

# NEW PERSPECTIVES ON JAMAICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

ROBERT R. HOWARD

## ABSTRACT

Recent investigations still yield no sign of preceramic or of Arawak occupation of Jamaica before early Period III in the Rouse chronology. Jamaican sites indicate a characteristically Arawakan culture, but they lack the ceremonial elaboration developed in Haiti. Jamaican pottery shows relatively little change through time and only minor local variation. Four distinct styles are present: (1) Little River from early Period III; (2) White Marl, the dominant style of the island; (3) Montego Bay, probably the latest in time; and (4) a little-known Red Ware whose chronological position is not clear. The closest stylistic affiliations are with Bani of Cuba and Meillac of Haiti. The late Carrier style of Haiti did not diffuse to Jamaica. Certain distinctive burial practices and features of village construction have been revealed by recent excavations at White Marl and other southern coast sites.

JAMAICA was the last of the major islands of the Antilles to receive archaeological attention. Much of what has been done in the last decade has been, of necessity, survey work and test excavations rather than intensive investigation of particular sites. Only at the important village site of White Marl on the southern coast has a major excavation campaign been begun, and this is still in its preliminary stages. Therefore many of the conclusions reached in this summary are tentative and will undoubtedly be modified as more complete evidence becomes available in the next few years.

At present, the Sub-Taino branch of the Arawak appears to represent the only pre-Columbian inhabitants of Jamaica. Ripley P. Bullen and I and several competent amateurs in Jamaica have searched for evidence of pre-agricultural Meso-Indian cultures that correspond to the Ciboney of Cuba, but no such sites have been discovered. If we consider the fact that Meso-Indian occupations have now been confirmed for all the major islands of the Greater Antilles except Jamaica, it seems most likely that such sites will eventually be discovered there as well. Certainly the archaeology provides no obvious explanation for the bypassing of Jamaica by Meso-Indian migrants. It should be remembered that certain portions of the Jamaican coastal area, such as the Portland Ridge region and much of the western and southwestern shoreline, which represent the type of ecological setting most favored by Meso-Indian peoples in Cuba and Haiti, have received

only the most cursory archaeological investigation.

Since Meso-Indian sites have not been found, we must turn to the evidence for Arawak occupation. The earliest known Arawak site in Jamaica continues to be Little River on the north-central coast of the island. Unlike later Arawak sites, Little River is directly on the coast and has been almost completely eroded away by the sea. It is unfortunate that no radiocarbon samples were rescued from the site because it now appears doubtful if enough material remains for this to be accomplished. The date for Little River therefore must at present be derived from ceramic cross-checks and associated dates with material elsewhere in the West Indies. As DeWolf, the discoverer of the site, has pointed out, the pottery seems to represent an extension of the Cuevas-Ostiones tradition of Puerto Rico into Jamaica (DeWolf 1953). This places Little River in the early part of Period III in Rouse's time scale (Rouse 1951) and suggests a date of around A.D. 500 for initial occupation of the island.

No other sites yielding material similar to Little River are known in Jamaica, although a few sherds in the refuse removed from the historic site of Sevilla Nueva by C. S. Cotter appear to belong to the Little River style. Since this earliest Spanish settlement is only a short distance from Little River and is also on the coastal plain near the sea, it seems probable that there may have been an early Arawak village at this site which had been abandoned centuries before the Spaniards built there. The lack of material belonging to Little River style elsewhere on the island suggests that the first occupation of Jamaica was small in scale and was confined largely to the northern coast.

Just when the major Arawak migration to Jamaica began and which areas were first occupied cannot be said for certain at present. The earliest radiocarbon dates we have for Jamaica come from the White Marl site midway between Kingston and Spanishtown on the southern coast. These dates, which were obtained from charcoal in the bottom levels of occupation, cluster around A.D. 900. The main Arawak occupation may go back a century or two earlier but probably not much before that.

Jamaican Arawak sites fall into three main categories: (1) midden deposits at village sites, (2) caves, and (3) petroglyphs. As is characteristic of other Sub-Taino remains in the West Indies, there is an absence of plazas, ball courts, or other ceremonial structures. Caves, which occur in large number in Jamaica, seem to have been used almost entirely for burial of persons of high rank and for related religious activities. A few scattered potsherds and shells in some of the caves indicate occasional use as temporary shelters for hunters or gatherers of shellfish. No new caves have been discovered in the last decade, and no really systematic excavation has ever been undertaken at any of the known cave sites.

