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The "South-Dominica" archaeological mission: the Soufrière site.

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Mots clefs : Archéologie, Caraïbe, Dominique, Soufrière, Saladoïde

ABSTRACT

The "South-Dominica" archaeological mission of the French ministry of foreign affairs has started work in 2005. Designed to enlighten the archaeological *terra incognita dominicana*, this research has essentially been dedicated to the early ceramic occupation of the island. Our work has been based on the analysis of the few collections already existing, on systematic survey campaigns and on an important test pit program.
This lecture will be concentrating on the presentation of the Soufrière site excavation. The Soufriere site, found in the seventies, is composed of an important early cedrosan saladoid occupation covered by volcanic deposits. The data obtained during this excavation, associated with other results of the "South Dominica" archaeological mission, incites us to think about a revision of the territories associated to the complexes in the Lesser Antilles.

RESUME

La mission archéologique "Sud-Dominique" du ministère français des affaires étrangères a débuté ses travaux en 2005. Destinées à en finir avec la *terra incognita dominicana*

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archéologique, ces recherches sont essentiellement consacrées à l'étude du premier peuplement agro-céramique de l'île. Le travail de la mission archéologique repose sur l'étude de séries anciennes, des campagnes de prospections systématiques et un important programme de sondages.
Notre présentation se concentrera sur la fouille que nous avons menée du site de Soufrière dans le sud de la Dominique. Ce gisement identifié dans les années 1970 correspond à une importante occupation saladoïde cedrosane ancienne qui a été recouverte par des dépôts volcaniques. Les données obtenues lors de cette fouille associées à l'ensemble des résultats obtenus en 3 années par la mission archéologique Sud-Dominique nous incitent à nous interroger sur la nécessité d'une révision des territoires associés à la notion de complexe dans les Petites Antilles.

RESUMEN

La misión arqueológica " Sud-Dominique " del ministerio francés de los Asuntos Exteriores empezó sus trabajos en 2005. Destinando a acabarlo con la *tierra incógnita dominicana* arqueológica, estas búsquedas son esencialmente dedicadas al estudio de la primera población agro-cerámica de la isla. El trabajo de la misión arqueológica reposa en el estudio de series antiguas, campañas de prospecciones sistemáticas y un importante programa de sondeos.
Nuestra presentación se concentrará sobre la excavación del sitio de Soufrière al sur de Dominique. Este yacimiento identificado en los años 1970 corresponde a una ocupación importante saladoïda cedrosana antigua que ha sido recubierta por depósitos volcánicos. Los datos obtenidos en el momento de esta excavación asociadas con conjunto de los resultados obtenidos en 3 años por la misión arqueológica Sud-Dominique nos incitan a interrogarnos sobre la necesidad de una revisión de los territorios asociados con la noción de complejo en las Pequeñas Antillas.

Introduction

The pre-Columbian occupation of Dominica is one of the poorly documented in the Lesser Antilles. Before the beginning of our work on the island only seven papers had been published concerning that subject, and they are now all more than 30 years old (Honychurch, 1997). Walter Fewkes (Fewkes, 1922) who staid few hours in the island and only took a look at the stone artifacts store at the Roseau Public Library, published the first one. After that, Marschall McKusick did the first test pits in the island, on the site of Vieille Case (McKusick, 1960).

But the most influencal effect on the archaeology of Dominica had a paper presented by Clifford Evans during the second congress for the study of the pre-Columbian cultures of the Lesser Antilles. In that paper, entitled "The lack of archaeology in Dominica", he explained that the poor quantity of archaeological sites he had been able to discover was a precise mirror of pre-Columbian reality. This was a result, so Evans explained, of the ecological limitations of Dominica which did not allow for the development of an important population (Evans, 1968). This paper, even if a few researchers like for example Robert Myers had tried to prove that Evans' statement was incorrect (Myers, 1978), was for some time the burial of Dominican pre-Columbian archaeology.

We have to be grateful to Henry Petitjean Roget to have been since then the only archaeologist to have proven in the field the poverty of Evans' assessments. Petitjean Roget went two times to Dominica, in 1976 and 1977, and did two important things: a general survey of the island, finding 24 new sites, and a small excavation of the early saladoid site of Soufrière (Petitjean-Roget, 1978). During his work he found a few other early saladoid sites in the south of the island. These findings are at the origin of the research program of the South Dominica archaeological mission of the French ministry of foreign affairs.

