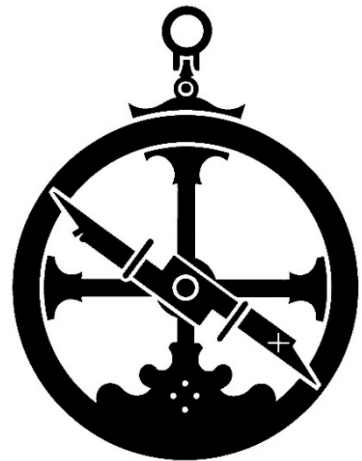


**“Maravedí Cove”, West Caicos: A Site of Historical
and Archaeological Importance to the Turks and
Caicos Islands.**

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On Sunday, March 8, 2009 accompanied by DECR Chief Science Officer Marlon Hibbert and Robert Krieble, the author revisited “Maravedí Cove,” a site of major archaeological and historical potential located on the west coast of West Caicos. Accidentally discovered in 1980, the site has produced prehistoric and historic artifacts and inscriptions spanning more than 500 years.

The impetus for the inspection was the recent return of the “Spillar Coin” (Fig 2) to the Turks and Caicos National Museum, and a desire to check the condition of the Maravedí Cove site which had not been visited by archaeologists since 1985. The story of the Spillar Coin’s discovery and subsequent visits to the site has been told in two articles in the National Museum’s newsletter, *The Astrolabe* (Keith 1999,2008).

Site Discovery

During the excavation of the early 16th-century Molasses Reef Wreck the author noticed that West Caicos is only about 8 miles downwind and down current, from the wreck site. As such, it would have been the most logical place for the survivors to have sought shelter, food and water. If the survivors reached West Caicos they may have left traces behind. The discovery of the Spillar Coin seemed at first to bolster this hypothesis until a representative of the American Numismatic Society, after studying it, stated that it was most likely minted in Santo Domingo between 1542 and 1558—two or three decades after the Molasses Reef Wreck is thought to have come to grief. Still, the exact date that the Molasses Reef shipwrecked and the exact date that the Spillar Coin was minted are not known.

After an unsuccessful attempt to relocate the site in 1984 the author and three colleagues finally found it in 1985. While the author concentrated on searching the pool of rainwater in the ironshore where the Spillar Coin was found and photographing inscriptions in the nearby bedrock, archaeologist Peggy Leshikar-Denton noticed fragments of Palmetto Ware, a type of pottery made only by the Lucayan Indians, in the bush just inland from the ironshore. This discovery potentially pushed the site’s time depth back many centuries.

Site Inspection

Hibbert, Krieble and the author spent about four hours at Maravedí Cove, during which it was determined that the site has changed little since 1985. The pool where the coin was found was dry, but other nearby fissures in the ironshore still contained water. The ironshore here rises approximately 10-20 ft above sea level, and forms a barren strip about 200 ft wide. The absence of loose stones seems to indicate that it is occasionally swept by powerful seas. The loose stones at the back of the ironshore strip form a gentle slope up to a berm composed of boulders. On both the seaward and landward sides of the berm we found a number of non-diagnostic historic artifacts, mostly fragments of glass vessels (Fig 3).

Crossing over the berm and entering the sandy loam area immediately behind it we immediately found the ground to be littered with tiny fragments of Palmetto Ware. The remains of a 19th-century narrow-gauge railroad running roughly parallel to the berm and about fifty or sixty feet from it (Fig 4) crossed the Lucayan site, apparently without disturbing it much. The railroad was cut perpendicularly by a bulldozer track leading



Figure 1. DECR Chief Science Officer Marlon Hibbert Surveys the ironshore component of the Maravedí Cove site.



Figure 2. The Spillar Coin, a Spanish Carlos y Juana "Santo Domingo Series" four- Maravedí piece.



Figure 3. Historic glass artifacts from the berm area include bottle neck, tumbler, and green glass bottle base fragments.



Figure 4. Remains of narrow-gauge railroad running through the dense bush covering the Lucayan site.

from the main north-south road to Maravedí Cove. Plainly visible in 1985 but now completely overgrown, the track crossed the site from east to west. We conducted no excavations on the Lucayan site and collected only the specimens appearing in this report.

The Inscriptions

The inscriptions were re-photographed. In addition to the main inscription set two others were discovered. The main inscription set (Fig 5) includes:

“C.B. SELVER JEN. 1900”

“THDD SELVER SEPT 16 1860”

“A. SPENCER SEPT 16 1860”

“CB SELVER 18__”

“BALLERAU 10 MARS 1808”

“__0 MARS 1808”

“yo __ Cap.n DE LA GUERRIERE 1_ MARS 1808”

. . . and several others, now illegible

There is another area of largely illegible inscriptions in the bedrock nearby and, farther away, a very clear “BASILE” on a large fragment of ironshore apparently recently detached from the bedrock and cast up among the ironshore boulders at the head of the cove (Fig 6).

