

A Field Survey of the Island of Carriacou, West Indies, March 2003

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Introduction

In 1999 a visit to the island of Carriacou from Grenada was organised as a field trip for participants in the 18th Congress of the International Association for Caribbean Archaeology. On the plane back to England colleagues discussed the unusual concentrations of archaeology seen at two sites and their evident lack of protection. It was determined then to try to organise a project to investigate fully the archaeology of the island, with the additional goal of increasing awareness of the need for protective legislation to prevent further destruction of sites.

In March 2003, the plan reached fruition when the author co-directed a comprehensive archaeological survey of Carriacou, with archaeologists Michiel Kappers (from the Netherlands) and Scott Fitzpatrick (from the United States). The goal of the 2003 project was to discover, examine and map site locations, determine which had the highest potential to reveal subsurface cultural remains, and assess the threat of destruction to sites by natural erosion and development.

Background

Carriacou lies in the eastern Caribbean approximately 250km north of Venezuela. The island is roughly 20km in area, with a high, wooded ridge averaging 230m in height running its length. Geologically, Carriacou is divided into two zones: the mainly Miocene fossiliferous limestone outcrops of the eastern one-third of the island, and a volcanic area covered by the products of lava flows that constitute the remaining two-thirds. The islands of Grenada, Petite Martinique and Union Island are clearly visible from points around Carriacou's coast, as are a series of nearby off-shore small, sandy and rocky islets and reefs. This chain of islands represents the exposed summits of submerged volcanic mountains (Grenadines.net 2003; Ordnance Survey 1978).

One of the first references to the island of Carriacou was made by Jean Baptiste du Tertre (1667: 41-42), when he described his 1656 visit to "Kayroyouacou". He remarked upon the island as, "The most beautiful of all the little islands... where I stayed long enough to be able to notice its special features" (du Tertre 1667: 41). He praised the fertility of the soil and the abundance of fowls, suggesting the island was capable of sustaining a colony, but he made no mention of a native population. He did, however, make reference to the nearby island of Grenada as having been taken by the French in 1650 after a peace treaty was made with Kaïeroüane, "chief of all the natives of the isle" (du Tertre 1667: 427). Colonial contact had all but wiped out the Amerindian populations of the larger Caribbean islands by the second decade of the 16th century (Sauer 1966: 204).

