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Origin and Development of the Indians Discovered by Columbus

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ABSTRACT

Ethnohistorians have classified the natives of the West Indies into three major groups, Guanahatabey, Taino, and Island-Carib. Columbus met only Tainos during his first voyage. They spoke a single language, also known as Taino, and shared the same culture, which reached its highest development in Hispaniola and Puerto Rico.

Linguists have assigned the Taino language to the Arawakan family and have traced that family back to the middle of the Amazon Basin by reconstructing its ancestral languages. They find that speakers of its proto-Northern language moved into the West Indies from the Guiana coast about the time of Christ. The Proto-Northerners developed the Taino language after reaching the Greater Antilles, and carried it into the Bahamas.

Archaeologists have confirmed the linguists' conclusions. They have assigned the pottery of the Taino Indians to an Ostionoid series of styles and have traced that series back to a Saladoid series, which originated in the Orinoco Valley. They find that the Saladoid potters entered the West Indies about the time of Christ, introducing not only pottery but also agriculture and zemiism, the religion of the Tainos. The Saladoids and their Ostionoid descendants gradually pushed the previous inhabitants of the islands back into western Cuba, where they became the Guanahatabeys. The Ostionoids developed Taino culture after reaching the Greater Antilles, and carried it into the Bahamas.

INTRODUCTION

The islands of the West Indies form a crescent separating the Caribbean Sea from the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean (Fig. 1). Since the natives lacked Columbus' ability to cross large bodies of water, they could only have entered the crescent at the points where it approaches the mainland: by way of the Yucatan Peninsula in Middle America, the Florida Peninsula in North America, or the islands of Trinidad and Tobago at the mouth of the Orinoco River in South America.

The prevailing winds and currents favor entry from South America, as does the outpouring of floodwater from the Orinoco River. Nevertheless, the natives only had to cross 75-125 miles of open sea to reach the island chain from either Middle, North, or South America. Once past this initial barrier, they could easily have spread throughout the archipelago, for almost all of its islands are within sight of each other.

Anthropologists interested in problems of origin have been attracted to the West Indies by these possibilities. They have sought to determine who the natives were, where and when they discovered the island crescent, and how they developed after they arrived there:

The anthropologists who first attempted to answer these questions failed because they were generalists, who did not discriminate between different kinds of data.² Today's anthropologists succeed because they have become specialists, using methods adapted to the kinds of data they study. Ethnohistorians work with the documentary evidence; linguists, with the surviving traces of the natives' languages; archaeologists, with the remains of their cultures; and physical anthropologists, with their biological traits.³ This paper covers only the ethnohistorical, linguistic, and archaeological research; physical anthropology has made too little progress in answering the questions of origin to be included.

ETHNOHISTORICAL RESEARCH

Ethnohistorians proceed in terms of ethnic groups, that is, groups which are mentioned in the documents or can be inferred from them. They recognize three major ethnic groups in the West Indies: the Guanahatabeys, who lived in western Cuba; the Tainos, who occupied the rest of the Greater Antilles and the Bahamas; and the Island-Caribs, in the central and southern parts of the Lesser Antilles (Fig. 2). The affiliation of the Indians in the northern part of the Lesser Antilles is unknown; those islands appear to have been largely depopulated in the time of Columbus.⁴

The three major groups are each defined by a variety of linguistic and cultural traits. They should not be confused with geographically or politically defined ethnic groups, such as the Lucayans in the Bahamas and the chiefdoms in the Greater Antilles. Lesser groups like these are beyond the scope of the present paper.

Guanahatabeys. The Indians of the first major group are also known as Ciboneys. This is a misnomer. The Ciboneys were actually a local group of Taino Indians who lived farther west in Cuba.⁵

The Guanahatabeys became extinct before they could be studied firsthand. They must have had a separate language, since Columbus' Taino interpreters were unable to speak with them. The chroniclers report that they were savages, lived in caves, subsisted by food gathering rather than agriculture, and were organized into bands rather than villages.

The documents tell us nothing about their origin. Ethnohistorians infer from their primitiveness and their remote position that they were descendants of the original inhabitants of the West Indies, pushed back into western Cuba by the next group to be discussed.⁶

Tainos. The Indians of this group had no name for themselves. Ethnohistorians call them Tainos because they used that term, which means "good" or "noble," to indicate to Columbus that they were not Island-Caribs. They are also known as Arawaks, but this is another misnomer. The Indians who called themselves Arawaks were limited to South America; they originated in the Guianas and spread only as far north as the island of Trinidad.⁷

The Tainos must have spoken a single language, for Columbus was able to use the same interpreters throughout their territory. They lived in villages and practiced a relatively advanced form of agriculture. They were ruled by hereditary chiefs, who derived much of their authority from personal deities known as zemis. These so intrigued Columbus that he commissioned Ramn Pan, a friar who accompanied him on his second voyage, to make a study of the religious practices and beliefs on the island of Hispaniola. Pan reports that the Tainos carved statues of their zemis, and portrayed them on their household utensils. Priests conducted ceremonies to the zemis in public places.⁸

The Tainos have left us no origin traditions. It is assumed that they came from South America because they bore resemblances in both language and culture to the Arawak Indians on the mainland. This is the reason for calling them Arawaks, but it is wrong because the Tainos and Arawaks spoke separate languages⁹ and lived in different cultures. Only the Tainos had chiefdoms and worshipped zemis.

Island-Caribs. The final group called themselves Caribs or Kalinas. Ethnohistorians have added the prefix in order to distinguish them from an ethnic group in the Guianas that bore the same name but had another language and culture.

The Island-Caribs differed in language and culture from the Tainos as well. Like the latter, they lived in villages and practiced agriculture, but their lives centered around warfare rather than religion. Their men raided the Taino settlements, killing the enemy warriors and consuming bits of their flesh in order to acquire their prowess. (Our word *cannibal* is derived from the Spanish version of their name.) They captured Taino women, brought them back to their villages, and set them up in family houses, apart from the men's houses in which they lived. They had no chiefs except for the leaders of their war parties, who were elected for the purpose.¹⁰

According to their traditions, they were descended from war parties that came from the Guianas shortly before the time of Columbus and conquered the previous inhabitants, whom they called Igneris. They imposed their own name and their warlike orientation on the Igneris, but appear to have adopted the latter's domestic traits.¹¹

LINGUISTIC RESEARCH

Linguists proceed in terms of speech communities, each of which had a separate language. Linguists classify the languages into families. They work back within each family from its historic languages to the common ancestor, reconstructing the development of the languages in reverse. They plot the development in the form of a family tree, or phylogeny, which begins at its bottom with the original proto-language and ends at its top with the historical languages. From the phylogeny they are able to infer the origin and development of the family's speech communities and their languages.

