

ARCHAIC ORIGINS OF THE CLASSIC TAINOS

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The initial development of the ethnohistoric Tainos has long been situated in the Ostionoid series of peoples and cultures. Conventional wisdom holds that the Ostionoid first developed in Puerto Rico from Saladoid traditions around AD 600 and then spread west. However, new evidence indicates that Archaic peoples were making and using pottery up to 1,500 years before the Saladoid colonists first arrived in Puerto Rico. In addition, early Ostionoid pottery and other aspects of their material culture are more similar to Archaic traditions than they are to those of the “Ceramic-Age” Saladoids. It is argued here that the Ostionoid developed out of Archaic traditions in Hispaniola and then spread to east, west, and north to other islands. The differences observed in ethnohistoric practices recorded for Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola, and Puerto Rico reflect the distinct trajectories that Archaic and Ceramic Age peoples followed on these different islands prior to the arrival of the Spanish.

El desarrollo inicial de los Tainos etnohistóricos se ha situado durante mucho tiempo en la serie Ostionoide de pueblos y culturas. La sabiduría convencional sostiene que el Ostionoide se desarrolló por primera vez en Puerto Rico a partir de las tradiciones Saladoïdes alrededor del año 600 D.C. y luego se extendió hacia el oeste. Sin embargo, nueva evidencia indica que los pueblos Arcaicos estuvieron haciendo y usando cerámica hasta 1.500 años antes de que los colonos Saladoïdes llegaran por primera vez a Puerto Rico. Además, la cerámica Ostionoide temprana y otros aspectos de su cultura material son más similares a las tradiciones Arcaicas que a aquellas de la “Era Cerámica” de los Saladoïdes. Se discute aquí que el Ostionoide se desarrolló de tradiciones Arcaicas en La Española y luego se extendió hacia el este, oeste y norte de otras islas. Las diferencias observadas en las prácticas etnohistóricas registradas para Cuba, Jamaica, La Española y Puerto Rico reflejan las distintas trayectorias que los pueblos Arcaicos y Cerámicos siguieron en estas islas antes de la llegada de los españoles.

Le développement initial du Tainos ethno-historique a été longtemps situé dans les séries Ostionoïdes de peuples et de cultures. La sagesse conventionnelle soutient que les Ostionoïdes se sont d’abord développés à Porto Rico à partir de traditions Saladoïdes autour de l’an 600, puis se sont étendus à l’ouest. Cependant, de nouvelles évidences indiquent que les peuples archaïques fabriquaient et utilisaient de la poterie jusqu’à 1.500 ans avant que les colons Saladoïdes ne soient arrivés à Porto Rico. En outre, la poterie ancienne Ostionoïde et d’autres aspects de leur culture matérielle sont plus semblables aux traditions archaïques qu’elles ne sont des Saladoïdes de l’âge céramique. Il est discuté ici que les Ostionoïdes se sont développés hors des traditions archaïques à Hispaniola et puis se sont étendus à l’est, à l’ouest, et au nord vers d’autres îles. Les différences observées dans les pratiques ethno-historiques enregistrées sur Cuba, la Jamaïque, Hispaniola, et Porto Rico reflètent la trajectoire distincte que les peuples archaïques et les peuples de l’âge céramique ont suivie sur ces différentes îles avant l’arrivée des Espagnols.

Introduction

The origins of Taino societies are based on several key assumptions (Rouse 1986, 1989, 1992): First, that Lithic and Archaic age groups did not make or use pottery; second, that pottery was first brought to the West Indies from South America by Saladoid peoples; third, that pottery reached Puerto Rico about 500 BC, but because the Saladoid expansion stalled in Puerto Rico, pottery was not introduced to the rest of the Greater Antilles until much later; fourth, that pottery vessels and designs were simplified during the 1,000 year pause in Puerto Rico resulting in the Ostionoid series; and fifth, that the Ostionoid peoples brought pottery to the rest of the Greater Antilles and Bahamas when they resumed expansion to the west and north around AD 700. Following from these assumptions, pottery making could *only* have been introduced to those other islands by the Ostionoid peoples of Puerto Rico. This conclusion



is wrong. Pottery is found in otherwise Archaic contexts in Cuba, Hispaniola and Puerto Rico up to 2,000 years before the arrival of the Saladoids, and in other Archaic contexts prior to the Ostionoid expansion.

