

The Jamaican Taino Project

A collaborative project of the University of the West Indies-
Mona, Jamaica, and Murray State University

Philip Allsworth-Jones and
Kit W. Wesler



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The Jamaican Taino project is a joint project of the archaeology programs of the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica and Murray State University. Drs. Philip Allsworth-Jones (UWI) and Kit W. Wesler (MSU) co-direct the project. Students from both universities, as well as from Southeastern Missouri State University, participated in the excavations.

The interpretations in the following slides and notes are preliminary. Analysis is in progress, and we hope to report the project fully in a monograph in the near future.

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The Taino were the Native American inhabitants of the Greater Antilles, Bahamas, and northern Lesser Antilles at the time of European contact. Historians often divide them into the Classic Taino of Hispaniola, eastern Cuba, and Puerto Rico, and the Eastern and Western (including the Lucayan, or Bahamas) Taino. The Classic Taino appear to have had the most complex chiefdom societies, the most elaborate ceremonials, and the most intricate and highly crafted artworks. To what extent this distinction reflects the much more detailed corpus of written works about the Taino of Hispaniola is unclear.

Two other groups of Native Americans, the Guanahatabey or Ciboney and the Island Caribs, are also distinguished by many historians. How different they were from the Tainos, or whether the picture of them that we have derived from Spanish documents is incomplete or misleading, is subject to debate.

Jamaica showing project locations



In 1998, Philip Allsworth-Jones and Kit Wesler began a project of test excavations of village sites of the Jamaican Taino. Our major goal was to explore variation within and among villages towards a better understanding of the organization of Jamaican chiefdoms. Spanish accounts of the Taino suggest a system of paramount chiefdoms, with district chiefs and commoners comprising a three-tier hierarchy of authority and status. Those descriptions refer mainly to Hispaniola, but the sketchier accounts of Jamaica indicate some form of chiefdom there as well.

We chose the Annotto Bay area as the focus of our efforts, and excavated in three sites over five summers, from 1999 through 2003. We also made a quick side foray to the Wentworth site, above Port Maria, west of our primary area.



Wesler's colleagues often ask why a North American specialist would choose to go and do research in Jamaica when there is so much to do in western Kentucky.

Well, we all make sacrifices for science.

Site plan, Bahamas



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One reason we wanted to investigate village sites was to understand their layout and organization. There are very few published plans of Taino village sites. This one, from the Bahamas, shows two apparent plazas that are joined at a point that is interpreted as a cacique's (chief's) house.

We can question whether this interpretation, based on site survey data, is fully supported. Could it, instead, be two villages of different times that chose almost the same location? Are there markers that indicate chiefly status for a house at the articulation point?

More relevant to our project, the topography of the Bahamas is quite different from that of Jamaica, which has far greater physical relief.

Annotto Bay site locations



There are four recorded Taino village sites around Annotto Bay. All occupy high hills overlooking the sea. The Green Castle and Newry sites are separated by a small river valley, and Coleraine is an isolated hill within the coastal plain around the bay. Iter Boreale is just around the corner, somewhat separated from the first three. We conducted testing at Green Castle for three years, and put one season each into Newry and Coleraine.

One of the things that attracted us to this study area was the proximity of these sites to each other, and what their relationships might tell us about chiefdom organization.

Green Castle (right) and Newry (left) sites



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Three of the sites are almost within hailing distance of each other. This view shows the Green Castle site on the hill to the north, and Newry hill on the south.

Coleraine site



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Turning around from the same point, here is Coleraine, just east. Given studies of chiefdom size, it seems unlikely that these villages were independent political units—if they were occupied contemporaneously.

View of Wagwater River from Coleraine hill



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This view shows Annotto Bay and the mouth of the Wagwater River from the slope of the Coleraine site. The name Wagwater is thought to be an English corruption of Guaiguata, a Spanish name for this area that they, in turn, apparently took from the local Taino. When James Lee recorded the Coleraine site in the 1960s, he suggested that Coleraine was the village that the Spanish called Guaiguata. Lee had no datable materials from the site. We wondered, then, whether Coleraine was in fact Guaiguata, or perhaps a component of a multi-village chiefly district that incorporated several sites around the bay. Only a good set of dates on these sites would answer that question.

