

FLAT ISLAND - ÎLE PLATE

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH,

FIELDWORK SEASONS 2022

MACH – Mauritian Archaeology and Cultural Heritage

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ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON FLAT ISLAND

The Mauritian Archaeology and Cultural Heritage (MACH) project, based at Stanford University, USA, has been working on the heritage of Mauritius for ten years. The team, led by Prof. Seetah, has focused attention on several archaeological sites, related to slavery and indenture labour implemented by colonial powers between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries.

Since early 2021 the ISLand Project, conducted by Dr. Cianciosi, started, focusing on the establishment of a quarantine system in the Indian Ocean, with the case study of Mauritius. The project is part of an international, interdisciplinary effort, combining history, archaeology, and anthropology. Flat Island, one of the sites preliminarily surveyed by the MACH team since 2014, became the main object of analysis. Through detailed surveys of the island, which was established as a quarantine station in the middle of the nineteenth century, we have identified a number of preserved structures associated with health, along with living quarters, cemetery, and facilities.

In collaboration with AGTF and the National Parks and Conservation Services (NPCS) of Mauritius, the main purpose of our collaboration has been to assess the feasibility of this island to function as a heritage attraction, and if so, provide evidence to establish how visitor activities could be sustainably managed. The archaeological research was performed under the project 'Documentation and Conservation of the former quarantine station in Flat Island, Mauritius'.

Flat Island clearly represents a significant heritage asset for Mauritius, for both local and tourist markets. Our immediate objective for the Quarantine station was to document the remaining structures, and for the whole island to perform overall archaeological potential assessment. Our results will form part of a wider restoration and conservation plan to promote the preservation of this important cultural site.

The 2022 fieldwork season extended between July 11th and 29th was conducted with the support of European Commission (MSCA_GA No 897004, Project ISLand), the collaboration of five professionals and five university students (from Europe and US).

The main focus of this season has been the survey and accurate documentation of the cemetery and hospital quarter, as well as the survey and drone-mapping of Camp 2 on the western side of the island. We focused on these portions of the quarantine station to collect archaeological data in areas most frequented by indentured laborers confined to the island for quarantine before landing on the mainland during the nineteenth century (Camp 2 and hospital quarter). The hospitals and burial grounds also represent the crucial sites for understanding the management of the sick and dead at the Flat Island quarantine station.

The archaeological investigation planned in the 2022 fieldwork season included a detailed documentation of the funerary elements and paths related to the cemetery. We performed a comprehensive archaeological survey of the standing architecture in the hospital quarter, where we found additional structures to those already known from archival sources and historical maps. We dug small trenches where we collected artifacts and environmental samples, related to the last period of station use.

EUROPEAN CEMETERY AND 'OLD GRAVES'

Nicolas Pike during his stay in Mauritius in 1873 visited the Flat Island and provided a rather detailed description of the Island and the infrastructures set up by the Government. About the burial ground he wrote that: "The cemetery lies to the east of the island and too many have found a resting-place there. A short time since the skeleton of a man was found when marking the road; it was in a sitting posture and was supposed to have been a victim to some assassin, possibly in the old days when piracy was rife in these areas. They carefully gathered his bones and laid them in a nameless grave in the cemetery" (Pike, 1873, Chapter 17, pp. 200-210). Indeed, the map drawn by T. Corby (Fig. 1), a Government Surveyor, in 1857, shows the rectangular area of the cemetery on the southern side of the island and marked some 'Old graves' nearby (letter 'h' on the map).

