“Re-examining Classic Taíno Culture History”

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Through funding from this grant, I was able to travel to Washington, DC during three weeks in the summer of 2012 and make significant use of artifacts collected by the National Museum of Natural History and the National Museum of the American Indian, both part of the Smithsonian Institutions. Although the analysis of my results is not yet finished, the data collection was a success.

I recovered a substantial amount of information regarding the cultural chronology of two Taíno subgroups (the Chican and Meillacan series). I divided my time between two museum support centers (museums display less than 10 percent of their complete holdings of artifacts at any one time, the rest of the objects are kept out of public view), as well as spoke with scholars in the area. I viewed several hundred complete ceramic vessels and fragments that dated to 800-1200 years ago. Of these, I measured a variety of elements from more than 200 pieces appropriate to my study. Before I arrived in DC, the curators sent me databases of objects, but I was able to find even more artifacts once I delved into the collections. The total number of samples used in my study was more than I anticipated and will provide statistically significant results.

My hypothesis is that the ceramic vessel design styles traditionally used to distinguish the groups are not reflections of cultural differences but intragroup choices. While the vessel forms are quite similar, it is likely that the surface decoration may have signified certain purposes to the users of the pottery, much like how modern families put out their fine china only on special occasions. Household inclinations and the continuance of particular rituals would affect the transmission of cultural practices like those seen in vessel production. Different social groups (class, sex, and age) have divergent performance preferences for their material culture, and the decision process concerned with adopting new forms requires compromises and trade-offs. The power of the Taíno chiefs may not have been able to penetrate the kitchens of the women making the meals or creating the dishes on which they were served. If confirmed through my investigation, this new view of ceramic decoration (and dismissal of the idea they belonged to separate groups) will cause a shift in the dominant paradigm regarding the cultural chronology of the area, and add to the knowledge about the causes and effects of human migration.

My collaboration with the Smithsonian curators was fruitful, and it resulted in a paper to be presented at the International Association of Caribbean Archaeology meetings this summer. I expect the presentation to be turned into an article that will be of interest to a peer-reviewed journal on Caribbean archaeology. Finally, the contacts I made with Smithsonian curators and researchers should serve me well in teaching future courses about material culture and museum practices.