

Rock Art at Corral de los Indios de Chacuey, Dominican Republic

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Corral de los Indios de Chacuey, a large prehistoric Taino complex with monumental architectural features, is located near the Haitian frontier in the province of Dajabón in northwestern Dominican Republic. The site is situated within the historically known *cacicazgo* (chiefdom) of Marien, an important political entity in north-central Hispaniola at the time of the arrival of Columbus. The site was systematically investigated between 1948 and 1952 by the Dominican archaeologist Emile de Boyrie Moya (1955) who identified three primary components: a large ceremonial plaza enclosed by an earthen embankment; a double pavement connecting the enclosure with the Río Chacuey; and an extensive gallery of petroglyphs along the banks of the Río Chacuey at Charco de las Caritas.

The plaza is situated 500 meters east of the Río Chacuey on the tableland of Sabana de los Indios. The interior of the enclosure measures some 36,000 square meters in area and was originally defined by a semi-elliptical wall of mixed earth and rubble measuring from 40-80 centimeters in height and from 4.5-5.0 meters across. Wall openings provided access to the center of the enclosure from east and west. Excavation yielded considerable pottery and other material remains dating the site to approximately A.D. 1437-1509.

A series of laws and decrees were created pertaining to the protection of national patrimony during the political regimes of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina and Joaquín Balaguer. This legislation had direct or indirect impact on Corral de los Indios de Chacuey, and Law 492 of 27 October 1969, established the site as a national monument. Unfortunately,

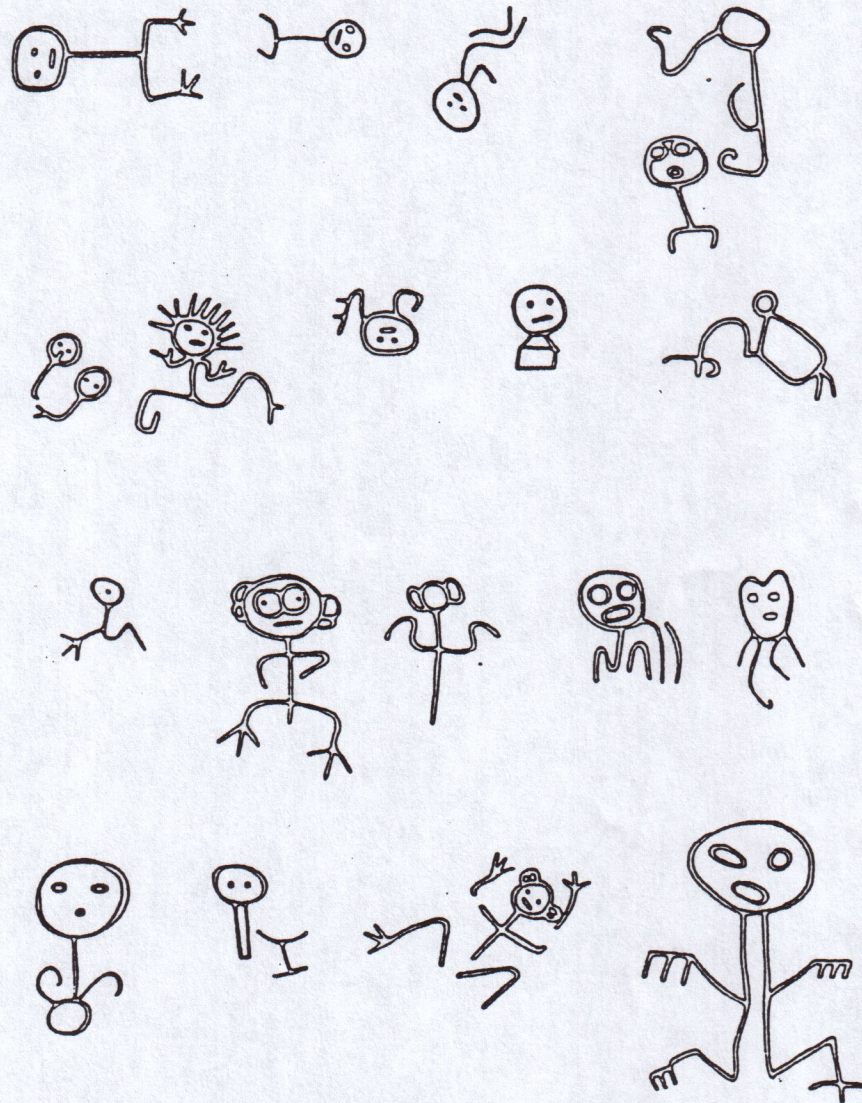


Figure 1. Anthropomorphs from Charco de Caritas, Corral de los Indios de Chacuey

during the early 1980s road construction 60 meters wide and 11 meters deep was excavated from the Río Chacuey some 700 meters eastward to Sabana de los Indios. The cut was positioned through the center of the enclosure thereby demolishing the western portion of the enclosure.

