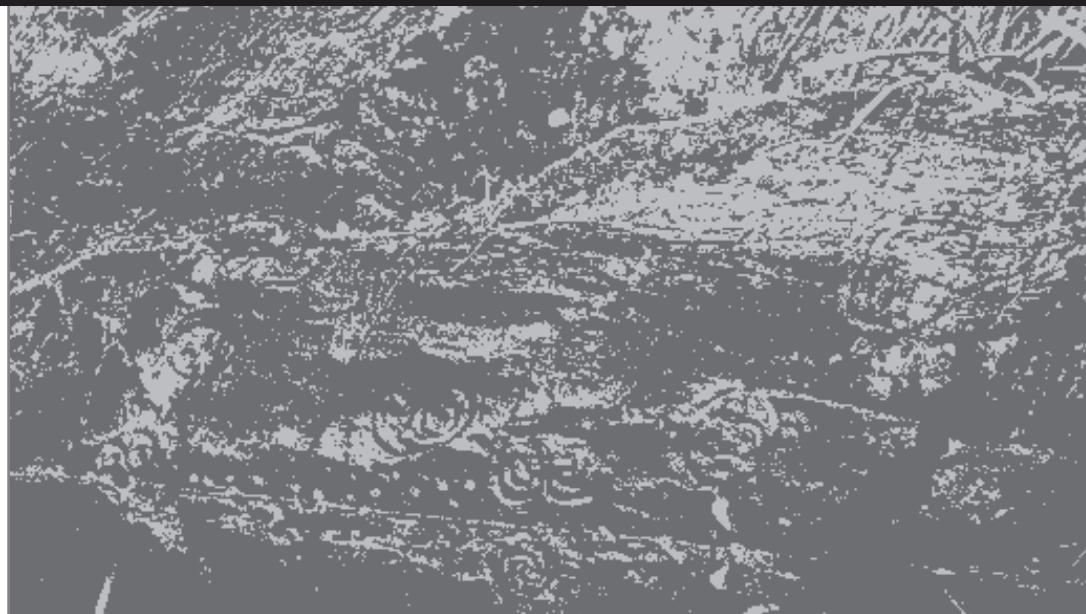


Ken S. Wild



Defining Petroglyphs Form The
Archaeological Record

Abstract

This paper explores archeological findings on St. John that exhibit correlations with the island's petroglyphs. The comparative study looks at dating, why they were made, and some additional assessments that may add to our understand of what they represent and why these on St. John, as well as many others, were carved at water sources. This paper also addresses the consequences of theories printed on the origins of the island's petroglyphs which are not within the mainstream thoughts in archaeological research and how this has affected the perspective of the local populace.

Introduction

On St. John, US Virgin Islands within the interior of the Reef Bay Valley are a series of petroglyphs carved into the basalt rock of the valley's waterfall. One set of these carvings reflects a 20-foot wide panorama of faces year-round at a spring feed pool located at the base of the falls (Figure 1). Over the last 40 years these carvings have been the topic of a number of papers. Up until the last five years, most reports provided little explanation as to why petroglyphs were carved and what they represent. For the Virgin Islands this has left the door open for local and visiting pseudoscience speculation.

In 1984, about twenty years from this writing, I began working on St. John and noted quite a few local legends about the carvings. Over the last decade there have been a couple more theories added to the lore by visiting historians about their origins, none of which appeared to follow accepted Caribbean anthropological and archaeological understanding of Caribbean rock art origin. This is intriguing, when less than sixty-five miles of the Virgin Islands in Puerto Rico petroglyphs play a significant role in the inhabitant's pre-Columbian heritage. Apparently the sheer number of archaeologists and anthropologists and cultural programs in Puerto Rico are responsible for making this distinction so obvious between these two very close regions.

On St. John, the impact of these pseudoscience theories has produced some believers but for the most part they appear to have created a science of skepticism about the rock art. It was this lack of local understanding and mistrust of another outside explanation by the local community that prompted research efforts on St. John to compare materials excavated from the island's archeological record to help explain the origins of these carvings, what they represent, and why they were carved at Reef Bay.

