



Pre-Colonial Caribbean

Vibrant networks of exchange connected the islands of the Caribbean since c. 5000 BCE. So why do we usually only hear about this region starting in 1492 CE?



0:01

*Sharika Crawford speaks,
facing camera*

*Image of a trade post
along these networks*

Map of the Caribbean Sea

*Sharika Crawford speaks,
facing camera*

Maps of the Caribbean Sea

Here at the World History Project, we talk a lot about the networks that connected communities across both land and sea. We've highlighted some of these networks such as those in the New World, the Silk Roads, and the Indian Ocean trade routes.

In fact, we've metaphorically described the Silk Roads and Indian Ocean networks as an archipelago of trade, comparing trading spots to a group of islands.

But there's an important network that existed in the Caribbean Sea that included multiple literal archipelagos.

First, we should define what we mean by the pre-colonial Caribbean. We'll start with the geographical scale of the Caribbean.

This includes more than 7,000 islands in the Caribbean Sea as well as the other landforms that touch this body of water. The larger islands in the Caribbean are grouped together as the Greater Antilles. The group of smaller islands to the south of these are the Lesser Antilles.

1:10

*Timeline of the pre-
colonial Caribbean*

*Sharika Crawford speaks,
facing camera*

*Map of the Caribbean
islands*

*Images of the Caribbean
islands' geography and
climate*

*Map showing pre-colonial
American networks*

In terms of time, pre-colonial refers to the history of the region from the earliest migrations starting about 15,000 years ago and up to the late 15th century.

Caribbean history spans thousands of years in a large geographical area with a lot of diversity.

For example, the size of the islands ranges from Cuba, which is as large as the state of Tennessee, to Islas Mujeres, which if you rode your bike around the whole thing would take less than an hour.

Some islands have dry desert-like environments, while others have rain forest. Some have high mountain ranges, while others are at or below sea level. Then there's the wide variety of plant and animal species, but the region's people also share a lot of characteristics.

Why?

Well partly, this is because the region was connected through a series of overlapping networks much like Afro-Eurasia's interconnected networks of the 13th and 14th centuries.

So what do we know about the people in the societies that lived in this region for thousands of years and how did they build networks of exchange across the aquatic highway of the Caribbean Sea and wider Atlantic Ocean?

2:25

*Sharika Crawford speaks,
facing camera*

Text showing questions

*Jorge Ulloa Hung speaks,
facing camera*

Hi, I'm Sharika Crawford, a professor of Latin American history at the U.S. Naval Academy, and in order to answer these questions, I turned to two experts, Dr. Corinne Hofman and Dr. Jorge Ulloa Hung who will help us answer these questions.

I'll start with the basics. When were the Caribbean islands settled and where did these early communities migrate from?

It is important to understand the possible connection of two different moments of the migrations to the Caribbean islands.

Timeline and map of the first migrations

For example, in the early moments in the 5000 BC, you have really important connection, not only with South America, you have an important connection now with Yucatan or Central America. And for example, the early communities enter for two ways of migration to Central America to the directly to, especially to Cuba, Puerto Rico, and another big islands, and you have another corridor of migration from South America for this first moment of migration.

3:35

Corinne Hofman speaks, facing camera, followed by timelines and maps of the second migration

And then the second one which is to be dated more like 2500 years ago, and until now we see in fact the major movement coming from South America and probably eastern South America, so we'll have to think about indeed Venezuela or the Guyanas maybe.

Sharika Crawford speaks, facing camera

So we know that there were at least two major migrations from the mainland of Central and South America, and we also have evidence of these migrations from the archaeological record such as the similarities of tools used by people living on different islands.

What else can the archaeological record tell us about how these pre-colonial societies lived?

4:18

Corinne Hofman speaks, facing camera

Well as an archaeologist, we are learning more and more on how the indigenous people lived in the islands.

Images of archaeological sites and techniques

And also with the advancement of techniques of course we can get inside into their food ways, into their diet, into how they interacted with their environment, how they were fishing, how they were trading, how they were transporting materials, and that is the wonderful thing about archaeology.

Corinne Hofman speaks, facing camera

That it is not a written history, but it is a history which is in the soil, and the soil has to be opened like a book.

Images of Caribbean houses and burial practices

And that is how we discovered that people were building, for example, how they were building their houses with wooden posts. Sometimes they were round. Sometimes they were oval. They were sometimes—they were five to eight meters in diameters, but we also found much larger houses up to 90 meters in diameter. People were burying their deceased kins or family members in the houses, sometimes outside the houses.

Sharika Crawford speaks, facing camera

These burial practices you describe make me curious about belief systems in the Caribbean.

Jorge, can you tell us more about how these beliefs changed from the early migrations to the later ones?

5:33

Jorge Ulloa Hung speaks, facing camera

It's not homogeneous. For example, belief system at the beginning of this community entered in the Caribbean islands, this belief system is more related with the mainland society, with this more equalitarian society.