Too little is known about the speech of the Guanahatabey Indians to apply this procedure to them. Resemblances have been noted between the Guanahatabey speech and that of the Warao Indians in the Orinoco Delta, which belongs to a Chibchan family, widespread on the western side of the Caribbean Sea.¹² These resemblances may have developed independently, however, or they may be due to trading contacts rather than population movement.

The Taino language is a member of the Arawakan family. Island-Carib was originally assigned to the Cariban family because of its name, but it has also turned out to be Arawakan. Apparently the Island-Carib warriors who conquered the Igneris of the Lesser Antilles adopted the Igneri's language, just as the Norman invaders of England gave up French in favor of English. The Island-Carib men retained only a secondary, pidgin language belonging to the Cariban family, which they spoke in their men's houses.¹³

Working back from the Taino, Island-Carib, and Arawak languages, linguists have constructed the phylogeny of the Arawakan family that is shown in Figure 3. They find that the original, Proto-Arawakan language most probably developed in the middle of the Amazon Basin. The speakers of that language originally expanded upstream to the headwaters of the Amazon, as shown on the right side of the diagram. Other Proto-Arawakan speakers moved up the Negro River, a northern tributary of the Amazon, passed through the Casiquiare Canal, and entered the Orinoco Valley (Fig. 1). Somewhere along that route they developed a new, Proto-Maipuran language, which evolved into Proto-Northern after their arrival in the Orinoco Valley.

The speakers of the Proto-Northern language subsequently spread into the Guianas and the West Indies. The Proto-Northerners who remained in the Guianas intercommunicated primarily among themselves and as a result developed their own Arawak language, which later became Lokono (Fig. 3). The Proto-Northerners who settled in the Lesser Antilles similarly produced their own Igneri language, which they transmitted to their Island-Carib conquerors. The Proto-Northern speakers who continued into the Greater Antilles, intercommunicated among themselves there, developed the Taino language, and carried it into the Bahamas.

The dates along the side of Figure 3 have been obtained by glottochronology, a technique that estimates the length of time since two languages

began to diverge by counting the number of differences in their basic vocabularies and dividing that figure by the rate of change known for historic languages. Glottochronology indicates that the Proto-Arawakan language arose about 3500 B.C.; Proto-Maipuran about 1500 B.C.; Proto-Northern during the first millennium B.C.; and Arawak, Island-Carib, and Taino within the Christian era. We may therefore conclude that the ancestors of the Taino speakers entered the West Indies about the time of Christ.¹⁴

ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Archaeologists proceed in terms of peoples, each of which had its own culture. Archaeologists identify each people by the remnants of its culture. Through study of the protohistoric remains in the West Indies, they have been able to divide Taino culture into three subcultures: Classic Taino in eastern Cuba, Hispaniola, and Puerto Rico, with extensions into the Turks and Caicos and Virgin Islands; Western Sub-Taino in the rest of the Greater Antilles; and Eastern Sub-Taino in the northern part of the Lesser Antilles (Fig. 4). The Classic Tainos have left more elaborate remains than the Sub-Tainos, most notably ball courts, ceremonial plazas, and complex carvings of zemis.

In tracing the origin and development of the Taino people and sub-peoples, archaeologists work primarily in terms of pottery, since it constitutes 95 percent of the artifacts found. They determine the sequence of ceramic styles in each local area and put the local sequences together in the form of regional chronologies. Then they compare the styles in these chronologies and group together those which appear to have developed one from another, like languages within a family. They call the resultant units series of styles, and name each series by adding the suffix -oid to the term for one of its member styles. Following the lead of the late Gary Vescelius,¹⁵ I have recently introduced a distinction between series and subseries, and have named each subseries by adding the suffix -an to the name of a member style.

Chronological charts for the West Indies and the adjacent part of South America are given in Figure 5, *a* and *b* respectively. The original peopling of the region is shown at the bottom of the figure, subsequent prehistoric developments in its center, and the Historic age at its top. The names of the three ethnic groups discussed in the first part of this paper are shown at the beginning of the Historic age, and beneath them are given the names of the subseries and series of styles by means of which the ethnic groups may be identified archeologically. It will be seen that the Tainos are identified by an Ostionoid series of styles. The Classic Tainos had a Chican Ostionoid subseries; the Western Sub-Tainos, a Meillacan Ostionoid subseries; and the Eastern Sub-Tainos, an Elenan Ostionoid subseries. These three subseries can be traced back through an Ostionan Ostionoid subseries to two

subseries of a previous Saladoid series: Cedrosan Saladoid in Puerto Rico, the Lesser Antilles, and the coast on either side of the Orinoco Delta; and Ronquinan Saladoid in the Orinoco Valley. Archaeologists have not yet been able to carry the ancestors of the Tainos farther back along the route worked out by the linguists.

Four periods, numbered I to IV, are shown along the sides of Figure 5. Period I is the time when the ancestors of the Guanahatabeys made their first appearance and Period II, the time of arrival of the ancestors of the Tainos. During Period III, the latter advanced at the expense of the former to the position in which Columbus found them. Period IV was the time of arrival of the Island-Caribs in the Lesser Antilles and of the development of Classic Taino culture in the Greater Antilles. The dates given for the four periods are based upon radiocarbon analysis, a technique that estimates the age of organic materials found among the remains by determining the amount of radioactivity the organisms have lost since they died and applying to that figure the rate of decay established by studying the decay in historically dated sites.

The advance of the ancestors of the Tainos into the West Indies cannot be understood without reference to the origin and development of the peoples who stood in their way, the ancestors of the Guanahatabeys. Since the latter peoples lacked pottery, they have had to be defined by their stonework. This is tentatively classified into two series of lithic complexes, Casimiroid and Ortoiroid, as indicated at the bottom of Figure 5.¹⁶ The peoples defined by the Casimiroid complexes appear to have come from Middle America, and the peoples defined by the Ortoiroid complexes, from South America. The Casimiroids discovered the West Indies some 6000 years before Columbus did. They appear to have arrived there while still in the Lithic age, that is, while still making only chipped stone implements. They later began to grind stone tools and thereby advanced into the Archaic age, to which the Ortoiroid peoples also belonged. The two groups presumably gave rise to the Guanahatabey Indians via the lines of development shown for the Archaic age in Figure 5, *a*.

The ancestors of the Tainos were in the Ceramic age. As they advanced at the expense of the Archaic-age peoples, they paused at a series of five frontiers, each of which is indicated by a jog in the boundary between the Ceramic and Archaic ages in Figure 5. The five frontiers are mapped in Figure 6. The last of them is the boundary between the Guanahatabeys and Tainos in the time of Columbus (cf. Figs. 2, 4, and 6).

