

ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE CREOLE CULTURES OF THE FRENCH

WEST INDIES

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588

Historical archaeology investigations of the “people without history” in the French West Indies have been slower to develop than in other parts of the Caribbean. Recently that has begun to change as historical archaeological research on plantation sites in Guadeloupe provides insights into the organization of slave villages, the material culture employed by residents of those villages, and some of the strategies of adaptation and environmental exploitation developed in the creole world of the plantation. This paper sets the stage for plantation archaeology in the French West Indies, and presents results from work on two plantation sites in Guadeloupe.

Las investigaciones de arqueología histórica de la “gente sin historia” en las Antillas francesas se han desarrollado más lentamente que en otras partes del Caribe. Esto ha empezado a cambiar recientemente porque la investigación en arqueología histórica en los sitios de plantaciones en Guadalupe ha ofrecido la oportunidad de comprender mejor la organización de los pueblos de esclavos, la cultura material utilizada por los residentes de esos pueblos, y alguna de las estrategias de adaptación y explotación medioambiental desarrolladas en el mundo criollo de la plantación. Esta ponencia establece el escenario para la arqueología de la plantación en las Antillas francesas, y presenta los resultados del trabajo en dos plantaciones en Guadalupe.

Les enquêtes de l'archéologie historique “d'un peuple sans histoire” dans les Antilles françaises ont pris plus de temps à se développer que dans d'autres parties des Caraïbes. Récemment, cela a commencé à changer lorsqu'une recherche archéologique historique sur des sites d'habitation à la Guadeloupe donne des aperçus dans l'organisation des villages d'esclaves, la culture à laquelle se consacraient les résidents de ces villages, et quelques unes des stratégies d'adaptation et d'exploitation environnementale développée dans le monde créole de l'habitation. Cette communication présente l'archéologie d'habitation dans les Antilles françaises, et présente des résultats du travail fait sur deux plantations à la Guadeloupe.

Introduction

Since 2001, I have been directing historical archaeological research on plantation slave village sites in the French West Indies. In May of 2001, I conducted an initial investigation into the archaeology of the African Diaspora in Guadeloupe, French West Indies (FWI) (Kelly 2002), and have followed that initial survey with excavation campaigns in 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005. Guadeloupe is an archipelago in the Lesser Antilles, consisting of three main islands, Basse-Terre, mountainous and well watered; Grande-Terre, and Marie-Galante, both of which are low lying and receive less rainfall. This study is the first concerted effort to try to identify archaeological remains associated with the living spaces

of enslaved Africans in the French West Indies, and used historical cartographic data to identify, locate, and facilitate a preliminary survey of village sites associated with seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century plantation sites. Prior to this project, historical archaeological research into the plantation-era past of Guadeloupe had focused on the industrial remains of sugar, coffee, and indigo plantations, which are frequently prominent features on the present-day landscape of the island due to their massive and substantial construction (Delpuech 2001; Kelly 2004; Rousseau and Vragar 2004). In contrast, the lightly built structures that housed enslaved Africans and their descendants on the plantations have not endured, and therefore archaeology is one of the few methods available to learn about the experiences and adaptations of the African population, as has been demonstrated in over 30 years of archaeological research elsewhere in the Caribbean, and in the former slaveholding regions of North and South America (Singleton and Bograd 1995; Singleton 1999).

Status of Archaeological Research on the French West Indies

An important feature of this research lies in the fact that although the former French colonies of the West Indies were economic powerhouses of the region during the eighteenth century, possessing well developed slave-based plantation economies home to more than one-half of all the enslaved Africans in the Caribbean (Blackburn 1997), our current historical archaeological understanding of the conditions of plantation organization, slavery, and people's responses to it, are based primarily on research focused on the former British colonies of the region (compare the treatment of African Diaspora archaeology in various parts of the Caribbean as seen in the contributions in Farnsworth 2001 and Haviser 1999). Yet there were many differences between the colonies of different nations, most significantly in this case, the impact of the French Revolution and the subsequent social upheavals it engendered. In the Caribbean, the French Revolution led to the uprising in St. Domingue that led to the establishment of Haiti, while in Guadeloupe it resulted in the unprecedented abolition of slavery in 1794, followed eight years later by its re-establishment. Martinique experienced neither revolutionary emancipation nor its overthrow, as it was occupied by British forces during the Revolution and they, in collusion with the established planter or *beke* class, had no interest in any change to the status quo of slave-based plantation production (Butel 2002; Nicolas 1996). It is in this unusual situation that historical archaeology may be able to contribute to a more complex and nuanced understanding of the social consequences of slavery in the French West Indies specifically and the Caribbean in general.

