
Introduction

Archaeology and En Bas Saline

On Christmas eve of 1492, the small fleet of ships under the command of Christopher Columbus—the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa María*—was sailing east along the reef-dotted north coast of Haiti. A weary Columbus handed off the tiller of the *Santa María* to the cabin boy while the crew slept, and the ship grounded on a reef at about midnight. Unable to save his flagship, Columbus enlisted the aid of a Native cacique (chief) from a nearby village. Chief Guacanagarí and his people unloaded what could be saved from the *Santa María*, but it was impossible to fit the 48 crewmembers from the *Santa María* crew on the other two ships. Columbus ordered them to remain in the village with Guacanagarí. The cacique gave them a very large house in his village as shelter, and Columbus named this tiny settlement and the Indian town La Navidad.

He then sailed with the remaining ships back to Spain, with orders for his men to build a fortification and promises to return for them. Columbus did, in fact, return less than a year later, but found the Indian town burned and his men dead. Abandoning his plan to establish a settlement at La Navidad, Columbus continued sailing east, searching for a more hospitable site in which to establish his first intentional colony in America, La Isabela.

The story of La Navidad has fascinated historians and archaeologists for more than 500 years, and perhaps no one more than Dr. William Hodges, a Baptist missionary physician (Figure 1.1). Hodges established the Hôpital le Bon Samaritain in the town of Limbé in northern Haiti in 1953 and dedicated the rest of his life to providing health care and basic infrastructural improvements to the entire region of northeastern Haiti (Deagan and Hamilton 1988). Bill was also a passionate student of Haitian history and archaeology, with a particularly fervent interest in finding the site of La Navidad. On his days off he scoured the region in his white truck, locating and recording dozens of Native American and colonial sites, including the sixteenth-century



Figure 1.1. William Hodges with residents of En Bas Saline.

Spanish town of Puerto Real (Hodges 1995). It wasn't until 1977, however, that one of his patients, a Haitian farmer, led him to a huge Taíno Indian site at the tiny farming village of En Bas Saline (roughly, "behind/below the salt") (Figure 1.2). This is a remote and rarely visited part of Haiti, accessible then only by foot or donkey. It is, however, near the part of the coast in which the *Santa María* is thought by most researchers to have wrecked in 1492 (Mori-son 1940; Hodges 1983).

The ceramics deposited at En Bas Saline were almost exclusively of the type known in Haiti as "Carrier" (Rouse 1941:113–136; Ulloa Hung 2013:190–94). It is part of the Chicoid ceramic tradition that first appeared in eastern Hispaniola around AD 1000 and remained in production in many areas until the arrival of Europeans in 1492. This temporal position, the site's size, and its coastal location near the reefs on which the *Santa María* sank convinced Hodges that En Bas Saline was the principal town of the Cacique Guacanagarí in which La Navidad was located. After carrying out test excavations at En Bas Saline, he contacted the Haitian Institut de Sauvegarde de Patrimoine National (ISPAN) and the University of Florida, which ultimately led to the archaeological program on which this book is based.

University of Florida and ISPAN archaeologists had already been working along with Dr. Hodges at the nearby Spanish townsite of Puerto Real since



Figure 1.2. Location of En Bas Saline. Based on map by Rémi Kaupp, CC BY-SA 4.0; <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>.

1979 (Deagan 1995). In 1983 we began a collaborative survey of En Bas Saline. Work took place there each year from 1983 until 1988, and again in 2003. These were sadly difficult years for Haiti. The ouster of Jean Claude (“Baby Doc”) Duvalier occurred during the 1986 field season, and economic and political disruption continued for several years. The North American team was air-evacuated in 1986 and in 1987, cutting short the excavations. Another coup d’état in the summer of 1988 was considered unremarkable at En Bas Saline, but Haiti was no longer considered a safe place to take students. We were able to relocate the Columbus-related research to La Isabela in the Dominican Republic, which was Columbus’s first intentional settlement, but we were unable to continue work at En Bas Saline until 2003.

EN BAS SALINE

The site at En Bas Saline is singular in the northwestern part of Hispaniola for several reasons in addition to its association with La Navidad. One of these is its size, which covers an area of more than 90,000 m², making it the largest site recorded so far in western Hispaniola (Moore and Tremmel 1997; Ulloa Hung 2013:277–280). The boundary of En Bas Saline is defined by a C-shaped earthwork ridge, and a band of residential occupation opposite and mirroring the earthworks (Figure 1.3). An open plaza with a large residential earth mound is located between these boundaries. This kind of purposeful space-defining construction is found at large sites in other parts of the Caribbean but is quite rare in western Hispaniola. Its size and configuration suggest that it was an important late pre-Columbian political and cultural center.