Of the nine reported petroglyph sites in Jamaica, several have been seriously damaged by vandals in recent years. The petroglyphs, mostly anthropomorphic representations and a few animals, are very crude and have facial and body features delineated in the most rudimentary fashion. The location of most petroglyph sites away from areas of occupation and in regions difficult of access suggests they may have served as shrines where some particular class of *zemis* was propitiated.

Village midden sites constitute the most common category of Arawak remains in Jamaica. During the last decade the number of such known sites has been nearly doubled, thanks largely to the systematic effort of several well-qualified amateurs: Dr. James Lee, J. Tyndale-Biscoe, Father F. J. Osborne, and C. S. Cotter. These men have coupled zeal with the unique opportunities provided them in the course of their routine activities to record accurately the locations of many hitherto-unreported village sites. For the most part, only surface collections have been made, but the materials thus accumulated have widened measurably our knowledge of Jamaican pottery.

The nearly 200 known village sites confirm the distribution pattern I noted in my survey of 1947-48 (Howard 1956). Most villages are on hilltops overlooking the coastal plain and with reasonably easy access to the sea. The importance of shellfish in the Arawak diet, as attested by enormous quantities of shells in the refuse heaps, accounts for the proximity to the sea, and the preference for elevated locations over sites on the coastal plain can easily be understood by anyone who has lived in Jamaica. As there is no evidence of fortification in any of

the villages, defensive considerations were probably secondary. The only considerable area of interior occupation seems to have been the north-central sector of the island. Here, as one moves away from the sea toward the mountains, land shells replace marine forms in the middens. Manioc agriculture was probably more important for these villagers than it was for those nearer the coast, although most midden sites are near land that could have been used for cultivation.

Most Jamaican middens are shallow, varying from a few inches to 3 ft. in depth. A few exceptional sites, such as White Marl and Tower Hill on the southern coast, show refuse accumulations of 6 ft. or more and must represent several centuries of more-or-less continuous occupation. At White Marl, for example, the radiocarbon dates indicate at least 400 years of uninterrupted use of the same location. No evidence has as yet been uncovered of any consistent pattern of arrangement at any of these village sites, except for the casual clustering of dwellings around a central open area. Most Jamaican villages do not appear to have been occupied for very long periods, but where the refuse is deep an interesting pattern can sometimes be observed in the deposition. At intervals 2 to 3 ft. apart, a layer of sterile, white limestone marl 1 to 2 in. thick has been laid down. This marling is clearly artificial and not the result of wind action. Its purpose is not clear; it may have served to "sweeten" the site periodically, or some pattern of ceremonial renewal may be indicated.

The presence of burials in middens, hitherto unknown in Jamaica, has been revealed in the last five years by test excavations in three of the deepest middens at the White Marl site. A single burial was discovered at the bottom of each midden. All were flexed, two of the bodies being interred on the side, the third in a seated position. Each burial appeared to have been placed on the original ground surface and the refuse then deposited on it over a period of time. None of the burials seems to have been intrusive. Burial accompaniment was entirely lacking.

These finds present several puzzling features. The absence of grave goods and the generally humble nature of the interments suggest that these were hardly persons of rank. The one skeleton fully analyzed thus far is that of a young man in his late twenties. While it is pos-

sible that additional burials will appear when the refuse heaps are entirely cleared away, I am inclined to doubt that any great number of skeletons will be found under any single midden. This seems to represent some special burial pattern rather than a prevailing mode of interment for most of the village population. Only additional detailed excavation of several middens can clarify this point.

In 1963, a considerable area in the center of the White Marl village was cleared and examined for posthole remains in the hope of gaining information on size, mode of construction, and arrangement of Jamaican Arawak dwellings, but no conclusive results were obtained.

