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The Role of the Nicaraguan Rise in the Early Peopling of the Greater Antilles

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One of the most hotly debated problems in Caribbean archaeology considers the peopling of the archipelago, especially the population movements in the Archaic Age, before the arrival of Island Arawakan speakers through Cedrosan Saladoid migrations. Long-held views explained the colonization of the islands as a “linear sequence of cultures” (Curet and Reid 2014) that was a result of several waves of migrations, all of which originated in northeastern South America and followed the same route from the Orinoco Delta through Trinidad and the chain of Lesser Antilles toward the Greater Antilles. The customary explanation was that the pre-Columbians were not sufficiently skilled in maritime navigation to account for the strong sea currents (the Caribbean Current) and opposing winds in the Caribbean Sea. Consequently, more direct routes from northern, northwestern, or western directions were deemed unlikely or simply not feasible. However, testimony provided by early Spanish and English explorers who attest to the seaworthiness of native Caribbean vessels and remarkable boatbuilding and seafaring skills displayed by local populations may ultimately alter such views. For example, Fernández de Oviedo reports on the use of sailing boats, essentially very large canoes with cloth sails (Dacal Moure and Rivero de la Calle 1996); Bartolomé de las Casas describes canoes that could carry over 150 people (Las Casas 1875, vol. 1); and Diego Álvarez Chanca gives an account of *fustas* hewn from single trees in which the Caribs of Guadalupe traveled up to 150 leagues (630 kilometers) to make raids (Cohen 1969). In a similar fashion, John Ley and Lawrence Keymis have expressed admiration for the nautical

skills of the coastal peoples of today's Guyana (Lorimer 1994; Keymis 1968). In early colonial times there were also reports of the Amerindians of Florida making routine trips to Cuba in their canoes to trade or visit family members (Yaremko 2011). In addition, recent experiments in seafaring using modern replicas of indigenous vessels by Benoit Bérard and his colleagues seem to confirm that long-distance trips were part of everyday life in pre-Columbian Antilles (Bérard 2013).

Although it was recognized that the Casimiroid people most likely arrived in Cuba and Hispaniola directly from Middle America (Kozłowski 1975; Rouse 1992) and that the Ortoiroid migrations reached the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico earlier than they reached the Lesser Antilles, suggesting a direct canoe movement (Callaghan 2010), the model persisted in which sea trips were possible only if they covered short distances or if they followed the itineraries predetermined by natural elements, such as sea currents and prevailing winds.

However, several recent studies conducted in different areas of research (archaeology, physical anthropology, genetics, and paleobotany) have produced results that reinforce a generally neglected argument that contacts between the Greater Antilles and Central America existed at an early date (Veloz Maggiolo 1993), regardless of the geographical distance (Keegan and Diamond 1987; Keegan 1994, 2000; Pagán Jiménez 2011; Martínez-Cruzado 2001; Roksandic and Alarie 2012; Wilson et al. 1998; Wilson 2007). The spatial position of the Greater Antilles makes them accessible from three main areas: Florida, Central America, and northern South America. Within these large areas there are several possible sources of incoming migrants, including Florida, the Yucatán, Belize, Honduras and Nicaragua, the Orinoco Delta, Venezuela, and Colombia. Central America is thus only one of the possible sources of population movements and exchanged goods. We also know that migrant groups who came to the island often tended to adapt their culture to new environment and that human groups with different economic and social structures continuously coexisted on the islands (e.g., Chinique de Armas this volume). It is thus clear that the patterns of successive migrations, the dynamic networks of exchange, and the matrixes of cultural influences within the Greater Antilles and the Circum-Caribbean were far more intricate and multilinear than was hitherto understood (Hofman and Carlin 2010; Hofman and Hoogland 2011; Rodríguez Ramos this volume). This also means that the history of the early population movements is complex, involving several waves of migrations coming from different directions. The key problems in that regard are making a clear distinction between migra-

tions, on the one hand, and trade or cultural influences, on the other; and elucidating not only the timing and direction of migratory movements but also the reasons behind them.

The potential links with Central America are especially interesting because they involve two culturally very different areas, both of which seem to have been in contact with the western Caribbean for long periods of time: Mesoamerica and lower Central America/the Isthmo-Colombian Area. For example, the fluted points found in Mesoamerica display a definite similarity to the early blade technology found throughout the western Caribbean and at some early sites in Cuba such as Levisa (Kozłowski 1974; Wilson 2007). Although typological characteristics cannot be taken to represent “cultures” or direct evidence of contact or migration, they can be understood as “traditions of doing” (Rodríguez Ramos 2010a). Dental modification, which was commonly practiced by pre-Hispanic populations in Mesoamerica, has been shown to have also been practiced in some skeletal remains recently excavated in Cuba at the site of Canimar Abajo (Roksandic and Alarie 2012; Alarie and Roksandic this volume). Evidence of certain cultural practices, such as ball games and courts, so typical for a number of sites in the Greater Antilles, have been suggested to have originated through cultural influences from Mesoamerica (Alegría 1983). On the other hand, some other research results cannot be linked to just one region of Central America. For example, the recent comparative study of ancient DNA has identified a distinct pattern of presence and absence of the frequent Central American haplogroup A in the osteological material from the western and eastern Caribbean, respectively (Roksandic et al. in press). Haplogroup A2 sublineages were identified in Puerto Rico in a different study (Vilar et al. 2014). In both cases, the results point at early contacts or migrations from either northern or southern Central America.