The South Dominica archaeological mission.

The South Dominica archaeological mission, funded essentially by the French ministry of foreign affairs and conducted by myself, consists of researchers from: l'Université des Antilles et de la Guyane, le Ministère français de la culture: Jean-Pierre Giraud, the University of West Indies : Lennox Honychurch, the University of Vermont: James Petersen and Florida University : Josh Toney.

The origin of this program is linked to important research conducted by a part of this team between 1996 and 2003, concerning the early saladoid occupation of Martinique (Bérard, 2004). All the sites associated to that chronological phase are located in the northeastern part of Martinique, opposite the south coast of Dominica, which is where H. Petitjean Roget found contemporary sites during is survey. Our main objective was to develop a research program studying those south shore sites in Dominica in a similar way to those recently done in Martinique, and also similar to recent work carried out in other Lesser Antillean islands to the north, especially Montserrat.

Our basic idea was that the comparison of archaeological results obtained in Dominica with those from Martinique and Montserrat, among other islands, should be able to provide us with a basis for discussion about the nature of social and economical mechanisms underlying the origin of the agro-ceramic pioneers in the Caribbean, thus helping us to identify the internal structure of the cultural pattern related to the migration. On a theoretical level, we hope that our results will be useful to review the concept of archaeological "complex," generally associated, following Irvin Rouse in the Lesser Antilles with single islands (Rouse, 1992), since it has never been fully validated. In fact, our hypothesis was that the term 'complex' may better be applicable to terrestrial and maritime spaces including nearby islands, in this case the North of Martinique and the South of Dominica and the channel between them.

We tried to test this hypothesis during our three years research program in Dominica. We hope that our work will enable us to determine if the sea provided a link or a frontier for the early Amerindian pioneers. Indeed, we strongly suspect that modern perceptions of the Lesser Antilles, dominated by important inter-island divisions that came into being with colonization and, more recently, decolonization probably have little or no relations to how the pre-Columbian people perceived their world. The idea is to leave the terrestrial island approach to develop an archipelagic maritime one following the idea first developed by Irvin Rouse and David Watters (Watters and Rouse, 1989).

Our three years of research in Dominica had included a review of all the collections already existing linked with early ceramic sites, a systematic survey of the island, which enabled us to increase by 40% the number of pre-Columbian sites known, the digging of tests pits in four early ceramic sites and a larger excavation of the Soufrière site.

It is the preliminary results of that excavation, we are going to present you now.

The Soufrière site.

Localization

The site of Soufrière is found in the south of the west coast of Dominica. It is located 10 m up the actual river level, on the south side of the sulphur spring valley, near to its mouth. The valley's stretch is broader at the east of the site where it constitutes a circus limited by the mornes: Acouma, Plat Pays and Patates. The land inside that circus, made up by young volcanic soils, seems to be perfectly suitable for agriculture (Lang, 1967). The water of the sulphur spring river is not drinkable, but a spring water source is available near to the site on the north side of the valley.

History of the research

Nowadays, the early saladoid site of Soufriere is located just beneath the actual village of Soufrière. It has been discovered in 1976 during the preparatory works linked to an estate project by Carl Winston, a Bulldozer driver. Following the exceptional findings of Mr. Winston, H. Petitjean Roget was contacted and he came to Soufrière to conduct the excavation of a 3x1m test pit. He was able to discover an early saladoid layer, well preserved under a pumice level. The collection linked to that excavation is nowadays stored at the Roseau Public Library and partially exhibited in the Roseau Historical Museum.

The field works

The south Dominica archaeological mission worked in Soufrière in 2005 and 2006. We have excavated in four different loci in the village.

In Locus 1, the place where Henry Petitjean Roget had worked in 1976, we dug two new 2x1 test pits and a trench in 2005. Locus two is near to the river level, where we did three test pits with a backhoe. Locus 3 is located in a lot just beneath locus 1; there, we conducted a 16-m2 excavation. Locus 4 did not correspond to a controlled archaeological excavation. In that lot, located around 50 m in the east of the loci 1 and 3, construction work for the building of a house was in progress in 2006. We were only able to screen the sediment coming from the excavation of the construction site.

