

# DIGGING UP DISCOVERIES @CINNAMON BAY

Article by **ANDREA MILAM**  
Photography by **MARLISE REED**  
**AND MALINDA NELSON**

A large procession moves toward the beachfront at Cinnamon Bay. The group is dark-skinned with pitch black hair, Amazonian features and flat foreheads. Feathers and ornaments decorate their pierced ears and noses, and their bodies are adorned with red paint. The women, donning headbands and short skirts, and the men in their loin cloths, are carrying baskets of offerings from the sea and singing spiritual songs as their chief — decorated in a headdress alive with feathers and gold — beats his worn hands rhythmically on a drum.

One by one, the villagers present themselves at the entrance to the temple, several yards from where the Atlantic Sea crashes onto Cinnamon Bay's gritty white sand. They press a decorative stick carved from bone down their throats to induce vomiting in an effort to purify themselves.

The seafood is offered to zemis — idols made from wood, stone, and other natural materials representing supreme ancestral deities — and is passed around to the villagers. The celebration reaches a fever pitch as villagers sing, dance and offer prayers under the blazing Caribbean sun.

Fast forward 500 years to 1992. Virgin Islands National Park archaeologist Ken Wild is toiling away at a one-by-one-meter excavation unit just yards from where the relentless ocean is pounding at Cinnamon Bay, putting the beach's historical resources at risk of being forever lost



This offering vessel provided a clear link to the island's petroglyphs, as the ancestral deities' headdress is decorated with the most commonly depicted symbol from the Reef Bay carvings. The artifact was recovered only a couple of yards from where the shore is currently eroding away.





to the sea. Tourists who walk down the path in anticipation of a tranquil beach afternoon have no idea as they pass Wild and his assistants that a major archaeological discovery is being made.

As Wild and his crew break the surface, shards of pottery are revealed which will forever change the way the archaeological community views the people who inhabited St. John from approximately 1000 AD until just before the island's discovery by Christopher Columbus in 1493. These people were Classic Taino.

The people who called St. John home in the 500 years before Christopher Columbus' discovery have generally been lumped in with the Eastern Tainos, whose reach extended down the Lesser Antilles to Montserrat. The Eastern Tainos were not as culturally

developed as the Classic Tainos; their agricultural methods were sub-par, and they were more hostile than the Classic Tainos, who inhabited Hispaniola and Puerto Rico.

Wild's 1992 discovery of Classic Taino pottery, and subsequent three year-long excavation of three two-by-two meter units beginning in 1998, cemented the association between the Classic Tainos of eastern Puerto Rico and those who lived here.

"Based on what we found here, it was obvious that we were dealing with the same kind of people who lived in Puerto Rico," says Wild, who was given the John L. Cotter Award for Excellence in Archaeology by the National Park Service for his findings at Cinnamon Bay. "All those things that you'd identify with Classic Taino culture, we found here. This site, more

than any other, really puts the nail in the coffin."

The Tainos, who probably carved the famous petroglyphs along the Reef Bay trail, were a highly advanced, deeply religious society. They organized themselves by villages — some of which could have had as many as 1,000 residents — presided over by caciques, or chiefs. Female chiefs were called cacicas. Each cacique reported to a district chief, who oversaw anywhere from 20 to 80 villages.

The Spaniards discovered the power held by the caciques not long after they arrived in the New World.

"The Europeans documented that these chiefs were able to mobilize large amounts of labor, in terms of manpower, and to requisition large amounts of food," says Dr. Emily Lundberg, an archaeological consultant

who often confers with VINP archaeologist Wild on his findings. “When the Spaniards arrived in Hispaniola, they’d eaten up what was on their ships and they demanded the indigenous people feed them. The district chiefs were able to go to their caciques and say, ‘we need 100 bushels of yucca.’ They were also able to show up with as many as 600 men when required.”

The Tainos’ ability to provide large amounts of food on demand is evidence of their agricultural innovation. Rather than use the slash-and-burn technique practiced by their ancient ancestors, Tainos formed rows upon rows of three foot-high, nine foot-wide mounds of soil in huge agricultural fields, where they predominantly grew different varieties of cassava, a main staple in their diet.

The Tainos also subsisted on marine foods, from which they garnered most of their protein. Proof of their aptitude in gathering seafood is viewed by thousands of unknowing snorkelers each year at the edge of Cinnamon Cay, just a foot below the water line.

“There are big circular loose stone walls, which probably would have had a basket weave across the top of it,” says Wild. “Any seafood that you wanted to keep fresh, you could keep in this pen. They had a way of retaining whatever they caught, whether it be turtles or fish, for later consumption.”

So it’s not hard to see why the Classic Tainos would have called St. John home.

“The island is just a wonderful marine resource,” says Lundberg. “Back then there were turtles, manatees and even a species of seal. Every now and then a whale would come through. Villages here were possibly supplying marine resources to towns in Puerto Rico in exchange for other goods.”

