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Archaeological Investigations at the Long Bay Site, San Salvador, Bahamas

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ABSTRACT

The first place in the New World where Christopher Columbus went ashore on 12 October 1492 was the Island of San Salvador in the Bahamian archipelago, in the northern part of the Caribbean. There has been much debate over the years as to just which island is the real San Salvador. We have come to assume, especially after the works of Samuel Morison and Ruth Wolper, that it is the island presently bearing that name. But Joseph Judge has built a strong case for it being another, farther south. Historic records reveal that Columbus saw people on the island, and that he exchanged many trinkets with them — glass beads, fragments of crockery, coins, and other things. Archaeological research presented in this paper covers four seasons of excavations at a site of aboriginal occupation situated close to the presumed San Salvador landing place, and the finding of prehistoric pottery in direct association with objects similar to those Columbus reported trading to the Indians. This evidence, in turn, supports a strong case for the present-day San Salvador being the site of that momentous first landing.

INTRODUCTION

Certainly one of the great Columbus scholars was Samuel Eliot Morison.[1] Working from his own translations of Bartolome de las Casas, who, in turn, was supposedly quoting directly from Christopher Columbus' journal, Morison traced the route of Columbus' little flotilla from Spain to the West Indies, paying especial attention to where the landfall might have taken place in the Bahamas. Working closely with Ruth Wolper, he concluded[2] that the island which we call San Salvador today was the scene of that momentous occasion. Much of the eastern side of San Salvador is bordered by reefs. According to Morison, Columbus sailed along the south end of the island and then turned northward along the west coast. While there are reefs along the western side, there are occasional openings, and inside, between the reefs and the beach, is sufficient water for anchoring any of Columbus' ships. Actually, many sailing ships today anchor just outside the

west coast reefs between the so-called "wall," where the ocean bottom drops off quite steeply and the reefs themselves. Columbus could have anchored his three ships in 30 meters of water, away from the reefs, yet only a few hundred meters from the beach, if he did so in the vicinity of Bamboo Point near present-day Cockburn Town. The first opportunity to pass through the reefs, if approaching from the south, is at Long Bay, or Fernandez Bay. I believe that Morison and Wolper postulate that Columbus did enter Long Bay and anchored approximately in the center, in quiet water, only meters from the beach. There are at least three places where the Long Bay reef may be threaded by small boats; I have done so myself while spearfishing there. However, I suspect, if he did land on San Salvador, he did so at the north end of that Bay, off what is today called Bamboo Point. There, as I said, deep water comes very close to the shore, and until it was removed a few years ago, there was a sand bar about 200 meters from the beach, an easy swim for the native islanders.

When Columbus did land, he records that many of the natives came out to his ships by boat and by swimming. The following is translated by Morison from Las Casas.[3]

> I . . . gave to some of them red caps and to others glass beads, which they hung on their necks, and many other things of slight value, in which they took much pleasure. They remained so much our [friends] that it was a marvel, later they came swimming to the ship's boats in which we were, and brought us parrots and cotton thread in skeins and darts and many other things, and we swopped them for other things that we gave them, such as little glass beads and hawk's bells.
>
> This island is very big and very level; and the trees are very green, and many bodies of water, and a very big lake in the middle; but no mountain, and the whole of it so green that it is a pleasure to gaze upon, and this people are very docile, and from their longing to have some of our things, and thinking they will get nothing unless they give something, and not having it, they take what they can and swim off. But all that they have, they give for whatever is given to them, even bartering for pieces of broken crockery and glass. I even saw 16 skeins of cotton given for three *ceitis* of Portugal, which is [equivalent to] a *blanca* of Castile. (Brackets Morison's.)

