

CHAPTER 2

THE AMERINDIANS

The first European settlers and their African captives arrived in Anguilla in 1650. There is no mention in the early accounts of finding any Amerindians in the island at the time of settlement. There is plenty of evidence of Amerindians occupying the island at an earlier time. Fragments of pottery are found at sites around the island. Middens, ancient rubbish heaps of broken conch shells, pottery, carvings, and other discarded objects, are occasionally revealed on or near the beaches (see illus 1).



1. Sandy Ground shell frog (Anguilla stamp)

Professionally conducted archaeological digs now take place (see illus 2).



2. Amerindian pottery bowl found at Sandy Ground

Archaeologists recognise three separate phases of occupation of Anguilla and the other islands of the West Indies by Amerindians. The pre-ceramic or archaic period lasted roughly from 1,500 BC to AD 300, when the ceramic age begins. Pre-ceramic simply means before pottery. The pre-ceramic age occupants of the islands were hunter-gatherers. Those of the ceramic period, when the use of clay pots is evident, were sedentary farmers. The ceramic age occupants are divided into two cultures. Those of the earlier period, 300-900 AD, belong to the 'Saladoid Culture'. Their pottery is highly decorated compared to the simpler more utilitarian pottery of the 'Post-Saladoid' period, 900-1,500 AD. At least 13 Post-Saladoid village sites belong to this period. There were also at least 20 smaller hamlets. Most of these sites are contemporaneous, suggesting that the late period in Anguilla was one of relatively high-density occupation.¹

The sites of Amerindian occupation most often mentioned include Sandy Ground, Meads Bay, Rendezvous Bay, and Island Harbour. The three oldest wells on the island, at The Valley, The Quarter and Statia Valley, date from the time of the Amerindians.²

There are also springs scattered throughout the island that supported human occupation. Fountain

¹ Dr John Crock, The Forest North Site and Post-Saladoid Settlement in Anguilla, 16th Int. Cong. Car. Arch, 1996.

² Sir William Halcrow & Partners, Water Resources of St Kitts, Nevis and Anguilla (1964).

Cavern is perhaps the most famous of these springs (see illus 3). It was until recently used by Anguillians as a source of water. In the 1950s, the crew of a visiting British frigate constructed a sheer steel ladder from the entrance at the top of the cavern to the cave floor some 25 feet below. This allowed the people of Shoal Bay easier access to the spring. It is now sealed off to protect the rare and valuable petroglyphs left behind by the original inhabitants.



3. Fountain Cavern petroglyphs (By Penny Slinger®)

The Valley well also dates to the time of the Amerindians. During much of the twentieth century, an electrically operated pump brought the water to the surface from The Valley well and distributed it through the government's main supply system. It is still used to

provide brackish water to the modern desalinisation plant that now supplies the island's public potable water.

The Big Spring at Island Harbour shows signs of its importance to the Amerindians. There are many petroglyphs carved around its rim (see illus 4). At Sandy Ground, the Amerindians used the perched spring on the hillside under North Hill. Their artefacts are found in that area.



4. Big Spring (By Penny Slinger[®])

Pere Raymond Breton was a French missionary who was sent to Guadeloupe in 1635. He spent the next twenty years travelling between that island and Dominica ministering to the Amerindians. A lot of what we know about the surviving aboriginal inhabitants of the islands comes from his writings. He tells us that the Amerindians called the island 'Malliouhana'.³ The meaning of the word is lost. Some have written that it might mean 'arrow'.

³ Pere Raymond Breton, Dictionnaire Caraibe-Francois, p.202.

This must be a reference to the long, narrow shape of the island.⁴ Others suggest that it means ‘Snake Island’, after the island’s long and winding shape, but that is unlikely.⁵ Few islands in the world are named after their shape. It is difficult to imagine that the shape of Anguilla was immediately apparent to a person paddling by it in a canoe.

