

VENEZUELAN ARCHAEOLOGY LOOKING TOWARD THE WEST INDIES

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ABSTRACT

The ceramic period of Venezuela began in the extreme west about 1860 B.C. with coarse-textured, grit-tempered bowls having modeled decoration, and it began in the east around 1050 B.C. with bichrome and modeled pottery in the Orinoco region. By 1000 B.C., pottery making and, by inference, agriculture had spread over most of Venezuela; and the later dual division between eastern manioc growers with a plastic ceramic tradition and western maize cultivators with a painted-pottery tradition was well started. Developments in both areas influenced the Antilles, with those in the east stronger in early times and those in the west stronger in later times. Relationships with the Antilles are not reducible to a simple formula that calls for movement from the northeastern coast of Venezuela out into the island chain.

ANY DISCUSSION of the development of culture in the West Indies must ultimately refer to the adjacent mainland of Venezuela (see preceding paper by Sleight), generally regarded as the principal source of population and cultural movements into the islands. Since no culture appears out of a void, it can be postulated that environmental adjustments, subsistence patterns, and cultural elements that developed on the mainland oriented and to some degree channeled subsequent adaptations to new conditions on the islands. Although more data are needed before such hypothetical influences can be adequately evaluated, a brief description of cultural developments in Venezuela that may be pertinent to the West Indies will indicate some of the relevant factors.

Although northern South America undoubtedly was occupied for a long period by nomadic hunting groups, little concrete evidence has yet been found. By 2000 B.C., however, some of these groups had begun to exploit shellfish as a food resource and thereby left an impression on the archaeological record. A series of radiocarbon dates from eastern (Punta Gorda, 2325 B.C.; La Aduana, 1730 and 1190 B.C.) and western sites (El Heneal, 1550 B.C.) indicate adoption of this way of life along much of the coast during the next 500 years (Rouse and Cruxent 1963: 44-6). The artifact complexes associated with shell middens are varied both in tool type and in raw material, reflecting probable chronological differences that have not yet been worked out. The earliest sites are characterized by conical

bone points, bone spatulas, and biconical stones, while the more recent ones show an increasing frequency of shell artifacts, including axes made from *Strombus gigas* and bipointed projectile points. Absence of stone implements characteristic of the preceding Paleo-Indian period suggests a discontinuity, but whether this is simply the result of radical change in the subsistence pattern or a reflection of ethnic difference is not clear. Shellfish gathering must have been supplemented by fishing with nets and hunting of land animals. The presence of shell middens not only on the mainland but also on the islands indicates possession of watercraft and a rudimentary knowledge of navigation at this early time, thus laying the foundation for movement along the Antillean island chain.

Expansion of a sedentary way of life to the interior awaited the introduction of cultivated plants, which in Venezuela may have coincided with the introduction of pottery making. Although it is postulated that the cultivation of manioc may have begun in Venezuela during the preceramic period (Rouse and Cruxent 1963: 143), the earliest radiocarbon-dated occurrences of pottery and incipient agriculture on the northern coast of Colombia tend to favor this area as the immediate source. Correlation of radiocarbon dates with the cultural sequence at the site of Rancho Peludo on the Guajira Peninsula is not clear, but the appearance of pottery here may date as early as 1860 B.C. (Rouse and Cruxent 1963: 48). Decoration is limited to a few rows of corrugation at the vessel rim, nicked appliqué ribs, fabric roughening of the lower exterior, and anthropomorphic adornos with horizontal slit eyes and mouth and an appliqué nose. The presence of griddles has been used as the basis for inferring the utilization of bitter manioc.

By 1000 B.C., pottery making and, by inference, agriculture had spread to the eastern and western limits of the present boundaries of Venezuela, and the dual division emphasized by Rouse between eastern manioc cultivators with a plastic ceramic tradition and western maize cultivators with a painted-pottery tradition was well established. This duality reflects environmental differences between the tropical low-

lands of the Orinoco Valley and the more temperate, mountainous western region, differences of little significance during pre-agricultural times but now exerting an influence on crops, productivity, and settlement pattern. Through time, divergence between the two areas increases, and by the late period the contrast in general level of cultural development is very marked. Several cultural differences, significant not only because of their differential distribution in the two areas but also because of the sociopolitical contrasts they imply, have been summarized by Rouse and Cruxent (1963: 55):

Burial in the west was in shaft graves or urns, accompanied by many grave objects, whereas in the east the body was simply placed in the ground, usually without any grave objects at all. The western Indians built mounds and other earthworks; the eastern Indians did not. The western remains include a variety of ceremonial paraphernalia, such as clay figurines, incense burners, and pendants carved in the form of amulets, but these are almost entirely lacking in the east, where non-ceramic artifacts are more utilitarian, the principal types being clay pot rests and stamps. Caves were used as shrines in the west but not in the east.