Pre-Arawak Pottery Horizon

Lithic and Archaic age sites with small amounts of pottery have now been identified throughout the Greater Antilles and into the northern Lesser Antilles, in what Rodríguez Ramos (n.d.) has termed the Pre-Arawak Pottery Horizon. Although previously it was commonly thought that this was an isolated phenomenon, a review of the available published and unpublished data on this early pottery conducted by Rodríguez Ramos (n.d.) has shown that it seems to be much more widespread than originally thought. Moving geographically from West to East: Harrington (1921) was the first to mention pottery in Archaic sites in Cuba. Twenty years later, Rouse (1942:133) made the same observation for the El Nispero site, but concluded that pottery in these sites was deposited after the site was abandoned. However, by 1984, Dacal and Rivero de la Calle (1984) had identified twelve sites in Cuba that belonged to what they called a “proto-agricultural” phase and which they dated to between 500 BC and AD 500. The number of similar sites has increased dramatically in recent years, with the earliest dates pushed back to 2160 BC (Jouravleva 2002:36; Ulloa and Valcárcel 2002).

In Haiti, there is pottery at the Archaic Couri 1 site (Rouse 1941), and Clarke Moore (1998) found “small crude sherds” at the Archaic Source Cascade II site, which was radiocarbon dated to 1090 BC. Furthermore, Meillac style pottery has been radiocarbon dated to the mid-7th century AD in central Hispaniola (Veloz et al. 1981). It is hard to reconcile this very distinct style, with the conclusion that Ostionan peoples introduced pottery to this area from Puerto Rico around AD 700.

In the Dominican Republic (Rimoli and Nadal 1983), pottery associated with an Archaic tool kit is described from the El Caimito (La Caleta) and Musié Pedro sites, which date to as early as 300 BC (Veloz et al. 1974, 1976). The El Curro site is dated to 1450 BC (Ortega and Guerrero 1981), and the Honduras and el Barrio sites are dated to 230 BC to AD 420 (Rimoli and Nadal 1980). Several sites near Punta Cana have decorated pottery that Veloz and Ortega (1996) describe as “proto-Chicoide.” The Punta Cana phase dates from 340 BC to AD 300, with a terminal date of more than 500 years before Chicoid ceramics are supposed to have been made. Similarly, the subsequent El Barrio phase (AD 300–700) has sites with “Ostionoid” components. La Iglesia for example, has radiocarbon dates that are 500 years earlier than the appearance of Ostionoid pottery in Puerto Rico (Ortega et al. 2003).

Pottery in an Archaic context on Puerto Rico is reported for the Coroso culture at the Playa Blanca and Jobos sites (Rouse 1952). Moreover, the Angostura site has a date of 1520 BC, and at the Paso del Indio site a deeply buried stratum with pottery dated to 2630 BC (García 1998, cited in Rodríguez Ramos n.d.).

Unlike Saladoid pottery, which has a highly formalized grammar (Roe 1989), the pots in Archaic sites seem to reflect a period of experimentation where different pastes and different decorative techniques were explored (Jouravleva 2002; Ulloa 2001). Sherds are not common at these sites, and they exhibit a high degree of variability. However, there are general patterns (Rodríguez Ramos n.d.). Globular bowls, with round or flat bottoms, and boat-shapes are the main vessel forms. The pottery is usually highly oxidized, vessel surfaces were smoothed, and most sherds are plain. Red, pink, white or black paint and/or slip, along with incised, punctate and modeled designs are the most common decorations.

Paints or slips were applied to the exteriors and/or interiors, occasionally with a red foundation



and black or white paint. Incision occurs in low frequency, and was executed as lineal incisions made parallel to the rim, perpendicular to the rim, and in angular patterns (Dacal 1986; Lundberg 1989; Tabio and Guarch 1966; Valcárcel et al. 2001; Veloz et al. 1976). Some curvilinear incision has been documented, and also some zoned-punctation and incisions filled with black paint (Castellanos et al. 2001; Ortega et al. 2003; Veloz 2001; Veloz and Ortega 1996). Modeled appliquéés and zoomorphic adornments representing birds and reptiles occur in the Barrio Phase. Finally, the transposition of designs from stone bowls or gourds to pottery has been suggested for Meillac style pottery from Haiti (Rouse 1992).

Return of the Archaics

The widespread use of pottery by Archaic peoples raises a number of questions: First, hemispherical bowls and boat-shaped vessels are the primary shapes in Archaic and Ostionoid sites. In contrast, Saladoid potters made a wide variety of vessel shapes (Roe 1989). If Ostionoid potters are the descendants of Saladoid potters, why did they restrict their repertoire to the two shapes that are most common in Archaic sites?

