

***THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF CARIBBEAN ARCHAEOLOGY***

Edited by William F. Keegan, Corinne L. Hofman, and Reniel Rodríguez Ramos (2013)  
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Reviewed by

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When I started working in Caribbean archaeology a few decades ago, I thought that I easily understood Puerto Rico's ancient history by way of Rouse's unilinear chronology. However, this simplistic view blurred when I tried to apply it to the larger scale of the Greater Antilles and even worse when I raised the scale a notch and included the Lesser Antilles and northeastern South America. I suspect this personal experience is not unique and probably is shared by many Caribbeanists; in fact, I suspect they, like me, thought of their study areas as the microcosms against which to understand the rest of the Caribbean. It took me a while to realize that this way of organizing peoples in space and time was unrealistic.

Soon after, I came to realize several realities of the Pre-Columbian Caribbean. First, the vast diversity and multi-dimensional character of its archaeological record making; second, the diversity of paradigms and theoretical positions among the archaeologists who were trying to make sense of the data; and, third, the poor communication that existed between the islands' archaeologists, mostly because of language and political barriers. This last one

also included the difficulties of acquiring publications from other islands. Because of these realities creating a general picture of the ancient history of the Caribbean without idealizing it, on one hand, or oversimplifying it, on the other, proved challenging. The ancient history of the Caribbean went from a largely culture-history focused paradigm based on very simple linear/stepping-stone processes to a bewildering situation of cultural diversity, multiplicity of social and political behaviors, and variability of local adaptations. This proved to be a situation that was difficult to grasp for both old and young scholars.

While many of these problems linger today, Caribbean archaeology has made enormous progress in the past few decades to the point that unilinearity and insularity are not as intense as they used to be. In the last few years, we have seen a number of publications that attempt to address some of these problems. The *Oxford Handbook of Caribbean Archaeology*, in my opinion, stands out significantly in these efforts. Its treatment of a wide range of topics and presentation of multiple perspectives represents an important departure from past

publications of its kind. It comprises reviews that cover almost the whole gamut of old and more recent topics, debates, issues and a wide range of opinions that have been leading the direction Caribbean archaeology has taken and will be taking in the future. It is a very inclusive volume, also, in terms of theoretical positions, opinions, contributor's backgrounds, and their countries of origin. It includes colleagues from, or who, have worked in different islands and both veterans and young scholars both with refreshing new ideas, methods, and approaches.

The volume is composed of 38 articles distributed in one introduction and three main sections. The editors' introduction lays out the logic of the organization of the chapters and establishes the cultural, chronological, and geographical framework for the rest of the volume. The maps and the information provided in this chapter are excellent and useful reference points for the other chapters. The first section of the volume, titled "Island History," consists of two articles; one on the history of archaeology from the perspective of the *Proceedings of the International Congress for Caribbean Archaeology* (IACA) held every two years (Siegel), and the second on paleoenvironmental reconstructions and their importance in our modeling of ancient human behavior and providing a context for ancient settlement of the region (Cooper). The second section, "Ethnohistory," includes articles on native languages (Granberry), Taíno culture (Keegan), kinship and social organization (Ensor), and Island Carib culture (Allaire). The "Culture History" section consists of 12 review articles discussing the history and state-of-the art of the culture history of various parts of the region. Four of the articles discuss specific cultures (Archaic [Rodríguez Ramos et al.], Huecoid Culture [Chanlatte Baik], Saladoid [Bérard], and

Meillacoid [Sinelli]), five on particular locations (Trinidad and Tobago [Boomert], Lesser Antilles [Hofman], Cuba [Ulloa Hung and Valcárcel Rojas], Jamaica [Wesler], and the [Bahamas] Bahama Archipelago [Berman et al.]) and three in specific culture-history topics (Arawak diaspora [Heckenberger], the southward route hypothesis of the Saladoid migration [Fitzpatrick], and long-distance interaction with Central America and Colombia [Rodríguez Ramos]).