Annotto Bay from Green Castle site



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The Green Castle site overlooks Annotto Bay.

Green Castle site, South Trench



Our first test unit at Green Castle recovered potsherds, chipped stone and faunal remains, but the soil was rocky and very shallow. The limestone bedrock was so weathered that we could cut into it with our trowels.

Green Castle site, Mid-trench, Level 1



contents

We placed the second unit in a saddle on the east-central part of the site. We quickly found a deposit that appeared to be a substantial midden. Potsherds and shell, as well as weathered limestone fragments, were abundant.

Green Castle site, Mid-trench, Level 3



contents

We excavated in 10-cm levels (or “spits” in the British terminology).

Green Castle site, Mid-trench, Level 4



This excavation reached the base of Level 4 at the end of our 1999 season. The red area at the west (left) end is weathered bedrock. At the east end, however, there is still dark, middeny soil at the base of the unit. We assumed that the bedrock was sloping eastward, and expected to return the following summer to finish this unit.

We removed a 20-cm wide extension at the east side, in order to take soil samples for further analysis.

**Green Castle
site, Mid-
trench, Level
4 in 2000**



In 2000, we returned and removed the backfill from the unit, ready to complete the excavation at the east end (upper end in this view).

**Green Castle
site, Mid-
trench, Level 5**



contents

At the base of Level 5 in the east (upper) end, the dark stain began to take on a rounded outline.

Green Castle site, Mid-trench, Level 6



contents

At the base of Level 6, the rounded outline became more distinct.

Green Castle site, Mid-trench, Level 7



contents

Level 7 followed the curve of a feature that had been excavated into the bedrock by the inhabitants of the site. In the northeast corner, we encountered a large bone.

Green Castle site, Mid-trench, Level 7



contents

Very close to the bone, we encountered a ceramic vessel.

**Green Castle
site, Mid-
trench, Level 7**



contents

At the end of the 2000 season, we had uncovered enough of the base of the feature to be certain that we had found a human burial, accompanied by a ceramic vessel. Well documented burials are rare in Jamaica, especially in open sites (as opposed to caves). Therefore we knew that we had to investigate this one thoroughly—but that completion of the excavation would have to wait until the third season.

We refilled the burial pit with clean river sand in order to protect the remains, and then backfilled the unit for the season.

Green Castle site, Mid-trench, burial pit



contents

On returning to the site in 2001, we removed the backfill but left the river sand as continued protection for the remains. We expanded the east end of the excavation unit to a 1.5 x 1.5 m square, and excavated to bedrock so that we could define the burial pit.

Green Castle site, Mid-trench, Burial 1



contents

Once the burial pit was defined, we could expose the burial. We had to carve away some of the bedrock that overlay the remains in order to expose them properly. The individual was an adult male, placed in a flexed position in a niche carved at the side of the burial pit. Is the niche a symbolic cave?

Green Castle site, Mid-trench, Burial 1



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The base of the ceramic vessel lay on top of the burial's legs.

Green Castle site, Mid-trench, Burial 1



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The vessel was removed, and it is being restored in the laboratory at the University of the West Indies. The skeleton was in very fragile condition and would have disintegrated if we had tried to remove it. Therefore, after close examination by Dr. Ana Luisa Santos, a visiting physical anthropologist who kindly consulted on our project, we re-covered the burial with river sand before backfilling the unit.

Green Castle site, South trench, Level 1



contents

The third unit, begun in 1999, was located on the southern rise of the site, in an area that appeared to have midden.

Green Castle site, South trench, Level 2



contents

We encountered a deposit rich in ceramics, faunal remains, and shell in the upper levels of the unit. This sherd is part of the rim of a boat-shaped vessel, a form distinctive to the Taino.