As already noted, our knowledge of the ancestry of the Tainos begins with the Ronquinan Saladoid potters, who lived in the Orinoco Valley during the first millennia B.C. (Fig. 5, *b*). Their frontier with the Archaic-age peoples was at the head of the Orinoco Delta (Fig. 6, *1*). They were making surprisingly complex pottery, decorated by modeling and incision as well as white-on-red painting (Fig. 7). They were already producing most of the vessel shapes and designs present on any of the later forms of pottery along the route traversed by the ancestors of the Tainos.

During the first millennium B.C., they passed along the right side of the Orinoco Delta and established a new frontier in the Guianas (Fig. 6,2). They seem to have been responding to pressure from another series of potters, the Barrancoids, who developed upstream from them. On the coast, they are assumed to have developed a new, Cedrosan Saladoid subseries, but the transition from Ronquinan to Cedrosan Saladoid pottery remains to be demonstrated (Fig. 5, *b*).¹⁷

About the time of Christ, the Cedrosan Saladoid potters expanded westward via Trinidad and the adjacent Venezuelan coast to the island of Margarita, and northward through the Lesser Antilles to Puerto Rico and the eastern tip of Hispaniola, where they established another frontier with the previous Archaic-age population (Fig. 6,3). Again, they appear to have been responding to pressure from the Barrancoid peoples, who expanded to the coast behind them. They brought with them Cedrosan Saladoid pottery, which is characterized by white-on-red painting and zoned-incised cross-hatching (Fig. 8, *a, b*). They made incense burners, which may be the result of Barrancoid influence, and clay griddles, which they used to bake cassava bread (Fig. 8, *c, d*). They also carved figures of zemis, including pendants and small three-pointed objects (Fig. 9, *a, b*). Hence, they may be said to have introduced agriculture and the worship of zemis into the Antilles.

After pausing some 500 years at the third frontier on the eastern end of Hispaniola, they moved on to a fourth frontier in eastern Cuba (Fig. 6,4). Meanwhile, they had developed a new form of pottery, Ostionan Ostionoid, which archaeologists use to trace their forward progress along the south coast of Hispaniola to Jamaica and through the valleys of northern Hispaniola to eastern Cuba (Fig. 10, *b, c*). The transition from Cedrosan Saladoid to Ostionan Ostionoid pottery has been well worked out on the island of Puerto Rico. The local potters gradually abandoned their Cedrosan Saladoid decoration, first its modeled-incised designs, and then its white painting. This left only simple modeling and red painting, which has caused archaeologists to refer to the Ostionan Ostionoid pottery as "redware." The reason for the simplification of their pottery is unknown; perhaps they had become isolated in the Greater Antilles, interacted mainly among themselves, and as a result were not exposed to the new developments that were taking place on the mainland.

Around 800 A.D., the Ostionan Ostionoid potters in the northwestern part of the Dominican Republic developed a new, Meillacan Ostionoid subseries, which spread through Haiti, Jamaica, and eastern Cuba. The Meillacan Ostionoid potters then expanded into central Cuba, moving the Ceramic-Archaic age frontier to its position in the time of Columbus. Their pottery had the same materials and shapes as the previous Ostionan Ostionoid pottery but was decorated with rectilinear incised designs that appear to have been borrowed from the Casimiroid peoples on the other side of the frontier (Fig. 10, *d, e*). In the Bahamas, this pottery degenerated into Palmetto ware, which was largely plain (Fig. 10, *f*).

Meanwhile, the Ostionan Ostionoid potters in the eastern part of the Dominican Republic developed a Chican Ostionoid subseries, which reached a new height of ceramic art, comparable to the earlier Cedrosan Saladoid climax. Chican Ostionoid pottery spread throughout the territory occupied in the time of Columbus by the Classic Taino people. It is characterized by elaborate modeled-incised designs, many of which appear to be representations of zemis (Fig. 11). The pottery is accompanied by ceremonial plazas in which the public worship of zemis took place, and by the most highly developed carvings used in that religion (Fig. 9, *a, d*). These features and the rise of heirarchical chiefdoms indicate that the Chican Ostionoid potters had advanced from the Ceramic into the Formative age, that is, into the beginning of civilization (Fig. 5, *a*).¹⁸

CONCLUSION

The ethnohistorical, linguistic, and archaeological research all indicate that the ancestors of the Taino Indians, whom Columbus met during his first voyage, came from South America and advanced into the West Indies at the expense of the ancestors of the Guanahatabey Indians, whom the Admiral encountered during his second voyage. If the ethnohistorians' conclusions be regarded as working hypotheses, both the linguistic and the archaeological research may be said to have confirmed these hypotheses. Both have disclosed that the ancestors of the Tainos arrived in the West Indies about the time of Christ by way of the Orinoco Valley and the Guianas, and gradually pushed the ancestors of the Guanahatabeys back into western Cuba where Columbus found them. Linguists have shown that the invaders diverged into speakers of the Island-Carib language in the Lesser Antilles and of the Taino language in the Greater Antilles and the Bahamas. Archaeologists find that these two speech communities also constituted separate peoples, each of which had developed a different culture. Taino culture reached its classic form in the heart of the Greater Antilles, where Columbus established the first European settlements.

NOTES

1. This paper is adapted from the author's *Migrations in Prehistory: Inferring Population Movement from Cultural Remains* (New Haven, 1986), pp. 106-56. Figures 1, 3, and 5-11 come from that book, where they are Figures 21-29 respectively.
2. E. G. Sven Lovén, *Origins of the Tainan Culture, West Indies* (Göteborg, 1935).
3. The Indians encountered by Columbus became extinct before they could be studied by anthropologists who specialize in the study of living populations.

4. Irving Rouse, "Whom Did Columbus Discover in the West Indies?", *American Archaeologist*, in press.
5. Ricardo E. Alegría, *El uso de la terminología etno-histórica para designar las culturas aborígenes de las Antillas* (Valladolid, 1981), pp. 5-6.
6. Sven Lovén, *Origins of the Taino Culture, West Indies* (Göteborg, 1935), pp. 3-5.
7. A. Boomert, "The Arawak Indians of Trinidad and Coastal Guiana, ca. 1500-1600," *The Journal of Caribbean History*, XIX, in press.
8. José J. Arrom, *Mitología y artes prehispanicas de las Antillas* (Mexico City, 1975).
9. D. G. Brinton, "The Arawack Language of Guiana in its Linguistic and Ethnological Relations," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, XIV (1871), 427-44.
10. Irving Rouse, "The West Indies," in *Handbook of South American Indians* (Washington, 1948), vol. 4, pp. 547-65.
11. Louis Allaire, "On the Historicity of Carib Migrations in the Lesser Antilles," *American Antiquity*, XLV (April, 1980), 238-45.
12. Julian Granberry, "West Indian Languages: A Review and Commentary," *Journal of the Virgin Islands Archaeology Society*, X (1986), 51-6.
13. Douglas R. Taylor and Berend J. Hoff, "The Linguistic Repertory of the Island-Carib in the Seventeenth Century: The Men's Language — a Carib Pidgin?", *International Journal of American Linguistics*, XLVI (October, 1980), 301-12.
14. Irving Rouse, *Migrations in Prehistory: Inferring Population Movement from Cultural Remains* (New Haven, 1986), pp. 120-6.
15. Gary S. Vescelius, "A Cultural Taxonomy for West Indian Archaeology," *Journal of the Virgin Islands Archaeological Society*, X (1986), 38-41.
16. Archaeologists have not yet been able to reach agreement about the origin and development of the ancestors of the Guanahatabeys. For an alternative version, see Marcio Veloz Maggiolo, *Las sociedades arcaicas de Santo Domingo* (Santo Domingo, 1980).
17. Irving Rouse, Louis Allaire, and A. Boomert, "Eastern Venezuela, the Guianas, and the West Indies," in *Chronologies in South American Archaeology*, edited by Clement W. Meighan, in press.
18. Irving Rouse, *Migrations in Prehistory: Inferring Population Movement from Cultural Remains* (New Haven, 1986), pp. 147-9.

