

POTTERY FROM GUN CREEK, VIRGIN GORDA

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The British Virgin Islands Archaeological Survey, which the author directed as a coöperative venture of the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, and the Government of the Crown Colony of the Virgin Islands, has been dormant since 1974. This has been due to the pressing duties and needs faced by the author, and it is unfortunate that much material which could be given to the printers with minimal effort has not been published. This note is an attempt partially to correct the situation.

Virgin Gorda, discovered by Columbus in 1493, is the easternmost of the volcanic Virgin Islands. It covers slightly over 8 square miles of surface area, and, in its central portion, rises dramatically to 1369 feet above mean sea level in a majestic, domed massif. From this central mountain project two long peninsulas, a southern one which contains the chief settlement of Spanishtown set against the jumbles of granodiorite boulders so impressive to visitor and native alike, and an eastern peninsula which ends in Punta de Pájaros, a name reputedly given to this wild promontory by the great Admiral himself. On the northern shore of the isthmus which connects Pájaros Peninsula to Virgin Mountain, and facing the excellent natural harbor of North Sound, is the small settlement of Gun Creek.

Gun Creek itself is an intermittent watercourse, or *gut*, with its source high on Virgin Mountain and a precipitous course parallel to the settlement, debouching into a small mangrove swamp fringed by tall manchenil trees. In more forested days, it may have been the 'river' of Virgin Gorda to which Spanish mariners repaired for water. Today, it is mostly a dry, sandy bed.

The precise location of the archaeological site whose pottery is the subject of this report, will not be divulged at present for the sake of its preservation; suffice it to state, then, that it is a small midden on the northern slope of the hilly isthmus, before the Creek which flows to the north-northwest of it. The site commands a telescoping prospect of the Gun Creek Estuary from a moderate altitude, and, though invisible from its side of the isthmian saddle, it lies a comfortable walking distance from the turtlegrass beds of South Sound and the fertile provision grounds of its deep Bottom.

The midden, discovered and excavated during the summer of 1973, is small, and represents no more than the *débris* of a single household—perhaps a communal house with about a dozen members. Despite the presence of relatively large quantities of bone and shell refuse, the soil remains highly acidic and the most careful excavation failed to disclose structural features. It is obvious, furthermore, that we were digging into what was, after all, only the dump or midden of

said household, and the building itself may be irretrievable now because modern construction has taken place upslope from the extant archaeological site. Evidence which need not detain us at present, suggests a single potter responsible for the bulk of the pottery exhumed.

The shallow midden, nowhere much over two feet in depth, contains a homogenous assemblage which probably indicates a brief occupation spanning at most the approximate limits of a single human generational effort. The bone and shell refuse, which, along with other particulars, will be detailed in the eventual site report, contains as expected moderate quantities of fish remains. More surprising is the large amount, relatively, of turtle and milk conch remains. Milk conch (*Strombus costatus*), in particular, is regarded by modern fishermen as rare in the surrounding waters.

The pottery fragments exhumed comprise the near totality of the artifactual assemblage, and are particularly instructive in the sense that they represent a circumscribed stylistic episode. Individual fragments, with some imagination, might be attributed either to a Saladoid or to an Ostionoid style. Viewed, as they must be, together, the impression is that of a very late Saladoid style.

Bell-shaped bowls and broad-lipped platters are well represented in the vessel shapes reconstructed, and a very fugitive red paint—possibly a vegetal dye applied after firing—is limited to the interior lips of vessels. Great care has to be observed in washing the painted fragments as the paint, of itself not particularly fast, and its preservation affected by the soil's acidity, decidedly tends to rub or to wash off.

An analytic mode easily isolated from the collection is a thumb-impressed rim, belonging to a type of vessel approximating a beaker's configuration, and, in its summary of traits, definitely concordant with the late Saladoid assemblage of which it is a distinctive part. The grayish-brown paste of all fragments of the Gun Creek pottery is compact and dense, lacking, however, the fine clang characteristic of so much early and middle Saladoid pottery, and missing also the high polish occasionally met with elsewhere.

A number of fragmented discoidal objects, ground out of pottery walls and perforated more or less centrally, were recovered at Gun Creek, and it is a fair conjecture that these represent spindle whorls, from which one may be tempted to infer a textile manufactory. For what it is worth, the neighboring South Sound Bottom grew fine cotton fields within living memory.

This note is not a ceramographic study, but in broad outline it is possible to postulate a late Saladoid style in the northeastern Virgin Islands, well on its way to a transformation into an Ostionoid style. The name of this late Saladoid style may be given with propriety as 'Gun Creek'. It is a Terminal Insular Saladoid style, placed temporally between the fifth and sixth centuries of our era. More details will be made available with the publication of a comprehensive site report. The drawings presented herewith are the work of Jeffrey M. Gross.