Morison footnotes[4] that Columbus shipped quantities of hawk's bells, as well as glass beads, brass rings, red caps, and such trifles because he had found them to be in great demand in his travels along the Guinea coast of Africa. From Columbus' journal of the 22nd of October, after landing at the island of Isabela he said the Indians "brought darts and some skeins of cotton to barter, and which they swopped with some seamen for pieces of glass, broken drinking vessels, and pieces of earthenware."[5] Later, during his landings on the north coast of Cuba, after leaving the Bahamas, the

Admiral records on 3 December that the Indians were "given hawk's bells and brass rings and green and yellow glass beads."[6]

Thus we learn that the following European objects were traded to the Indians: crockery, glass, glass beads, brass rings, coins, and hawk's bells. Reflecting upon this it seemed to me that if we are able to find glass beads and coins dating from Spanish times in the rather acidic soils of Florida, then I should be able to find them in the soils of the islands of the Bahamas. And, the best place to look would have to be the island upon which the best evidence suggests that Columbus first landed. Further, the aboriginal village closest to the actual landing beach would probably have been the recipient of the greatest quantity of these items. At the time there were three major contenders for the title of being the island of the first landing. Egg Island in the northern Bahamas, San Salvador, and Grand Turk in the southern end of the archipelago.

In 1971 I had visited the Turks and Caicos, and surveyed much of Grand Turk, but found no sites there.[7] I did locate sites on Providenciales, however,[8] but did not believe Columbus would have landed in the Caicos without at least mentioning having seen Grand Turk. And, because I knew little of the argument for it, I discarded Molander's Egg Island entirely. Thus, I resolved to return to San Salvador.[9]

When, at the Caribbean archaeology meetings in Dominican Republic in 1981, I was invited by Donald T. Gerace, Director of the CCFL Bahamas Field Station on San Salvador, to return to the Bahamas to carry out archaeological research, I welcomed the opportunity. I had decided that I would want to excavate a site of prehistoric activity somewhere along Long Bay, preferably toward the north end, close to Bamboo Point. In 1960 John Goggin found a site at the southern end of the Bay and in 1965 I had found one at the northern. In 1981 John Winter located several sherds of Palmetto Ware, fish bones, and fragments of old shell on the surface of the ground just below the Long Bay settlement in almost the direct center of the Bay, not far from a cross Mrs. Wolper had erected in honor of Columbus having landed there.

THE LONG BAY SITE

The Long Bay site lies between 100 and 200 meters from the beach of Long Bay. It is on the back (east-facing) gentle slope of the beach ridge. It is bordered on the west by the ridge, and on the east by a low ground which parallels the shore along the southern half of Long Bay. All the area behind the beach is fair to good farming land. However, Don Gerace made arrangements with the owner, Mr. Vernon Knowles, who graciously gave us permission to excavate. We were working side by side with people actually farming, using a slash and burn technique, planting with the aid of a digging stick and/or machete. Dense brush makes it difficult to determine the true area of the site, but it appears to cover quite a few hectares. Because of the

surface finds at the north and south ends of the Bay, and at occasional gardens between those two places, a tentative conclusion is that there may have been a series of occupation or activity areas of varying intensities on the eastward-facing gradual slope behind the beach ridge; a series of huts, probably in clusters here and there, along the entire length of the Bay. This involves a linear distance of some 7 km.

Immediately east of and paralleling this ridge, at least along the southern half of the Bay, is the low-ground area mentioned above, which may be the remains of a late Pleistocene or Recent inlet or embayment, of which there are several on San Salvador. Natives on the Island say that the low ground will, in rainy weather, fill with fresh water. We found the remains of an old well about 100 meters northeast of the site in the lowest part of this low ground. This low area parallels the beach until it "comes out" in a small cove about 3.2 km. south of the site. At places along the low ground I observed standing sweet water in 1983, 1984, 1985, and 1986. Whether the result of surface run-off, a spring, or an aquifer recharge, I do not know, but standing fresh water is not a common occurrence anywhere in the Bahamas, including San Salvador. There may have been an obvious connection between the proximity of the site and the availability of fresh water, yet close to the sea.

Test excavations were begun at Long Bay in the summer of 1983 with students from Northern Arizona University and representatives of the Bahamas Archaeology Team from Nassau. An innovation in our excavation procedure was the use of a fine-mesh screen. I made this decision primarily because I wanted to recover any tiny glass beads (I was afraid they might fall through the quarter-inch-mesh hardware cloth) and partly as the result of discussions with Elizabeth S. Wing, zooarchaeologist at the Florida State Museum. Wing felt that the quantity (and representativeness) of faunal remains increases significantly with the use of the fine-mesh screen[10] (a conclusion to which she no longer subscribes). We set up a kind of double-deck system. Most of the soil excavated was first passed through standard quarter-inch mesh hardware cloth, and then through a 1/16-inch mesh screen. Our progress was slowed considerably, but I felt that it would be worth it.

