



**THE  
PEOPLE WHO  
DISCOVERED  
COLUMBUS**

THE  
PREHISTORY  
OF  
THE  
BAHAMAS

WILLIAM F. KEEGAN

## **The People Who Discovered Columbus**

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**The People Who Discovered Columbus**  
**The Prehistory of the Bahamas**

William F. Keegan

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*FOR LORIE*

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## Preface

Are you still doing that archaeology stuff?"

That question started a phone call from Richard Nordstrom. It was the fall of 1977, and Rich and I were both at the University of Connecticut. He was completing his master's degree in marine biology (he is now president of ORCA Industries) and I my BA in anthropology. We shared a mutual interest in SCUBA diving and had worked together in a variety of capacities. Prior to that phone call we had last spoken six months earlier when I was president of the UCONN SCUBA Club and he was our diving instructor.

During those six months Rich had become involved in the fledgling Foundation for the Protection of Reefs and Islands from Degradation and Exploitation (PRIDE) on Pine Cay in the Turks and Caicos Islands. In those days PRIDE was more dream than reality, the offspring of Chuck Hesse and Kathy Orr. It was founded as a not-for-profit scientific and educational foundation that would actively work to educate the local and tourist publics and to protect and preserve the natural resources of the islands. PRIDE has been successful beyond all but Chuck's expectations.

PRIDE had arranged to offer a summer field school in conjunction with the UCONN School of Education. Dr. Thomas Goodkind was by then well known for his field schools in which present and prospective teachers were immersed in a "foreign" lifeway (although one of his field schools was held in the western United States, the setting was foreign to his typical student). The purpose was to bring new meaning to their role as teachers by bringing new meaning to their own educational milieu.

Rich had called because they wanted an archaeologist as one of the instructors for the course entitled "Field Study in Caribbean Island Environments," which was to be held on Pine Cay in July 1978. There was an archaeologist working on Middle Caicos at the time, but he was planning

to leave in January and could not return in time for the course. I jumped at the opportunity. I was told that I needed to meet and get the approval of both Goodkind and the director of the PRIDE Foundation, Chuck Hesse. Goodkind was across campus, Hesse on Pine Cay. So less than a month after that momentous phone call I was on a plane for Pine Cay.

I had gone to Jamaica in 1973, in 1974 the Bahamas and Puerto Rico, in 1975 the Bahamas again, and in 1976 the Bay Islands, Honduras. Yet I was totally unprepared for what I was about to see. The twin-propeller plane took over three hours to reach Grand Turk from Miami. I then boarded a nine-seat island hopper, and we proceeded from Grand Turk to Middle Caicos to North Caicos and finally to Pine Cay. As the plane made its approach to the small coral runway I wondered what had happened to all the trees. Apparently, the Caicos were still recovering from Hurricane Donna, which struck the islands in 1960. Some say Pine Cay, highest elevation 25 feet, was completely under water. On none of the islands, except the settled areas of North and Middle Caicos, did the vegetation exceed six feet. You couldn't buy a piece of shade.

That night I met with Chuck, Kathy, and PRIDE's patron Bill Cowles and it was decided that I should meet the archaeologist. The archaeologist was Shaun Sullivan, then a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Illinois.

The next morning they woke me at 7:00 A.M. and put me on a Cessna headed for Middle Caicos. I was deposited at the Conch Bar airstrip (a dirt runway whose terminal was a 6-by-10-foot shed) and managed to arrange "trans" to the settlement of Bambara, the location of Sullivan's base camp. It took an hour to go the ten miles to Bambara. I arrived to find that Sullivan had not yet returned for the day from the field, but his assistant, Barbara Macnider, thought Shaun would have no objections to my staying and helping out for a few days. Shaun arrived about an hour later and all was settled; I would work with them for the next five days.

The days were spent profitably. There was a rainy day during which I coaxed from Shaun a day-long lecture on Caribbean prehistory. Two days were spent surveying with Barbara on North Caicos. We were led from plantation site to plantation site ("where the olden-time people lived") by a local guide who swore that he knew the locations of prehistoric sites. He was trusted because he had worked for Shaun on Middle Caicos. Our survey covered more than 30 miles yet produced no sites (most of our time being spent in the interior).

