CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Nearly 6,000 years ago, people took the bold step of paddling their canoes out beyond the horizon of the Caribbean Sea, where no land could be seen. They were well rewarded for taking this risk, for they found a large, rich, and uninhabited chain of islands that stretched 1,500 km and contained more than 200,000 sq km of land. It was the last large area of the Americas to be explored and populated. These discoverers and their descendants have lived in the Caribbean ever since. They were eventually joined by people from other parts of the Americas and from Europe, Africa, and Asia. In the millennia that followed, their descendants went through a series of changes that in some ways paralleled what happened with people in other parts of the Americas: they developed an efficient economy that worked well in the island setting and eventually adopted a sedentary, horticultural way of life based in part on domesticated plants brought from South America.

But ever since people first moved into the Caribbean they have followed a distinctive course, one that differs from the rest of the Americas despite nearly constant contacts between Caribbean people and the surrounding mainlands. These first colonists refashioned the island environments, unintentionally and intentionally, to suit their purposes, just as present-day Caribbean people are doing. They brought in many new species and caused the extinction of many others. Through time they grew to be diversified into many distinctive regional groups, creating a mosaic of cultures across the islands.

Throughout its history, the indigenous people of the Lesser Antilles developed and redeveloped interisland networks for trade and other kinds of interaction. They also maintained connections with the South American mainland that lasted well into colonial times. In the last centuries before contact, large and complex polities emerged in the Greater Antilles. They had enduring hierarchies of social status and large political units organizing tens of thousands of people. When Columbus and his company arrived in 1492, they witnessed large and dense populations living in villages of up to several thousand people. These complex societies were supported by intensive agriculture and other kinds of specialized production and the distribution of food, salt, stone, and other raw materials. Scholars have come to call these people the Taíno, borrowing one of the many names they had for themselves (Rouse 1992).

The island people of the Greater Antilles bore the brunt of the first wave of European conquest in the New World. Taíno society quickly disintegrated after the arrival of the first European explorers (Anderson-Córdova 1990; Deagan 1995; Sauer 1966; Wilson 1990). The spread of epidemic diseases took the highest toll, but Spanish tribute and labor demands also undermined the complexly integrated Taíno economy, causing famine to spread through the Greater Antilles. The Bahamas were also badly affected by disease and by the removal of people who were enslaved and taken to Hispaniola (now the Dominican Republic and Haiti) to serve as forced labor (Keegan 1992).

The indigenous people of the Lesser Antilles fared slightly better in the century after European contact, principally because they were able to survive the influx of European diseases more successfully (Hulme 1986; Wilson 1997). They typically lived in smaller villages and were more mobile. Although they also suffered from disease and raids, they could take to their canoes and flee Europeans who might attack or attempt to enslave them. These Lesser Antillean people, who came be known as the Island Caribs, tenaciously fought European attempts to colonize their islands for nearly two centuries, eventually making peace and living in reserved areas on a few of the islands or in Central America (Allaire 1997; Gonzalez 1988).

Since the time of Charles Darwin's travels in the nineteenth century, there has been a temptation to think of islands as "laboratories" for the study of biological or cultural processes – isolated places where changes could take place over long spans of time, unaffected by the outside world. Darwin saw the Galapagos Islands as a natural laboratory within which he could study evolution by means of natural selection. It would be very misleading to approach the Caribbean islands in such a way, however, for in terms of their human history they were certainly not isolated places. From the earliest human colonization, the islands were linked to one another by the sea, not separated by it. Nevertheless, islands have special properties with implications for their human occupation (Renfrew and Wagstaff 1982). Islands in general, and the Caribbean islands in particular, are fascinating places to research the interaction of people with the environment, as well as the complex interplay of geography and culture. Cyprian Broodbank (2000:3), writing about the Aegean in *An Island Archaeology of the Early Cyclades*, advocates the development of an archaeological approach specifically developed for island environments, an approach that

> . . . encourages a structure of enquiry centred around a series of key questions about people on islands that are common to island archaeology all over the world. Why did people go to islands? How did they choose to live after arrival? How were people's lives shaped by, and how did they reshape, in physical but also cognitive terms, the islands that they inhabited? What kinds of interaction took place between island communities, and also between islanders and other, non-insular communities? How did external contacts affect the cultures of islanders? How and why did island societies 'end' – if indeed they did?