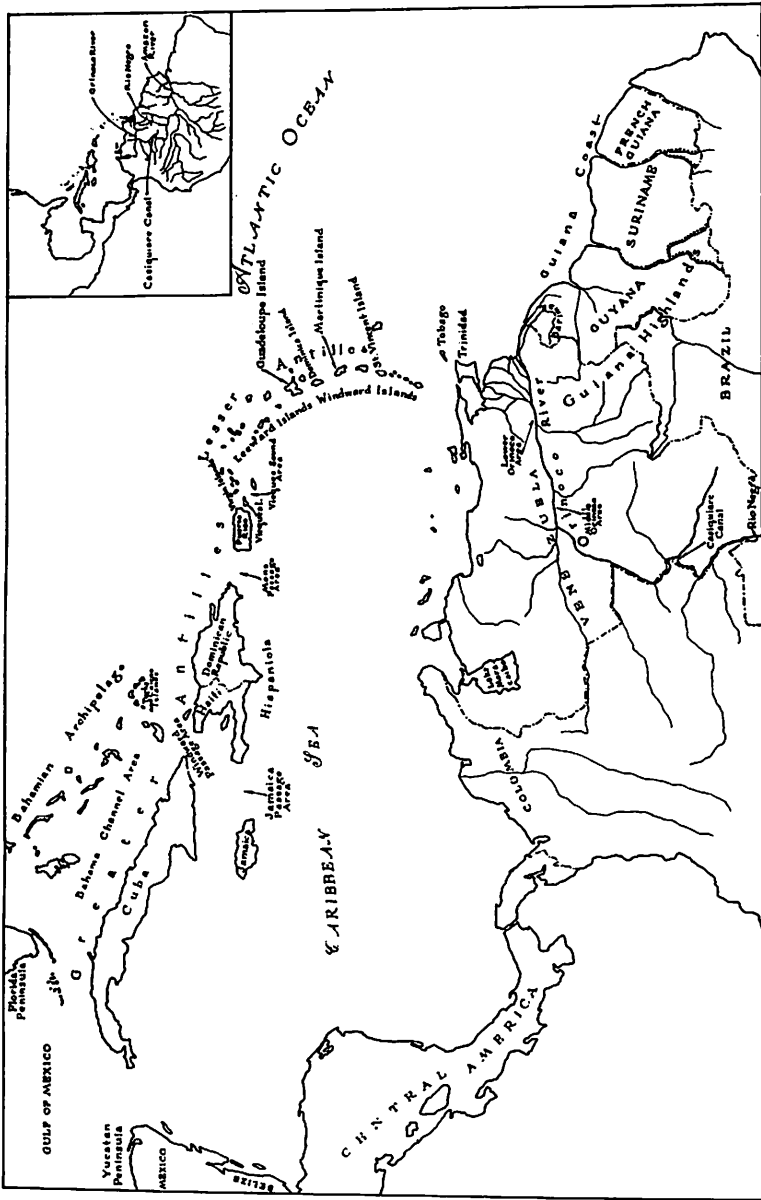


Fig. 1. Map of the Caribbean Area

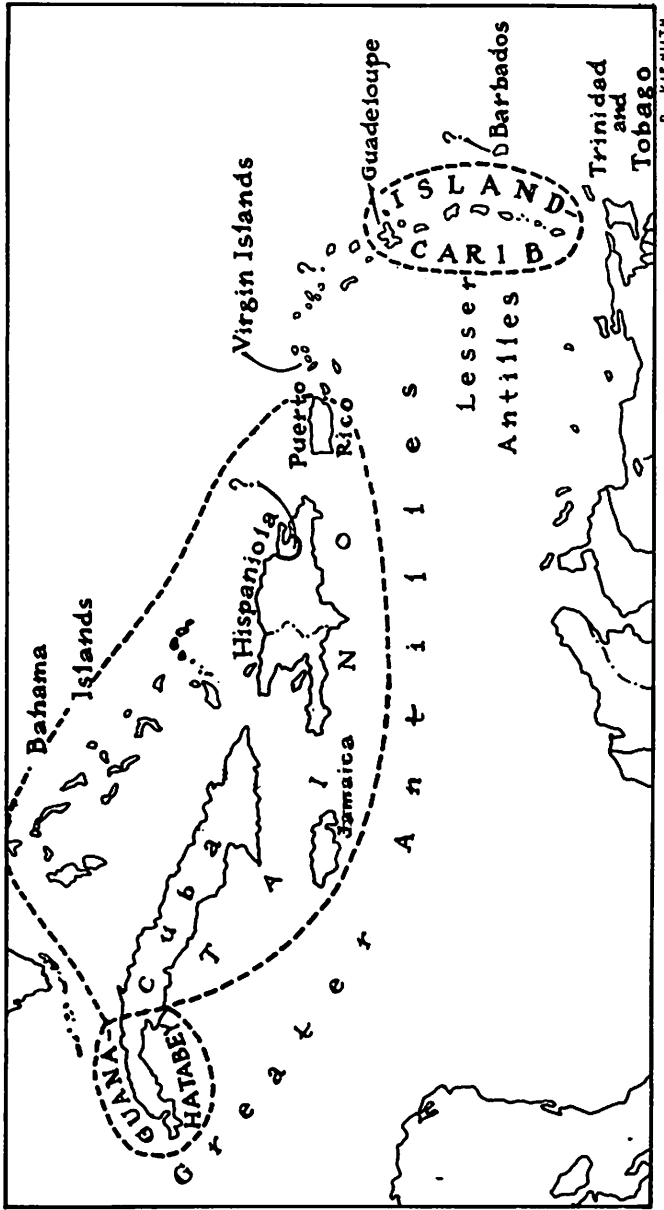


Fig. 2. Ethnic Groups and Languages Encountered by Columbus in the West Indies

