Prehistoric Culture of Cuba

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To Miss Sophie Keenan,
With the compliments of
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By J. WALTER FEWKES

INTRODUCTION

Although the early Spanish writers ascribed to Cuba a large aboriginal population, they recorded very little regarding racial differences of natives in different parts of the island. The majority, considering the inhabitants as homogeneous in culture, paid little attention to variations in language or to diversity in mode of life, while later authors, who are few in number, have added little to earlier accounts. Archeological investigations, to which we must now look for more light on this subject, have thus far been limited, and our museums are very poor in prehistoric Cuban objects. Few specimens are known to have been found in the province of Pinar del Rio, or the western end of the island, and local collectors are unanimous in saying that all the aboriginal objects they possess came from the eastern extremity. This limitation is significant, especially when we consider that Yucatan, where the natives attained high culture, is such a short distance from the western end of Cuba, and that it was from the Cubans that the Spaniards first heard of the highly developed Indians of Mexico. The present paper, based on studies and collections made during a brief visit to Cuba in 1904, suggests an explanation for this paucity of prehistoric objects and the limitation of the localities from which those known have been obtained.

A study of the available evidence, both documentary and archeological, shows that the aboriginal culture of Cuba differed in different parts of the island. Some of the inhabitants reached a
comparatively high degree of culture development, others were rude savages; the former had polished stone implements and knew how to make the fertile soil yield their food supply, but the latter were naked cave-dwellers who gathered for food roots or tropical fruits that grow spontaneously in the rich soil of the island. There were also fishermen, who subsisted on a natural supply of the products of the sea when their habitat made it possible; contact with people of higher culture had raised them somewhat above the dwellers in the mountains to whom they were related.

Columbus commented on the resemblance of the aborigines of Cuba to those of the Bahamas, regarding them the same in language and customs; but this supposed identification was true only in a very general way. The diary of the first voyage of the discoverer, as found in the writings of Las Casas, affords no direct evidence of a more primitive race in Cuba, although it suggests the theory that such a people existed.

Historians do not agree as to the first landfall of Columbus in Cuba, but no one doubts that it was somewhere on the northern shore of what is now Santiago province. At whatever point he landed, he found the natives living in houses, making use of hammocks of cotton and palm fibers, and possessing stone idols and carved wooden masks. Columbus learned from them of a ruler, whom he called king, of a country to the south, which was rich in gold. Nothing is said in his diary of the natives to the west of the landfall, but he sailed westward a few leagues along the northern shore without finding people worthy of special mention. Later, turning back, he rounded Cape Maysi and examined a section of the southern coast, but was not attracted farther toward the west. On this side of Cuba he again heard of the wealth of the Indians of the south. The implication is that the people of eastern Cuba knew the Haytians and recognized that their culture was superior to that of the western end of their own island. They held out no inducement to Columbus to extend his explorations westward, as we might suspect they would have done had there been a superior race in that end of the island.

The great Genoese returned to Cuba on his second voyage, and explored the entire southern shore. Bernaldez, to whom we owe
an account of this visit, scarcely mentions the Indians in this part of the island, although he describes the Jamaicans in some detail, regarding them a highly developed race. Many native fishermen were seen along the shore, but they were evidently lower in development than the Jamaicans, whose canoes (according to Bernaldez) were painted, better made, and more luxuriantly ornamented than those of the Cubans.

Numerous references might be quoted from the writings of those who followed Columbus, showing that the prehistoric customs and languages of the natives of the eastern and western ends of the island were not the same. In the judgment of many of the Spanish conquerors, among whom Diego Velazquez may especially be mentioned, the natives of Cuba were more susceptible to Christianity than the other West Indians, but they say that this docility was not true of all the Cubans, some being less tractable than others. The extreme western end of Cuba was said to have been inhabited by barbarous Indians similar to those living in Guacayarima, the province at the western end of Hayti. The Spanish writers declare that these natives could not speak; by which is probably meant that their language was different from that of any other Indians of these islands. Bachiller y Morales says that the Guanahatebeyes (Guanacahibes), who lived in the interior of Cuba, were savages who did not treat with the other Indians. He adds that they lived in caves, which they left only to go fishing, and quotes from older writers that there were other Indians called Zibuneyes, a tribe that included the inhabitants of the islands off the northern and southern coasts, called the Gardens of the King and Queen, who were enslaved by the other natives.

According to La Torre the Indians of Cuba form one of the natural groups of the Tainos and are generally known by the name Siboneyes. They inhabit, he says, the whole island and have the same customs, although in certain parts of Cuba there are backward tribes, as the Guanacabibes of Cape San Antonio. The

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1 A town on the island of Trinidad, where survivors of the Indians still live, is called Arima. There is another Trinidad village called Naparima.
2 Cuba Primitiva, p. 280.
3 Manual de Guía para los exámenes de los Maestros y Maestras, p. 45.
original authority for these statements is found in the Muñoz Collection, and reads as follows:¹

"Lo mismo podrá hacerse con los indios de los Jardines del Rey é de la Reina, que son muchos islotes de indios que no suelen comer sino pescado solo. E éstos se les durá menos trabajo, pues no están acostumbrados sino á pescar, lo mismo se entiende para unos indios al Cabo de Cuba, los cuales son salvajes que en ninguna cosa tratan con los de la Isla, ni tienen casas, sino están en cuevas continuo, sino es cuando salen á pescar; Guanahatabeyes otros hay que se llaman Cibunyes, que los indios de la misma Isla tienen por servientes é casi son ansi todos los de los jardines."

