

Distant Cousins or Next Door Neighbors? New Ideas about Pottery Styles at La Isabela, Dominican Republic

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ABSTRACT

Archeology always uses decorative patterns on ceramic vessels as a means of distinguishing different cultures of different time periods. Among the Taíno Indians of the Greater Antilles, two types of Ostionoid pottery designs, Chican and Meillacan, have been assumed to come from two distinct cultures; one predating the other by hundreds of years. However, recent excavations done at Taíno Indian sites in the Dominican Republic are challenging this assumption. Research conducted by members of the Bahía Isabela Archeological Project (BIAP) shows evidence these two decoration styles, Chican and Meillacan, are present in the same village sites and presumably within the same time period. This paper will show that the distribution of recovered pottery fragments across the site is more consistent with the hypothesis that these separate decoration styles may reflect small scale social distinctions and not separations caused by time or geography.

Since the 1930s, the name Irving Rouse has been irrevocably linked to Caribbean Archaeology and his work is often referenced in archaeological publications to this day. He has been instrumental in developing the current chronological model naming the cultures, peoples, and migration patterns used in tracking these cultures through space and time. However, although Rouse's categorization has been shown to work well in the past for the Leeward and Windward Islands, there has been increasing discrepancy between his ideas and what is seen in the archaeological record of the Greater Antilles. Recent excavations in the Dominican Republic by Indiana University's Bahía Isabela Archaeological Project (BIAP), have uncovered possible inconsistencies in the relationships between two of these groups of people, known as the Chican and the Meillacan, and may indeed show that these cultures co-existed along the northern coast of the Dominican until the time of contact with the Spanish explorers.

The Rouse methodology uses a hierarchical system in which cultures are divided into smaller component units in order to track cultural traditions and migrations among the indigenous people of the Caribbean. At the top, this model has a *series*, which are people who produce and consume related material culture, followed by a *subseries*, which refers to local groups that are relatively close in time or geography, and finally *styles*, which are those groups of people all producing the same type of decorated ceramic vessels. This way, the geographical distribution and specific timeline of cultures can be represented in a chart or template (Curet, 2005). Rouse strongly advocated distinguishing people and cultures by the period in which they occupied an area, and he divided cultural boundaries geographically in space and time along specific lines of development. Categories are made "culturally as homogeneous as possible," so that each spatial and temporal combination "ought to contain a different people and culture" (Rouse, 1986).

In Rouse's taxonomy, the Ostionoid Meillacan subseries developed in the Cibao Valley of Hispaniola and radiated west into central Cuba and southward into Jamaica. Its ceramics were characterized by rectilinear designs featuring hatching and crosshatching along the body of the vessel, with incised lugs or handles meant to represent geometric or zoomorphic shapes (Fig. 1). It was replaced in the Mona Passage and Hispaniola by the Ostionoid Chican subseries around

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AD 1200. Although there are different styles attributed to the Chican subseries, they are generally characterized by a curvilinear pattern of varying complexity, sometimes in combination with incised lines and punctuations and modeled lugs or adornos (Fig. 2). According to Rouse, this subseries also originated in the Dominican Republic, and he believed that the Chican people were the ancestors to the classic Taíno found throughout Hispaniola and the earlier Meillacan culture evolved into the Taínos of Jamaica and Bahamas.

The categorizations created by Rouse provided the framework on which most archeological research in the Caribbean has been founded. Since that time, other archeologists who have studied and reported on Caribbean culture continue to reference the major cultural changes as abrupt, time-oriented events. In this view, once a culture migrated to the islands they would eradicate, displace, or absorb any other indigenous cultures present (Rouse 1986; 1992). The assumption is that subcultures are pure until they are influenced by another group, at which point, one culture assumes the traits of the other. There is no interaction between cultures (except for replacement) and only rarely did one group evolve into another.

The problem with this model is that only one culture or people are present in one region at a time and that they cannot exist in the same spatial and temporal region simultaneously. Using the Rouslean methodology, when a group migrates to an area that is already inhabited, one culture or people must necessarily conquer or displace the other. Recent evidence found by archeologists at Indiana University, however, shows that this may not be the case for the Meillacan and Chican people.

Since 1995, archaeologists from IU's BIAP team have been investigating sites on the northern coast of the Dominican Republic near the ruins of the first Spanish settlement at La Isabela. Previous archaeological research has been done at these ruins, but these projects have been focused solely on the Spanish settlement (Deagan and Cruxent, 2002). Research done by BIAP is focused on the daily lives of both the Taínos and the Europeans, as well as how these two cultures interacted. Of particular interest to the archaeologists are the shell and bone remains, stone tools, and types and categories of the ceramics used by the Taínos.

Several sites surrounding La Isabela have been excavated, including Edilio Cruz, Loma de Leonardo, El Tamarindo, and El Perenal (Fig. 3). Of the many artifacts recovered, two types of decorative patterns, Meillacan and Chican designs, are regularly found, often within the same site and even within the same 10 centimeter excavation levels. These findings suggest the possibility of two culturally different groups occupying the same geographical areas at the same time, and the likelihood that they co-existed, traded, or intermarried with each other.

One of the Taíno village sites that BIAP investigated in the summers of 2005 and 2007 was El Tamarindo, a relatively large settlement overlooking the Río Bajabonico and the Atlantic Ocean. El Tamarindo is on a hillside located 2 km south of La Isabela and was heavily wooded during the 2005 excavation, although the site had been cleared of trees and vegetation since then. The topsoil had been disturbed, and rain runoff in the previous 2 years had uncovered large surface areas that were scattered with shell middens and ceramic sherds. Data were collected from the Tamarindo site and some 1093 ceramic sherds were recovered from the large midden piles, along with a multitude of other artifacts of daily life.

