

Book Review

The earliest inhabitants: the dynamics of the Jamaican Taíno

edited by

LESLEY-GAIL ATKINSON (2006)

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MY THIRD edition of *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Onions, 1983, p. 99) will help me to explain my interest in *The Earliest Inhabitants*. Archaeology is a subject that some scientists leave solely for historians - "Ancient history generally; systematic description or study of antiquities." Yet the definition extends beyond history into science - "The scientific study of the remains and monuments of the prehistoric period." So, science meets ancient history in archaeology, just as it does in Atkinson's book. It is a pity that some scientists have a poor opinion of archaeology, offering as it does insights into topical subjects such as environmental change and human response (see Caribbean examples in Wilson, 2007). Archaeology is strongly interdisciplinary, and in consequence catches the eye of administrators, grant awarding bodies and the general public. It also appeals directly to the core audience of *CJES*, that is, to Earth scientists.

The Earliest Inhabitants is an attractive, well produced volume that consists of a general introduction followed by 14 chapters collected into four unequal sections. The introduction explains the historic distinction of the terms Taíno and Arawak, but finishes with a plea for more support for archaeology in Jamaica. Half of the chapters had been published hitherto, but most were in conference transactions or journals that are not readily available internationally. For example, 'Petrography and source of some Arawak [=Taíno] rock artifacts from Jamaica' by Roobol and Lee (Chapter 9) was a paper that I have now enjoyed reading. Despite studying the geology of Jamaica for over 20 years, I had never come across it before, probably because it originally appeared in the proceedings of an archaeological conference in Guadeloupe in 1976. I thank Lesley-Gail Atkinson for making these papers more readily available.

Chapters are well written and readable. Most figures are line drawings. Some of the photographs (e.g., fig. 10.1) would have benefitted from higher quality paper, but most are adequate. It is particularly satisfactory to find three papers written or co-authored by the late James Lee, a geologist by training and a notable expert on the pre-Columbian archaeology of Jamaica, but whose contributions are not widely available (see pp. 204-205). I would have welcomed an index.

The first section, 'Assessment and excavation of Taíno sites,' includes an introduction to the framework of Jamaican prehistory, three site reports, and an essay on the conflicts between development and archaeology on the island. The site reports are multi-disciplinary. For example, collaboration with palaeontologists led to the identification of marine and terrestrial shells for palaeoenvironmental analysis. Chemical analysis of pottery artifacts from six sites in the Kingston area showed that they were probably derived from a single source; further geological input is now needed to determine the location of the parent clay deposit. A detailed study of the organic content of one productive horizon at Chancery Hall, near Kingston, lists a fascinating diversity of plant and animal remains. Terrestrial arthropods have a poor fossil and sub-fossil record in Jamaica, and, sadly, the insect and scorpion remains at this site were recent introductions, probably due to burrowing (compare with Pflug, 1990).

'Taíno exploitation of natural resources' (Section 2, three chapters) concerns biological, not geological assets. A brief introduction to the island's physiography and terrestrial biota is followed by two chapters examining broader (palaeoethnobotanical) and more local impacts. In the latter, Scudder examines Rodney's House in the Hellshire Hills, west of Kingston and near the

coast, and has produced a detailed faunal list (four pages!) of food species derived from the marine and terrestrial environments, mainly vertebrates and molluscs. I was particularly interested by the short list of crabs and lobsters. Identifying these crustaceans from claws and other fragments is a rare specialism. Future studies might benefit by submitting such material to an expert in the field.

Section 3, entitled 'Analysis of Taíno archaeological data' (four chapters), examines rock artifacts and pottery. The paper by Roobol and Lee, mentioned above, demonstrates the principal problem in reprinting a paper 30 years old; it's out of date. Not only does the title refer to Arawaks, but the modern literature of Jamaican geology is ignored. Further, if the questions raised by this paper (e.g., p. 144) have been answered, the resolutions are not shared. But, despite these quibbles, the paper provides a wealth of geoarchaeological data which leads to the conclusion that almost all Jamaican stone artifacts were manufactured from metamorphic rocks of the

island, particularly greenstones. Two pendants made of rocks foreign to Jamaica demonstrate movement of artifacts between islands.

Other papers, both here and in section 4, 'Taíno art forms' (two chapters), are interesting without being directly relevant to a review for natural scientists. Yet there are questions about pottery and artwork that could draw scientists into these studies. Pottery could be examined in thin section by petrologists or, as shown in Chapter 2, by geochemical techniques. Both could provide data relevant to provenance studies. Petroglyphs are found in limestone caves and the scientific study of Jamaica's caves, particularly geomorphological surveys, continues (Fincham, 1997). And wooden artifacts can be dated by radiocarbon and other techniques.

I recommend *The Earliest Inhabitants* as a well written introduction to the prehistory of Jamaica and the Antilles. It covers a sufficient breadth of subjects to entertain any interested reader and much that will interest natural scientists. The cost, by current standards, is not unreasonable.

REFERENCES

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