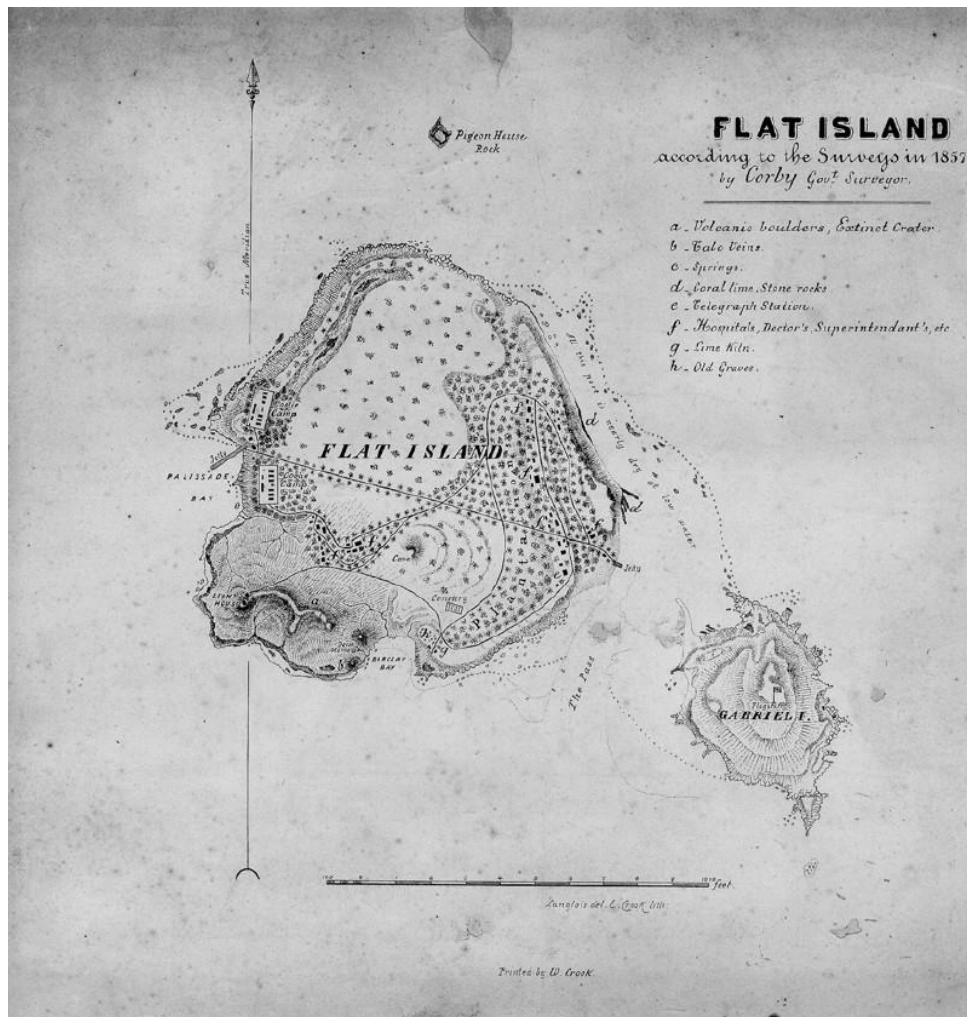


Figure 1. Flat and Gabriel Island: the map by Thomas Corby (1857).

The location of the cemetery, called the 'European' or 'French' cemetery, is well-known and easily accessible via a path from the coast-guard headquarters to Barclay Bay along the island's southern coast. During the 2015 campaign the cemetery was located and partially cleared. A 1-meter-height basalt wall surrounding a rectangular area and nine graves were identified and documented. The graves were aligned towards the east or northeast, with rows of graves running from north to south.

During the last campaign we attempted to systematically map the cemetery with a drone, but the vegetation and grass cover did not allow us to create an accurate photogrammetry of the area. However, the removal of shrubs and the surface grass layer in some test-pits allowed for the identification of two main paths made of stone curbs and cobblestones that created the alignment of the rows of graves and allowed for an organized pathway within the cemetery running from northwest to southeast

(Fig. 2). The main entrance was located on the northwest side of the cemetery and nineteen graves, marked by epitaphs, concrete sarcophagi, tombstones or a curb/frame made of aligned stones, were located by professional GPS (RTKSouth). We found two main groups of graves, marked on the surface by stones: one along the northeast side and a row along the main paths in the central area of the cemetery.

In addition to the well-known epitaph of J.H. Melotte, who died in 1919, another epitaph was found at a small concrete sarcophagus in the northeast corner of the cemetery. It was carved in memory of Dorothy, daughter of W. Scheffler, who died on March 1878 at the age of only 9 days¹ (Fig. 3). Through some test-pits in the cemetery area, we verified that under the surface layer of grass there was a homogeneous layer of loose sandy soil, which favored the excavation of deep burials in the past. The differentiation in the grave marks could signify a difference in social status or chronology of burials. Despite the absence of surface markers in some portions of the cemetery, it is possible that these may have been covered by later sand fills, especially for older burials.



Figure 2. A portion of the main path in the European cemetery.

¹ It is possible to read "Sacre...[d.to]... the memory of Dorothy infant daughter of W. Scheffler, who died on [16?] March 1878. Aged 9 days".



Figure 3. Two new tombstones found during the survey of the cemetery.

THE HOSPITAL QUARTER

The central location of this area is crucial to understanding the sanitary management of the station and the relationships between the European quarter to the east and the quarantine camp to the west.

During previous fieldwork, the main stone building used as hospital and the alleged 'dead-house' were located and thoroughly documented. A second building, described as hospital, was drawn in Corby's map and was still visible in a 1949 aerial image. Combining these data and using a GPS-Garmin, we located this building which was characterized by the presence of stone foundations and pillars, but wooden walls (removed after their last use). For this reason, it was not easily visible in the vegetation. A comprehensive archaeological survey of the neighborhood around the two main buildings used as hospitals allowed us to locate several other structures and the 'native doctor's house', located halfway between the two hospitals (Fig. 4).