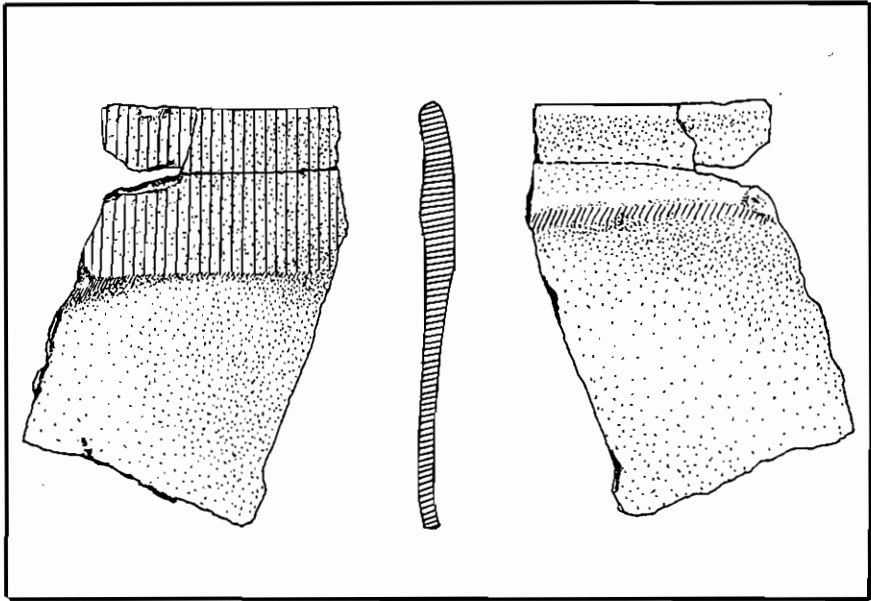


FIGURE 1

A platter or shallow bowl rim fragment with fugitive red paint (vertical hatching) on the inner lip zone. Scale 1:2.

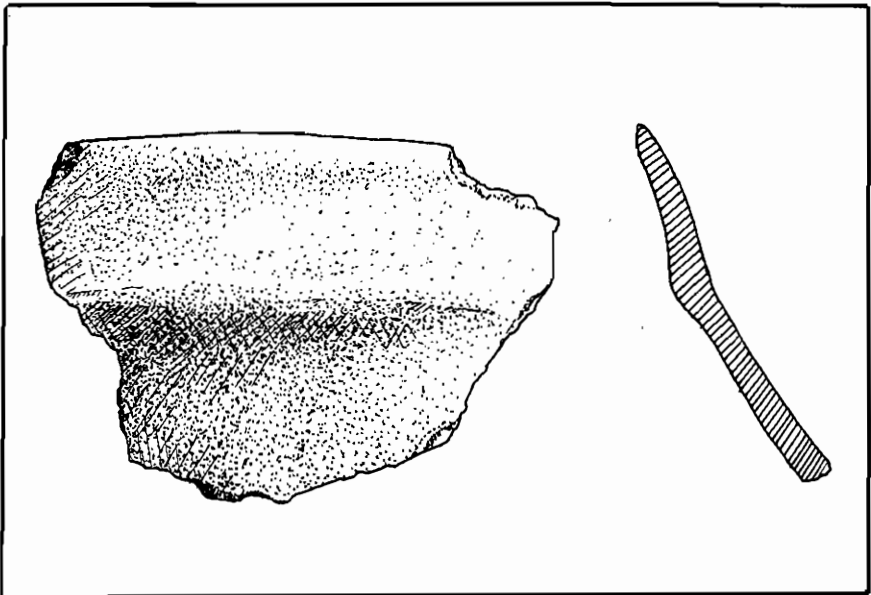


FIGURE 2

A bell-shaped bowl rim fragment of utilitarian ware. Scale 1:2.

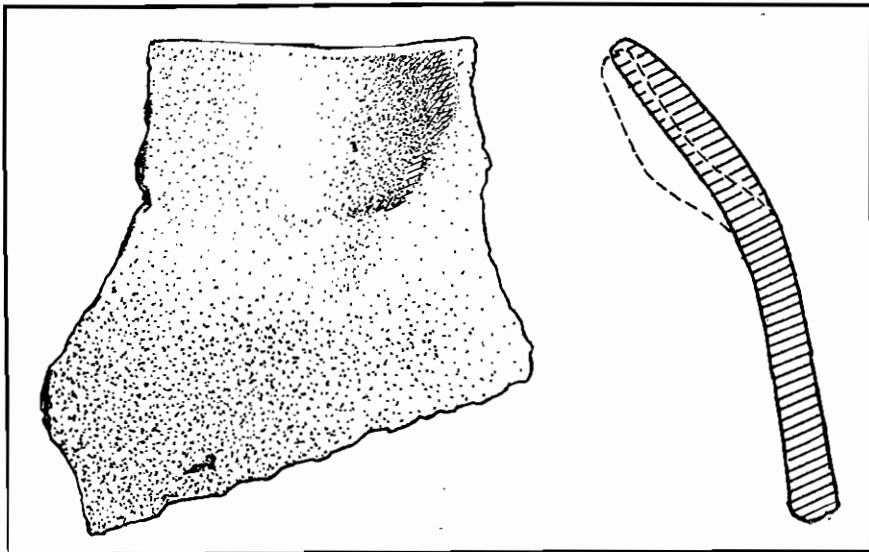


FIGURE 3

A thumb-impressed beaker rim fragment of utilitarian ware. Scale 1:2.

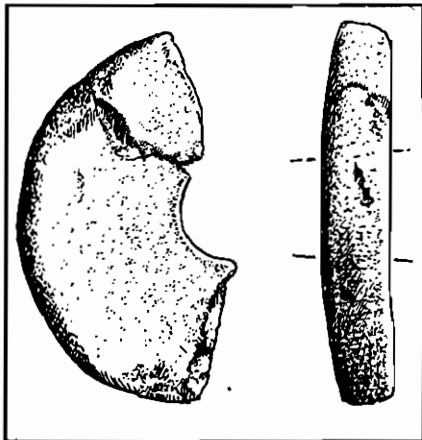


FIGURE 4

A centrally perforated discoidal fragment ground out of a pottery wall. Scale 1:2.



FIGURE 5

The author's younger brother (5'10") provides a scale against an area of the site exposed by a roadcut. Note the milk conch shells jutting out of the exposure. Photograph taken in 1973.