

HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY IN VENEZUELA

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DEFINING THE FIELD OF STUDY

Historical archaeological research in Venezuela has been ongoing for more than sixty years and in recent decades the field of study has been gaining a stronger disciplinary voice locally, regionally, and internationally. In Venezuela, historical archaeology is concerned with the period following Columbus' third voyage in 1498 during which he encountered the indigenous communities in what today is north-eastern Venezuela. Spanish colonization occurred slowly in subsequent years, as settlement only began in earnest after 1546 when the Crown revoked the charter that granted the Province of Venezuela to the German Welser banking family. Santiago de León de Caracas – the eventual capital of the Province and today's country – was founded as late as 1567. The long and turbulent period of Spanish colonialism came to a bloody end in a protracted independence struggle between 1810 and 1830, resulting in the establishment of the sovereign Venezuelan state.

Venezuelan archaeologists traditionally define the study of the country's post-1498 past as the archaeology of the colonial and republican periods. I prefer to refer to the archaeology of both these periods as 'historical archaeology' on the basis that, even though the term is contested,¹ it is widely recognized in the Caribbean and North America and is increasingly used and accepted in Ibero-America and beyond,² consolidating an important global disciplinary identity. Broad usage does not,

nevertheless, imply that the term is taken uncritically as it is indeed contextualized and defined locally and regionally³ in different ways.

BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW, INSTITUTIONS, AND GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

The earliest excavation of a colonial-period site in Venezuela was undertaken in 1955 by pioneering Venezuelan archaeologist of Catalan origin, José María Cruxent, in the short-lived Spanish city of Nueva Cádiz, formally established in 1528 on the desert island of Cubagua to harvest its rich pearl oyster beds.⁴ Beginning in 1976, Irida Vargas and Mario Sanoja excavated a number of colonial- and republican-period sites on the Lower Orinoco River, among these various Spanish fortifications, Catalan Capuchin missions, and settlements.⁵ In the late 1980s and 1990s they furthermore undertook extensive excavations in the colonial centre of Caracas within historic landmarks, as well as in the urban centre of the city of Maracaibo.⁶ During the past thirty years, Alberta Zucchi excavated in colonial- and republican-period cemeteries on two islands at the entrance to Lake Maracaibo, the church of San Francisco de Coro, Falcón State, and at a colonial-period Franciscan mission in Anzoátegui State.⁷

Other more recent studies include, among others, those by Luis Molina who undertook archaeological, historical, and architectural investigations of sugar cane mill haciendas (*haciendas de trapiche*) throughout Venezuela.⁸ In 2006, the Institute of Cultural Heritage (*Instituto del Patrimonio Cultural*, IPC) – the institutional body governing heritage preservation in the country –

sponsored historical archaeological investigations under the direction of Rodrigo Navarrete at multiple sites associated with the life of Simón Bolívar.⁹ A rescue archaeology project was initiated in 2004 at the Casa Monagas in the city of Barcelona, Anzoátegui State, where Ana Cristina Rodríguez and Alasdair Brooks studied the nineteenth-century ceramics from the elite Republican-period household.¹⁰ Over the past two decades, Kay and Franz Scaramelli conducted extensive archaeological investigations at numerous colonial- and republican-period indigenous settlements, mission towns, and forts in the Venezuelan Middle Orinoco region.¹¹ Lastly, since the early 1980s, Marlena and Andrzej Antczak undertook historical archaeological investigations on dozens of Venezuelan islands including, most recently, Margarita Island.¹² In the past few years, I surveyed several of these islands, including La Tortuga, and excavated various campsites beside their saltpans where from the seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century foreign seafarers cultivated sea salt.¹³

Many of the above investigations started as rescue archaeology projects funded by governmental and private entities including the IPC, public universities and research institutes, municipal governments, and large corporations.¹⁴ The Constitution of 1999 made considerable strides in broadening the definition of cultural heritage and giving voice and rights to previously marginalized sectors of society.¹⁵ In practice, this legislation, however, has not promoted funding for new question-driven archaeological research, encouraged critical redefinitions of what constitutes colonial- and republican-period cultural heritage, or incentivized its active preservation. Today, Venezuela is still ostensibly the only Latin

American country without a national historical, anthropological, or archaeological museum in its capital city. Moreover, looting and metal detecting at colonial- and republican-period sites are large problems, and legislation and policing to curb these destructive activities is at most limited.

In the small circle of professional archaeologists working in Venezuela, those that have done historical archaeological research are mostly trained prehistorians. For this reason, there is no divide between prehistoric (prehispanic, in Venezuela) and historical archaeological research. Rather, historical archaeology developed out of prehispanic archaeology, from the ideological, ethical, and political concerns driving Venezuelan archaeologists to erase the arbitrary pre- and post-contact ‘boundary’, as well as trace historical continuities from the deep past into the present day.¹⁶ As a result, sixteenth- through early twentieth-century archaeological remains have been intentionally collected and recorded in most excavations in the country since the 1950s. Historical archaeological publications have also regularly appeared in Venezuelan journals and book series traditionally reserved for prehispanic archaeology, anthropology, ethnohistory, and history.¹⁷ Books on historical archaeological topics in Venezuela have been published exclusively in the Spanish language and printed in limited numbers.¹⁸ Furthermore, the results of many historical archaeological investigations cannot be easily accessed as these are either unpublished undergraduate and master’s theses from the Central University of Venezuela (UCV) or single-copy reports given to governmental institutions. Although most Venezuelan archaeologists have engaged in historical archaeology, there is no existing association

or support network for this work, and the discipline still largely derives its identity from the theoretical currents and methodological practices of prehispanic archaeology.