While a variety of stone, shell, and occasionally wood artifacts have been found in Jamaican archaeological sites, pottery is by far the commonest material encountered. Although a preliminary description of Jamaican pottery has been given elsewhere (Howard 1956), it seems pertinent to summarize its salient characteristics once more, with certain additions and modifications made possible by the last five years of excavation and collection on the island. At present, there appear to be three distinct local styles, and a fourth which may or may not be of Jamaican origin. The earliest of these in time is Little River, first described by DeWolf in 1953. This style, as noted above, seems to represent an extension into Jamaica of the Cuevas-Ostiones pottery of Puerto Rico. DeWolf feels that it is closer to early Ostiones than to either Cuevas or late Ostiones. Little River shows a high incidence of D-shaped handles, loop handles, flat-bottomed vessels, necked vessels, vessel walls with outcurving rims, extensive use of paint, and paucity of incised and affixed decoration. All of these traits are conspicuous by their rarity or absence in later Jamaican pottery. Certainly Little River does not seem to have influenced the major Jamaican pottery style to any marked degree.

This second style (Fig. 1 *d-j*) I have tentatively called Jamaican Meillac because of its close affinity with that style in Haiti. There are also many traits shared with Cuban Baní pottery. I feel that the time has now come to give the style a name of its own to distinguish it more clearly from its Haitian and Cuban relatives, and I propose the term White Marl, since it is at this site that the style appears in its most characteristic and complete form and it is here

that its development can be traced over a period of several centuries. Most of the aboriginal pottery found in Jamaica belongs to this major style, and there is a remarkable homogeneity in techniques of manufacture and range of decorative modes wherever the style occurs on the island. Some regional variations undoubtedly were present, but these appear to have been minor and unimportant. Most White Marl vessels fall into two basic shape categories: (1) round and (2) boat-shaped. Most pots of each shape are shouldered and round-bottomed. Round bowls vary in size from 12 to 20 cm. in width and from 8 to 15 cm. in depth. Boat-shaped vessels average about 15 cm. in length and 10 cm. in width. The largest known, which is from a burial cave on the northern coast, measured 40 cm. in length, 28 cm. in depth, and 25 cm. in width. Complete vessels are known almost entirely from burial caves; they are rarely found in middens. Compartmented vessels, miniature pots, and water jars are the only other vessel types. The first two, unknown in Jamaica until recently, have been found in north-coast middens and at White Marl. Water jars (Fig. 1 *i*) were apparently more numerous, although they seem to be lacking from many areas altogether. They are usually represented only by the very heavy arched handles and, until a fortunate find was recently made by Dr. James Lee, we did not know the form of the vessel to which such handles were attached.

Aside from the water jars, Jamaican White Marl pottery is relatively thin-walled and uniform in thickness, the average thickness being about 8 mm. The vessels are coil-constructed, and there is little indication of added coloring matter or artificial temper. The clay of fired vessels varies in color from brick red through reddish gray, brown, and black, with yellow and buff prevailing in some parts of the island. No slip was applied, but most pots received a dull polish. On the whole, the pottery is well-made and well-fired, if somewhat uninspired from an esthetic point of view.

Compared with Meillac or Baní, White Marl shows less decoration and fewer decorative modes. At least 50% of the pottery examined has no decoration whatsoever. Painting is largely absent. The usual techniques are incision, application, punctation, and modeling. Vessel shoulders, handles, and lugs were the main areas of decoration. Incised designs are invariably geometric, the most common being groups