Green Castle site, South trench, Level 4



contents

We also found the tip of a ground stone petaloid celt, another distinctive Taino artifact.

Green Castle site, South trench, Level 4



contents

At the end of the 1999 season, we had reached the base of Level 4 without encountering bedrock.

**Green Castle
site, South
trench, Level 9**



contents

We returned in 2000 and removed five more 10-cm levels. Near the end of the second season, we reached reddish-stained weathered limestone and assumed that we were near bedrock. However, we were still recovering artifacts and animal remains, and knew we were not quite finished with this unit.

Green Castle site, South trench, Level 12



contents

We excavated three more levels in a 1 m x 50 cm section at the south end of the unit, expecting to prove that bedrock was imminent. Instead, at the base of Level 12, we found another midden.

**Green Castle site,
South trench,
Level 12, west
profile**



contents

The west side of the profile of our deep test hints at the stratigraphy. A reddish zone that resembles the top of the weathered bedrock elsewhere on the site separates an upper from a lower midden zone.

Green Castle site, South trench, west profile 2000



contents

In looking more closely at the west profile of the unit, we also realized that we had intersected the skull of a very young person. This, too, would require further investigation in 2001.

**Green Castle site
2001, South
trench, Level 12**



contents

On returning to the site in 2001, we completed the excavation of Levels 10-12, and prepared to continue deeper into the lower midden zone.

**Green Castle
site 2001,
South trench,
Level 15**



contents

We finally found bedrock at the base of Level 15.

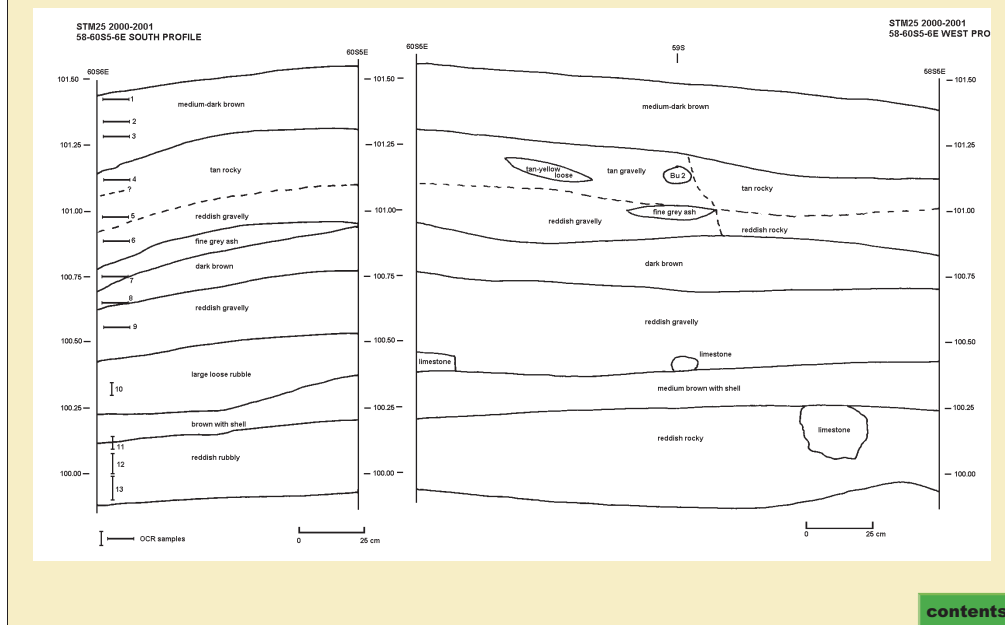
**Green Castle
site 2001,
South trench,
South profile**



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The south profile of the unit reveals the stratigraphy. There is a zone of displaced bedrock above a deeply-buried midden. The upper red zone apparently was formed during a landslide resulting from heavy rains. This is a modern hazard in Jamaica because of the slopes and the weathered limestone soils, especially where soils have been disturbed by such activities as building roads. Soaking by heavy rains often is the immediate cause of modern landslides. Evidently, the Taino sometimes created enough disturbance to face similar hazards.