Central Venezuela provides a meeting ground for these two divergent traditions, amalgamating elements of both into a third tradition with certain distinctive features of its own. All of these areas or traditions may have played a role in the development of culture in the West Indies.

Although the possibility of movement directly from the Venezuelan coast to the Greater Antilles cannot be ruled out, it must at best have been secondary to migration along the island stepping-stones from eastern Venezuela. The archaeological situation in the east at the beginning of the Christian era is thus of interest. The picture is a spotty one, perhaps a reflection of incomplete knowledge. In the Barcelona lagoon area on the coast, small shell heaps dating from 570 B.C. indicate persistence of the early way of life. Artifacts include shell gouges, milling stones, conical pestles, and bone points, to which are added a few Barranoid-like potsherds believed by Rouse and Cruxent (1963: 57-9) to be of trade origin. Farther to the east, on Cubagua Island and the adjacent mainland, radiocarbon dates attest to the survival of this way of life until the beginning of the Christian era.

By contrast, the lower Orinoco was the habitat of pottery-making groups a thousand years earlier. The first pottery, termed Saladoid, is

characterized by white-on-red decoration in geometric motifs covering the entire vessel surface and by very small rim lugs. A few griddle sherds indicate cultivation of manioc. However, the abundance of wild floral and faunal resources would have made it possible for such a group to support itself rather well, and possibly even to have attained the beginning of social stratification or occupational specialization with a rather rudimentary agricultural technology. The origin of this Saladoid complex is not well understood, since early sites are not known outside the lower Orinoco.

The Saladoid people did not long enjoy undisputed occupancy of the region, for radiocarbon dates indicate that the Barranoid ceramic style made its appearance only about a century after. Barranoid affiliations can be traced back to coastal Colombia, where the Malambo phase on the lower Magdalena River is dated by radiocarbon at 1200 B.C. (Angulo Valdes 1963a, 1963b). The ceramics are characterized by a predominantly plastic style of decoration based on modeling and incision, in which a profusion of modeled and incised biomorphic adornos is the most outstanding feature (Fig. 1, *a*). The elaboration and competence of the decoration indicates a high degree of technical skill on the part of the potters, possibly resulting from occupational specialization. Grids suggest the use of manioc, although the presence of manos and metates suggests that wild seed plants or maize may also have been important.

At the beginning of the Christian era, expansion of Saladoid-Barranoid pottery to the eastern coast of Venezuela is shown by the appearance of the El Mayal phase, dated by radiocarbon at A.D. 100. These immigrants from the Orinoco probably came into contact with shellfish-gathering groups that had persisted along the coast. In any case, the pottery-making cultures adopted a mixed subsistence economy that included the use of seafood and agriculture, an adaptation that was maintained until the time of the Spanish Conquest. Concurrently or subsequently, certain of these groups appear to have moved into the Antilles, giving rise to a series of ceramic complexes whose style is reminiscent of those in the Orinoco Valley.

Meanwhile, in western Venezuela events were moving in a different direction. About 200 B.C., well-developed polychrome and bichrome pottery was introduced into the earlier incised and

