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A History of Islands

The Caribbean is named for its sea, but the islands define the region and make its history. As a marine environment, the Caribbean Sea is a creation of the land that encloses it, with a continental coastline to the south and west, and a permeable but continuous arc of islands facing the Atlantic Ocean. Without the islands there would be no sea. The water would be nothing more than another stretch in the fluid maritime history of the ocean. Equally significant, the islands of the Caribbean surround and demarcate the sea rather than sitting in it. This geographical formation determined fundamental features in the development of the Caribbean and distinguished the experience of the region from that of other island histories around the world.

Islands can be scattered in many different kinds of patterns. Sometimes they stand alone, in splendid isolation, but often they occur in groups or clusters. The tropical Atlantic from the Caribbean to the coast of Africa is almost empty of islands. In this vast oceanic zone, islands are small, few in number, and extremely isolated. The islands of the Caribbean, by contrast, are numerous and vary greatly in size (Map 1.1). What determines the uniqueness of the Caribbean islands as a whole is the way they form an archipelago, spread through an extensive arc stretching over 3,000 km, with large bodies of water to each side, and the way the archipelago floats free of the

Map 1.1 The modern Caribbean

mainland. The Caribbean Sea, like the Atlantic, is largely empty of islands. The enclosing islands seem almost like a chain cast outwards by centrifugal force, straining to escape the pull of gravity.

The histories of the islands look both ways, towards the continental Americas on the one hand and across the Atlantic to Africa and Europe on the other. This does not mean they float in limbo, always searching somewhere else for meaning. Rather, the islands support unique creative cultures, reflecting their role as vital sites in the creation of the modern western world. In spite of this importance, the islands were challenging destinations for early people, requiring an initial leap into the unknown and possession of appropriate sea-going technology.

When they finally did reach the islands, the first peoples brought with them ways of life constructed on continental lands that needed only minor modifications to make them viable in the tropical environments of the islands. What was different was the ready access they had to marine and littoral resources and the potential for development of insular identities.

Whereas the first human colonizers of the Caribbean were latecomers in the broad sweep of world history, the islands were prime sites in the fateful modern colonization that brought Europeans and Africans across the Atlantic to the Americas. It was on a Caribbean island that Columbus set foot on his first voyage of 1492 and it was in the islands that the Spanish built their first colonies. Rather than seeming a barrier, the sea now served as a conduit for European imperialism. Further, the easy accessibility of island shores, together with the islands' small size and long coastlines, made them ideal sites for economic exploitation. Mile for mile, it was cheaper to ship a barrel of rum or a bale of cotton across the seas than it was to haul it overland on a wagon.

This advantage remained true in the long term. It is now cheaper to move goods across the seas in container ships than to drive the same containers across country. On the other hand, the globalization of economic life that moved apace in the later twentieth century shifted the emphasis to bulk and large-scale production and, in this process, small islands, including those of the Caribbean, often lost out as producers and traders. The great advantages of accessibility associated with smallness and insularity mattered most in the context of the technologies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and it was in

those centuries that the Caribbean was seen by Europeans as a prime site for exploitation.

The smallness and seaward accessibility of the islands also meant that competing colonizers could attack and displace rival powers relatively easily, resulting in changes in allegiance that affected culture and trade as well as governance. Thus, in the modern period, the significance of the insularity of the Caribbean stretched beyond the region and across the Atlantic. The low cost of transport by sea enabled the competitive shipping of tropical products to markets in Europe and North America and facilitated the forced movement of people, particularly through the Atlantic slave trade that brought millions from Africa to the Caribbean and created the foundations of a demographic pattern that differed significantly from that found on the continents to the north and south.

