

La Loma del Convento: Its Centrality to Current Issues in Cuban Archaeology

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Paper presented at the 71st annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, San Juan, Puerto Rico, April 28, 2006

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Among the archaeological sites of the south-central Cuba, that of Loma del Convento^a has been said to offer the most research possibilities of practically the entire region (Domínguez 1991:21). Since its discovery in the 1970s, the site has become a recognized landmark in Cuban archaeology. It has been a subject of repeated investigation and commentary by Cuban and Russian specialists. Yet there is no recent synthesis of this research. I take that as an opportunity for the following review. I will place special emphasis on certain publications in Russian which do not seem to be widely known among Caribbeanists. I also want to suggest how the findings at Loma del Convento articulate with several broad themes of interest in modern Cuban archaeology. These themes are (a) the nature of the inferred Arawakan expansion across the island; (b) the rise and character of socio-political complexity among the late prehistoric agricultural peoples; and (c) the effects of European colonization of the island on native Cubans and their modes of resistance to subjugation.

At the close of the conquest of Cuba, one of several areas the Spaniards found most promising for settlement was the native province of Guamuhaya, centered on Jagua Bay on the south-central coast, the location of the present city of Cienfuegos. It was from a base of operations at Jagua that Diego Velázquez, conqueror of Cuba, sent a letter to the King of Spain summarizing his conquest in April of 1514. Velázquez found Guamuhaya to be a thriving Native population center with an exceptionally good port. A Spanish settlement on the lower Arimao River he had founded just a few weeks before his letter to the King had already begun to thrive, with a growing complement of livestock (Marrero 1972:233). Moreover, the Spaniards discovered that placer gold could be washed from the sediments of the Arimao river that drained the nearby Sierra de Escambray (Rodríguez 2000:21). But although some Spanish interest continued in the Jagua Bay area, their nucleus of settlement soon shifted coastwise to the east, to the present city of Trinidad.

Archaeological Background

Archaeological evidence of the native towns making up the province of Guamuhaya began turning up in the 1930s, starting with the exploration of Cayo Ocampo in Jagua bay by the Grupo Guamá, led by Morales Patiño and Herrera Fritot in five expeditions between 1930 and 1946. Within a short span of time, two more late-period sites in the vicinity were located and explored by the same group. Morales Patiño and others discovered and excavated the extraordinary Cantabria site (González Muñoz and Avello 1946). This was closely followed, in turn, by the discovery of the site of El Abra de Castellón by González Muñoz (Sanjurjo 1950), which was, like Cantabria, located in the upper Arimao River drainage. In the 1940s, this small group of sites was believed to be the westernmost expression of the pottery-making agricultural peoples in Cuba.

These early investigators recognized that the pottery from the south-central district was different in many respects from that of late prehistoric agricultural settlements located farther to the east in Cuba. A subsequent study of pottery from Cayo Ocampo and Cantabria by Herrera Fritot (1964:18-19, 28-29) led him to name the phenomenon the “Cantabria phase or style,” which, due to its simplicity of decoration, he classified as “early Taíno.” That is to say, Herrera believed that the Cantabria style mostly antedated the previously defined Baní style in

eastern Cuba. As the Cayo Ocampo and Cantabria material became better known, there was considerable discussion and debate among Southeastern U.S. and Cuban archaeologists about possible connections between the Cuban assemblages and those of the Glades culture of South Florida¹ (Rouse 1949, 1958; Bullen and Laxon 1954; Herrera Fritot 1964). It was the inclination of Herrera (1964:27-28) to suggest that specific stylistic resemblances were due to a northward migration out of Cuba into southern Florida. In contrast, Rouse (1958) expressed doubt about the importance of the observed similarities. Rouse instead incorporated the south-central Cuban material into his general conception of a late, westward Arawakan expansion into Cuba. In so doing Rouse essentially disregarded the stylistic distinctiveness of the south-central material as minor, as shown by the fact that in his later publications he includes all of central Cuba within the Baní style of his more generic Meillacan Ostionoid series (1992: Fig. 14). Most modern Cuban archaeologists acknowledge the general affinities of south-central Cuban ceramics as Meillacan (or Meillacoide), while however insisting on their regional distinctiveness, a position with which we find ourselves in agreement. Guarch Delmonte (1990:60-63) suggested “cultural variant Jagua” as a name for the regional phenomenon; Celaya and Godo (2000) reiterated that nomenclature. For their part, Bashilov and Golenko (1992), like Herrera before them, suggested “Cantabria culture” as a name, but only for the latest chronological levels. It appears that the name “Cantabria” has priority of usage.

Numerous additional sites with ceramics of this general style group have been reported in the last several decades (Figure 1), most of which are included in the Archaeological Census of Cuba (Febles 1995). At the present time, some 30 late-period sites classified as *agroalfarero* are documented within the south-central region (Angelbello and Delgado 2003). Several localities have seen some degree of field work and reporting. Among the more important excavated coastal sites is Ojo de Agua, with field work done in 1978 and 1979 by Martínez Gabino (1991).



Figure 1. Agroalfarero stage sites in the Jagua Bay area.

Turning to the geography, Jagua is a classic Cuban “pocket bay” with a narrow entrance and spacious interior that occupies a relatively flat zone of limestone-bedded coastal plain fronting the Caribbean (Figure 2). Four rivers empty into Jagua Bay, the easternmost being the Arimao, an evident focus of Amerindian settlement. Constraints to human settlement lie on both sides of Jagua Bay. Just to the east rises the precipitous Sierra de Escambray, one of the three prominent mountain ranges in Cuba, a massif formed primarily of metamorphic rocks. The most conspicuous natural feature west of the bay is the Cienaga Oriental de Zapata, an expansive mangrove wetland that was incidentally the scene of the Bay of Pigs invasion.

