Lost Caribbean Culture Comes to Light

Indiana University and the Dominican Republic Team Up to Excavate a Columbus-Era Site, Underwater!

It wasn’t easy. In order to investigate an ancient watering hole of the Taino Indians, Charles Beeker (Underwater Science, HYPER, IUB) had to catch a plane to the Dominican Republic, transport his equipment by helicopter to a remote stretch of rain forest, rappel 50 feet into a cenote, or limestone sinkhole, strap on his scuba gear, and plunge 140 feet into uncharted waters.

But it was worth it. Guided by his powerful underwater “Icolite” flashlight, Beeker saw remnants of an Indian culture hidden from human eyes for nearly five centuries.

“It was the most unique site I had ever seen before. I couldn’t believe my eyes,” said Beeker, who has spent years in the Caribbean locating and preserving historically significant underwater sites. “I had to ask myself, am I really seeing a gourd rope from 1503?”

In subsequent excavations of the sinkhole, known locally as El Manantial de la Aleta or simply “La Aleta,” Beeker and his team of researchers from Indiana University have uncovered a trove of objects that may help shed light on the Taino culture and on the impact of early Spanish incursions into the New World.

The Taino Indians are believed to be the first people to have met Christopher Columbus on the island of Hispaniola, but not much is known about the now extinct Taino culture. Within 15 to 20 years after the arrival of the Spanish, the entire population of Taino, numbering between 1.5 and 3 million people, was wiped out by war and pestilence.

In August 1996, the Dominican Republic invited a team of underwater archaeologists led by Beeker to investigate two sites in a national park on the eastern tip of Hispaniola, the José María cave and the La Aleta sinkhole.

Beeker, who is the director of the Underwater Science and Educational Resources Program in the School of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation, has been conducting Columbus-era archaeological studies in the waters of the Dominican Republic since 1993.

Inside the José María cave, Beeker and his associates saw over 1,200 pictographs depicting the cosmology and history of the Taino people.

Beeker thinks one of the scenes on the cave wall might be an account of forced tribute to the Spaniards, requiring the Taino to provide free labor and food.

The La Aleta sinkhole nearby was apparently the water source for the capital village of tribal chieftain Cotubanamá, who led his Taino people in battle against Juan de Esquivel over the Higuay region of Hispaniola.

Excited by the potential importance of these sites and curious about what might lie at the bottom of La Aleta, Beeker soon returned with a team of five other experienced divers.

He arranged for some equipment to be flown in by helicopter, while team members Steve James, a nautical archaeologist from Memphis, Tennessee, and Rob Bleser, a professional diver from Key Largo, Florida, hiked 17 miles to the site, leading six mules loaded down with more equipment.

“We still didn’t know what we’d find. We had no idea. All we knew was we were going deep,” said Beeker.

The sinkhole was formed when part of the roof of an underground limestone cave fell in, leaving seven holes or “eyes” in the ground over a 30 feet diameter area. The largest of the eyes measures only 6 feet by 9 feet, but affords a dramatic view of a subterranean...
chamber dropping 50 feet down to water level.

Beeker's team had to rig a rope and pulley system to lower people and equipment through the eye in a free descent to the water below. Then, a 14-foot Quicksilver inflatable raft was prepared and lowered into the sinkhole to serve as a diving platform. From this platform, divers dropped a line to the tip of the cap rock, a pile of rock from the collapsed roof, 113 feet below.

Descending along the line, divers found a rich deposit of artifacts on top of the 20-foot diameter rock pile. The divers could make out ceramic vessels, wooden artifacts, gourds, a basket, and a stone implement protruding from the black humus sediment coating the sinkhole floor.

In the course of two diving expeditions this fall, Beeker and his colleagues made over 80 dives into La Aleta to map these objects and to retrieve some of them. The basket and many of the gourds were too fragile for immediate retrieval, but divers did bring up 11 ceramic bowls, three ceramic water containers, four wood artifacts, and a stone axe head.

All recovered artifacts were transported within 2+ hours to East National Park Headquarters and the Faro a Colon Museum in Santo Domingo.

Director of IU's Mathers Museum Geoffrey Conrad, who accompanied Beeker to La Aleta this December, said that he knows of no comparable site in the Caribbean.

"There are a number of unique aspects to the site. Certainly one is from the underwater side. That kind of preservation doesn't occur on land, so we expect to see unique materials, things that are simply not known," Conrad said. "This may well turn out to be the largest Taino settlement ever excavated in terms of the variation contained within the site."

The discovery has generated a great deal of interest among scholars in the Dominican Republic and at IU. Beeker says the find opens up potential research opportunities for many IU departments including archaeology, anthropology, geology, and biology.

These unique gourd fragments feature incised geometric patterns. Spanish records from the 16th century describe the Taino Indians' use of such gourds, but none had ever been recovered before this expedition. (The caliper is set to one inch.)

"There is an excellent opportunity for the IU community to bring in any number of departments and disciplines," said Conrad. "The site is located in a national park. How does a third world country deal with this? This site and its resources have the potential to accrue multiple benefits to the Dominican Republic and we have a chance to establish a good working model for handling similar resources in the future."

On December 11, IU signed a cooperative agreement with three institutions in the Dominican Republic to facilitate the exchange of scholars, students, park professionals, and experts in the preservation and interpretation of Columbus-era archaeology.

Signatories to the agreement include IU President Myles Brand; Dean Tony Mobility of IU's School of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation; Joel Meier, chairman of IU's Department of Recreation and Park Administration; and representatives of the Universidad Catolica of Santo Domingo, the East National Park, and the Dominican Club.

Two IU graduate students traveled to the Dominican Republic this January to begin cataloging artifacts recovered from La Aleta. Beeker and Conrad are preparing for another trip to the site this coming March.

More information on La Aleta, including a scholarly paper coauthored by Beeker and John W. Foster, senior state archaeologist for California, is available at http://www.indiana.edu/~scuba.

—JDW

IU's Geoffrey Conrad addresses representatives at a signing ceremony, among whom are President of the Universidad Católica de Santo Domingo Ramón Alonso (left) and President of the Patronato Parque Nacional del Este Ramón Alonzo (2nd from right).