Beneath the apparent symmetry of the island arc lies a more complex, slowly shifting foundation. The central building block, the Caribbean Plate, carries with it almost all of the islands, with the exception of Cuba and the Bahamas, which rest on the North American Plate, and Aruba, Curaçao, and Bonaire, which sit on the South American Plate. This geological structure came about through the long-term eastward movement of the Caribbean Plate from its origin as an oceanic plateau in the Pacific 90 million years ago, pushing its way through the North and South American Plates, resulting in considerable deformation along the edges. The Greater Antilles – Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola, and Puerto Rico – were formed in this process. Immediately south of Cuba, the Gonave microplate underlies parts of Jamaica and Hispaniola and its movement creates fault

lines that contribute to the frequency of earthquakes in the zone. The Caribbean Plate continues to edge eastwards relative to the North American Plate at about 20 mm per year. On its eastern front, the Caribbean Plate collided head-on with the Atlantic Plate, creating the 'ring of fire' that gave birth to the volcanic islands stretching from Grenada in the south to Saba in the north, known as the Lesser Antilles. The collision of the plates also raised above sea level a number of islands composed of much older sedimentary rocks.

Thus, the main islands of the Caribbean can be said to belong to three distinct archipelagos: the Greater Antilles, the Lesser Antilles, and the Bahamas. The Greater and Lesser Antilles are separated by the Anegada Passage. The Virgin Islands and Vieques have an ambiguous position, being situated on the island shelf east of Puerto Rico and located west of the Anegada Trough, but appearing in their surface morphology to belong to the Leeward Islands and hence the Lesser Antilles arc. In spite of the technical correctness of these definitions and distinctions, the notion of archipelagic coherence and unity of the whole of the Caribbean islands remains compelling.

These geophysical developments explain the contrasting shapes and sizes of the islands and island groups. In addition, by helping identify the periods during which the land was under water, they indicate the relative difficulty plants and animals faced in finding homes on the islands. Particularly in environments such as that of the low-lying Bahamas, changes in sea level were vital to determining the amount of exposed land surface. Jamaica, too, was mainly or entirely submerged during part of its history. Variations in sea level resulted from

climate change as well as tectonic events. Particularly important in the very long term was the asteroid strike that hit the region about 65 million years ago, off the eastern tip of the Yucatan Peninsula, before the proto-Antilles had achieved their modern forms. It is probable that this strike and others like it, together with volcanism and climate change, ended the age of dinosaurs and made the world safe for mammals, clearing the way for the evolution of human beings. The tsunamis and hyper-canes (gigantic hurricanes) that resulted from this event changed the Caribbean landscape.

Long-term variations in rainfall, over the period of human colonization, were also important in setting limits to the productivity of the environment. The earliest ventures into the Caribbean occurred during a relatively moist period of the middle Holocene that lasted from 8200 to 3000 BP (Before the Present). This was followed by a drier regime that, in turn, was replaced by wetter conditions in the late Holocene, beginning around AD 500 and continuing to AD 1100, when drier times returned once more. Global warming began to be noticed around 1950 and, in the Caribbean, quickly came to be associated with rising sea levels and an increased intensity in hurricane activity.

The geological and climate histories of the Caribbean had major consequences for the individual islands – indeed, their very existence. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the number of Caribbean islands – land units permanently above sea level that individually occupy at least 1 km^2 – is about 3,700, of which only 1,600 have names. Almost all of the unnamed islands are tiny and uninhabited. Altogether, the islands contain

234,000 km², but they vary dramatically in size and topography and experience surprisingly different climate and weather patterns. The viable land space is concentrated in just a few. The Greater Antilles occupy 89 per cent of the total land area, the Lesser Antilles 6 per cent, and the Bahamas 5 per cent. Of the four main islands that make up the Greater Antilles, Cuba alone, at 110,000 km², accounts for almost half of all the land, followed by Hispaniola with 76,000, Jamaica 11,000, and Puerto Rico 9,000 km². Cuba stretches over 1,000 km. The highest mountain, Pico Duarte in Hispaniola, rises to 3,175 m. In spite of the contrast between the Greater and Lesser Antilles in terms of scale, and in spite of the differing landforms and geological origins of the elements, the islands are drawn together by the sea and by the linear pattern they form within that shared sea. Whereas the water creates the uniqueness of the islands and supports the perception of separate identities, it also connects and unifies.