Archaeological Research in Guadeloupe

This paper reports on the results of five field seasons of archaeological work conducted on two plantation sites in Guadeloupe, and outlines some prospects for additional research (Figure 1). The initial phase of research in Guadeloupe occurred in 2001, and was geared to developing an evaluation of the potential of plantation archaeology in Guadeloupe. Doing this required 1) a determination of the historical sources that are available to facilitate the targeting of potential slave village sites; 2) developing a methodology for locating such sites; and 3) determining that village sites associated with enslaved Africans were present and intact.

In contrast to some other parts of the West Indies, such as Jamaica, the historical record for Guadeloupe is somewhat thin. In particular, the extensive series of maps and plans that exist for some of the British possessions apparently are not duplicated for the former French colonies. Indeed, for Guadeloupe, there are only a few such maps. However, one that does exist is extraordinary in its detail. This map, the *Carte des Ingeneurs du Roi*, produced in the 1760s following the Seven Years War, depicts the entire island, and shows every plantation present at the time. Furthermore, the level of





detail on this map is remarkable. Each sugar estate is shown, with individual buildings noted, including the industrial works (marked by a symbol indicating the presence of a windmill, watermill, or animal mill). Also, the villages occupied by the enslaved Africans are indicated as collections of individual buildings that appear to actually reflect the layout of each village, and are not depicted by a standardized symbol. Thus, some are shown as parallel rows of houses on each side of a roadway, while others are shown as seemingly randomly distributed clusters, and yet others are shown as orderly villages laid out on a grid pattern. Roads and geographical features are well represented, and a comparison with modern topographic maps demonstrates a great degree of conservatism in the road network. Using the *Carte des Ingenieurs du Roi* in conjunction with modern topographic maps, a number of target village sites for field visits were selected. Other sites were targeted based upon industrial ruins recorded on present-day topographic maps. Employing an understanding of some of the principles used in situating villages (typically on hilly or otherwise uncultivable land, reasonably close to the industrial complex, etc. (Armstrong and Kelly 2000) enabled the prediction of the landforms likely to contain the sites. Subsequent field visits usually demonstrated these predictions to be valid. Lastly, target sites were primarily located in regions of Guadeloupe that have not been substantially impacted either by the rapid urban growth of the past 20 years, or the spread of banana cultivation which also negatively impacts archaeological sites.

Using these strategies, nearly 30 village sites on Basse-Terre, Grande-Terre, and Marie-Galante were visited. Nearly 20 of these locations were found to contain features, artifacts, or other indications of largely intact village sites. The results of this survey are available in a Research Note in *Antiquity* (Kelly 2002). All observations were based on surface artifacts and indications: no excavations were conducted at this stage. Most of the sites dated to the mid to late eighteenth century and the early to mid nineteenth century. Artifacts and other indications at several of the sites suggest that some villages may have been abandoned around the end of the eighteenth century, probably in the upheavals associated with the French Revolution and the abolition of slavery. On one estate, artifacts associated with two separate village sites suggest that the earlier village was occupied during the eighteenth century, and the second nearby village was associated with the nineteenth century.

Results

The results of this initial survey were promising on all fronts. A useful strategy for finding village sites was developed, the presence of largely intact village sites was confirmed, and the potential of such sites to yield archaeological data that will substantively influence our understanding of the similarities and differences in French colonial slavery was demonstrated.

Test excavations were conducted in 2002 on two sites identified during the survey, Habitation La Mahaudière and Habitation Grande Pointe (Kelly and Gibson 2005). At each site, a base map of the village area was constructed, and tied into existing maps of the industrial works. Then, test excavations were placed inside and adjacent to house platforms, ruins, and foundations in order to determine the subsurface integrity of the archaeological deposits. In the case of both estates, the results were highly favorable, and led to some initial observations about the nature and organization of the slave villages, and how they changed through time.