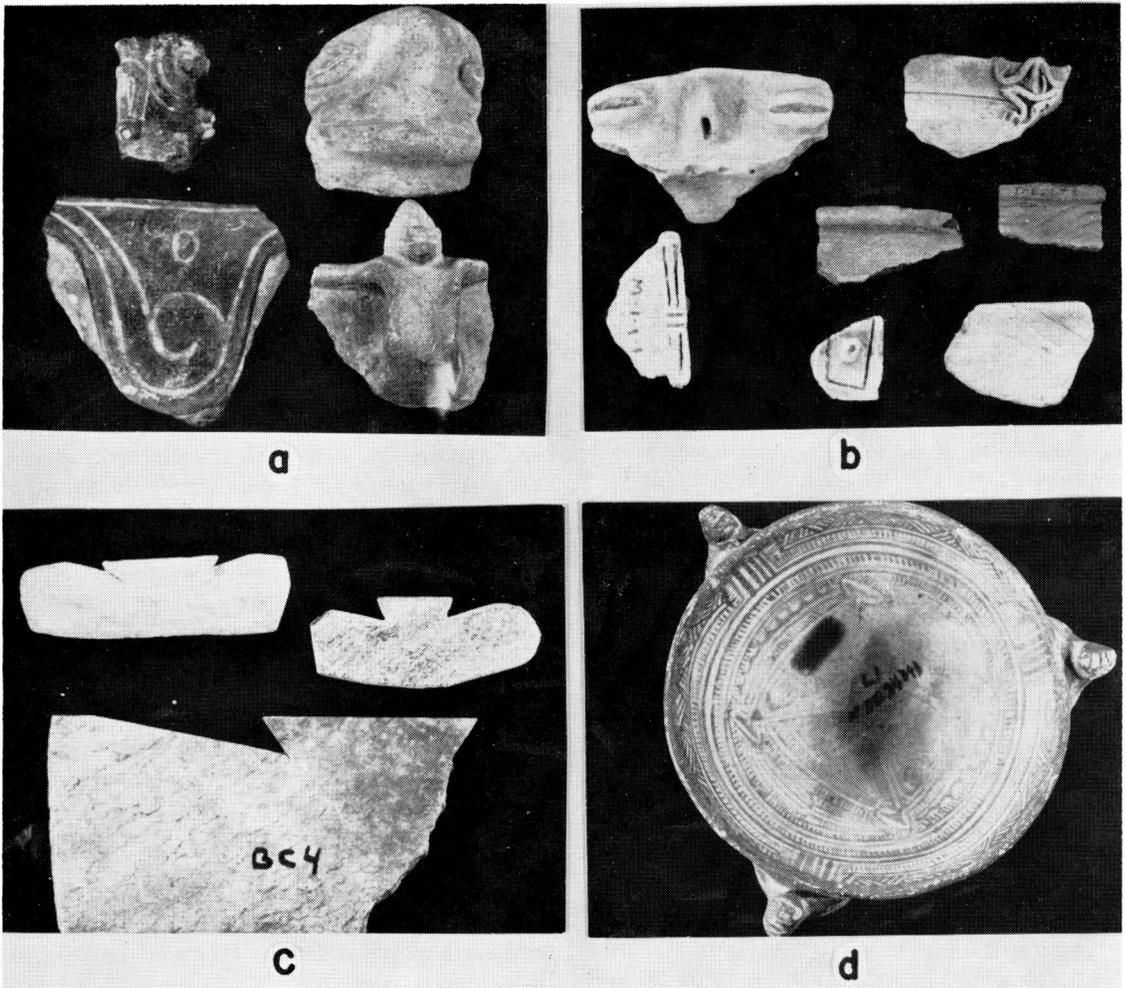


FIG. 1. Archaeological specimens from western Venezuela. *a*, relatively early Barrancoid-type lugs, handles, and incised sherds; *b*, sherds of middle period Zancudo phase, from south of Lake Maracaibo, showing decorative elements also found in the Antilles; *c*, slate pectorals from the late Valencia phase; *d*, late period polychrome vessel.

modeled tradition. One result is the Tocuyano phase, which occupied the valley of Quibor in the Andean foothills. In addition to black-on-white and tricolor painting in linear motifs, the pottery of this phase is characterized by plastic forms of decoration that included broad incision in curvilinear patterns, undulating appliqué fillets, and biomorphic adornos. Distinctive vessel shapes incorporate leg, annular, and ring-and-leg bases. Some of these traits occur earlier in northwestern Colombia, implying an introduction from that direction.

In the Quibor Valley, the Tocuyano people must have found land well-suited to agriculture. Although today the region is arid, different climatic conditions probably prevailed in the

past. Manos and metates are absent, although associated with related ceramic complexes on the coast. However, maize was probably cultivated, since cobs have been found in the later Guadalupe phase. By analogy with the present situation, it can be postulated that the temperate slopes were used for potato cultivation, a crop well-suited for support of an expanding population.