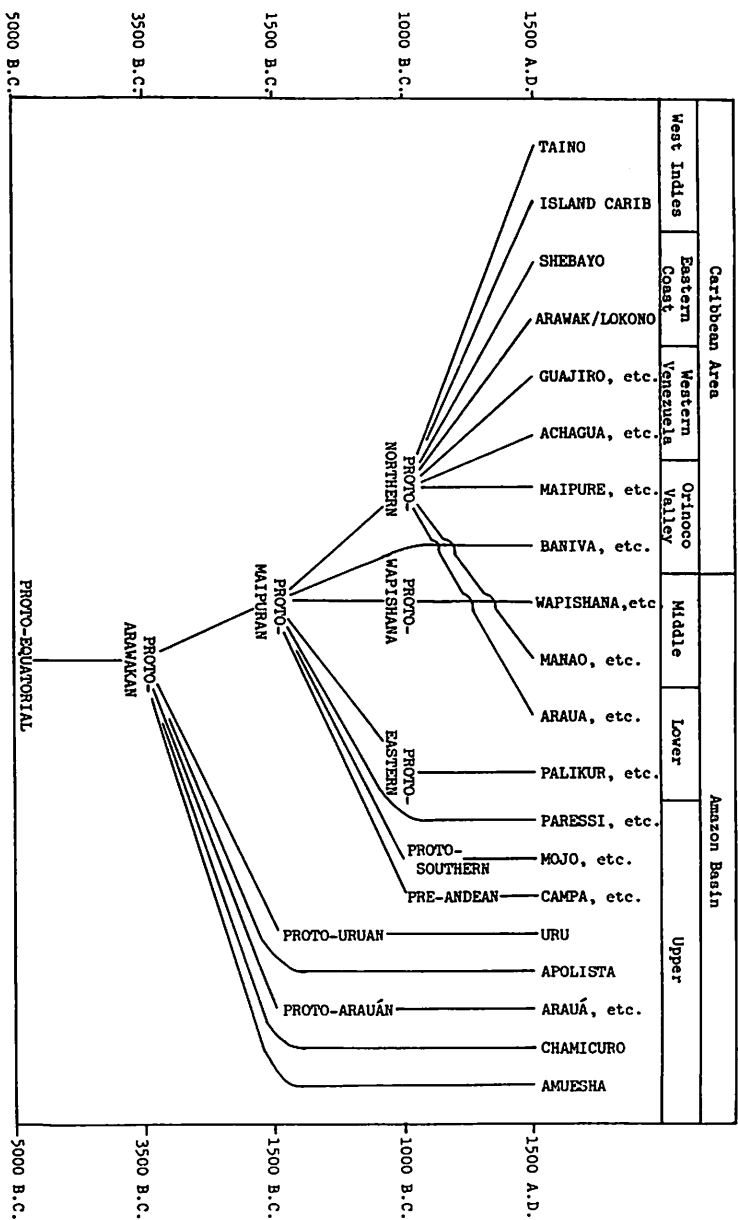


Fig. 3. Phylogeny of the Arawakan Languages

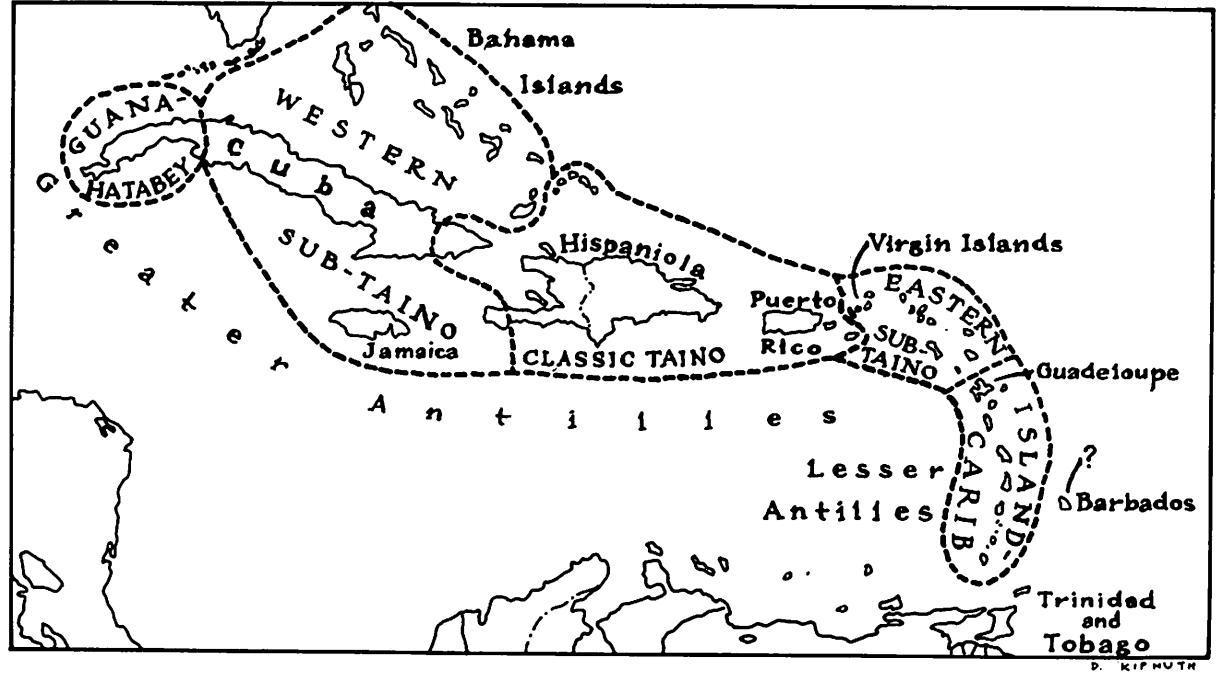


Fig. 4. Peoples and Cultures Encountered by Columbus in the West Indies.

