000 BC a second wave of hunter-gatherers, the Ortoiroids, island-hopped from the Orinoco River Valley in present-day Venezuela through the Lesser Antilles, Hispaniola, and central Cuba.

In 500 BC the Saladoids, an agricultural, pottery-making people, migrated from the Orinoco to the Caribbean. In 600-800 AD yet another South American group, the Ostionoids, traced essentially the same path. The Ostionoids brought new pottery styles and the ceremonial ball court tradition, eventually evolving into the Taino culture of 1200-1500 AD.

From 1200 to 1500 AD, South American Caribs moved north through the Lesser Antilles. Island-Caribs were known as a warlike people who cannibalized male war captives and kidnapped females; Taino may have abandoned some of their eastern set-

tlements (like St. John) due to Island-Carib depredations. The Island-Caribs put up a fierce resistance to European colonization until they were finally subdued in the late 18th century.

For many years, the Taino were considered extinct, wiped out by disease, forced labor, and outright slaughter. Yet Spanish-Taino intermarriage was common; in a 1514 census, 40 percent of married Spaniards had an indigenous wife.

In 1970, a Taino Tribal Council was established in the mountains of Puerto Rico. "In our past, the island people popularly believed the political propaganda that we as a people became totally extinct," writes tribal leader Pedro Guanikéy Torres. "This may have been due to the political disintegration of our past Taino government and culture. Today we have a 500-year-old mestizo Taino heritage."

Torres is supported by a 1998-1999 University of Puerto Rico study that found Indo-American DNA in half the Puerto Ricans they sampled. Was it Taino DNA? We may know in the future for certain, but for now it seems likely that some islanders have Taino ancestry.



Rouse, a leading authority on the Taino. But history took a different route, leaving sites like this to tell the Taino story.

Excavating through his beachfront meter of Taino history, Wild discovered unusually discrete layers of artifact assemblages. By pure luck, planters in the early 18th century built a road right over the site, protecting it for nearly 300 years from the disturbances of tree roots, animals, and man. “The way the material culture fell into distinct categories was really strange,” says Wild. “Most of the time, ceramic styles show gradual shifts. But remarkably, out of hundreds of pottery shards not a single shard attributable to a particular pottery style was found mixed with a different style?”

The explanation, Wild realized, could be found in the writings of Frey Bartolome de Las Casas, who arrived in Hispaniola in 1502. “We found that in the season when they gathered the harvest of the fields they had sown and cultivated . . . they put this portion of first fruits of the crops in the great house of the lords and caciques, which they called caney, and they offered and dedicated it to the zemi,” wrote Las Casas. “All the things offered in this way were left either until they rotted . . . or until they spoiled, and thus they were consumed.”

Wild believes the unusually neat, sequential layers of pottery, shellfish, and animal remains represent the accumulation of centuries of offerings. The caney that Wild uncovered had been in continuous use for almost 600 years. The artifacts proved that the Virgin Island Taino were more culturally advanced than previously believed, firmly within the Classic Taino tradition. The excavation also provided a tantalizing glimpse into Taino society as it became increasingly complex and dominated by the elite.

This change can be traced through the clay zemi figures that once decorated the caney’s ceremonial offering pots. Some of the reconstructed pots had round holes punched in the bottom, a practice that for some Native American groups symbolizes the release of the soul. Many of the clay adornos have bat/human forms, a common motif in Taino art. “They think the dead wander at night and eat the

THE EXCAVATION ALSO PROVIDED A TANTALIZING GLIMPSE INTO TAINO SOCIETY AS IT BECAME INCREASINGLY COMPLEX AND DOMINATED BY THE ELITE.

Left: Remains of Taino pottery.

fruit of the guannaba [guava],” wrote Spanish historian Pietro Martir d’Anghiera. Because bats flew at night and ate guava, they were believed to be the spirits of ancestors. Wild shows me a small ceramic zemi with round empty eyes, a jutting chin, and curious saucer-shaped nostrils—a “bat nose.” “This figure is probably an ancestor,” explains Wild. “It was found approximately mid-level, probably made around 1200 AD” The zemi represents access to the ancestors’ spirit world.