CURRENT STATE OF HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY IN VENEZUELA

During the last two decades, Venezuelan public universities and research institutes employing archaeologists in the country have been suffering an aggravating budgetary crisis as they are being severely underfunded by the central government. This situation, concatenated with the country's profound social, economic, and political crisis, has stymied the development of young archaeologists, as well as resulted in an increasing diaspora of scholars and a stagnation in new research. For these reasons, in a country where scholars are already acutely underpaid, those undertaking archaeological investigations have had to finance new fieldwork and laboratory analyses from sources alternative to governmental funding or even out of their own pockets. Doing field archaeology in Venezuela has also become a dangerous undertaking as uncontrolled crime and violence severely limit archaeological surveys, fieldwork, and field schools, especially in remote and desolate locations.

In the face of all these obstacles, however, Venezuelan historical archaeology has steadily gained a stronger local, regional, and international disciplinary voice. The number of Venezuelan historical archaeological publications, not only in Spanish, but also in the English language has increased since the turn of the century, appearing as chapters in edited volumes or as standalone articles in top international journals. An upcoming

volume, *Venezuelan Historical Archaeology: Current Perspectives on Contact, Colonialism, and Independence*,¹⁹ will include a wide range of contributions by archaeologists working on late pre-contact and contact-, colonial-, and republican-period sites in Venezuela, and will be published in English and Spanish, guaranteeing broad internationalisation and Ibero-American and nationwide dissemination.

As discussed, historical archaeological research in Venezuela has typically not been an outcome of question-driven research designs but often resulted from rescue archaeology projects in urban centres. More recent interpretive studies, however, have moved from focusing on asymmetrical capitalist relations and processes of Spanish urbanization to engage with topics such as indigenous, afro-Venezuelan, and *criollo* agency and ethnogenesis,²⁰ gender and identity,²¹ as well as seafaring mobilities and human-thing entanglements,²² situating them within local, regional, and global contexts. Venezuelan archaeologists have also increasingly involved local communities and their concerns through historical archaeology workshops and inclusive public archaeology activities.²³ Venezuela has great historical archaeological potential and the future application of fresh theoretical approaches along with new methods and analytical techniques will not only contest extant metanarratives but also contribute meaningfully to wider debates on human-thing relations and multiple ontologies, transculturation and ethnogenesis, and colonialism and decolonization.

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¹ The term is often rightly charged with perpetuating ahistoricism. For one of the Venezuelan critiques see Vargas Arenas 2014.

² See, for example, Montón Subías & Abejez 2015.

³ See, for example, Zarankin & Salerno 2007.

⁴ Cruxent 1955.

⁵ Sanoja & Vargas Arenas 2005.

⁶ Sanoja 2008; Sanoja et al. 1998; Sanoja & Vargas-Arenas 2002; Vargas A. et al. 1998.

⁷ Zucchi 1997, 2010, 2013.

⁸ Molina 1999, 2005.

⁹ Navarrete 2014, 2017.

¹⁰ Brooks & Rodríguez Y. 2012; Rodríguez Y. & Brooks 2012. Brooks has been one of the few non-nationals to take part in historical archaeological investigations in the country.

¹¹ Scaramelli & Scaramelli 2015; Tarble de Scaramelli 2016; Tarble de Scaramelli & Scaramelli 2005, 2012.

¹² Antczak et al. forthcoming.

¹³ Antczak et al. 2016; Antczak 2015, 2018.

¹⁴ Large corporations have been principally involved in funding rescue archaeology operations to mitigate the impacts of their construction of hydroelectric dams and gas pipelines, as well as other large infrastructural projects.

¹⁵ Molina 2007; Tarble de Scaramelli 2016.

¹⁶ Such historical continuities should, nonetheless, be considered with caution as they cannot be assumed to have existed *a priori* based on ethnohistorical sources alone (direct historical approach).

¹⁷ These journals include *Antropológica*, *Boletín Museo Antropológico de Quíbor*, *Boletín Antropológico* (Universidad de Los Andes, Mérida), *Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales*, *Tierra Firme*, and *Nuestro Sur*, many of which are now freely available online.

¹⁸ Altez & Rivas 2002; Amodio et al. 1997; Sanoja et al. 1998; Sanoja & Vargas-Arenas 2002; Sanoja & Vargas Arenas 2005; Vargas A. et al. 1998; Zucchi 2010, 2013.

¹⁹ Antczak forthcoming 1.

²⁰ Rivas 2001; Tarble de Scaramelli & Scaramelli 2011.

²¹ Scaramelli & Tarble 2000; Tarble de Scaramelli 2012.

²² Antczak forthcoming 2.

²³ Antczak et al. 2013; Rivas & Altez 2015; Tarble de Scaramelli 2016.