Archaeology of the Caribbean in the Early Modern Period

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Abstract

Historical documents are frequently used for archaeological purposes and archaeology is used to supplement and replace historical documents when necessary. The European expansion into the Caribbean region in the early modern period, which is considered to span from the early 15th to the end of 18th century (Chaplin 53-49), is no exception. Although European explorers were meticulous record keepers, they primarily documented the wealth they found, rather than the lifestyles of the natives themselves. This is a shortcoming of knowledge about the native way of life at the time of Columbus’ arrival, but can be expanded with a non-biased archeological perspective of Euro-Caribbean relations in Caribbean history. Integration of new technologies, such as GIS programs, are critical in understanding regions where sites and records have been destroyed, such as seen on Leeward Island with record destruction in the 17th century. The history of the European expansion in the Caribbean in the early modern period is not only concerned with the European colonial powers but also with the natives who occupied these lands whom the colonists settled on. Archaeological collaboration with the governments of Caribbean nations has pushed for greater cultural resource management through the study of maritime archaeology. Through the use of particular case studies and archaeological resources this essay will provide a few of the many examples of the contributions archaeology has had to Euro-Caribbean history in the early modern period.

Introduction

The interest in and importance of the past is highly valued in both history and archaeology. They both work towards a common goal of understanding the past with use of information and materials from recent or distant time periods. Historical documents are frequently used for archaeological purposes and archaeology is used to supplement and replace historical documents when necessary. The European expansion into the Caribbean region in the early modern period, which is considered to span from the early 15th to the end of 18th century (Chaplin 53-49), is no exception. Although the Spanish, English, Dutch, Portuguese and French were all meticulous record keepers, some information has either been lost over long periods of time or not recorded. This is where the use of archaeology is so beneficial to the Caribbean history of the early modern period. There has been a plethora of knowledge gained through different forms of archaeological investigations in the Caribbean and much more waiting for archaeologists underneath both the waves and sand of this part of the world. The history of the European expansion in the Caribbean in the early modern period is not only concerned with the European colonial powers but also with the natives
who occupied these lands whom the colonists settled on. Through the use of particular case studies and archaeological resources this essay will provide a few of the many examples of the contributions archaeology has had to Euro-Caribbean history in the early modern period. This will be done through explanation of current geo-informatic technologies being used for non-destructive investigations, relations between Europeans and the Caribbean native populations of the time for which there is little historical documentation, heritage legislation that works hand in hand with maritime and underwater archaeology to protect historical resources and the use of the case study of Port-Royal, Jamaica in the 17th century to talk about the importance of marine archaeology to Caribbean history. Through these examples, the importance of archaeology to early modern Caribbean history will be conveyed.

Exploring Caribbean Pasts with New Technologies

Archaeology itself has changed extensively even over the past 20 years. New technologies of the modern age have given us new perspectives to look upon old problems. Archaeology is no longer limited to long hours of research in the library and performing excavations but has incorporated technologies to provide new perspectives. The field of landscape archaeology has grown lately due to improving Geographic Information System (GIS) software (Cheetham 2008:562). GIS is used to map out a landscape and provide spatial analysis of it (Cheetham 2008:577). GIS software is useful in archaeology because it provides us with the ability to understand the broader placement of settlements and features in landscape. This can be illustrated with a case study of the Leeward Island of Nevis which was controlled by the British in the 17th century (Koot 2007:133). GIS technology was very important to the history because the majority of the land records for this island were destroyed by the French in 1706 (Reid 2008:127). When historical documentation is unavailable, the archaeology can be the only source of information. The island of Nevis had many plantations in the 17th century which were subsequently abandoned over time. The systematic mapping of features using conventional surveying equipment and archaeological test pitting gave information on where many of these old buildings and fields were situated. This information was put into GIS software and maps were generated of all the historical features on the island (Reid 2008:129). From this they were able to determine that the land distribution was not done at random but rather were set out in regular intervals using compass directions (Reid 2008:130). Through the use of archaeological methods and technologies a map and land use provided historical context for the island in which none existed before.