The sophistication of these people, whose heritage can be traced back to northern South America, is also evident in their skill as mariners. It was reported by Christopher Columbus that the Tainos could carry as many as 150 people in canoes hewn from trees.



**(TOP)** The first offering vessel of an ancestral chieftain found at Cinnamon Bay. **(CENTER LEFT)** This bat nosed effigy face without a headdress provided a link in defining the emerging Taino Culture. **(CENTER RIGHT)** Piecing together ceramic vessel fragments that may date back two-thousand years. **(BOTTOM)** The view from the circa 1680 building that serves as both an educational center and the archaeology laboratory.

**OPPOSITE PAGE** Archaeological investigations continue at Cinnamon Bay. This year extensive work was completed further inland revealing evidence of occupation of the site as early as 2,000 years ago.

"The majority of people here don't see water; they see the land," says Dr. Lundberg. "Water was the Tainos' environment. They were totally linked and united by water. To get to a village across a mountain, they may have canoed around the island. It would have been no problem for them to visit other islands, and we know they kept ties with the mainland (northern South America) because of individual artifacts that we've found."

One only has to look at a map to realize it would have made perfect sense for the people living on St. John to be tied in with the Classic Tainos liv-

ing on Puerto Rico, an island often visible to the naked eye across a stretch of ocean that would have been easy for the expert mariners to traverse.

Another cornerstone of Taino culture, which is arguably the most important aspect of their existence, was religion. And that's where the Cinnamon Bay site comes into the picture. Wild believes he has excavated the remains of a Taino temple, where the cacique would have housed his zemis — figures carved from natural materials in likenesses of the Tainos' ancestral deities — which the villagers would have worshiped.

"We found a post hole this big," Wild says, holding outstretched arms in front of him in wide arcs.

In addition to the posthole, which indicates the presence of a large wood pillar that would have supported the temple structure, Wild has found numerous offerings the villagers would have made to their cacique's zemis, including a pile of eared arks — bivalves similar to clams — in a large bowl featuring a turtle effigy.

"What was amazing was that these were in a pile," says Wild. "What's more amazing is that they weren't open. If you can prove it



**THIS PAGE (LEFT)** Archaeologists mapping and consulting with NPS project manager Ken Wild. **(TOP)** A boat shaped pre-Taino effigy vessel with bird handles that has been purposely punched out during ceremonial activities. **(BOTTOM)** Water screening the soils through fine wire screens ensures the recovery of even the tiniest artifacts.

**OPPOSITE PAGE (LEFT)** A small silver cross inlaid with turquoise stones recovered this year. **(TOP)** At the Cinnamon Bay laboratory work will continue to piece together the ceramic fragments such as this chieftain effigy, to better understand this ceremonial site and its relationships with Taino cultural groups across the Caribbean islands. **(BOTTOM)** Typical tools utilized by archaeologists in the field.



hasn't been eaten, then you know you're dealing with offerings. These guys were perfect. You couldn't have asked for a better offering than this pile of eared arks."

Temples such as the one that was likely located at Cinnamon Bay were often placed between big population groups, leading Wild to hypothesize that Tainos could have come from Tortola and other neighboring islands to bring offerings to the zemis.

