

Beyond the Blockade. New Currents in Cuban Archaeology

Susan Kepecs, L. Antonio Curet and Gabino La Rosa Corzo.
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This book offers a new perspective on some of the most important archaeological work that is being developed in Cuba in the first decade of the new century. This research is defined within the context of changing socio-economic circumstances and transformations in theoretical and methodological approaches to Cuban archaeology. The compilation reflects the academic consolidation of a new generation of Cuban archaeologists and their interaction with archaeologists from other areas in a productive and respectful collaboration. Importantly, this volume reveals the multitude of ways in which Cuban archaeology has maintained its independence and retained links with other countries despite political boundaries established by the United States.

Five years after *Dialogues in Cuban Archaeology* was published by two of the same editors, the current volume showcases the perseverance of Cuban archaeology. It contrasts *Dialogues* by being less focused on presenting the Cuban situation and archaeological process and more on the presentation of people and sites with an in-depth historical overview. *Beyond the Blockade* also has a stronger pre-Columbian representation than *Dialogues*. It is clear that although operating under politically isolated conditions from the U.S., Cuban archaeologists have attempted to operate above and beyond these restrictions. The first chapter in this edited volume brings to the fore the wider historic and political context of Cuban archaeology over the last 50 years as well as focusing on influential individuals and the role they have played in Cuban Archaeology ‘despite the blockade’.

Chapter two is a brief tribute to Betty J. Meggers on behalf of Cuban archaeologists, which serves as a complement to the introduction of the book. Meggers is recognized as a key American archaeologist who has given immense support to many local Cuban researchers in recent decades, in terms of scientific information, access to courses in the United States, and the production and dissemination of publications. From 1996 to present, she has supported one of the only two Cuban archaeological journals, *El Caribe Arqueológico*. Meggers also teaches courses on the Ford seriation method, a system with great impact on Cuban archaeological practice known more for its typological and descriptive possibilities and used less as a chronological resource.

In Chapter three, Deagan argues for close development of archaeological practices and theories and intellectual connections in historical archaeology between archaeologists from Cuba and Florida. 'The reason for this is the assertion that in many ways Florida and Cuba are a coherent geographic historical and cultural unit of historical archaeological focus' (17). She states that perhaps even before European colonization but most definitely after, since Cuba and Florida were the closest neighbors during the colonization, a movement of people took place. Deagan's perspective provides the view from the other side, that is, the relationship of an American researcher with Cuban archaeologists.

In chapter four on La Loma del Convento, Knight gives an overview of research that has taken place on this site in the south-central area of Cuba over the past century. In the introduction the author's aims are made clear: to review the research conducted by Cuban and Russian archaeologists, subsequently relating the results of these studies to current broad themes of interest, which are the nature of the Arawakan expansion in Cuba, socio-political complexity in the agroalfarero stage, and the effects of the European colonization on the indigenous people. Although the chapter comprises a thorough description of studies on the site, the all-encompassing character of this made the review rather superficial, lacking a critical analysis. The lengthiness of the overview overshadowed the aims to relate La Loma del Convento to current issues in Cuban archaeology, however, it should be noted that such a broad overview of the site is critical to our understanding of its relevance and its centrality to current issues.

The fifth chapter written by Morales Santos, shakes Cuba's established Archaic chronological order with evidence obtained during a survey in the Villa Clara region. Where before

only the Seboruco lithic industry was recognized as a pre-tribal tradition, Morales Santos presents data and evidence for a predating industry known as Tepas, and distinguishes the Jibá industry as directly succeeding the Seboruco complex. Their deviation from the established Cuban typology and the resulting degree of interrelationship is based upon techno-typological analyses and cluster analyses from the compositions of circa 300 archaeological sites in central-eastern Cuba (48). There are problems, however, for instance Morales Santos refers to a hypothesis which theorizes earliest human occupation in Cuba at around 10,000 BP (60) and places his typology within that framework, despite the lack of radiocarbon dates. This idea is intriguing on its own, but the contextual associations between megafauna remnants and human-made artifacts of the Tepas and Seboruco lithic industries could have occurred at the more conventional 5,000 BP as well (56). Consequently, this reference is unnecessarily speculative. A second difficulty lies with his suggestions of stylistic relationship between the Seboruco complex and North American industries (60), as they contrast recent studies on the genetic origins of Archaic groups in Cuba that argue against North American origins without providing strong evidence.