At Grande Pointe, the village dates principally to the nineteenth century, and is composed of several dozen well-built buildings that were at least partially constructed of local stone. These buildings were all of approximately the same dimensions, and laid out in a regular and orderly fashion in evenly spaced rows contained behind a massive stone wall, still nearly 2 meters high in some places, and the ocean. The reason for the confinement of the village on this isolated plantation is not clear, as this is an unusual pattern reported in only a few instances. However, I believe it is likely that the

wall construction is either associated with the uncertainties of early nineteenth century re-imposed slavery, or that its installation was a reaction to the Trois-Rivières uprising where several planters and their families were killed by enslaved people in the 1790s (DuBois 2004). Nonetheless, whatever the reason the village was enclosed, the massive nature of the wall guarantees that it diverted labor from other tasks. Among the other findings were that the components of the villages that appeared to date to the nineteenth century were laid out in a very orderly fashion, with the houses being placed in evenly spaced rows (Chapman 1991). This seems to contrast with the earlier eighteenth century village remains at La Mahaudière (eighteenth century artifact scatters, traces of earthen platforms that do not coincide with the masonry structures, etc.), which appear to be more randomly placed across the hillside. This work demonstrated that the nineteenth century structures appear to have been much more substantially built than earlier buildings in the villages (Kelly and Gibson 2005).

In 2003, 2004 and 2005, I chose to focus our efforts on the village site at La Mahaudière for several reasons (Figure 2). Firstly, although La Mahaudière also exhibited the remains of an orderly series of houses with masonry half-walls, the presence of eighteenth century material indicated an occupation that would allow us to begin to investigate change through time, instead of simply describing conditions at one point in the history of the estate. Secondly, local interest in developing an interpretive center adjacent to the site meant that our results would reach the public more rapidly than at Grande Pointe. Demonstrating this interest are several articles published during 2004 and 2005 in *France Antilles*, the principal newspaper of Guadeloupe. Thirdly, La Mahaudière lies in the rural and still relatively little developed northern portion of Grande Terre, thus allowing us to include aspects to the study that addressed the regional settlement pattern and also the way present-day residents of the region think about the plantation era.

Masonry Foundations

Our excavations have concentrated on the area of three nineteenth century masonry foundations, and the “yard” areas between these buildings in an effort to learn about the variety of ways enslaved people “created their world” in the village, and to learn how people used the open spaces between structures for aspects of their daily lives (Armstrong 1991). During the course of our excavations inside and between the nineteenth century structures, we have found abundant evidence of an earlier component of the village (Figure 3). This period is principally indicated by the presence of postholes excavated through the shallow soil of the village area, and into the limestone bedrock. The fill of most of these postholes is completely free of artifacts, demonstrating that they date to the earliest occupation of the area, before refuse had built up in the village area. Some postholes have a few artifacts in their fill, and those date to the late eighteenth century, again showing that the structures predate the nineteenth century. The great number of postholes makes it clear that the area was heavily modified by village occupants in the eighteenth century, probably with fences delineating gardens as well as postholes for wattle and daub “kaz en gaulottes” (Berthelot 2002). Several of the posthole features had stones within them used to support and stabilize the posts, and one retained a sizeable chunk of wood identifiable as “bois rouge” (*Amanoa caribea*), a species endemic to Guadeloupe and Dominica. Although postholes are the primary eighteenth century features identified in the village area, there are several others, including a hearth that directly underlies a nineteenth century masonry wall, and at least two other linear trench or groove features of unknown purpose.

Further demonstrating the continued occupation of the La Mahaudière village area and the changes that have occurred through time at this site, our excavations in the nineteenth century masonry structures show that they clearly post-date the earlier posthole-based structures. In our excavations beneath the floors of each of three nineteenth century houses, we have identified postholes that are in deposits clearly sealed by later floors or masonry wall foundations. The nineteenth century houses also



demonstrate the incorporation of individual choices in the finishing of the interiors of the buildings despite their uniform outward appearance and organization. Each structure excavated has a different floor treatment, and one incorporated an interior partition and inside hearth.

Foodways and Ceramics

Our excavations also have yielded extensive evidence of foodways in the slave village, through the recovery of faunal remains and the ceramic vessels used to prepare food. Preliminary indications suggest that pork was an important food, and that people supplemented their diets by obtaining wild shellfish from the littoral environments along the nearby coasts. The ceramics recovered are almost entirely of French origin, and include the glazed cooking pottery that was produced in vast quantities in eighteenth and nineteenth century France. What is interesting is that there has been very little of apparently hand made, locally produced pottery that would be similar in function to the “yabba” wares of Jamaica or the Colonoware of the Southeast United States. Although hand-built wares appear to have a very limited distribution in Guadeloupe, there was an active industry producing industrial sugar wares and vessels for domestic use, and these are found in quantity at La Mahaudière.

