

# THE BIRD MAN

## WHAT BIRD WAS ITS INSPIRATION?

### THE BIRD MAN

IN APRIL 1799, THREE WOODEN FIGURES WERE PUT ON display before the Society of Antiquaries of London, as recorded in its journal *Archaeologica* in 1803:

April 11, 1799

Isaac Alves Rebello, Esq. F.A.S. exhibited to the Society Three Figures, supposed to be of Indian Deities, in wood, found in June 1792, in a natural cave near the summit of a mountain, called Spots, in Carphenter's Mountain, in the parish of Vere, in the island of Jamaica, by a surveyor in measuring the land. They were discovered placed with their faces (one of which is that of a bird) towards the east.<sup>1</sup>

The above extract refers to the figures as "deities" and states that they were positioned facing east. Although mentioned by J.E. Duerden in the *Journal of the Institute of Jamaica* in 1897,<sup>2</sup> no description of the figures appeared until 1907, in an article by T.A. Joyce which provided black and white plates showing frontal and side views.<sup>3</sup> William Fagg in 1970 described them as "probably the finest works of wood sculpture produced in the Americas before or since Columbus".<sup>4</sup> The figure noted in *Archaeologica* to have the face of a bird has come to be referred to as the "Bird Man".

Like the Bird Man (888 mm), the other two figures are made of highly polished wood, with marks that indicate the insertion of shiny material in selected places. One with splayed legs (405 mm) is said to represent Boinayel the Rain Giver due to "the tears that stream from his eyes [which] signify the magical tears that created rain".<sup>5</sup> The third figure (375 mm) also shows grooves from the eyes, but is described as a "'table', probably used for the reception of offerings"<sup>6</sup> or a *cohoba* stand.<sup>7</sup> The three figures are now in the British Museum in London.

As mentioned in *Archaeologica*, the artefacts were discovered in 1792, and no one knows when or why they were made, nor by whom. It is possible that they were lodged in the cave in order to protect them from being found by Europeans or other invaders, but even this is speculation. Carbon dating has not yet been carried out, so no date can be specific, but the British Museum suggests a possible origin in the late fifteenth century.

In a *Jamaica Journal* article in 1977, Jerome Handler presented the most comprehensive description of the Bird Man, yet his remarks raised a number of questions: for example, what type of bird is represented; what was the significance of its eastern orientation when found; and what was the role it played in Jamaican Arawak culture. He proposed that it may be a type of "agricultural zemi", and concluded, "There are no concrete data which satisfactorily explain the significance of the 'Bird Man' in Jamaican culture."<sup>8</sup>

Early records of interaction between Taínos and Europeans contain much more detail about Puerto Rico and Hispaniola than about Jamaica; consequently, archaeological research,

fieldwork and the resultant studies are usually strongly influenced by these accounts. As a result, suggestions in this article have little recourse other than to draw on these resources.

### THE ROLE OF THE CEMÍ IN TAÍNO SOCIETY

In *Caciques and Cemí Idols*, José Oliver states: "The power of cemís is . . . not a generalised or abstract force, but one that had specific immediacy among the living and in nature."<sup>9</sup> He proposes for Hispaniola (c. AD 600–1300), a development from an egalitarian to a more complex stratified society. This was exhibited "by changing how one reckons ancestry to iconographic representations of ancestors".<sup>10</sup> It is not known if such development took place in Jamaica, but such knowledge would assist in determining the place of the cemí in the Jamaican Taínos' social and religious beliefs and practices.

*Cohoba* ceremonies involved inhaling a hallucinatory drug which was placed in a receptacle on a stand like that shown in the third figure found in the cave. These ceremonies were used to make grave decisions as,

by inhaling the drug, the cacique or the shaman was able to communicate with a cemí and to interpret its response. In describing a *cohoba* ceremony on matters of policy, Oliver states that the cacique “has the prerogative to communicate directly with the cemí; the rest of the assembled have to wait for the results of the exchange”. In further discussion on the ‘rank’ of cemís, he mentions that Columbus noted that “they venerate one [cemí] more than others’ . . . probably reflecting the pecking order of the cemís”.<sup>11</sup> Among specific examples given by Oliver are the Bird Man and the ‘splayed leg’ figure, which he refers to as “cemí idol[s]”, while Colin McEwen describes the latter as having “exposed skeletal vertebrae of the spinal column [which] reinforce its association with the spirit world of revered dead male ancestors imbued with a life force called ‘cemí’”.<sup>12</sup>

### QUALITIES OF CEMÍ ICONS

Let us examine whether its various qualities and features can assist in confirming the supposition that the Bird Man is a deity in the Jamaican Taíno culture.