Along with GIS there are other technologies providing information where historical documentation is lacking. Some of these tools used to fall under the heading of ground-based, non-invasive subsurface mapping techniques which include ground penetrating radar (GPR), magnitometry, and resistivity surveys (Cheetham 2008:564-574). The case study in Reid’s edited book of Dr. Eric Klingelhofer, a professor of history at Mercer University, looks at the use of these technologies to find Sir Walter Raleigh’s Caribbean outpost in Trinidad, one of England’s earliest in the Caribbean Archaeology as a discipline can be is destructive through excavation of sites. Once a site is
excavated it is destroyed, but lives on through meticulous records that were kept. The beauty of these technologies is that excavation is not necessary to attain information on what is below the surface (Reid 2008:143). Using historical documents, one can determine the relative location of a site, and with these technologies they can be pinpointed. After scouring historical documents, Klingelhofer determined that a likely place was Los Gallos Point on the Island of Trinidad (Reid 2008:156). Using a soil resistivity survey, he determined that certain soil changes indicated disturbance of the ground and high archaeological potential. After excavations, very little was found and he moved on to another possible site. Magnitometry was conducted on the St. Quentin Estate close to Los Gallos point. Many metal objects were detected but after excavation, they all dated to the 18th century (Reid 2008:158-162). In the end he was not successful in finding Raleigh’s 1595 outpost, but he did, however, discover the period coastline and other sites that will also be studied. These will be supplementing the historical record, all thanks to the use of archaeological geophysical technologies available to archaeologists.

Along with geo-infomatic tools, there are many other technologies like LIDAR, satellite imagery and aerial photography that archaeologists are using to supplement historical resources and excavations. GIS can help with the interpretation of historical maps and provide possible sites of unknown settlements of historical importance. These technologies are very important to the interpretation of Caribbean history in the early modern period, but need to be used in conjunction with other historical documentation.

GIS technologies are used on native sites in the area as well, though much of Caribbean history neglects to discuss European and native Caribbean relations during this period. Although there are records written about these encounters, they are written from the European perspective. An archeological perspective provides a non biased view of these relations to Caribbean history. The people that Christopher Columbus first encountered are thought to be the Taino people (Cook 2002:353). These people inhabited the chain of islands known as the Greater Antilles. The De Orbo Novo discusses the Taino during Columbus’s voyage in 1498: “most of them wore about their necks and arms, collars and bracelets of gold and ornaments of Indian pearls.” (Martyr D’Anghiera 1912). The Europeans mainly documented the wealth the native had, rather than the lifestyles of the natives themselves. This shortcoming of knowledge about the native way of life at the time of Columbus’ arrival is rediscovered through archaeology (Deagan 1988:194).

European Contact

The history of European exploitation started very soon after Columbus arrived. At his first settlement at La Isabella in Dominican he had native workers. This use of natives as slave labour would later be formalized by the crown in 1503 by Encomienda. Through this act of the crown, populations were relocated and consolidated (Deagan 1988:195-197). From the number and size of archaeological sites, it is believed that the Taino population of the Caribbean went from several million in 1492 to fewer than 25,000 by 1515. Disease would often precede the Europeans (Deagan 1988:198). Archaeological evidence of the Taino basically ceases to exist after 1525. Archaeozoological evidence shows that the Taino were, essentially, replaced by European animals like cows and pigs on many of these islands. The latest Taino site known to
exist dates to around 1580, a date known by a European coin found at the site. This seems to be the last refuge of the Taino (Deagan 1988:202).

There is also early evidence of European contact amongst the Lucayan people of southern Florida. There is artifactual evidence amongst Lucayan burial mounds of European contact. Metal axes dating back to the late 1490’s have been found as prestige items in these native burials. The Lucayan people were known to trade with early settlers as well as salvage items from shallow shipwrecks (Keegan 1991:343). European materials excavated at Lucayan sites have helped historians pinpoint the route of Hernando de Soto’s 1539-1543 expedition into Florida and the southern states. This work has not only located the route but has been able to show impacts of Europeans on the local populations (Milanich 1987:23). These impacts are illustrated in Lucayan burials that contain individuals who have evidence for epidemic related deaths as well as physical trauma caused by metal weapons (Deagan 1988:201). The amount of archaeological sites known that date to after European contact is substantially less than pre-European sites. This speaks to the effect of Europeans on native populations (Farnsworth 2001:3). Archaeology has shed much light on the contact period and has taken out the bias involved with historical documents of the time. The two information resources used together provide a wealth of knowledge on a poorly understood part of early modern colonial history in the Caribbean.