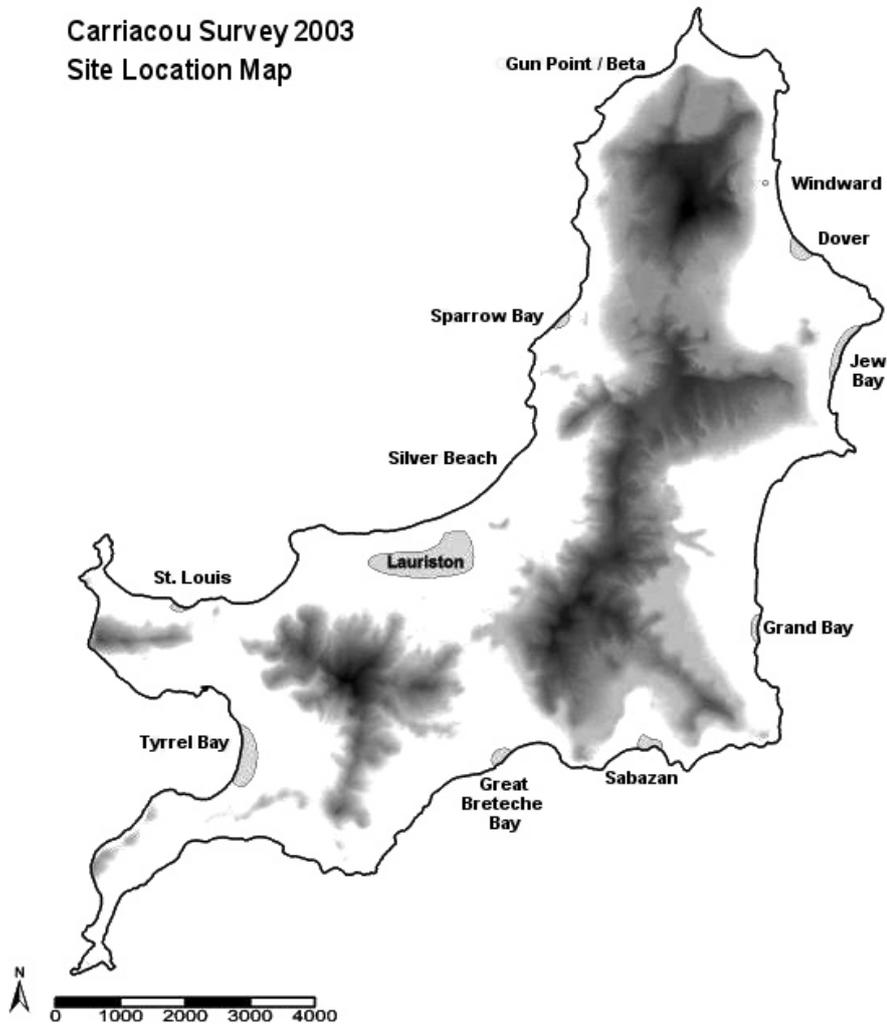


Figure 1. Map of Carriacou with site locations (drafted by Michiel Kappers, INTERRIS).

Archaeology

Compared to other islands in the Lesser Antilles, such as Barbados (Drewett 1991, 2000), Anguilla (Crock 2003; Crock *et al.* 1994; Petersen and Watters 1991), Montserrat (Petersen 1996; Watters 1994, 1995) and St. Eustatius (Versteeg and Schinkel 1992), there has been a paucity of archaeological research on Carriacou. Little is known about the depth and extent of archaeological sites on the island, which could shed light on when Carriacou's first inhabitants arrived, their connection to other population groups in the region and locally developed technological and subsistence adaptations.

Previous visits to Carriacou by archaeologists (Bullen and Bullen 1972: 4, 11, 18; Fewkes 1907 [1970]: 189-190, 1914: 667-8; Suttly 1990: 242-259) reported a number of important sites along the coastline, but no prior systematic survey had been carried out. Fewkes visited Grenada in 1904 and collected specimens from Carriacou, which he described as “among the finest West Indian ware that has yet come to the Smithsonian Institution” (Fewkes 1907: 189-190). Bullen and Bullen (1972: 4, 11-18) visited the island for two days in 1969 and looked at three sites on the east and south coasts (Dover, Grand Bay and Sabazan). They identified a wide range of ceramic material ranging from Insular Saladoid to late prehistoric Suazoid. The Bullens excavated a single, foot thick “slice” from the profile at Sabazan, which was radiocarbon dated and published as “at around 940 ± 100 years B.P. or about AD 1010” (Bullen and Bullen 1972: 17).

Suttly (1990: 242-259) was the first to attempt a survey of sites in Carriacou and their associated artefacts. This, however, was a preliminary compilation. At the time, she noted that Grand Bay was perhaps the most important of these sites based on the diverse array of ceramic styles found and the expansive area of the site, which she gave as “some 10 to 12 acres” (Suttly 1990: 246).

The small Carriacou Historical Society Museum in Hillsborough contains a modest collection of ceramics identified stylistically by the author and Mary Hill Harris (pers. comm.) as spanning from the earliest style, the Saladoid, through to the Suazoid of the Hispanic period, that is *c.* 500 BC–AD 1500, confirmed by Bradford (2001: 109).

Methodology

The survey team consisted of the author, Kappers, Fitzpatrick, two Dutch archaeologists and eleven undergraduate students from the University of Oregon. The 2003 field season consisted solely of field survey and surface collection, with no excavation undertaken. The technique employed by the group was a series of field-walking exercises in which team members fanned out roughly 5-10 metres apart across a designated area. In this way, despite limitations on the time available, it was possible to examine almost the entire coastline and many adjacent flat inland areas of Carriacou.

The survey team used a hand-held Global Positioning System (GPS) unit to record site locations. At several sites a Total Station was also employed to more accurately define site perimeters, scatters of artefacts and other important landscape features. This information was downloaded into a field computer for generating site maps and managing collected material.

Only diagnostic samples of ceramics, worked stone, shell and other material were bagged and given a unique finds number which related to the numbered section from which they were retrieved. Conch shells were counted on a Minimum Number of Individuals (MNI) basis and left behind. Samples of artefacts were collected, photographed and moved to the museum to be weighed, boxed and stored for future analysis. Twenty-five ceramic specimens were taken to the University of Oregon for petrographic analysis. Shell, bone and charcoal samples were also taken for radiocarbon dating.

