Review


This book revolutionises the cultural geography of the precolonial Caribbean, and is the latest and most forceful proponent of a paradigm shift which has seen Caribbean scholars break out of their traditional culture area and move away from pottery-based histories of migration (see contributions to Hoffman & Bright 2010). Rethinking Puerto Rican precolonial history explodes the former unilinear neatness of archaeological histories and engages with complex and pluralistic models of society reaching into other parts of the American continents.

The author puts the major hypotheses of Irving Rouse to the test for the island of Puerto Rico (p.2). Rouse, the father of Caribbean archaeology, sketched a culture history of the precolonial insular Caribbean based on pottery typo-chronologies which still form the baseline for archaeological interpretation in the Caribbean today. This grand narrative describes the gradual replacement of technologically and politically simple cultures (i.e. Archaic foragers) by complex and sedentary migrants (the Neolithic Saladoid culture), the latter being the ancestors of the Taínos, the chieftdom societies of the Greater Antilles encountered by Columbus.

Instead of presenting the precolonial history of the islands as an orderly procession of pottery cultures, proceeding in waves from the South American mainland, Rodríguez Ramos paints a picture of a Greater Caribbean in which thousands of years of interaction with regions such as the Isthmo-Columbian area, as well as the traditional ‘source’ cultures of north-western South America were just as, if not more, important. Puerto Rico is presented as a dynamic social landscape, in which exchange relationships are the driving force and in which groups with radically different technologies, lifeways and diverse ancestries were living side by side for centuries when they were supposed to have been centuries apart.

The work under review employs a suite of evidence including studies of lithic technology and provenance data, a synthesised radiocarbon dataset and palaeobotanical evidence from starch grain analysis to turn existing models on their head. Thus the author shows how Archaic (‘pre-Arawak’) cultures not only introduced a range of cultigens to the islands, hence behaving in very ‘Neolithic’ ways, but also co-existed and interacted with pottery-producing groups in Puerto Rico with Central and north-western South American ancestries. The same is also true of later times, when cultures formerly occupying discrete and sequential chronological niches are proposed to have been contemporaneous, creating a ‘messy pottery landscape’ (p. 160). Perennial debates such as the ‘La Hueca problem’ and the ‘Ostionoid expansion’ are reformulated from these perspectives and, although the book does not offer the final word, it will rejuvenate the debates.

The focus on lithics from Puerto Rico, with analysis of over 8000 samples from ten sites, provides an important complementary dataset to contrast with the traditionally used ceramic evidence. The active role assigned to material culture in networks of interaction also provides a refreshing perspective on Caribbean material culture. However, the author’s rigorous technological study contrasts with the sometimes anecdotal nature of the stylistic comparisons between artefacts, observed in Costa Rican collections for example. Although the book is intended more as a call to arms to colleagues to look outside the traditional geo-cultural box, anthropologists should be wary with arguments establishing links through stylistic similarity. In general, while the argumentation is original and persuasive, one is nevertheless left with the feeling that there is not yet enough evidence from large-scale excavations to sufficiently substantiate all the claims. For example, the sample sites are not described in much detail (a table with radiocarbon dates for each site and other important characteristics would have been a helpful addition) and other sites such as
Maruca and Angostura which are important players in the discussion are not included.

Overall, this is an engagingly written book. One criticism is aimed at the quality of the photographic material, in which a combination of dark backgrounds and mediocre printing quality renders the details of the lithic items unintelligible. Many flint flakes appear as undifferentiated blobs, and the cutting edges and contours of the tools (e.g. fig 7.4) are invisible! That said, the book is well-timed with respect to the accumulation of new evidence. It is also an inspiring contribution whose aim to ‘decolonise’ Puerto Rican and Caribbean archaeology (p. 2) will provoke new research questions and lines of hypothesis-testing.

References
http://www.flnnh.ufl.edu/jca/current.htm

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