We cleared and documented the following main structures related to the main buildings:

HOSPITAL 1:

-STR 127: Hospital 1, rectangular stone building with many windows and two doors, well preserved (except the roof), equipped with a concrete veranda. It was cleared and three test-pits were dug along the north side. One test-pit was opened on the western side along the slope where the hospital was built.

-STR 148: Dead House, a small rectangular stone building, with two doors, on the southern side of Hospital 1, cleaned and documented for 3d model.

-STR 159: Water cistern c/o Hospital 1, very well-preserved, partially cleared.

-STR 160: cellar or small underground storage c/o Hospital 1. Small rectangular underground structure, lacking roof (but some pieces of metal corrugations were nearby), cleared and a test-pit was dug on eastern side. It was documented for 3d model.

-STR 187: rectangular structure c/o Hospital 1 with stone foundation and wooden pillars bases. It may have been used as privies for the hospital. It was documented for 3d model.

HOSPITAL 2

-STR 145: Hospital 2, rectangular stone building, with irregular stone pillars to elevate the wooden floor (not preserved as the wall). It has a concrete veranda on two sides. A four-step staircase by the main door was restored with concrete in 1949 (the date was carved on one step). Two test-pits were dug (one inside the structure and one outside, not far from the main entrance). It was documented for 3d model (Fig. 5-6).

-STR 146: rectangular structure c/o Hospital 2. Concrete rectangular platform covered by a wooden roof, with some wooden pillars still preserved and ruined on the floor. It may have been used as privies for the hospital. It was documented for 3d model.

-STR 191: Water cistern c/o Hospital 2, very well preserved, partial restoration with concrete probably dated to 1949. It was documented for 3d model.

-STR 147: Kitchen c/o Hospital 2, small rectangular stone building equipped with stove top and oven. The facade was completely ruined on the ground. It was documented for 3d model.

-STR 192: cellar or small underground storage c/o Hospital 2. Small rectangular underground structure cleared and completely excavated inside (metal cans, animal bones included in the fill). It was documented for 3d model (Fig. 7).

NATIVE DOCTOR'S HOUSE:

-STR 188: Doctor's house, a rectangular stone-based building, with a veranda. Very well preserved, although the wooden walls are totally missing. It was documented for 3d model (Fig. 8).

-STR 189: Water cistern c/o the doctor's house. Small rectangular concrete structure. An iron pipe is still in place and well preserved a three-step staircase allowed climbing to the top of the cistern vault. It was documented for 3d model.

-STR 190: Kitchen c/o doctor's house. Small rectangular building with two doors. Very well preserved, it is still possible to see where the oven and the stove were located. It was documented for 3d model.

-STR 193: cellar or small underground storage room c/o doctor's house. Small rectangular underground structure, with missing roof, partially cleared and with numerous ceramic and glass artifacts found around it (Fig. 10). A second cellar was located nearby but was not cleared.

