



NICHOLE BODIN

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COMPLEXITIES OF THE ANTILLES

Geographic perspectives and the spectrum of cultural diversities.



Credit: Aapan kaam/ WIKIPEDIA

The Antilles were colonized by multiple waves of indigenous peoples over a period of 8,000 years and each of the settlement groups probably had a distinct social order and a special set of subsistence strategies.

The Caribbean had great cultural diversity even in prehistory. Today, it is clear that the islands are culturally and linguistically diverse, divided between speakers of **Spanish, French, Dutch, English, Hindi, Papiamentu** and other distinct **creole** languages.

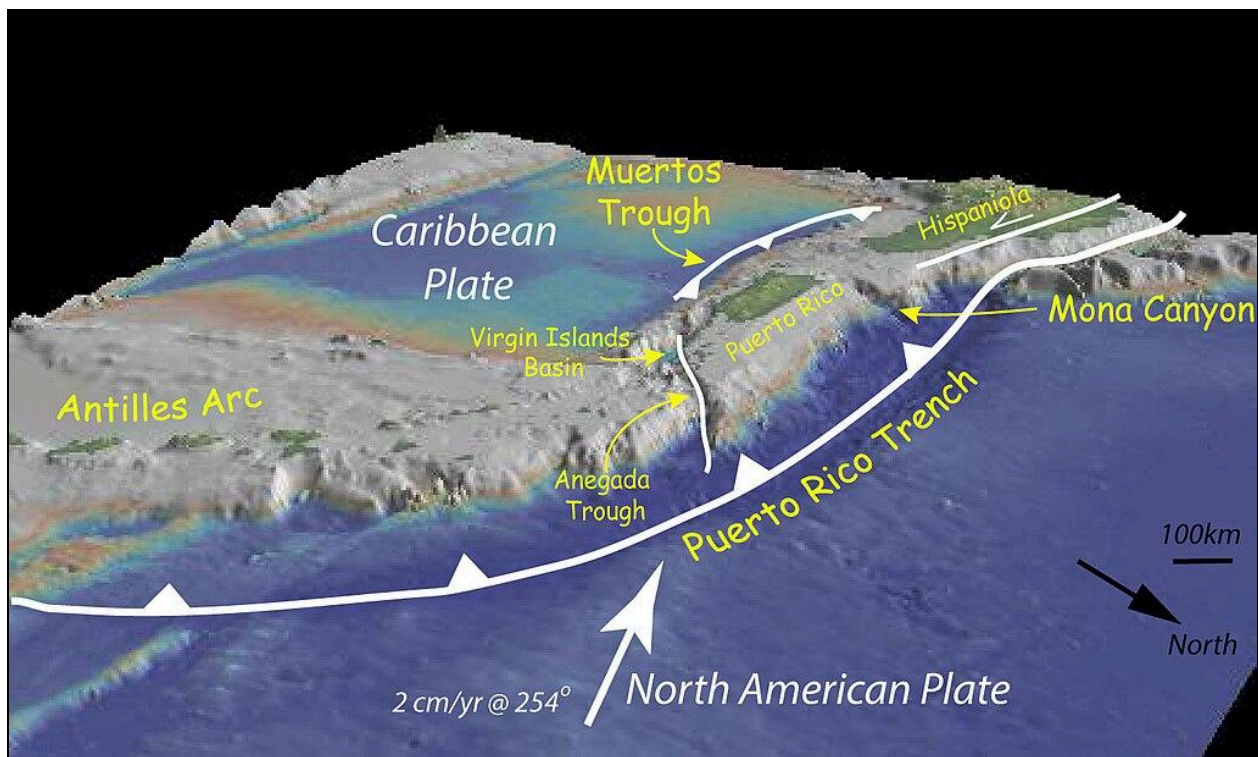


Map of the Caribbean Sea/ Credit: LAC GEO

The Antilles, also known as the **Caribbean Islands** or **insular Central America**, are a group of archipelagos composed of the Bahamas or Lucayas Islands, the **Greater Antilles** and the **Lesser Antilles** with a total area of about 299,000 km². They're located between the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean and extend from the southeast of the **Florida** peninsula, United States and the east of the **Yucatan** peninsula of Mexico in North America, to the eastern coast of Venezuela, in South America.