Wild picks up two other clay figures. “In the next level, we found this face with a bat nose and a chief’s headdress. We know from the Spaniards that only Taino caciques wore headdresses. The iconography is changing; it seems to suggest that now the Taino are worshipping not just ancestors, but the cacique’s ancestors. Ancestors are being used to legitimize the power and status of the cacique. In one of the last layers, we found this figure with a chief’s headdress, but no bat nose. As Taino society became more hierarchical, the chief had greater status. Perhaps he could expect to be worshipped more directly. An important shift in Taino society maybe reflected in these zemi figures?”

“They believed these zemis gave them water and wind and sun when they had need of them, and likewise children and other things they wanted to have,” wrote Las Casas. Caciques and shamans (behiques) would enter the canopy to communicate with the zemis. The ceremony involved ritual purification using special vomiting sticks, often beautifully carved from manatee ribs. As Columbus noted, the cacique and behique would inhale a hallucinogen, cohoba, through a forked tube held to the nose. Through the cohoba ceremony, the cacique and the behique were able to enter the supernatural realm of the zemis. “These soothsayers make people believe,” wrote d’Anghiera. “Indeed they enjoy great authority among them, for the zemis themselves speak to them and predict future matters to them. And if any sick man gets well, they persuade him that he has achieved this by the grace of the zemi.”

ARCHEOLOGIST FOR A DAY

As Wild explains the significance of the material culture, curious tourists wander by. “What are you digging for?” asks a woman toting a beach bag. Wild patiently directs her to a nearby information board, and encourages her to volunteer. I ask Wild if the constant parade of visitors is annoying. “Oh, no,” says Wild, who as a National Park Service archaeologist has worked on Civil War, Revolutionary War, and pioneer sites—as well as underwater shipwrecks and Spanish fortresses. “It’s sad when the community can’t get involved, when nobody knows what you’re doing. By involving the public in the investigation like this you get a chance to engender a positive effect on a lot of people, and inspire them to preserve their heritage.”

Since the excavation began in 1998, an average of 1,000 volunteers a year donated between 12,000 and 14,000 hours to the project. After a short



training session, volunteers (children need an adult along) are set to work washing artifacts and screening dirt. Long-term volunteers carefully excavate artifacts. As Wild spoke, my three children scrubbed ancient offerings of shells and parrotfish bones. Children volunteers at Cinnamon Bay have found stone tools, shell beads, dayzemis, and carved teeth. A man and his son found a gold disk in the “fine” screen, probably an eye inlay for a carved wooden statue.

A variety of groups from the mainland come to participate—like seniors, Boy and Girl Scout troops, and students from high schools and graduate field programs. One high school class raised money to come. Once a week the site hosted a local school group’s participation after an orientation in the classroom.

On site, the volunteers are rotated on a schedule to each work station, manned by either a student intern, park ranger, or experienced local volunteer. This allows them to grasp all aspects of field investigation including the laboratory work.

AN AVERAGE OF 1,000 VOLUNTEERS A YEAR DONATED BETWEEN 12,000 AND 14,000 HOURS TO THE PROJECT.

Left: Designs visible in carefully exposed Taino vessels. Opposite: Anthropologist Anna Lawson volunteers her time on the excavation.

Almost all schools in the region participated in the investigation, as does the local college. For you archeologists out there, this only required four hours a week away from scientific endeavors and responsibilities, but the rewards were immeasurable in community support—and work accomplished.

“We couldn’t do it without these volunteers,” says Wild, “and it would not have been possible without the park’s friends organization.” Archeology in partnership with a friends group is a win-win proposition. Through the friends organization it’s possible to raise funds for a specific need such as archeology. And by making the research public, you help the friends group help the park by raising resource awareness. This enhances the group’s ability with funding because the public participation inevitably leads to increased membership.

Partnering with the friends group allowed for a greater involvement by the community and local businesses too. The partnerships provided the funds for a college intern program with student stipends. “A lot of funding comes from donations—from volunteers and universities like Syracuse and Southern Maine,” says Wild.

The St. John community (population 4,500) has responded enthusiastically. Local students organize fundraisers; a jewelry shop makes silver and bronze zemi jewelry and donates all of the sales. The Friends of the Virgin Island National Park recently raised \$40,000 to house and hopefully display Taino and plantation-era artifacts.