Stratigraphy

We faced a number of problems during the excavation of the Soufrière site: First, it was only possible for us to work on the unbuilt lots; second, the paleotopography of the site is complex; and third, the stratigraphy of the site is complex.
The site is cut by paleoditches running down the slope of the Morne Patates and the early saladoid occupation is covered by an important level of volcanic deposits, accumulated in the paleoditches. In locus 2, for example, we have never been able, even with a backhoe, to reach the early saladoid layer located under more than two meters of volcanic deposits.
Broadly the stratigraphy of the site can be divided in four complexes:

The base complex is composed by a series of alluvial layers linked with the activity of the sulphur spring river. A gray/yellow sand layer including some reddish gravel lentils composes the D complex. It is in the D complex that we have found the artifacts linked with the earliest Amerindian occupation of the site. These layers have been partially destroyed by paleoditches. The C complex is associated with a black/brown anthropic layer. In the C complex we have found the remains of a denser occupation of the site. Volcanic deposits constitute the B complex. The A complex is linked with the re-occupation of the site after the volcanic eruption. Only the structures associated to that occupation dug inside the B complex have been preserved. Historical layers cover them.
The two earliest Amerindian layers (complex D and C) are associated with the early cedrosan saladoid phase. The C complex has been dated by C14 to 1800±40 BP, 150-250 AD calibrated, the volcanic eruption has been dated by vulcanologists and ourselves to

1560 ± 40 B.P. The late Amerindian occupation of the site is related to the middle/late cedrosan saladoid phase.

The artefacts

We will now concentrate on the early saladoid occupations of the site.
The remains coming from the excavation of the Soufrière site are essentially composed of ceramic elements. The high acidity level of the sediments did not permit the preservation of the faunal remains and only few lithic artifacts have been found.
Included in the earliest collection coming from the H. Petitjean Roget test pit, we have analyzed near to 2500 sherds linked with the early saladoid occupation of the Soufrière site. The interpretation of the results of this analysis is still in progress. But some results can already be presented.
First, the early ceramic occupation of Soufrière is without doubt linked to the cedrosan saladoid sub-series. Second, the first comparison of the ceramic material coming from Soufrière with the collection of Vivé, Fond Brulé and Moulin l'Etang in the north of Martinique (Bérard, 2004) demonstrates the great similarity of the two assemblages. This similarity is visible at different levels: Sizes and shapes of the vessels, relative proportion of the different decoration techniques and designs produced by those techniques.
We are highly aware that the great similarity of the early ceramic productions coming from the north of Martinique and South of Dominica is not sufficient to demonstrate definitively the existence of a small cultural sphere linked with that geographical space. However, the preliminary results of the 2007 field works in the north of Dominica seem to confirm that idea. Only two early ceramic sites have been identified. Those sites are clearly geographically distinct from the south dominica sites set. Furthermore, a part of the ceramic remains founded in those north sites seems to have no equivalent in the south dominica and north Martinique early ceramic collections.
We need now to compare our data with early ceramic collections from Marie-Galante and Guadeloupe in the north and St Lucia in the south to ensure that we have been able to locate a small cultural sphere linked to the internal diversity of the first agro-ceramic pioneer groups in the Lesser Antilles.