Secondary destruction caused by relocating road fill and surface scraping is evident to the south and east of the enclosure.

Although the site complex was essentially demolished, the petroglyph gallery has remained intact. The rock art reflects a variety of styles and occupies practically all suitable surfaces along the banks of the Río Chacuey. Additional petroglyphs are reported, although undocumented, some 200 meters downstream at Charco de los Mellizos and on a large, stone surface at Salto del Musu in the Arroyo Tireo, an affluent of the Río Chacuey some 2.5 kilometers upriver from Charco de las Caritas.

Between 1993 and 1995 a complete record was made of all rock art visible at Charco de las Caritas using black and white negative and color positive photographic film, and drawn at 1:1 scale on transparent plastic sheets. Some of these images are illustrated in Figures 1 through 5. Petroglyphs were made by abrading, cutting, hitting, or drilling the rock with tools probably made of stone, shell, or wood. The typical method used at Charco de las Caritas appears to have involved drilling a series of shallow holes and then connecting them to form a line. An inventory of visible images represents anthropomorphs (45%), zoomorphs (30%), and phytomorphs (6%). Approximately 19% are geometric or enigmatic figures difficult to define. Many of the images have been destroyed by graffiti and in a few places attempts have been made to imitate indigenous renderings, although these are obvious.

The location selected for the petroglyphs at Chacuey is at the edge of the Río Chacuey near swirling pools and mild rapids, a place of great environmental impact. Throughout the Dominican Republic rock art is usually associated with sheltered places such as caves and overhangs, and near waterfalls, cataracts, rapids, and other places of potential physical danger. The incidence along quiet stretches of river appears less frequent (Dubelaar 1995). Such settings may stimulate the invocation of supernatural forces. There is an eastern directional tendency for petroglyphs at Charco de las Caritas, suggesting a possible solar association.

The meanings represented by the images are unknown although it is probable that some, and the terrain around them, had spiritual significance. There were certainly stories, beliefs, rituals, and songs connected with the site, and the character of the site can to some extent be seen by the subjects represented. The petroglyphs at Charco de las Caritas are an extension of

