

Caribbean-Central American Long-Distance Interaction – a Cautionary Note

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Introduction

Caribbean archaeology has witnessed exciting changes in recent years. The addition of a fresh generation of trained colleagues, the use of novel technologies, and the application of innovative theoretical positions and modeling strategies have helped us to move on from the traditional culture-history approach to a more dynamic one that encompasses new critical approaches to both documentation and interpretation. One of these developments that has received more attention than many others is the discovery of materials of Central American origin in the insular Caribbean, leading to arguments for direct long-distance interaction between both regions. As if this was not surprising enough, the evidence also seems to suggest that (1) the interaction may have begun quite early, during the initial stages of the peopling of the islands and (2) that the nature of the materials being circulated and exchanged varied through time.

In this paper, we reflect on the analytical issues and comparative methodologies that need to be taken into consideration if we are to satisfactorily address the many challenges raised by the proponents of long-distance interactions. Since Rodríguez Ramos and Hoopes (in this volume) review this topic in detail, we will present a very brief summary of the available evidence and some of the ways it has been interpreted. Our discussion then turns to a critical appraisal of the methodological and empirical challenges that are of vital importance in evaluating the nature and extent of long-distance exchange between groups inhabiting the Circum-Caribbean theatre.

Summary of the Evidence and Interpretations

In general, most of the evidence used in the arguments claiming *direct* long-distance interaction between Central America, Colombia (Hoopes and Fonseca 2003) and the Caribbean islands, primarily the Greater Antilles, can be grouped as follows:

(1) 'Green-stones': A number of exotic green-stones (primarily jadeite celts and pendants) found in some of the Caribbean islands (e.g., Antigua), have been chemically sourced to the jadeite source of Motagua Valley, Guatemala.

(2) Useful/edible plants: introduced species have been reported for the earliest cultural contexts of the islands (about 5000 BP), especially Puerto Rico. Example of these taxa include maize (*Zea mays*), manioc, sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*), marunguey or zamia (*Zamia spp.*) yautía (*Xanthosoma safittifolium*), ñame (*Discorea/Rajania*), beans, yellow sapote (*Poutevia campechiana*), sapodilla (*Manilkara zapota*), and possibly avocado (*Persea sp.*) (Pagan et al. 2005; Pagán-Jiménez 2013). Accordingly, this suite of introduced plants is similar to archaeobotanical assemblage identified (earliest) in Panama around 7000-5500 BP (e.g., Piperno and Pearsall 1998; Dickau 2005; Dickau et al. 2007). Moreover, another evidence related to the processing of (some) of these plants, is the co-presence of the edge-ground cobble/milling-stone complex also present in the Isthmian-Colombian Area (particularly in Panama) as well as Puerto Rico, Hispaniola and Cuba (Rodríguez Ramos 2005; 2010: 64-73; 84-85; 2013; Rodríguez Ramos et al. 2013: 130-131).

(3) Stylistic Similarities: Resemblances in the forms, designs and motives found on objects of local manufacture. With few exceptions, most of the morphological analogies are based on the iconography of sumptuary or 'religious' artifacts of personal use (i.e., pendants); the majority are made of mother-of-pearl or various species of 'greenstone' (see Chanlatte-Baik and

Narganes Storde, ed. [2005] and references cited in Rodríguez-Ramos and Hoopes, this volume).

(4) Technology: Objects made of gold-copper alloy known as *tumbaga* (see Oliver, 2000) and objects made using the string-sawing technique in the production of early pendants (c. 500 BC to AD 500) can be traced to the continent.

(5) Computer Simulations: finally, navigational computer simulation studies by Callaghan (2001, 2003) have demonstrated that successful direct “drift” round trips between the Isthmian-Colombian region and Costa Rica (Callaghan and Bray 2007) and also the Greater Antilles are possible (Callaghan 2013).

Sourcing apart, the evidence summarized above has been used to speculate about the nature of this intra-regional contact. Some, for example, have used the sumptuary character of the objects to suggest that the interaction was part of an exchange system between elites (e.g., Hofman and Hoogland 2011:20). Others have argued that contact between the islands and the Isthmian-Colombian area strongly influenced cultural and socio-political trends in one or both regions (e.g., Rodríguez Ramos 2013: 166, Rodríguez Ramos 2010: 35). The evidence has also been interpreted as showing very intensive and extensive interactions that resulted in, or stimulated, the development of networks or spheres of trade and/or exchange that together comprise a pan-regional cultural/social unit that can be called the ‘Greater Caribbean’. This pan-regional interaction sphere, it is argued, included a shared, common belief system expressed in the material and iconographic qualities of the objects in question (e.g., Hofman and Bright 2010; Rodríguez Ramos 2010: 6, 35).

