

# SPECTRUM

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*Corps' Cultural Resources Program:*  
**"A morsel of genuine history is a thing  
so rare as to be always valuable."**  
~Thomas Jefferson



These intricately carved ancient petroglyphs form the north wall of the batey. Both male and female figures are represented. (Photo by New South Associates, Inc.)



## Discovery of Pre-Columbian Ceremonial Site YIELDS RARE TREASURE

One of the largest, best-preserved pre-Columbian ceremonial centers known in the Caribbean was unearthed as contractors for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Jacksonville District prepared a disposal area to be used during construction of the Portugues Dam in Puerto Rico. "The discovery was thrilling, a once-in-a-lifetime experience," explained David McCullough, the archeologist overseeing the contractors' work.



# Amazing Discovery

News of the Jacanas archeological site discovery, initially designated by the Corps as PO-29, was reported internationally and drew much attention.

At the site, the archeological consultant discovered a huge four-sided ceremonial plaza, a “batey” or ball court about 130 by 160 feet. It was here that the Tainos held their religious ceremonies and sports events. Also discovered was a 60-foot-long row of intricately carved stones bearing ancient petroglyphs, which appear to date to shortly before the arrival of the Spaniards in the 11th and 12th centuries. Petroglyphs on the north side are some of the most intricate, detailed and well-carved found to date on the island. In the wall of carvings, one of the large stone slabs depicts full-length human figures – a man and a woman wearing headdresses and ear spools, arms outstretched and legs stretched in a frog-like stance.



Close up view of one of the petroglyphs, considered among the largest and most elaborate known to date in Puerto Rico. (Photo by New South Associates, Inc.)

The team discovered a burial ground with 40 sets of well-preserved human remains that will provide a sample of the resident population’s age, gender and overall health. This is the first portion of potentially as many as 400 prehistoric burials beneath the batey. They also found patterns of post holes that delineated ancient dwellings and an artifact-laden midden mound, or place for community trash. “This is likely a sample of what lies beneath, for barely 15 percent of the site excavated” said Aida Belen Rivera, archeologist and then-director of the Puerto Rico State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO).

## History Unearthed

In 2006, the Corps was set to move ahead with construction of the Portugues Dam, the final component of a large flood protection project in Ponce, in the southern part of the island. The site where the Jacanas archeological discovery was made was planned as a disposal site for material from construction of the dam.

According to McCullough, initial cultural resources surveys completed in 1979 in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act had identified the area as having artifacts of moderate significance, eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. To mitigate potential impacts, the Corps devised a plan to conduct an archeological testing program and investigations, to create a research design and a work plan for archeological data recovery excavations. The plan was coordinated with SHPO and the local project sponsor, the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (PRDNER).

## A Change of Plans

When excavations performed by Corps contractor New South Associates, Inc. in the summer of 2007 revealed what appeared to be a small batey, the Corps allocated additional time and money to the project. Upon discovering the wall of carved stones, indicating the magnitude and extraordinary significance of the archeological site, the Corps further changed its plans.

First, the Corps directed the archeological consultant to halt machine excavations and continue with hand excavations only. The Corps also immediately revised the plan to use the area as a disposal site. Finding an alternative disposal site and performing subsequent mitigation work to preserve the site entailed additional project costs of about \$3 million. All actions were coordinated with SHPO, which advised the Corps and was involved in the decision-making process pertaining to the future of the site.

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Archeologist inspects part of a 60 foot row of well-carved stones or ancient petroglyphs discovered by the Corps at the archeological site near the Portugues Dam construction site in Ponce, Puerto Rico. The site was stabilized and the petroglyphs and other areas are preserved and covered with specific geotextile materials and clean alluvial fill. (Photo by New South Associates, Inc.)





## Beyond the Headlines

The Governor of Puerto Rico, dignitaries and a steady stream of media visited the site. As news of the discovery made headlines and public interest grew, some local archeologists complained about the use of a backhoe for the initial excavations, and decried the removal of artifacts from the island.

News of the discovery also brought with it the potential threat of theft of the valuable petroglyphs, valued from \$10,000 to \$100,000 on the black market. The Corps erected security fences, limited access to the site, installed portable high density lights and worked with the local police to provide armed guards.

The Corps and its contractors had begun the project with hand excavations to promote understanding of the soil stratigraphy. A backhoe was brought in only after it was known how much of the soil constituted disturbed overburden and how deep the intact archeological deposits were. Once the preservation operation began, only shovel work was performed in areas that had already been scraped. Machine-assisted scraping had been warranted by the fact that the initial intent was to conduct a salvage data recovery operation on the site prior to depositing material from the dam excavations.

Residents became distraught when artifacts and human remains were removed from the island and shipped to the contractor's laboratory in Georgia for cleaning, cataloging and analysis. This became an emotional and highly political issue. However, the Corps is bound by federal law to keep the artifacts in a federally-approved facility, and there are none on the island. SHPO concurred with the Corps in housing the artifacts on the mainland until the report is fundamentally complete, and the Corps has assured the Puerto Rican government and the public that following this work, all items will be returned to a repository designated by the Puerto Rican government, where they will be available for further study by local scholars.

## Future Plans

The government of Puerto Rico, the State Historic Preservation Office, international and local archeologists and others all have future plans for Jacanas, the former Corps PO-29 site. Preservation of the site symbolized the beginning of a long journey to learn more from these spectacular petroglyphs, burial sites and artifacts. SHPO and many others recognize that if it had not been for the Corps' work, the valuable area may never have been found.

In the spring of 2008, the archeological contractor covered the excavated site with special materials to protect it for future excavation work. They used geo-textile fabric to cover excavation surfaces, gravel caps to demarcate unexcavated burial sites and a 30 to 40cm clean alluvial fill cap to further protect the area from vegetation and looters. The site is now fenced and protected.

Archeologists, university professors and students look forward to searching the site in the future and finding answers to many of the mysteries about the pre-Columbian site occupied by the Taino and pre-Taino people. Work will continue for many years and require many resources, which are not currently available. The site will eventually provide a wealth of knowledge about ancient roots for the benefit of future generations.

The Corps of Engineers is proud to have contributed to the great discovery and preservation of this unique archeological site. The Portugues Dam construction continues, while in its shadow, the archeological site lies underground, sheltered and protected, silently waiting to share its story. ■

by Elsa Jimenez  
Jacksonville District



In 2008, the American Cultural Resources Association (ACRA) presented its Industry Award to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Jacksonville District, the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources and New South Associates, Inc., in recognition of their efforts to preserve a site of international interest.

Jurors cited the Corps' recognition of the public benefit and value of the site, and its willing commitment of additional financial and organizational resources to preserve it. The Corps took the unprecedented step of preserving the archaeological site after completing the data recovery mitigation. In addition, all work was closely coordinated with SHPO and local officials. The Corps' David McCullough (center) and Joe Joseph (right) of New South Associates, Inc. accepted the award presented by ACRA President Mike Polk (left) at a ceremony held September 2008 in Tucson, Ariz.