The word Anguilla means eel in Latin and Italian. There are no eels in Anguilla. The island provides an excellent habitat for the racer snake, a harmless grass snake that lives off insects, and that is found everywhere. The first Italian to step ashore would quickly have become aware of their presence and named the island accordingly.

My preferred theory about the meaning of the word Malliouhana is based on Jill Tattersall's analysis of the wordlists and dictionaries of Amerindian languages.⁶ These were provided by the early missionaries among the Amerindians. Each vowel and consonant has a number of possible meanings or connotations. When you apply her analysis, you find that one possible meaning of the word Malliouhana is, “*The Ritual Strengthening Place of the Young Men of my Tribe*”. If this reading is correct, it

⁴ Katherine J Burdon, [A Handbook of St Kitts-Nevis](#) (1920), quoting Pere Breton.

⁵ Bryan Dyde, [Out of the Crowded Vagueness: A History of the Islands of St Kitts, Nevis and Anguilla](#) (2005).

⁶ Jill Tattersall, [Standardised Simplified Spelling System Applied to Interpreting the Taino and Carib Languages](#) (International Association for Caribbean Archaeology, 9th Congress, Santo Domingo, 1981, pp 506-509).

may be a reference to the important ceremonial function of the Fountain Cavern at Shoal Bay. This ritual cavern is far too elaborate to have served only the inhabitants of the island. You may conclude that the Fountain Cavern was more probably a ceremonial site for the puberty rituals of the young men from several of the islands around. At the most propitious time each year, the young men were landed on the beach at Shoal Bay. The well-worn track to the cavern shows generations of bare feet wearing down the rocky surface (see illus 5 for Penny Slinger's depiction of Shoal Bay and the cavern below).



5. Golden Age of the Arawaks (By Penny Slinger®)

The grotesque wall carvings of the cavern, and the equally ominous totems carried by the shamans, visible in the flickering torch light, would have thoroughly terrified the drugged young men. This prepared them for the rigours of manhood that they were about to meet (see ills 6, 7, and 8).



6. Lizard Fertility God petroglyph from Fountain Cavern (Anguilla stamp)



7. Solar Chieftain petroglyph at Fountain Cavern (Anguilla stamp)



8. Rendezvous Bay shell mask (Anguilla stamp)

Archaeologists now believe that, during the period 900–1,500 AD, the Amerindians of Anguilla and the Leeward Islands were all members of one culture. They were mainly sedentary and agricultural, with extensive trade links between the islands. There is not one piece of archaeological evidence for the entry of the legendary warlike tribe of Caribs, killing and eating their way northwards through the islands at the time of the arrival of the Spanish.

According to Spanish legend that is repeated to this day in all the history books and tourist literature, the Amerindians that were living in the islands of the Caribbean when the Spaniards arrived belonged to two supposedly quite different and opposed Amerindian cultures. They called them the Caribs and the Arawaks.⁷

When Christopher Columbus discovered the northern islands of the Bahamas in 1492, he found the natives wearing ornaments of gold which they readily exchanged with the Spaniards for trifles (see illus 9). The search for the source of this gold became one of the major causes of the destruction of the Amerindians of the West Indies.

Columbus described the Amerindians of the Bahamas as having a loving manner and gentle speech. These Amerindians became known to history as the Arawaks. This was not the name they called themselves.

About the year 1975, Professor Christopher Goodwin, then of Baton Rouge University, gave a lecture in Basseterre in St Kitts. He was conducting rescue archaeology on the site of the Ponds Pasture industrial estate in St Kitts. This area of Basseterre was long known as an Amerindian burial site. As I recall his lecture, he gave an imaginary and amusing explanation of

⁷ RP Devas, The Island of Grenada, 1650-1950 (1965) p. 23: "It was the Europeans who called these people Caribs, for that is not what they called themselves, which, says Raymond Breton, was Callinago . . ."

how Columbus came to mis-name the inhabitants of the Caribbean as 'Arawaks' and 'Caribs'.