Challenges for the Future: Methodology

The discovery of exotic materials in the Caribbean islands that pointed to mainland sources beyond or outside the expected Northeast Venezuela -Trinidad-Guyana sphere was a surprise to many of us. It took time and lots of test results to convince most archaeologists in the region. Looking back now, it seems to us that the reluctance to accept the new evidence was not because we thought that the ancient islanders were incapable of such long-distance travels. In fact, we were all keenly aware of the aboriginal expertise in open sea navigation, an obvious requirement (initial conditions) to account for the first human colonization of the insular Caribbean. This skepticism was instead due to the fact that for a long time (starting with Rouse 1958, 1962, 1966) we did not “see”, or could not recognize, any continental influences in the archaeological record, with the notable exception of NE South America. But once the hard borders of the Caribbean Culture Area were, so-to-speak, breached, the study of social and cultural processes in the ancient history of the region not only entered a new and exciting phase of archaeological inquiry, but also amplified the challenges we face in untangling the complex deep history of relations between the islands and the adjacent continental mainland fringing the Caribbean, particularly Central America and Colombia.

We need, however, to be cautious and make sure that the excitement does not lead us to ignore or overlook some of the big questions as well as the subtle nuances of the topic. For this reason, we would like to propose a series of suggestions on methodological challenges to further our understanding of the presence of Isthmian-Colombian material in the Antilles.

To begin with, a pervasive problem encountered in many of the comparisons, revolves around a particular potential logical pitfall in argumentation: *abductive reasoning* (for definition and use, also see Gell 1998: 15). Alexander Geurds (2011), a colleague archaeologist working in

Nicaragua, has best expressed our own concerns regarding what he calls, the “Similarity Trap” (Geurds and Broekhoven 2010). It is well worth an extended quotation:

The reasoning entailed in many of the comparative investigations of circum-Caribbean mobility and exchange is suggestive of some form of interaction. However, in all cases, except for the arguments based on provenance studies of artefacts, they are not based on samples of a particular data-set; they are a form of probable argument, perhaps a conjecture. In essence, the growing list of publications arguing pan-Caribbean interaction is predominantly built around comparisons of resemblance [analogy]. This resemblance is deemed sufficient to warrant these conjectures. This is *abduction*, in Peircian terms [see also Oliver 2009: for a discussion of abduction]). By themselves, abductions cannot warrant any particular conclusion, they need to be accompanied by follow-up research taking a regional and site level perspective. If surprising resemblances between objects across the Caribbean Sea are observed in pre-Colonial material cultures, and if we assume that these resemblances coincided with the existence of a Greater Caribbean interaction sphere, or a primordially shared Caribbean worldview and so forth, such resemblances are rendered obvious, and we can assume that the Greater Caribbean thesis is true. Whilst archaeological reasoning holds abduction as part of its essence of reasoning about the past, not furthering initial probable arguments by means of local scale case studies will have the Greater Caribbean thesis fall short of being convincing (Geurds 2011:52; our italics and our additions in brackets).

This is not to say that the first step in selecting materials for technological and/or morphological comparison from two or more distant regions should not be grounded on similarity, but like Geurds, we do emphasize that the reasons (causes) for such similarity cannot be based on abductive or circular reasoning.

The “Trap of Similarity” problem aside, the first analytical step in apprehending what similarity (analogy) means is to identify and formulate the appropriate research questions besides

just asking where the object or symbols might have originated. Questions that can help us begin to understand the social, cultural, and physical nature and dynamics of the long-distance movements of objects and symbols across space. Examples of such questions relate to topics such as:

- **Acquisition/Fidelity of Transmission:** How similar objects and/or meanings have to be to ‘count’ as originating from a singular source? At the risk of stating the obvious, analogy is not homology and *vice versa*. Outside precise copies ([re-]productions of identical objects/meanings), the acquisition of an unaltered ‘original’ to be taken afar, this question relates to the matter of *fidelity and modes of transmission* that is, in turn, linked to modes learning and practice (see Joyce, this volume) that may account for variations from the original model; for example emulation at the source and its potential transformation processes after acquisition and transportation to its new geographic and sociocultural setting, over the short or long term (e.g., reinterpretation, such as syncretism).

- **Meaning:** how were these oral and/or material objects reinterpreted by the recipient society vis-a-vis the group of origin?
- **Intensity of interaction:** How much, for how long, and how often?
- **Functions:** How and where were they used (contexts)? How and where were they disposed of?
- **Importance:** What were the impacts of the interaction on the local historical processes on both sides of the interaction?

To answer these questions demands detailed studies at multiple levels of analysis. Of course, the object itself and, if available, the associated or attached symbols have to be the primary unit of analysis. Eventually, however, the analysis must go beyond the object to obtain information at other levels and scales. For example, studies focused on the physical composition

of the object can provide valuable information on the origin of the raw material used to craft it. Likewise, stylistic features are important for cross-cultural comparison. But, by themselves, the objects will not provide contextual information that can help us address many of the questions listed above. With better evidence, in terms of site location and contextual stratigraphy, we are better placed to address questions about its uses, potential meaning and whether it was the finished object or just the raw material that was imported.

To increase confidence in interpretative analyses, we would suggest the use of a variety of statistical and quantitative methods ranging from simple descriptive and multivariable statistics to more sophisticated spatial quantitative techniques. Using quantitative analysis can be helpful in obtaining details about the “exotic” object, such as their proportion compared to the local ones of similar type; their distribution and concentration within the assemblage, site, and region; or patterns of association (e.g., co-occurrence) with other objects.

