Archaeological Evidence of African Slave Occupation at Brimstone Hill Fortress National Park, St. Kitts, West Indies

Brimstone Hill Archaeological Project Report No. 2.

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Abstract

Archaeological investigations undertaken at Brimstone Hill Fortress National Park on the
West Indies island of St. Kitts in July 1995 focused on areas identified to have been either
habitation or work areas for African slaves. Afro-Caribbean ware sherds and English ceramic
sherds with an etched "X" on the back provide artifactual evidence of African Slave occupation at
the fortress. These artifacts indicate that the African slaves were maintaining African cultural
traits inspite of the dominant British military.
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Introduction

The study of African slaves in the West Indies has been undertaken in numerous islands throughout the Caribbean. Among these are Jamaica (Armstrong 1985, 1990), Montserrat (Pulsipher and Goodwin 1982; Pulsipher 1991; Howson 1995), Saint Eustatius (Heath 1988), Barbados (Handler and Lange 1978; Lange and Carlson 1985), and others. These studies have focused on slave and planter social interactions, African slave ethnicity and Africanisms within the material record (Armstrong 1985, 1990; Heath 1988; Finamore 1995).

The archaeology of slavery on the island of Saint Christopher (St. Kitts) in the Leeward Islands has yet to be extensively studied. Previous archaeological research on the island has primarily focused on the prehistoric occupations of the island (Goodwin 1979, 1980). The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in conjunction with the Center for Field Research (Earthwatch) and the Brimstone Hill Fortress National Park Society, has initiated archaeological investigations of the Brimstone Hill Fortress to study the role the fort played in protection of the island and the role that African slaves and free blacks played in the construction, maintenance and armament of the fortress. This report examines material remains recovered during the July 1996 excavations at Brimstone Hill in order to interpret the role of African slaves and free blacks on the fort. The manifestations of African traits as exhibited in the material remains is considered in light of British military regimentation and finally these traits are examined to show slave resistance to British culture.

Excavations in 1996 were conducted in two areas of the fort identified as locations of slave residential or work areas according to a map produced in 1791 by British military engineers (see Schroedl 1997 for further explanation of the excavations undertaken during 1996 at
Brimstone Hill. The first area where excavations were undertaken was the lime kiln area at the base of the hill. This industrial complex consists of a lime kiln, lime storage building, well and two buildings of unknown function. The 1791 map indicates several structures in the area of the lime storage building that may have been associated with African slaves. Excavations were undertaken around the lime storage building and the two buildings of unknown function at the request of the Park Society in anticipation of future reconstruction. No architectural evidence for slave occupation was encountered during these excavations. However, it was discovered that dirt from a landslide had been piled to the west of the lime storage building possibly obscuring any structural evidence in that area until the overburden is removed.

The other area where excavations were undertaken was along the stone defensive wall between the Orillon and Magazine Bastions. The 1791 map indicates four structures in this area as either work or residential areas for African slaves. Schroedl (1997) suggests that these structures were more likely for work rather than habitation structures although temporary residences may have been located in the vicinity from time to time because of its location outside of the main fort areas. No architectural evidence of slave occupation was encountered during the limited test excavations undertaken in this area (see Schroedl 1997 for further explanations of the work conducted in this area). However, numerous artifacts were recovered which indicate the use and/or occupation of this area by African slaves or that waste disposal by slaves was occurring here.

Material Remains from African Slave Occupations at Brimstone Hill

Close to 5000 artifacts (excluding floral remnants and roofing slate fragments) were recovered from five one by one meter test units excavated between the Orillon and Magazine
Bastions. The test units revealed a midden, approximately 1 m thick, consisting primarily of ceramics, glass, faunal remains and bone-button making debris, and slate roofing with smaller amounts of nails, buttons (non-bone), pipe stems and bowl fragments, and other cultural debris. Of particular interest are the non-European earthenware ceramics, Afro-Caribbean ware, that were probably made and used by African slaves on St. Kitts, and the European ceramics with an "X" or cross scratched into the back similar to that found on Colonowares found in the Southeastern United States (Ferguson 1992) that were recovered from this area.