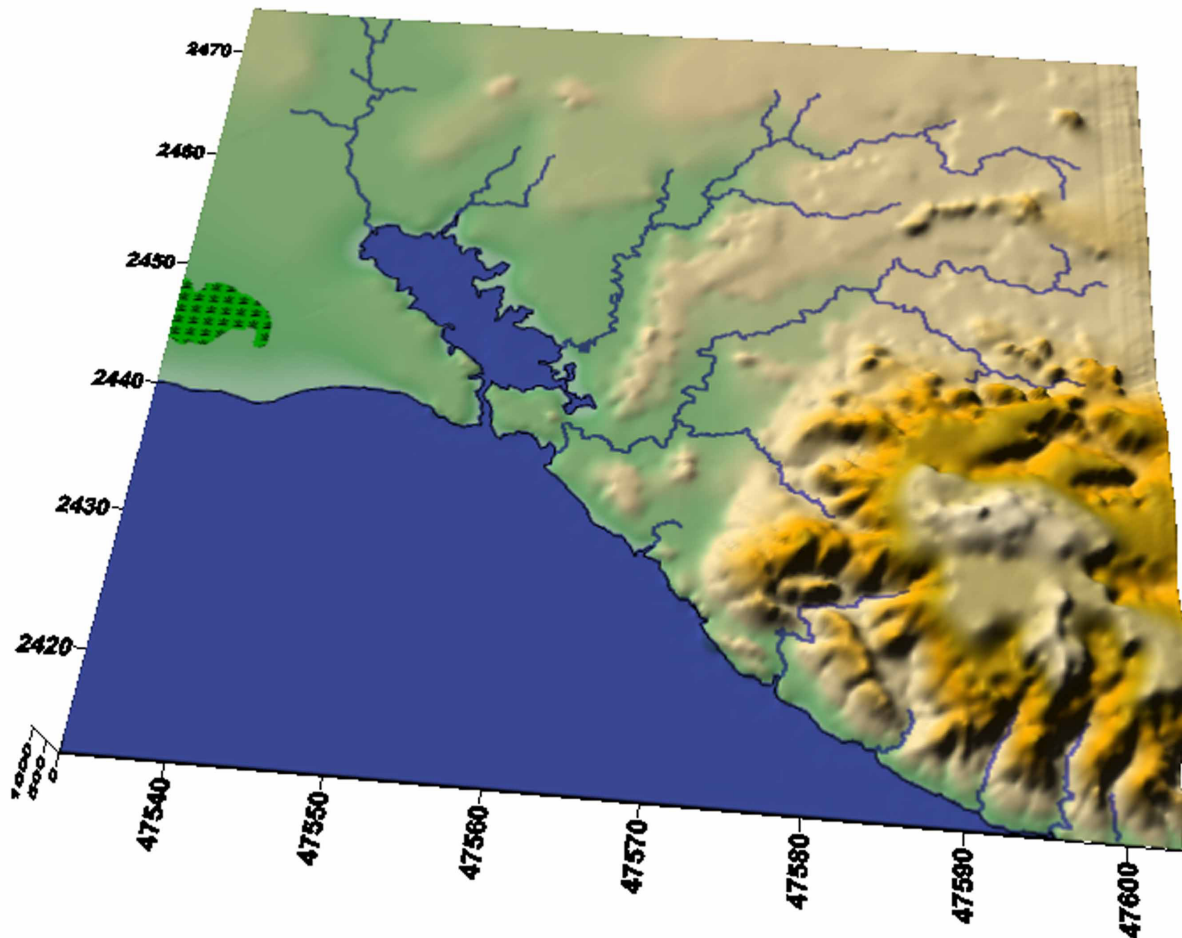


Figure 2. Topography of the Jagua Bay area, showing the Sierra de Escambray to the east of the bay and the Cienaga Oriental de Zapata to the west.

Late-period sites in this area are found in several kinds of environments (Domínguez 1987, 1991). Locally, there are sites fronting the bay margins and on islands within Jagua bay, including Cayo Ocampo. Secondly, there are sites found at intervals along the Caribbean coastline, especially at river mouths. Thirdly, there are a few sites in the interior, within the Arimao River basin. It is of much interest that each of the interior sites is located on a high ridge top overlooking the alluvial valley below. In this regard, the settlement pattern recalls that of the more densely settled Banes district on the eastern side of the island where interior settlements also are found in elevated terrain (Rouse 1942; Valcárcel 2002). Interior sites of the Arimao basin

show unusually heavy occupation, with conspicuous midden buildup including midden-mounds; these midden accumulations have produced the majority of skillfully crafted goods so far found in the region, such as stone beads, shell pendants, shell teeth from carved wooden “cemis,” and vomitory spatulas of bone. Anthropomorphic pottery vessel rim adornos and pottery talismans in the shape of hands and feet also have been found. The interior sites are not, however, especially large. The site size data that are currently available show horizontal dimensions comparable to sites on the bay margin and nearby Caribbean coast.

Discovery and Field Work at Loma del Convento, 1974-1988

Loma del Convento is customarily classified as one of the interior sites of the Arimao basin, although the distance to the sea in this case is not great, being only some 4 km. The site was discovered in August of 1974 by Alfredo Rankin Santander, in the company of a group of amateur archaeologists who had assigned themselves to do a thorough survey of the east bank of the lower Arimao in the vicinity of a colonial-era hacienda called Las Auras. Rankin's survey was motivated by a search for the remains of the encomienda of Bartolomé de Las Casas, said to be in this vicinity. They located an Amerindian site atop a steep limestone ridge spur, traditionally called La Loma del Convento or the Hill of the Monastery, a provocative toponym with an obvious clerical connotation although no known monastery ever occupied the locality. The hill bearing this name rises about 50 m above a broad expanse of valley floor currently farmed by an agricultural cooperative. Rankin returned in November of 1974 and again in January of 1975 to undertake several test excavations in the southern half of the largest midden-mound, Mound 1. Rankin's report of this work was submitted in manuscript to the Institute of Social Sciences of the Academy of Sciences of Cuba. His write-up of the ceramics was subsequently revised by José Guarch Delmonte and was published (Rankin 1980). Rankin's article provides a sketch map (Figure 3) showing nine midden mounds arranged in an irregular loop, a pattern reminiscent of site plans documented for *agroalfarero* sites in eastern Cuba (cf. Tabío and Rey 1985:fig. 18; Castellanos 1991:fig. 3; Guarch 1991, figs. 1, 3).

Rankin's ceramic study provided a detailed description of the assemblage, illustrated with characteristic vessel shapes, rim profiles, and decorations. His main purpose was to provide descriptive and quantitative grounds for comparison with better-known assemblages from eastern Cuba. Based on the fact that no European-derived artifacts were found in the test excavations, Rankin concluded that the site was entirely pre-Columbian. He obtained the first radiocarbon date for Loma del Convento, and tentatively hypothesized that the earliest levels dated to the 12th century A. D. Rankin noted the presence of several post holes in his test pits, suggestive of structures. As to the hilltop location, he noted that the frequent inundation of the Arimao River floodplain made the elevated situation ideal.

The next excavations at Loma del Convento, realized by Lourdes Domínguez in 1985, were of a different character. Domínguez's work was in the context of a regional survey, designed to test specific hypotheses concerning socio-political development among the late-period sites. For this purpose, some 16 documented *agroalfarero* sites for which collections were available were classified by environmental zone. Five of these sites underwent new test excavations, including representatives from each environmental category. Loma del Convento

was selected to represent the interior sites. Domínguez excavated five new test pits. Much of the work focused on an area adjacent to Rankin's earlier test pits in the south and central portions of Mound 1; additionally one 2 x 2 m test was placed within Rankin's Mound 2, just to the south of Mound 1. She encountered rich, stratified midden deposits during this episode of field work. As with Rankin's work, Domínguez's excavations yielded no evidence of European contact.