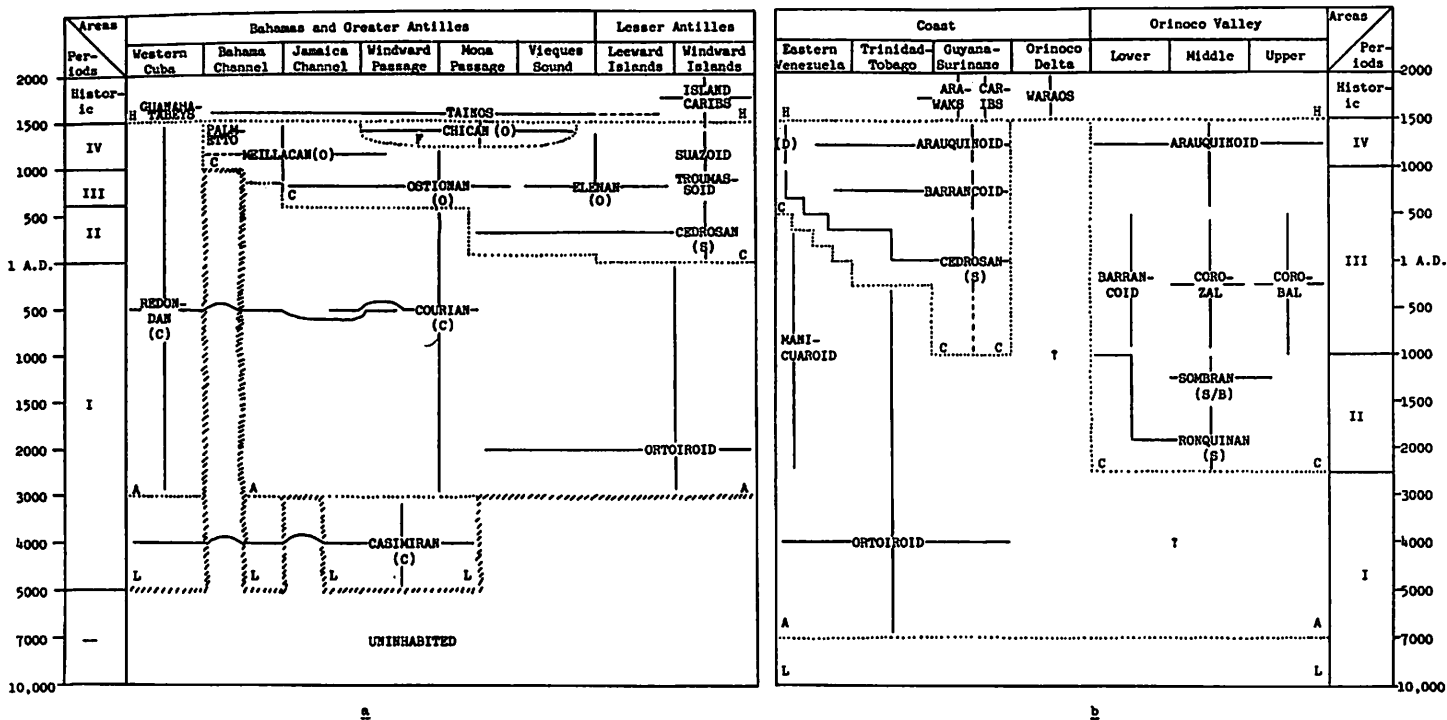


Fig. 5. Chronology of the Peoples and Cultures in the Caribbean Area: (a) West Indies. (b) coast and Orinoco Valley. Ages: L=Lithic, A=Archaic, C=Ceramic, F=Formative, H=Historic. Series of peoples and cultures: (C)=Casimiroid, (S)=Saladoid, (B)=Barrancoid, (O)=Ostionoid, (D)=Dabajuroid