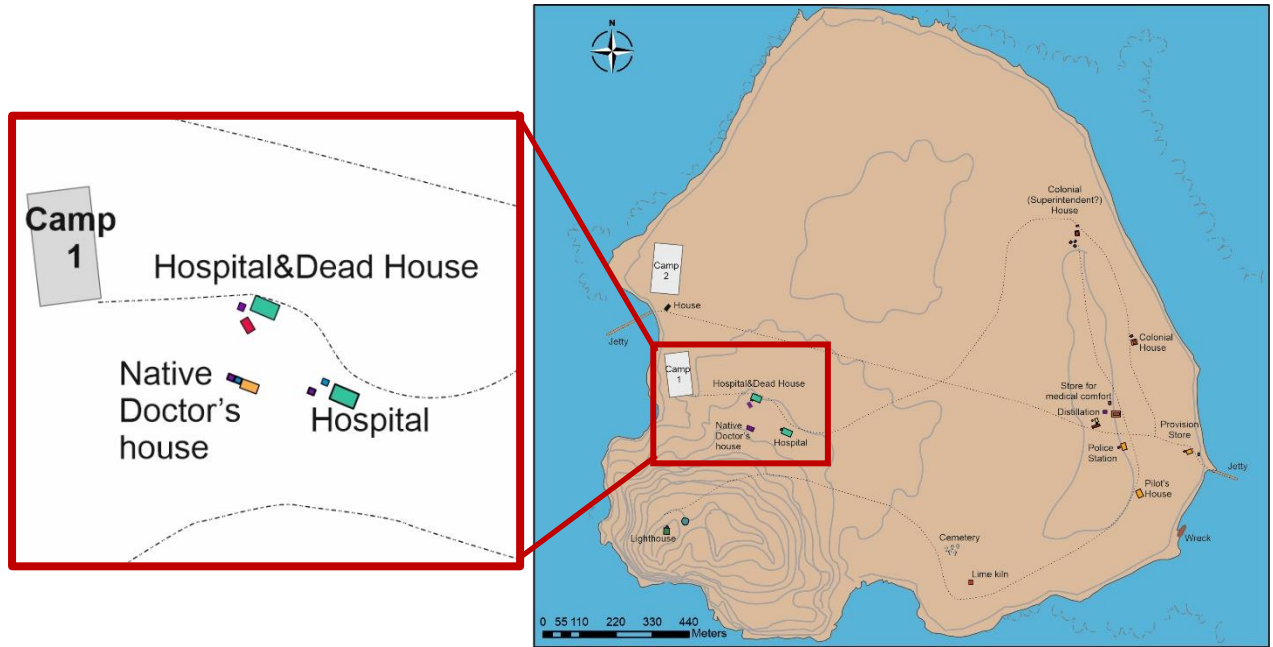


Figure 4. GIS map of the hospital quarter in the Flat Island Quarantine Station.



Figure 5. Hospital 2 (STR145) from the main entrance.

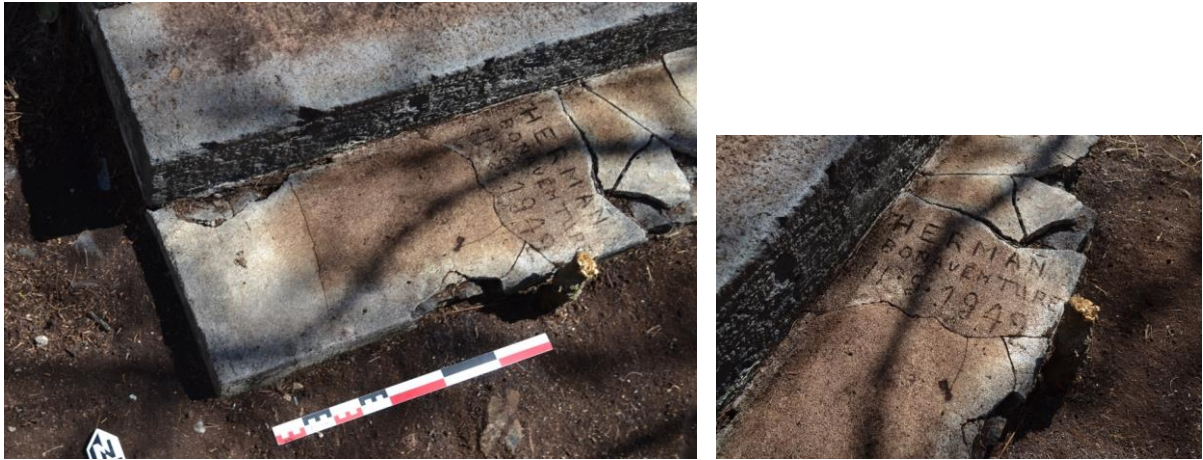


Figure 6. Hospital 2, detail of the carved writing on the staircase, dated to 1949.



Figure 7. The water cistern and the underground storage room at Hospital 2.



Figure 8. The native doctor's house equipped with a water cistern and a kitchen.



Figure 9. Drone images of Hospital 1, Hospital 2, and the native doctor's house.



Figure 10. Artifacts found in the test-pits in the hospital quarter.

QUARANTINE CAMP. CAMP 2

The organization and general layout of indenture camp 2 are similar to those of camp 1, which was investigated during the 2018 season (see the general report Flat Island 2018) (Fig. 11).

However, camp 2 was covered with different types of vegetation (more vacoas than acacia) that created an impenetrable barrier and made preliminary investigation more difficult (Fig. 12). During the 2022 season we located the basalt wall and six concrete or stone platforms, used as barracks and wooden huts for indentured laborers during quarantine, through professional GPS (RTKSouth).

We should plan in advance for a systematic clearance of the area to carry out a proper archaeological research in the future. The support of botanists and naturalists would be

needed to understand land use around the camp because the differences in vegetation cover may be indicative of a different historical function.



Figure 11. Quarantine camp 2, where indentured labourers were housed. One of the concrete platforms used as a barrack during quarantine.



Figure 12. The drone-mapping of quarantine camp 2. It is possible to see the difference between the coverage of acacia on the left and vacoas on the right.

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