Starchy Foodways

The foodways approach to archaeobotanical investigation is used in this dissertation for reconstructing lost and forgotten lifeways. The deep history of the Greater Caribbean is rich with culinary practices, which is explored through microbotanical residues (starches). They were recovered from different types of kitchen-related artifacts excavated in three geographic regions: the northwestern Dominican Republic, the Bahama archipelago, and central Nicaragua.

The first case study focused on shell and limestone artifacts from the archaeological site LN-101 (cal. 1088 ± 68 CE) on Long Island, Commonwealth of The Bahamas. This case study contributes the first examination of limestone tools and the first certain identification of manioc (cassava) in the Bahama archipelago.

The second case study focused on shell artifact samples from three archaeological sites: El Flaco (cal. 1309 ± 81 CE) and La Luperona (cal. 1352 ± 60 CE) in the northwestern Dominican Republic, and Palmetto Junction (cal. 1391 ± 41 CE) on Providenciales, Turks & Caicos Islands. This case study provides additional evidence for the use of exogenous plants in the northern Caribbean and recognizes culinary practices according to which certain plants were pre-cooked before being processed further using bivalve shells.

In the third case study, the recovered material remains derived from the same sites, but the artifacts represent fired clay griddles. This case study provides the first evidence of manioc being prepared on such griddles in the insular Caribbean. In addition, these griddles were used to prepare maize, chili pepper, cocoyam, and Zamia (guáyiga/coontie). This diversity of prepared plants was expected, but the discovery and amount of manioc was remarkable.

The fourth case study expands the scope of this dissertation to mainland Nicaragua. From unique finds of pottery griddle fragments at The Barillas site (cal. 1261 ± 37 CE) in central Nicaragua, it challenges preconceived views of ancient foodways in the region. These results invalidate the preconception that griddles were tools used exclusively for the production of maize tortillas in pre-Hispanic Central America, which helps explicate associations drawn between ethnic identities and culinary practices.

This dissertation paints a dynamically diverse picture of Indigenous Caribbean Peoples' culinary practices. The results and discussions of human-plant adaptation strategies involved exogenous plant translocations. Each chapter demonstrates that culinary practices from these case study sites incorporated some poisonous plant manipulation to produce edible meals. Overall, this dissertation creates a more refined insight into how starchy culinary practices varied in the Greater Caribbean prior to the advent of European invasions.

Starchy Foodways:
Surveying Indigenous Peoples culinary practices prior to the advent of European invasions in the Greater Caribbean

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