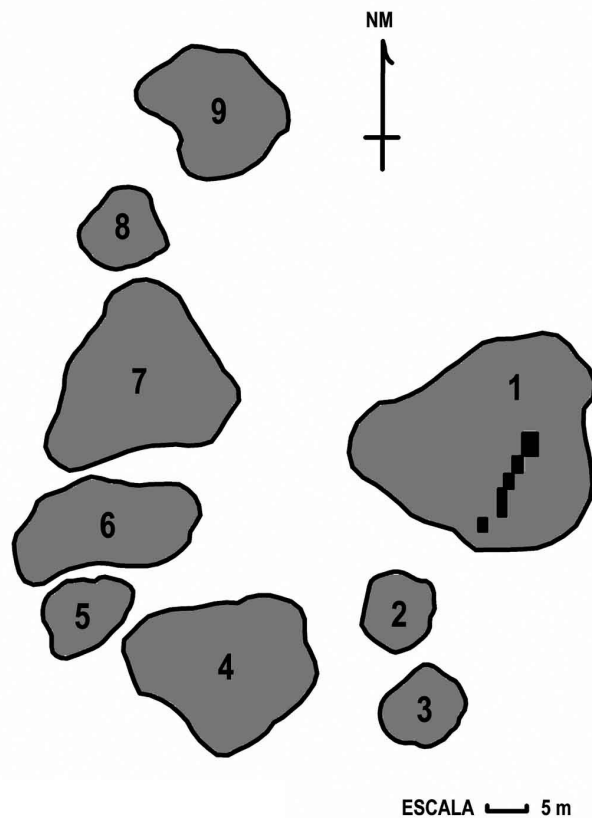


Figure 3. Map of mounded middens at Loma del Convento. After Rankin 1980.

Among the most important conclusions reached by Domínguez's regional study was that the interior hilltop sites, including Loma del Convento, assumed, over time, the character of regional centers. In her model, as the population of the area developed a greater reliance on food production, the focus of production shifted from the coast to fertile interior valleys, in which root crop production could be intensified. More complex, more highly differentiated social relations among kin groups emerged in connection with this economic development. Domínguez interpreted the degree of hierarchization as incipient, not reaching the level seen among Taíno of Hispaniola and Puerto Rico. In her view, the now regionally-integrated society was still kin organized, but with centralized, "hegemonic" roles (Domínguez 1987, 1991:79-87).

Domínguez's developmental model is embedded within a hypothetical population history for the agroalfarero communities of the region. According to this hypothesis, the first agroalfarero communities in the region were Arawakan migrants who brought the cultivation of bitter manioc, and who settled at various points along the south-central coast at river mouths, lagoons, and keys in approximately the tenth century AD. Later, through a process of local

environmental adaptation, these communities expanded into the fertile interior valleys, not abandoning, however, the coastal settlements as the region became economically and socially interdependent. These changes imply a population increase within an ethnically homogeneous Arawakan population. Based on limited evidence, she saw some of the communities as lasting well into the Spanish colonial era (Domínguez 1991:46, 83-91)

Data brought to bear in support Domínguez's model of economic and social centralization included several highly noteworthy within-site and between-site differences. At the intra-site scale, at Loma del Convento, suggestive differences in pottery designs were noted between Mounds 1 and 2, while differences in the distribution of polished versus flaked stone were noted between Mounds 1 and 9. Insofar as the separate midden mounds might correspond to different domestic units organized in reference to a central plaza, such variation could be interpreted as indicating a division of labor among kin groups—with the caveat that the middens at the site had not been broadly sampled (Domínguez 1987, 1991:79).

At a larger scale, differences were found between coastal and interior sites. Just as objects of personal adornment and skillfully crafted goods were more prevalent at interior sites, so were fragments of *burenes* or griddles, presumably reflecting greater agricultural activity in the riverine settings. In contrast, *burenes* were scarce at coastal sites, suggesting that economically specialized coast-dwellers may have obtained some of their agricultural products from the surpluses of interior settlements (Domínguez 1991:38, 62, 81). A similar economic interdependence was suggested by the distribution of terrestrial and marine fauna and marine shell. Somewhat paradoxically, Domínguez reported that hunted terrestrial fauna such as hutia were less prevalent at Loma del Convento than at coastal sites; in contrast fish bone and marine shell was actually more prevalent in the interior than on the coast. This extraordinary finding was suggestive of a strong economic interdependence between coast and interior in which the organization of production was perhaps dictated by the interior centers (Domínguez 1987, 1991:68-69). There were ceramic differences between coastal and interior sites that were largely technological. One emphatic difference that suggests differences in foodways lies in the differing distribution of vessel sizes based on rim orifice measurements. At coastal sites the size distribution was unimodal and the vessels were small. At interior sites the distribution was bimodal, with a large size mode in addition to the smaller vessels (Domínguez 1991:37). One implication is that larger groups were being served at apparent civic centers such as Cantabria and Loma del Convento.

Moving ahead in our chronology, the most extensive excavations to date at Loma del Convento began a year after Domínguez's field work, with two seasons carried out in 1986-87 and 1987-88 by a joint Cuban-Soviet project (Figure 4). On the Soviet side, the work was supervised by the late Vladimir Bashilov, an Americanist archaeologist with prior experience in highland South America, assisted by Viktor Golenko.^b Supervision from the Cuban side was by Jorge Calvera. Unlike the two previous episodes, the Cuban-Soviet project focused on large-scale horizontal exposure, the objectives being to investigate the spatial organization the settlement including the location of houses, workshops, areas of funerary activity, and areas of food preparation. Careful records were made of stratigraphic contexts, and most artifacts were piece plotted horizontally within each stratigraphic zone. During the initial season, the Cuban



Figure 4. Soviet-Cuban excavations at Loma del Convento.

and Russian team exposed a contiguous area of some 120 square meters on Mound 1, excavating much of the northern side of the site's primary midden mound. During the second season they expanded this block excavation by adding a long, narrow trench downslope to the west, bringing the total area excavated to 168.75 square meters. It is of interest that the second season's western trench convinced Bashilov that Rankin's map was inaccurate; that there were no deposits due west of Mound 1 (V. Bashilov, personal communication, May 2005).^c

After three years of laboratory research, conducted in Russia as well as in Cuba, the collaborative project was prematurely brought to a close by the collapse of the Soviet Bloc and the abrupt withdrawal of the Russians from most of their Cuban interests. Because of this withdrawal, there is no report for the second season.^d However, Bashilov and Golenko compiled a comprehensive manuscript report on the first season, filed with the Institute of Archaeology of the Academy of Sciences of Cuba. Moreover, this first season of work was the basis for three articles in Russian journals.

