

# YUCATAN CHANNEL and TRADE<sup>1</sup>

By Ronald Canter

## *Abstract:*

*This article summarizes some of the evidence for the passage of Maya trade items and ideas eastward, and examines factors affecting canoe navigation across both the Yucatan Channel and the Straits of Florida. The recent tracing of jade artifacts in Antigua to parent mines in Guatemala indicates that there was past trade across the Yucatan Channel. Additional references document trade between Cuba and Florida.*

The Yucatan Channel separates Yucatan from the western tip of Cuba. From Punta Sur on Isla de Mujeres to Cabo San Antonio is 194 km, a daunting crossing made worse by the Yucatan Current surging between capes. The Yucatan Current is an “intense jet reaching 2m/sec” at its maximum. It oscillates back and forth in the Yucatan Channel between Cabo Catoche and Cabo San Antonio in Cuba. Its speed is usually fastest closer to Cabo Catoche, with a second maximum in the center sometimes (Badan, 1998). The Cozumel Current is a feeder.

For coastal paddlers the Yucatan Current is not a problem unless one wanders too far offshore, past the edge of the Campeche Bank. Boats caught in the current might get a free ride to the Florida Keys, or to the endlessly circling gyre of the Loop Current in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico. The crossing from Yucatan to Cuba is the more dangerous since the target is smaller, the low, narrow point of Cabo San Antonio. On the return it is enough to just hit some part of the east coast of Yucatan

Nonetheless, a small but steadily accumulating body of evidence suggests direct, though sporadic, trade between the Maya in Yucatan and the Taino in Cuba. There is evidence of indirect trade of Maya articles east through the Taino cultural area, even as far as Antigua. The small amount of evidence suggests sporadic and infrequent contact, rather than sustained.

Some cultural and trade goods occasionally did cross the channel, whether in Maya or Taino canoes is uncertain. A large cake of beeswax, found in easternmost Cuba on Columbus’s first voyage, would have come from Yucatan, the only logical source (Columbus, 1493, pg 161). The common honeybee was unknown in the Americas before contact. Only the stingless bees *Meliponini beecheii* and *M. Yucatanica* were suitable for honey production, and the Maya were virtually the only beekeepers. Bartolome de Las Casa, in comments on Columbus’s “Journal of the First Voyage”, noted that the people of Cuba did not keep bees or produce beeswax themselves. Las Casas speculated that the wax had come from a wrecked Maya trading canoe. Given the currents, this seems unlikely, but not impossible.

More significant is Pendergast’s find of a Taino vomit ladle in a grave at the Classic Period site of Altun Ha, Belize. Even if it could float, it could not have drifted

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[http://research.famsi.org/aztlan/aztlan\\_journal.php](http://research.famsi.org/aztlan/aztlan_journal.php)

across the Yucatan Channel. Anything caught in the Yucatan Current is bound for Florida or beyond. The ladle would have come via canoe (Graham, 2002).

Dacey Taylor and Chris Jones have investigated Taino ball courts. The Mesoamerican ball game seems to have leapt the Yucatan Channel in the Classic and quickly spread eastward from island to island. At La Aleta in the Dominican Republic there is monumental architecture, a ball court, and a cenote containing sacrifices (Beeker, 1999). On Puerto Rico, Dr. Jones found parallel-walled courts near Utuado and at Tibes, 10 courts at each site. All were more recent than 650 AD, and were called “batay”, “a word that seems to appear in Classic Maya inscriptions in reference to ball playing” (Jones, Taylor, 2001).

Most remarkable is the recent tracing by mineralogist George Harlow of Preclassic jadeite “axes” found on the Island of Antigua back to their parent mines - in Guatemala. Antigua is nearly 3000 km east of the Motagua valley as the crow flies, and 3500 km island hopping via Cuba, Hispanola, etc. Rocks don’t float. Only by canoe could they have made their way across the entire Caribbean (Petit, 2006).