9. Track through the Caribbean of the First Voyage of Columbus in 1492.

The purpose of his anecdote was to demonstrate how incredible it is that the Amerindians that Columbus met on his first voyage could have told him what the names were of the tribes that inhabited the West Indies at the time of Columbus' arrival. Tongue in cheek as the tale was, it is still the only sensible explanation that I have ever come across.

Columbus sailed west in search of India and the spices of the east. He took the precaution of taking an

interpreter, Luis de Torres, with him. According to Professor Godwin's amusing theory of what happened next, de Torres was fluent in Urdu and Hindi, the main languages of the Indian sub-continent. As it was his first voyage to the West Indies, there were in Spain no Amerindian language speakers who could act as interpreters. When his crew came upon that first pirogue being furiously paddled by a terrified old man of the coast of the Bahamas, Professor Goodwin imagines that Columbus must have said to his interpreter, "*Ask the fellow in the canoe what part of India he belongs to.*" The interpreter complied. He ran to the bow of Columbus' carrack, the Santa Maria (see illus 10), and leaned over, calling out to the paddler in the canoe below, "*Ah puchanah, yani mani cou?*", or something to that effect, in Urdu. The old man in the canoe below may have looked up to him, and with the Amerindian version of the famous two-finger gesture, responded, "*Arawak, Arawak*", or something like that.

Not comprehending, but not wishing to seem incompetent, the interpreter hurried back to Columbus. He explained, "*Lord Admiral, I did as you instructed. The old man says he belongs to the Arawak nation.*" Columbus solemnly wrote it down in his journal which was carried to all the corners of Europe. "*The first Indian I found belongs to the Arawak nation!*" This word 'Arawak'

has remained in all the history books ever since, even though we have long known that it is utter nonsense.⁸



10. Replica of Columbus' Santa Maria

In recognition of the wrongful naming of the Amerindians as Caribs and Arawaks, modern

⁸ See for example: E Daniel, West Indian Histories (1937) Vol. 1, p. 35; John Parry and Phillip Sherlock, Short History of the West Indies (1956) p. 3; OA Garcia, History of the West Indies (1965) p. 18; Helmut Blume, The Caribbean Islands (1974) p. 55.

archaeologists, following Irving Rouse, have taken to calling all the pre-Columbian inhabitants of the Bahamas, the Greater Antilles, and the Northern Leeward Islands ‘Tainos’.⁹ The word is thought to mean ‘good’ or ‘noble’. There is no evidence that the people inhabiting Anguilla at the time of the arrival of Columbus called themselves by this name. It is more likely that the people of each island called themselves by their name for the island they occupied.



11. Cassava

The so-called ‘Arawak’ crops of the Bahamas, as of Anguilla, consisted of maize and bulbous plants such as sweet potatoes and cassava (see illus 11). They cultivated tobacco and smoked it in pipes. They became

⁹ Irving Rouse, The Tainos: Rise and Decline of the People who greeted Columbus (1992).

quite intoxicated from smoking the dried leaves by inserting a forked pipe through their nostrils. They also grew cotton, weaving it into 'hamacas' to sleep in, nets, and small aprons or loin cloths. Some Arawaks went naked or clothed themselves with leaves. They protected their bodies from the sun by staining their skins with the dye they called 'roucou'. Arawak shelters were mere huts, thatched with palm leaves. Their chiefs or Caciques wore head-dresses of feathers, occasionally decorated with little pieces of gold and bands of coloured beads and bones. Their religion was a form of nature-worship. Their gods, called 'zemis', were represented in the form of heads of lizards, snakes or bats made from chalk or baked earth or carved on rocks (see illus 12 for one with character).

The Amerindians of the Leeward Islands at the time of Columbus' arrival were a sea-faring people, in addition to farming and fishing.



12. A zemi (By Penny Slinger®)

They built pirogues, large canoes, from the gommier and cedar trees, capable of holding up to one hundred men. These were used for travelling among the islands. There was an active trade in stone tools and pottery, and many of the artefacts found in Anguilla are made of stone from neighbouring islands such as St Maarten.