In the sixth chapter entitled, 'Investigations at Laguna de Limones: Suggestions for a Change in the Theoretical Direction of Cuban Archaeology', Torres Etayo proposes to introduce the highly debated international research theme of social inequality into Cuban archaeological discourse through a case-study involving his recent fieldwork at the well-known, ceremonial and settlement site of Laguna de Limones. The main discussion imparts largely preliminary, yet noteworthy insights advancing the author's objective of re-conceptualizing Cuba as an area of ancient social complexity

evidenced through the social hierarchy and advanced engineering skills deemed necessary considering the presence of ceremonial plazas, a hydraulic feature, and linear orientated villages. It seems apparent that our understanding of the site has benefited from firm research goals and “high-quality, high-resolution topographic maps”- though precise deductions of the site as a migratory area are not possible (80). On the other hand, it is important to observe here that while Torres Etayo provides a degree of stimulating “food for thought” regarding the past and future of Cuban archaeology, he acknowledges that at this point of his investigations; there are no “strong conclusions” (77).

Chapter seven, by Cooper, Valcárel Rojas, and Calvera, discusses the site of Los Buchillones (cal A.D. 1264-1690), located on the north coast of Cuba. It examines the nature of interaction of this site with several contemporaneous sites (cal A.D. 1232-1670) in the Jardines del Rey archipelago. According to the archaeological data it could be possible that the sites in the Jardines del Rey archipelago were used as temporary camps for marine resource exploitation and shell artefact manufacturing while the site of Los Buchillones was continually occupied. The examination of inter-regional interaction or specialisation in this interaction, however, through use of wooden artefacts can be difficult, as there are not many sites with a degree of preservation of these artefacts that would allow for comparison.

Chapter eight is entitled ‘Turey treasure in the Caribbean: Brass and Indo-Hispanic contact at El Chorro de Maíta’, Cuba by Valcárel Rojas, Martínón-Torres, Cooper, and Rehren. The study of contact between Indigenous groups and Europeans during the time of Columbus’ first arrival in the Caribbean is a widely debated subject. Because most studies of the

impact of this contact are made through ethno-historic or historic studies based on European accounts, the Indigenous side of the story has been understudied. This chapter attempts to bridge the data gap by researching metal elements from the contact period graveyard site of El Chorro de Maíta in northeastern Cuba. The strength of this research lies in the fact that the brass objects are used to prove the interaction between and even adaptation of European objects in Indigenous Cuban societies. By using an approach from the Indigenous side, this argument is made more poignant and can be seen as a new insight into old debates on the matter. Most of these lines of research used in the chapter by themselves are however insufficient to prove European influences over this area in Contact times. Linking European brass objects to other ‘non-indigenous’ practices such as cranial deformation and extended burials suggest a European influence. Although the investigation readily proves the interaction of European and indigenous peoples, analysis of the metal objects forms a peripheral part of the investigation.

The ninth chapter is focused on the archaeology of escaped slaves. By combining excavated evidence with both archaeological and historical documentations, La Rosa wished to reconstruct the daily lives, defense tactics, and access to resources of escaped slaves on several sites in western Cuba. Although La Rosa paints a relatively clear picture of the lives of fugitive slaves who inhabited rock-shelters and caves in the area under study, placing the results in a broader context, a comparison is unfortunately lacking. She mentions that there was great preference for hidden places by fugitive slaves. Even though 4 percent of the recovered artifacts were used for defense and/or subsistence, there is no mention of how these artifacts specifically would have functioned for defensive purposes. It seems unlikely that

fugitive slaves were content with having a well-hidden place and did not see the need to further equip themselves with defensive means. Chapter ten 'Built patrimony and historical archaeology', is written by Hernández Mora, the residential archaeologist and historian for the municipality of Camagüey, Cuba. It is essentially about the struggles and internal conflicts, practical and theoretical, which surround historical archaeology of urban spaces and buildings in Cuba. It deals with fundamental questions like the complex relationship between archaeology (meaning here: extraction of information by excavation/ destruction/intrusion), conservation, and restoration and questions if a policy of 'minimal intervention' is really the best way to protect the authenticity of national heritage. The central dilemma of the article is this: "If holistic, complex archaeological investigations that produce valuable knowledge for the conservation of the built patrimony cannot be carried out because archaeological practice destroys the foundations that sustain these historical buildings – and thus archaeology conflicts with the restoration of the structures – then what is the point of archaeological studies?" (147/148). And thus: "how can we rescue and preserve archaeological sites and objects (cultural patrimony) adequately and in a manner congruent with their social value, while also protecting the information they contain?" (148). In the process of answering these questions, the writer also discusses some more theoretical issues, such as the definitions of the words 'historical archaeology' and 'patrimony'. He also reflects on how archaeology is never scientific (for this would

imply ethical and ideological neutrality), but always politically motivated and a manifestation of the discipline's values at that time. 'Beyond the Blockade' seeks to enhance scholarly exchanges that can lead to the further development of Cuban archaeology and its reintegration into American and global archaeological discussion. The broad array of topics broached in this volume attest to the advances that Cuban archaeology has made in all facets of its archaeological inquiry. It is hoped that this well-compiled volume reaches both North American and Cuban scholars. As it stands, the authors have already achieved their aim of making it easier to incorporate Cuba in global discussions of archaeology by taking this powerful initial step.

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