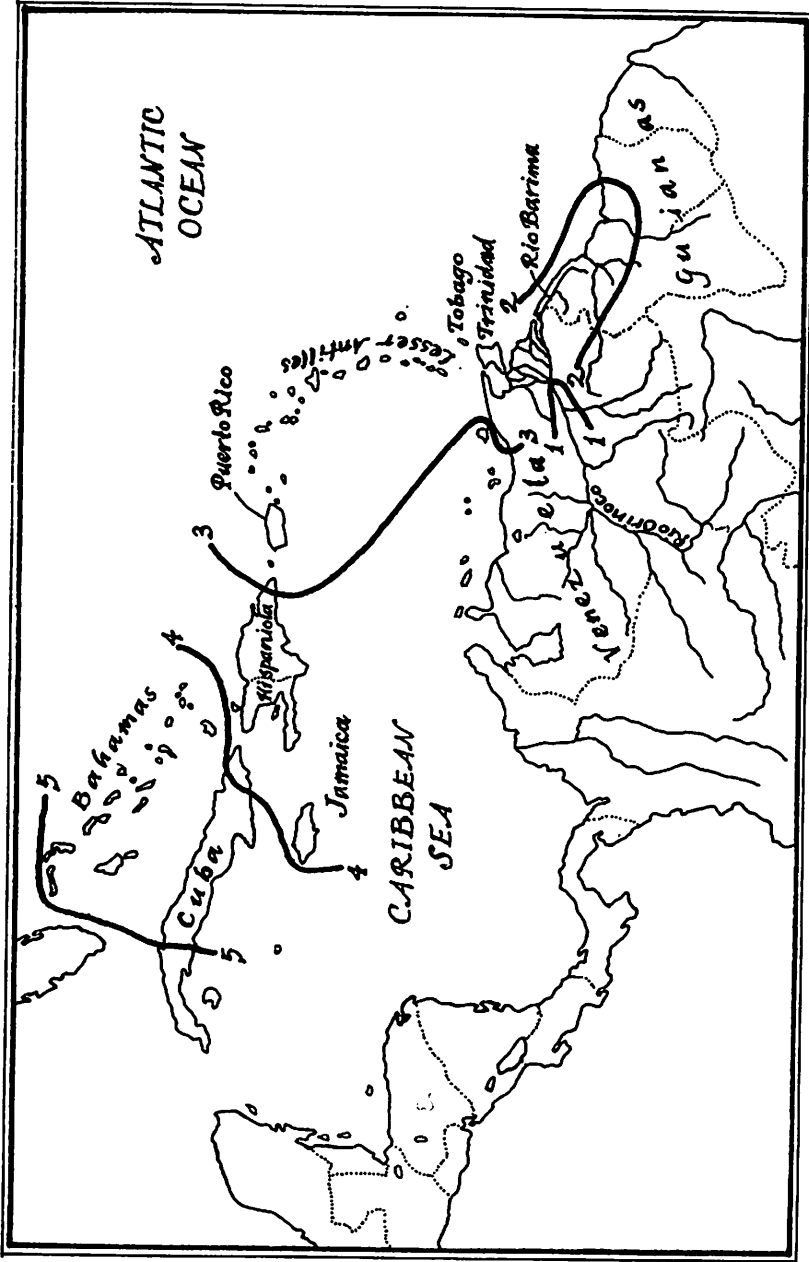


Fig. 6. Advances of the Ceramic-Archaic Age Frontier through the Caribbean Area

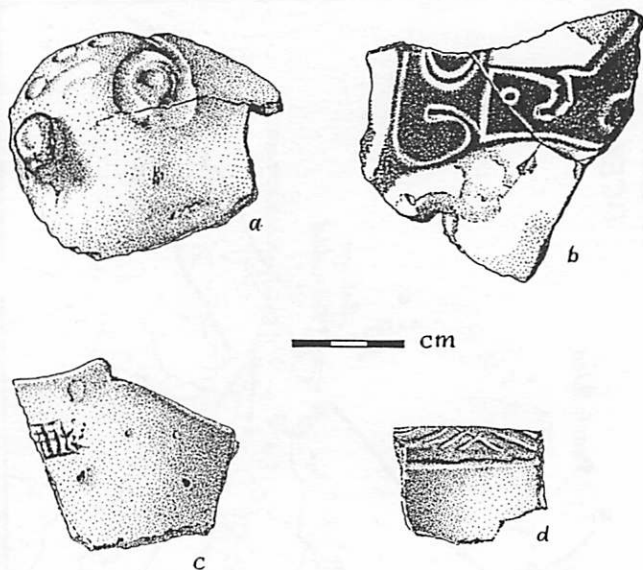


Fig. 7. Ronquinan Saladoid Pottery: a, modeled-incised design on vessel wall, La Gruta style; b, white-on-red painted sherd, La Gruta style; c, red-painted sherd, Saladero style; d, incised sherd, Saladero style

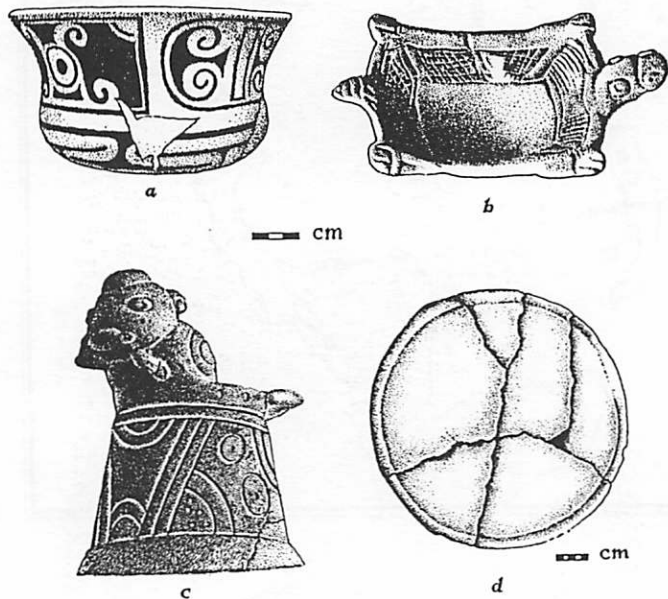


Fig. 8. Cedrosan Saladoid Vessels and Utensils: a, white-on-red painted pot, Puerto Rico; b, modeled and zoned incised crosshatched pot, Guadeloupe; c, incense burner, Martinique; d, clay griddle, Martinique

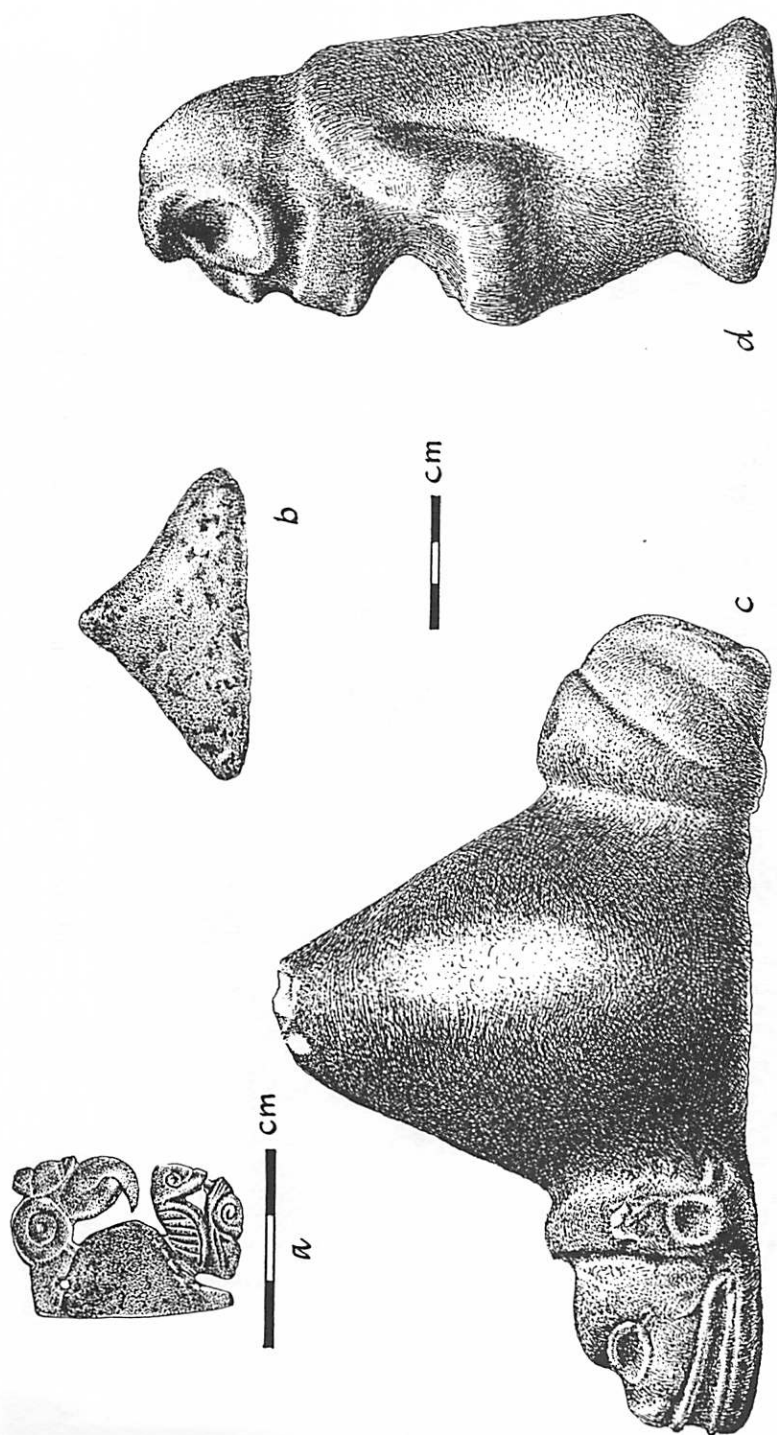


Fig. 9. Artifacts Used in the Worship of Zemís: a, bird pendant of stone, Vieques Island; b, small, plain three-pointed of stone, Puerto Rico; c, large, carved three-pointed of stone, Dominican Republic; d, stone statue, Dominican Republic

