

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF TRINIDAD'S PREHISTORY

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This is a historical account of the various theoretical approaches taken in the study of Trinidad's prehistory from 1913 to the present. There is no attempt to provide an exhaustive listing of research efforts including minor and/or unpublished reports; nor is there an attempt to provide a general summary of Trinidad's archaeology. The focus is on major developments in archaeological techniques and their applications to the situation in Trinidad.

Historically, interest in Trinidad's prehistory has been sporadic. Between 1913 and 1924 there were a number of excavations including those of Fewkes, de Booy, and Bullbrook; this was followed, however, by a *lacuna* of twenty years in which little was accomplished and even Bullbrook became discouraged. A rekindling of interest resulted in the formation of an archaeology section within the Trinidad and Tobago Historical Society during the 1940's. This continued through the mid-50's, sparked by the visits of Rouse and John and Rita Goggin in 1953. After the death of Bullbrook, interest declined and there was not much work done until the late 1960's, when members of the Trinidad and Tobago Historical Society (Southern Section) again engaged in active research. More recently, scholars from the Dominican Republic participated in excavations at Banwari-Trace sponsored, in part, by the Historical Society (v. Veloz Maggiolo 1972).

As Figueredo (1974) has noted previously, the major theoretical contributions to Caribbean prehistory usually have come from outside the area. Fewkes and de Booy conducted their research under the sponsorship of American museums, and, of course, the leading figure in Caribbean prehistory, Dr. Irving Rouse, is professor of Anthropology at Yale University.

Most importantly, Bullbrook (who was the first to use modern stratigraphic techniques in Trinidad) was educated in Great Britain and had previous field experience in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. His techniques represent a significant advance over the 'museological' approach that characterized the work of Fewkes and de Booy (*cf.* Figueredo 1974).

Fewkes and de Booy did not dig stratigraphically; they mixed cultural levels and interpreted all findings as evidence for one uniform aboriginal culture. Fewkes, writing in 1914, saw Trinidad as an island unto itself, separate from South America and only distantly related to the cultures of

the Greater Antilles. He sought additional support for this position by analyzing place names in Trinidad and comparing them to place names on the other islands. From this, he concluded that the prehistoric inhabitants of Trinidad were distinct linguistically and culturally from those of the other islands (Fewkes 1914: 203).

Bullbrook also believed that Trinidad was inhabited by one distinct cultural group only throughout most of its prehistory. He interpreted the two strata that he was able to distinguish at his Palo Seco site in 1919 as two phases of the same culture which could be best explained in terms of 'improvements such as would naturally be evolved as time went on and population increased' (Bullbrook 1953: 68 *et seq.*). For Bullbrook, there was no essential difference between the culture of his earlier ceramic style and that of the later one.

In 1946, Rouse dug at the Palo Seco site and uncovered a sequence of ceramic styles with implications for the entire Circum-Caribbean region. Cedros pottery of Trinidad was found to resemble the Cuevas style of Puerto Rico. Rouse suggests that this may have been the result of early Arawak migration. On the other hand, similarities between Erin style pottery in Trinidad and Los Barrancos of the lower Orinoco River (Osgood and Howard 1943) was seen as a result of trade between the natives of Trinidad and those of the Orinoco Delta (Rouse 1947: 103). This shows a reluctance to deal with prehistoric Trinidad in terms of multiple ethnic migrations.

In the course of his extensive and largely unreported fieldwork, Rouse was unable to discover evidence for ceremonial centers on Trinidad (*i.e.*, ball courts and dance plazas). He concludes that Trinidad did not participate in the ceremonial developments which took place during ceramic times in other parts of the Caribbean area; in this respect, the island appears to have been more akin to the Guianas and Amazonia than to the rest of the Caribbean (*v.* Rouse 1953: 111). This is a considerable elaboration and/or modification of Fewkes' original position.

The recent work of Peter O'Brian Harris is very much in the tradition of Bullbrook and Rouse, although Harris appears to be more interested in preceramic cultures than either of the earlier researchers. His major concern is to establish an accurate chronology for Trinidad, a task which he believes is far from accomplished (Harris 1974). José M. Cruxent (a key figure in the history of Caribbean archaeology) is a definite influence behind the sophisticated ecological approach evident in Harris' investigations of preceramic sites.

What is woefully lacking in the study of Trinidad's prehistory is a concern with cultural process as well as chronology. There is a need for a more 'conjunctive' approach (*cf.* Taylor 1948) emphasizing settlement patterns, subsistence bases, *etc.*, in order to 'flesh out' the chronological framework. Archaeologists will need to expand their excavations in order to obtain

necessary data, and they will also have to become conversant in other fields such as geology, human geography, ethnography, and ethnohistory. There is much to be gained in coöperation and/or collaboration with other scholars (*cf.* Newson 1976; Figueredo and Glazier *in press*). A direct historical approach (*cf.* Steward 1942), such as that begun by John and Rita Goggin in their unpublished study of mission sites, may provide a convenient starting place for such coöperation (Rouse 1953; *v.* Bullbrook 1960).

In conclusion, it can be stated that the study of Trinidad's prehistory has seen a gradual progression from the 'museological' approach of Fewkes and de Booy to the chronological approach of Bullbrook, Rouse, and Harris. There are also changes in interpretation, as scholars no longer consider Trinidad to have comprised a single cultural entity and are beginning to recognize the various ethnic groups which may have played a part in Trinidad's prehistory (*cf.* Figueredo and Glazier *in press*). Hopefully, the current emphasis on culture history and/or chronology will give way to a 'conjunctive' approach, and it will be possible to find out not only *when* a certain people lived on Trinidad but *how* they lived as well.

Acknowledgements

This paper has benefited from discussions with Alfredo E. Figueredo and David Maharaj. I also wish to thank the staff of the J.F.K. Library (University of the West Indies at St. Augustine) for their kind assistance.

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