The most memorable day was spent at site MC-6 with Shaun and Grethe Seim. As I will discuss later, site MC-6 is a ceremonial/trading center—a Classic Taino outpost that was probably established after A.D. 1200 to manage access to a salt-producing pond and to facilitate the collection of marine resources on the Caicos Bank (notably queen conch).

MC-6 was a four-kilometer walk from Bambara along a true "Bahamian trail." Most trails in the Bahamas make parsimonious use of machete cuts and instead take full advantage of natural breaks in the vegetation. It is therefore difficult for the uninitiated to be certain that they are really on a trail. The trail wound along ridge tops through the dense brush of the interior and deposited us in a cactus forest on the northern margin of Armstrong Pond. On that day Armstrong Pond was a muddy brown color, but when I returned in the summer of 1984 it was all a white crust of crystalline salt. Sullivan found 18 sites around the margin of the pond; common sense tells us that the pond is the reason people settled there. Salt is the only logical motive.

We progressed along the margin of the pond until we reached the mile-long aboriginal road that led to the site (an irrefutable confirmation of the association between the site and pond). We left the dense closed-canopy (but only 10 feet high) hardwood coppice at the end of the road and stepped onto a grass-covered field. The field is the first permanently dry land above the seasonally flooded salina that today extends 4 kilometers to the sea. As we stepped out of the forest we were immediately engulfed in mosquitoes, my arms turning black before my eyes. Though they respected the power of Cutter's repellent, their incessant buzzing made me willing to offer my blood in return for silence, a deal that I knew was impossible since there were more of them than rations of my blood. Somehow you manage to ignore both the noise and their occasional forays into eyes, mouth, and ears.

MC-6 was spectacular. The site is a planned community of houses arranged around two plazas. The house locations are marked by stone foundations and depressions in a meter-high midden ridge. The larger plaza has a central court on which limestone rocks have been aligned. At first this court was thought to be a ballcourt, the scene of the Taino's *batey*. But when Sullivan completed the analysis of the detailed map he made he found that the stones were aligned with the rising and setting of certain stars and with the summer solstice. An on-the-ground observatory, the court is a unique Bahamian artifact of Taino culture. Sullivan's

(1981) research is testimony to the importance of detailed topographic mapping as well as to a broad-based knowledge of circum-Caribbean societies (for instance, ancient astronomy; Aveni and Urton 1982).

The day after my first visit to MC-6 I spent the entire afternoon waiting for a plane that I was never completely convinced would arrive. The nine-seat plane was filled with local women returning from a shopping trip to Grand Turk. Each take-off and landing, not to mention turbulence, was filled with entreaty and blessing ("Praise Jesus," "Thank you, Jesus"). The 250-pound woman who sat next to me took great solace in my presence; as the plane rose and descended her grip strengthened to flatten biceps into bone. Despite temporary disfunction in my right hand, I returned to Pine Cay safely, made arrangements for my part of the summer field school, and then read everything I could find on Caribbean archaeology. To borrow a line from Kurt Vonnegut, "So it goes."

From that day forth there has been no looking back. Certainly there were times when I thought it would soon end, but those were thankfully overcome. Early on I decided that I would one day write a paleoethnography of the Lucayans. My concept of what constitutes a paleoethnography has changed substantially from those days in the Caicos. Nonetheless, what follows is my present view of what should constitute a culture history in which archaeological methods are used to further anthropological goals.

In writing this book I have tried to reach two audiences. One is those people with a scholarly interest in questions concerning the Bahamas specifically, the West Indies in general, or, even more generally, small-island biogeography. There is a glaring lack of synthetic studies of Caribbean archaeology on all levels. My emphasis, of course, is on the Bahama archipelago. At the same time scholarly syntheses are lacking, there are even fewer sources available to the general audience. I have therefore sought to present this study in language that is easily understood by readers unacquainted with the jargon of anthropologists.