Following the publication of a short summary of the first season's work (Bashilov 1988), Bashilov and Golenko published a much more thorough paper entitled "The Problem of the Periodization of Subtaíno Culture in South-Central Cuba" (1992). In this paper, they criticized Cuban archaeologists' approach to the culture history of late-period agroalfarero sites. They claimed that the Cubans had neglected to come up with classifications that would properly differentiate some six centuries of agroalfarero development over an enormous expanse of

territory. Consequently the focus of their study was the construction of a ceramic sequence for the Loma del Convento based on three superimposed strata, labeled from earliest to latest Horizons I through III. Contrary to Cuban practice, they developed a typological approach to pottery chronology, defining 15 pottery types which are combinations of modes of vessel shape with modes of rim form. They also defined some 30 modes of vessel ornamentation and five basic forms of external lugs. Ornamentation and lug forms were treated as independent modes, crosscutting the pottery types. A convincing and well-documented pottery chronology resulted from this analysis, making Loma del Convento one of the most useful stratigraphically-derived chronologies so far published for Cuba.

In the first place, the classification resulted in true chronotypes whose relative percentages increase or decrease monotonically through time. This, it seems, is primarily due to the fact that stylistic modes are prominent in the type definitions, rather than modes of manufacture and technology that appear to have more to do with geography and site function than time. Modes of decoration behave monotonically through time in a highly useful way. Re-casting Bashilov and Golenko's data in a Ford diagram (Figures 5 - 7), one can see that the early, Horizon I assemblage is dominated by modeled arcades arranged in panels above the vessel shoulder, whereas the late, Horizon III assemblage is dominated by incised zigzags. These trends can be broken down further. Plotting the decorative techniques independently from motifs, one sees that the early assemblage is dominated by modeled decoration, while the latest assemblage is almost entirely incised rather than modeled. Ignoring the technique of decoration, the earlier pottery is dominated by arcades and several more infrequent designs lumped as "other." The later pottery is dominated by zigzags. These stratigraphically derived chronological trends can form the basis for a valid regional seriation. For example, in this light the pottery assemblage published for the Cantabria site as well as those of several coastal sites closely resemble Horizon III, the latest assemblage, whereas that published for Abra de Castellón, the farthest inland of the Arimao basin sites, more closely resembles the early Horizon I assemblage at Loma del Convento. Recognizing the probable regional validity of this sequence, Bashilov and Golenko recommended that the term "Cantabria culture" be reserved for the latest assemblages, in which incising and zigzag decoration are dominant over modeled and arcaded decoration.

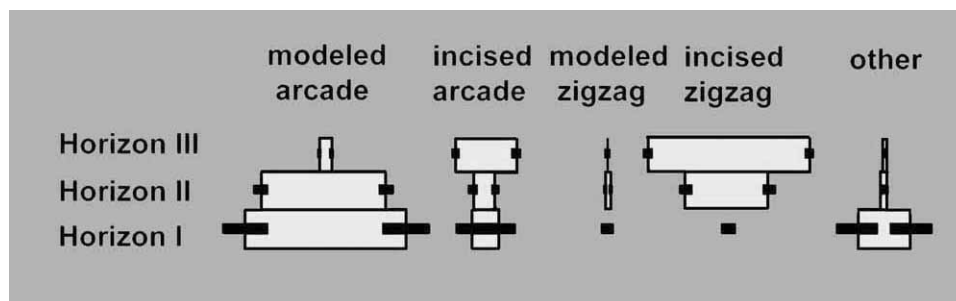


Figure 5. Ford diagram of modes of decoration by horizon.

Horizon III is a period of intensified use of the Mound 1 locality, as seen by greatly increased midden density. As to the dating of this horizon, it is now clear that Horizon III correlates with early sixteenth-century European contact. During the Cuban-Soviet project, unambiguous Spanish-derived artifacts began to appear for the first time in one part of the

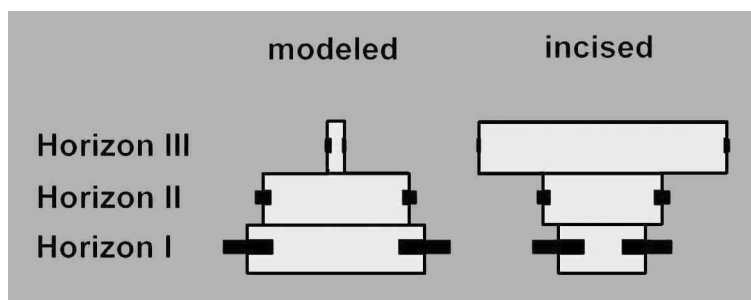


Figure 6. Ford diagram of modeled versus incised decoration on pottery, by horizon.

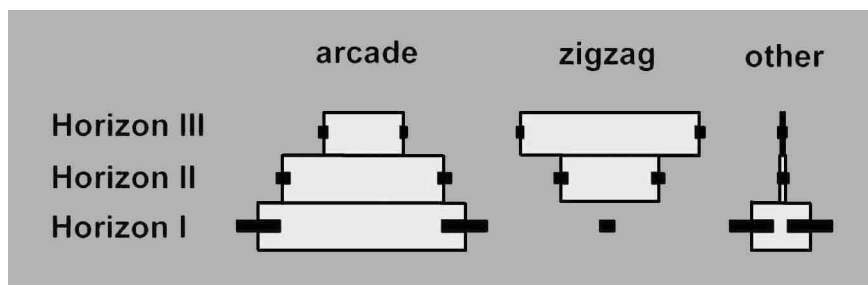


Figure 7. Ford diagram of decorative motifs on pottery, by horizon.

site. These included a small rectangular piece of ferrous sheet metal and several small sherds of Spanish majolica (Columbia Plain), including one piece that had been shaped and notched for suspension. The most striking of the European-derived artifacts is one-half of a bronze navigator's compass (Figure 8) that had been turned into a pendant (Rodríguez 2002, 2004:70). It is Rodríguez Matamoros's opinion that the grooving on the upper part of the piece has been added by a Native artisan to emulate stylized anthropomorphic pendants of tabular shell.



Figure 8. Navigator's compass of bronze from Loma del Convento. Courtesy of Marcos Rodríguez.

Relevant laboratory dates include one radiocarbon assay, tree-ring corrected to AD 1279-1388 at one sigma (GD 1053)^e. According to Bashilov and Golenko, this sample, collected by Rankin, is associated with materials of Horizons I or II. This ¹⁴C date is complemented by two dates on faunal bone using the so-called collagen method.^f These collagen dates are 650 ± 20 BP (M 150, ca. 1340 AD) and 400 ± 20 BP (M 178, ca. 1590 AD) (Pino Rodríguez 1994). The first of these, from the basal level (0.60 – 0.80 m), generally supports the earlier radiocarbon date while the latter, falling in the sixteenth century, is from an upper level probably corresponding to Bashilov and Golenko's Horizon III. Rodríguez (2004:47) interprets the combined evidence as indicating that Loma del Convento was initially occupied around the beginning of the fourteenth century AD. He dismisses as questionable another collagen-method date of 1080 ± 20 (M 179, ca. 900 AD) from the related Rancho Club site at the mouth of Jagua Bay, as this date is far earlier and out of line with the accepted age of initial agroalfarero sites in eastern Cuba such as Damajayabo in Granma province. A total occupational duration of Loma del Convento of about two centuries, as Rodríguez's interpretation would have it, seems reasonable to us in view of the amount of stylistic change seen in the pottery.

