

Introduction

Crossing the Caribbean Divide

Integrating Anthropological Analyses in the Study of Pre-Columbian Cultures

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The Caribbean is the world's second-largest sea and seventh-largest body of water, encompassing an area of 2,754,000 square kilometers (1,063,000 square miles) and stretching 1,700 kilometers north–south from Florida to Panama and 2,300 kilometers east–west from the Antilles to the Yucatán Peninsula (figure 0.1). Geographically, the Caribbean comprises several island chains that are typically separated into three major groups—the Greater Antilles, Lesser Antilles, and Bahamas (including the Turks and Caicos). This is a general distinction, for other groups such as those adjacent to the South American mainland (for example, the “ABC” islands of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao), the Caymans, and Trinidad and Tobago do not readily fit into these categories yet are important nonetheless for examining pre-Columbian settlement patterns and adaptations.

The larger islands of the Caribbean are a mixture of volcanic and limestone continental rock, while the Antillean chain is primarily composed of younger volcanic and coral islands. The Caribbean, because of its tropical climate, oceanography, and proximity to various physiographically distinct landmasses, is extremely diverse ecologically. It is home to 2.3 percent of the world's endemic plant species and 2.9 percent of endemic vertebrate species. These percentages are significant, considering that the Caribbean contributes only 0.15 percent of the Earth's surface. In addition, over 1,500 species of fish, 25 coral genera, more than 600 mollusk species, and numerous echinoderms, crustaceans, sea mammals, sponges, birds, and reptiles have been recorded in marine, freshwater, brackish, and terrestrial environments. The diversity of plant and animal taxa found in the Caribbean prehistorically and historically is well illustrated by Newsom



Figure 0.1. Map of the Caribbean (drafted by Michael Scisco, BioGeo Creations).

and Wing (2004) and deFrance and Newsom (2005). Despite the region's past and present ecological diversity, it is under tremendous threat from a variety of human-related events, including pollution, global warming, overfishing, and development, prompting Conservation International to designate the Caribbean as one of the world's 25 "Hotspots"—regions that are relatively small but contain high percentages of endemic species (see www.biodiversityhotspots.org).

For over a century, antiquarians, archaeologists, and anthropologists have searched for evidence of when and how peoples first settled the Caribbean islands (see Keegan 1994, 1996, 2000). Related questions addressing how Amerindians adapted to new insular landforms, where they began constructing permanent villages, and the mechanisms used for exploiting their surroundings have also been of great interest to scholars. Investigations of these lines of inquiry have helped researchers to better understand migratory patterns, group interactions on mainlands and islands, and the transformations of insular environments that were shaped to suit Caribbean peoples' particular needs, largely through agricultural activities and the associated rise in population.

The most enduring research questions related to the pre-Columbian Caribbean, however, have revolved around colonization events and settlement patterns. The main foci of these studies have often involved developing cultural typologies (*sensu* Rouse 1986, 1992a). More recent technological advances in the physical and natural sciences, such as radiocarbon dating and geochemical and mineralogical analyses, have greatly increased the ability of archaeologists to address many issues related to the peopling of these islands. Researchers in archaeology and other branches of anthropology, particularly skeletal biology and genetics, have also opened up new avenues of inquiry by using a host of sophisticated techniques, including stable isotope and DNA analyses. This has greatly diversified and expanded our efforts to track ancient population movements (for example, biodistance, demography, and affinal relationships) that complement existing archaeological data. Many of these advances have been successfully applied to the study of prehistoric population expansions in other geographic regions, and interest in conducting and integrating similar studies is growing in the Caribbean.

Caribbean archaeologists have been very proactive in developing cultural typologies and trying to decipher the various patterns of colonization and migration that occurred over the course of six thousand years or so. Several books published in the past twenty years, including Keegan's *People Who Discovered Columbus* (1992), Newsom and Wing's *On Land and Sea: Native American Uses of Biological Resources in the West Indies* (2004), Curet's *Caribbean Paleodemography: Population, Culture History, and Socio-political Processes in Ancient Puerto Rico* (2005), and Keegan's *Taino Indian Myth and Practice: The Arrival of the Stranger King* (2007), have all shown the importance of integrating and interpreting decades of archaeological data. Edited volumes by Siegel (1989, 2005), Curet and colleagues (2005), and Delpuech and Hofman (2004), for example, have also improved our ability to bring together, and shown the necessity of bringing together, a wide range of scholars in archaeology to comment on and debate current issues in prehistory. There have been few attempts, however, to integrate the multiple perspectives within anthropology.