Excavations by the Department of Anthropology, Universidad de los Andes, Merida, have made it possible to correlate the Tocuyano phase with pottery from the site of Santa Ana, which is farther south in the state of Trujillo. Both types of pottery are associated in the vast cemetery at Las Locas near Guadalupe, Quibor,

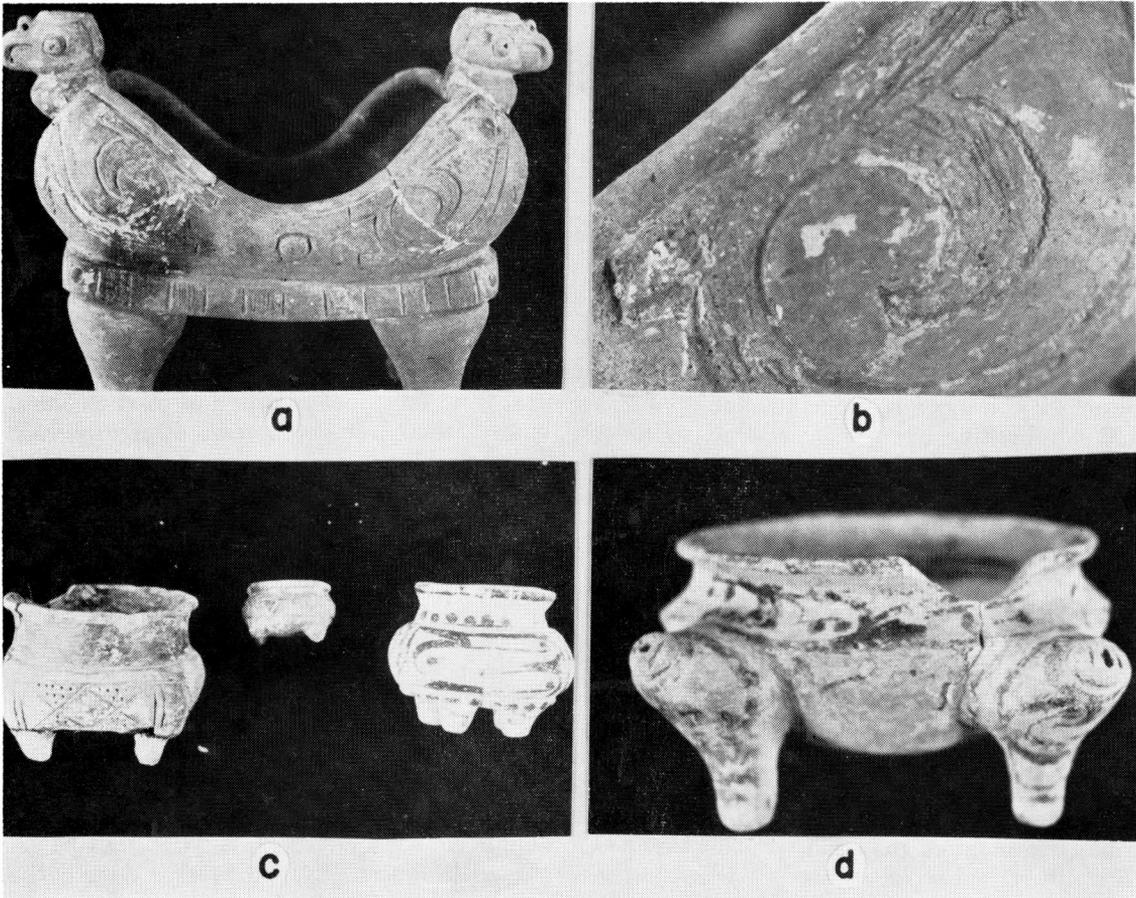


FIG. 2. Relatively early archaeological specimens from Las Locas cemetery, Quibor, western Venezuela. *a*, square tetrapodal vessel with Barranoid lugs and zoned scarification; *b*, close-up of scarified area on vessel; *c*, zoned punctated and black-on-cream tetrapodal vessels; *d*, black-on-plain vessel with La Pitia style legs.

which produced a great variety of burials, including extended, flexed primary, and secondary types. Associated grave goods include tetrapod boatshaped vessels with biomorphic lugs on both ends, small "alcarrazas" with necks, open bowls with broad, outcurved, modeled-incised rims and modeled-incised adornos, and ollas with incurved walls (Fig. 2). Decoration is either painted or incised, in the Santa Ana style, with painting mostly black-on-plain, red-on-white, or a zoned negative or resist delineated by incision. Also present are open bowls with flat bottoms decorated in Tocuyano tricolor or bicolor curvilinear motifs.