The initial impetus for the program at En Bas Saline—particularly during the years leading up to the 1992 Columbian Quincentenary—was the possibility of locating Columbus’s fort of La Navidad. Our initial excavation strategy was designed to test areas predicted to have a strong possibility of yielding evidence for that fortification, based on analysis of fifteenth-century Spanish documents, surface and subsurface surveys, and Dr. Hodges’s tests. It soon became evident, however, that the Indian town itself was an exceptionally important archaeological site dating to a relatively unstudied period in Haiti; that is, ca. AD 1200 to ca. AD 1500. From 1984 onward, excavations

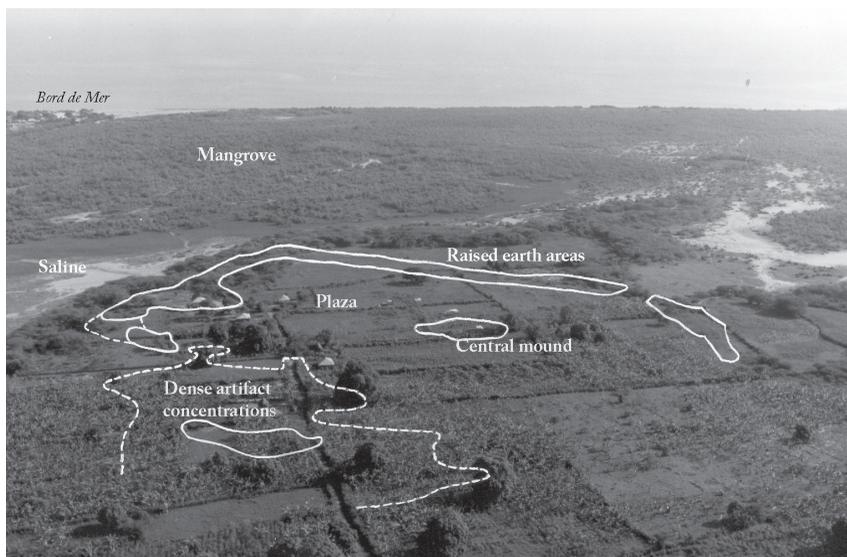


Figure 1.3. Aerial view of En Bas Saline showing site features.

attended both to the question of La Navidad and to understanding the pre-1492 town.

RATIONALE FOR THIS BOOK

During the 15± years since the last excavations at En Bas Saline, Caribbean archaeology has intensified and diversified tremendously, providing a much richer regional context and comparative base for the work documented in the following pages. That observation is not offered as an excuse for a 15-year delay in writing this book, but rather to underscore the work done by colleagues throughout the Caribbean region since then. These contributions have made it possible to understand not only En Bas Saline in a larger regional context but also the site itself in the light of new kinds of questions.

Much of the research at En Bas Saline has been previously reported, including the search for La Navidad (Deagan 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1993; Hodges 1983, 1986, 1988; Williams 1990), change in ceramic production and use before and after European contact (Cusick 1989, 1991), the subsistence strategies and sociality of diet of both the pre- and postcontact Taíno occupations (LeFebvre 2015; Newsom 1993; Newsom and Deagan 1994; Newsom and Wing 2004; Wing 1991, 2001a, 2001b), and gendered assessment of postcontact change and adjustment (Deagan 2004). This book is intended to synthesize the results of our archaeological explorations through a more contemporary interpretive lens. In doing so, I hope that it will also offer a source of fine-grained comparative information at the scale of household and event.

The data from En Bas Saline also contribute importantly to other questions of broad interest (but having limited comparative information) in Caribbean archaeology. One of these is tracking and interpreting patterns of migration and expansion during the late pre-Columbian period, represented in Hispaniola by the spread of Chicoid pottery traditions. En Bas Saline is somewhat unique in this context, in that it is a single-component Chican site at the western extent of what is thought to be Chican expansion into an area dominated by Meillacoid ceramic-making people. Where did the settlers of En Bas Saline come from? Why did they settle where they did? What kinds of relationships did they have with people already in the region? Fortunately, there exists a robust site-survey database in both northeastern Haiti and northwestern Dominican Republic, allowing contextualization and evaluation of En Bas Saline within a less granular but equally important regional focus (detailed in Chapter 5). The critical importance of regional context in understanding even a single community has been clearly