Cultural Resource Management and Maritime Archaeology

Archaeology has not only benefitted the history of the Caribbean through excavation research, but also through the protection and spearheading of legislation to preserve the physical history. Most work done on this has been on maritime and underwater sites. This has proven necessary due to the possible economic values of these sites. Gold and certain valuable items on board sunken ships and in inundated settlements makes them a perfect target for treasure hunters (looters by the definition). In certain areas of the Caribbean it is legal to loot these wrecks of their contents. It is difficult, though, to protect this heritage when treasure hunters are much better funded and equipped than archaeologists (Leshikar-Denton and Erreguerena 2008:25-29). However, the protection of these heritage resources is slowly improving thanks to the work archaeologists and historians with the government of the countries who control the waters. These countries are recognizing the importance of these sites and using them as part of their national island identities (Farnsworth 2001:xix). This branch of archaeology dealing with the governments and these underwater and marine sites are referred to as cultural resource management (CRM) which is defined as “taking action to responsibly protect underwater cultural heritage” (Leshikar-Denton and Erreguerena 2008:27). One of the largest steps taken to do heritage management for underwater sites was taken by UNESCO with the Santo Domingo Declaration which decreed that underwater cultural heritage is the property of the state in which it is found and is the heritage of all humanity (Association of Caribbean States 1999). It has been ratified by many Caribbean
nations, but most alarmingly not by the United States (Leshikar-Denton and Erreguerena 2008:29). The American legislation almost contradicts this UNESCO declaration by giving out permits to salvage companies to legally recover items in American waters. This promotes the commercialization of underwater looting and the destruction of cultural heritage without the recording of context (Leshikar-Denton and Erreguerena 2008:29). Without context the artifacts are nearly useless to archaeology and history.

This regulation of underwater sites is very beneficial to all parties involved. Archaeologists are able to conduct detailed research without fear of the site being looted by treasure hunters. The historians are provided with a wealth of knowledge from these archaeological investigations. The archaeological work can reveal the exact dimensions of a ship, the contents of its hold and its exact location (Fransworth 2001:13). Few blueprints exist of early Spanish sailing vessels and the archaeology provides information on this.

When sites are regulated by the government it is beneficial to all because it consolidates available knowledge. Many of the sites are put into a GIS database and provide a detailed map of all underwater shipwreck sites (Leshikar-Denton and Erreguerena 2008:42). Historians and archaeologists both benefit through the regulation and protection of maritime cultural heritage resources. One famous site that has been protected from modern looting by Jamaican legislation is that of Port Royal. This famous site has given archaeologists and historians an amazing glimpse into a bustling Caribbean town from the 17th century. This leads into the final example of how archaeology is important to the early modern history of the Caribbean.

Case Study: Port Royal, Jamaica

Port Royal is one of the most well known underwater sites in all of the Caribbean. The present day town is a small fishing village that sits across the harbour from the modern Jamaican capital of Kingston. It is most well known for its economic success back in the 17th century, which came to abrupt and dramatic end in 1692.