Green Castle site 2001, South trench, South and West profile drawings



Close study of the profiles revealed an even more complex stratigraphy. Three occupation zones (described as browns in the drawing) are separated by rubble zones that represent soils displaced from farther up the slope, probably during heavy rainstorms.

Radiocarbon dates for the upper occupation place it in the AD 1400s, possibly into the early 1500s. The dates on the lower two zones are very close to each other, and suggest an occupation (interrupted in this part of the site by a landslide) in the AD 1200s. We refer to the occupations as Late Green Castle and Early Green Castle.

We recovered roughly similar dates from the mid-trench, but the stratigraphy there is much harder to distinguish. The adult burial from the mid-trench probably belongs to the Late Green Castle occupation.

Green Castle site, South trench, extension



contents

Towards the end of the 2001 season, we excavated a 1 x 5 m extension to investigate the child burial that we had noted in the profile of the south trench.

Green Castle site, South trench, Burial 2



contents

The child of about 6-7 years old was buried in a very tightly flexed position. It is possible that the large chunks of limestone at the child's head were placed there as a symbolic niche like the one in which the adult was placed. However, it is at least as likely that the limestone is a natural occurrence in the generally rubble-filled soil. We found no other artifacts in association with this burial.



The artifact from Green Castle were varied, and typical of the Jamaican Taino. An effigy adorno, a potsherd disk, and a possible effigy handle are distinctive.



Ground stone items include a miniature celt, stone beads, the end of a petaloid celt, and a fragment of a large ground stone tool or ornament. A scored and shaped piece of shell is pictured with the stone beads.

**Green Castle
Carved bone
artifacts**



contents

Several carved bone items are also unusual finds, including a bird effigy, an eyed needle, and a bone with a relief carving that may be part of a snake figure.

Wentworth site



contents

The Wentworth site overlooks Port Maria from the west. Noel Coward built his Jamaican home, called Firefly, on the site, but it is also a large Taino village site. We conducted a brief test excavation at the north end of the site. This section is owned by Mr. Errol Henry, who kindly gave permission for the work.

A previous set of test excavations had demonstrated the presence of a midden here. Archaeologist Basil Reid suggested the possibility of a stratified deposit, with late Taino materials (White Marl period, ca. AD 900-1500) overlaying earlier (Little River period, ca. AD 600-900) ceramics. If this was the case, it would be a most unusual find, but Reid advocated further testing to confirm or refute his provisional interpretation.

**Wentworth site
landowner s collection**



contents

The landowner, Errol Henry, has collected numerous artifacts from the site, including incised pottery, ceramic effigies, and stone beads.

Wentworth site, final floor



contents

We conducted a brief excavation in March, 2002. Our project cleared a section of the profile of one of Basil Reid's former test units, and then excavated a unit of slightly smaller than 1 x 1 m to bedrock. We saw no sign of stratigraphy in the soil profile.



We did not find any red-slipped (“redware”) ceramics characteristic of the earlier, Little River period. We did, however, confirm the presence of a rich midden. We recovered ceramics very comparable to those from Green Castle, and other artifacts, such as the stone bead in the upper right corner. Our small unit cannot begin to fully characterize the large and undoubtedly complex Wentworth site, but we can see that the northern section is comparable in period to the Annotto Bay sites in our project.

Newry site, 2002



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We returned to the Green Castle Plantation in the summer of 2002, and excavated eight test units at the Newry site. Six of the units found shallow soils, but two encountered stratified deposits.

Newry site, 10-11S1-2W Level 11



This 1 x 1 m unit found marly bedrock at about 1 m below surface.

Newry site, 10-11S1-2W west profile



contents

The stratigraphy includes a deep rubbly zone, sloping down toward the south. This zone appears to represent another landslide, much like those at Green Castle.

Newry site, 14-15S6-7E Level 8



contents

The second deep test was farther east.

Newry site, 14-15S6-7E, East profile



This unit also revealed a stratified deposit, although the distinctions between zones were subtle.

