

The Skeletons from Guadeloupe — Report of the Excavators

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When the human skeleton from Guadeloupe was deposited in the British Museum in the year 1813, information about its excavation was lacking. Certainly, König¹ showed no awareness of the existence of any accompanying documentation. Nevertheless, General Ernouf, the Governor of Guadeloupe, did receive a report from the excavators of this skeleton. The document, dated 15 April 1806, was eventually published in the Transactions of the Linnaean Society in 1818².

Despite the evidence presented by Wise³ and myself,^{4,5} Cooper⁶ has continued to argue a case for the skeleton to have been embedded in Lower Miocene limestone and thus be considered a relic of the Noahic Flood. It is now clear that the excavators themselves were convinced that the rock was recently formed, and their detailed report must surely be regarded as significant for the resolution of this controversy.

The authors of the report describe the coast east of Moule, Guadeloupe, as being littered with the debris of sea shells. The fragments had been subjected to varying degrees of cementation — a process thought to be linked with the evaporation of sea-water subsequent to each tide. In the judgment of the writers, cementing agents were carried by sea-water:

“We notice that the precipitation and adhesion of these salts to these agglutinated sea shell particles established a more perfect union between the latter while becoming themselves constituent parts of the rocks which subsequently came from them.”

They describe four stages in the consolidation of these beach sands. The process starts with a very weak adhesion which allows the assemblage to be easily eroded and destroyed, and finishes with a strong adhesion which results in a coherent, tough and indurate rock.

“It is under this fourth state that the reunited sea shell particles can assume the identity of stone and

can be numbered among the other minerals under the name of ‘Aggregate made up of carbonated lime joined with muriatic lime and soda’.”

They draw attention to various recognisable shells incorporated into the rock. These are listed as *Cypraea pediculus*, *Cypraea stercoraria*, *Cypraea exanthema et zebra*, *Buccinum cornutum*, *Buccinum perdis*, *Buccinum dolium*, *Voluta oliva*, *Murex ramosus*, *Bulla ampulla*, *Bulla gibbosa*, *Nerita versicolor*, *Nerita peloronta*, *Strombus lambis*, *Turbo pica*, *Trochus niloticus* and several varieties of Patella.

“All these sea shells, as with all the matter interposed among their crushed particles, had to necessarily become incrustated since these particles have become agglutinated. This is why we meet today as well as these sea shells, some land shells, pieces of pottery or terra-cotta, stone hatchets, tools used by the workers of the land, isolated human remains, even whole skeletons more or less well preserved.

Not only has the nature of all these objects not changed, but the sea shells have become incrustated without losing their mother-of-pearl or their colours. It is wrong therefore that we have confused, right to this present day, the incrustation of these substances with those classified in the category of petrification.”

Thus, their close examination of the rocks containing the skeletons led them to the conclusion that they were not in the same category as other rocks containing fossils. They perceived a difference between these rocks and the Miocene limestones that are widespread in the Moule area — and throughout Grande-Terre. They wished to correct the mistaken notion that these rocks should be classified “in the category of petrification”. They witnessed various stages of consolidation of the beach sands, and recognised that chemicals dissolved in sea-water were involved in the cementation process. These

chemicals were precipitated as a drying sun removed water from the sands subsequent to each tide. Though they did not have our modern terminology, they nevertheless correctly described the formation of beach rock.

The excavators proceed, in their report, to the question as to how the skeletons came to be incorporated into the beach sands and consolidated with them. They relate local tradition of two Indian tribes, the Caraibes and the Galibis. The former were small, slight people with long black hair and dark brown skin. The latter were tall, well-built people with long hair and yellowy-olive coloured skin. Their settlements were located to the east and to the west of Moule — the river served as a line of demarcation between their territories. These tribes preceded the settlement of Europeans on the island. To go further than this, the authors cite the testimony of "several inhabitants of Moule" and particularly that of "a trustworthy man". This man's father had spoken of tribal warfare in the years 1710 and 1711 which culminated in a great massacre. It was the Galibis who were beaten and dispersed, but the traditions conclude at this point. The informant's father had seen 15-20 skeletons lying in the calcareous sand, which he had associated with the massacre. These corpses were still visible in the 1760's, when the informant himself said that the calcareous material surrounding them was fairly fragile and bones could be detached using a piece of wood as a lever.

It must be a matter of conjecture as to what exactly happened to the bodies of those killed in battle. After describing two modes of burial (which are both illustrated in reference 4), the writers comment:

"All we can conclude from the different positions of the two skeletons which we have just mentioned is that they have both been buried according to the customs of the two differing nations."

However, the site containing the skeletons did not appear to the excavators to be a proper cemetery; for they were unable to detect any indications of order in the locations of the individual bodies. They observed:

"that bones were scattered, and that the position of these skeletons was not at all like what you would suppose for buried corpses. Isolated bones are found today in the same place; bows, arrows and hatchets have also been found at different times by the inhabitants of the area."

There the report concludes. The local traditions

illuminate but do not wholly explain the observations: an experience which is well-known to many archaeologists!

In this controversy, it is important to distinguish between the geological and the archaeological problems. Geologically, there are no significant uncertainties. The rock containing the skeletons is a modern beach rock and not Miocene limestone. The investigations of the excavators (1806), Cuvier (1818-1825), Duchassaing (1847) and Saint-Michel (1961) all come to this conclusion; direct examination of the rock containing the skeleton by Konig (1814) and numerous others show it to be a cemented calcareous sand; and microscopic examination of thin sections of the rock confirm that it is a typical unaltered beach rock. Archaeologically, there is more opportunity for speculation — but failure to answer all the questions here does not affect the verdict that must be reached about the skeletons from Guadeloupe.^{3,4,5}

Acknowledgement

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