Observations

Investigations at two sites on St. John, Cinnamon Bay and Trunk Bay have produced a series of diagnostic artifacts confirming Classic Taino culture in this region and clarify many past misconceptions about the presence of Taino artifacts in the area. In that they were neither trade goods, nor the result of some late migratory phase, nor some sub-Taino culture as proposed by previous scholars. Taino culture had developed here like the larger islands of Puerto Rico and Hispaniola (Wild 2001).

Analysis of six hundred years of ceramic iconography recovered from sequential ceremonial episodes from these two sites has provided evidence towards understanding the culture's shift from a simple society to a complex hierarchal society. Taino ancestral worship had evolved to empower an elite lineage. Archeological theory for this evolution process was presented by Curet and Oliver (1998:219) in their study of mortuary practices. The study of the ceramic iconography from St. John demonstrates a probable scenario as to how the power was acquired over time and retained through a process



of religious manipulation of existing beliefs in ancestor rites by controlling the religious structure and symbols to legitimize the elite authority. Central to the argument is that ceramic adornos depict how and when the emerging elites enhance the established ancestral cult by introducing a visual manifestation into the natural world that has a dual connection to the supernatural world. This provides that symbolic link between the human soul and the supernatural through this physical manifestation of the dead that comes to life in the natural world

This supernatural manifestation was the bat as chronicled by the Spanish, which enters the natural world of the living and is to be worshiped, consulted and, as the historical record indicates, feared. This then enforces institutionalizing a need for specific individuals who can communicate with the supernatural. In this process the elite have the power to determine the appropriate symbolic imagery that portrays the physical representations of the ancestor. Symbolic imagery permeates almost all of pre-Columbian art. From the two sites on St. John the symbolic imagery depicted in the ceramic adornos attached to offering vessels shifts over time from strictly anthropomorphic to anthropomorphic faces with a zoomorphic bat nose indicating the probability that the offering is intended for the deceased ancestor. Herrera Fritot and Youmans (1946: 69-83) were the first to correctly identify this ceramic imagery as “humanized faces that highlight the isomorphism between these animals and the souls of the dead”. Offerings in the archaeological record dramatically increase when this imagery is introduced. They have made ritual activities and offerings mandatory in order to “propitiate” as Rouse notes (1992:14) or appease ancestry deities and attain knowledge needed to cure, make rain and obtain appropriate direction on community needs. As the elite’s power evolves this symbolic imagery places a headdress on these offering vessels very possibly demonstrating approximately when the Taino begin worshipping an elite lineage (Figure 2).

In comparing these same adornos found on these offering vessels to the petroglyphs we find that there is comparative imagery and designs in the faces and symbols that make up the petroglyphs. The encircled eye designs are most telling, but one real clincher to help demonstrate a correlation to St. Johnians is a symbol known well on the island because of its use as a logo by the island’s largest and oldest Rockefeller resort, Caneel Bay. The design is so popular it can be found in earring and pendant form in almost, if not every jewelry stores. This same design outlines the headdress of one of those ancestral chiefs honored at Cinnamon Bay (Figure 3).

The majority of the designs, like those on the petroglyphs, are found in the upper levels at the Cinnamon Bay Site. These upper levels are final chapters in Classic Taino history before European devastation. At this point Taino society had long since made the shift from a simple society, as excavated at Trunk Bay (circa AD 900), to a complex hierarchy where the chief’s ancestral lineage is worshiped. Most correlations have been found in Chican ceramics and researchers studying cave petroglyphs in Puerto Rico have, from serration studies of petroglyphs from the Puerto Rican archeological site of Maisabel, dated the rock art to the Elenan culture (Roe, and Rivera Melendez, 1995). Elenan culture at Cinnamon Bay is represented by the middle layers between the end of Trunk Bay and the Classic Taino Period represented by the Chican ceramic style. It is interesting to note that it is within this period that the first anthropomorphic bat effigy vessel occurs. In 2002, however, it appeared at least possible that some carvings could date prior to the Elenan culture.

During analysis and mending of the pre-Columbian remains from Trunk Bay, a face dated circa AD 900 emerged from fragments of pottery that depicts that typical heart shaped owl like face found with petroglyphs throughout the Caribbean including one at Reef Bay (Figure 4). However, this heart shape design continues through the Classic Period thus making it difficult to assign a temporal period to the shape except that it could have been carved at any time after circa 900 AD. Presently, evidence from St. John suggests that the petroglyph carving in this region were one of a number of elaborate art forms that develops over the last 500-years of pre-Columbian occupation.