The **Greater Antilles** are made up of **Cuba, Jamaica, Santo Domingo** (Dominican Republic and Haiti) and **Puerto Rico**. Also included in this list are the islets of **Cayo Coco, Culebra, Desecheo, Mona, Tortuga** and **Vieques**.

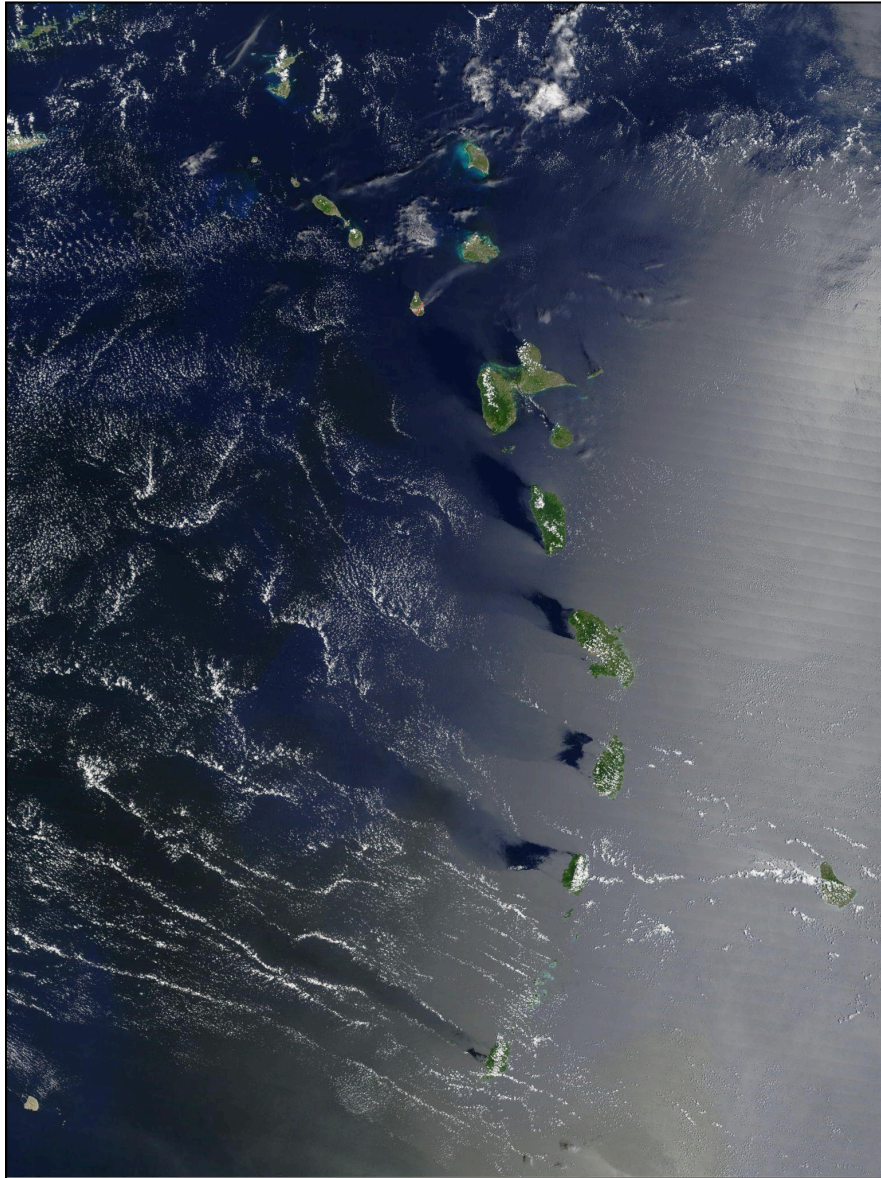
The **Greater Antilles** lie on a common underwater massif with mountain ranges with different peak levels crossing these islands. At least **40%** of the surface of the Antilles is present in karst geology and landscapes. The highest peaks of these mountains range between two and three thousand meters that culminate in Santo Domingo and decrease in Cuba, Jamaica and Puerto Rico. The composition of the mountains in the area is made up of limestone, with outcrops of other rocks, all of them much older than those of eruptive origin in the Little Antilles and without traces of recent volcanic activity.