The Cuban-Soviet exploration of 1986-1987 found and mapped two complete structures within the northern section of Mound 1 (Figure 8).^g The first, Structure 1, coincided with the horizontal limits of a mounded midden dating to Horizon III, and thus the structure probably dates to the late period at Loma del Convento. Structure 1 was of modest size, about 5 m by 3 m in diameter, outlined by six widely-spaced post holes, hexagonally arranged around the wall margin, with a small center post. There was no evident internal hearth. Because Structure 1 was built directly over uneven, sloping limestone bedrock, an extraordinary preparation included artificially leveling the floor by chipping away the soft bedrock to an even grade. All of the post holes were also dug directly into the bedrock, just as were the post holes previously found by Rankin within his test pits at the base of the southern section of Mound 1. The Horizon III deposit overlying this floor was rich in potsherds and buren fragments, with a special concentration of ceramics and dietary remains mapped within an area corresponding to the western half of the structure floor. Rarely in Greater Antilles archaeology has the contents of a mounded midden of a specific period been correlated with a specific structure in this manner.

Structure 2 was located closer to the central portion of the mound. It was mapped within Horizon II, just south of the limits of a midden concentration of that period. Structure 2 was quite small, only 3 m by 2 m in diameter, and showed construction features considerably different from those of the first structure. The defined floor area was roughly oval, lacking post holes either delimiting the wall or internal to it. Central to this floor area was a circular ash deposit about one meter in diameter, containing a small rock cluster and four sherd clusters. Within the structure floor and external to the hearth, the excavators mapped several items including a second rock cluster, five additional sherd clusters, two buren fragments, and a concentration of dietary remains. Just outside the defined limits of Structure 2 there were three more sherd clusters and two additional concentrations of dietary remains. Given its size and characteristics, it is doubtful that Structure 2 represents the remains of a domestic structure. Rather, it seems to represent a small specialized structure of some sort, provided with a hearth and used in food preparation involving pottery containers and possibly burenas.

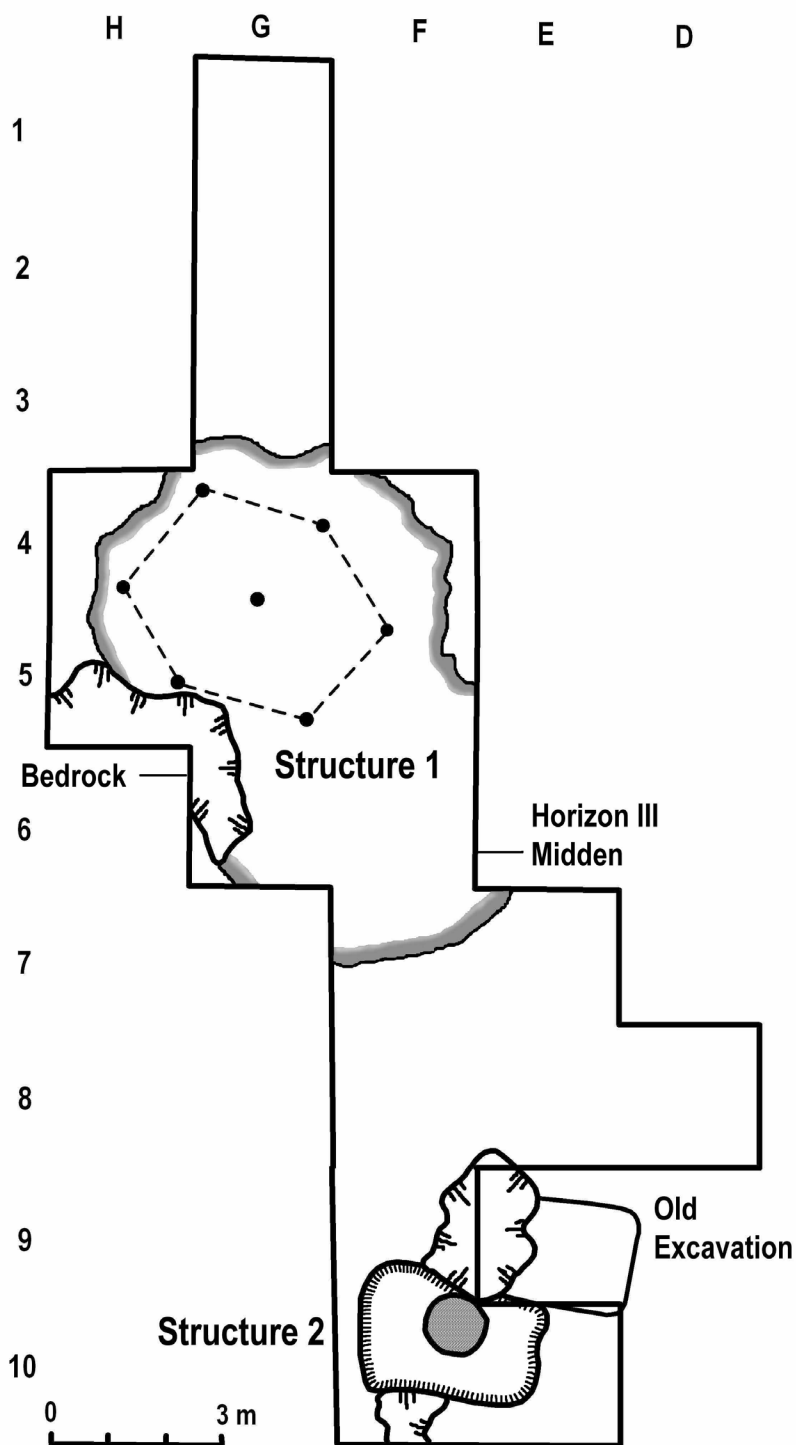


Figure 9. Cuban-Soviet excavation of 1986-87, showing Structures 1 and 2, after Bashilov and Golenko.

In sum, a series of excavations of Loma del Convento in the 1970s and 80s by Rankin, Domínguez, and the Cuban-Soviet team are, in each case, documented by publications presenting

us with an increasingly well-defined agroalfarero assemblage from the south-central Cuban region, an increasingly well-developed internal chronology based on stratigraphy, laboratory dating, and European artifact associations, documentation of two forms of architecture, and regional survey data suggestive of a process of socio-political consolidation. Other contemporaneous sites in the region also have seen varying degrees of published investigation. In this combination of particulars, only the Banes district of eastern Cuba offers a comparably rich dataset for Cuba's agroalfarero stage. Moreover, a number of secondary and complementary studies addressing ceramic and ethnohistoric data have enhanced this baseline considerably.

