

16th and 17th Century Jewish Grave Markers Lacovia, Jamaica

Jews sailed with Christopher Columbus in 1494 when he discovered Jamaica. Jews also played a significant role in his being awarded hereditary titles to the island by Spain's King Ferdinand. The heirs to these titles were successful in preventing the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition from entering Jamaica, although there was always a tug-of-war over who was in charge, the Columbus family or the Spanish Crown as sovereign rulers of the Spanish Empire. Regardless, many Spanish and Portuguese Jews migrated to Jamaica in the 16th century as cryptic Jews (Converses) also known as Portugals. The shadow of the Inquisition always hung over this little-known population until the British conquest of the island in 1655 resulted in their being granted a significant measure of religious freedom.

Some of the burial markers reported here were likely constructed prior to 1655. Some may date back as far as the first half of the 16th century, a time when significant migration of Jews from Portugal and Spain occurred. Some 20 to 30 of the markers bear striking similarities to the oldest markers present in the Old Jewish Cemetery in Marrakech, site of the burial of many who were forced to flee the Inquisition. Foremost among these is the absence of any decoration, symbols or inscriptions of any kind. The structures are also nearly identical in construction and design being of brick and stone with a hard stucco-like plaster outer shell (see Marrakech-IJCP report).

As in Marrakech, the Lacovia markers lie close to the ground, only 1-2 feet high, some with rectangular foundations visible and each topped by a long narrow dome-like structure running down the long axis of the structure 2-4 feet long and 1-11/2 feet wide. The absence of decorations, symbols and inscriptions is likely due to the builders having to conceal the faith and identity of the deceased.

In 1655 and for more than a century thereafter the British and most of Europe did not have hard plaster like that used on the external surface of these markers. The source of this technology may have been the Moors that dominated Spain prior to the restoration of a Catholic monarchy and imposition of the Inquisition. Moors, who had lived in Spain for generations, much like the Jews, were forced to convert to Christianity (called Moriscos) and some fled to Jamaica in the 16th century to work as artisans. Hard plaster and mortar has also been found at the Spanish ruins at New Seville, Jamaica and in the recently discovered Spanish ruins near the seaport town of Black River seven miles southwest of Lacovia.

Some of the bricks present in these markers can be identified as Spanish due to their similarity to specific types present in original brickwork at New Seville and/or Black River Spanish sites. Much more may be learned from this kind of analysis in the future.

Another 20-30 markers are evidenced only by rectangular outlines of foundation elements at ground level while a similar number of brick and stone structures with hard plaster exteriors are found with a rectangular prismatic shape with beveled edges at the top and look like coffins. These are about the same size as the first described markers. These and the domed structures are often covered with irregular spots of white material that may be whitewash trapped in depressions in the rough stucco-like exterior.

Other types of markers of the same general type of construction are present. Some with faintly etched inscriptions on small thin plates of slate that may have been retrofitted and are mostly illegible or partly removed. The various types of markers are each spatially intermixed with other types suggesting the spatial organization is according to families and different types represent a temporal progression influenced by various factors including a growing confidence in freedom of religious expression.

The burial site described here is found on the grounds of and adjacent to the St. Thomas Anglican Church in Lacovia, about 100 yards southwest of the Lacovia Jewish Cemetery currently listed by the International Jewish Cemetery Project. This currently listed site contains nine inscribed marble gravestones dating in or near the second half of the 18th century. The Anglican Church building and the oldest Anglican grave markers near to it are from the late 19th century.

When the British captured Jamaica in 1655 the total human population was about 2,500 with the great majority residing in the capital, now known as Spanish Town, and located sixty miles, over very difficult terrain, east of Lacovia. Lacovia lies on the Black River, seven navigable miles from the port of the same name. A good, although very remote, location for trading commodities with passing ships.

Our earliest view of Lacovia comes from the Jamaican historian Edward Long in 1774 who described it as having 12-14 dwellings, two taverns able to offer accommodation to visitors and being inhabited mainly by Jews.

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August 14, 2017