#### Wood

Wooden idols had a central role in the rituals of Taíno cosmology, with special properties attributed to certain woods. Artefacts of polished black wood made by the Taínos included deities, *duhos*, weapons, musical instruments and snuffing tubes, many with designs of spirits in animal or other form. M.W. Helms suggests that many of these items “appear to be specifically associated with political-ideological elites”.<sup>13</sup>

*Guaiacum officinale*, *lignum vitae*, is native to the Caribbean and northern South America. It is a dense, heavy wood that produces a resin and becomes darker when highly polished. In the Indies it was known as “palo sancto”<sup>14</sup> (holy wood) due to its many valuable properties – medicinal, as posts for Taíno houses, and worthy of

making a seat for the cacique (*duho*) as well as of depicting a deity.

Cemís were made from trees which were believed to contain the spirit of a dead cacique.<sup>15</sup> Ramón Pané describes how roots that moved signalled a tree’s request to an onlooker, then a shaman would be summoned to enquire what was its wish,<sup>16</sup> and that the extreme courtesy used to address the tree suggested that it was the spirit of a chief’s ancestor who responded. Through a ceremony using the *cohoba*, the tree’s spirit, nature and form would be revealed to the shaman. As described by Helms, this was a “‘liberation’ of the spirit from the tree form into its own form”.<sup>17</sup>

#### Colour

Little work has been carried out on the symbolism of colour among the Taínos except by Helms, who states, “In the Greater Antilles black was featured not only on certain wooden items, but also . . . as body paint.”<sup>18</sup> Rouse notes, “Before the shaman visited a sick person . . . he blackened his face with soot and proceeded to the sick person’s hut.”<sup>19</sup> Helms extrapolates symbolism of the colour black from Central and South American examples to include “a range of related topics: the night; riches; . . . warfare and the control of power; priests, sacred communication, and access to esoteric knowledge and wisdom”<sup>20</sup> – all of them the responsibility of the elite in a society.

#### Tools and Finish

The construction of the Bird Man (as well as other artefacts) of *lignum vitae* was a considerable achievement due to the hardness of the wood as the Taínos did not have metal tools. They had wooden and stone axes, and, as Diane Golding-Frankson has identified,<sup>21</sup> grinding and polishing stones, hammer and anvil stones, as well as awls and stone chisels. The latter could have been used to carve the fingers, and could leave imperfections such as seen on the torso of the Bird Man.

Woodworkers claim that *lignum vitae* needs little other than wet-sanding with fine grit to produce a good finish. Today it is unlikely that



evidence would be found of such material in Taíno sites; however, the wood releases resin under heat or friction, so that “rubbing red-hot round river pebbles on to the wood [brings] the resin to the surface, thus not only staining the wood darker but also providing a natural surface protectant”.<sup>22</sup> Further finish of the wood may have been provided by the use of Horsetail (*Equisetum* sp.), which had been noted by Patrick Browne in 1756 as being natural to the island; Browne added that the “dried plants, are used by our Cabinet-makers to give a polish to their work; for the surface of every part of them is something like a fine file . . . and leave the surface smooth and shining”.<sup>23</sup>

The finish also included the inlay of shiny materials such as gold and polished shell, for example, in the eyes and teeth. The carving of the figure, the shiny insertions, the colour of the wood together with its medicinal properties, and its ability to take a high polish all made it an object worthy of representing a deity.

#### PREVIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

Handler was unable to determine which bird was depicted in the Bird Man, but two suggestions have been

OPPOSITE PAGE *Bird Man*, front view

THIS PAGE *Cohoba* stand

made. In a collage of images related to the colibri/hummingbird on the blog of “Yamaye-Mike”,<sup>24</sup> is the Bird Man that is described as a “Jamaican Taíno sculpture of what appears to be a hummingbird man”. This interpretation may be influenced by the fact that the red-billed streamertail (*Trochilus polytmus*) is the national bird of Jamaica.

In his book, Oliver includes an illustration of the Bird Man, of which he writes: “The sample may represent a woodpecker (*Melanerpes* spp.) given by its ‘patch’ (outline) of feathers on the forehead. It is likely to be one of the central or primary idols for veneration.”<sup>25</sup> On the British Museum web page with the figure of the Bird Man is a quote from McEwan, who states: “The prominent beak and extended wings identify him as a bird . . . This spirit being (cemi) of a bird-man seems to embody the archetypal husband whose long beak is celebrated in myths . . . as the instrument for activating the reproductive potential of ‘proto-women’.”<sup>26</sup> Here McEwan is alluding to the woodpecker myth of the Taínos (see box).

### FEATURES OF THE BIRD MAN FIGURE

The Bird Man has the following distinctive features:

**Decoration** – It is “provided with a frontal fillet [a band or ribbon worn around the head], an ornament reserved, as we know for caciques”.<sup>27</sup> The pattern is simple and is repeated on the side of the head in front of the ears.

**Arm and leg bands** – These are circular constrictions of woven cotton to make muscles appear large, especially in contrast to the constricted area.<sup>28</sup>

**Eyes** – Despite the arms and legs, the placement of eyes is unlike a human, but bird-like – at the side of the face. From remnants of resin, it appears that a shiny inlay was inserted.

**Beak** – It is in no way representative of the type of beak of other birds depicted on known Jamaican Taíno artefacts: for example, that of a pelican – straight and long; a parrot – heavily curved; a woodpecker – straight and chisel-like; nor a hummingbird – long and slender.

### THE WOODPECKER MYTH

[Based on Pané’s several years of living among the native inhabitants of Hispaniola]

[The men] saw some kind of persons fall from some trees . . . These forms were neither men nor women, nor did they have the sex of male or female . . .

Chapter VIII: *How they found a solution so that they would be women*

They looked for a bird called inriri, formerly called *inriri cahubabayael* which makes holes in trees and in our language is called a woodpecker. And likewise they took those women without the sex of male or female, and they tied their hands and feet, and they brought the aforementioned bird and tied it to their bodies. And believing they were trees, the bird began his customary work, picking and burrowing holes in the place where the sex of women is generally located. And in this way the Indians say that they had women, according to the stories of the most elderly.

– Fray Ramón Pané, *An Account of the Antiquities of the Indians*, new edition, with introductory study, notes and appendixes by José Juan Arrom, translated by Susan C. Griswold (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 12.



A. Red-billed streamertail skull  
B. Jamaican woodpecker skull  
C. Jamaican crow skull

COMPOSITE PHOTO BY BRIAN K. SCHMIDT, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

**Ears** – Birds’ ears are protected by feathers and do not protrude from the side of the head, yet the Bird Man has observable ears on each side, like humans.

**Teeth** – Why does the figure show exposed teeth? Facial expressions are often interpreted by an observer in the context of his or her own culture, so early descriptions of Taíno expressions were seen to exhibit “fierce fangs and dentures”,<sup>29</sup> with an analogy to devils. However, since the time of Darwin, facial expressions have been considered in their evolution in comparison to higher vertebrates. Samson and Waller interpret the ‘Bared Teeth Motif’ in the pre-Columbian Caribbean as serving “as a general affiliative and benevolent signal and thus had a communicative role in propagating social cohesion”.<sup>30</sup> This is evidenced by Christopher Columbus who described Jamaican Taínos as gentle and who “received us cheerfully”.<sup>31</sup>

**Navel** – The figure lacks a navel, in contrast to the third figure found in the cave. Pané related that the Taínos could distinguish the *operito* (the spirit of the dead) from the living by looking for the navel: they believed the dead have no navel.<sup>32</sup>

