TOWARDS A PAN-CARIBBEAN PERSPECTIVE OF PRE-COLONIAL MOBILITY AND EXCHANGE:
PREFACE TO A SPECIAL VOLUME OF THE JOURNAL OF CARIBBEAN ARCHAEOLOGY

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On a micro-scale, there has been evidence of intensive interaction between people throughout the Caribbean archipelago for many years. Recently though, increasing evidence has come to light to suggest that these relationships extended over far larger areas, bridged greater distances and variably intersected one another more than had been previously anticipated. Conceiving of the wider Caribbean as a circum-Caribbean region (Antilles, coastal South America, southern Caribbean islands, Isthmo-Colombian area and coastal Central America) inhabited by a multitude of pre-Colonial Amerindian communities, is to render (at least conceptually) the region a variegated yet cohesive entity, and lend it a degree of commonality and shared identity. In so doing, actors and contact lines should be identified, any of which could represent pivotal nodes within what may amount to a pan-Caribbean network system made up of larger as well as smaller interlocked or independent interaction spheres, in which people, goods and ideas moved. Such a broad, regional take on the prehistory of the wider Caribbean should not only provide a holistic view of the patterns of material interaction in the area, but, by expanding the scale of analysis, we are opening the door to exploring hitherto un(der)considered long-distance inter-societal engagements between the inhabitants of the islands and those of the surrounding continental regions. This would in turn invite (if not demand) us to speculate on how to conceptualize the potential engagements between communities with different levels of socio-political complexity over great distances and over long periods of time. In this spirit of scalar expansion and horizon-gazing, an international conference session was conceived to explicitly explore the themes of mobility and exchange within the circum-Caribbean region.

We are grateful to Chris O. Clement and William F. Keegan for giving us the opportunity to publish in this special issue of the Journal of Caribbean Archaeology the fruits of the exciting and wide ranging session entitled ‘Mobility and exchange from a Pan-Caribbean perspective’, held at the 2008 Society of American Archaeology (SAA) meetings in Vancouver, Canada. The original session encompassed sixteen presentations by scholars specialised in the archaeology of the Caribbean and Central
Corinne L. Hofman, Alistair J. Bright and Reniel Rodríguez Ramos explore the participation of pre-Colonial Amerindian community members in interaction networks of human mobility and exchange of goods and ideas. They propose a multi-disciplinary and multi-scalar approach to evaluate the structure through time of these social networks, examining various lines of evidence in the process. The focus in their contribution is on the larger archipelagic and regional scale.

Reniel Rodríguez Ramos makes a case for considering the Greater Caribbean as a geohistorical area of study, and bolsters this proposal by referring to the long-term macro-regional interactions evident in the circulation of jadeitite and social jade.
Jago Cooper models movement and exchange between pre-Columbian sites in the island of Cuba through GIS based cluster analyses, viewshed analyses, surface cost maps and simulated journey models. His analyses suggest that in some cases, marine or riverine based transport and interaction would have been favoured over more time-consuming or inefficient land based movement. Furthermore, he provides hypotheses for the nature of interaction between coastal and offshore sites, and between coastal and interior sites.

William F. Keegan explores how the concepts of boundary work and reputational systems have been used to delimit and structure the investigation of population movement in the prehistoric insular Caribbean. His inquiry demonstrates that representations of prehistoric population movements are a product of historical contingencies within the discipline of Caribbean archaeology and not necessarily an accurate portrait of human migrations into and within the islands.

Peter Siegel rounds off the compilation with a thoughtful, critical appraisal of the papers and a number of themes that are raised in them, principally the history of ideas or reception of past Caribbean research, geographic scales of analysis, and modes of interaction.

In closing, we would like to acknowledge Scott Fitzpatrick and an anonymous reviewer for their useful comments on the papers submitted for publication in this special issue. We also wish to express our thanks to Alex Geurds for correcting all Spanish abstracts, to Benoît Roux for correcting all French abstracts, and to Anne van Duijvenbode and Hayley Mickleburgh for assisting with checking the copy proofs.