Direct communication between lower Central America and the Greater Antilles has also been indicated by several important discoveries. The circulation of some plant and animal species is a case in point. For example, the presence of *pollo* maize, a variety that is absent in northeastern South America and Mesoamerica but is present in Colombia and lower Central America, has been documented in Puerto Rico (Pagán Jiménez et al. 2005), while a special tool kit used for processing *zamia* (one of the most poisonous edible plants, requiring very specific detoxification process) has not been identified in either northeastern South America or Mexico; it is present only in the Isthmo-Colombian Area and the Greater Antilles (Rodríguez Ramos 2013).

Another line of evidence possibly linking lower Central America and the Isthmo-Colombian Area with the Greater Antilles is based on the linguistic analysis of toponyms. Toponyms, or place names, can survive the demise of the ethnic group/speech community to whose language they belong and remain on the map for much longer, as the last remnant of the people who once lived at that location. In many cases, their meaning can be lost and their pronunciation changed and adjusted to the phonological structure of the language of the new inhabitants of the area, but they still represent dependable evidence of past communities and can be very important for historical reconstructions. Even in cases when it is impossible to successfully interpret the meaning of a toponym, its structure—phonological and morphological—can give us clues as to its linguistic affiliation. Toponyms demonstrate that the speakers of the language they originally belonged to were physically present and inhabited the location where they still persist. For that reason, toponomastic analysis can be used to make a distinction between trade or cultural influences, on one hand, and actual population movements, on the other.

Toponomastic studies have been considerably less common in Caribbean—and, generally speaking, New World—archaeology, than in the Old World, where they have always had an important place. There are several reasons for this difference, the most important being the absence of written documents in the New World before Columbus (with the exception of Mesoamerica) and the resulting lack of historical depth in the available toponomastic material. For example, we know nothing about Caribbean toponyms before the arrival of the Spanish. In spite of that, toponomastic analyses can help us shed more light on early historical processes, even in cases where temporal depth is considerable. As examples of their usefulness we can mention several interesting studies carried out in different areas of Europe and Asia. Itzick Shai (2009) examined Philistine and Hebrew place names in Israel in order to better understand Philistine migrations in the late second and early first millennium BC, whereas Das and Das (1987) applied toponomastic analyses to investigate the phases of expansion of Indo-European newcomers into the Indian subcontinent. Jankowski (2000) used the approach to explore the early ethnic history of the Crimean Peninsula. River names in central and northern Russia show that these territories were inhabited by Finnic-speaking groups before Slavic expansion (Fortson 2010). Some of the most important Greek cities, such as Athens, Knossos, and Korinthos, carry non-Indo-European, pre-Greek names (Kitto 1950);

in this case, the inherited toponyms are at least 4,000 years old and probably more. All those studies clearly show that place names can survive long historical periods and that a similar approach can be used to unravel Caribbean past(s).

Unfortunately, toponomastic evidence can only very rarely provide an unambiguous and complete solution to a specific problem. Instead, it gives us important information that narrows down the scope of possible answers. In other words, the analysis of toponyms in a region has to be done in combination with results from other fields of research (such as archaeology, physical anthropology, ancient DNA analysis, and isotope analysis), as an additional method for reconstructing historical processes. The other type of difficulty in interpreting place names is purely linguistic and comes as a consequence of chains of transmission and cross-language interference. For example, the toponyms from western Cuba interpreted as Guanahatabey were transmitted by Arawak speakers to Hispanophones, who wrote them down (Granberry and Vescelius 2004, 18–19). Given that those three languages (Guanahatabey, Island Arawak, and Spanish) have different phonological structures, we need to be able to—at least tentatively—reconstruct the original forms of toponyms before we can proceed to compare them with possible source languages (or language families). The number of non-Arawak toponyms in the Caribbean is quite small, a fact that limits their usefulness. However, since no general study on pre-Columbian place names has been done so far, it is possible that closer scrutiny would find quite a few toponyms belonging to other language families in specific areas of the islands.

At the time of the initial contact with the Europeans, Taíno (or Island Arawak) was the dominant language and the lingua franca throughout the Greater Antilles. However, the early chroniclers (Las Casas 1875; Pané 1999) indicate that three or four other languages were also present: Ciboney Taíno and Guanahatabey were spoken in Cuba, while Macorís and Ciguayo were spoken in northern Hispaniola (Granberry and Vescelius 2004; Highfield 1997; Taylor 1997). Questions about the origins and cultures of their speakers are directly connected to our understanding of different migratory movements onto the islands. Those four speech communities are usually interpreted as remnants of earlier populations that were slowly acculturated into the Taíno sphere. In case of the Macorís and the Ciguayo, that was actually the case: those communities accepted not only Taíno social structure and customs but also their language, creating a unique bilingual situation (Las Casas 1875, vol. 5). As a result, their linguistic affiliation is not clear because of