The Caribs were supposedly far less civilized than the Arawaks. They lived on the southern islands of the Lesser Antilles. The Arawaks were supposedly docile farmers and fishermen. The Caribs were described as warlike and cannibalistic. As for the story of cannibalism,

a form of ritual cannibalism did exist among the Amerindians of the West Indies. This involved chopping up a dead or dying enemy and eating cooked parts of him. This was meant to insult the dead or dying enemy. The injuries prevented his spirit from taking any kind of revenge once he was dead. If the eyes, tongue or muscles from the arms and legs were chewed up, the spirit of the dead man would be handicapped from ever seeing, talking, and shooting again.

For the religious 'Caribs', it was a waste to simply kill a captured enemy outright. Ritual required that his captors torture him death. His dying screams of pain, his last breath, would be inhaled by the victors. In that way, the strength of his spirit was absorbed, and fortified the spirit of his captors. The greater the torture, and the more painful the death, the greater would be the strength of the spirit that was inhaled and absorbed. Hence, their reputation for sitting around their tortured male victims, watching them as they died. There was no similar advantage in torturing women or children. There was no masculine strength to absorb from their dying spirits. There are no accounts of women or children being tortured or eaten. Torturing, killing, and eating men was a religious practice, not a nutritional supplement.

Anthropologists call the practice of eating part of an enemy 'exo-cannibalism'. It is distinguished from 'endo-

cannibalism'. The latter occurs when the fat, or some other part of the body of the deceased, is consumed by the grieving relatives. This is believed to preserve the spiritual essence of the loved one within the tribe and family. That is particularly important in the case of a great chief or other dignitary. The belief is not limited to the South American Amerindians. It is a recurring concept through human civilization. We see traces of its survival in the Christian ritual of the Eucharist. Thus, we celebrate Christ offering his disciples bread and water saying, "*This is my body, take it and eat it in memory of me. This is my blood, take it and drink it in memory of me*". The sacrament of the Eucharist is a ritualized form of endo-cannibalism. Both forms of cannibalism served religious rather than nutritional aims.

Professor Goodwin, as I recall, also amusingly explained how the 'Caribs' got their name. He surmises that, shortly after Columbus and his men landed on the first Bahamas island they came to, Columbus sent the same enterprising, Urdu-speaking interpreter to have a word with the Cacique, or chief, perhaps standing with his warriors in front of his home, or 'ajoupa'. The ladies of the village wasted no time in cavorting in the surf with his sailors and crew.

Little did the Spanish adventurers on this first voyage know that the only historically significant gift of the

'Indians' that they would carry back to Europe when this voyage was over was the dread spirochete later known as Syphilis.

Columbus' instruction to the interpreter at this first landing was to enquire of the Cacique whether all the natives of the islands around were as friendly as his people were. Or, were there, perhaps, some who were dangerous and to be avoided? So, the interpreter approached the stern-looking Cacique. He enquired in Urdu, "*Ah pucha nah, mani ani cou yah nah hah?*" or something to that effect. The uncomprehending chieftain glared back at him. Perhaps, with an imperious gesture of his out-flung right hand, which was then pointing to the south, he replied, "*Carib, Carib,*" or something to that effect. He probably meant, "*Leave our women alone and sail back out to sea immediately!*"

Still not wishing to seem a dunderhead, the enterprising interpreter hurried back to Columbus. He delivered the solemn news, "*My Lord High Admiral, I did as you instructed. The chieftain told me that, to the south, where he pointed, there lie a people who are war-like and much to be avoided. They call themselves Caribs.*" Columbus solemnly wrote down the information in his journal. And so, there entered the lexicography, topography, and mythology of the world the long-lasting story of the peaceful Arawaks of the northern islands and

the war-like Caribs who lived in the southern islands of the West Indies. All this was told to Columbus on his first voyage, when there was no Spaniard who could speak or understand the language of the natives. This myth would haunt the Amerindians in the years to come.

