

Passing of a Pioneer Researcher in Caribbean Archaeology

By

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The Caribbean archaeological community mourns the recent passing of Benjamin Irving Rouse, a pioneer researcher in Caribbean pre-Columbian archaeology. Affectionately described by many as the father of Caribbean archaeology, Irving Rouse's stellar career spanned a period of over 60 years and was characterized by the publication of a miscellany of books and articles on Caribbean prehistory. Beginning with his 1939 monograph, *Prehistory in Haiti: A Study in Method*, Rouse's most notable publications included *Introduction to Prehistory*, *Migrations in Prehistory: Inferring Population Movement from Cultural Remains*, *Excavations at the Indian Creek Site (Antigua West Indies)*, *Excavations at Maria De LA Cruz Cave and Hacienda Grande Village Site (Loiza, Puerto Rico)*. His most recent major publication was *The Tainos: Rise and Decline of the People Who Greeted Columbus*, published by the Yale University Press in 1992.

Professor Rouse began his career at Yale University as an undergraduate in forestry and switched to archaeology while a student employee of the Anthropology Division. At various times from 1938 through his retirement in 1984, Professor Rouse was Curator, Assistant Curator, Research Associate and Faculty Affiliate. In college, Ben Rouse had been drawn towards taxonomy in botany, a mature field of study, but he shifted to the much younger discipline of anthropology because he saw a more urgent need for classification there. "As I look back," he said, "I am impressed by the fact that archaeology by the 1960s had reached the same state of maturity in classification that biology had reached when I was an undergraduate only 30 years earlier." Professor Rouse himself was largely responsible for that transformation. His breadth of perspective equipped him to devise ways of organising archaeological evidence that would serve researchers and theorists well for many years.

From an archaeological standpoint, Irving Rouse did for the Caribbean what Donald Lathrap did for the Amazon – he brought scholarly attention to a region that was considered peripheral to mainstream archaeology in the New World. While inordinate

focus was being placed on the so-called “high cultures” of the Mayas and Aztecs of Central America and the Incas of Peru coupled with the large chiefdom societies of the American southeast and southwest, Irving Rouse dared to concentrate his academic energies on the “inconspicuous” yet important pre-Columbian societies of the Caribbean. By travelling extensively throughout the Caribbean (including *Trinidad* in 1946 and 1955), Professor Rouse quickly became a pioneer in circum-Caribbean archaeology and a major contributor to the development of archaeological methods, particularly ceramic analysis, typology and chronology.

A firm believer in cultural history (which is the reconstruction of the ‘history’ of peoples from detailed cultural data such as ceramics, lithics etc.), Irving Rouse developed a time-space systematics for the Caribbean, in which characteristic “modes” of pottery at a site were used to identify a “style” that usually bore the name of the first site at which it was described. For example, *Saladoid* was named after the site of Saladero in Venezuela, where its pottery characteristics were first described. Local pottery styles that shared sufficient similarities were grouped into “sub-series” (denoted by –an suffix), and “sub-series” were grouped into “series” (denoted by an –oid suffix). Rouse used this classification to identify “peoples” and “cultures”, which in his view were “two sides of the a coin, one consisting of a local population group and the other of the cultural traits that define the group.” For example, *Saladoid* is a series and *Cedrosan* Saladoid is a sub-series. Rouse recognised that while it might have been possible to name Caribbean cultural groups that existed at the time of European contact (such as the **Tainos** of the northern Caribbean), it was virtually impossible to accurately name cultural groups that existed deep in time. Therefore, his “series” and “sub-series” were designed to bring a great deal order to the classification of Caribbean pre-Columbian peoples and cultures. Despite minor adjustments through the years, this system of classification remains an intrinsic part of scholarly research in the Caribbean to this day. In subsequent years, Irving Rouse in conjunction with J.M. Cruxent, extended his overall Caribbean chronological scheme to embrace the several archaeological regions of Venezuela, a scheme which was subsequently validated by radiocarbon dates.

During his field expeditions to Trinidad in 1946 and 1953, Rouse visited the pre-ceramic (Archaic) sites of St. John and Ortoire, the ceramic-age (Saladoid) sites of

Cedros and Palo Seco, the ceramic-age (Barrancoid) site of Erin, the ceramic-age (Araquinoid) site of Bontour and the ceramic-age (Mayoid) sites of St. Joseph and Mayo. In fact, his archaeological expeditions in Trinidad led to the creation of a number of “series” and “sub-series” for the wider Caribbean, for example *Ortoiroid* (named after Ortoire in east Trinidad) and *Cedros* (named after Cedros in southwest Trinidad). Rouse also produced a smattering of publications on Trinidad’s archaeology, with *Excavations in Southwest Trinidad* and *Prehistory of Trinidad in Relation to Adjacent Areas* being notable examples. In his 1992 flagship publication, *The Tainos* Rouse not only acknowledged Banwari Trace as the oldest site in the West Indies but he also discussed the importance of Trinidad and Tobago as a “gateway community” for the several Amerindian groups that entered the Caribbean from northeast South America.

As a reflection of his unswerving dedication to service, Irving Rouse was the recipient of many prestigious awards such as the Viking Fund of the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Inc. in 1960, the Franz Boas Award for Exemplary Service to Anthropology in 1984 and an award from the International Association for Caribbean Archaeology (IACA) in 1995. Professor Rouse will be greatly missed not only by the archaeological fraternity in the Caribbean but also by the myriad historians and other scholars who have read and appreciated his books and articles.