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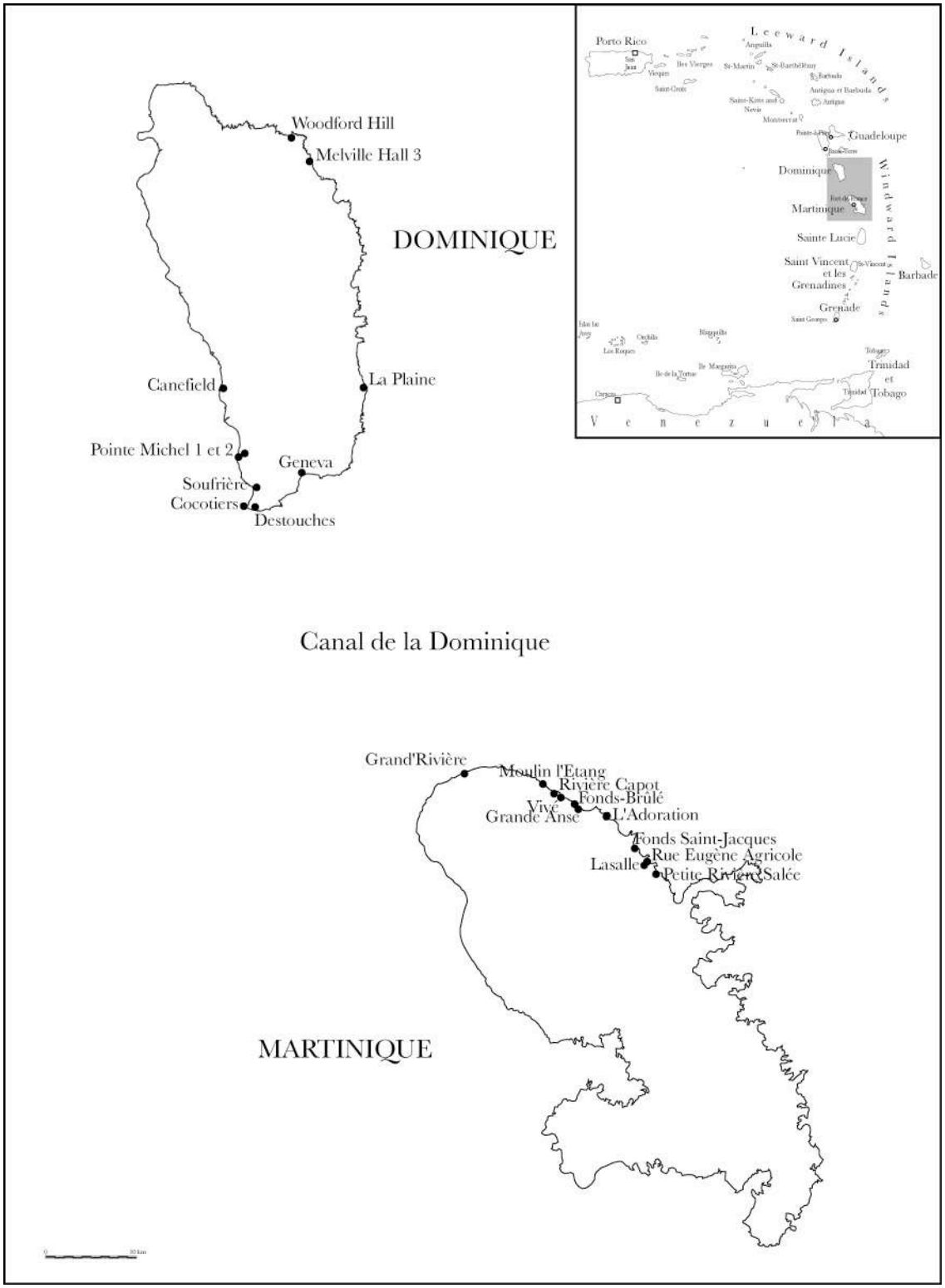

Figure 1 : Location of the early ceramic sites in Martinique and Dominica.

Figure 2: Location of the Soufrière Loci.

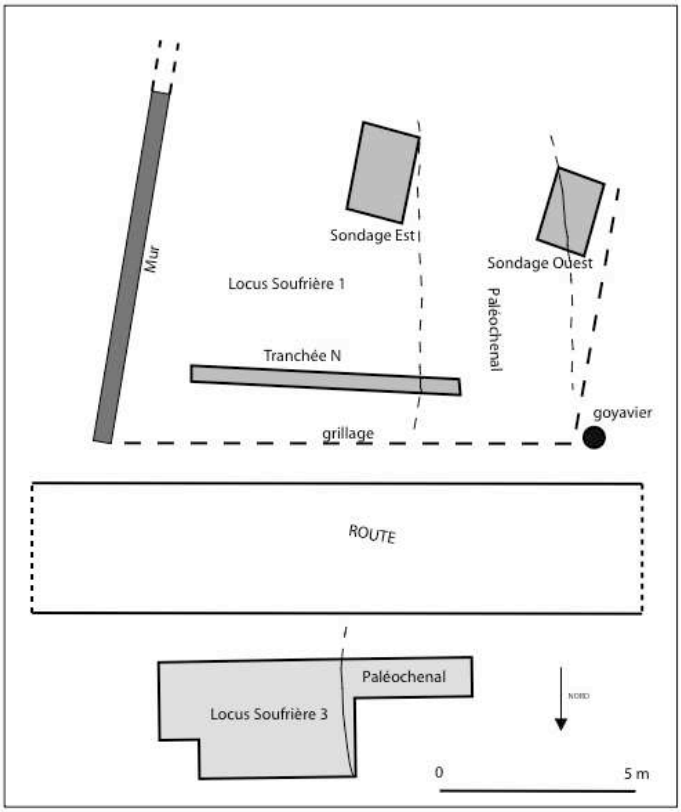

Figure 3: Soufrière Locus 1 and Locus 3 - Map of the excavations.