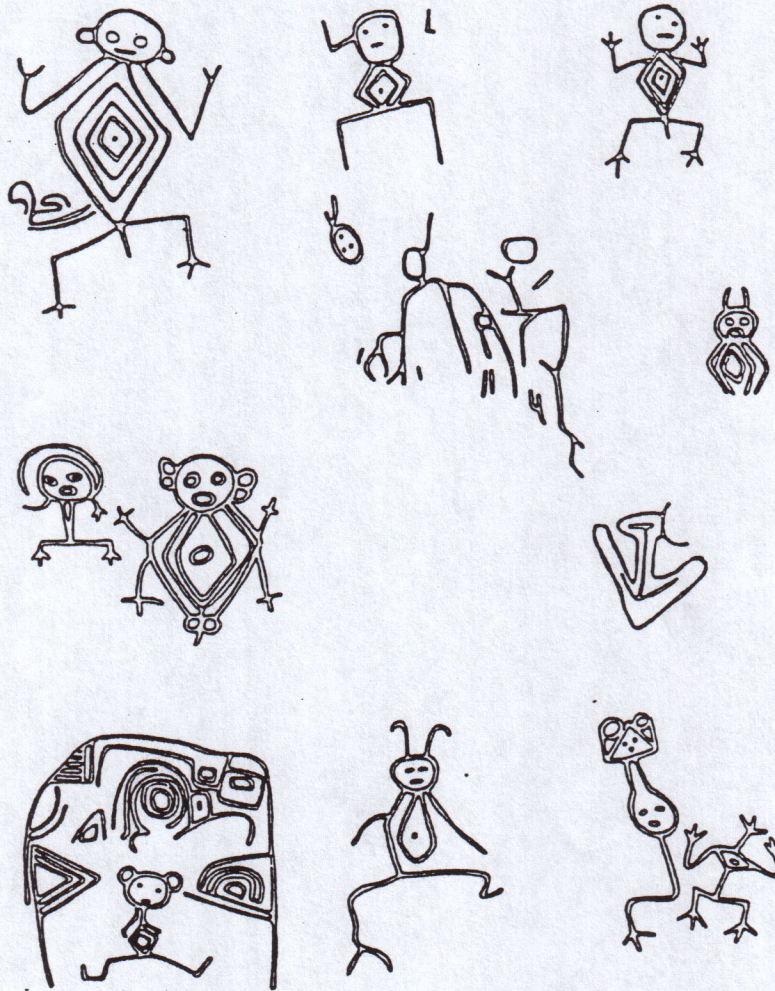


Figure 2. Anthropomorphs from Charco de Caritas, Corral de los Indios de Chacuey

these beliefs; they have many subjects and tell many stories. A hunting scene, for example, may be seen in various ways: it may express the desire for a kill in a lean season, it may tell of a past great hunt, and it may be used in a lesson to initiate the young into their adult role as food procurers. In addition, anthropomorphic figures may be transformations of beings who lived in the past. In some images the head or another part of an animal appears on the body of a person.

An understanding of the significance of the rock art at Corral de los Indios de Chacuey is possible only through the Taino belief system, not through simply looking at or counting the depictions. Recent research has shown that the trance dance and spiritual experiences lie at the core of much rock art (Whitley 1992). It is likely that most, possibly all, of the artists were shamans who engraved trance visions of the spirit world and symbols of the supernatural potency that enabled them to achieve their transcendent states. Most likely they made their pictures after they had returned to this world and could more serenely contemplate their tumultuous hallucinations. Meaning is tied with highly complex and nuanced symbols, metaphors, and implications of Taino shamanism.

The sixteenth century chronicler Ramón Pane (1959:162-163) described from his own direct observation how hallucinogenic *cohoba* snuff was used by Taino *behiques* (shamans):

And the lord is the first to make the *cohoba* . . . and while he makes the *cohoba* none may speak. After he has finished his prayer he remains for sometime with bowed head and arms resting on his knees; then he lifts his head, looks up to the sky, and speaks . . . and he relates the vision he had while stupefied with the *cohoba* that he snuffed up his nose and that went to his head. He tells that he has spoken with the *ceimi* and that they will gain victory, or that their enemies will flee, or that there will be many deaths, or wars, or famines . . . or whatever comes to his addled head to say. One can imagine the state he is in, for they say the house appears to him to be turned upside-down and the people to be walking with their feet in the air. This *cohoba* they make not only for the *ceimies* of stone and wood but also for the bodies of the dead.

The basis of Taino shamanistic curing ritual was an identification between the *behique* and his patient. *Cohoba* snuff was sniffed when a shaman wished to discern the cause of an illness, heal someone who was sick, visit the lord of the animals, carry out hunting magic, establish contact with his animal and helping spirits, transform himself into another being, predict the future, detect evil magic, or cause harmful magic.

Taino shamanism was a public religion as much as the rock art was publicly displayed. The spirit world was actually in the midst of this world. The supreme importance of the spirit world may explain why key features like the arms back posture, elongation, hair standing on end, bending forward, fish, birds, and so forth, occasionally occur in apparently



Figure 3. Zoomorphs from Charco de Caritas, Corral de los Indios de Chacuey

narrative scenes or associated with single human figures scattered through complex panels. They show the pervasive influence of trance experience in the art. Trance and the beliefs associated with it are the filter through which the real world passed before it appeared in the art. Some aspects of the real world were filtered out while those aspects that were important to the shaman-artists became prominent. Once we know about this filter we are in a position to make discoveries.