An outgrowth of the ceramics study at La Mahaudière and Grande Pointe has been the initiation, with Mark Hauser, of a large scale, several-island-wide investigation into the production and distribution of locally manufactured pottery in the former French colonial possessions (Hauser, Kelly and Armstrong 2005; Kelly et al. 2007). Initial results of this work already demonstrate the presence of an active trade in island-produced earthenwares between Martinique and Guadeloupe. At this point it appears that the wares exchanged consisted primarily of industrial ceramics such as sugar cones, molasses drip pots, and so forth. However, we have been able to demonstrate that at least some domestic wares, including these pitchers found in Basse-Terre, Guadeloupe, were manufactured in Martinique and traded off island (see Hauser, Kelly and Armstrong 2005; Kelly et al. 2007). The La Mahaudière project has also spawned several other studies, some of which are reported on in the following papers, such as that of Syracuse University Ph.D. candidate Heather Gibson on internal markets, own account production and consumer choice (Gibson 2005), Audrey Dawson who completed her University of South Carolina MA on a site survey in the region surrounding La Mahaudière (Dawson 2005), Lauren Davis who completed her University of South Carolina MA on a comparison of La Mahaudière and Grande Pointe; and Sylvie Lomer’s USC Honor’s Thesis on the perceptions of local residents of the region surrounding La Mahaudière about heritage, archaeology, history, and place (Lomer and Kelly 2005). Along with these projects, we have some initial observations about the potential for plantation archaeology to inform us about slavery in Guadeloupe. In conducting the archaeological survey in Guadeloupe, it rapidly became clear that the best preserved plantation sites dated from the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and earlier sites, especially slave villages, were very difficult to identify. This is due to several factors, but principal among them is the impact that banana agriculture and the rapid sub-urbanization of the portions of Guadeloupe settled earliest have already destroyed many of the seventeenth century plantation sites. What is particularly worrisome is that these processes are now extending to even the most rural and isolated portions of the island.

Conclusion

Although we are just finishing the fieldwork at La Mahaudière, and thus will have additional results to report as time goes on, this project is leading to a longer term comparative investigation of slavery and plantations in both Martinique and Guadeloupe. As the archaeological research was initiated in Guadeloupe in part to explore the relationship of the French Revolution and its attendant abolition of slavery, with the development of Creole society in Guadeloupe, the next step is to investigate the way



plantation slavery and Creole societies developed in situations where there was no direct experience of the French Revolution nor a revolutionary abolition. In July 2005 we completed three weeks of archaeological survey at the site of Habitation Crève Cœur, an eighteenth and nineteenth century sugar plantation in southern Martinique. Crève Cœur is in many ways comparable to La Mahaudière: it has been subject to considerable industrial archaeological investigation, but the slave village area has not been explored, it lies in a region of Martinique that was not occupied in the initial colonization of the island, and it had about the same number of enslaved laborers.

