Stéphen Rostain

Islands in the Rainforest: Landscape Management in pre-Columbian Amazonia.

Walnut Creek CA: Left Coast Press, 2013. 277 pp. (Cloth US$89.00)

This book was translated from the French by Michelle Eliott for the collection “New Frontiers in Historical Ecology.” For me, a “real Mesoamerican and Amazonian archaeologist” (in the words of Kent Flannery [1982]), it has several drawbacks.

First, the book is characteristic of the “new archaeology” and other theoretical constructions in archaeology born in the 1970s in the sense that the author doesn’t always present rigorous archaeological data, but rather develops many hypotheses, some of which may be plausible and some of which are definitively not. This confusion between archaeological facts and hypotheses is the principal default of many works in archaeology, and this book is one of them. Consider, for example, the supposed pre-Columbian dating of all raised fields of French Guiana that is presented in several maps (pp. 141–144, 146–148). This dating is currently questioned by many archaeologists and geomorphologists working in this region, and Rostaing gives few arguments for defending it. He also offers poor illustrations of excavations that he conducted in French Guiana. Why so little proof? Furthermore, Rostain has few dates for coastal sites, even though recent excavations in the “Island of Cayenne” and between Macouria and Awala-Yalimapo have given more dates. Data from other excavations in the rainforest of ditched sites such as Yaou, Pointe Blondin, and Pointe Morne, by Mestre, Hildebrand & Texier (2008) have unfortunately not been included.

Chapter 3, covering archaeological cultures, is agreeable except that the description of Aristé and Koriabo cultures fails to take into account recent studies in French Guiana that have produced important data concerning both of these cultures. The title of Chapter 4 (“A Natural Garden or a Domesticated Forest”), like that of the book, is misleading, as ridged fields are present on the coast where the land cover is composed mainly of savannas, not rain forests. The core of this book and the work of Rostain more generally are based on “multiple survey methods” (p. 140). He studied the raised fields from 1987 to 1991 (see Rostain 1994) but hasn’t lived in French Guiana since then, and it seems unlikely that his verification of all ridged fields from “the river Kourouabo to the Maroni” in French Guiana during missions lasting only a couple of weeks could have been accomplished. The interpretation of aerial data as well as precise fieldwork of many ridged fields is obligatory in a serious scientific work. “Pedologists and archaeobotanists have conducted sampling and measurements,” but in only two sectors of ridged fields (p. 157). I understand that it is
not possible to survey all ridged fields of French Guiana, but Rostain over-interprets the data of his colleagues.

The model of spatial organization of Arauquinoid sites of the Guianas is an interesting hypothesis that must be verified with more field work and open area excavations. The discovery of phytoliths of cultivated plants (maize in particular) by the archaeobotanists strikes me as the most interesting information in this book. These data can provide new hypotheses about food production in pre-Columbian societies. The book’s discussion of social hierarchy based on archaeological data is interesting, but the archaeological data, in several cases, don’t reveal as much as the ethnohistorical and ethnological data that provided the basis for the archeologist’s hypothesis. The argumentation follows a sort of circular logic, without including the findings of new archaeological fieldwork.

Chapter 5 describes the evolution of the Guianas’ savannas and the pre-Columbian ridged fields during the five centuries after the Conquest, focusing on the problem of preservation of these famous ridged fields. One final problem for me (and I presume for anthropologists and other researchers) is that the countries concerned in this book speak principally French, Spanish, and Portuguese. Unfortunately, for many anthropologists or archaeologists in the world, it’s more profitable for their career to publish in English.

This synthetic book is more interesting for anthropologists and historians than for archaeologists—who, by the way, are not cited completely in the bibliography (at least for French Guiana). The lack of numerous new archaeological data not published but available in field reports is another “little” problem; see, for example, those by Jérome Briand, Lydie Clerc, Claude Coutet, Sandrine Delpech, Sylvie Jérémie and Étienne Dambrine, Clara Samuelian, and Martijn van den Bel.1

But for anyone interested in Amazonia or French Guiana, the book provides a useful overview of the pre-Columbian agricultural savoir-faire and the environment, the general evolution of archaeological cultures of the Guianas and their ridged fields in a comparative perspective, with different specialists involved in the same project.

We hope that this book will be the first of several interdisciplinary archaeo-ecological publications about pre-Columbian peoples of Amazonia and the Guianas.