A unique and valuable trade item tends to become more valuable as it is traded farther from the source. The incentive is to profit by continuing to trade it until one of three things happens: an owner can’t bear to part with it, it reaches a cultural area where it is not valued, or it reaches the bitter end of the trade route. For the jadeite axes found on Antigua, the second and third may have both applied. Antigua was the far eastern edge of the Taino cultural area and of the Caribbean island chain.

Maurice Ries reportedly found a small amount of “Maya sherds and obsidian implements on the western tip of Cuba” (William R. Coe II, 1957, pg 280). If a Maya entrepot ever existed in Cuba, even for a short time, a logical place to look would be in the Los Colorados Archipelago off the north coast of western Cuba. Any island mound groups would be modest and possibly partly submerged, something like Wild Cane or Frenchmans Cays in Belize. If they exist, they have probably not been noted, or just assumed to be a minor Taino or Guana-Hatabey site. It is equally possible such a site does not exist, but it would be instructive to check.

Larry Koenig, a sea kayaker, has plans to complete his circumnavigation of the Gulf of Mexico by paddling the last leg from Yucatan to Florida. He had originally thought to cross the Yucatan Channel and then coast along the north shore of Cuba. Instead he plans to ride the Yucatan Current and Gulf Stream directly from Isla Mujeres to the Dry Tortugas.

It has nothing to do with politics. He calculates that it would take three days either to ferry 200 km across the Yucatan Straits to Cabo San Antonio in Cuba, or three days to ride with the currents 600 km all the way to the Dry Tortugas 110 km from Key West. The second choice is simply more efficient. Koenig’s estimates seem informed, considering that he and Arthur Hebert have kayaked the Gulf Coast from Key West to

Isla Mujeres. In 1998 Arthur Hebert spent 20 days at sea paddling 900 km from Isla Mujeres straight across the Gulf to New Orleans (Hebert, 1998).

A dangerous three-day sea crossing requires a stronger driver than symbolic games and vomit ladles. What the main object of Maya-Taino trade might have been is unclear, but the 18<sup>th</sup> century Florida-Cuba trade might offer some clues. William Bartram listed trade goods moving each way: deerskins, furs, dried fish, beeswax, honey, (from introduced honeybees), and bear's oil from Florida, and "spirituous liquors, coffee, sugar, and tobacco" from Cuba. All are perishables that, except for liquor bottles, would leave no long-term trace at either end (Bartram 1791, pg 193).

In trying to locate the source of a note that the Maya traders took three days to cross the channel to Cuba, the author revisited several other citations often used to claim that the Spanish in Cuba had reports of Yucatan before it was located by Europeans. On his fourth voyage, Columbus did collect an unequivocal reference to Yucatan prior to its European discovery, but not from Cuba. Maya sea traders, whom he met in the Bay Islands of Honduras, clearly indicated that their homeland was west. Columbus, for unexplained reasons, sailed east and missed the chance to explore the "Land of Deer and Turkey".

An oft-cited "mainland ten days journey away", from Columbus's first voyage, doesn't seem to mean much. Columbus understood "that from there to the mainland would be a sail of ten days by reason of the notion he had derived from the chart or picture which the Florentine had sent him" (Columbus, 1493, pg 131). "There" was in eastern Cuba, and no mainland was remotely ten days away by native standards. Yucatan was about 1400 km west, and Florida about 900 km west and north. The "ten days" appears to be a combination of poor work by his Taino translator and of preconceived notions on his part. Columbus later noted that, unaided by currents, an average day's canoe travel was 7 leagues (about 30 km), which sounds about right for daylight coastal travel.

On the other hand, direct trade between Cuba and mainland Florida seems well documented for the period before and after Spanish contact, and probably began much earlier. The Spanish in Cuba soon had vague references from Native Americans to "lands to the northward" which inspired Ponce de Leon to go in search of the Isle of Bimini – not Florida.