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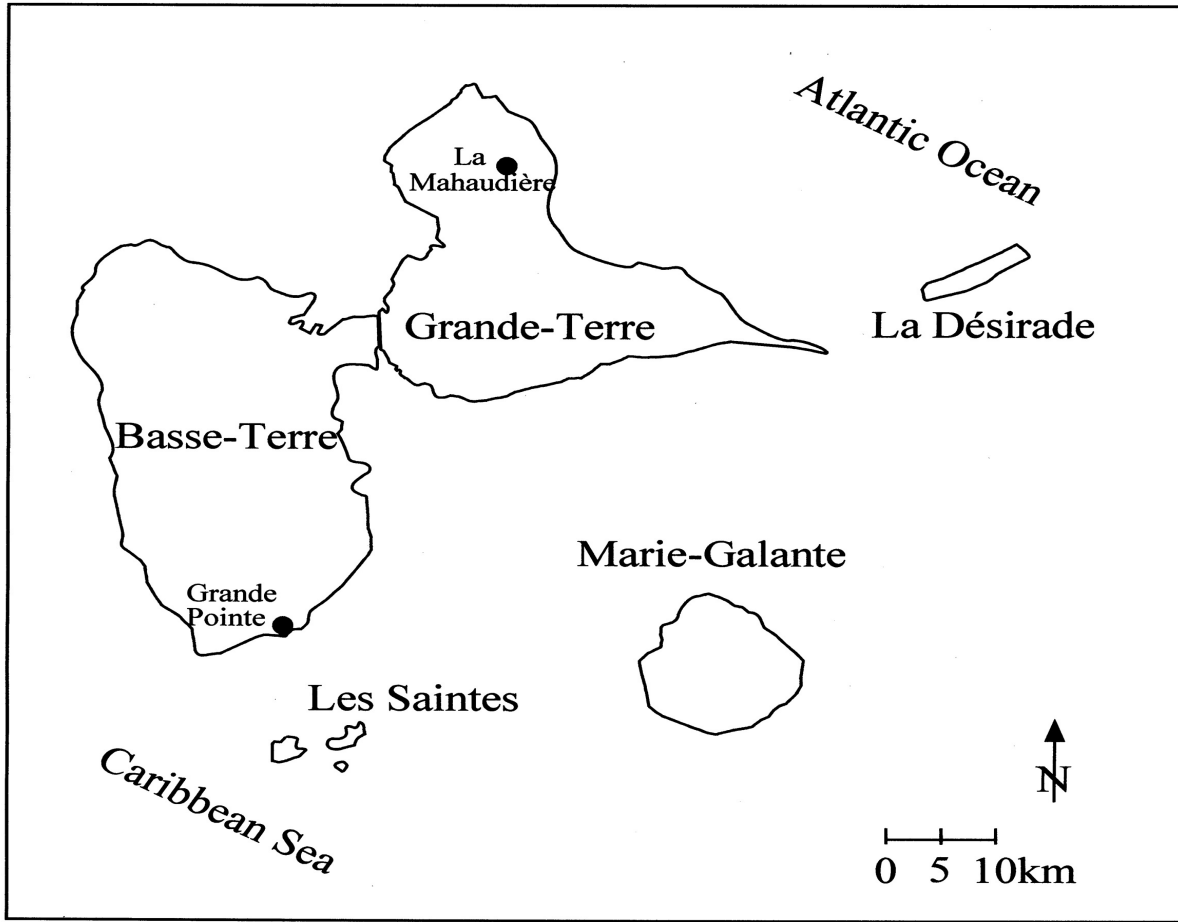


Figure 1 Guadeloupe with sites of Grande Pointe and La Mahaudière indicated.