A total of 19 Afro-Caribbean ware sherds and five European ceramic sherds with etched "X's" on the back were recovered from the excavations. Although these sherds are less than 5% of all recovered ceramics and less than 1% of all recovered materials, they represent some of the most important artifacts recovered during 1996. They demonstrate the existence of African slaves and possibly free blacks at the fort and indicate that these people were spending long periods of time on the fort.

**Afro-Caribbean Ware**

The 19 recovered Afro-Caribbean ware sherds (Figure 1) were recovered from the northern three excavation units (N204-205 W100-101, N208-209 W100-101, N212-213 W100-101). These sherds are similar to those found throughout the Caribbean and American Southeast. Barbara Heath's dissertation (1988) concerning Afro-Caribbean ware on St. Eustatius, immediately to the north-west of St. Kitts, is currently the best synthesis of Afro-Caribbean wares in the Leeward Islands and the vessel typologies she developed are used here.

Macroscopic analysis of the sherds revealed that the temper is a combination of 

Which is fired and unfired clay, and black volcanic sand. This type of tempering was common
during the prehistoric period on St. Kitts (Goodwin 1980). Although no survey of clay sources on St. Kitts has been undertaken, it is probable that clay sources are available as on Nevis (Heath 1988). The black volcanic sand used as a tempering agent for the Afro-Caribbean ware is readily available at the northern end of the island (Goodwin 1980) or it may have part of the clay.

Three of the 19 sherds were red, indicative of reduction during the firing process, while the remainder were black, as either a result of an oxidizing firing process or from smudging and sooting produced during cooking. The different firing processes represented by these sherds indicate small batch firings (Heath 1988). Heath's (1988) ethnological study of modern Caribbean potters in Nevis, St. Lucia, and Barbados revealed great variation in firing processes.

Another aspect of Heath's research was an ethnoarchaeological study of currently produced Caribbean pottery types. She used these data to develop functional categories for the archaeological material (see Heath 1988 for greater details). Unfortunately the majority of the sherds recovered from the 1990 excavations at Brimstone Hill were primarily body sherds, therefore, vessel type could not be discerned. Seventeen of the sherds are body sherds, one is a shoulder sherd, and one is a rim. One of the sherds came from the junction of the body of the vessel and the base. The sherd is probably from a flat bottom vessel that is similar to several of the storage vessels that Heath illustrates (Heath 1988: Fig. 5-1, Fig. 5-4). The shoulder sherd is probably from an everted rim similar to that identified by Heath on storage and cooking vessels (Heath 1988:213-223). The rim sherd is also similar to the cooking and storage vessels identified by Heath (1988). There is enough of the sherd to determine that the mouth of the vessel was approximately 12 to 13 cm in diameter. The probable small size of the vessel and the everted rim, in light of Heath's functional categories, suggests that this vessel was a small storage vessel.
Seven sherds exhibit evidence of sooting from use in the preparation of foodstuffs. The smudging and sooting on these sherds provides proof that the cooking or heating of foodstuffs by African slaves was probably occurring on the fort. These activities may have occurred elsewhere at the fort since the area where they were recovered was used as a refuse disposal area for 20 to 30 years. However, the buildings on the 1791 suggest that this area was used by African slaves so it is likely that these sherds were used and disposed here.

**European Ceramics**

The other material culture items of note are five European ceramic sherds that have a "X" or cross etched or inscribed on the back (Figure 2). These constitute less than 1% of the close to 1200 recovered ceramic sherds. Four of the inscribed sherds are creamware and one is pearlware. Two creamware sherds and one pearlware sherd are from soup plates while the other two sherds are from unknown vessel forms. Three of the sherds come from two levels of a single unit (N212-213 W100-101) where Afro-Caribbean ware was also recovered. All the Afro-Caribbean ware and etched European ceramics come from the northern three units (N204-205 W100-101, N208-209 W100-101, N212-213 W100-101). Additionally, one creamware sherd had an etched "W" and a portion of another letter, possibly an "H" (Figure 3). There is a possibility of the etching on this sherd being of African slave origin, but no other marking of this style were found. This sherd more likely represents the marking for individual ownership of a plate by a British soldier.