There is a telling reference in Herrera's account of the discovery of Florida indicating that the people of the Lucayos (the Bahamas) were already well aware of the mainland. Thinking that Florida was an island, De Leon and his companions were confused by the people of Florida each giving the name of their own province when asked what land it was. The Bahamian guides, whom the Spanish had brought along, sorted it out for them. "It was called Cautio, a name that the Lucayos Indians gave to that land because the people of it covered certain parts of their body with palm leaves" (Herrera, 1513, pg 22).

After leaving Florida, De Leon sailed “southwest a quarter west” from the Dry Tortugas “with the intention of discovering on the way some islands of which the Indians that they carried gave them information”. Sailing west of south compensated for the Gulf Stream setting them eastward, and the bearing took them straight to Cuba, though to a part not yet explored by the Spanish (Herrera, 1513, pg 20-21).

Cornell University's ornithology site on the Ivory-billed Woodpecker references the Precolumbian Florida-Cuba trade. "Early explorers noted a considerable trade in live birds between peoples of Cuba and peninsular Florida. Native Americans placed great value on these (Ivory-billed) woodpeckers." Jackson speculated that the Ivory-billed Woodpecker might have entered Cuba through this trade (Jackson, 2004).

Several Timucuan words are Taino loan words. Not being a linguist, I will just quote. The source is Julian Granberry, *A Grammar and Dictionary of the Timucua Language*, The University of Alabama Press, 1993. The specific words are hinino (from Taino hynino 'tobacco') and casino (*Ilex vomitoria*). It has that three-syllable shape that Taino words tend to have. There is another Timucua term for *Ilex*, ipopi, which derives from the native term ipo ‘to charm or bewitch, to take medicine’. *Ilex* was the basis of the quintessential ceremonial beverage in the Southeast, the "black drink," (still) used as a purgative to cleanse the body before ceremonies.

It is also the secret ingredient in Coca Cola, which started out in Georgia as a medicinal and then became a refreshment, like Smilax (*zarza parilla*), used as a medicinal (for venereal disease) in the 16th century and which later became the "sasparilla" famously drunk by wimps in Western movies” (Hopkins, 2006).

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, at Talahasochte, far up the Suwanee River in northern Florida, William Bartram witnessed the return of an 850 km trade voyage by canoe from Cuba (1700 km round trip), and heard of others to the Bahamas. Their cypress canoes could hold 20 to 30 warriors. The route mostly hugged the sheltered west coast of Florida but ended with the most dangerous and difficult part - a 150 km crossing of the choppy Florida Straits, swept by the powerful current of the Gulf Stream. The trip is less challenging than one from Yucatan to Cuba but still serious. The crossing does have the advantage of large “targets” on either side of the straits: the line of the Florida Keys to the north and the coast of Cuba to the south. Paddlers would still have to angle westward to avoid being swept far to the east while crossing.

In April of 2006 a 15 m dugout canoe was found in the Apalachicola River, in northern Florida. The canoe is not ancient (only about 200 years old) but the design is (Ensley, 2006). It is a pitpan, distinguished by projecting platform ends used as stances for poling. Except for size, its design is identical to ones used from the Preclassic to the present on both Caribbean and Central American waters. Of 55 Archaic canoes examined from Newnans Lake, Florida, four showed similarities to the pitpan design, though not fully developed. “The ends of the Newnans Lake canoes are upward sloping and tapered, and some have a slight overhanging platform - typical end shapes formerly thought to be associated only with more recent canoes” (Wheeler, 2003).

Finally, there are cultural similarities suggesting the possibility of diffusion of some Maya cultural values into Florida and perhaps beyond. A flat karstland, with sinkhole springs, central Florida is geologically the twin of northern Yucatan. At the time of European contact, arguably the most advanced of the Mississippian societies was the Calusa state in southern Florida. With planned towns, artificial canals and islands, temple mounds, sophisticated art, and a kingdom the size of Ireland, it was as civilized as many Mesoamerican polities (Arrington, 1997). On the minus side, not one Maya artifact has been found in Florida, and two large sea crossings separate it from Yucatan. Without finding something specifically made in the “Land of Deer and Turkey”, the transmission of Maya concepts to Florida, either directly or via the Taino, remains only a tantalizing possibility.

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