Collections Research

One attempt to seriate the south-central Cuban sites was by Castellanos and Rives (1991), using assemblages from the sites of Cayo Ocampo, El Masío, Cabagán, Abra de Castellón, and Cantabria curated in the Department of Archaeology of the Institute of Social Sciences in Havana. This effort was made prior to the availability of a stratigraphically-based chronology by the Russians, Bashilov and Golenko. Castellanos and Rives ordered the sites primarily by the relative frequencies of coarse versus fine pottery temper, reproducing an observation also made by Domínguez (1991:35) that the coastal sites tend to have greater amounts of fine-tempered pottery than the interior sites. Unfortunately, this ordering by technological traits does not result in a chronology, as is shown by the relative confusion introduced by accepting this order as a guide to understanding change in pottery decoration.^h Castellanos and Rives obtained more convincing results in grouping the same sites by means of cluster analysis. In their analysis they essentially confirmed the homogeneity of the south-central group in contrast to agroalfarero sites in eastern Cuba.

Independently of the work done by Domínguez on pottery technology of the agroalfarero sites in the south-central group, Bobrinski and Loman (1992) of the Russian Institute of Archaeology made a detailed technological study of a sample of 104 specimens from all three stratigraphic horizons at Loma del Convento. They recorded some 23 macroscopic and microscopic variables on these potsherds. Among the more important observations were the following. First, sooting and other characteristics show that the ordinary bowl shapes at Loma del Convento were commonly used over fire, as cooking vessels. Second, sherds from all three horizons frequently have interior surfaces saturated by carbonized, fatty food residues. Third, the pottery tempers are intentional additives rather than fortuitous inclusions in the clay. These tempers come from several geological sources, not to mention the use of organic tempers seen as carbonized vegetal material in the clay body. Fourth, vessels made of marine-deposited clays were found in each horizon, together with more common vessels made of iron-rich alluvial clays. Fifth, all three horizons of Mound 1 contain direct evidence of on-site pottery-making in the form of incompletely fired, thermally fractured pieces, or "wasters" from the firing process.

These technological observations by the Russian scientists complement those of a more recent study of pottery clay composition at agroalfarero sites in the south-central region. Using neutron activation analysis, Padilla and Celaya (2003) characterized the pottery clays used at eleven agroalfarero sites in the south-central region, including Loma del Convento where some 30 sherds were analyzed.ⁱ Principal component analysis of the results yielded three aggregates

of elemental variables, that the authors propose are correlated with the geology of the Jagua Bay area in a definite manner. One group, they suggest, derives from clay sources in the upriver sections of the Caunao and Arimao River drainages. A second group correlates with clays from beds closer to the mouths of the Caunao and Arimao. A third group was assigned a provenance near the mouth of the Damuji river, on the northwest side of Jagua Bay. As concerns the Loma del Convento sample, these authors observe that all three of the inferred clay source areas are found at Loma del Convento, confirming its function as a regional center of interaction (2003:132). They also observe that sherds characterized as coming from the upriver source area increase through time at Loma del Convento, indicating “some displacement of the pottery activities to territories located inland” in the latest period (2003:129).

In recent years increasing attention has also been paid to stylistic study of pottery decoration among agroalfarero sites throughout Cuba, including those of the south-central region. Celaya and Godo (1998, 2000), in particular, have worked toward refining the picture of stylistic variation in central Cuba. They see the “schematized” arc and zigzag designs within continuous panels characteristic of Jagua Bay region pottery as derived ultimately from earlier representational motifs found farther to the east. This derivative relationship is, in turn, thought to reflect a migration history in which the Jagua-area peoples came most immediately from communities in the Guacanayabo region of Granma province in eastern Cuba.^j One intriguing suggestion is that the Jagua Bay region’s tendency toward simplified geometric forms in panels is a result of these peoples’ intimate contact with nonagricultural, Archaic peoples (Padilla and Celaya 2003:121).

Historical Research

Turning to recent documentary history, it is Rodríguez Matamoros’s conclusion that the site of Loma del Convento is precisely that of the encomienda presided over by Bartolomé de Las Casas and Pedro de Rentería during 1514 and 1515. It is well known that Diego Velázquez granted an encomienda on the Arimao River to these two Spaniards in recognition of their service during the Cuban conquest. In his *Historia de las Indias*, Las Casas (1875) remembers the name of the native village commended to him as Canarreo, a name that also appears in other documents and maps of the sixteenth century. It is this encomienda that the cleric Las Casas renounced in 1515, in protest of the maltreatment of Amerindians under Spanish rule.

As early as 1952, Cancela Feminías laid out criteria for physically identifying the site of the encomienda. Cancela suggested that the Amerindian town of Canarreo would be recognized as a late-period (Complex III) archaeological site on the banks of the lower Arimao River between Jagua bay and Trinidad. Moreover, the site should yield artifactual evidence of indohispanic transculturation (Cancela 1952). As we have seen, the site of Loma del Convento does meet these criteria. It is the only site on record along the lower Arimao that does so.

Rodríguez (2000-2002) makes the identification more specific, primarily by a kind of triangulation. In his *Historia*, Las Casas says, and Velázquez appears to independently confirm, that the haciendas of the cleric were on the Arimao River one league from the port of Jagua. It appears to be well established that “port of Jagua” in that era specifically meant Cayo Ocampo,