Villages were erected away from the beach to protect residents from po-

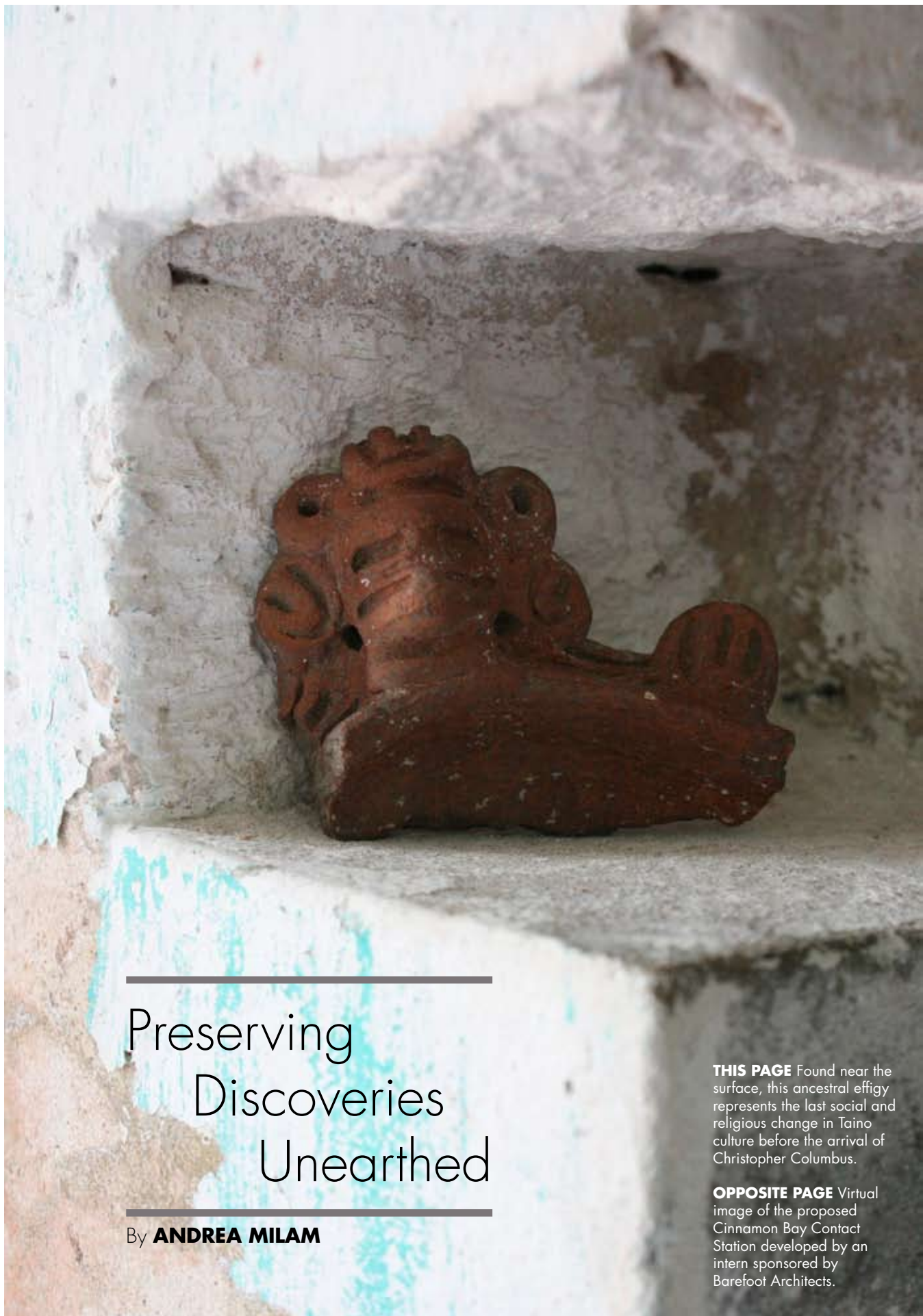
tential storm surges, making it entirely possible that when tourists staying at Cinnamon Bay Campground lay their heads on their pillows at night, they are actually resting atop hundreds of years of Taino culture.

Wild estimates he's uncovered just one percent of the Cinnamon Bay site. More excavation is underway, in preparation for planned campground renovations. Shovel tests have been done throughout the site, giving Wild an idea of the village's parameters, and only time will tell what he will find

as the excavation continues.

"You never know what you're going to find," Wild says. "We're digging near to where the actual village was, so you've got to be prepared for anything. We could even hit burials."

One thing is for certain: we are only just beginning to discover the complexities of those who called Cinnamon Bay home hundreds of years before the beach became just another pristine stretch of white sand that beckons people daily with the promise of rest and relaxation. *SJM*



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# Preserving Discoveries Unearthed

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By **ANDREA MILAM**

**THIS PAGE** Found near the surface, this ancestral effigy represents the last social and religious change in Taino culture before the arrival of Christopher Columbus.

**OPPOSITE PAGE** Virtual image of the proposed Cinnamon Bay Contact Station developed by an intern sponsored by Barefoot Architects.



Rendering by Barefoot Architect

The very artifacts discovered at Cinnamon Bay which proved that St. John was home to Classic Tainos in the 500 years before Christopher Columbus' arrival will soon be on display, along with a bevy of other relics that tell the story of the history of this island.

Cinnamon Bay's Archaeology Lab is getting a facelift thanks to funding from both the National Park Service and the Friends of the Virgin Islands National Park. The new facility, to be dubbed the "Educational and Visitor Contact Station and Archaeology Lab," will give students and visitors the opportunity to view historical artifacts and to watch the VINP's archaeology team at work.

"It will be a great environment for

kids to see work being done," says VINP Archaeologist Ken Wild.

The building itself will be renovated, with new paint, doors, windows and an alarm system complete with cameras, and the interior will feature glass display cases. Design for the new archaeology lab was donated by local firm Barefoot Architect.

Wild's ultimate goal is to use the lab as a teaching tool.

"We want it to have a good flow, so a teacher can walk in there with a class and take students all the way through the history of St. John," he says.

The exhibits will change frequently, ensuring visitors a new experience each time they return. Some artifacts, which are too fragile to be on regular

display, will be brought in on special occasions. Wild also expects to showcase recreations of such fragile items found at Cinnamon Bay, like bowls the Tainos used to present offerings.

Wild anticipates the exhibits will be on display at the newly renovated archaeology lab, when it's completed sometime in 2011.

The lab component of the facility is key to sharing the work that's being done at Cinnamon Bay with the community, Wild explains.

"It's just as important to engage the public in what we're doing as it is to actually be doing it," he says. "What's the point in digging if you can't educate, share and make what you find a part of your community?"

SJM