The Lucayan Site

Fragments of three different types of pottery were found on the Lucayan site. The darker sherds flecked with white specks seen in Figure 7 are Palmetto Ware, the signature ceramic of the Lucayan Indians, who occupied the Turks & Caicos Islands at least as early as AD 700 and were quite numerous when the first Spanish explorers arrived. This

shell-tempered pottery is distinct from that made by other culturally- and linguistically-related Indian groups from the Greater Antilles, who probably also visited the Turks & Caicos. The large pale rim sherd in the center of the group shown in Figure 7 is different from the others, but also appears to be shell-tempered. The fragment in the lower left corner is different from the others and is definitely not Palmetto Ware. It was sent to Southeastern Archaeological Research, Inc. (SEARCH) for identification, it was examined by Lab Director Debra J. Wells who wrote:

“This sherd is consistent, paste-wise, with Iberian cantimplora and Olive Jar [vessel types]. From the very thin walls of the rim and the lack of pronounced lip, I would tend more towards the former. All that can really be said is that it is an unglazed coarse earthenware vessel lip consistent with Spanish ceramics.”

The presence of this sherd again raises the possibility that Maravedí Cove is a “Contact Period” site—a place that was occupied when the earliest European explorers arrived in the New World. This weak hypothesis would deserve no mention at all were it not for the fact that the Spillar Coin was found only about 150 ft away.

The Mystery of Maravedí Cove

Why do we find, in this seemingly unattractive place on the barren ironshore coast of West Caicos, evidence of human habitation or activity spanning more than five centuries? Two obvious explanations present themselves. The presence of the cove makes access by boat possible—if not particularly safe or easy. The presence of drinkable water in the numerous “bird bath” depressions in the ironshore which capture rainwater and



Figure 5. Part of the main inscription set.



Figure 6. The BASILE inscription stone.



Figure 6. Three types of ceramics found on the Lucayan site.

hold it until it evaporates, may also have been an attraction. Some of these depressions are quite large. There may have been other attractions as well—a spring nearby, or the availability of a plant or animal species utilized by the Lucayans..

Recommendations

Containing both prehistoric and historic elements, the area around Maravedí Cove is one of the most important archaeological and historical sites in the TCI. It appears to be on Crown Land, but does not appear to have any of the special protections afforded by official recognition. Although the site does not show evidence of abnormal

deterioration from either natural or human agencies, pressures are mounting and proactive measures need to be taken while it is still pristine.

An important dive site on the drop-off just offshore of Maravedí Cove brings divers to the area who occasionally come ashore at the Cove to spend their surface interval. Dive operators sometimes advertise this as a bonus activity. Additionally, although the marina and resort developments consisting of hotels, condominiums and private homes are currently on hold, in the near future there will be a relatively large full-time human presence on West Caicos that will tend to

adversely impact the site unless steps are taken.

Whether incorporated into the TCI National Park system or not, systematic archaeological exploration of the site under the aegis of the Turks and Caicos National Museum should be initiated as soon as possible with the objectives of determining its boundaries, the depth of its archaeological deposits, and the extent of preservation of features and materials such as evidence of dwellings, hearths, food remains, tool manufacture, burials, etc.

Such a systematic archaeological exploration could be done at virtually any time of year and would not be costly if local “in kind” support were forthcoming. Perhaps the Molasses Reef Development would permit a small team of 4-6 archaeologists and volunteers to commute to West Caicos on a regular basis aboard the vessel used to shuttle maintenance and security there daily. Alternatively (and preferably) perhaps simple living quarters could be found among the now-abandoned workers’ housing. If team members could be permitted to stay at the School for Field Studies facility at Southside Marina another cost could be reduced or eliminated. Some funding would have to be made available for analysis of the recovered artifacts, carbon-14 samples for dating, and organic material such as bone, shell and wood (if any are recovered), curation of the artifacts and samples, and the

design and fabrication of exhibits on Provo or West Caicos (if desired).

At least one of the inscriptions in the ironshore may be of more than local interest. There is a possibility that the La Guerriere mentioned in an inscription dated 1808 is the French-built frigate captured by the British that fought against the USS Constitution in the War of 1812. It was in that battle when the Constitution acquired her famous nickname “Old Ironsides.”

The results of the site exploration, test excavations, and laboratory analyses would be presented in report form to all concerned parties including but not necessarily limited to the DECR, National Trust, Molasses Reef Development, and all those who supported the project. Armed with this hard information, TCIG resource managers in concert with the developers of West Caicos will be better able to make informed decisions about how to proceed with site protection and future investigations of the Maravedí Cove site.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Mr. Brian Riggs for supplying the GPS coordinates for the Maravedí Cove site and Mr. Ryan Blain of the Molasses Reef Development for arranging boat transportation with Captain Swann from Provo to West Caicos and for land transportation from the West Caicos Marina to Maravedí Cove once we arrived.

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