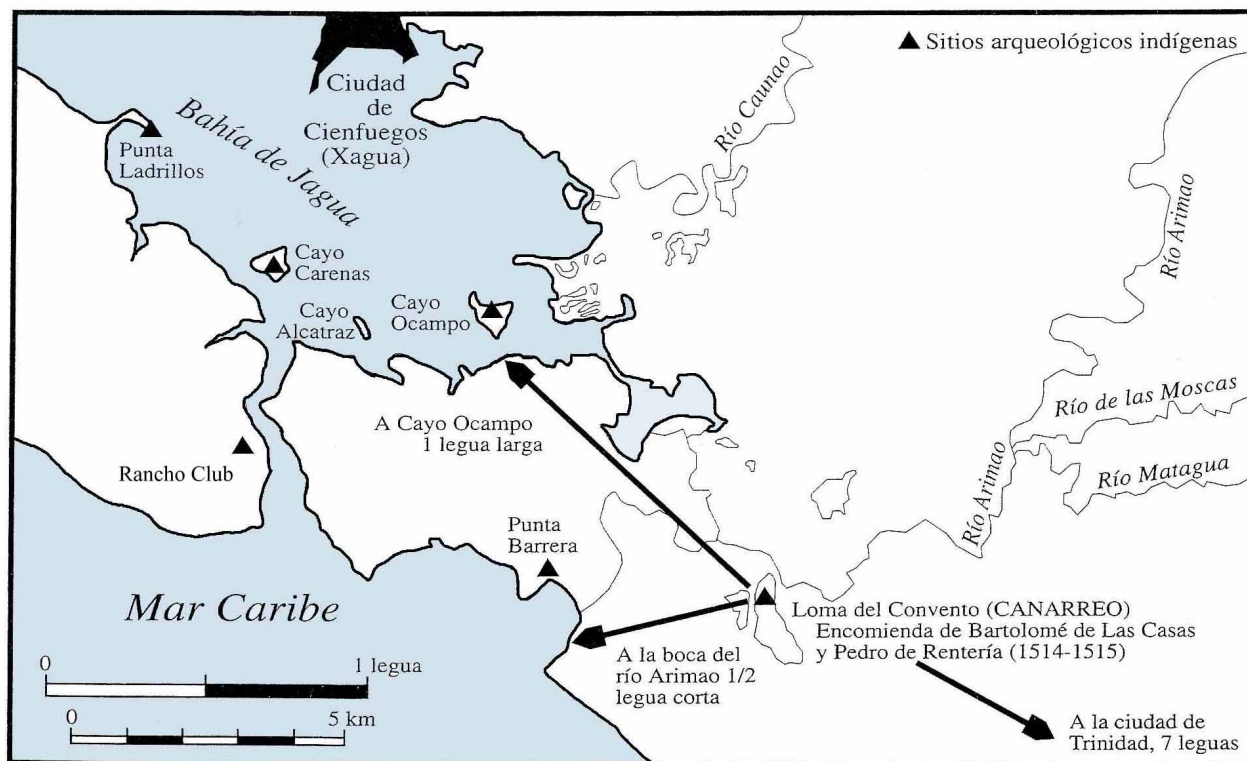


Figure 10. Location of Las Casas's Canarreo at the site of Loma del Convento. Courtesy of Marcos Rodríguez Matamoros.

the island in Jagua Bay that served as a Spanish anchorage and operational base. The historians Rousseau and Díaz (1919) add, without citing their source, that the encomienda was one-half league from the mouth of the Arimao. Cosculluela (1918) further specifies, again without specifying his source, that the town of Canarreo was on the left margin of the Arimao River near the hacienda Auras. Rodríguez, using the itinerant league of 7.4 km as the league used in the *Historia*, concludes that these combined specifications bring us to within 221 meters of La Loma del Convento, where we have a large archaeological site of the correct period that has yielded direct evidence of early indohispanic contact. Rodríguez adds that sixteenth-century cartography consistently shows the place-name Canarreo on the east side of Jagua Bay, that the site is close to the old Spanish road between Jagua and Trinidad, that the place name Loma del Convento preserves the memory of a clerical connection, and that several other previously suggested locations for the encomienda in this vicinity have been systematically ruled out. He notes that Rankin's 1974 survey of the Lower Arimao with this question in mind was "exhaustive." All of this leads Rodríguez (2002, part V:61) to suggest that his identification is conclusive.

Given this background, I now want to examine how the record at Loma del Convento and related sites bears on three issues of broader importance in Cuban archaeology.

The Arawakan Expansion

The dominant model governing Cuba's late-period or "neolithic" populations is one of migration and colonization of the island by Arawakan agriculturalists, proceeding from

east to west. This model has its antecedents in the early work of Harrington (1921), Loven (1935), and Ortiz (1935), among others. In its modern version, the model envisions Cuban territory, previously inhabited by hunter-gatherer-fishermen, as encroached upon at about the ninth century A.D. by peoples emigrating from neighboring Hispaniola. These Arawakan colonists established multiple settlements initially in eastern Cuba, and from there gradually expanded westward as far as modern Havana province. Displacing the locals along the way, there eventually formed a frontier in western Cuba between the emigrant Arawakan agriculturalists and a remnant population of Archaic peoples in Pinar del Rio province. The model very persistently envisions the emigrant population as uniform in ethnicity, language (Arawakan), physical type (with artificially flattened crania), and cultural characteristics (manioc horticulture, pottery of Meillacoid and Chicoid stylistic traditions, burenes, and generically Taíno ritual gear). It is noteworthy that this migrationist scenario for the sweeping introduction of neolithic traits in later prehistory clashes with orthodox dialectical materialism in Cuban archaeological theory, which prefers to see prehistory as driven by gradual evolutionary processes of environmental adaptation and technological change (e.g., Tabío 1984; Guarch 1990).

It is my guess that the near future of Cuban archaeology will witness an increasingly critical interrogation of the homogeneous Arawakan expansion model in its simple form. That is to say, the view of early neolithic settlements in Cuba as resulting from a westward wave of one biological people/one language/one culture that arrived completely intact and that displaced the original population, will give way to more subtle models based on the complexities of local sequences. To some degree Guarch (1990) anticipates this trend by emphasizing internal evolutionary change, regional differentiation, and Arawakan-Archaic transculturation during the later prehistory of Cuba. Beyond this, however, it remains open to question how many migrations were involved, what caused them, and whether the emigrating populations were large or small. Moreover it is conceivable that the westward expansion was as much an incorporation of pre-existing locals into new socio-political arrangements by linguistic and economic acculturation as it was a relentless migratory displacement. As such details come into better focus, it is possible to envision alternative scenarios in which the cultural landscape of Cuba during the agroalfarero stage was always multiethnic and multilingual, united by a trade language (western Taíno), and by rapid adoption of elite ritual gear in the Taíno mold, as outward signs of new integrative social and political roles.

Loma del Convento and related sites in south-central Cuba, being in geographic proximity to a posited Archaic frontier of long standing, are highly pertinent to any re-conceptualization of the Arawakan expansion. Cuban archaeologists are already contemplating a possible contemporaneous relationship of these sites to other communities in the region that are classified as Protoagrícola or late mesolithic, meaning in this case, Archaic-with-ceramics (Padilla and Celaya 2003). They also have speculated that the regional shift from representational to purely decorative motifs on pottery is perhaps due to an Archaic influence (Celaya and Godo 2000). Other points of reference for a reconceptualization are potentially distinctive economic traits and settlement patterns. Regarding the latter, it is worth suggesting that the elevated location of large inland communities in settings of rugged topography may reflect considerations of defense. At any rate, the viability of the Arawakan expansion model in its present form will increasingly rest on the comparison of developed micro-chronologies in different regions. What

is most needed at this juncture are stylistic-technological sequencing and comparison of artifact forms at several scales including the pan-regional, together with a greater emphasis on the dating of assemblages. In this respect Loma del Convento currently stands as a key point of reference.