About A.D. 1000, the region along the southern coast of Lake Maracaibo was characterized by the plastic ceramic style of the Zancudo phase. This region is a narrow fringe of lowland covered with dense tropical forest that extends

from the lake border for 20 to 30 km. to the foothills of the mountains which rise suddenly to some 3000 m. Pottery decoration is based mainly on incision, punctation, modeling, and appliqué, supplemented by some painting, of which red wash is the most common expression (Fig. 1 *b*). Punctation occurs on appliqué fillets placed at the base of necks and around shoulders of jars. Incision is generally associated with modeling and punctation to create anthropomorphic effigy vessels. Anthropomorphic adornos have coffee-bean eyes. Common vessel forms include open to slightly constricted bowls with round bottoms, globular ollas, tall-necked jars, and squared vessels with incised rims. Perforated pedestal bases and perhaps leg bases also occur. The presence of a large number of griddles testifies to manioc cultivation, although a few manos and metates are also present. Fish

and mammal bones are abundant. Direct primary burials with offerings and secondary burials with only hands and feet occur, and human bones are found in the habitation refuse. Some of these elements are paralleled in the Antilles, particularly incised rims and zoomorphic motifs on vessel walls.

Along La Cabrera Peninsula and the coast of Lake Valencia, influences from the plastic Barrancoid tradition of the Orinoco mixed with the pottery tradition of western Venezuela, giving rise to the La Cabrera phase. This ceramic style is reminiscent of Los Barrancos, being based principally on incision, modeling, and appliqué, and emphasizing biomorphic adornos (Kidder 1944). Associated with this are a series of western cultural elements, such as coffee-bean eyes, double spout linked by bridge handle, incised lines filled with pigment, and ring-and-leg base form. The relatively large area of the sites implies that the population at this time was fairly large and that it was dispersed along the coast. Griddles indicate the utilization of manioc; pipes, the cultivation of tobacco. Subsistence was probably basically agricultural, although supplemented to a large degree by hunting and fishing, since the zone is rich in both land and sea fauna. Burial was primary, and some differential treatment of the dead, possibly equated with differential social status, is evident in the association of pottery vessels with some individuals.

The subsequent history of western Venezuela is largely an elaboration of trends already mentioned. Painted decoration (Fig. 1 *d*) increasingly dominates plastic techniques, and there is a growing amount of nonutilitarian forms, as well as increasing standardization. An increasing degree of social and cultural stability seems to be indicated by the widespread occurrence of habitation mounds and causeways, particularly in the Quibor Valley and the Barinas region. A similar tendency toward urbanization is manifested by the Valencia phase. Intensification of agricultural production is indicated by terrace construction and the appearance of irrigation, implying organized group efforts toward increasing crop yield. Direct evidence of maize cultivation comes from the Guadalupe Valley, where several charred corn cobs, 25 to 28 mm. long, were recovered from the lowest levels of the El Tiestal site, as well as from the El Mosquitero and Ojo de Agua mound complexes. Mangelsdorf (personal communication), who has ex-

amined this material, identifies it as an early domesticated form ancestral to the primitive but still surviving Pollo race of Colombia. Increased agricultural production is reflected in innovations in ceremonialism, manifested by numerous caves containing ceremonial pottery, large slate pectorals in the form of a bat (Fig. 1 *c*), and seated or standing figurines. While the greatest elaboration of ceremonial elements occurs in the western phases of Dabajuro, Guadalupe, and Carache (states of Falcón, Lara, and Trujillo), stylistically related complexes exist in the mountains farther to the south, along the coast from Falcón eastward, and on the central llanos, although in these areas diagnostic traits are much diluted.

It is evident from this brief summary of the archaeological picture in Venezuela that interrelations with the Antilles are not reducible to a simple pattern leading from the eastern coast out into the island chain. Although the basic ceramic tradition seems to be derived principally from the Saladoid and Barrancoid traditions dominant in eastern Venezuela from the first millennium B.C., later developments in the larger islands find their closest parallels with western Venezuela. The elaboration of ceremonialism in the two areas and the development of similar kinds of ritual paraphernalia are of special interest. As more work is done in the islands and on the mainland, the significance of these parallels will undoubtedly become apparent, not only increasing our understanding of the prehistory of the Caribbean area but perhaps also shedding some light on the larger and more theoretical problems of cultural process.

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