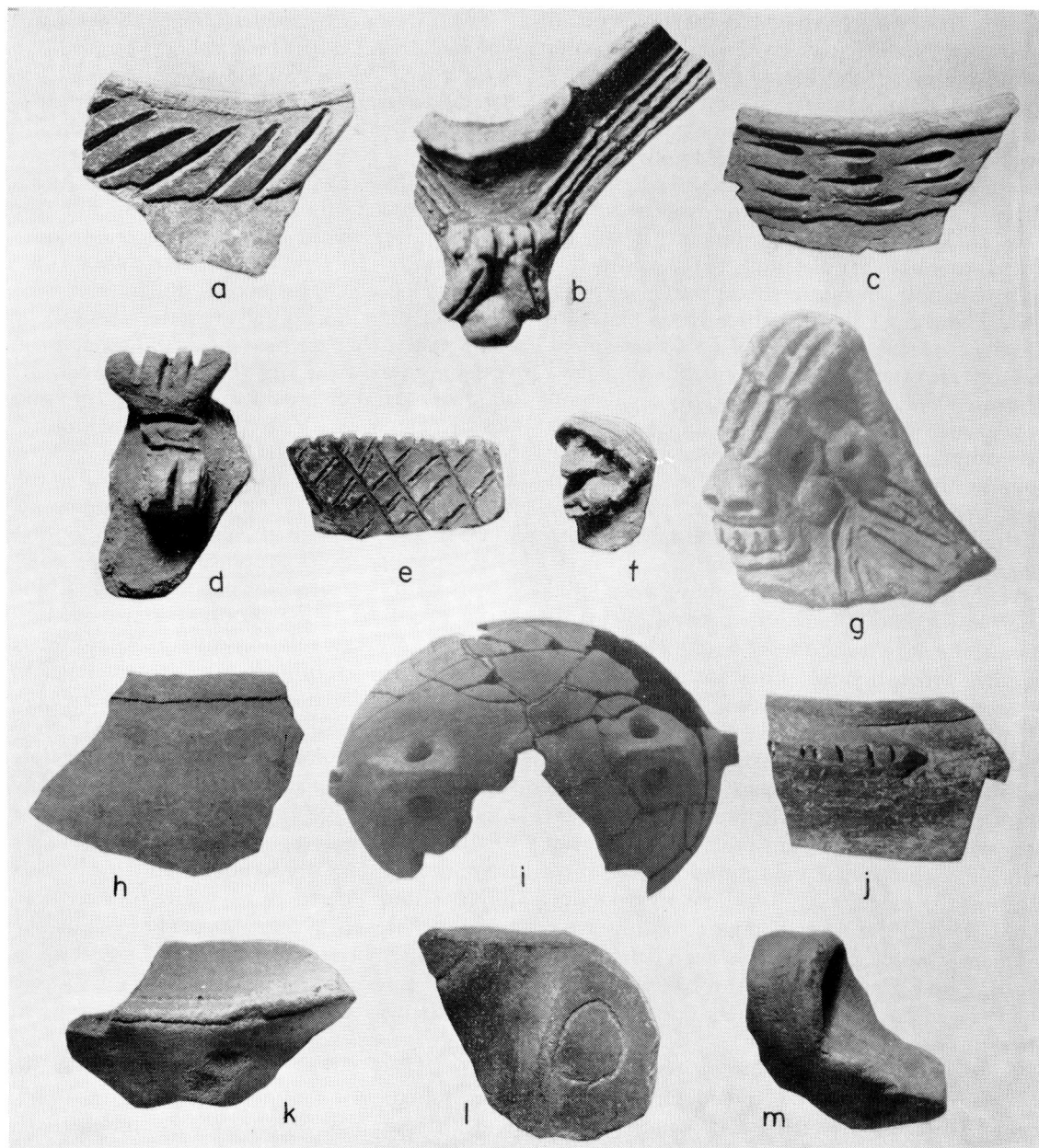


FIG. 1. Sherds of Jamaican pottery. *a-c*, Montego Bay style; *d-j*, White Marl style; *k-m*, Red Ware.

of alternating, obliquely parallel lines applied to the shoulder. Crosshatching, so common in Meillac, is quite rare in Jamaica (Fig. 1 *e*). The favorite decoration for rim tops is that of closely spaced parallel incisions, usually about 5 mm. apart, which are sometimes cut deeply enough to give the edge a serrated appearance (Fig. 1 *e*). Curved-line incision occurs on very few sherds. Punctuation usually accompanies line incision as

a decorative mode. Evenly spaced parallel rows of dots are commonly placed on the shoulder or on the rim and above any incised design which may be present. The technique of application is less frequently employed than that of incision. The most common is a serrated double-curved motif. Another is a limb design in which the applied strip is flattened and broadened at one end and marked with two vertically incised

designs that vaguely resemble the limbs of an animal or reptile. Such designs are usually found on vessel shoulders. Lugs and handles show the greatest variation and are the most consistently decorated features of Jamaican pottery. Four main types of handles are found: (1) a rare loop handle that probably reflects Little River influence; (2) a flaring tipped handle (Fig. 1 d), which is quite common; (3) a cylindrical knoblike handle; and (4) a distinctive arched handle encountered on water jars (Fig. 1 i). Handles of the first three categories were usually placed at each end of boat-shaped vessels and are often further decorated with incised designs. Very common, especially on round bowls, are wedge-shaped lugs, almost always vertically incised, which are placed in opposing pairs at the vessel inturn, parallel to the rim (Fig. 1 j). Perforation of the shoulder at the base of the handles is sometimes found on Jamaican pottery, but it occurs infrequently.