A glance at the political map of the Americas, as it is at the beginning of the twenty-first century, shows clearly the consequences of these broad differences in geography and patterns of development. To the north of the Caribbean, the massive continent of North America is occupied by just two nation states, Canada and the United States, and dominated by English-speaking peoples. South America, three-quarters the size of North America, is made up of 10 Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking states, several of them large in population and area, and dominated by Brazil, together with three peri-Caribbean enclaves – Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana – where the languages are versions of

English, Dutch, and French. Stretching through Central and Middle America from Panama to Mexico are another seven Spanish-speaking states, most of them quite small, and the English-speaking enclave Belize.

Although the islands of the Caribbean have a land area less than 1 per cent that of the Americas, they are home to 24 distinct polities, one more than the total on the continental landmass. The people speak four main European languages (but not including Portuguese) and a number of creoles. At the same time, the island polities have a total population in 2020 of 44 million, compared with the 980 million of the continental states of the Americas. The picture changes only somewhat if the balance is confined strictly to truly independent states. Of the 24 distinct polities in the Caribbean, only 13 are true sovereign states with separate membership in the United Nations. The others are represented by independent states located outside the region with which the islands are associated. By contrast, only one mainland territory – French Guiana – is not a member of the United Nations and has representation only through its parent state, France. Further, the islands have a more varied range of polities and political relationships, some of them defined as overseas territories of European nations and of the United States, others truly independent. Overall, the islands were slower than the nations of North and South America to establish their independence – only Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba were independent before 1900 – so that the experience of colonialism was much more extended. On a global scale, the Caribbean islands remained colonies much longer than the typical experience, almost all of them being colonies for more than 300 years and many closer to 500 years.

Both the priority and the longevity of the colonial experience in the islands of the Caribbean gave them a central role in the making of what has come to be known as Atlantic History and the Atlantic World and, more broadly, in the making of modern world history. They were the initial sites of contact between peoples previously separated by a vast ocean, and vital sites in the creation of new modes of economic organization, new languages, and new forms of social relations. In many ways, these developments are associated with the birth of the modern world and the concept of modernity, as well as the related and more recent concept of globalization.

It may seem strange to associate such concepts of modernity with the Caribbean, a region that now has a relatively low profile on the international scene and may be seen as a scattering of insignificant, small, and not particularly well-off mini-states, accidents of history and geography. Similarly, it may seem paradoxical that ideas of the modern and the global should be related to the Caribbean, a region that saw some of the harshest systems of exploitation and some of the most savage genocides. This is part of the point, however: 'modern' has often meant brutality and the extraction of profit at any price; a world in which progress and human welfare could be swept aside for economic efficiency and selfish benefit. Equally important, the Caribbean witnessed wonderful examples of the resilience of the human spirit, in direct opposition to the harshness of the exploitative regimes put in place by imperialism and representing positive responses to the opportunities that even the most brutal systems permit the creative.

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Ancient Archipelago

7200 BP–AD 1492

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People came late to the Caribbean islands – late in terms of the broad sweep of human history, and late in the peopling of the Americas. The islands of the Caribbean remained uninhabited longer than almost any other of the world's major resource-rich regions. Even when the process of colonization began, it proceeded in fits and starts and took thousands of years to complete. Some islands remained uninhabited long after their neighbours had been populated and are still uninhabited because they lack the resources to be viable. Why were the islands colonized so late, and why, once commenced, was the process so protracted and erratic? Looked at another way, the more difficult question may be why people chose to live on islands at all. Why leave behind the immense resources of the continents in order to live in small places surrounded by saltwater?

Perhaps population pressure impelled some to consider migration as a viable option, while others sought to escape conflict, but all of those who pushed out canoes and paddled into the unknown must have shared a fundamental curiosity and a primal fear. At only a few points on the long coastline of the Americas would exploratory voyagers encounter islands fit for settlement. Apart from the Arctic, the Caribbean archipelago was exceptional.