The third section, "Creating History," includes the largest number of chapters, 15, which address many specific topics on Caribbean research that can be applied to all islands, periods, and cultures. Some of them focus on particular socio-cultural topics such as seafaring (Callaghan), spatiality (Altes), social contracts (Morsink), interaction networks (Mol), chiefdoms (Torres), and households (Samson). The rest review research on faunal (deFrance), botanical (Pagán Jiménez), and human remains (Crespo Torres et al.); funerary practices (Hoogland and Hofman); rock art (Hayward et al.); and metal objects (Valcárcel Rojas et al.). Others discuss the application of laboratory techniques on archaeological materials, especially human remains including stable isotope analysis to study diet (Pestle), paleomobility (Lafoon) and DNA analysis (Martínez Cruzado). The final section includes three articles that deal with the region's more recent history (post-European Contact). The first two discuss the direction of historical archaeology in the region (Armstrong) and maroon archaeology (Agorsah), this last topic being one that is normally omitted from many overviews on Caribbean archaeology. The third and last paper in this section discusses the emergence of native voices and, in some cases newly-constructed identities throughout the region (Laguer Díaz). This topic has taken the front stage of many recent debates regarding modern identity

and contemporary people's links to the region's ancient and more recent past and has (1) forced us to reconsider the interpretations of traditional historiography and challenged us to reexamine the archaeological record in different ways, (2) reminded us that we do not work in a socio-political vacuum and (3) made us realize that our conclusions and public debates have powerful legal, political, social and cultural implications. The volume ends with an article by Wilson who comments on the recent accomplishments of Caribbean archaeology and looks at the potential of expanding them to other topics in the future (e.g., household archaeology, cultural identity, environmental archaeology, paleodemography, and others).

It is clear that this volume covers a lot of ground. But, it is important to emphasize that the authors are not all in agreement on all issues; in fact, one of the strengths of the volume is the open discourse that conveys the multiplicity of and sometimes contradictory ideas. I do not point this out as a weakness of the book, but as a strength, since open discourse is what fuels the advancement of scholarly disciplines. This certainly represents a contrast to the longstanding normative view of history that dominated our thinking only a few decades ago.

The diversity of articles in this volume provides exposure to parts of the region unfamiliar to me and offered a deeper representation of the complexity and variability of the Caribbean archaeological record than found in previous publications. I found articles that focused on the cultural history and changes in specific localities most illuminating. Examples of these are the chapters on Trinidad and Tobago (Boomert), Lesser Antilles (Hofman), Cuba [Ulloa Hung and Valcárcel Rojas], Jamaica (Wesler), and the Bahama Archipelago (Berman et al.), which provide excellent overviews of the patterns and diversity of

the archaeological evidence at more localized levels. The same can be said of most articles in the third section, "Creating History", where local data were presented and interpreted within the context of the local setting and without extrapolating to the rest of the island, culture, period or archipelago as was done in the past under the premise of normativism. This bottom-up approach is of critical importance to understand the "nuts-and-bolts" of ancient societies. Otherwise, we will be (1) oversimplifying ancient human behavior and (2) making the same mistakes that previous scholars made by focusing almost exclusively on cultures, subseries, and series.

One of the benefits of having a volume like this one available is that allows readers to identify some of the trends in Caribbean archaeology. It is clear from the *Handbook* that one of these trends is that Caribbean archaeology has and, to a point, is still going through a period of healthy revisionism that has led us beyond the restrictions imposed by previous paradigms (i.e., emphasis on culture history at the expense of socio-political and cultural processes). It is from this questioning of the "establishment" that has directed us to new discoveries, new ideas, and new perspectives on how we see past human behavior in the region. These new perspectives, combined with the use of improved and innovative methodologies, have produced new lines of research that a few decades ago would not have been taken seriously. Some of these topics include the emphasis on cultural diversity, identifying of exotic material from Central America, early ceramics, cultivation and introduction of staples by "hunters-and-gatherers" and others, the focus on social and political aspects and not only on cultural ones, and the complexity of indigenous cosmology.