Newry site, 2002



contents

Newry produced a number of conch shell scoops like the one in the upper photograph, and a good sample of potsherds. On the left is a very unusual artifact for Jamaica, a small triangular chipped stone arrowhead, made from a chert flake.

Coleraine 2003



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Our final season, summer 2003, concentrated on the Coleraine site. Several of our test units found shallow deposits, but one area of the site had a productive midden.

Coleraine 4.5-5S6-7W North profile



contents

In this area, the deepest soils formed a distinct, reddish-brown zone.

Coleraine



contents

The deep zone produced our only uncontaminated radiocarbon sample from Coleraine, and also an assemblage of unusual artifacts, including this conch shell celt.

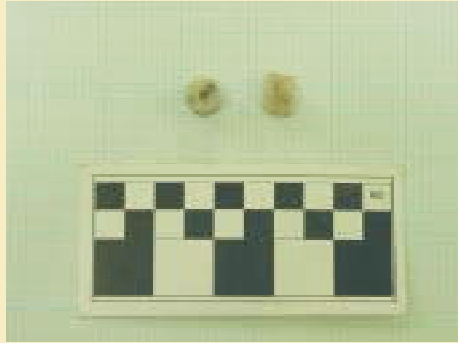
Coleraine



contents

A shell hook and ground stone pick or chisel came from the deepest soil deposit.

Coleraine

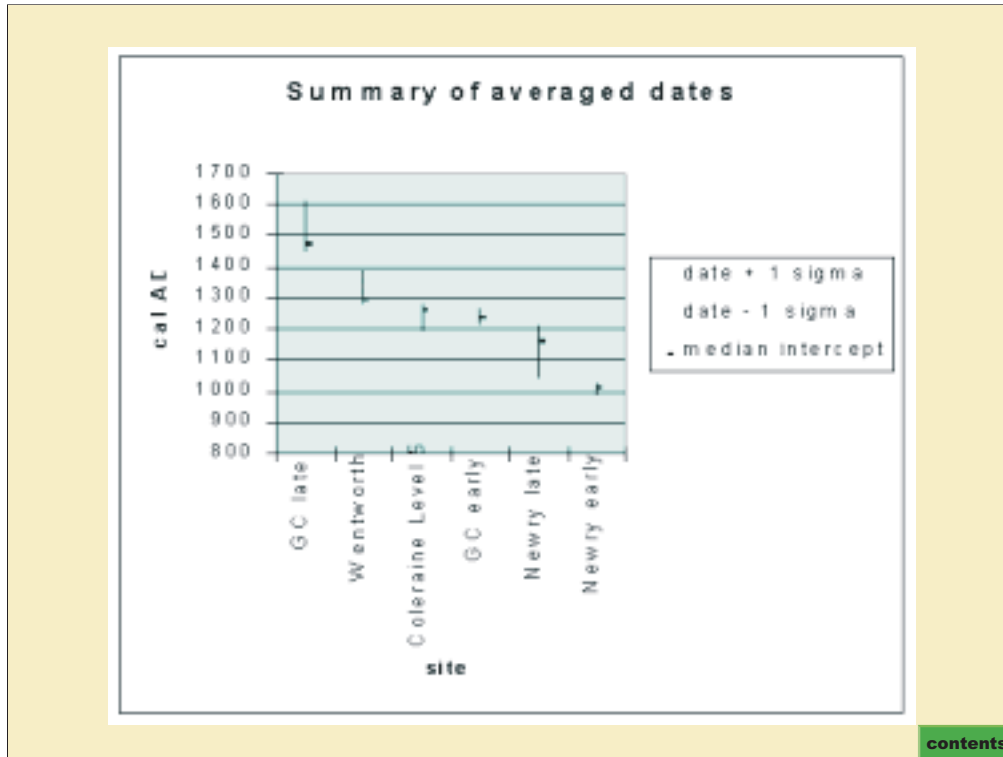


contents

Coleraine also yielded two fine stone beads, shell artifacts, and a good ceramic sample.



