AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL RECONNAISSANCE OF BIMINI, BAHAMAS

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UNDER the auspices of the University of Florida Anthropology Laboratory the writer devoted the second and third weeks of June, 1955, to a survey of the Bimini Islands, Bahamas, the primary objective being an archaeological site reconnaissance of the group. Although archaeological findings were few, there were significant features meriting the observations presented in this report.

One of the most perplexing problems of the anthropologist in the Caribbean is the origin of preceramic, pre-Arawak peoples and culture complexes. Archaeologically these occur from Western Cuba south through the Virgin Islands, and then again, moving northward into the islands from South America, in Trinidad. Preceramic sites have not been reported from islands in the break between St. Thomas, V.I., and Trinidad. In Trinidad the San Juan, Tortuga, St. John, Ortoire, and Cocal sites, all preceramic, have been discussed but not yet fully defined (Rouse 1953: 94, 108). Presumably they represent a tradition from the South American mainland.

The northern preceramic complexes have been grouped together under the generic term Ciboney (Rouse 1948: 497-501) because of similarities in site types, artifact types, and, presumably, nonmaterial aspects of culture. Under the designation Ciboney, Rouse (1951: 251, Fig. 2) includes Cayo Redondo and Guayabo Blanco (Cuba), Cabaret and Couri (Haiti), the Railroad Cave site (Dominican Republic), the Coroso sites (Puerto Rico), and the Krum Bay site on St. Thomas (Virgin Islands). The last three, however, are questionable. In both Trinidad and the Greater Antilles preceramic strata always lie beneath ceramic strata in sites with both occupations, and it has therefore been assumed that preceramic complexes represent first settlement in the West Indies (Rouse 1951: 250; 1953: 96). In the Greater Antilles Ciboney groups must have been fairly widespread, judging from archaeological remains, but by historic times they had been restricted by Arawak pressure to Western Cuba and the Guaicayarima Peninsula in southwest Haiti (Rouse 1948: 497).

Cosculluela (1922: 9) and Rouse (1949) have suggested a North American origin for the Ciboney, specifically a Floridian origin, but other archaeologists have assumed a South American homeland (Harrington 1921, Vol. 2: 424-6; Herrera Fritot 1943: 268). While the gap in preceramic sites between the Virgin Islands and Trinidad affords very little evidence to uphold the latter theory, we have, on the other hand, as little evidence to propose a North American background for these people and their culture. It is true that the Lesser Antilles gap may in actuality represent nothing more than inadequate archaeological knowledge of the region, but for the present we must assume that preceramic sites do not occur there. The data we have today on the early nonceramic phases of the Archaic tradition in Florida show more points of correspondence with Ciboney than can be found between Ciboney and South American nonceramic cultures (Rouse 1949).

This problem of Ciboney origins led the writer to work on Bahamian archaeology in 1950. The archipelago, providing excellent stepping-stones south, held a nebulous position in Caribbean archaeology, and it seemed probable that preceramic sites would be found there if the Ciboney had migrated to the Greater Antilles from Florida. With this problem foremost in mind all accessible archaeological material from the Bahamas was examined, and a thorough analysis was made of the surveys of Brooks, De Booy, Rainey, Herbert Krieger, and Goggin. The writings of Las Casas, Anghiera, Oviedo, and Herrera y Tordesillas were carefully read for references to the islands. No definite preceramic sites were noted, and there were few indications of any pre-Arawak occupation of the Bahamas. It is true that Strombus gores reminiscent of the Ciboney gubia were found from both extremes of the archipelago and that undeformed, characteristically Ciboney, crania have been reported from Andros, but this evidence is so tenuous that no clear-cut decision can be based upon it. A report of Ciboney middens from the Berry Islands and Andros (Krieger 1937: 98) has not been verified nor further described.
With the completion of the general survey (Granberry 1955) the writer concentrated his attention on further clarification of the specific problem. Although most of the archipelago had been surveyed for sites, the western end of Grand Bahama, Great Isaac Cay, the Biminis, the Cat Cays, the islets down to Orange Cay, and Cay Sal and the neighboring Anguila Isles had not been touched upon, except for De Booy's brief stop at Bimini in 1912 (De Booy 1913). These islands form an arc between the southeast Florida coast and Cuba and are the first land encountered after crossing the Gulf Stream. It would seem logical to suspect that Ciboney groups would stop somewhere along this arc in their southward journey, which must have been a haphazard and long-term migration. Somewhere within this arc preceramic sites might occur. The Biminis are closer to Florida than any of the other groups on the arc and they were therefore selected as the departure point of investigation.