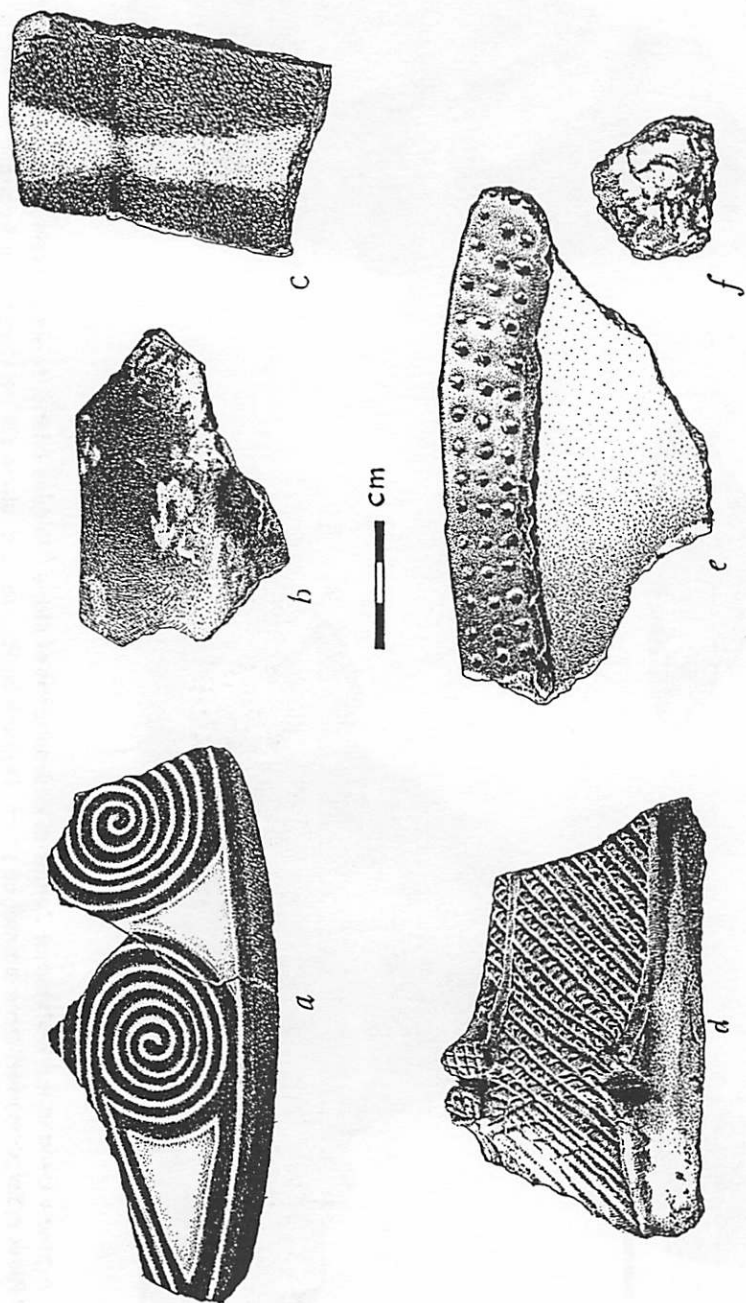


Fig. 10. Markers for the Ceramic Age Repeopling of the Greater Antilles: *a*, Cedrosan Saladoid pottery, Puerto Rico; *b*, *c*, Ostionan Ostionoid pottery, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic; *d*, *e*, Meillacan Ostionoid pottery, Haiti; *f*, Palmetto ware, Bahamas

1 cm

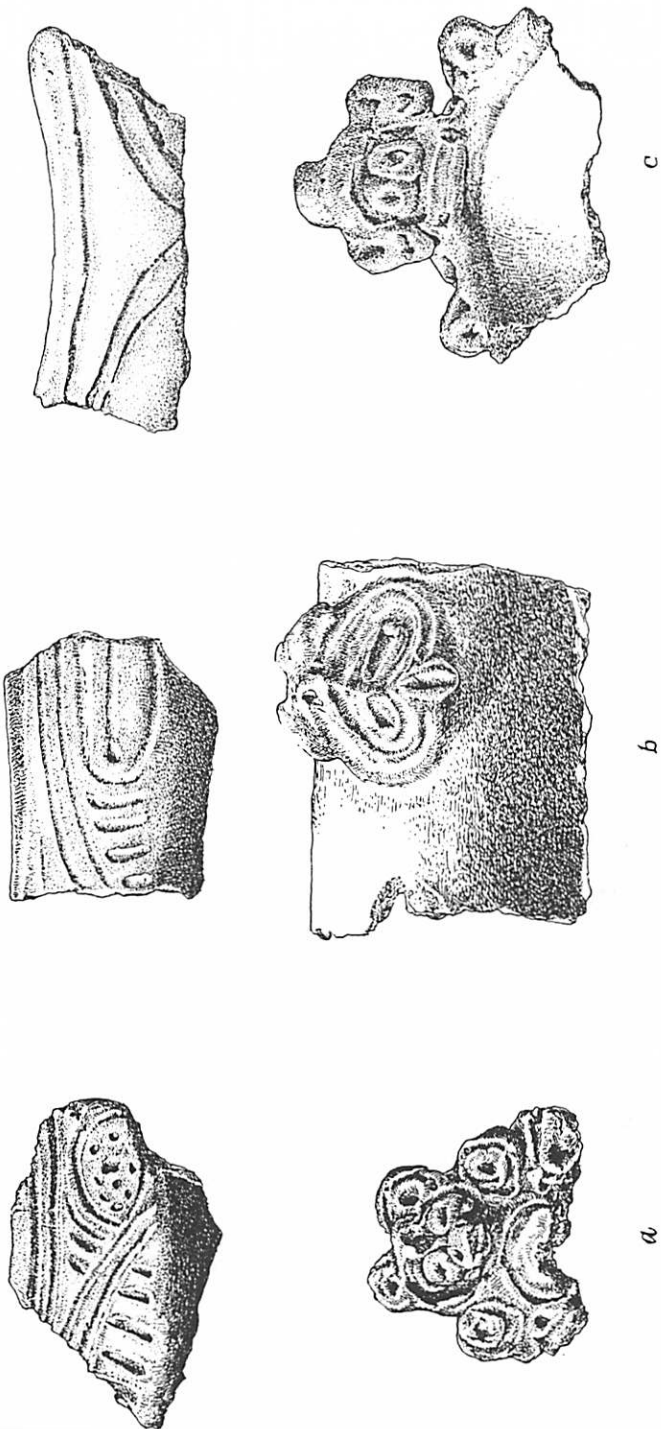


Fig. 11. Chican Ostionoid Pottery: *a*, Cap style, western Puerto Rico; *b*, Boca Chica style, central Puerto Rico; *c*, Esperanza style, eastern Puerto Rico

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