During the summers of 1983, 1984, and 1985, we excavated 19 two-meter squares to a maximum depth of 60 cm. in some, to 40 cm. in others. In general the sub-surface profile was uniform. Below a thin to absent layer of root mat was approximately 40 cm. of grey soil. Below that, in most instances, the soil color changed abruptly to a sterile whitish yellow. Under some squares we found limited distributions of loosely cemented rock, similar to that found on the sand beaches around the Island. There seemed to be no connection between the rock and cultural activity; it was probably decaying "beach rock," perhaps from the late Pleistocene or Recent when that part of the Island was itself a beach.

RESULTS OF EXCAVATIONS

The first indication that all our efforts might be worthwhile came on 13 June 1983 when we recovered a tiny fragment of plain white, grey paste majolica at 18 cm. below the ground surface. A few centimeters away we found a metal D-ring, apparently hammered out of bronze. Then, small fragments of metal began showing up on the fine screen from the 20-30 cm. level. On 17 June we found a large metal fragment, perhaps a bent bolt or end of a large nail in the 10-20 cm. level, and on the 19th a large flake of metal alongside sherds of Palmetto Ware and fish bones. The hints were tantalizing, but the tiny fragment of majolica really told us we were on the trail of Columbus. Then came a week of exceedingly hot days, a minor insurrection of no-seeums, and little else. The crew begged for the 4th of July off. We worked. Fortunately. In the 20-30 cm. level we recovered a metal "planking nail" or spike at 26 cm., an apparent metal blade or knife at 29 cm., and a yellow or amber-colored glass seed bead in the fine screen.

The next day we found a similar bead, green in color, fragments of honey-colored melado ware, and a bronze buckle, similar in shape to several illustrated by Bernardo Vega as part of the early Spanish times in Dominican Republic.[11] On the 6th we found a green glass bead *in situ* at 28.5 cm. below the ground surface. Still other objects of apparent Spanish origin were found — beads and bead fragments, planking nails, a bent nail or hook. A few days before we were to close up the 1983 season student James McGuinness and BAT member Aline McLaughlin found a copper coin at about 19 cm. down. We also noted the presence of tiny, pin-head size fragments of what appear to be sulfur. The coin has since been identified as a *blanca*,[12] minted probably in Sevilla, in honor of Henry IV, between 1471 and 1474.

A tiny sliver of a broken glass bead, the coin, the two buckles, and some of the pottery were sent to Robert Brill at the Corning Museum of Glass in New York. Brill arranged for lead isotope analysis of the specimens, the results of which indicated that the leads used in their manufacture were almost certainly mined in Spain.[13]

In addition to plain and decorated Palmetto Ware pottery, shell "heishi" beads, fragments of shell, and fish bones, over the 1983, 1984, and 1985 seasons we recovered:

1 amber glass seed bead,[14]
6 whole and 3 fragments of green glass seed beads,[15]
38 sherds of melado pottery,[16]
2 sherds of majolica (too small to classify, grey paste, white enamel, no marks or decoration),
10 planking nails or spikes (the metal has apparently been almost entirely replaced),
2 metal hooks (or bent planking nails),
4 metal knife (blade?) fragments,

1 bronze D-ring,
1 bronze buckle,[17]
1 copper coin,
1 copper grommet,
1 metal button, plain,
Many fragments of flat metal,
Many fragments of green glass,

All of these materials were found in direct association with sherds of Palmetto Ware, previously believed to have been made by pre-Columbian occupants of the Bahama Islands. During the summer of 1984 we found several pieces of melado lying flat, right next to pieces of Palmetto Ware on a flat rock. The rock measured about 10 by 20 cm. and was 29 cm. below the ground surface, a few centimeters from a polished petaloid celt from the same level. Several of these flat rocks were found throughout the excavations, generally at the same level, all lying in a flat position. I believe they were shelves such as people living in sandy areas might use for placing items upon. It appeared that the fragments of Palmetto Ware pottery and melado ware had been placed next to each other on that shelf.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND SPECULATIONS