Bishop Bartholome Las Casas was a Spanish Roman Catholic priest (1474-1566) who arrived in Hispaniola in 1502. He was the first Catholic priest ordained in the Americas, and the first bishop of the West Indies, where he lived from 1502 to 1550. At his urging, the Spanish King would issue his famous but short-lived edict. This was to the effect that the 'peaceful Arawaks' were spared from slavery. No such indulgence need be shown to the 'war-like Caribs'. The initially enslaved Amerindians of Hispaniola and Puerto Rico soon died off. More slaves were needed to work the Spanish mines.

Under the rules of engagement laid down by the Spanish King, the Caribs could legally be seized and condemned to slavery. Given the exemption for enslaving Caribs, it is not surprising that the Spanish slave-hunters 'discovered' more and more Caribs paddling their canoes in the northern waters of the Caribbean. The explanation the Spaniards gave for this imaginary northern expansion of the Caribs was that they were fighting their way to the north, decimating and eating the peaceful Arawaks, and threatening the Spaniards.

This invention served the Spaniards' purpose of legally enslaving only Caribs and not Arawaks. The truth is there never were either 'Arawaks' or 'Caribs' in any of the waters of the West Indies. This myth is repeated as gospel in the history books taught to the school children of the West Indies to this day.

It was on the second voyage to the West Indies that Columbus first met the Amerindians he called the Caribs. At Guadeloupe, he saw huts near the shore and landed, but he found the people run away. In the huts, his men discovered pottery of various kinds, calabashes, hammocks, parrots and cotton, both spun and unspun. What was more significant was the large number of human bones found lying around on the ground or in the eaves of the huts. It even appeared that drinking vessels were made from human skulls. This led the Spaniards to believe that they were in the islands of the warlike cannibals, the Caribs, described previously by the gentle natives of the Bahamas.

After a time, some women and children were brought back, and it was learned that all the men were gone on a raid. Columbus' new interpreter, Diego Colon, an Amerindian taken back to Spain from his first voyage, explained that the women claimed they were captives from the northern islands, and that the male prisoners of those islands were slain and eaten (see illus 13).

The very word 'cannibal' derives from a spelling error in the name that Columbus gave the Caribs, whom he called 'Los Carribales'. Columbus was not particularly good at forming the letter 'r'. When he wrote it, it looked like an 'n'. The monks who transcribed his letter to Queen Isabella mis-read his 'carribales' as 'cannibales'. So, we get the word cannibal in English. The Caribbean Sea may as easily be called the Cannibal Sea.



13. An early and imaginary European depiction of Carib cannibalism

What was even more astonishing to the Spaniards was Diego Colon's claim that the Carib women spoke a completely different language from the men. This was a

result, the women claimed, of the Carib custom of carrying off Arawak women for wives. Columbus' account of the Carib women's explanation for their separate speech is nonsense. What we see here is the Amerindian religious concept of 'taboo'. When Amerindian men were on the warpath, they would use certain expressions which only men could employ. If the same expressions were used by women, bad luck would result. Just as it was taboo for her to use his term for common objects or persons, so it was taboo for a man to use a woman's word for the same objects or persons. That does not mean that they did not understand each other perfectly well. We find a version of this common phenomenon even among modern teenagers. An urban male gang-member in a modern city to this day uses words special to him and his friends that no proper lady among his friends and family would dream of using.

There is another cause of sex differentiation in words and phrases amongst the Amerindians of South America even today. This is the Amerindian kinship and gender system. In modern European languages derived from Latin, objects and persons may be of the male or female gender. So, we say, 'le table' and 'la plume' in French. Not so among the Amerindians. The word changes according to the gender of the speaker. Thus, the word for 'my father' varies according to the gender of

the speaker. A son and a daughter use different expressions in addressing the same father. This system of gender differentiation in language is well understood.¹⁰ It suggests that the relationship of a boy with his father is different to the relationship of the same father to his daughter. The son and daughter understand each other perfectly when they speak to each other about their father using the words proper to their gender. This does not mean they speak different languages, or that the men captured the women from foreign tribes.