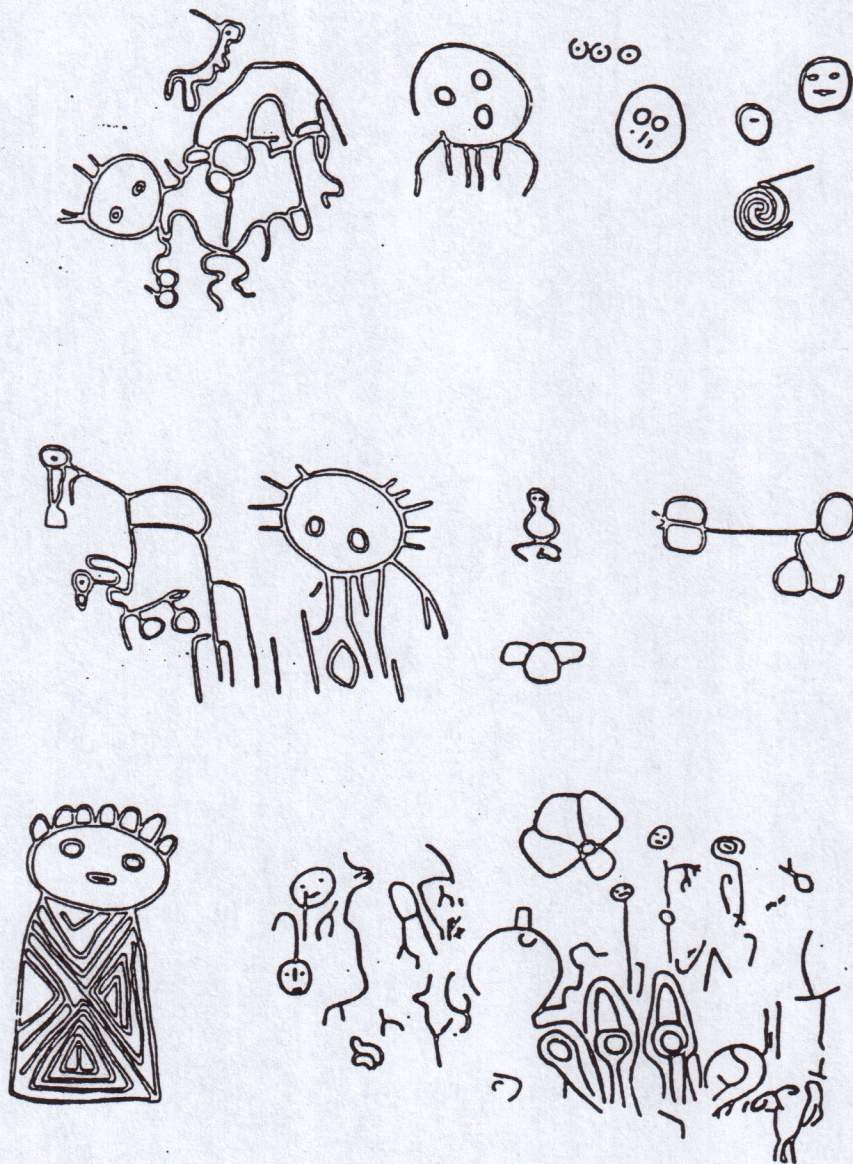


Figure 4. Petroglyphs from Charco de Caritas, Corral de los Indios de Chacuey

Cohoba has been identified as *candelon de teta* (*Anadenanthera peregrina*), a small tree measuring less than 20 meters in height and with greenish-white to yellow flowers. Seeds occur in pods 5-30 centimeters in length, similar to the tamarind (*Tamarindus indica*). The plant occurs in northeastern South America and is naturalized in the western part of the



Figure 5. Petroglyphs from Charco de Caritas, Corral de los Indios de Chacuey

Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and the Lesser Antilles, growing in open plains areas, scrub or wastelands, savannas along watercourses, woody hillsides, and on open ridges (Llogier 1985:57; Schultes and Hofmann 1980:148). Stands of *candelon de teta* are located less than 20 meters from the petroglyphs at Charco de las Caritas along the banks of the Río Chacuey.

The fruit in these pods produces an hallucinatory effect upon those who ingest it. All species and subspecies of *Anadenanthera* that have been investigated chemically contain a series of substituted beta-phenethylamines (substances which produce euphoria, exhilaration, and sometimes visions) in their seeds including DMT (N,N-dimethyltryptamine). These are extremely potent psychedelic effects and elicit a completely different state of consciousness for approximately ten to fifteen minutes. The state is typified by ego dissolution, fantastic multidimensional visions, experiences of death and rebirth, transformations into animals, erotic ecstasies, experiences of flying, and powerful eruptions and in some cases, depression, panic, and depersonalization. Tryptamine derivatives are not effective orally and must be either sniffed or smoked (Emboden 1979:162; Rátsch 1992:151).

Hallucination in a religious context is seeing beyond the normal (Stevens-Arroyo 1988:65). The use of drugs unleashes the psychic power of the religion. In times of crisis the believer communicates with the source of disturbance and finds answers to his questions. When use of this practice is integrated into a life style, one achieves wisdom. For the Taino, this kind of vision was equivalent with life itself.

Numerous similarities in drug use between the Taino and the Vaupés of South America are found in the plants used, tubes or pipes used to ingest the substances, the stools (*duhos*) upon which practitioners are seated, relationship of drugs to dance, use of the maraca, artistic expression of geometric designs perceived during trance, and the use of drugs in healing and divination (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975:12; Stevens-Arroyo 1988:64). Furthermore, an association with birds is characteristic of many snuffing practices (Emboden 1979:107). This suggests the great potential of ethnographic analogs in the understanding of the potential cultural significance of prehistoric rock art.

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