Wilson's edited volume, entitled *The Indigenous People of the Caribbean* (1997), was important because it is one of the few attempts to interweave perspectives from archaeology, cultural anthropology, linguistics, and ethnohistory to discuss early West Indian inhabitants and their ancestors who came into contact with Europeans. Wilson's *Archaeology of the Caribbean*

(2007), Newsom and Wing's (2004) book, and Hofman and colleagues' *Crossing the Borders: New Methods and Techniques in the Study of Archaeological Materials from the Caribbean* are more recent attempts to synthesize the growing corpus of archaeological data, following a more holistic approach to understanding pre-Columbian peoples in the region.

However, collaborative efforts in the Caribbean have really only now begun to reach the point where researchers can tackle issues of population expansion and mobility in a more systematic and comprehensive way. Archaeology has clearly provided the bulk of the evidence for explaining human settlement patterns during the pre-Columbian colonization of the Caribbean, but the data are severely limited in many respects, in part because of the tropical climate, which is generally not conducive to the long-term preservation of organic remains. Archaeological sites are also easily destroyed by development, erosion, and looting. As a result, archaeology provides us with only a portion of the larger puzzle of how pre-Columbian populations expanded into their island world. Geographical gaps in the research must also be considered. A heavy emphasis on archaeological surveys in the northern Antilles compared to the southern part (particularly those islands south of Martinique) leaves us with many unanswered questions of how Amerindian groups made their way through the Caribbean.

Temporal Framework

The Caribbean, also commonly referred to as the West Indies, was initially colonized by two separate waves of hunter-gatherer-foraging groups. The first of these was probably to Trinidad and Tobago around 7000 BP; another migration, slightly later, may have taken place from Mesoamerica to Cuba and Hispaniola about 6000 BP (Keegan 1994, 2000). Both migrations occurred when sea levels were significantly lower than they are today, shortening the distance between landmasses and, in some places, exposing previously submerged islands. Two other major migrations occurred a few thousand years later and represent the initial colonizers of the Lesser Antilles and Puerto Rico. The first of these is usually termed the Archaic and happened around 4000–4500 BP, while a separate migration of ceramic-making horticulturalists known as Saladoid made their way into Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and the Lesser Antilles around 2500 BP. These groups, after what appears to be a lengthy hiatus, eventually spread into the Greater Antilles and Bahamas between 1500 BP and 1300 BP, developing

into a wide range of different cultural groups (Keegan 2000). Because of these geographically broad and temporally disparate conditions that led to several major (and probably multiple minor) migrations, the Caribbean presents some unique opportunities and challenges for researchers in attempting to explain how prehistoric peoples colonized these islands and how settlement patterns were structured after initial occupation.

Some of the earliest work dedicated to looking at the origins of Amerindian peoples in the Caribbean was conducted by Fewkes (1907, 1914), who ventured through Puerto Rico and the Lesser Antilles collecting artifacts for the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Researchers in the early part of the twentieth century included such prominent figures as Jesse Fewkes (1907, 1914), Froleich Rainey (1940), Ricardo Alegría (1965), Irving Rouse (1986, 1992a), and Ripley Bullen (Bullen and Bullen 1972), as well as Estrella Rey Betancourt, who all began to offer more detailed glimpses of the ancient Caribbean by examining and in many cases excavating sites in the Caribbean and on the South American mainland. Through these efforts, we have slowly begun to piece together when and how peoples colonized these islands, how cultural differences began manifesting themselves, and how these and other events structured settlement patterns, ultimately influencing resource use and social behavior through time (see Fitzpatrick and Keegan 2007).

The results of these investigations demonstrate that pre-Columbian peoples were interacting frequently (Hofman et al. 2008), adapting to variations in environment and resource availability, overexploiting many terrestrial and marine foods, and developing unique cultural traits. For a more in-depth treatment, readers can consult several key sources that summarize what we presently know about cultural periods in the Caribbean during pre-Columbian times: Rouse 1986, 1992a; Siegel 1989, 2005; Keegan 1994, 1996, 2000, 2007; Wilson 1997, 2007; Petersen et al. 2004; Newsom and Wing 2004; Fitzpatrick and Keegan 2007 (see figure 0.2 for a synopsis of cultural periods identified in the Caribbean).



Biological Perspectives

The origins of Native Americans, their dispersal patterns throughout the New World, and the unique cultures that developed have also been a topic of fundamental interest to anthropologists and other scholars for centuries. However, discussions and studies addressing Native American origins