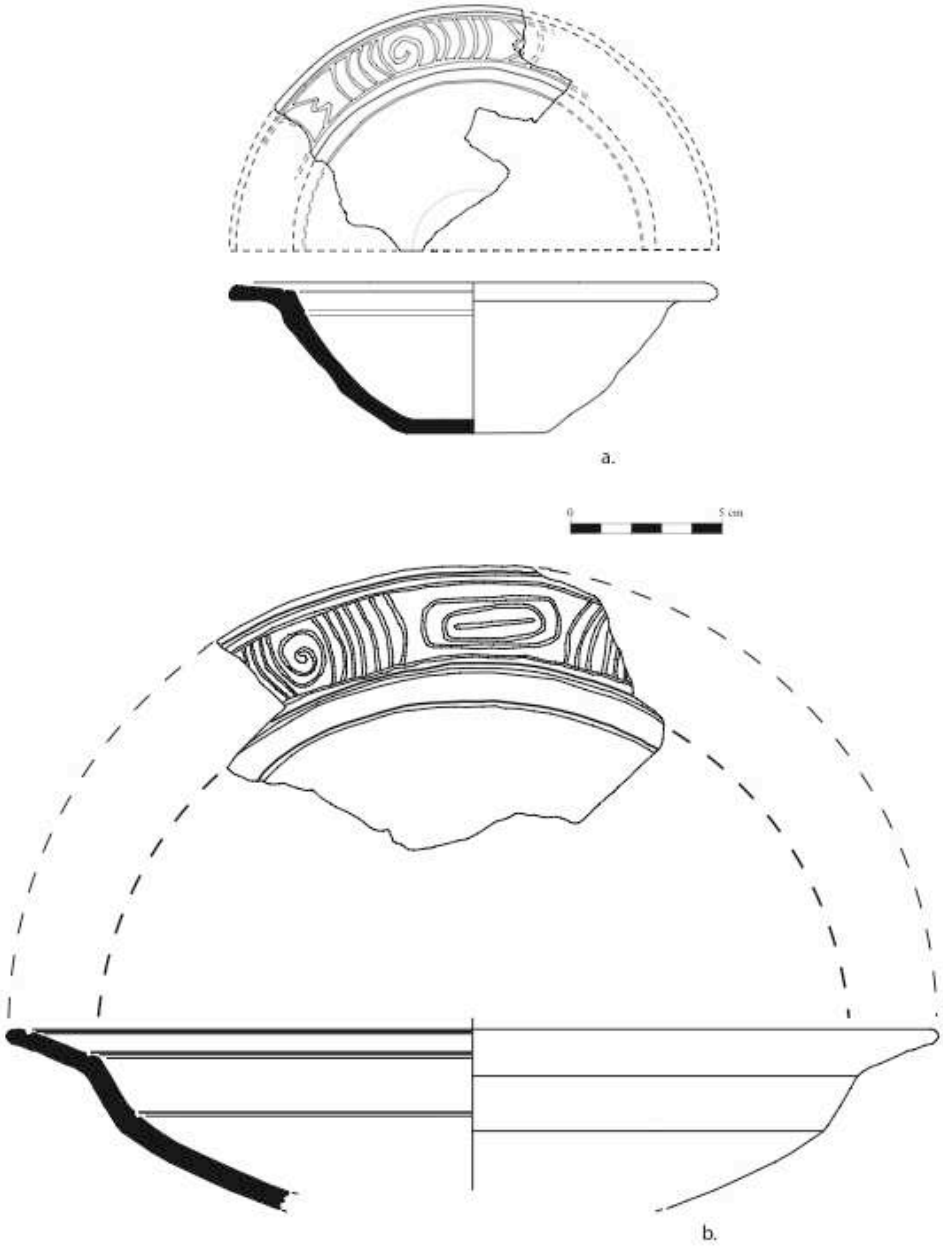

Figure 4: exemple of great proximity between the early cedrosan saladoid ceramic productions of Martinique and Dominica. a. Vivé (Martinique), b. Soufrière (Dominica).