Port Royal was an island during the 17th century and was initially settled by the Spanish. It was in 1655 that the British sailed into what is now Kingston harbour and brushed aside the meagre Spanish resistance. Within a year the town had built a fort, 18 houses and usable docks. The town was beginning to boom due to its strategic placement in the middle of the Spanish Caribbean (Pawson and Buisseret 1975:1-8). Previous attempts to capture major Spanish footholds like Havana failed miserably. The first use of the name Port Royal was in official documents in 1661 (Pawson and Buisseret 1975:17). The main importance of the port was to conduct maritime warfare on the Spanish trade routes. As aging warships were sold off by the crown and governors of Port Royal, privateers bought up these ships and begun the maritime activities that the town is known for today. Privateers were private individuals or ships that received government sanctions to attack foreign sailing vessels. By 1663, Port Royal had turned into a hub for privateering (Skowronek and Ewen 2006:15). Sir Thomas Modyford spent 6 years as governor and was very supportive of privateering but condemned piracy. The most famous of all the privateers was Captain Henry Morgan, later to become Sir Henry Morgan. He commanded a fleet of privateering ships that terrorized Spanish ports and trade routes all under the crown's
letter of mark. From one port he was said to have plundered over 250,000 pieces eight (Pawson and Buisseret 1975:20-28). It was through this huge influx of wealth that Port Royal grew and became the town famous for its depravity and lavish lifestyles. An example of this can be seen in the probate inventory of Sir Henry Morgan from February 19th 1689, which states “wee according to the best of our skills and judgments appraised the foregoing inventory amounting to five thousand two hundred sixty three pounds on shilling and three pence [sic]” (Heywood and Moone 1689:1). This amount in 1689 was a considerable amount and was all due to his exploits in privateering.

By 1680 the Port had grown into a bustling port for legitimate trade. Tonnage peaked in 1688, exporting many thousands of tons of sugar (Pawson and Buisseret 1975:35). The archaeology at the site compared with historical records estimated that there were some 7,000 people living in the town at its peak (Pawson and Buisseret 1975:99). This was not to last; at 11:40 am on June 7th 1692, the ground began to shake as an earthquake shook more than half of Port Royal into the sea. Two thousand people were said to have died and along with them the life of the town (Pawson and Buisseret 1975:120-124). A letter written to a friend in London shortly after by Reverend Divine describes the chaos “His sudden judgements have destroy’d many, astonish’d all; streets have quickly been swallowed up the gaping Earth; their houses overturn’d, the inhabitants have either gone down quickly into the pit or been cast floating upon the waters” (Anonymous 1692). Port Royal was utterly devastated. The town continued on as a naval port until 1905 but would never again reach its former glory.

One may ask why this particular site is important to maritime archaeology history. It is important because this site was covered up during a disaster where people were not able to take their things with them. All items from daily life have been preserved in the houses under the waves in situ. Excavations by maritime archaeologists have uncovered a wealth of knowledge about life at this most unique town from the 17th century. Some 20,000 pipes have been uncovered between 1981 and 1990 at the site. This is good historical evidence for the British stimulation of preindustrial manufacturing and colonial trade (Fox 2002:61-68). Using historical maps, one can actually navigate the streets of the submerged town as they were in 1692. This town, with its haunting harbour filled with shipwrecks, is truly a time capsule. There were many hurricanes and storms throughout the Port’s history before and after the earthquake, which means the loss of many ships. Through sudden catastrophic events, both the Port and shipwrecks have become perfect examples of daily life in situ. Archaeologists can contribute much knowledge through the excavation of these types of sites. Port Royal has especially contributed to the history of the Caribbean in the early modern period.

Conclusions

Pre-contact Caribbean history relies on archaeology to provide answers about the people and cultures that inhabited the warm tropical islands and coasts. However, archaeology is just as important in the contact years even though there is a wealth of historical records that give a good idea of what life was like. Archaeology provides a less biased perspective on historical events, providing the hard facts and data that
allow for a very accurate retelling of the history of the Caribbean. This essay has illustrated how archaeology contributes to Euro-Caribbean history through the use of particular case studies and archaeological resources. This has been done through the explanation of current geo-informatic technologies, Native Caribbean-European relations, heritage legislation that works hand in hand with maritime and underwater archaeology to protect historical resources, and the use of the Port-Royal, Jamaica in the 17th century to talk about the importance of marine archaeology to Caribbean history. Although there is a near endless list of points that illustrate the interdisciplinary benefits of the two subjects, only some of the most important were explored. There is no doubt that archaeology will compliment Caribbean history long into the future, not only producing knowledge, but serving to protect valuable historic and archaeological resources.

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