### **Outline of the Book**

The book is organized to provide a historical depiction of the movement of peoples into the Bahamas, a portrait of the characteristics of the islands themselves during the early days of Taino settlement, and de-

scriptions of how the Lucayans made their settlements, what they ate, how they organized themselves in social groups, and how their population grew to settle all of the archipelago, ending with the arrival of the Spanish and the Lucayans' untimely demise.

In the first chapter I take us "before the beginning" to glimpse the movement of peoples through the Antilles to the point from which they embarked for the Bahamas. I also introduce the native West Indians at contact and discuss their importance in Bahama prehistory. I describe the physical and biological worlds in the Bahamas in chapter 2 to set the stage. In chapter 3, I evaluate alternative models for the colonization of the Bahama archipelago with regard to their ability to account for observed patterns in the archaeological record.

Having established a first colony on Great Inagua, I next examine where the Lucayans chose to live and how determining those choices allows us to retrodict the way in which the islands were settled. In other words, I follow the Lucayans as they colonize all of the islands in the archipelago. The models used to explain how the islands were settled proved incomplete without a consideration of Lucayan social organization. I discuss in chapter 5 how the Lucayans were organized, where they resided in relation to family, and how their system of inheritance operated. In this discussion the missing pieces of the colonization puzzle are supplied, and the model of population expansion is completed.

Having peopled the islands, I turn next to the diet that sustained the colonists and that pulled them northward onto unoccupied islands (chapter 6). The final aspects of Lucayan society that I consider are reproduction, population growth, and the size of the Lucayan population at contact (chapter 7).

With chapter 8 we commence the beginning of the end. The arrival of Christopher Columbus, Columbus's search for the "City of Gold," the failure of the colonial enterprise, and the practice of overexploiting human resources in the absence of material counterparts are all considered. The arrival of Columbus and the reconstruction of his route through the Bahamas are discussed in chapter 8; the effects of the conquest are then examined (chapter 9). I also examine in chapter 9 the wholesale export of Lucayans to Hispaniola and, in the closing years, from there to the pearl beds off Venezuela. The Lucayans were the first people to be contacted, and the first to disappear from the face of the earth. By 1520, a Lucayan population of perhaps 80,000 had declined to, at most, a few

refugees. The book concludes with a reflection on the methodology of archaeological anthropology and a short overview of the Lucayans on the eve of contact (chapter 10).

Each chapter includes information drawn from a variety of sources. These sources include historic reports (in the Bahamas limited essentially to the *diario* of Columbus's first voyage), ethnohistoric interpretations of those reports, ethnographic accounts of modern populations who are living in tropical forest and small-island settings similar to the Bahamas, ethnological interpretations of the general patterns of human culture, and, finally, the results of archaeological investigations. Although archaeology is typically presented last in the sequence, I have tried to avoid the error of placing too much weight on historic documents. Such reliance on the written word of the Spanish chroniclers has caused significant misinterpretations of the prehistoric record (Keegan 1989b; Davis and Goodwin 1990). The documents need to be treated as suspect until archaeological or other confirmation is established.

## Acknowledgements

It goes without saying that I owe a debt to a great many people. A number of people had profound and long-lasting effects on my development as an archaeologist. Of special note are Nick Bellantoni, Nick Blurton Jones, Tim Earle, Julian Granberry, Marvin Harris, Allen Johnson, Jerry Kennedy, Pat Kirch, Kevin McBride, Charlie McNutt, Bob Preucel, Bill Sears, Shaun Sullivan, and John Terrell.

It has also been my great fortune to have collaborated with some truly excellent scholars, including Brian Butler, Michael DeNiro, Jared Diamond, and Morgan Maclachlan. They will recognize something of themselves in the chapters that follow. Dara and Eric Silverberg helped with first draft transcriptions. Tony Lyons assisted with the preparation of the bibliography. George Anthony Aarons, Judith Fandrich, and Geoffrey Senior read drafts and offered extensive comments. Dave Davis and Sam Wilson provided insightful reviews that improved the content and flow of the book.