Modeling does not seem to have been used often in decorating Jamaican pottery. When it does occur, it takes the form of modeled lugs or handles which may be either anthropomorphic or zoomorphic representations. A few can be identified, particularly snake and turtle heads, and one quite lifelike monkey head was found recently on the northern coast (Fig. 1 g). One or two human heads give interesting hints on hair styles (Fig. 1 f). Rim profiles of Jamaican pots are of three types: (1) rounded, (2) tapering, and (3) rectangular. Of these, the rounded rim is by far the most common. Fillets were frequently applied along the outer surface of the rim, and sometimes the rim coil was thickened (Fig. 1 h). Ridges on the inside of the rim are rarely found.

Two other classes of pottery objects often found in Jamaica should be noted. Griddle fragments, averaging between 2 and 3 cm. in thickness, come from round, beveled griddles between 30 and 35 cm. in diameter. These griddles are poorly fired and are never found intact in midden refuse. They were undoubtedly used for cooking manioc cakes, and their frequency attests to the importance of manioc cultivation in the subsistence pattern. Conical pottery objects, usually termed pestles by local collectors, are probably amulets, since most of the specimens are perforated at the small end for suspension and several are crudely incised with human facial features.

Two other pottery styles remain to be noted. The first (Fig. 1 a-c) I have called Montego Bay since it was first discovered at the Fairfield site near Montego Bay and seems to be concentrated on the northern coast. It also occurs sporadically elsewhere in Jamaica but not in significant quantity. Montego Bay is characterized by much thicker vessel walls and probably much larger vessels, although no complete specimens have been found. The style is particularly notable for its use of incision. The favorite design consists of groups of short, horizontally parallel lines (about 1 cm. apart) that are heavily incised around the vessel just below the rim (Fig. 1 c). Short, wide, obliquely parallel lines form another common design (Fig. 1 a). Virtually all the incision on Montego Bay pottery is much deeper, bolder, and less carefully applied than that found in the White Marl style. This type of incision seems to be in keeping with the coarse, heavy nature of the pottery itself. Application is often combined with incision to produce zoomorphic forms (Fig. 1 b). The temporal position of Montego Bay and its relationship to White Marl remain to be determined, but I am inclined to believe that it represents a later period style.

A final style is Red Ware (Fig. 1 k, m), a few sherds of which have been found in widely separated parts of Jamaica but never in any concentration. The pottery seems very similar to the Red Ware reported by Krieger (1931) from the Dominican Republic and by Fewkes (1907) from Puerto Rico, where it occurs in fairly early levels in both cases. The distinctive color of the pottery was achieved by the application of a red slip which was then highly polished. In this ware modeling is accomplished through extension of the vessel wall, and affixation is absent. Simple incision is added to delineate human and animal facial features (Fig. 1 l). Ribbon-loop handles are common in the Red Ware (Fig. 1 m). It remains to be determined whether the Red Ware finds are trade sherds or whether they represent a brief and numerically insignificant occupation of Jamaica comparable to that of Little River. The evidence seems to point to a relatively early date for Red Ware.

The Carrier style and related ceramic developments of Period IV in Hispaniola and the rest of the Greater Antilles never reached Jamaica. The essential conservatism and resistance to outside influence revealed in Jamaican

pottery as a whole is only one of many indications of cultural retardation, which is confirmed only too clearly by the rest of the archaeological remains. Whether future archaeology can give us the answers to this puzzling problem in cultural dynamics remains to be seen.

DEWOLF, MARIAN W.

- 1953 Excavation in Jamaica. *American Antiquity*, Vol. 18, No. 3, pp. 230-8. Salt Lake City.

FEWKES, J. W.

- 1907 The Aborigines of Porto Rico and Neighboring Islands. *25th Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology*, pp. 1-220. Washington.

HOWARD, ROBERT R.

- 1956 The Archaeology of Jamaica: A Preliminary Survey. *American Antiquity*, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 45-59. Salt Lake City.

KRIEGER, H. W.

- 1931 Aboriginal Indian Pottery of the Dominican Republic. *United States National Museum, Bulletin* 156. Washington.

ROUSE, IRVING

- 1951 Areas and Period of Culture in the Greater Antilles. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 248-65. Albuquerque.

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin  
June, 1964