The misnaming by Columbus of the aboriginal natives of the West Indies received a further boost in the mid-nineteenth century. The Prussian explorer and ethnologist Alexander von Humboldt explored the Amazon and Essequibo regions in the period 1799 to 1804. He met many Amerindian tribes. He attempted to classify their languages. He explored the West Indies, and even wrote a history of Cuba.¹¹ He gave names to the groups of South American languages that he identified. Some of them he arbitrarily called 'Carib' and others 'Arawak.' These names were not known to the original inhabitants of the islands or of South America. Nor were they an authentic indigenous tribal classification. Von Humboldt made it up out of thin air. In his writing, he repeated the lurid stories of cannibalism

¹⁰ Peter Trudgil, Sociolinguistics (1974) p.85.

¹¹ Alexander Von Humboldt, The Island of Cuba (1856).

and of the report of the different languages of the men and the women.¹² His works were popular and widely read. After blessing with this repetition the fictitious story of the two competing tribes of the Caribs and the Arawaks, no one would doubt its accuracy until recent times.

On subsequent voyages, Columbus placed settlements in Hispaniola and later in Cuba and Puerto Rico, where mines were dug in the frantic Spanish search for gold and silver. They enslaved the Amerindians for this purpose. By the time that Anguilla was settled a hundred and fifty years later in 1650, the Amerindians were gone. One reads only of diminishing numbers of so-called Caribs living in some of the mountainous volcanic islands to the south, such as Dominica and Saint Vincent.

The rapid disappearance of the Amerindians from the islands, including Anguilla, is well documented. There are many explanations for their rapid dying off in the islands of the West Indies suggested in the textbooks. Spanish cruelty was Protestant propaganda, and not the entire reason. Even their great god, Jocahu, the cassava god, could not save them from extinction (see illus 14). The Amerindians were fatally susceptible to such minor common European diseases as smallpox, measles, and even the common cold. They possessed no immunity to

¹² Alexander Von Humboldt, Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of America during the years 1799-1804 (7 vols, 1814-1829).

these new diseases. More of them died from these infections than from the guns and swords of the Spaniards. The Amerindian wars with the English, French and Spanish intruders, and their enslavement in the Spanish mines, are all well documented.



14. The Great God Jocahu, carved on a stalagmite at Fountain Cavern (Painting by Penny Slinger®)

New light is being thrown every day on the identity and culture of these first aboriginal inhabitants of the islands. New theories are developing that explain many things not

previously understood about their way of life and their eventual fate.¹³

The legend of the Arawak women captured by the fierce Caribs and speaking a different language from the Carib men is now laughed at. It is the same with the legend of the cannibalism of the indigenous people. Modern knowledge has not caused these legends or myths to disappear from the history books still written and published throughout the region. The attraction of the concepts remains. They probably start in the usual unconscious design of a conquering nation to objectify the people they are about to destroy. They were useful in promoting Christianisation and colonialism in the early period. They served as justification for the European enslavement and destruction of the 'savage Caribs'. Now that they have outlived their usefulness, it might be time to let them go.¹⁴

¹³ Penny Slinger's brilliant and surrealistic paintings of the Amerindians of Anguilla can be viewed at her website: <http://www.arawakart.com/>

¹⁴ Many university professorships have flowed from creative theorizing about the pre-Columbian religion, culture, and history of the Island Caribs. Enterprising academics have invented tribal names for them such as the Kalinago and the Taino. They engage in polite academic warfare with each other, each pushing his or her own theory about the religion and lifestyle of the aboriginal inhabitants of the islands. The truth is that little is known about the culture and life of the inhabitants of the islands at the time of Columbus' arrival. I recommend Professor Chris Goodwin's light-hearted theory of the origin of the Caribs and Arawaks of the islands as the most reliable of them all.