**Shininess** – Apart from the high polish given to wood, there was also a cultural value placed on the shiny qualities of wooden artefacts, especially with shell and metal inlays. As Columbus observed, “It is not the costliness of the gold that they value in their ornaments, but its showy appearance.”<sup>33</sup>

### BIRDS IN TAÍNO CULTURE

Early inhabitants of the Caribbean islands were surrounded by birds on land, sea and shore. A great variety of calls would have echoed through the forests (e.g., parrots and night birds), while ground-dwelling birds would have responded to any disturbance with an audible call and rush of wings. Birds were an important part of the Taínos’ life; feathers were used for adornment, while some species contributed to their diet. Many examples exist of representations of land and sea birds on wood-carvings

(*duhos* and *cohoba* stands) as well as on pottery, stone images, collars and other artefacts. The Taínos considered birds “as spirit beings, the natural avatars of shamans, able to break the bonds of earth and fly up to the spirit realm”.<sup>34</sup>

Crows are not mentioned in the early accounts, with little if any representation of them on artefacts, but ample evidence of birds being used as food items in the Antilles is obtained from middens, for example, pigeons and doves, gallinules, ducks and seabirds.<sup>35</sup> Modern-day evidence of birds is deduced from bone fragments in middens, but as Elizabeth Wing points out, “Bone preservation is closely related with the acidity of the soil. The more acidic the soil, the greater the loss of bone . . . Bone is less well preserved in inland sites . . .”<sup>36</sup> In 1918, A. Wetmore reported finds of bones of the white-necked crow (*Corvus leucognaphalus*) in middens in the Virgin Islands;<sup>37</sup> and ninety years later, Steadman reported: “After the Taínos’ favourite species of birds got harder to find on Grand Turk, the most common bird bones recovered at the Coralie site became pigeons, doves (*bajani*) and crows. Crows are still ubiquitous today; nearly everywhere we have worked in these islands, Cuban crows were continually squawking.”<sup>38</sup>



HTTP://IBC.LYNXEDS.COM/  
PHOTO/JAMAICAN-CROW-  
CORVUS-JAMAICENSIS

### The Jamaican Crow (*Corvus jamaicensis*)

Crows belong to the order Passeriformes (perching birds) and the family Corvidae. The genus *Corvus* occurs worldwide, except at the poles and in South America. In the Western Hemisphere, *Corvus* species occur in North America, Mexico, and in the Greater Antilles<sup>39</sup> where there are four species: the Jamaican crow, *Corvus jamaicensis* (note that this is not the bird known in Jamaica as the “John Crow”);<sup>40</sup> the palm crow, *C. palmarum*, on Cuba and Hispaniola; the Cuban crow, *C. nasicus*, on Cuba, the southern Bahama Islands and Caicos Islands; and the white-necked crow, *C. leucognaphalus*, on Hispaniola (now extirpated on the Puerto Rican mainland).

The Jamaican crow is all black in colour; it is gregarious and often occurs in small flocks which are noisy, especially at roosting time.<sup>41</sup> It is an opportunistic omnivore – its food requirements contain a significant proportion of fruit taken from trees, where it also probes for small invertebrates,<sup>42</sup> and it takes small frogs and occasionally, bird eggs. Its voice is distinctive, varied and often loud. Its habitat is very wet to mesic forest, particularly on limestone, but it will use disturbed areas such as old plantations converted to agriculture or grazing, as long as old epiphyte-laden trees remain.<sup>43</sup> Thus it would have been found over almost the

entire island except in dry areas. At the time of the Taínos, the size of the resident human population and their “prevalence of tree worship”<sup>44</sup> was likely to have caused comparatively little disturbance of the natural vegetation, so the bird would have been more widespread than it is today when only 8 percent of closed broadleaf forest cover remains.<sup>45</sup>