Thanks to local business donations this program continued past the initial first year’s funding, and now, four years later, it continues today. These partnerships also made it possible to house the students and project scientists on this very expensive island, through donations to the friends by local campgrounds. As it turned out the campgrounds benefitted, as the students provided lecture programs for their visitors. The lectures in turn brought in many more volunteers and ensured that students were well acquainted with the research. Many times when funds were low a number of interns signed on as volunteers.

One of the primary success stories was on-site community involvement. The volunteers made it possible to continue educational programs when intern numbers were low. One very talented volunteer guide, Linda Palmer Smith, was a primary organizer, recruiter, advertiser, and artist for the site presentations. As a comic strip writer, artist, and playwright, she made sure that the tours were both educational and

Below: Students, ever-present at the site, ranged in age from first grade to college. **Opposite:** Student involvement often led to original discoveries.

VOLUNTEERS ARE ROTATED ON A SCHEDULE TO EACH WORK STATION, MANNED BY EITHER A STUDENT INTERN, PARK RANGER, OR EXPERIENCED LOCAL VOLUNTEER. THIS ALLOWS THEM TO GRASP ALL ASPECTS OF FIELD INVESTIGATION INCLUDING THE LABORATORY WORK.



ABOVE AND LEFT: KEN WILD/NPS

entertaining. In 1999, he wrote a play that incorporated the Taino beliefs and culture, which was presented to a packed house every Saturday night for four months. All 65 cast and production members, of course, were volunteers. Working with the volunteers, visiting project scientists—like the zooarcheologist Irv Quitmyer of the Florida Museum of Natural History and ceramic specialist Emily Lundberg—found that they could accomplish so much more.

Academic involvement played a major role. “Syracuse University helped to excavate plantation-era buildings—also eroding on the beachfront,” says Wild. He believes they have found in one eroding structure perhaps the first physical evidence of a significant chapter in Caribbean history—the St. John slave revolt of 1733. The research may shed some light on the 200-year gap in St. John history between the disappearance of the Taino in the 15th century and the arrival of Danish colonists in 1718. Many materials recovered by Doug Armstrong of Syracuse suggest that other Europeans had probably settled this stretch of beach before the Danes laid claim.

In some areas the historic era is interlaced with prehistoric remains. When Columbus sailed through the Virgin Islands in 1493, his only recorded contact with local inhabitants was on St. Croix; it is unclear whether they were Taino or Island-Carib. The Taino may have already abandoned St. John, possibly because of Island-Carib attacks. Preliminary analysis may well provide at least a theory of what happened to the St. John Taino. Artifact study in the lab may take the Cinna mon Bay Taino site back to 600 AD.

THE ZEMIS’ PROPHECY

With the coming of the Spanish, the Taino were forced to work on encomiendas (estates)—ranching, farming, and mining. The hard work, poor diet, and exposure to European diseases quickly took their toll. At the time of Columbus’ first voyage, the Taino population of Hispaniola alone numbered in the hundreds of thousands. By 1509—a mere 17 years later—only 60,000 remained. In 1542, native communities were declared free by the Spanish crown. There were only 60 Taino left on Puerto Rico to celebrate what they had taken blissfully for granted a half-century earlier.

According to legend, the zemis had warned the Taino of their fate. “The zemis [prophe- sies] that not many years would go by before a people covered with clothes would reach the island, and they would end all those rites and ceremonies . . . and would kill all their children or deprive them of freedom,” wrote d’Arghiera. “When truly they saw the Spaniards . . . they resolved that they were the people of the prophecy. And they were not mistaken . . . not even a memory is now left of the zemis, who have been transported to Spain so that we might be acquainted with their mockery and the devil’s deceptions.”

More than a memory has surfaced on the beach at Cinna mon Bay as the zemis return to tell the story of the Taino.

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ON THE WEB

For more information about the Friends of the Virgin Islands National Park—and volunteering—see their website at www.friendsvini.org. The site also has information about the project, lesson plans for elementary and middle school teachers on the prehistory of the Virgin Islands, and sales items that fund the archeological research.

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Opposite: Detail of Taino artifact. Above: Archeologist Ken Wild at work.