After reviewing all the articles, however, one is left feeling that despite the

fact that new questions are being raised and answered and new discoveries are made, some of the problems present in earlier frameworks (especially in Rouse's work) continue to unwittingly persist in modern Caribbean archaeology. One example is the implicit prevalence of normativism in the use of major classificatory categories (e.g., cultures, series, subseries, family of languages) as units of analysis (see for example, articles by Keegan, Ensor, Chanlatte Baik, Heckenberger, Bérard, and, probably the most extreme case, Sinelli). That's not to say that *some* norms are not shared in a society, but it cannot be assumed that (1) everyone followed the norms and (2) that norms are not socially and historically conditioned and manipulated. Following this way of thinking, generalizations about human behavior are made based on peoples' cultural affiliation or, more specifically, on the norms of that cultural affiliation. Problematically, such conclusions can be extrapolated from a limited number of case-studies and broadly applied to culture and, in the case of the Rousean model, and to supra-culture levels (e.g., series), or, in the case of linguistics, the language family (Heckenberger). Furthermore, one corollary of this perspective is that culture determines human behavior precluding human agency.

A second problem is the discrepancy between the units of analysis, the units of observation, and the scale of the interpretation. In several articles, for example, evidence found in few sites is extrapolated to represent patterns in larger regions, cultural entities, and periods of time. In other words, how we move from one scale to the next? Once again, this is not much different than the approach used by many earlier archaeologists who we tend to strongly criticize (i.e. going from site excavations to culture). Examples of this, although they are not the only ones, are the recent studies of long-distance trade where artifacts, after being sourced to locations

within or outside the Caribbean, are taken to create models of migration, interaction, and influences that may over-exaggerate their influence and importance on local and regional socio-cultural development (e.g., migrations across the Caribbean sea in search for raw materials, direct elite exchange between chiefdoms from the Greater Antilles and those from Central America). Thus, arguments go from the level of the evidence of objects (low level) to a macro-regional model without considering the social context at lower levels where the artifacts were found, especially the community and localized regions (for a similar arguments see chapters by Torres and Wilson; Curet 2003; Siegel 2010). *Assuming* that the presence of exotic materials is evidence of *direct* interaction or culture contact, no good modeling can be developed without understanding the meaning of these objects at more localized context. This epistemological problem brings with it major methodological deficiencies. One of them is the unrigorous use of archaeological data. Using the long distance exchange as an example, again, it is surprising that very little quantitative or statistical analysis is used in trying to arrive at a better understanding on the nature of this type of interaction. For example, few studies have mentioned the frequency of the imported objects present in the different sites, much less in what proportions compared to similar objects made of local materials; how many of these objects were imported per year; what mark did these objects leave on the local culture (i.e., did it influence the rest of the material culture?); or what are the contexts where these objects were used? These are important questions that need to be answered in order to understand the role and meaning of these exotic materials within the local communities. In other words, we need to go back to basics and do the painstaking job of collecting and analyzing detailed and fine-

grained data before being able to model past human behavior at scales such as the Circum-Caribbean. Again, this topic is being used as an example of an epistemological problem that is present in other research areas of Caribbean archaeology.

In conclusion, all in all this publication is a superb reference and research source. I can see it being used by the general public, archaeologists, cultural anthropologists, avocational archaeologists, historians, museum professionals, heritage management specialists, and others in related interpretive fields for years to come with its useful and inspiring perspectives. The work of all the contributors strengthen communication among Caribbeanists, makes available current and innovate views of the past, and demonstrates to archaeologists outside the Caribbean how vibrant and innovative Caribbean archaeology has

become. I congratulate the editors for putting together this resourceful, imaginative and forward-looking compendium. Kudos to the editors and to the volume contributors.

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