Second, red surface treatments, including an oxidized paste, red painting and red slips are common on vessels from Archaic sites. In contrast, the Saladoids made extensive use of white paint on a red surface, black paint, and polychromes to represent a complex iconography (Roe 1989; Rouse 1992). Why did the Ostionoids restrict surface treatments to the red coloration that is typical of Archaic vessels?

Third, a wide variety of zoomorphic lugs and adornos were affixed to Saladoid pots while similar lugs and adornos are not found on Archaic or Ostionoid vessels. Why were the diverse and complex zoomorphic adornos of the Saladoid abandoned in favor of a more limited repertoire (e.g., bats, frogs and birds)?

Fourth, Saladoid deposits tend to have the remains of thousands of land crabs and very few mollusks, while Ostionoid deposits have exactly the opposite (Rainey 1940). Land crabs were available during Archaic times, yet Archaic peoples chose not to exploit them. Why does the Ostionoid diet more closely resemble Archaic diets?

Fifth, why do the flaked-stone and shell-tool assemblages in Ostionoid sites look more similar to Archaic tool kits than to the tools found in Saladoid sites (Rodríguez Ramos 2005)?

Sixth, Ostionoid sites appear almost simultaneously in Jamaica, Hispaniola and the Bahamas (circa AD 700), is hard to attribute this distribution to a source area in Puerto Rico (Keegan 2004). How could Ostionan peoples have spread so quickly across Hispaniola and into Jamaica and the Bahamas when they were stuck in Puerto Rico for 1,000 years? In addition, it is not clear that Ostionan pottery ever reached Cuba (Ulloa Hung, personal communication 2004), despite a well-developed ceramic tradition on the island.

Conclusions

The wide distribution of pottery in Archaic sites prior to the arrival of the Saladoids indicates that pottery was *not* introduced to the Greater Antilles by Saladoid colonists. Moreover, early Ostionoid pottery and other associated cultural features most closely resemble late Archaic assemblages in Cuba, Hispaniola and Puerto Rico (Rodríguez Ramos n.d.). It is far easier to explain the Ostionoid as the progressive development of Archaic peoples than it is to view the early Ostionoid as the degeneration of the Saladoid (Chanlatte 2003; Rodríguez Ramos n.d.; 2005).

How and why this Ostionoid development occurred might have multiple explanations. For instance, Rodríguez Ramos (n.d.) argues that what has been lumped into the Ostionoid reflects the multifocal development of Archaic societies in the different islands as a result of both, internal



processes as well as their interaction with other ceramic-making migrants such as the Huecoid and the Saladoid. Another possible explanation is that the Ostionoid development came about in the Dominican Republic, from where it radiated to neighboring islands. Situating the origins of the Ostionoid in Hispaniola solves a number of nagging problems in Taino studies. There are significant differences between Puerto Rico and Hispaniola in the distribution of ceremonial artifacts, the media through which iconography was expressed, community layout and monumental architecture, house size and burial practices, and social and political organization (Curet 2002; Curet and Oliver 1998; McGinnis 1997; Ostapkowicz 1997; Roe 1995). As Curet (2003:19–20) recently noted, “Hispanolan and Puerto Rican polities used significantly different ideological foundations, a reflection of differences in the nature of the political structure and organizations. Judging from the striking differences mentioned, they likely developed from distinct types of ancestral societies, and/or through different and divergent historical processes.”

For 1,000 years Saladoid motifs served to maintain a regional cultural identity, which united peoples in widely dispersed settlements on different islands (Keegan 2004). However, the Saladoids were caught in a vice between Archaic peoples to the west and the Barranroid peoples to the south (Boomert 2000). Thus, after 1,000 years, the Saladoid system of representation collapsed.

The available evidence supports Curet’s conclusion that Taino peoples in Hispaniola and Puerto Rico are indeed the outcome of distinct types of ancestral societies and divergent historical processes. In Puerto Rico they reflect the syncretism of the Saladoid and the Archaic-inspired Ostionoid, while in Hispaniola and Cuba the Tainos had stronger ties to Archaic traditions. Rather than following a single historical trajectory, or simply reflecting changes in lifeways associated with different immigrants, we view these developments as the outcome of multicultural processes, following to some extent Luis Chanlatte’s (1981) early lead.

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