We were unable to investigate Iter Boreale in our five-year project, but did recover excellent artifact, shell and faunal samples from Coleraine, Newry, and Green Castle. Our analysis now turns to our original question. Given that these sites are so close to each other, were they occupied simultaneously? If so, might they have formed a set of villages in a chief's district that the Spanish called Guaiguata?



The radiocarbon dates suggest that the sites form a sequence, not a contemporaneous group. The early levels of Newry belong roughly around AD 1000. The upper deposits at Newry can be dated mainly to the 1100s. Early Green Castle can be assigned to the 1200s. The single date from Coleraine is very comparable to the early Green Castle average, but the dated Coleraine sample came from the base of the deposit, and we can postulate that the main occupation was slightly later. The late period at Green Castle belongs to the 1400s, and possibly persisted as late as the Spanish period (although we recovered no artifacts suggesting Spanish contact). The Green Castle site is thus the most likely candidate for a village that the Spanish would have called Guaiguata.

By happenstance, our date from the Wentworth site indicates that this deposit fits chronologically between the Green Castle occupation periods.

Green Castle: open and filled triangle decorations



The ceramics from our sites belong to the White Marl ceramic style, originally defined through the work of Robert Howard and Ronald Vanderwal at the White Marl site on the south coast. The characteristic decoration was made by incising, generally on the body of the vessel above the carination. For our preliminary analysis, we call the major variations open-triangle and filled-triangle. Many sherds, of course, are undecorated.

Green Castle: open and filled triangle decorations



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Rims are sometimes decorated as well. Some rims are set off as a design field with solid, dashed or punctated lines parallel to the lip. Other rims have a fillet strip, which may or may not have the same rim decorations on them. There are also a few shallow vessels with flaring rims, as in the lower right.

**Montego Bay
(Fairfield) style**



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The White Marl style is distinct from the Montego Bay or Fairfield style, found on the northwestern coast. In the Montego Bay style, the decorations are similar, but the design field is almost entirely restricted to a very wide rim fillet. These sherds are from collections excavated by Ronald Vanderwal in the 1960s and curated at by the Jamaica National Heritage Trust. We recorded only a couple of sherds in these collections on which the incising could have been on the body of the vessel, and in those cases, we think it is likely that they are filleted rims with the tops and bottoms broken away, and not really body sherds.

Decorative type frequencies

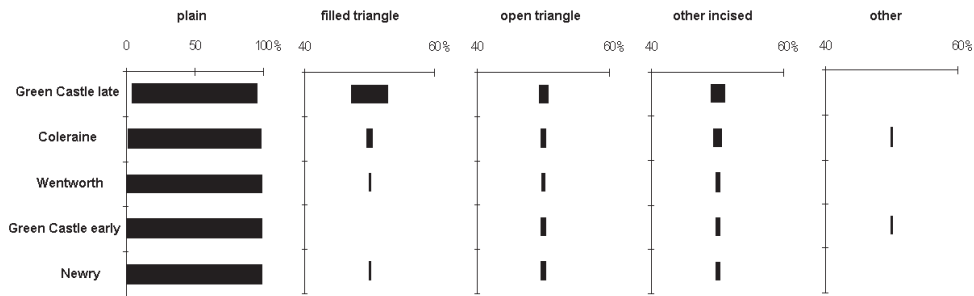


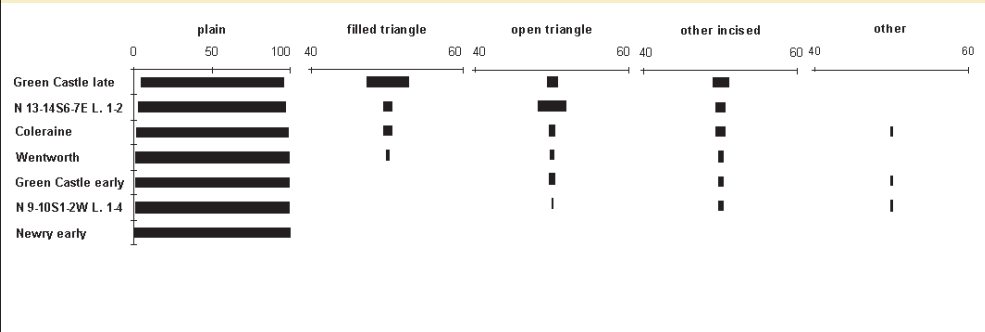
Figure 2. Decorative type frequencies.

