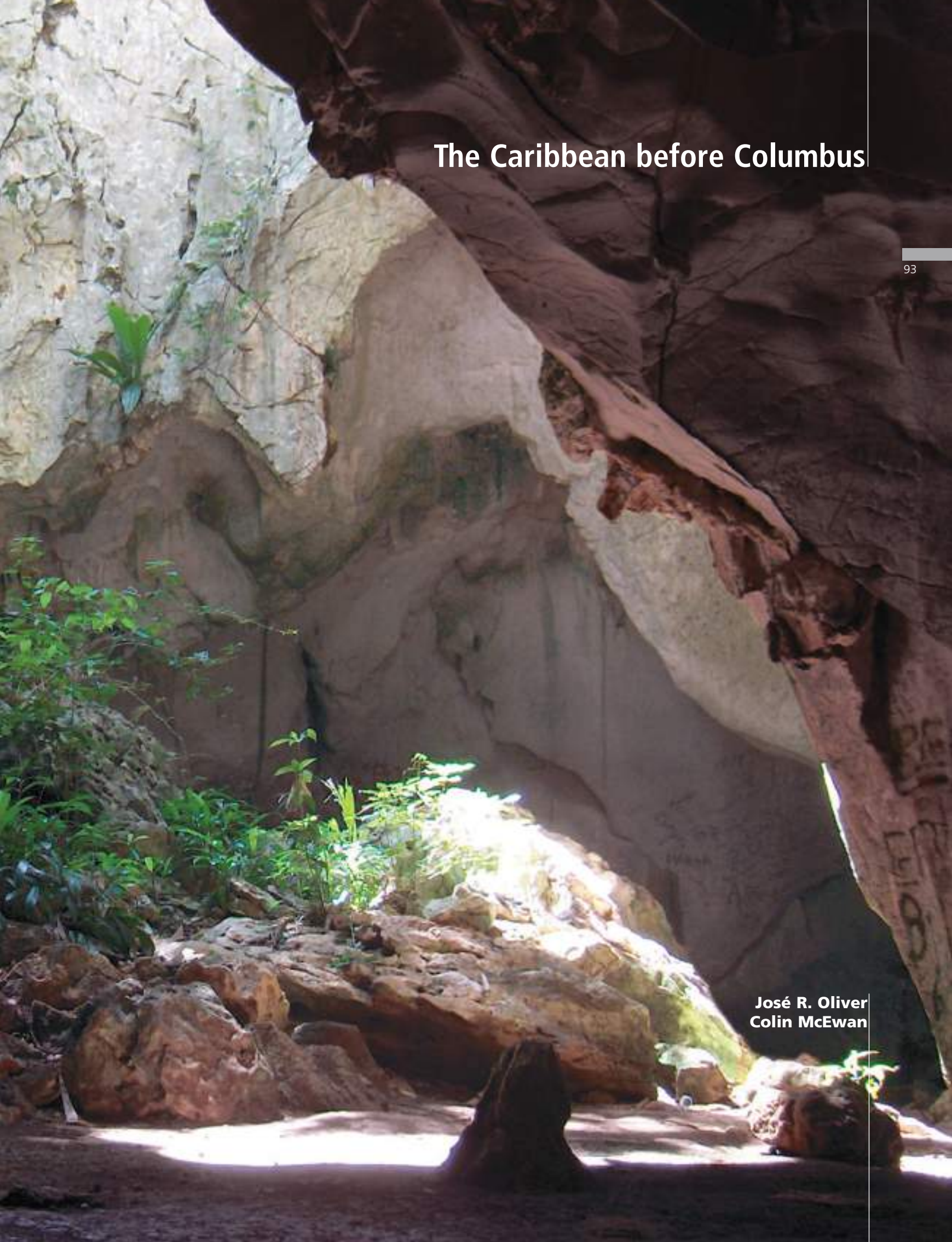




The Caribbean before Columbus

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José R. Oliver
Colin McEwan



A new travelling exhibition, whose tour started in early June at the Barbier-Mueller Museum in Barcelona, unveils a range of rare, visually arresting religious icons and other objects fashioned by Taíno (800–1520) artisans in the Caribbean. The exhibition and accompanying catalogue (**fig. 2**) offer a tantalising glimpse into the animate universe inhabited by Amerindian cultures before the arrival of Columbus in 1492.

