A Note on a Radiocarbon Date for the Rupununi Phase, Southern Guyana

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Introduction
One of the unresolved mysteries of the archaeology of the interior savannahs of Guyana is the age of the so-called Rupununi Phase culture. This culture is associated with horticultural peoples who made distinctive pottery. On the basis of ceramic and other artifacts including some dating to the 18th and 19th centuries, the long standing convention is that the phase is associated with historic Makushi and Wapishana populations of the Guyanese interior. The radiocarbon date reported here is the first absolute or chronometric date for the Runpununi Phase. The radiocarbon determination confirms the historic age of the phase.

The Rupununi Phase of Southern Guyana
During field work in Guyana in the early 1950s, Evans and Meggers (1960) explored the archaeology of the Rupununi savannahs that extend from the Pakaraima Mountains south to the Brazilian border. Early pioneers in Guayanese anthropology had previously identified a range of site and artifact types (Brown 1873, Farabee 1918, Henderson 1952, Roth 1929) from the region that included rock alignments, petroglyphs and a variety of stone and ceramic tools (Brown 1876). Evans and Meggers (1960) conducted the first systematic survey in the area and identified a number of site types and pottery forms that serve as the basis for definition of the Rupununi Phase. The phase is described as a horticultural pattern with site locations that include caves, rockshelters, open site areas habitations/farming areas, cemeteries and ceremonial locations and petroglyph sites.

The material culture of the Rupununi phase includes a range of chipped and groundstone artifacts made predominately from syenite, quartzite, sandstone, and felsite and include anvils, grooved axes, choppers, hammerstones, hoes, manos, metates, cores, flakes and stone bowls. Pottery types include Kanaku and Rupununi Plain vessels. Made by coiling, the pottery occurs in a variety of surface colors with a range of orange to reddish orange to reddish brown and is characterized by three distinct forms. These include shallow to deep bowls with outsloping to almost vertical walls, direct rims and flattened to rounded lips, carinated bowls and jars with sharp to rounded shoulders, and globular bowls and jars with rounded and incurving walls and rounded lips. Kanaku Plain which appears to be the earlier of the two types is distinguished from Rupununi Plain by the absence of a grey core. Sherds are typically sand tempered, though occasional cariapé temper occurs. Decorative techniques include incision, appliqué, punctuation, and the use of white and red slips. Ceramic artifacts include pottery rests, disks, shaft polishers, and simple anthropomorphic figurines.
In addition to the early discoveries by Evans and Meggers (1960), Dubelar and Berring (1979), Hanif (1967), Poonai (1970), Goodland (1976) and Williams (1979) have described the rock art of the Aishalton region in the south savannahs. Williams (1979b, 1985) petroglyph surveys on the Essequibo and Kassikaityu form the basis of an argument that petroglyphs were important in fisheries management. Recent work in the Rupununi has documented a greater range of site types that include diverse pollisoirs, lithic workshops, varied rock alignments, diverse cemetery sites and pictographic rock art (Plew and Pereira 2000, Plew, Pereira, Mercer and Sundell 2001, Plew, Pereira and Saras 2002, Plew 2005).

**Dating the Rupununi Phase**

Evans and Meggers (1960: 327-332) associate the Rupununi phase with the historic Macushi and Wapishana whose geographic dispersal overlaps with the distribution of the Rupununi phase pattern based upon historic maps by Horstman (1748), Olmedilla (1771-75) and Surville (1778). All three maps place the Macushi in the north Rupununi with the Wapishana to the south nearer Brazil save in the case of Surville who does not identify the presence of the Wapishana. Schomburg visited the location in 1835 and reported a similar distribution as does Im Thurn (1883). Eleven (28%) of the 39 sites recorded by Evans and Meggers (1960) contained historic materials that included glass, metal fragments and European trade beads. These artifacts date between 1780 and 1900. On the basis of these materials Evans and Meggers (1960: 329-332) established the chronology of the Rupununi phase sites as dating within the last 200 years. No corroborating chronometric dates have been established for the phase.

**Dating Residues from the Rock Point Site**

Evans and Meggers (1960) collected a buried Kanuku vessel near the modern village of Annai from site R-14, the Rock Point site. The vessel which measured between 43 and 48 cm in height and 65-68 cm in diameter contained badly deteriorated human remains that were not recovered. The find was returned to the national museum in Georgetown. It was subsequently removed to the Walter Roth Museum of Anthropology. The interior surface of the vessel contains a layer of organic residue measuring approximately 2mm in thickness. It is unclear as to the origin of the residues but suggests that the vessel may have been in use prior to internment. With permission of the Ms. Jennifer Wishart, Museum Director, a small sample of the organic residue was collected in 2001. In 2006 the sample (Beta-219543) was submitted to Beta Analytic for analysis. Though recognizing that the
organic residues accumulate over time it was believed that the rate of accretion was not sufficiently
great as to void its use in establishing a chronometric date for the phase.

Results
Analysis of the sample resulted in a conventional radiocarbon date of 60+/-40 BP (Beta-219543) and
2 sigma calendar calibrated results (at 95% probability) of between 240 BP and 20 BP. Given the
ranges, the date most probably falls into the later portion of the 19th century which is in accord with
estimates of the later Rupununi phase chronology proposed by Evans and Meggers in 1960. Of
interest is the fact that the radiocarbon date is relatively late even though Kanuku pottery is by
seriation the earlier of the two major pottery types. This may be a simple aberration or may reflect the
need to re-assess the relationship of the two types that are distinguished primarily on the basis of
core color. Regardless, the first radiocarbon date for the Rupununi phase of southern Guyana fits the
chronology developed by Evans and Meggers (1960).

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