Diego Velazquez, the conqueror, wrote ² to the King of Spain, in 1514, that there were two provinces in the western part of Cuba and that one of these was called Guaniquanico, the other Guanahatabibes. The latter was situated at the western extremity, where the natives lived as savages, having neither houses nor farms, subsisting on game captured in the mountains, or on turtles and fishes. Pedro Martir de Angleria says that the inhabitants of the Haytian province of Guacayarima, to which these Indians are said to have been allied, lived in caves and subsisted on forest fruits.

Gomara ³ mentions the fact that the inhabitants of different parts of Cuba have different languages, and says that both men and women wear little clothing. He thus writes of a peculiar custom which they practised in their nuptials:

"Si el Novio es Cacique todos los Caciques combinados duermen con la Novia, primero que no el; si mercador, los mercaderes; si labrador, el Senor o algun Sacerdote." ⁴

HISTORICAL

The earliest contribution to the archeology of Cuba we owe to Sr Andrés Poy, who in 1855 read before the American Ethnological Society a paper entitled "Cuban Antiquities: A Brief Description of some Relics Found in the Island of Cuba." Although Brinton ⁵ says this paper was not published in English, Sr J. Q.

² *Documentos inéditos del Archivo de Indias*, vol. xi, pp. 224, 225.
³ *Historia*, chap. 51, p. 41.
IDOL OF CORAL ROCK FROM CUEVA DE BORUGA, BARACOA, CUBA. (Santiago Museum.)
Garcia, in 1855, edited what he calls a Spanish translation of it in the fourth volume of his *Revista de la Habana*.

The figures accompanying this article include two stone images, a few clay heads copied from Charlevoix, and a stone pestle taken from Walton. The stone images are from Cuba, but the pestle and the clay heads came from Santo Domingo. The images more especially concern us in this article. One of these, called an idol, is made of a hard stone of reddish color, highly polished, with a head cut on one end. Poey believes it was originally covered with a varnish which has been worn off in exposed places. He is probably right in this conclusion, for remains of a resinous substance which once covered some of the three-pointed stone idols from Porto Rico still adhere to several specimens. This so-called idol has the general form of a celt, although it differs in details from the ceremonial celts which have thus far been described as from the West Indies. It is now in the Archeological Museum at Madrid. There is no doubt that the other image, described and figured both by Poey and Ferrer, is an idol. The former likens its attitude to that of a dog resting on his hind parts, the forelegs crossed over the abdominal region. This specimen is now in the University of Havana, to which institution it was presented by Ferrer.

The form of this idol is different from that of idols from Santo Domingo and Porto Rico, but its technique indicates an equally high development in stone working.

In a brief article of four pages, Brinton, “without aiming at completeness,” gives a review of the labors and results of students of the archeology of Cuba. He calls attention to some of the contributions of Poey, Ferrer, Garcia, Pi y Margall, and others, and shows that the archeology of Cuba has not been wholly neglected by intelligent Cubans, although it is true that there has been little

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2. *Present State of the Spanish Colonies, Including a Particular Account of Hispaniola*, London, 1810. Mr Walton finds in these pestles evidences among the Haytians of phallic worship like that of the Hindoos, and Poey devotes considerable space in his articles to a discussion of this theory, which he supports. The comparisons of this pestle to the *yoni* and *lingam* appear to me to be strained, especially when we examine a series of these objects, some of which represent birds and other animals.
serious investigation of the remains." He considers that "the most promising localities for research would seem to be the extreme eastern and western provinces, Santiago and Pinar del Rio. In the caves of the latter we should, if anywhere, find traces of the Mayan culture."¹

According to Brinton,² Señor Garcia gives in "one of the numbers of the Revista de la Habana" an illustration of what is called a duchi, which is the common term in Cuba for the figures of stone or clay attributed to the aborigines. This particular duchi was a stone ring, with eyes and ears of gold, and was supposed to have been the seat or throne of a chief, but probably was a stone collar. I have not been able to find this illustration in the Revista de la Habana, although I have examined and copied Garcia's two articles which he claims to be translations of Poeys's paper read before the American Ethnological Society, which I have not seen.

Brinton's suggestion that this duchi was a stone collar does not appeal strongly to me, for the term duchi, duho, or dujo was given by the West Indians to native seats or stools in the form of animals with eyes and ears of gold.³

According to Bachiller y Morales,⁴ D. Tomás Fio Betancourt, in his Historia de Puerto Príncipe, says that D. Pedro de Parrado y Pardo, in a book on the genealogy of families of Bayamo, written in 1775, gave the name duho to one of these seats, in possession of Doña Concepcion Guerra, that formerly belonged to the Cacique of Bayamo.

I am unaware that the following statement by Brinton⁵ has ever been verified: "I have also learned," he writes, "of a locality, which I will not now further specify, in central Cuba, a river valley, along which, from time to time, one meets grim faces carved from the natural rock, and sometimes monolithic statues, the work of the aborigines and believed to represent the guardian spirits of

¹ Brinton says that according to Ferrer there are caves along the Rio Cuayaguege, in Pinar del Rio, in which the aborigines interred their dead.
³ So far as known, stone collars and three-pointed idols, which characterise Porto Rican aboriginal culture, have not been found in Cuba.
⁴ Cuba Primitiva, p. 268.
⁵ Archaeology of Cuba.