All of these questions are relevant to the present study and help to call attention to some of the distinctive characteristics of Caribbean history. In considering what makes the Caribbean such a unique historical situation, it is important to recognize that the colonization of the Antilles took place long after the rest of the Americas was well explored and occupied. At around 4000 B.C. the islands were something of a "last frontier" – a large, rich, and uninhabited part of the hemisphere. The islands had escaped colonization for so long

because the first long step out to the archipelago was such a difficult one. The places where the Caribbean islands are closest to the mainland are western Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago, and the northern Bahamas. It is nearly 200 km from the Yucatan peninsula out to the western tip of Cuba, and on the other end of the archipelago there is a 125-km gap between Tobago and Grenada (Figure 1.1). It is about 100 km from Florida out to the nearest of the Bahamas. Once past the first step, however, the other passages are relatively easy. For example, in the southern Lesser Antilles, after the first passage of 125 km, the next island in the chain is in sight or otherwise apparent, all the way to Cuba. In historical times interisland contact via canoes was common, and this was probably true from the very beginnings of the human colonization of the Caribbean (Watters and Rouse 1989).

THEMES EXPLORED IN THIS SURVEY

This volume aims to provide a synthetic overview of what is known of the prehistory and early colonial history of the indigenous people of the Caribbean. Several themes receive special emphasis. First, it is apparent that the Caribbean had a great degree of cultural diversity even in prehistory. Today it is clear that the islands are culturally and linguistically diverse, divided as they are among speakers of Spanish, French, Dutch, English, Hindi, Papiamento, and many distinct Creole languages. But traditional views of the precontact Caribbean, based in part on mistaken ethnohistoric perspectives, had divided the archipelago between only two large and relatively homogeneous groups: the Arawaks and the Caribs. In that view, which began with Columbus's very imperfect attempts to understand the cultural situation he encountered, the Island Caribs were "warlike" recent arrivals from the South American mainland, engaged in conquering their way up through the Lesser Antilles. In the Greater Antilles, according to this story, the Arawaks or Taíno lived in their villages in peace. The story of "peaceful" Arawaks and invading Caribs is still taught in Caribbean schools and elsewhere.

It now appears that at the time of the Europeans' arrival the archipelago was much more complicated and diverse than the explorers thought. In fact, the diversity and cultural interaction in the