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Graphing the frequencies of the major groups of sherds in our Annotto Bay sites (and Wentworth) in the order suggested by the radiocarbon dates, we do seem to have a sequence. Incising in general, and the filled triangle type in particular, clearly increase in the late part of the sequence. There is some indication that the open triangle decoration also increases slightly with time. Here we have arbitrarily placed Coleraine later than Wentworth because the pattern makes more sense.

The slight perturbation in the sequence appears to be the Newry site. A closer study of the distribution of the sherds, though, shows that the decorated specimens concentrate in the uppermost levels of one of the deep tests.

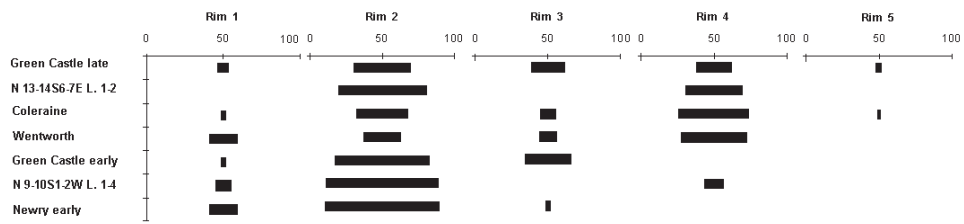
Jamaican Taino project Seriation by ceramic decorations



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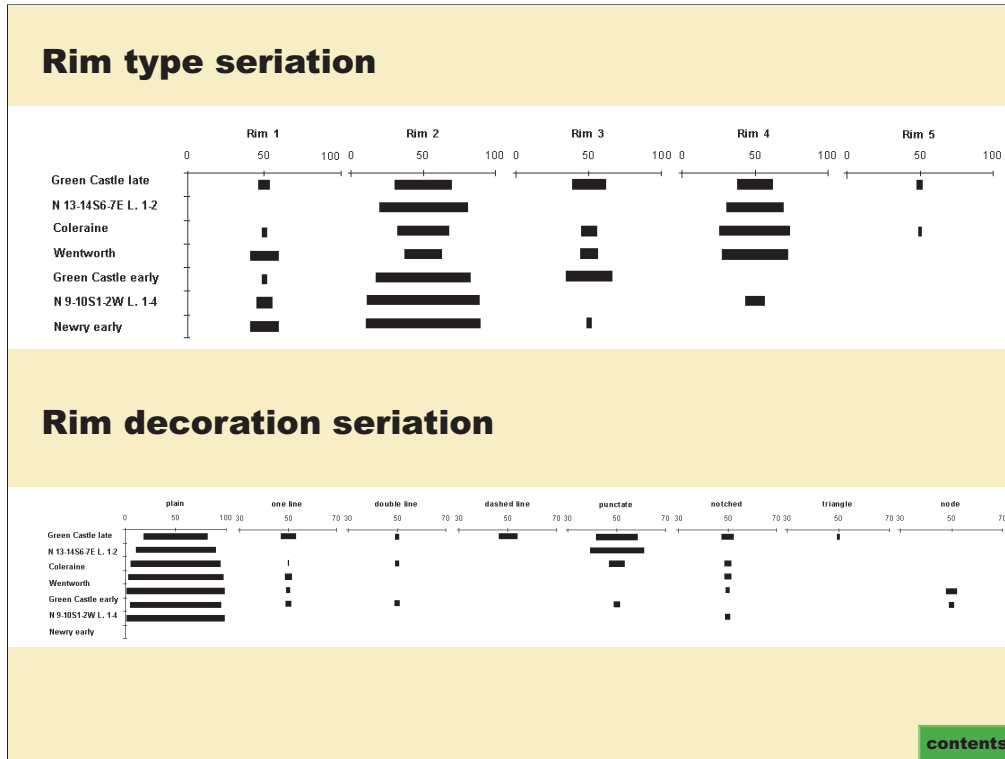
If we separate out those levels, and also the early from late middens, we can seriate the Newry deposit with decorated sherds into a position between Coleraine and late Green Castle. The sequence makes very good sense. The interesting implication here is that there indeed may have been a small late period occupation at Newry, even though our radiocarbon samples, which came from lower in the midden, did not catch it. If so, we can raise the possibility that Green Castle was the seat of Guaiguata, but that some settlement was dispersed away from the main village.

