

LATE PRE-COLONIAL AND EARLY COLONIAL ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE LAS AVES ARCHIPELAGOS, VENEZUELA

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Abstract

This is the first thorough report on the pre-colonial archaeology of the two coralline archipelagos of Las Aves, situated ca. 150 kilometers off the north-western coast of the Venezuelan mainland. By analyzing the archaeological remains and features recovered on these islands this paper aims at shedding light on the nature of social, political, and economic phenomena that may have underlain the mobility of Amerindians who bore stylistically distinctive pottery both from the mainland coast to the islands and from one group of islands to another, during late pre-colonial times. The 16th- and 17th-century documentary data is also reviewed to assess how the arrival of the European colonizers impacted traditional Amerindian mobility and interactions in this region. The results of the research indicate that diverse social-political and economic strategies and negotiations were used by the late pre-Hispanic societies of the north-central Venezuelan mainland coast and from the islands of Aruba, Curaçao and Bonaire to gain access to the natural resources of these oceanic islands. They also suggest how the mainland polities controlled the access to the island territories through time. Two decades after the arrival of the Spanish conquerors, violent slave raids led by Spanish pearl fishery entrepreneurs from the eastern coast of Venezuela as well as from Santo Domingo and Puerto Rico permanently halted the traditional indigenous mobility that oscillated between the islands and between the mainland and the islands.

Keywords: pre-Hispanic archaeology, Venezuelan archaeology, Las Aves archipelagos, islands of Venezuela, Valencioid archaeology, Dabajuroid archaeology, Southern Caribbean archaeology

Resumen

Este es el primer informe sobre la arqueología prehispánica de los dos archipiélagos coralinos de Las Aves, situados a unos 150 kilómetros al norte de la costa noroccidental de Venezuela. Mediante el análisis de los restos y la información arqueológica recuperada en dichas islas, el presente trabajo pretende arrojar luz sobre la naturaleza de los fenómenos sociales, políticos y económicos que puedan explicar la movilidad de los grupos amerindios portadores de una cerámica estilísticamente distinta desde la costa continental a las islas y de un grupo de islas al otro, durante finales de la época pre-colonial. En el curso de la investigación se analizaron, también, las fuentes documentales de los siglos XVI y XVII para evaluar cómo la llegada de los colonizadores europeos afectó la movilidad y las interacciones tradicionales en esta región. Los resultados de la investigación indican que las sociedades prehispánicas de la costa continental venezolana y de las islas Aruba, Curaçao y Bonaire utilizaban

diversas estrategias y negociaciones políticas, sociales y económicas para lograr el acceso a los recursos naturales de estas islas oceánicas. También sugieren cómo los indígenas del continente controlaban el acceso a los territorios insulares a través del tiempo. Dos décadas después de la llegada de los conquistadores españoles, las violentas armadas esclavistas lideradas por los emprendedores españoles involucrados en la pesca de perlas en la costa oriental de Venezuela, así como provenientes de Santo Domingo y Puerto Rico, interrumpieron la movilidad tradicional de los indígenas que oscilaba entre las islas y entre el continente y las islas.

Palabras clave: arqueología prehispánica, arqueología de Venezuela, archipiélagos de Las Aves, islas de Venezuela, arqueología Valencioide, arqueología del Caribe Meridional

INTRODUCTION

The research discussed in this paper is part of the long-term Project on Venezuelan Island Archaeology that has been advanced by the authors since 1982. To the present, more than 60 islands located off the Venezuelan coast have been surveyed and dozens of pre-colonial sites located. More than 900 m² have been excavated, distributed over 200 test pits and 14 trenches. At nine sites, systematic 'block' excavations have been carried out (Antczak and Antczak 1989c, 1992, 1993, 1999, 2006, 2008, in press).

This study focuses on the pre-Hispanic and early colonial archaeology of two small coral archipelagos located off the central coast of Venezuela: the Las Aves de Sotavento and the Las Aves de Barlovento. No data regarding the archaeology of these islands was known before the present project began. The authors visited the archipelagos on four occasions and the fieldwork lasted for a total of 52 days. The main goal of the fieldwork was to locate and make an inventory of the archaeological sites and to generate, from the insular perspective, hypotheses concerning the mobility of Amerindians who were the bearers of stylistically diagnostic pottery between the mainland coast and the islands. We also aimed to establish the first chronology of the presence of the distinctive pottery bearers on these groups of islands. The last part of this paper is dedicated to discussion of a possible political and economic rationale lying hidden behind the pottery bearers' movements in space and time. We envisage the role of this study as one stimulating and opening paths for future systematic research into the nature and dynamics of interisland and island-mainland sociocultural interactions, rather than one providing conclusive remarks on the pre-Hispanic and early colonial past of the Las Aves archipelagos.

THE OCEANIC ISLANDS

The Southern Caribbean islands situated off the mainland coast of Venezuela are located within an arid belt stretching along the southern Caribbean and the northern part of South America (Trewartha 1961; Lahey 1973 [Figure 1]). The archipelagos of Las Aves, Los Roques and La Orchila, the islands La Tortuga, La Blanquilla and Los Hermanos, as well as the Netherlands Antilles of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao (ABC islands) are largely calcareous formations. They are considered an independent part of the Antillean orogenesis (Stock 1982: 193). The most important non-calcareous groups are Los Testigos, Los Monjes, Los Frailes and Margarita, which is only in part a calcareous island. It has been suggested that this whole insular region 'may be a crustal block (Bonaire block), wedged and rotated between the Caribbean and South American plates' (Silver *et al.* 1975). The igneous-metamorphic complex, which outcrops on some Venezuelan islands such as Gran Roque and La Orchila, is probably of Cretaceous and Upper Cretaceous age (Schubert and Moticska 1972, 1973). These islands are separated from the mainland by channels several hundred meters deep and by a distance of dozens of kilometers (Schubert and Valastro 1976). This indicates that they were never connected to the