Bathymetry of the northeast corner of the Caribbean Plate showing the major faults and plate boundaries; view looking south-west. Credit: NOAA/ COMMONS WIKIMEDIA

The **Lesser Antilles** or **Little Antilles** is the group of islands in the Caribbean Sea formed by a smaller size, from the southeast of the Greater Antilles or Great Antilles from the east of Puerto Rico to the western coast of Venezuela. These islands are part of a long

arc of volcanic islands, most of which lie around the eastern part of the Caribbean Sea on the western boundary with the Atlantic Ocean, and some lie in a southeastern fringe of that same sea, just north of South America.



Credit: Visible Earth / NASA

The Lesser Antilles coincide with the outer edge of the Caribbean Plate, and many of the islands were formed as a result of subduction, when one or more Atlantic plates slid beneath the Caribbean plate. Politically, the Lesser Antilles are divided into 8 independent

island countries, **3 British Overseas Territories**, **2 Overseas departments of France**, **2 Overseas collectivities of France**, **3 autonomous countries of the Kingdom of the Netherlands**, **3 Special Municipalities of the Kingdom of the Netherlands**, **1 Insular Area of the United States**, and **2 federal entities of Venezuela**. The main languages are **English, French, Spanish, Papiamentu** and **Dutch**.

As for the **karst** landscape, all the islands have variants of the same topic. It could be said that there are islands with landscapes that are not very rugged, such as the island of **Mona**, or that of **María Galante**, and there are submerged islands with much more rugged landscapes in parts and with complex hydrography. Large swaths of territory in the major islands of Cuba, Hispaniola, Jamaica and Puerto Rico belong to this classification.

Entire islands, like the groups of **The Bahamas, Turks and Caicos, Cayman Islands**, and other smaller ones, such as **Saona Island, Mona Island, Anegada, Anguilla, Barbuda, Grande-Terre, Désirade, María Galante** in Guadeloupe and **Barbados** also have these characteristics, covering 40% of the Archipelago.

Submerged islands are characterized by indented coasts and a necklace of islets around them, forming isolated heights due to the invasion of the sea, these being elongated and/or compact, like the island of Barbuda or the island of Watling's (San Salvador). (Figueredo, 2011:10) However, long and winding ones predominate, such as the islands of **Anguilla, Great Abaco and Eleuthera** in the **Bahamas**, and **Saona Island**. Here, the heights are frequently lower, and when they are formed from ancient dunes, they spread out into small mountain ranges.

Emersion islands present characteristics with more obvious signs of ancient rises and falls in sea level, seen in numerous horizontal chains marking old wave levels, undermining cavities that later, due to normal geological processes, became more or less significant caves similar to the islands called Makatea in the Pacific, with a perfectly defined central plateau. On **Emersion** islands, or **relative emersion**, there are many sites located on the west or lee coast, and sometimes with a hill or height sheltering the part from where the wind comes.

In Puerto Rico, the sites of **Los Indios** and **Punta Ostiones** come to mind, and **Sardinero** on **Mona Island**. At **Watling's** (San Salvador) **Three Dog Site**, **Folle Anse**, at María Galante, **Clifton**, at New Providence. In The Bahamas, there is no volcanic stone, and useful stones are scarce. The settlement by human groups in karst areas entails the need for trade, or at least barter, sometimes over long distances.