The Rise of Socio-Political Complexity

Las Casas (1875) wrote that at the time of the Spanish conquest, the largest political entities in Cuba were only at the level of the village and village chief, unlike neighboring Hispaniola with its powerful regional cacicazgos. Loven (1935:81-83) took this observation literally to mean that when the Spaniards used the term “province” in Cuba they were usually referring only to “the village with its surrounding conucos,” or in the case of more spatially expansive “provinces,” named districts that were not organized as true chiefdoms. Some more recent archaeologists (e.g., Tabío and Rey 1985:169) have been in basic agreement with these statements.

However, it seems more than plausible that simple chiefdoms did develop in Cuba and were pervasive at the time of first contact. These simple chiefdoms would not have compared in scale or complexity to the paramount chiefdoms of Hispaniola, the latter with their compound levels of political hierarchy. However, the Cuban chiefdoms would have measured up to Carniero’s (1981) criterion, in consisting of more than one community joined under the same political authority. Spanish colonial archives pertaining to Cuba have not been researched with this specific question in mind, and this needs to be done.

In recent years Cuban archaeologists have begun to document the emergence of political complexity that is clearly beyond the scope of the village. For example in the Banes district of eastern Cuba, Valcárcel (1999, 2002), shows that skillfully crafted objects of personal adornment and ceremonial use concentrate in only five sites distributed among a much larger number of communities. Moreover, within important communities, such objects are spatially restricted to areas in or near the largest mounded middens. As such objects tended to be associated with spiritual aspects of chiefship, Valcárcel concludes that such persons lived in regional civic-ceremonial centers to which many other communities were subordinated. The process of centralization was a late development, culminating in the fifteenth century.

As we have seen, Domínguez’s research in south-central Cuba reached a similar conclusion. Domínguez views regional centralization in the Jagua area once again as a process of local development that reached its highest level in late prehistoric times. Here, the case for regional integration includes contrasts in dietary remains among regional communities that suggest economic interdependence. Loma del Convento is posited as one of several central places of interaction that developed superordinate roles in the region. The excavations at Loma del Convento have provided key evidence of this development, including economic specialization, differences in vessel sizes, exchange of foodstuffs and pottery, clustering of ritually important goods, and hints of intra-site spatial differentiation in pottery and stone industries. Domínguez’s work shows the promise of such studies as the question of regional integration and political dominance in Cuba continues to be debated.

Effects of European Colonization

Despite the historical significance of the Spanish system of repartimiento and encomienda in the subjugation of Amerindian peoples in the Greater Antilles, the archaeology of this institution remains undeveloped. In Haiti, Deagan (2004) recently has interpreted the post-contact component of the En Bas Saline site as that of a large village subject to encomienda labor drafts. To date, Deagan's is the only such study to examine this topic archaeologically. In Cuba, there is a long history of reportage of post-contact sites and materials showing evidence of indohispanic "transculturation," to use the term coined by Fernando Ortiz (e.g., Rouse 1942; Morales Patiño and Pérez de Acevedo 1945; García Castañeda 1949; Domínguez 1978, 1984). There is a remarkable concentration of such sites in Holguín province in eastern Cuba. These contexts in Holguín are variable in character, suggesting a prolonged period of indohispanic interaction during the sixteenth century (Valcárcel 1997).

Deagan's work at En Bas Saline emphasizes Taíno reactions to Spanish domination that varied by social class and by gender within a large community. Her conclusions hint at the unrealized potential of an archaeology of the encomienda system, which surely varied in its implementation under specific circumstances. Some differences may have depended on whether labor drafts were primarily used in agricultural work and ranching within previously settled districts, or alternatively were used to work mines in remote uplands far from established settlements. We know that in some areas of Cuba, but not all, Amerindian peoples were gathered and removed to new artificial communities called reducciones in order to concentrate their labor near Spanish commercial enterprises (Wright 1916). Forms of Native resistance to the encomienda system no doubt also varied according to local circumstances. In certain times and places, resistance took the form of open rebellion against the Spanish overlords. At other times and places, there were reactions ranging from flight to attempts at political negotiation through Native caciques. Perhaps the most dramatic form of resistance on record was mass suicide, either by hanging or by self-inflicted starvation through consumption of dirt. The latter response, which smacks of a nativistic movement, was specifically an issue in south-central Cuba (Pérez 1972).

At the present time there is no archaeological site more clearly connected to a documented encomienda than La Loma del Convento in the south-central region. This fact comes to our attention only because the encomendero was none other than the famous Las Casas, Protector of the Indians, who happened to write profusely about his experiences in a form that has come down to us intact. The precise localities at Loma del Convento that date to the encomienda period are not yet known, so it is premature to say how the site contributes to the discussion of the encomienda system generally. It is safe to say, however, that additional progress on the topic will depend in large measure upon new, directed archival research, especially in the Archivo General de Indias in Seville. With this research, it should be possible to identify other encomienda settlements on the ground, and to refine the questions which the archaeology of these settlements might elucidate.

Endnotes

- a La Loma del Convento (The Hill of the Monastery) is also known in the literature simply as “El Convento.”
- b The collaboration seems to have been somewhat strained at first. According to Bashilov, there was so little coordination that he was unaware of the identity of the previous excavators whose test pits were still visible in the southern portion of Mound 1. On the Cuban side, Rankin (personal communication, 2004) claims that he had to intervene to insure that faunal bone recovery was up to Cuban standards.
- c More superficial examination by us in 2004 failed to locate deposits in this area as well.
- d According to Bashilov (personal communication, 2005), the graphic and photographic documentation for both seasons are in the Russian Institute of Archaeology, while the field materials were deposited with the Institute of Archaeology in Havana.
- e Cited as GD 1053 666 ± 50 BP.
- f The collagen method is based on the rate of protein decomposition in bone as measured by the amount of nitrogen present. Like similar chemical methods, it is influenced by any number of local environmental factors and should be considered a relative dating technique at best.
- g First described in print by Rodríguez Matamoros (2002).
- h The decorative trends suggested by Castellanos and Rives are either erratic or are basically inverted (e.g., 1991: Fig. 3). Domínguez (1987-88, 1992: figs. 39, 40) independently seriated some 15 south-central agroalfarero site assemblages based on pottery temper and evidence of the firing conditions, producing orderings that demonstrate the cultural uniformity of the region but once again do not appear to be chronologies, in view of the stratigraphic results of the Russians at Loma del Convento.
- i Altogether, Padilla and Celaya (2004:126) analyzed 142 sherds from eleven south-central agroalfarero sites.
- j In particular, Godo (2000:75-76) derives the Jagua Bay-area appliqué arcaded designs from representational elements associated in the eastern regions with the supernatural figure known as “llora-lluvia,” or “cries-rain.” This motif is most strongly associated with Guarch Delmonte’s (1990:65) “Cultural Variant Bayamo.”

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