Given the archeological evidence and the similarity in design elements, it certainly seems probable that the faces and symbols on the petroglyphs maintain the same meaning as they do on the ceremonial vessels. The faces on the ceramic adornos are the elite dead returning as the fruit bat as the petroglyphs also represent the faces of their dead ancestral deities or, if you like, the faces from their supernatural world (Wild 2001). The findings in the archeological record of St. John indicate a connection between the worship of the dead and the significant role that the bat plays in this social development. It is this connection that they may also help us to understand even more about the petroglyphs and why they were carved in certain places.

Discussion

Connecting the petroglyphs to pre-Columbian artifacts from the island has helped to demonstrate to St. Johnians a Native American connection. We have also found that it is equally important to understand and explain why the Taino would carve these images and here we reflect on the Native American and their concept of the world. Indians possessed a greater understanding of the interdependent relationships between the spiritual and natural world than the Europeans that entered their lands. In their minds the supernatural was a complex matrix interwoven into everything in this natural world. In this regard, the Taino were little different from most Native Americans and like them clashed with the Europeans who perceived nature as something separate and to be controlled, usually for a profit. Unlike their European counterpart the Native American was not apart from, but lived inside this web of the natural and supernatural, with all creatures being like more than unlike themselves. The supernatural was a powerful force every bit as real as their physically visible one, and it effected all aspects of life and health, the weather, crops, war, essentially everything in their lives (Taylor 2001). . It was therefore, extremely important to the Taino that every effort was extended to preserve communication with that other life in the supernatural world to insure the well being of individuals in both worlds. If these concepts are accepted we may be beginning to comprehend what the petroglyphs represent and why they were carved

Conclusions

One of the intriguing questions I have often been asked by local islanders is that of; why are the petroglyphs carved here at this pool of water at Reef Bay? It is this very question that possible connects the bat effigies depicted on the ceramics from the archaeological sites to the petroglyphs. Those of you who have taken a fresh water swim in the Caribbean have probably experienced what occurs at dusk; bats arrive to feed on the insects. The Reef Bay petroglyphs are not unusual in their proximity to water. Most petroglyphs are found either in caves, on the stones lining ball courts, or at a source of fresh water. Last year we visited Reef Bay at dusk and captured fascinating footage of bats circling the pool with the petroglyphs as the backdrop. So just possible the simple answer to why the petroglyphs were carved here is that they are located where the ancestors gather, whether caves or water pools. A place for these people to come and communicate with their ancestors in order to cure the sick and make rain as mentioned in papers just preceding this one at this Congress. There maybe another reason as to why they are at Reef Bay and other water sources. At Reef Bay there is almost always water in this particular pool. Also, the water is always at an optimal level to reflect the carvings and never over them. Researchers, like Dr. Peter Roe (1997:148), have written about the duality or mirrored/reflective imagery often found on Taino art that represents the natural and supernatural worlds. The Taino on St. John certainly believed in this duality. This is evident at Cinnamon Bay as many effigies recovered depict this mirrored imagery. With this in mind is it not possible to imagine no finer place to mirror the images of their two worlds than where their ancestors from the supernatural world return to the natural world, and at one of the only mirrors available to Native Americans, a pool of water (Figure 5).



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Figure 1. One set of petroglyphs at Reef Bay. Photograph taken from an original by Rudy Patton.



Figure 2. A fruit bat found in the Caribbean in foreground. In the upper left is a bat nosed adorno with a headdress from Cinnamon Bay. The photograph of the bat is credited to Merlin D. Tuttle courtesy of Bat Conservation International.



Figure 3. Bat-nosed adorno with petroglyph design in headdress. Upper right, the design at Reef Bay used by the Caneel Bay Resort as a logo. The petroglyph in this photo was chalked by an island visitor, a constant protection problem given the remote location of the rock art. The adjacent petroglyph has encircled eyes also similar to the eyes in the adorno.



Figure 4. Heart shaped faces found at Reef Bay and the ceramic face from Trunk Bay.



Figure 5. Petroglyphs positioned for maximum reflection at the water pool at Reef Bay.