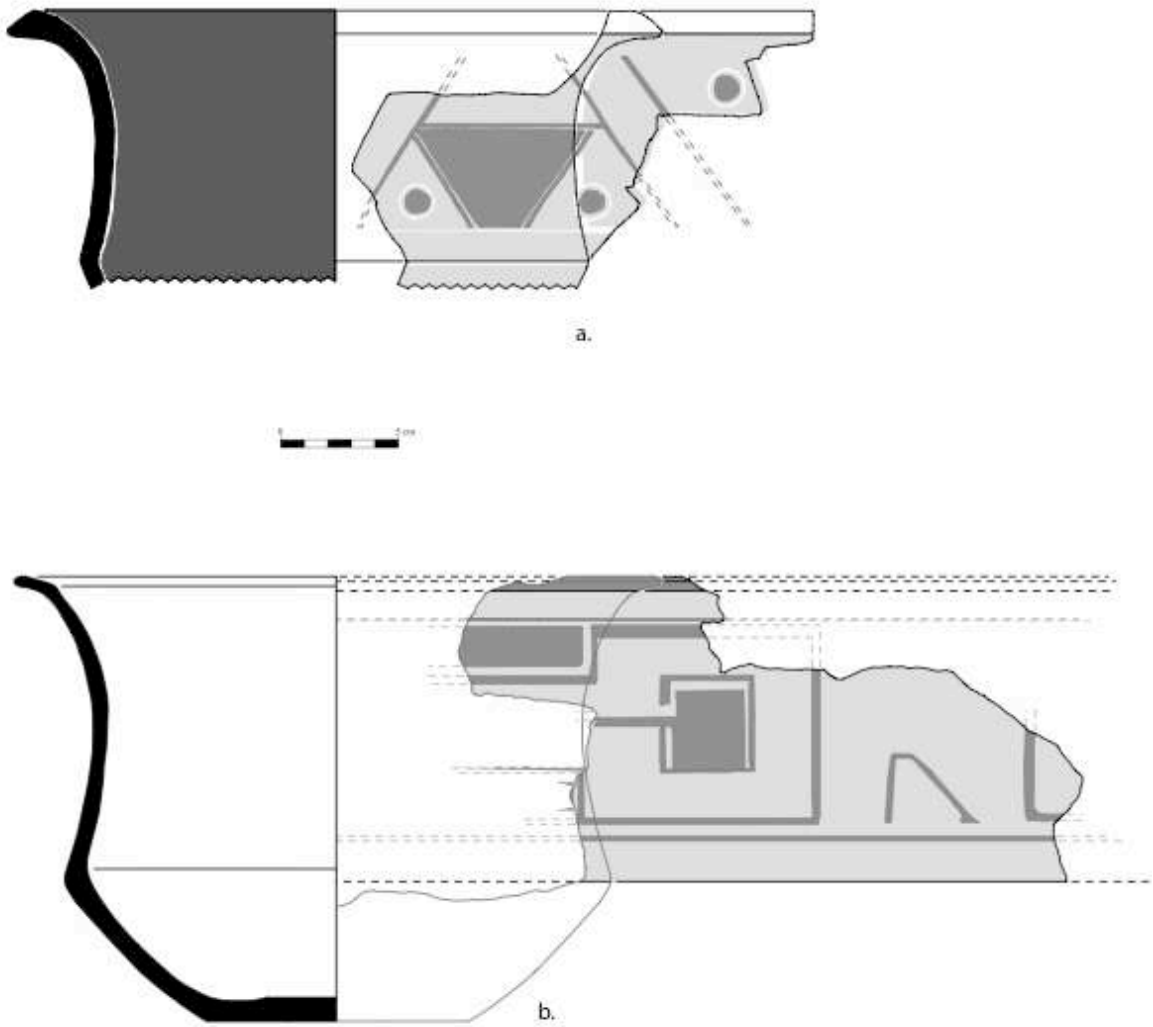

Figure 5: exemple of great proximity between the early cedrosan saladoid ceramic productions of Martinique and Dominica. a. Soufrière (Dominica), b. Vivé (Martinique).