*Images of Caribbean
religious artifacts*

They believe more in ancestors, and they offer many offerings to their ancestors in the burials, and you have a special space to bury on his ancestor in the middle of the community especially in the early moment of this society. And in the late moments, you have more conceptualized and more symbolized belief system. You have a kind of mythology. You have a belief in icons or beings.

This kind of being is like a god, and this god has a different powers, and this power is related with the owner of the icons. This is a reason if you have a powerful god, a powerful icon, you have at the same time a power.

*Jorge Ulloa Hung speaks,
facing camera*

You have at the same time social power. You have at the same time social influence over your community.

6:45

So the archaeological record can help us understand how these communities shared beliefs, how they acquired food, and how they built their homes.

*Sharika Crawford speaks,
facing camera*

Another thing that archaeology can tell us is how indigenous Caribbean peoples got the other things they needed.

*Images of Caribbean trade
goods*

Trade goods such as jade and ceramics were transported from island to island on dugout canoes, and these items crisscross the Caribbean Sea.

Can you tell us what other items were traded between the islands and also between the mainland and the islands?

*Corinne Hofman speaks,
facing camera*

So yeah and then there's also, for example, another trade item which we have been finding is for example teeth from dogs that were made into pendants and that were traded across the islands.

*Images of Caribbean trade
goods*

We have also found teeth coming from mammals like jaguars or tapirs for example, and we've seen that they were coming from the South American mainland.

*Corinne Hofman speaks,
facing camera*

So all in all, there has been an enormous trade, an exchange going on between the islands, between the Greater Antilles and the Lesser Antilles but also between the islands and the mainland of South America.

7:54

So there was a continuous flow of mobility and exchange between these islands going on from the first colonizations till really 1492.

*Map of goods movement
from the Caribbean islands*

The archaeological evidence tells us a lot about the networks of exchange and interaction between these islands in the pre-colonial period.

What about interactions after 1492 when Columbus and the Spanish arrived?

*European map of the
Caribbean islands*

I think that the Spanish really tapped into the networks that were existing in among the indigenous peoples in the Caribbean and that is one of the reasons why they could expand so fast and into the other islands but also into other parts of the Americas.

*Images of Spanish
settlements and indigenous
enslavement in the
Caribbean*

First, the indigenous peoples clearly had a role towards the Spanish as translators, as guides. exchanging their knowledge and that rapidly changed into a situation where the indigenous peoples were enslaved, were put into work, into gold mines, into pearl fishery, and were put into the encomienda system where whole indigenous villages in fact were put under the rule of the Spanish leaders.

9:07

*Sharika Crawford speaks,
facing camera*

*Map of the Caribbean
islands and image of a
Kalinago village*

*Sharika Crawford speaks,
facing camera*

10:08

*Map of goods movement in
the Columbian Exchange*

*Corinne Hofman speaks,
facing camera, followed
by a world map by a
Portuguese cartographer
in 1500*

*Sharika Crawford speaks,
facing camera*

11:06

*Map of goods movement
from the Caribbean islands*

*Sharika Crawford speaks,
facing camera*

Some indigenous Caribbean societies voluntarily helped the Spanish, while others were forced to labor for them. There were also some indigenous groups like the Kalinago who resisted Spanish control.

Can you tell us more about this resistance?

Yes. In the Lesser Antilles, we see the Kalinago persistence against the Spanish colonization for about 150 years. The coast of South and Central America were already colonized and settled really by the Spanish. The Lesser Antilles were still sort of stronghold for the Kalinago people, which were people probably composed also of the indigenous peoples who were fleeing from the Spanish in the Greater Antilles and on the other hand also from the South American mainland.

A final question, in your opinion how do the colonial interactions with indigenous peoples in the Caribbean contribute to a new global history?

So from on the first years of colonization, we see what has later been labeled the Columbian Exchange, where we see foodstuffs and other products going back and forth from the Americas to Europe and to other parts of the world. So I think that is really one of the major changes. In fact, it was the beginning of a true globalizing world, connecting all the continents with each other.

You can really label it as the beginning of the true globalizing world. Of course, globalization is a term that it has been used in many other contexts, but if we are looking really at opening of all the continents to each other and exchanging goods and people and diseases and everything else yet, then it is really 1492.

The arrival of European colonizers after 1492 disrupted a maritime system of migration trade and cultural exchange that had existed for millennia.

The societies of the Caribbean developed diverse beliefs and technologies, and they interacted across extensive sea networks connecting the islands of the Caribbean with the two mainlands of Central America and South America.

The violence of the Spanish conquest destroyed so much and killed so many that historians and archaeologists today must rely on techniques like isotope analysis to reveal who these people were, how they lived, what they believed, and how they connected with each other.

However, indigenous culture did not disappear with colonization. The Caribbean people and their culture have persisted. We can find it in Caribbean foods that were shared around the world and in the fusion of cultures and beliefs that continue to shape our world long after 1492.