More than a decade of archaeological fieldwork has been brought to bear on the questions that are addressed in this book. The work would not have been so professionally or personally satisfying without the help of Ellen Bethel, Tom Goodkind, Jim Kelley, David Knowles, Charles Misick, Rich Nordstrom, Kathy Orr, Grethe Seim, Dennis Williams, and the people at AUTECH on Andros. I owe a special debt to Bill and Ginny Cowles (formerly of Pine Cay) and to Chuck Hesse for supporting my first efforts. Neil Sealey has been a valued friend, colleague, and unending source of knowledge about all aspects of the Bahamas.

Fieldwork in the Bahamas would not have been possible without three remarkable people. Over the 10 years Corbett Torrence has worked with me on archaeological surveys covering almost 1000 km. His assistance has been invaluable. Between 1982 and 1987 Steven Mitchell and I seemed

to be constant companions. Although differences in our professions have taken us down different paths, Mitchell deserves credit for his diligence in introducing geo (archaeo)logical approaches in the Bahamas and for conducting fieldwork on the most difficult of islands. Lastly, Gail Saunders has been a continuous source of encouragement and support. It is through her efforts that government permission for our research was obtained.

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The true catalyst behind this work is Loretta Cox Keegan. Instead of complaining about the long hours and months in the field, her present concern is, what will the *next* book be about? This book is for Lorie; she knows why. But, as with everything else these days, she will have to share it with Daniel, Lindsay, and Caroline.

1—

## **Before the Beginning: Native Peoples of the West Indies**

Most written descriptions of the Caribbean at the time of Columbus record the presence of only three cultures, usually called Ciboney, Arawak, and Carib (Rouse 1948). Even people with only the most rudimentary knowledge of Caribbean prehistory today know of the "peaceful Arawaks," "Carib cannibals," and "cave-dwelling Ciboney" (map 1.1). These names were lifted from the historic reports of the early contact period. What historic descriptions failed to record, archaeological speculation has supplied. In the process, accurate information was often the first victim. The names themselves not only are misleading and inaccurate but also mask the wide range of variability in language and customs that the Spanish chroniclers recorded. In addition, the names have come to assume temporal, spatial, and cultural dimensions.

The traditional outline of Caribbean prehistory reads as follows: The Ciboney were the last in a line of people who lived by hunting, gathering, and fishing whose ancestors arrived in the Greater Antilles at least 9,000 years ago (Veloz and Vega 1982). By the time of Spanish contact they had been pushed into peripheral locations in the extreme western provinces of Cuba and southwest Haiti. They lacked agriculture, pottery, houses (they lived in caves), and their language and religion were different from

Image not available.

Map 1.1.  
West Indian cultural geography at contact, after Rouse, 1986.

the other peoples who occupied the West Indies at Spanish contact. They were the losers in confrontations with the expanding Arawaks, and they disappeared from the historic record soon after contact.

The Ciboney were followed by at least one migration of Arawakan-speaking peoples who entered the West Indies at the time of Christ. The Island Arawaks colonized all of the Greater Antilles (except western Cuba), the Lesser Antilles, and the Bahama Islands. Their staple crop was manioc, which was made into cassava bread, they lived in large villages, they spoke a single language, and they shared a common religion. In eastern Cuba, Hispaniola, and Puerto Rico there developed a complex culture called by the Spanish Taino, which glosses as noble or good in their language. The Island Arawaks were the victims of the Spanish conquest. Their population declined from one million in 1492 to a few hundred by 1540.

Beginning just before the Spanish conquest, the Island Arawaks in the Lesser Antilles were hunted down and consumed by Caribs who entered

the West Indies from the coast of the Guianas. The Island Caribs were cannibals who ate Island Arawak men and took Island Arawak women as their wives. By the time the Spanish arrived they had established a foothold in eastern Puerto Rico. The approach of the marauding Island Caribs, among other things, led to the colonization of the Bahamas as the Arawaks fled from their path. Island Carib militarism helped them to hold the Europeans at bay until the eighteenth century, by which time a large "Black Carib" population had developed in the Windward Islands through the joined forces of escaped slaves and native peoples.