The use of an engraved "X" has been seen in numerous African slave contexts in the United States and the Caribbean. Leland Ferguson (1992) covers the extensive use of the symbol on Colono-ware throughout the Southeastern United States focusing on South Carolina and
Virginia. He suggests that this "cosmogram" is akin to the West African symbols seen historically and marked on modern earthenware vessels made in West Africa. In addition, similar marks have been reported on a spoon, coin and marble recovered from a Kentucky slave assemblage (Young 1996).

The X cosmogram has been reported solely on non-European earthenwares in the United States (Ferguson 1992). The only other reported use of the icon on European made ceramics has been from African slave contexts associated with Belizean logging camps (Finamore 1995). The etched X's on the base of two vessels recovered from the sites surveyed were interpreted as expressions of individual ownership in resistance to the imposed communal lifestyle enforced on the residents of the logging camps (Finamore 1995:10).

This symbol and other material items, like blue glass beads (Stine et. al 1996) and smoothed ceramic, glass and wooden disks (Klingelhofer 1987), are identified as having religious and ideological significance in slave contexts. Ferguson (1992) suggests that they may have magical significance. Young (1996) suggests that the engraved X on things like spoons and coins and the smoothed edge ceramics and glass where used as amulets for healing and protection against evil spirits.

Discussion

The occurrence of Afro-Caribbean storage and cooking pots and jars and European ceramics etched with possible African iconographic symbols supports the assumptions that African slaves occupied the Brimstone Hill Fortress for long periods of time. They imply the retention of African traits in meal preparation and serving of foodstuffs, belief systems, and social patterns.
Military life could best be described as "a closed society of soldiers" (Smith 1994:100). Little is currently known about the day to day life of British soldiers stationed at Brimstone Hill, but it can be assumed that they lead a regimented life that was dictated by military rules and regulations. However, Smith reports that troops spent most of the day in barracks out of the sun and drinking and gambling became diversions "from a humdrum existence" (1994:100). This is reflected by the abundance of glass bottle and serving vessel fragments.

Caribbean slaves often were given foodstuffs and plots of ground to grow provisions (Edward 1819; Howson 1995). A law enacted on St. Kitts in 1793 provided for the allotment of ground for slaves to raise provisions and allowed them Sunday off for worship (Edwards 1819b:178-186). If the fortress followed these laws, then the government owned African slaves were allowed to grow their own provisions which were probably foods that they preferred. In addition, slaves may have been allotted time away from the fort for Christian worship since a chaplain at the fortress was rare and no chapel was ever built (Smith 1994:100).

Ferguson reports that a typical modern West African meal consists of a starch served with relishes and vegetables. The starchy main course is prepared by boiling or simmering in a large earthenware or iron pot and then served in a calabash, ceramic bowl, or clean leaves. The relishes, vegetables and occasionally meat, are prepared in smaller pots and served in small bowls in conjunction with the main course. The meal is usually eaten using the hands rather than with formal silverware (Ferguson 1992:97). In some cases the preparation of the food is done by continual simmering rather than high temperature cooking (Heath 1988 190-197). Ferguson suggests that this is partially due to the nature of the earthenware which the African slaves used for cooking. The shape of the vessel and the permeability of the ware, which allows for low
temperature cooking, are the reasons for this type of cooking and eating arrangement (Ferguson 1992:105).

The recovery of Afro-Caribbean ware also suggests that the African slaves prepared some of their own meals while living at the fort. Small cooking pots and storage vessels, similar to what was recovered to Brimstone Hill, are typical of those used by slaves for the preparation and serving of meals (Heath 1988; Ferguson 1992; Howson 1995).