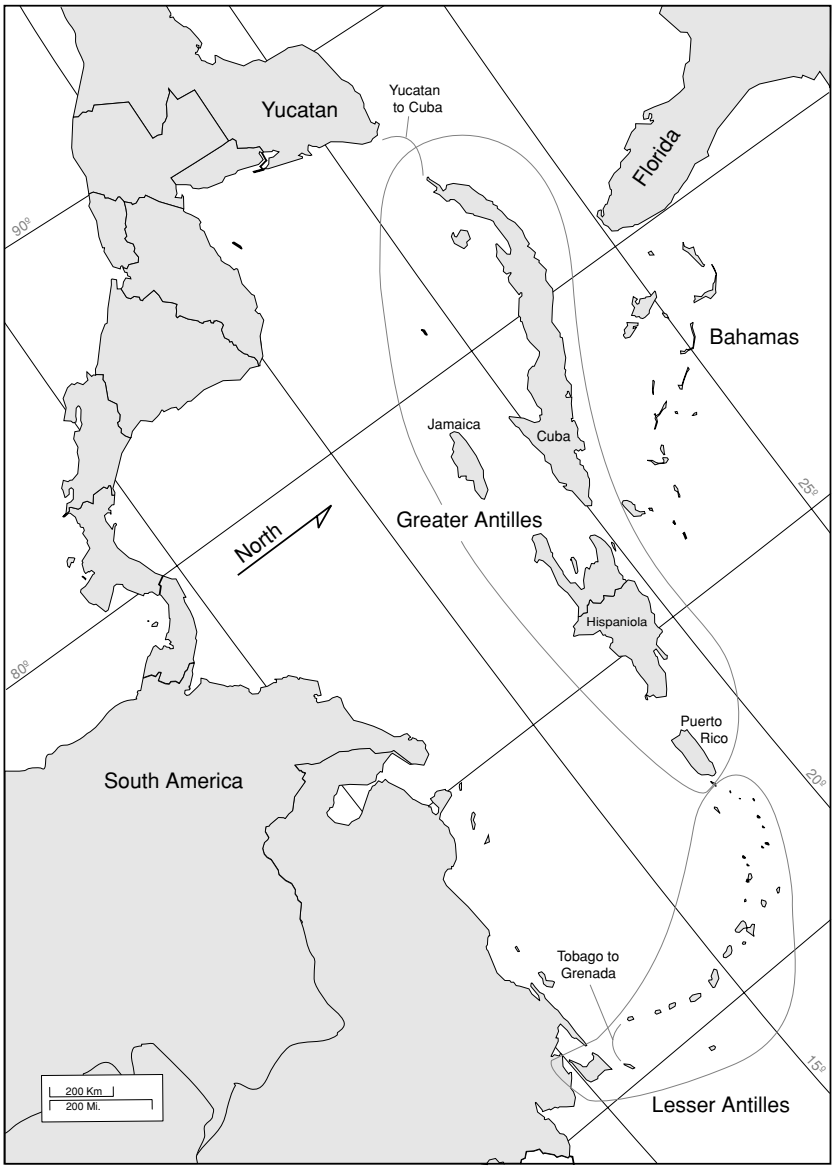

Figure 1.1. Map of the Caribbean.

islands played a critical role in culture change throughout Caribbean prehistory. I will argue that in situations in which people with different ancestries and cultures live in close proximity and interact intensely, an individual or group gains little advantage by the strategy of clinging to old and conservative ways. Instead, invention and innovation is a better strategy for finding new solutions to problems and for attracting followers and allies. In looking at the modern situation, the cultural impact of the Caribbean on the world is far out of proportion to its size. With fewer than 40 million people (in 2003; Rand McNally World Atlas 2004), the entire population of the 30 or so Caribbean countries is less than that of Poland, Tanzania, or Colombia. But the region has disproportionate influence in terms of world music, art, literature, sports, and global cultural trends. I believe the explanation is that in multicultural situations there is more opportunity and indeed a great advantage to combining genres, styles, and ideas in new ways. This seems to have been the case in the prehistoric Caribbean just as it is in the region today.

Tracking cultural diversity in the archaeological record is a difficult matter, however; and it is a focus of research that is being explored at present by many archaeologists. Some distinctive markers of a person's cultural identity can be subtle or displayed in ways that archaeologists cannot recover. For example, patterns of dress, hair styles, tattoos, and other things are not preserved archaeologically. Fortunately for archaeologists, other markers of identity are more obvious and well preserved. The difficulty, as we will see in the discussion of cultural variability in Saladoid times, is in interpreting what these markers and the differences between them really mean.

A second theme, closely intertwined with the first, involves the attempt to understand the factors that led to the emergence of complex societies in the region. By "complex societies," archaeologists generally mean societies that have some or most of the following characteristics: (1) some sort of permanent hierarchy of social statuses that are determined by birth more than achievement; (2) a demographic scale or size to support nonproducing elites, usually 10,000 people or more; and (3) a system of political organization that involves decision making at above the village or community

level (Curet [2003] provides a good discussion of the concept of complex or middle-range societies in the Caribbean). These characteristics emerged in parts of the Caribbean between A.D. 500 and the time of European conquest, and so for archaeologists interested in how this process takes place, this has been an important topic of investigation. An important aspect of the Caribbean case is that the emergence of complex society is relatively recent, compared to the first time it happened, in Mesopotamia more than 6,000 years ago. Another important parameter is that these social and political changes occurred in relative isolation from other more powerful polities. It is reasonably clear that complex Caribbean polities emerged for internal reasons, not because of external pressures.

Just what range of factors were involved in the emergence of complex societies in the Caribbean is not completely clear, but they likely include such things as changes in the economic basis of society, population growth, changing connections with groups both inside and outside the Caribbean, control of trade and knowledge, competition for resources, and strategies for dealing with internal and external threats. The theme of complex society emergence is particularly important in Chapter 3, which deals with the Saladoid phenomena and again in Chapters 4 and 5 dealing with the Taíno.

Another theme of this volume is that interisland networks were very important throughout time, particularly in the Lesser Antilles and Bahamas. Evidence is beginning to emerge for shifting alliances of people from different islands, who certainly traded and probably also intermarried and allied with one another for raiding or defense (Delpuech and Hofman 2004). These interisland networks expanded the horizons of the participants' social world, but more importantly the economic and alliance networks made the occupation of the islands and island groups possible. As will be discussed, in later prehistory the breakdown of some of these networks preceded and probably precipitated the abandonment of several adjacent islands (Crock and Petersen 2004; Hofman and Hoogland 2004; and other papers in Delpuech and Hofman 2004). Keegan and others have also discussed interactions among the Bahamian islands and between them and the Greater Antilles (Keegan 1992). Both of these cases suggest that it is important not to think of islands as isolates; rather,

populations from several islands were likely linked in networks of interaction (Rouse 1986).