Results

Concentrations of archaeological material indicated that there were at least five to six settlements and five to six areas of less concentrated remains (a total of 11 separate locations of prehistoric use) (Fig. 1). Sections of higher land in the far north, the south-west and the southeast were also examined but found to be devoid of surface evidence of archaeological material. This pattern of settlement in the coastal zone conforms to that found on other islands in the Antilles (Boomert 1999: 57; Drewett 1991: 18; Keegan: 1992: 68). Coastal degradation is a factor to be borne in mind when determining site location and preservation, and aerial photographs taken in the 1950s may assist in measuring coastal erosion.

In two areas, deemed most at risk from erosion (Grand Bay and Sabazan), profiles were photographed and partly drawn in order to determine the rate of destruction between this (2003) survey and any return visit. Material was collected from sections marked by flags at one metre intervals along the surface of the profile at each site. Surface retrieval from a 120m stretch at Grand Bay resulted in the collection of over 220kg of multi-period ceramics, which were deposited with the Carriacou Historical Society Museum. Identified at these and other sites were a range of ceramic sherds (including rims, bases, legs, handles and zoomorphic and anthropomorphic adornos), ceramic griddles, shell, coral and stone tools, shell and stone beads, stone spindle whorls, ceramic stamps, food remains (fish, shellfish and small mammal bones) and evidence of human burials. Crouched and extended human burials were identified at Sabazan, Great Breteche Bay, Dover and Grand Bay (where one burial was in close proximity to what has been interpreted as a large post hole). Human bones protruding from the profile in three different areas at Sparrow Bay indicate multiple burials.

Discussion

The deep fertile soils of Carriacou, together with the many freshwater wells which dot the island, enabled cotton, sugar and lime production in the 18th and 19th centuries. These industries no longer survive, although ruined structural evidence is still visible. The abandonment of this production and the subsequent grazing of sheep, cattle and goats has led to devastating soil erosion and the coverage of large areas by dry thorny scrub, cactus and the poisonous Manchineel tree (*Hippomane mancinella*) (Eshleman 1977).

In addition to soil erosion, the coastline of Carriacou is under severe stress through both natural phenomena and the activities of man. Local informants describe the ravages of sea surges, such as 'Jenny' in November 2000, and hurricanes, like 'Lily' of August 2002 (when 10 inches of rain fell in four hours), which remove vegetation and damage the coastal profile, eating into coastal archaeological sites. Among the most destructive of human activities, apart from tourist-related coastal developments such as the building of a yacht marina (Grenada Informer 2003: 25), are sand dredging and archaeological looting. Sand dredging, witnessed by the survey team within metres of surface concentrations of archaeological material at Great Breteche Bay, produces observable changes in tidal flow which increase the impact of the sea on the coastal profile, damaging both the coastline and the archaeology within it. Deep concave cuts into the archaeologi-

cal profiles and neatly stacked piles of sherds were evidence of recent looting, as were reports by local residents of “bagloads” of material being taken away.

Conclusions

The 2003 Carriacou Archaeological Survey was an attempt to survey and record comprehensively all archaeological sites on the island. In consultation with local heritage managers, a substantial database of site locations and their associated archaeological assemblages has been compiled.

The 2003 survey revealed sites which preliminary analysis indicates span the early to late ceramic periods (*c.* 500 BC – AD 1500). This firmly establishes an early Saladoid presence on both the leeward and the windward sides of this small island. Occupation of sites until the late ceramic period was also confirmed.

Several of the sites identified by the survey had not been previously recorded, and nearly all require archaeological intervention to protect the integrity of the assemblages. Further research, planned for 2004, in conjunction with local heritage managers, will help to determine the extent of prehistoric settlement through excavation, increase community awareness about Carriacou’s past by working on site with local schoolchildren and mounting an exhibition at the museum, and, we hope, with active lobbying, to promote future legislation to protect these important sites.

Close collaboration with the Grenada and Carriacou Tourist Boards has facilitated attempts to identify ways in which the rich archaeology of the island can be both preserved and promoted, thus boosting the much-needed tourism sector. Among ideas so far proposed are the production of leaflets and posters, the creation of a common logo for use with all archaeology-related publicity material, encouraging visitors to the island to explore archaeological sites by establishing a local guide (with a suitably identified mini-bus) to operate from the tourist office and the erection of illustrated and informative boards at major sites which would stress the importance of preserving artefacts *in situ* rather than removing, destroying or selling them.

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