The European ceramics with etched X's on the back may represent individual ownership as Finamore (1995) suggests for those materials recovered from communal African slave contexts in Belize; however, they may also serve as religious and magical symbols like inscribed X's seen on Colonoware, spoons, coins, and other objects seen in the Southeastern United States. Since there were no bases of Afro-Caribbean ware vessels recovered during the 1996 excavations at Brimstone Hill, it is not known whether X's or other symbols were used on these vessels. Ferguson (1992) indicates that many of the X's are recorded on Colonoware bowls and the Brimstone Hill soup plates with X's may have served the same role as Colonoware or Afro-Caribbean ware bowls. The whole Colonoware bowls from South Carolina and Virginia are 3 to 11 cm in height and 7.3 to 41 cm in diameter (Ferguson 1992:136-139), well within the height and diameter ranges of English soup plates (Figure 4). In addition, modern Caribbean potters refer to a vessel similar to Colonoware bowls as the "dish" which has a diameter of 20 cm and a height of 3 cm (Heath 1988:209). If similar bowl forms were unavailable on St. Kitts and the European equivalents were available, it is more than likely that the African slaves incorporated English soup plates into their serving complement.
In Jamaica (Armstrong 1985) and Montserrat (Howson 1995), European produced annular decorated bowls are commonly seen in African slave assemblages. The use of these bowls is a creolization of African serving and eating styles and European produced vessels. Although there were several bowl footings and blue hand painted and transfer printed body sherds recovered during the 1996 at Brimstone Hill excavations, annular decorated vessels are not well represented. Most vessel forms were plates or unidentified flatware vessels. Since the annular decorated bowls were probably not readily available to the slaves living at the fort, the soup plate was used as a substitute vessel form.

The occurrence of African traits at Brimstone Hill, as seen in the use of Afro-Caribbean ware and the etching of West African religious symbols onto European made ceramics, while subjugated by a dominant British military society, represents a resistance to the beliefs and concepts of the dominant culture. Domination has been considered the “exercise of power through the control of resources” (Paynter and McGuire 1991:10). The existence of Afro-Caribbean ware and English ceramics with inscribed “X’s” on the back on the regimented landscape of a military fort and on many plantations throughout the Caribbean indicates that these resources were readily available for trade and use by African Slaves. These items are not overt symbols of resistance because they were not recognized as such by the British military. Rather, the materials were selected by slaves based on their functionality and familiarity. They helped maintain African cultural traits which the African slaves were trying to reproduce in order to survive in a society that was not African (Maschler and Mithen 1996:11).

Overt signs of resistance in the face of a dominant culture like the British military would have reduced the chances for the African slaves to maintain their cultural identity. Therefore, the
objects that display African traits, although a visible form of resistance, would have been selected for to insure survival. Overt African traits and resistance which conflicted with the ideology of the British military regime would have been repressed.

Were the African slaves selecting Afro-Caribbean ware and inscribing African religious or magical symbols on English ceramics as covert and/or overt symbols of resistance to the British military and plantation owners or was the selection for these materials simply a desire to maintain African traditions? These objects were selected to maintain an African cultural identity, which then by default became covert objects of resistance. The use of Afro-Caribbean ware, the use of European ceramics in a manner similar to that of Afro-Caribbean and West African ceramics, and the cooking and serving of meals by West African methods was a way to maintain an African cultural identity while the culture of the dominant society was being imposed on them (Ames 1996:116) rather than as a conscious overt sign of resistance. In a military situation, where a person’s lifestyle is regimented by the military hierarchy, overt symbols of resistance would probably have not been tolerated leading to the demise of a cultural tradition.
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Figure 1. Afro Caribbean Ware

Figure 2. English ceramics with etched "X" on back
Figure 3. English Soup Plate with etched "W."

Figure 4. English Soup Plates