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Reading the dental record : a dental anthropological approach to foodways, health and disease, and crafting in the pre-Columbian Caribbean

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Propositions

1. The study of foodways in the pre-Columbian Caribbean requires a multidisciplinary and multiscalar approach: faunal and botanical research, stable isotope analysis, and dental anthropology are complementary methods, which together form a powerful basis to assess diet and sociocultural aspects of diet and subsistence.
2. Investigations of foodways in the Ceramic Age Caribbean archipelago should avoid the implicit assumption that there is a direct causal relationship between sociopolitical organization and foodways.
3. Despite increasing evidence for pre-Columbian Caribbean maize consumption, the traditional use of high caries rates as a proxy for a heavy reliance on maize must be avoided, as a range of other cariogenic (staple) crops consumed in the region contributed to high caries rates.
4. Although some daily task activities, including food procurement and preparation, may have been associated with gender in the Ceramic Age Caribbean, there is currently no evidence for (gender-based) status differentiation in daily food consumption.
5. Patterns of lingual wear currently identified as LSAMAT across the globe require further investigation, since various activities may cause loss of lingual enamel of the upper incisors: acidic foods or gastric acids, as well as the (alimentary or non-alimentary) action of pulling fibrous material across the surface.
6. Dental anthropologists and bioarchaeologists in general should avoid dichotomizing hunter-gatherer and agriculturalist foodways, and focus on reconstructing foodways based on the specific social, temporal and geographical context.
7. Current knowledge of crafting in prehistoric communities can be greatly enhanced by including bioarchaeological approaches focussing on the traces of craft activities left on the human dentition and skeletal frame.
8. The Caribbean islands are in need of simple and clear-cut protocols and legislation regarding the removal and later return of pre-Columbian human dental and skeletal remains – including very small tissue samples – from collections in the region.
9. Although the palaeodiet is nowadays promoted as a highly natural and healthy way to live, evidence from archaeological remains worldwide, as well as in the Ceramic Age Caribbean, has shown that prehistoric foodways are often associated with very poor oral health and sometimes nutritional stress.
10. It is deplorable that even though dental disease related to soft, carbohydrate rich foods and poor hygiene is one of the major ailments of modern humans, affordable dental health care and preventive education on oral hygiene is still predominantly only available in rich (Western) countries.