These are but a few examples of possible additional analysis. Summarizing, a detailed analysis at multiple levels and scales can provide the necessary information in order to understand the “nuts and bolts” of the dynamics of the interaction.

Challenges for the Future: Empirical Issues

In addition to the methodological issues outlined above, some studies of putative Isthmian-Colombian-Caribbean connections have what might be called ‘empirical challenges’ that need to be tackled in order to move forward. While various kinds of challenges can be discussed, here we concentrate on those related to the proposition of a direct route across the Caribbean Sea rather than on those focusing on movements through the island chain.

The first challenge and, possibly the most important one, is how to explain the absence of insular materials/objects/symbols in the Isthmian-Colombian region. This point is of critical importance since it undermines a core principle or premise of the direct contact model, where one would expect that transactions based on reciprocity would take place. The lack of Caribbean-sourced archaeological materials on the mainland, of course, does not imply that they are absent – it is just that convincing examples have not yet come to light. This needs urgent resolution.

Assuming that a direct contact occurred, there are many possible explanations for this including:

- the evidence exists, but has not been found yet because of the scarcity of archaeological projects in the continental region;

- the evidence exists, but it consists of non-sumptuary objects that are not commonly published in reports;

- not all interaction necessarily entails material exchanges, but, perhaps of intangibles that are difficult to detect archaeologically (e.g., wife exchange, slaves, other perishable materials);

- the nature of the interaction may have required the transfer of materials in one direction only, although we find this scenario rather improbable.

These and any other potential explanations need to be assessed and evaluated against physical evidence.

Until recently, there was a tendency to invoke direct contacts across the Caribbean Sea, between the Isthmian-Colombian region and the Greater Antilles (especially Puerto Rico), because of a perceived ‘absence’ of Antillean-mainland similarities or influences in the continental area to the *east*, along the Caribbean coasts of Colombia to central Venezuela. There are two problems with this view. First, this area of northwestern Colombia and northern Venezuela has seen little archaeological work and the absence of Caribbean objects may be more the result of sampling

problems. Therefore, like in the case discussed above, here the absence of evidence may not be evidence for the absence.

Having said that, however, some of the material types typically used as evidence in favor of the direct contact have been found recently in this intermediate region. These include the presence of *Zamia spp.* and other cultivars in Trinidad as early as 7,790 B.P (Pagán et al. 2015; Rodríguez Ramos and Hoopes, this volume), a three-pointed sculptured object from Malambo site in Barranquilla, Colombia (Veloz Maggiolo and Angulo Valdez 1982), and the green-stones pertaining to the “Huecoid” complex depicting a raptorial bird (purportedly depicting a Andean condor; see Chanlatte-Baik and Narganes Storde 2005), found also in Trinidad. This evidence is too little to debunk the model of direct contact, but it raises many questions and the possibility of other explanations such as: (a) the objects may have been traded directly with Central America, eventually, they may have entered in circulation eventually reaching the locations where they were found; (b) the direct route model is not correct; (c) there could have been multiple routes active at the same time.

Independently of all these possibilities, however, the evidence of the presence of these few objects is not enough to support any of them and further examination is needed following a broader methodology such as the one suggested above for the direct contact model.

Final Remarks

This brief discussion is intended to prompt us all to reflect on the many difficulties faced by archaeologists when assessing long distance and most especially direct contact between the Isthmian-Colombian mainland and the insular Caribbean (particularly the Greater Antilles). We are encouraged that the ‘circum’ in Circum-Caribbean is once again a salient topic in mainland-

island comparative studies. We also insist that we should consider the Circum-Caribbean as an open rather than a closed space; that we ought to retain an awareness for the potential for, and strive to distinguish between, direct and indirect contacts and interactions; that the selected materials for cross-comparison be systematically and rigorously analyzed beyond the “similarity” (analogy, to the exclusion of homology) framework. The papers presented in this volume provide various efforts in tackling what Geurds (2010) labeled the ‘similarity trap’ (for example, Joyce, this volume), but in regard to the Isthmian-Colombian and Caribbean Islands comparisons (Rodríguez Ramos and Hoopes, this volume) purported direct links with the Antillean islands (especially Greater Antilles) we feel that much analytical work is still needed to overcome the problems entailed in the uncritical application of abductive reasoning. The primary aim of this cautionary note is to ensure that well-intentioned efforts do not revisit the old (hyper-)diffusion models, such as the direct voyage between Japan (Jomon) and Coastal Ecuador (Valdivia) of Meggers (e.g., Meggers and Evans 1966), or the direct movement (migration) from Cedeño in the Apure-Orinoco juncture (Venezuela) to northern Hispaniola (Zucchi 1984; Veloz Maggiolo 1991: 141-145). Dressing up ‘diffusion’ as vectors or nodes in network models does not, by itself, solve the problem of analogy and abductive reasoning, nor does it reveal the multi-scalar social, economic, political and, in a word, cultural processes that would account for similarity.