A final theme that is given special attention is the importance of long-distance interaction, especially with people outside the Caribbean. We know there was sustained contact between the Lesser Antilles and the South American mainland and have some evidence for contact between the Greater Antilles and Central America, and perhaps the Bahamas and North America as well. But these types of data are elusive and difficult to use with confidence if it involves artifacts that did not come from well-documented contexts. As discussed in later sections of the book, it seems increasingly likely that long-distance interactions and contacts with other regions may have played a significant role in the course of Caribbean prehistory.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

The strategy taken in this volume is not to attempt to "set the environmental stage" on which a human drama is played, because environmental change is itself such an important part of that story. Instead, the strategy is to address human–environmental interactions period by period, as they occurred. Nevertheless, it is necessary to make a few general points about Caribbean environments and the opportunities they provide and the constraints they impose. It is also possible to make some observations about the perceptions about tropical environments that foreign researchers have brought with them to the Caribbean.

First and perhaps most important, all the islands of the Caribbean are very different from one another. They vary widely on a number of axes – size, topography, climate, environmental richness, and diversity, to name a few.

A very important difference among the islands is their size. When one travels through the archipelago the differences are obvious, but their magnitude is hard to gauge. The islands of the Greater Antilles are enormous compared to the Lesser Antilles (Figure 1.1). The largest island, Cuba, is nearly 10 times larger than all of the Lesser Antilles combined. All together, the Lesser Antilles comprise about 12,000 sq km, whereas the combined Greater Antilles total about

Figure 1.2. View of the volcanic cone of the island of Nevis from the west.

194,000 sq km. These differences in size have significant implications for the inhabitants' economy, social and political organization, and demography. In the Lesser Antilles, people's diets were almost always linked to ocean resources, whereas in the interior of the large islands people often had a wholly terrestrial food supply. Productive resources such as the large and fertile valleys of the Greater Antilles are rare on most of the Lesser Antilles. The larger islands clearly support larger populations in proportion to their size, but they also may have supported higher population densities due to the general productivity of the land, especially the large interior valleys. Groups inhabiting the same island did not necessarily interact more than those on adjacent islands, however, and in some cases they may have been more isolated due to geographic barriers, for example, mountain ranges or the distances between valleys.

The topography of the Caribbean islands is also very diverse, reflecting the differing underlying geology. A tectonic plate boundary between the expanding Atlantic plate and the Caribbean plate accounts for the volcanism and uplift of the arc of the Lesser Antilles. The collision of these two plates has produced two very different kinds of islands in the Lesser Antilles. There are volcanic islands that have been raised up by an arc of eruptions stretching from Grenada, off the coast of South America, up to the island of Saba almost 1,000 km up the archipelago (Figures 1.2 and 1.3 show the volcanic

cone of the island of Nevis in the Leeward Islands). This "ring of fire" is still active, as the 1995 eruption on Montserrat demonstrates. As my colleagues and I were carrying out excavations on the east coast of Nevis in the late 1990s we saw the incessant plume of smoke from Montserrat, and the eruption has continued for more than 10 years. The 1902 eruption of Mt. Pelée on Martinique engulfed and destroyed the town of Saint Pierre, and many *soufrieres* and hot springs may be found up and down the arc. The same tectonic phenomenon accounts for the uplift of many islands with sedimentary substrates. These much older geological formations generally appear as relatively flat islands without the pronounced topography of the volcanic isles. The island of Guadeloupe is a good example of both structures because it is really two very different islands that happen to touch. Basse Terre on the western half is a series of volcanoes, the highest of which rises to 1,467 m (it last erupted in 1956). On the eastern side, Grande Terre is made of 20-million-year-old Miocene limestone, some dissected with karstic features, and there are only a few hundred meters of topography in all.

The other major landforms in the Caribbean are the faultblock mountains of the Greater Antilles. These mountains are really continuations of the cordillera systems of Central America. The mountain systems of Guatemala and Belize carry across to the eastern province of Cuba and the northern cordillera of Hispaniola. A southern cordillera extends from Honduras and Nicaragua to become the backbone of Jamaica and the bulk of Hispaniola's Cordillera Central (Blume 1972:27–39). The same range underlies Puerto Rico's central cordillera. Beneath Puerto Rico are primarily uplifted and deformed sedimentary rocks, and in Hispaniola there are also igneous and crystalline complexes (which contained gold and helped make Hispaniola the first target for intensive European colonization in the Americas).

In addition to this structural diversity, there is considerable variability through the archipelago in terms of other environmental variables such as climate, fauna, flora, and off-shore resources. In the Caribbean the interaction between people and the environment has been of enormous importance, arguably more dramatic than in non-island contexts. From their earliest arrival, people had an immense impact on the environment they entered; they caused a host of