It would seem that the Long Bay site is an early historic/ prehistoric site. A site of Spanish contact with American Indians. The beginning date for the contact period of the site would have to be 12 October 1492. Las Casas reports that by 1513 no Indians could be found in the Bahamas when Spanish ships went there looking for slaves to carry off to Hispaniola to mine gold or to the pearl beds of Nueva Cadiz.[18] Inasmuch as San Salvador was one of the islands already known to the Spaniards, it seems likely that they would have included that Island in their slave-raiding itinerary. We might, then, consider the possibility that the end date for appearance of Spanish trade goods on the Island was 1513. The type of glass beads traded by Columbus was manufactured until about 1516.[19] It was then replaced by a larger, more ornate bead. To be more conservative I might estimate that the historic artifacts appeared at the Long Bay site between 1492 and 1560.

Because of the few Columbus' documents we have, I assume that the people found on his San Salvador spoke the Arawakan language. I further assume that they were related to, perhaps even descended from, other Arawak speakers on the mainland of Hispaniola to the south. There were either Taino Indians from Hispaniola, or people who were related to the Taino of Hispaniola. Indeed, I would venture to say that Hispaniola was the Saomete that Columbus reported the Indians pointing to, rather than another island in the Bahamian archipelago.

As you can see, the description of the island by Columbus matches San Salvador today: green, inland lakes, rocks along the shore suitable for erecting public buildings, a north-northeast boat trip from the original docking place to the north end of the island, a harbor that could hold all the ships in Christendom, and even an island that is not quite an island. And, there is a site of aboriginal activity near where it is presumed Columbus went ashore. And, in that site we found the kinds of artifacts Columbus reported trading to the Indians in direct association with what we would have otherwise considered to be prehistoric Indian pottery. So. Is San Salvador the real first landing place of Columbus?

In the past few weeks Joseph Judge has postulated Columbus landed on Samana Cay some 65-70 miles to the southeast. He is basing this on several lines of reasoning.[20] I believe his strength lies in his reconstruction of the route Columbus took through the Bahamas after he left San Salvador. Columbus reported seeing several islands, and stopping at three more of them. By taking into consideration the distance he traveled each day, the directions, and island descriptions, it would seem that Judge's proposed landing on Samana Cay has a lot of merit. Far more merit, say, than Morison's second island, Rum Cay. Morison has it half the size Columbus reports. I agree with Judge that it is not sufficient to say that Columbus was using a different form of measurement when the island doesn't fit. Accepting that, however, Morison would have Columbus leave Rum Cay and head for the east-west coastline at the north end of Long Island. There doesn't seem to be an east-west coastline at the north end of Long Island. Then Morison has Columbus traveling from the north end of Long Island to the south end in a matter of a few hours. In a calm sea. Again, there is something wrong. If Long Island is Columbus' third island, I have to agree with Judge that Columbus landed further south, probably in the vicinity of Adam's Hole harbor at the south end; the east-west coast line would be that near Clarence Town. There are other areas where I find I have to agree with Judge. I shall report on them in detail in the future.

Meanwhile, Luis Marden collaborated with Judge on the project to determine the real San Salvador. Marden used a computer to track Columbus' fleet as it progressed across the Atlantic. By adjusting the tract to take into consideration set and current along the way, he concluded that Columbus had to land some 60 miles farther south than San Salvador, right where Samana Cay happens to be. The real problem I have with this is the obvious possibility of error, in a seaman dozing off at the tiller, the compass not being accurate, an accumulated error in reading direction and/or distance traveled.

Judge's argument, with or without Marden's trans-Atlantic track is a good one. Samana Cay could have been the first landing place. However, there are other problems. Columbus describes his Fernandina (supposedly Long Island) as being all beach and lower than his San Salvador. No matter which San Salvador you choose, neither one is higher than the east coast of Long

Island. Long Island has a very hilly eastern coastline, a high rocky shoreline, and only occasionally are there beaches between the rocks. Further Columbus reports that he could not sail around the south end of Fernandina and up the west coast. While on Long Island this summer I saw several ships, easily drawing as much water as Columbus' ships, traveling at least a third of the way up the west coast.