There are 2 major islands, North and South Bimini, as well as several smaller ones to the immediate east of Alice Town on the south end of North Bimini. South Bimini, which is relatively flat, is not settled heavily and is covered with mangrove forests. North Bimini, too, is
flat and mangrove covered, except for a narrow strip of land about 4 miles in length and rarely exceeding ¼ mile in width, extending southwards from the west end of the island near Porgy Bay to within a few hundred yards of South Bimini. This spit of land has a ridge down the center averaging 15 to 25 feet above high-tide level. It is tolerably well protected on the bay side from all but the most severe storms by the shallow water of the Grand Bahama Bank, the eastern extension of North Bimini, the protecting arm of South Bimini, and the bar between the north and south islands. There is a narrow beach on the ocean side, from which the underwater shelf slopes down rapidly within a few miles to the great depths of the Gulf Stream. The central ridge juts into the beach with steep limestone overhangs and small cliffs, which, unlike those on most other islands in the Bahamas, are not pitted with caves. The ridge soil has not eroded away to any appreciable extent, and, although sandy, can support the cultivation of vegetables and basic garden produce. Coconut groves cover a considerable portion of the cultivable area. The temperature is usually high, but it is always bearable because of constant east winds. Rainfall, bringing the only water supply, is frequent during the summer and early fall months.

A thorough survey of the ridge area of North Bimini, the only section well suited to and high enough for permanent habitation, revealed no signs of sites, although the bay front at low tide is covered for extensive stretches with English ceramics dating generally from the 1800’s and 1900’s. The natives, both young and old, knew of no Indian remains. Indeed, most of those questioned stated with certainty that no Indians had ever lived on the island. The older people were not familiar with the term “thunderbolt” or “thunderstone,” frequently used in the Bahamas as a name for the Arawak petaloid stone celt.

The only artifacts known from Bimini are a perforated stone pendant and an anthropomorphic coral zemi or spirit-image found by De Booy in 1912. Both specimens are now at the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, and are without doubt of Arawak origin.

If Bimini was inhabited in prehistoric times, village or campsites would certainly have been on the central ridge of North Bimini. The 2 settlements of Alice Town, to the south, converging with Bailey’s Town, to the north, cover the entire 4-mile stretch of the ridge with the exception of very infrequent unsettled areas. Any Indian sites were probably destroyed long ago by the establishment of these 2 towns. One report of a burial mound on the south end of North Bimini was received, but this proved to be a cemetery dating from the devastating cholera epidemic of the late 1800’s.

From historical evidence we know that the islands in the vicinity of Bimini were at least sparsely inhabited by Arawak as late as 1513 (Herrera y Tordesillas 1936, Vol. 3: 324-5). De Booy’s finds indicate that Bimini itself was inhabited by Arawak, but there is no indication of earlier occupation.

The Biminis are not the only islands in this arc, and investigation of others, some still unsettled, is planned for the near future. Although such work may produce further negative results, these should be more satisfactory than the present questionable status of Ciboney origins.

Of ethnological interest was a single report, given the writer by Miss Rita Cartwright of Bimini and New Providence, of the use of obeah in the cure of asthma. Miss Cartwright stated that ouanga charms, containing a gray powdered mixture, had been used by both whites and Negroes in Nassau and were held in high repute as asthma cures. The “doctor” using this method was said to have been taught by his father, who acquired a knowledge of obeah while living in Cuba as a young man.

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PERFORATED ELK TEETH: A FUNCTIONAL AND HISTORICAL ANALYSIS *

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In 1955 an archaeological field party from the State Historical Society of North Dakota recovered 2 perforated elk teeth from a village site, 32SI4, on the Missouri River in North Dakota. The excavations at this site were directed by Alan R. Woolworth and the writer. In an attempt to determine the significance of these specimens the writer searched the literature for data on their distribution in archaeological and ethnographic contexts and hints as to their function among socio-linguistic groups.

The perforated canines of mammals are nearly universal among North American Indian costumes. A large variety of animals have been used for sources of these teeth including bear, canids, horses, bison, and elk. Most of these teeth were suspended point down by a thong passed through a perforation in the root. Northern Plains Indian costumes are commonly decorated with the canines of elk; in fact, the presence of elk teeth in large numbers on garments permits an almost certain identification of a “Plains” item of apparel. Great quantities of these teeth were formerly used in costume embellishment, and today they are not only treasured heirlooms of the Indians yet possessing them, but are highly prized by non-Indian collectors.

Despite the common use of elk teeth on Plains Indian costumes, little has been said of them with respect to function and distribution. The primary sources concerning these pendants are in 19th century accounts of Western travel and exploration. Elk teeth are commonly slighted, and they are only briefly noted in most ethnographic accounts. The perforated elk tooth is an artifact type, defined and classified by the material of origin, the manner of modification, and form. This morphological type is identified, by analogy and association, with pendants on historic Indian costumes and with certain specimens recovered from archaeological sites. Functional interpretations of artifact types may serve as tools in the reconstruction of the culture history of an area. Because elk teeth are found in an integrated and patterned trait complex unique to the Northern Plains and its periphery, these pendants are of interest to those concerned with the history of that area.

Elk teeth are commonly found on the upper parts of a one-piece, sleeveless dress, or on the