Rim type seriation



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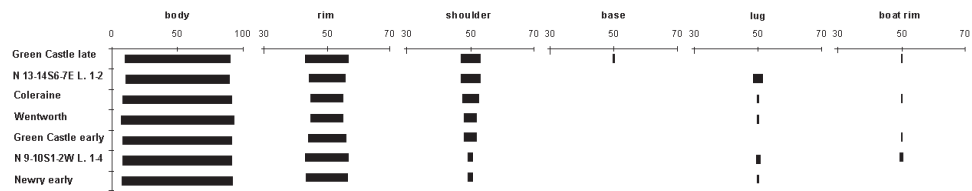
We defined five rim shapes in the Annotto Bay sites. Rims 1-3 really are just variations, and probably should be merged for analytical purposes. Rim 4 is the filleted rim, and offers some suggestion of a battleship curve.



Rim decorations also show some signs of a sequence. Plain rims diminish in the late period. A couple of decorations either increase or appear late, and noded rims have only a brief moment in the sequence.

These sequences appear promising, but must be tested before they can be applied uncritically or to regions beyond our study area.

Sherd form seriation



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There is also some indication that carination increases in frequency with time. The column we have listed here as “shoulder” refers to sherds with carination angles. Base sherds, lugs and boat-shaped rims also look patterned, but there are so few of them that we would not have much confidence in those sequences.

Annotto Bay site locations



The data from our project suggest a couple of preliminary conclusions. First, we have a sequence of occupations spanning the last five to six hundred years of Taino occupation around Annotto Bay. Ceramic frequency distributions through time suggest that the development of a fairly fine-scaled chronological sequence is possible. Further study of other classes of materials, notably dietary remains, may give us new insight into changing adaptations in the region.

Second, only the late occupation of Green Castle potentially reaches into the period of Spanish contact, and thus may belong to what the Spanish called Guaiguata. We emphasize that we recovered no sign of Spanish contact in the site.

Third, we have no indication that more than one large village was occupied here at any time. Assuming a chiefdom level of organization, we see no sign that several villages may have come under the control of a single chief. On the other hand, ceramic seriation cannot discount the possibility that there was a small occupation at the Newry site in the late period. Also, Jo Stokes's data, under analysis at the University of Kentucky, indicate that large villages were not the only locus of Taino habitation. It is possible that the large Annotto Bay villages were centers for a dispersed hinterland, and that we may have a two-tier settlement hierarchy. Only systematic survey efforts in the area can answer that question.

Annotto Bay sites



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We also have to note that we were not able to test Iter Boreale, and we do not know how it might fit into the picture. Too, there is at least one other topographic situation, about where the O in ANNOTTO BAY is, that matches the three sites we tested, and it would be well worth finding out if there is a site on top of that hill.

Finally, it is also possible that Annotto Bay or Guaiguata was a subsidiary unit in a larger regional system comparable in scale to the complex chiefdoms described for Hispaniola. Our data cannot address that possibility.

So, clearly, there is a great deal more work to be done in this area of Jamaica before we can fully characterize the settlement system and its sociopolitical complexity. Nonetheless, we have been able to show that the three sites we tested form a sequence rather than a contemporaneous group, and that there is good potential for studying change through time within the White Marl period in this area.

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