Book Review

The earliest inhabitants: the dynamics of the Jamaican Taíno

edited by

LESLEY-GAIL ATKINSON (2006)

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MY THIRD edition of The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (Onions, 1983, p. 99) will help me to explain my interest in The Earliest Inhabitants. Archaeology is a subject that some scientists leave solely for historians - “Ancient history generally; systematic description or study of antiquities.” Yet the definition extends beyond history into science - “The scientific study of the remains and monuments of the prehistoric period.” So, science meets ancient history in archaeology, just as it does in Atkinson’s book. It is a pity that some scientists have a poor opinion of archaeology, offering as it does insights into topical subjects such as environmental change and human response (see Caribbean examples in Wilson, 2007). Archaeology is strongly interdisciplinary, and in consequence catches the eye of administrators, grant awarding bodies and the general public. It also appeals directly to the core audience of CJES, that is, to Earth scientists.

The Earliest Inhabitants is an attractive, well produced volume that consists of a general introduction followed by 14 chapters collected into four unequal sections. The introduction explains the historic distinction of the terms Taíno and Arawak, but finishes with a plea for more support for archaeology in Jamaica. Half of the chapters had been published hitherto, but most were in conference transactions or journals that are not readily available internationally. For example, ‘Petrography and source of some Arawak [=Taíno] rock artifacts from Jamaica’ by Roobol and Lee (Chapter 9) was a paper that I have now enjoyed reading. Despite studying the geology of Jamaica for over 20 years, I had never come across it before, probably because it originally appeared in the proceedings of an archaeological conference in Guadeloupe in 1976. I thank Lesley-Gail Atkinson for making these papers more readily available.

Chapters are well written and readable. Most figures are line drawings. Some of the photographs (e.g., fig. 10.1) would have benefitted from higher quality paper, but most are adequate. It is particularly satisfactory to find three papers written or co-authored by the late James Lee, a geologist by training and a notable expert on the pre-Columbian archaeology of Jamaica, but whose contributions are not widely available (see pp. 204-205). I would have welcomed an index.

The first section, ‘Assessment and excavation of Taíno sites,’ includes an introduction to the framework of Jamaican prehistory, three site reports, and an essay on the conflicts between development and archaeology on the island. The site reports are multi-disciplinary. For example, collaboration with palaeontologists led to the identification of marine and terrestrial shells for palaeoenvironmental analysis. Chemical analysis of pottery artifacts from six sites in the Kingston area showed that they were probably derived from a single source; further geological input is now needed to determine the location of the parent clay deposit. A detailed study of the organic content of one productive horizon at Chancery Hall, near Kingston, lists a fascinating diversity of plant and animal remains. Terrestrial arthropods have a poor fossil and sub-fossil record in Jamaica, and, sadly, the insect and scorpion remains at this site were recent introductions, probably due to burrowing (compare with Pflug, 1990).

‘Taíno exploitation of natural resources’ (Section 2, three chapters) concerns biological, not geological assets. A brief introduction to the island’s physiography and terrestrial biota is followed by two chapters examining broader (palaeoethnobotanical) and more local impacts. In the latter, Scudder examines Rodney’s House in the Hellshire Hills, west of Kingston and near the
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cost, and has produced a detailed faunal list (four pages!) of food species derived from the marine and terrestrial environments, mainly vertebrates and molluscs. I was particularly interested by the short list of crabs and lobsters. Identifying these crustaceans from claws and other fragments is a rare specialism. Future studies might benefit by submitting such material to an expert in the field.

Section 3, entitled ‘Analysis of Taíno archaeological data’ (four chapters), examines rock artifacts and pottery. The paper by Roobol and Lee, mentioned above, demonstrates the principal problem in reprinting a paper 30 years old; it’s out of date. Not only does the title refer to Arawaks, but the modern literature of Jamaican geology is ignored. Further, if the questions raised by this paper (e.g., p. 144) have been answered, the resolutions are not shared. But, despite these quibbles, the paper provides a wealth of geoarchaeological data which leads to the conclusion that almost all Jamaican stone artifacts were manufactured from metamorphic rocks of the island, particularly greenstones. Two pendants made of rocks foreign to Jamaica demonstrate movement of artifacts between islands.

Other papers, both here and in section 4, ‘Taíno art forms’ (two chapters), are interesting without being directly relevant to a review for natural scientists. Yet there are questions about pottery and artwork that could draw scientists into these studies. Pottery could be examined in thin section by petrologists or, as shown in Chapter 2, by geochemical techniques. Both could provide data relevant to provenance studies. Petroglyphs are found in limestone caves and the scientific study of Jamaica’s caves, particularly geomorphological surveys, continues (Fincham, 1997). And wooden artifacts can be dated by radiocarbon and other techniques.

I recommend The Earliest Inhabitants as a well written introduction to the prehistory of Jamaica and the Antilles. It covers a sufficient breadth of subjects to entertain any interested reader and much that will interest natural scientists. The cost, by current standards, is not unreasonable.

REFERENCES


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The Earliest Inhabitants: The Dynamics of the Jamaican Taïno University of the West Indies Press, Mona, Jamaica. Collard, Andrée 1971 Bartolomé de las Casas, History of the Indies. Jan 2006. This book takes a close look at the relationships with humans and other (non-human) beings that are imbued with cemi power, specifically within the Taïno inter-island cultural sphere, encompassing Puerto Rico and Hispaniola. The relationships address the important questions of identity and personhood of cemi icons and their human "owners" and the implications of gift-giving and gift-taking that sustain a complex web of relationships between caciques (chiefs) of Puerto Rico and Hispaniola. 2006. The Earliest Inhabitants: The Dynamics of the Jamaica Taïno, University of the West Indies Press, Jamaica. de Hostos A. 1923. Three-pointed stone zemÃ­ or idols from the West Indies: an interpretation. American Anthropologist 25(1):56-71. Hofman CL, and Hoogland MLP. 1999. Expansion of the Taïno cacicazgos towards the Lesser Antilles. Journal de la SociÃ©tÃ© des AmÃ©ricanistes 85:93-113. doi: 10.3406/jsa.1999.1731. Moorsink J. 2011. Modern inhabitants of the Caribbean islands mostly have a mixture of African and European ancestry, but some have a little indigenous DNA as well. Thatâ€™s not entirely surprising; Spanish colonists reportedly married Taíno wives, and other records say that Taíno and escaped African slaves also intermarried and formed communities. The revelation that Taíno DNA closely resembles that of modern Arawakan Peoples also doesnâ€™t rule out the possibility that people reached the Caribbean in earlier waves from places like the Yucatan, for instance. Schroeder says more ancient genetic data could help fill in those gaps. Little knowledge of the Taíno culture is left, but genes can record a history of social interaction that can at least help map out large-scale interactions. You can write a book review and share your experiences. Other readers will always be interested in your opinion of the books you've read. Whether you've loved the book or not, if you give your honest and detailed thoughts then people will find new books that are right for them. 1. CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA Earliest inhabitants: the dynamics of the Jamaican Taïno / edited by Lesley-Gail Atkinson p. cm. Includes bibliographic references. ISBN: 976-640-149-7 1. Taino Indians â€” Jamaica â€” Antiquities. 2. Indians of the West Indies â€” Jamaica â€” Antiquities. 3. Taíno Indians â€” Jamaica â€” Ethnobotany. 4. Excavations (Archaeology) â€” Jamaica. R. Dï¿½Nï¿½This book represents a major contribution to the cultural history of British Colombia, to Chilcotin studies, and to the late prehistory of North America as a whole. Comments0. Join the community to add your comment.