Recent archaeological, ethnohistorical, and linguistic studies have demonstrated that most of the foregoing conventional history is inaccurate. Those conventional views are modern myths or "just so" stories created by scientists, avocationalists, and the public in their efforts to understand a complex history from a limited and biased ethnohistorical data base. In this chapter I seek to correct some of those misconceptions and in the process to introduce the peoples whose lives did leave, or are thought to have left, some imprint in the Bahamas.

In the present context only a very brief outline of West Indian prehistory is possible. To achieve detailed coverage this broad topic would itself require book-length treatment (see Rouse 1986; Siegel 1989; Wilson 1990a). The present discussion will focus first on the Guanahatabey (formerly called Ciboney). Although there is presently no evidence that these peoples ever occupied the Bahamas, it was at one time thought that they came from Florida, possibly along a route that passed through the Bahamas (Loven 1935), and it remains a possibility that they did settle in, or at least exploited the resources of, the Bahamas (B.A.T. 1984).

The Island Caribs are next. Although the Island Caribs never actually settled in the Bahamas, they are sometimes credited with forcing the Island Arawak colonization of these islands (Craton 1986). Moreover, the Island Caribs were the victims of a very successful slander. They deserve to have a more balanced view presented (Myers 1984; Allaire 1980, 1987; Davis and Goodwin 1990).

This chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the Island Arawak expansion through the Antilles, to set the stage for the movement of these peoples into the Bahamas. It should be noted that the culture history (or histories) of the peoples the Spanish called Tainos is extremely complex. The general nature of the following review does not allow this complexity to be expressed (see Rouse 1986; Wilson 1990a).

### **The Ethnohistory of the Guanahatabeys or Guanahacabibes**

The Guanahatabeys, formerly called Ciboney, were first described by Diego Velázquez de Cuellar (the man who initiated the Cuban entrada in 1511) in his letter to the king dated April 1, 1514: "The life of these people is of the manner of savages, for they have neither houses nor village quarters, nor fields, nor do they eat anything else than the flesh they take in the montes [mountains] and turtles and fish" (quoted in Sauer 1966:184). That report is supplemented by Bartolomé de Las Casas who wrote, "Indians at the Cape of Cuba [Cabo San Antonio] who are like savages, have no relations whatever with others of the island, nor do they have houses, but they live in caves, except when they go out to fish, and are called Guanahacabibes" (quoted in Sauer 1966:184).

Las Casas also provided an accounting of the natives of Cuba. In his 1516 memorial to Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros, he described four native groups who needed to be salvaged: those of the Jardines or cays off both north and south Cuba; the Guanahacabibes of the Cape of Cuba; the Ciboneys, who were the same as those of the Jardines, but were kept as servants by the other Cuban Indians; and any left on the Lucayan islands who are described as of the same nature and ways as those of the Jardines (Sauer 1966:185). From this account it is evident that Las Casas had two classificatory groups in mind: the Guanahatabeys (i.e., the Guanahacabibes) and the peoples who have come to be called the Sub-Tainos (i.e., the Ciboney, the Lucayans, and the people of the Jardines).

Although both Las Casas and Velázquez lived in Cuba for some time, Loven (1935) has concluded that the discoverers and conquerors of this island never visited western Cuba and thus lacked firsthand knowledge of the Guanahatabey. Furthermore, when Pánfilo de Narváez entered the province of Habana he found caciques (chiefs) and conditions that were similar to those of eastern Cuba (Sauer 1966). In addition, five provinces or "chieftainships" have been identified in western Cuba from the reports of Velázquez and Narváez. These provinces bear the Taino names (from west to east): Guanahacabibes, Guaniguanico, Marien, Habana, and Hanabana (Rouse 1948:501).

In sum, both Velázquez and Las Casas reported that the people of western Cuba were different from those in the remainder of the northern West Indies, that these people lacked houses and lived in caves, lacked agricul-

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