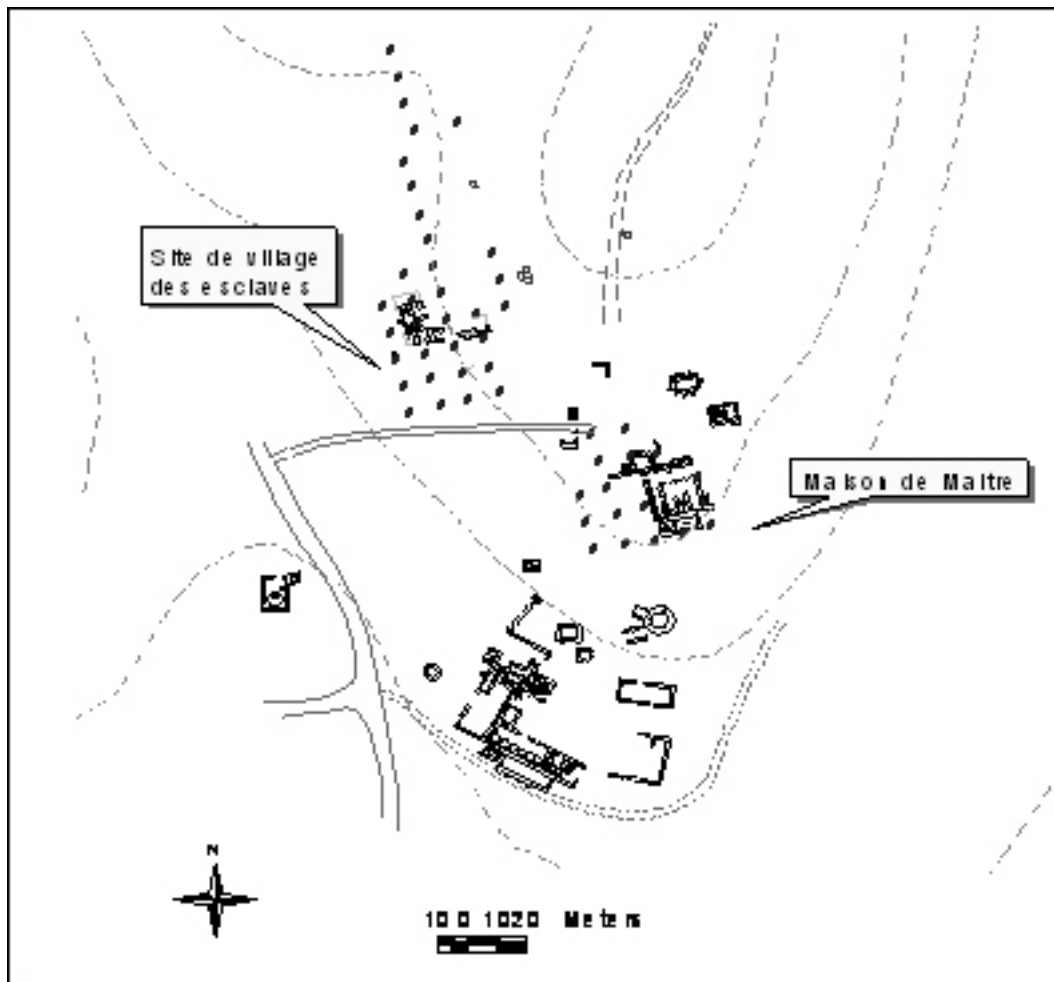


Figure 2 La Mahaudière site complex showing excavation areas and shovel tests



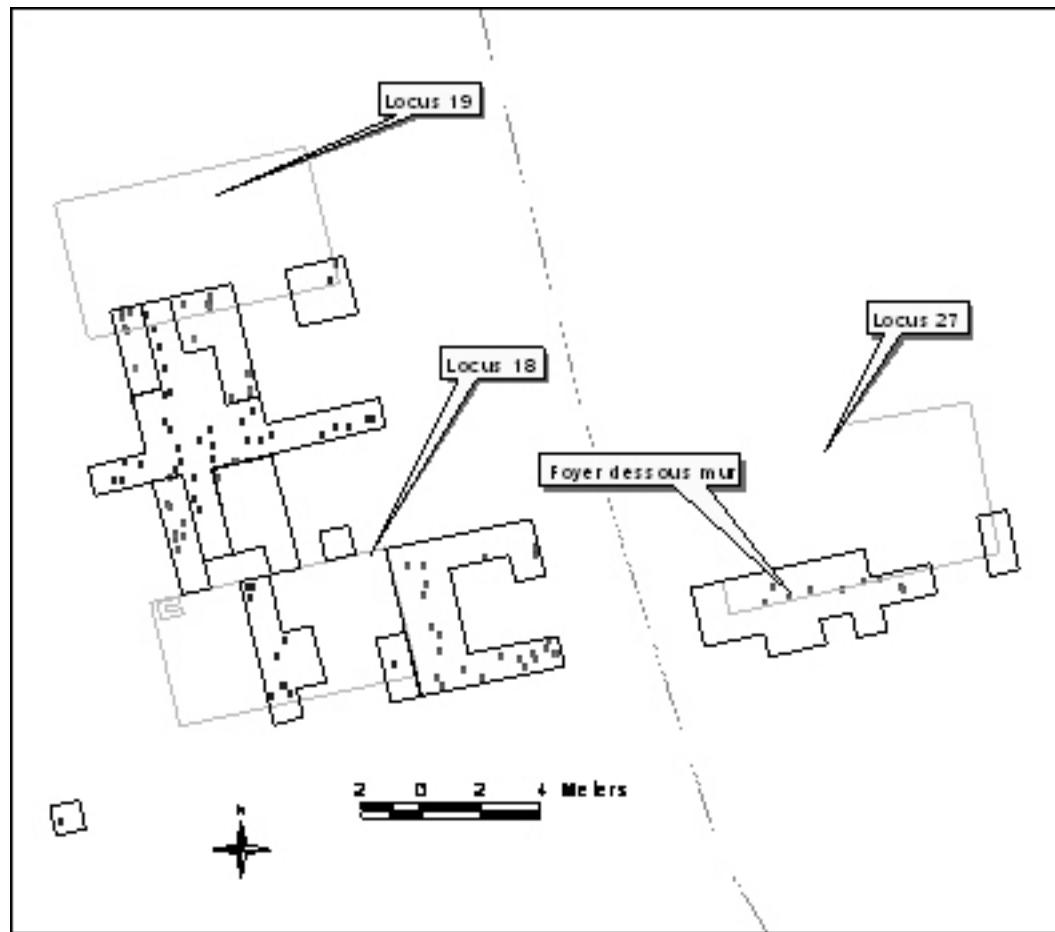


Figure 3 Areas excavated between 2002 and 2004 at La Mahaudière.
Circles indicate post holes