Arie Boomert, Birgit Faber-Morse, Irving Rouse et al.

_The 1946 and 1953 Yale University Excavations in Trinidad._ New Haven CT: Yale University Publications in Anthropology 92, 2012. xiv + 200 pp. (Cloth US$ 85.00)

In 1946 and again in 1953, Irving Rouse (1913–2006) conducted extensive archaeological excavations at prehistoric and protohistoric sites in Trinidad. This volume constitutes the first full analysis of his findings and places them within the broader context of Caribbean archaeology and prehistory. It also provides welcome insights into Rouse’s changing ideas about Caribbean migrations and offers a detailed analysis of indigenous cultural developments in Trinidad through Spanish-Amerindian contact. Finally, while not intended as such, it gives a fairly comprehensive overview of archaeological research on the island of Trinidad.

The volume is organized much as archaeologists Jesse Walter Fewkes or Cornelius Osgood might have done nearly a century ago. Presentations are methodical, dry, and sometimes repetitious. Like most of the Yale series, this book is written for specialists. Featuring excellent background material and maps that will prove invaluable for future fieldworkers, it also contains 174 excellent black-and-white photographs, precise line drawings, and exceptionally clear charts and graphs. Although published in 2012, it reflects an age when archaeologists stuck closely to their data, shied away from advanced technology and statistical methods, and made modest claims. The advantage is that by separating findings and analyses, the findings may be re-interpreted later in light of methodological innovations and new paradigms.

Irving Rouse, the “father” of Caribbean archaeology, was the first to establish a viable ceramic chronology for the region (still in use today) and one of the first Caribbean archaeologists to analyze indigenous food remains. Other contributors to this volume include Birgit Faber-Morse (curatorial affiliate in the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History), A.J. Daan Isedoorn and Annette Silver (also affiliates of the Peabody Museum), and Arie Boomert (author of an accessible introduction to Trinidad prehistory for nonspecialists [2000]). In a sense, the volume is a tribute to Boomert as much as to Rouse. The contributors suggest that Rouse’s rigorous teaching schedule during his “post-retirement” years hampered the publication of his Trinidad findings, but the lack of access to the Trinidad collection was also a factor since much of the 1953 Trinidad collection remained at Florida State Museum until 1980.

Chapter 1 gives a brief overview of the volume. The most accessible chapter, it includes a geological description of Trinidad with attention to topography, soil types, rivers, currents, presence of seismic activity, and so on. It also includes...
an overview of the Contact Period, highlighting interactions between natives of Trinidad and the South American mainland, which were frequent and unencumbered. And it discusses Rouse’s methodological approach, which greatly influenced his findings; for example, the narrow trenches he used made it difficult (if not impossible) to determine settlement patterns and the size of local populations.

Chapter 2 focuses on the excavations of 1946 and 1953, with a one-to six-page description of each site, its location, topography, and a history of its excavation. Most of the sites had been identified prior to Rouse’s excavations in Trinidad. For example, the Palo Seco and St. John sites had been thoroughly studied by John Bullbrook in 1919 and 1924, and the Cedros site was first identified by geologist H.G. Kugler in 1923. The Erin site, best known for its highly decorated pottery, was discovered in 1888 by Sir William Robinson, then governor of Trinidad, and excavated by Fewkes in 1913. St. Joseph I, St. Joseph II, and Mayo are ceramic and historic sites, respectively. When Rosemary C. Glazier and I cataloged them in 1981–82, St. Joseph I had been so fully disturbed that workers did not attempt to preserve stratigraphy, simply dumping artifacts from every level into open trays (Glazier 1982). The Mayo site, first discovered and excavated by John and Rita Goggin and Irving Rouse in 1953, consists mostly of Mayoid potsherds mixed with English porcelain and shells. Annette Silver’s chapter provides a full analysis of porcelain and other European goods from St. Joseph II; Appendix C details her findings.

In Chapter 4, Rouse’s findings are divided into Archaic Age, Ceramic Age, and Historic Age (even though ceramics exist in “Archaic Age” sites and there are so-called “Ceramic Age” sites with scant pottery). Rouse stayed close to the data, for example making few speculations about local alterations in subsistence. Other contributors have taken greater liberties, arguing that Rouse was incorrect in asserting that bitter cassava was a major foodstuff at St. Joseph I, St. Joseph II, and Mayo due to the abundance of griddles and chip stones (which were used as teeth in cassava graters). They suggest instead that Archaic Age and Ceramic Age peoples relied mainly on hunting and fishing. But how, then, does one account for the profusion of griddles and chip stones?

This extraordinary volume is unlikely to be superseded. The photographs, line drawings, charts, and graphs are well worth the price of the volume, and the overview of 1946 and 1953 findings by Rouse and the Goggins are thorough and sophisticated. At the same time, its tendency to offer emendations and reinterpretations of more recent work is confusing. It might have been more useful to analyze Rouse’s artifacts from 1946 and 1953 on their own terms, without reference to subsequent research.
Stephen D. Glazier
Department of Anthropology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln NE 68858, U.S.A.
Sglazi234@charter.net

References