

A CULTURAL TAXONOMY FOR WEST INDIAN ARCHAEOLOGY

By Gary S. Vescelius

Over the course of the last few years, I have been attempting to systematize our information on the prehistory of the Virgin Islands, and, inevitably, that effort has involved the restructuring or refinement of the existing frames of reference for the West Indies as a whole. In this, the first of a series of short papers on the general subject of new frames of reference for West Indian archaeology, I propose to discuss the matter of cultural taxonomy, and to outline a scheme for the classification of the ancient cultures of the Caribbean. In various subsequent articles I shall be dealing with a diversity of other topics: chronology, ecology, the labelling of ethnic groups, evolutionary terminology, and universal codes for the designation of archaeological sites, plant and animal taxa, soil taxa and those forms of rocks and minerals with which archaeologists working in the Caribbean are likely to be confronted. It is my hope that at least some of the schemes I have devised will prove to be useful to other investigators, and that they will therefore be adopted elsewhere, but, whether or not that should ever come to pass, these articles will serve, at any rate, to explain some of the concepts, procedures and terms that I have been employing in the course of my recent work in the Virgin Islands. I do not intend to cover these matters in detail in this particular set of articles; they could not be treated fully in anything shorter than a long monograph. My main object, at this point, is to define some newly devised terms, and to redefine some older ones, that I will be employing in my reports on other aspects of the archaeology of the Virgin Islands.

With respect to the matter of cultural taxonomy, it seems to me that we are urgently in need of a rigorous hierarchical classification of local cultural complexes, and I have devised such a classification. It does not represent much of a departure from existing systems. It can be viewed, instead, as a refinement of the prevailing scheme, the main features of which were formulated by Cruxent and Rouse in the late fifties. It is also compatible with such recently developed schemes as those of Kozłowski on the one hand and Veloz Maggiolo and his associates on the other.

In the rather simple form in which it was originally laid out, the Cruxent-Rouse scheme involved the assignment of individual assemblages to cultural *complexes* of a fairly specific nature, followed by ordering of those complexes into larger classificatory units called *series*. (This represents something of an overstatement, in that Cruxent and Rouse, in dealing with assemblages containing pottery, really limited themselves to the classification of just a *portion* of the

material remains—to the classification of the *pottery* alone, and to the definition of the *partial* complexes they called 'styles'. For present purposes, however, this is not a matter of any great consequence.)

The series concept has proven to be a very useful one here in the Caribbean area. There has been a tendency to replace the word '*series*' itself with the term '*tradition*', but the basic notion remains the same. By 1970, the notion of the tradition was in widespread use throughout the Western Hemisphere.

I think, however, that we require a somewhat more elaborate framework than the simple one devised twenty years ago by Crucent and Rouse. For one thing, there is, as I see it, a pressing need for some sort of intermediate taxonomic unit—something *less* specific than the complex or style but *more* specific than the series or tradition. I propose to refer to a unit of such a grade or level as a *pattern*, and I will be dealing later, with various *patterns* represented in the Virgin Islands. The *Saladoid* cultures of the Virgin Islands, for example, can be sorted out, tentatively, into three patterns: an early (and very wide-ranging) one, which I will call the *Cedrosian*; an intermediate one, which I will call the *Cuevan*; and a later one which I will call the *Longfordian*.

There is also a need—or there is shortly going to *be* a need, almost everywhere in the West Indies—for a taxonomic unit *more* specific than the complex or style (in the sense in which the notion of complex/style is currently employed, at any rate). Though the term '*phase*' has frequently been used, in many different parts of the Western Hemisphere, more or less synonymously with 'complex' or 'style', I would prefer to reserve it for application to the most *specific* units we are capable of defining—to *subdivisions* of those larger units currently labelled as complexes or styles.

In the Central Andean area, where I have done a large part of my own work, the notion of the *phase* as a very specific classificatory unit is well established and has proven to have a great deal of utility; and I think it is going to turn out to be equally useful here in the West Indies.

Fundamentally, then, the classificatory scheme I am currently using is one involving taxonomic units of four different grades or levels of specificity. In order of *decreasing specificity* (or *increasing generality*), those units are: the *phase*, the *complex*, the *pattern* and the *tradition* (or *series*). These are the *basic* units of the taxonomic framework. Just as in the case of the Linnaean classification, it may be convenient, in certain instances, to distinguish units of finer, broader, or intermediate grades; but there is no need to go into that matter at this point, other than to note that there is obviously a need, under certain special conditions, for at least one additional sort of unit. In some cases, we may have reason to believe, in trying to classify a particular assemblage, that it does *not* represent a whole cultural complex but that, on the contrary, it represents only one limited set of activities: shellfish-gathering, for example, or stone-quarrying, or some particular set of ritual activities. In such instances, we need to erect some sort of special tax-

onomic unit, and I propose to call such a unit a *facies*. To give just a couple of examples, it seems to me that the materials recovered by Pantel in the course of his investigations at the Cerrillo workshop site in western Puerto Rico should be considered to represent only one facies of some fuller cultural complex, as yet undefined. They seem to represent only a very limited portion of the material culture of a particular community. By the same token, the materials from the Arboretum site on St. Thomas are best interpreted, as I see it, as representing nothing more than one particular facies—a shellfish-gathering facies—of what is likely to have been a considerably more complicated way of life.

The important point here is *not* whether I happen to be correct in considering this or that particular assemblage to represent nothing more than a facies. It *is*, rather, that we should all be aware of the fact that the materials with which we are dealing may fall into such a category, in which case we must be careful not to treat them as if they were full-blown assemblages.

As to nomenclature, I will simply observe that I have been following the conventional practice of naming complexes after type sites, and traditions or series after type complexes (using the suffix '-oid' as a marker). For patterns, I follow the traditional model, but use the suffix '-(i)an' in place of '-oid'. For phases, I follow the Central Andean convention, numbering them in serial order from early to late.

In this very brief exposition of my own approach to cultural taxonomy, I have had to skip over all sorts of important points; but I hope I have been able to give an idea of the general nature of the taxonomic framework, at any rate.

There are likely to be some people to whom the very notion of a rigorous hierarchical classification of ancient West Indian cultures is likely to be remarkably unappealing—people by whom this sort of thing is likely to be viewed as some sort of giant leap *backward* (all the way back to the thirties, in fact, when North American archaeologists were exhibiting such a notable preoccupation with McKern's 'Midwestern Taxonomic System').

I would agree that a preoccupation with classification as a thing unto itself is bad policy, but I would also argue strenuously in favor of the idea that we are not likely to make much progress on other archaeological fronts—including the ecological front—unless and until we can marshal our data into some sort of really meaningful culture-historical framework. I think we need *more* rather than *less* cultural taxonomy in order to arrive at sound interpretations of an ecological nature, or in order to investigate general processes of cultural evolution, or in order to do almost anything else that archaeologists—including those who would style themselves 'New' with a capital *N*—profess to be interested in doing.

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