During the 2007 field season, five excavation units were mapped in an area 45 x 55m² along the hillside. Each unit was marked in a 1m x 1m square grid and excavated down to the bedrock. Excavations were done in 10cm levels when artifacts of significant size were found, and in 20 cm levels where few or no artifacts were present. The majority of sherds recovered were located in the T22, T23, and T25 units, which are located along a ridge sloping south-southwest. These units

were chosen for the surface runoff, which had accumulated on the downward slope of the hill. The units held large quantities of oyster shell, and smaller numbers of net sinkers, lithics, and gastropod remains.

Of the 1093 ceramic artifacts recovered from the site, roughly 6% ($n = 63$) were incised with observable decorations. Of these, 43 were identified as having Chican designs, 13 were of the Meillacan style, and 7 were unidentifiable. These numbers show that 20% of decorated sherds found were of Meillacan origin. In addition, Meillacan sherds were always found in with Chican sherds in the same levels, and the relative proportions between the two designs ranged from approximately 11% to 48% within each excavation unit. The co-occurrence of the two pottery styles was unexpected, as Rouse and other scholars claim the cultures represented by these ceramics occupied separate, distinct places, and times.

One explanation for the mixing of styles may be the less than pristine condition of the site. The topsoil had been subject to disturbance by the recent deforestation and the effects of modern animals such as horses, cattle, and land crabs. There was effectively no visible stratigraphy in the soil down to the bedrock to approximately 70-80cm below the surface. Considering this, it is highly unlikely that the soil had remained undisturbed to this depth. This can be problematic when attempting to accurately date the artifacts or to attach any significant meaning to the ceramics that were recovered. Still, although El Tamarindo does not show significant stratigraphy in the soil, there is evidence of regular distribution among the sites. The majority of artifacts are consistently found at the 20-40cm level, with the total number of artifacts found showing a normal distribution curve from the surface to the bedrock. This pattern is steady throughout the El Tamarindo units and does provide some measure of accuracy in placing these sherds within the same time period. Considering the soil layer is only 70cm thick, any major turnover within the subsoil would have resulted in a homogenous distribution of the ceramics, which was not observed.

In addition, nine sherds from El Tamarindo have been analyzed for specific residues from food remains that have been absorbed into the vessel walls (VanderVeen, 2006). These sherds consisted of Meillacan and Chican design styles, as well as undecorated pieces of pottery. All of the sherds were found to have been used in the processing of fish, indigenous land mammals, and local plant material. However, seven of the sherds showed evidence of lipids and fatty acids that were from ruminant animals such as cattle, goats and sheep, which were not indigenous to the Caribbean. These included two Meillacan styled sherds, and interestingly, none of the Chican sherds. These vessels must have been used after contact with European colonists and, although the sample size is small, it is interesting to note that the producers of the Meillacan pots were thought to be from an earlier time period than the Chican peoples and located far from the Spanish settlements, and yet these vessels must be from a post contact period.

Past research saw cultural changes in terms of population movement, where radical changes were seen at the boundaries where these people met. In Rouse's model, one population completely replaces another cultural group, through assimilation or annihilation. But the Tainos likely showed a greater diversity at the community level than this model allows. For instance, there was probably trading or intermarriage between the people of all the groups, as evidenced by sherds from different decoration styles found within the same site and even during excavations of stratigraphic levels only 10cm deep (VanderVeen, 2005). The communities and villages around the site of La Isabela show a close relationship among different cultures and there is the distinct possibility that, in fact, they were not separate cultures.

It has been argued that socio-demographic processes are mostly influenced on the local level in individual communities (Curet, 2005). There has been documentation that the Taíno traced their descent through the female line and that the male often left his village to live with his wife's family (Keegan, 1991). This developed into an avuncular society (one in which power is handed down through the sister's sons), and allowed for significant circulation of individuals by marriage throughout an area of local villages. The fluid population certainly contributed to the spread of cultural ideas. We also know that the Taíno engaged in long distance trade, and regularly associated with others far from their own geographical communities. This would also add to the cultural diversity found in any one village or group.

In addition, individual pots can be used for a variety of purposes, and may be used by multiple households or passed down through generations. It may be that the individual designs were designated for certain aspects of Taíno life, such as mortuary practices, religious ceremonies, or the housing of foodstuffs. All of these may have contributed to the trading and producing of the different styles of decorated pottery sherds found within Tamarindo and adjoining sites. For whatever reason, there is growing and convincing evidence taken from the excavations at El Tamarindo and other neighboring villages that there was a complex interaction of some type between Meillacan and Chican groups, and that the distinction between these populations has been blurred. Clearly there were Meillacan people in northern Hispaniola past the date of AD 1200 that Rouse gave for their demise.

Migration patterns and culturally identifiably 'pure' people are vastly more complicated than Rouse's model suggests. The artifacts recovered during this research point to the possibility that these two separate cultures may have settled next to one another and participated in trading goods as well as social values. Such behavior is something that must be taken into account when dealing with the archaeological record of Hispaniola and the rest of the Greater Antilles. There remain questions as to the true origins of these pattern types found in these Taíno villages. Were there indeed two cultures in the area, or were the different pottery styles made by the same culture? Did the different types have special uses? Or is this evidence for significant trade between distant villages? Further excavations may shed additional light on these interactions and help us further refine the current spatiotemporal division of these cultures.



Figure 1. Meillacan pottery designs.



Figure 2. Chican pottery designs.



Figure 3. BIAP Archaeological sites in the Dominican.

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