What other island could be Fernandina? To me the only other one that fits his description is Andros. Arne Molander has already suggested Andros is Fernandina. Is he correct? If so, we are faced with the same problem, of even greater magnitude, of Columbus traveling from the north end to the south end in a matter of a few hours. Moreover, what happens to his fourth island, Isabela? There is no island where Isabela would be if Columbus sailed southeast from the south end of Andros. Columbus said he could see the southern tip of Fernandina and Isabela from one place. The only islands southeast of Andros are the Ragged Islands, over a hundred miles away. It is doubtful Columbus could have seen both Andros and the Ragged Islands at the same time.

We are left, I fear, with the conclusion that if San Salvador were where Samana Cay is, we would have no problem. But if Samana Cay is the real San Salvador, then the problem is, how did all those historic artifacts get on present-day San Salvador.

NOTES

1. But see also Cubitt, George. *Columbus: on the Discovery of America.* Boston: D. Lothrop & Co, 1881; Durlacher-Wolper, Ruth C. *A New Theory Clarifying the Identity of Christophorous Columbus.* The New World Museum, 1982; Floyd, Troy S. *The Columbus Dynasty in the Caribbean.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico press, 1973; Fox, Gustavus Vasa. *An Attempt to Solve the Problem of the First Landing Place of Columbus in the New World.* Washington, 1882; Irving, Washington. *The Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus.* New York: A. L. Burt, Publ., n.d.; Wolper, Ruth G. Durlacher. *A New Theory Identifying the Locale of Columbus's Light, Landfall, and Landing.* Washington: Smithsonian Institution, Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, Vol. 148, No. 1, 1964, among others.

2. Morison, Samuel Eliot. *Admiral of the Ocean Sea.* Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1942; Morison, Samuel Eliot. *Christopher Columbus.* New York: The Heritage Press, 1963.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

7. Hoffman, Charles A. "Caribbean Research," in *American Antiquity.* Society for American Archaeology, 1972.

8. *Ibid.*

9. I had carried out excavations at the Palmetto Grove site at the northern end of the Island in 1965, but found no historic objects during the course of that work. See Hoffman, Charles A. "Bahama Prehistory: Cultural Adaptation to an Island Environment," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Arizona, 1967; and *The Palmetto Grove Site on San Salvador, Bahamas*, Contributions of the Florida State Museum, Social Sciences, No. 16., University of Florida. Gainesville: University of Florida, 1970.

10. The fine-mesh screen was not used in the excavations at Palmetto Grove. I found it quite helpful at Long Bay as far as the beads are concerned, but there were artifacts recovered there which would have been caught in the quarter-inch-mesh hardware cloth. We did not, however, improve our recovery of tiny fish bones with this system.

11. Vega, Bernardo.

12. The coin was identified by two independent coin specialists in Madrid, Spain. See also unpublished manuscript *Glass Beads and Other Artifacts Recovered from the Long Bay Site, San Salvador, Bahamas.* by Brill, Robert and Charles A. Hoffman.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Smith, Marvin T. and Mary Elizabeth Good. *Early Sixteenth Century Glass beads in the Spanish Colonial Trade.* Greenwood: Cottonlandia Museum Publications, 1982. See Number 106 illustrated in Figure 7, Page 43.

15. *Ibid.*, Bead Number 105, Figure 7, Page 43.

16. See Goggin, John M. *Spanish Majolica in the New World*, Yale University Publications in Anthropology, Nr 72. New Haven. Department of Anthropology, Yale University, 1968.

17. Vega, Bernardo

18. Las Casas, Bartolome de. *Historia de las Indias*, 11, Edited by Jose M. Virgil, Biblioteca Mexicana. Imprenta y litografia de Ireneo Paz, Mexico, 1877, pp 347-348; also *Ibid.*, pg. 100.

19. Smith, Marvin T. personal communication, 1983.

20. Judge, Joseph. "Where Columbus Found the New World," in *National Geographic.* Washington: The National Geographic Society, 1986.