Credit: Joshua Stevens/ NASA Visible Earth

The **submerged islands** have more obvious signs of ancient rises and falls in sea level, seen in numerous horizontal chains marking old wave levels, undermining cavities that later by normal geological processes. The Bahamas Archipelago has been called “**the Cuban**

Foreland” by Richard T. Hill and other geographers. The **Old Bahamas Channel** between **Cayo Lobos** and **Cayo Confites** in Cuba are 14 nautical miles away and a few thousand years ago, the distance was much smaller and they became more or less significant caves. But traditional historical views of the Caribbean, based in part on misguided ethnohistorical perspectives, had divided the archipelago between only two large and relatively homogeneous groups: the **Arawaks** and the **Caribs**.

The Arawaks inhabited the islands of the Caribbean and the Antilles, were united by a common language and connected through trade between the islands. These groups included the **Táinos**, who occupied the Greater Antilles and Bahamas, the Nepoyas and Suppoyos of Trinidad and the Ignieri who inhabited the Lesser Antilles before the arrival of the Caribe, who lived on the east coast of South America, up to what is now Brazil. The indigenous peoples of the ancient Antilles maintained their cultures through strategic responses to their natural environment.

They were accustomed to eating shellfish, which provided them with relatively easy access to salt, volcanic rocks, and other coastal and marine supplies. They excelled in stonemasonry, in forms of sculpture, and as traders with the people of the American continent, they exported different types of objects with close and distant partners for the use of practical and elite materials. The Antilleans used the tropical land and its river and marine resources for food and obtaining raw materials.



Credit: Eduard Rivas

The Paleo-Indians arrived on the islands in prehistory with their lifestyles only that can be inferred from the "**Stone Age**" cultures living today and from the very rare stone tools such as ax heads and flaked blades. (Wilson,2007:25) The Paleo-Indian may have lived in constructed dwellings, in available natural features such as caves, or in some provisional combination of these. Several archaic **Amerindians** arrived in the Antilles between the **4th** and **2nd millennium BC** and have left behind considerably more artifacts than their Paleo-Indian predecessors and neighbors. (Rouse,1992:51) These include finely made stone tools, such as axes, mortars, gravers, chisels, pestles, scrapers, blades, and projectile points.

The **Guyana** people began expanding across the Lesser Antilles in the early 2nd millennium CE. They are famous for their battles with the Arawak peoples during the expansion, they also appear to have been directly related to Taíno relatives, called Igneri, in the Eastern Caribbean. (Rouse, 1992:21) These are the ancestors of the **Kalinago** people who

are today from Dominica and St. Vincent, and the Garifuna people from Saint Vincent and Belize. Their 'Arawako-Caribbean' language and culture symbolized the Antillean mixture long before the creolization of the European colonial period. On the eve of the conquest, the Antillean **Caribs** began to make incursions into Puerto Rico governed by Taínos from



bases in the Leeward Islands.
(Rouse, 1992:22)

Local indigenous Guyana people
Credit: WWF



A bohío, circular, thatched-roof huts constructed from palm wood and leavesCredit: Eduard Rivas

By the 15th century, the Antilles were made up of at least six different cultural zones:

- **The Paria complex:** the sphere of multiethnic interaction of **Trinidad and Tobago** and the Lower **Orinoco** (Boomert, 2000)
- **Windward Islands:** **Ignieris / Caribs**
- **The Leeward Islands:** the **Eastern Taino**
- **The Greater Antilles: Classic** (central) **Taino**, but also the **Macorix** and other minorities
- **The Greater Antilles, West:** the **Western Taino**
- **Western Cuba:** the **Guanahatabey** or “**Ciboney**”



Cacike Caciba Opil with men of a **Neo-Taino** tribe.
Credit: **El Concilio Taino Guatu-Ma-cu A Borikén, Inc.**

As of today, the Caribbean is recognized as the first region of the Americas that was

subjected to a permanent settlement by Europeans, making the archaeology of the contact period a significant topic of historic interest. The identification of many more contact lines and the contextualization of such nodes as to their position within an overall Caribbean network system should be made possible by more thorough research into the



archaeological and anthropological reflection of all cultural interactions.

Chief Jorge Baracutei Estevez, the head of **Taino** organization **Higuayagua**
Credit: KEITH.GRIFFITH@DAILYMAIL.COM and HARRY PETTIT FOR MAILONLINE

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