Would the Taínos have been familiar with the species? Due to the bird’s widespread distribution across the island, and the noisy and distinctive voice announcing its presence, it would have been difficult for the Taínos to ignore it. At times the crow’s communication almost resembles human quarrels “poured forth in sentences”,<sup>46</sup> and is described by David Lack as “a wavering semi-musical jabbering”<sup>47</sup> with bubbling sounds, which in Jamaica earns the bird the common names of “Jabbering”, “Chattering” or “Gabbling Crow”. Crows are arboreal nesters and become silent near the nest; they maintain pair bonds all year, and pairs remain closely associated with their breeding territory despite minor disturbances as the bird becomes habituated to human activity. Philip Gosse writes of their intelligence by recounting that when a group landed noisily in a tree, one would steal off in complete silence to feast on nearby berries.<sup>48</sup> A fearless bird, it has been described as attacking and chasing off the much larger red-tailed hawk *Buteo jamaicensis*.<sup>49</sup> It is the only

TOP The Jamaican Crow (*Corvus jamaicensis*)

LEFT Bird Man’s teeth

predator on the island known to attack the endemic Jamaican boa, *Epicrates subflavus*, and itself has no known predator (other than juveniles in nests being taken by the boa).

The shape of the beak is “coracoid” – a word also used to describe the beak of a crow: it is distinctly curved, in comparison to the beaks of the woodpecker and of the hummingbird, which are both straight. There is a “patch” of feathers on the forehead, known as rectal bristles;<sup>50</sup> these feathers cover the base of the bill, seemingly to protect the nostrils. This structure does not appear on a woodpecker or a hummingbird, but is a morphological feature exhibited on all Greater Antillean crows.

Given that early inhabitants of the Caribbean are said to have originated in South America and parts of Central America where the species is absent, little information has been found on symbolism of the crow. However, in some societies the bird is seen as a messenger of the gods, an oracle or a symbol of the spiritual side of death. This idea leads one to consider Helms’s suggestion that “tree zemis . . . were spirits of chiefly ancestors”<sup>51</sup> with “at least two interpretations [to] be offered for the significance of the shine or polish produced by surface enrichment techniques: one deals with the attraction of external matter and the other with the exposure of internal matter”.<sup>52</sup> Oliver expresses this in philosophical terms:

In life the head of a human being was the repository of his living soul . . . The eyes of the ancestor cemí idols, as well as many other cemí icons, were covered with gold sheets (. . . or other shiny materials), because these are the liminal orifices – windows to the soul – allowing the soul to ‘see’ the world outside and – for the outside world to reach the inner soul.<sup>53</sup>

As the Bird Man figure is without a receptacle for *cohoba*, it is not likely that it was directly related to shamanic activities, but stood upright, as Loven suggests, “for worshipping”.<sup>54</sup> The



*Boinayel, the Rain Giver*

human elements of hands, feet, teeth, ears and male genitals combined with those of a bird – the prominent beak, the placement of the eyes, the “patch”, and the lack of a navel – reveal a complex interplay of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic features which, if studied in depth, may help to unravel the interpretation that this deity had for the people who crafted it.

Considering that the three figures found in the cave are said to be important artefacts of Taíno culture, these observations seem to indicate that the Bird Man may have been an ‘ancestral’ cemí. However, this cannot be verified with the present state of knowledge. Are the two figures – the Bird Man and the ‘splayed leg’ figure – ancestor deities? In fact, they are diametrically opposed in stance – the ‘splayed leg’ figure stands with legs wide apart and hands and arms tight against the body and with tears coursing from its eyes, while the Bird Man stands with hands and arms extended wide, with legs carved as if conjoined.<sup>55</sup> One other suggestion may be considered. Pané refers to two cemís located in a cave in Hispaniola

that were valued very highly: “When it did not rain, they say they would go in there to visit them, and it would rain at once. And one cemí they called Boinayel, and the other Márohu.” Pané interprets Márohu to mean “Without-Clouds” or “Clear-Weather”.<sup>56</sup>

It is possible that the Jamaican crow, with its sociable nature, distinctive voice (almost human-like) and ready presence around Taíno settlements, became the chosen bird to ‘liberate’ a cemí, in a pose – perhaps with ‘extended wings’, or with an all-embracing, benevolent gesture – that could, as Oliver suggests, “be one of the central or primary idols for veneration”<sup>57</sup> in Jamaican Taíno cosmology. ❖

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