On this occasion the Barbier-Mueller Museum, Barcelona brings together for the first time rare wooden sculptures and a range of other unusual religious objects from the collections of the British Museum (**fig. 1, 4, 6 and 8**), the Museo de America in Madrid and the Barbier-Mueller collection (**fig. 3**). These objects were all made by the culture first encountered by Columbus on his exploratory voyages

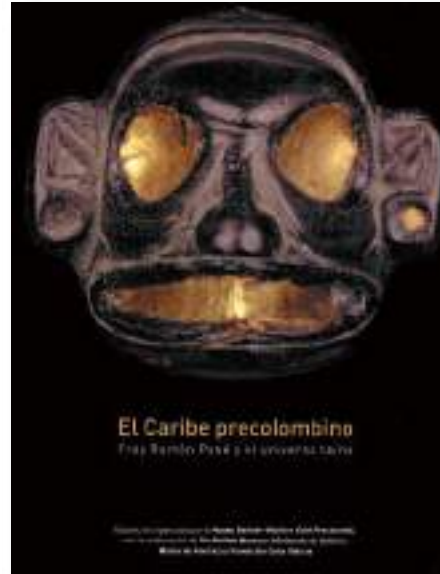
Title pages: *View of the Cueva (cave) del Lucerno, Juana Diaz (Puerto Rico).*
Photo José R. Oliver.

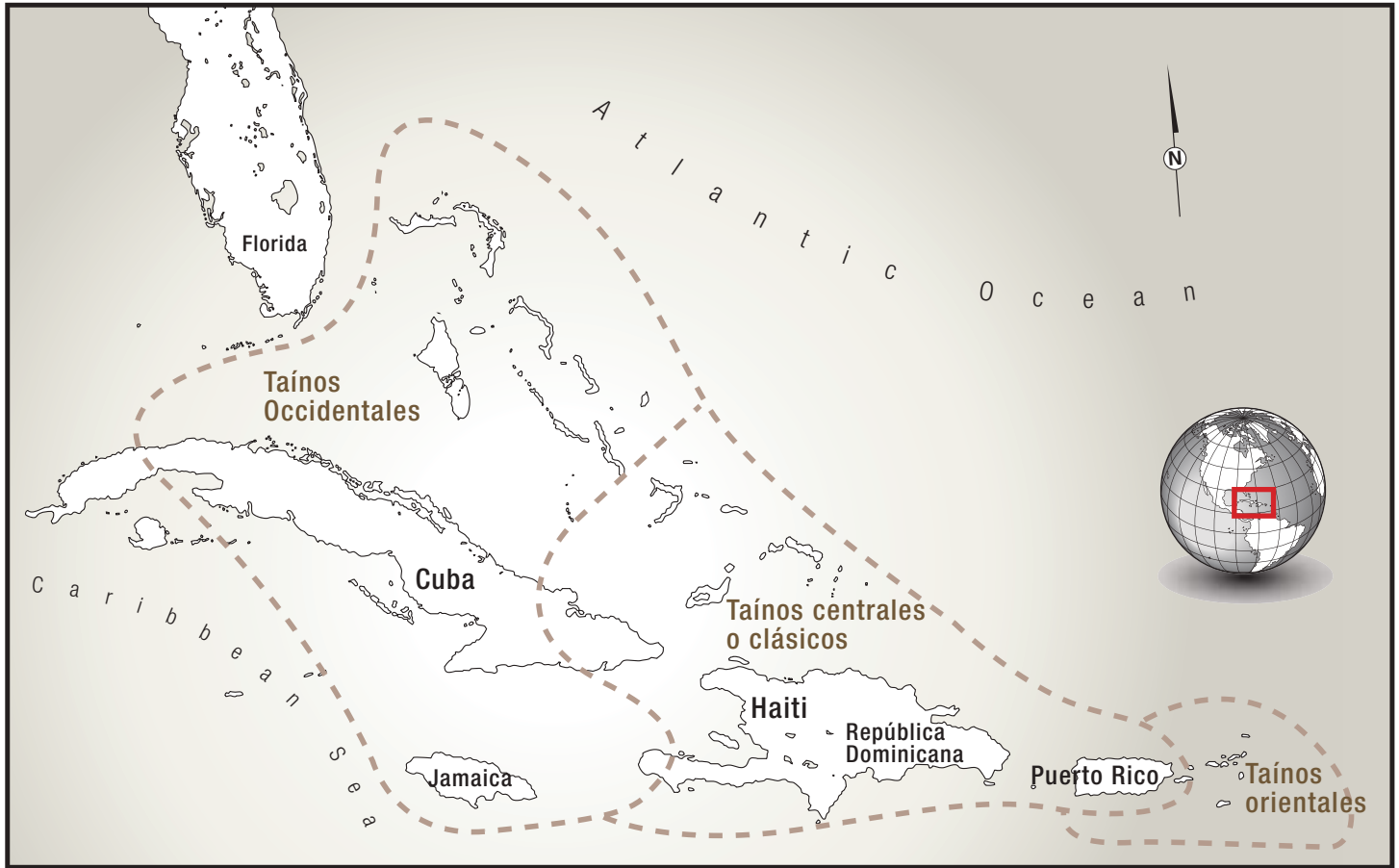


Fig. 1. Wooden seat dúho. Taíno. Hispaniola. 9th–16th century. Height: 22 cm, width: 44 cm. BM Am 1949,22.118. British Museum.

Fig. 2. Cover of the exhibition catalogue.

Fig. 3. Amulet-pendants in calcite. Taíno. Santo Domingo. Greater Antilles. 9th-16th century. Height: 9.8 cm and 7.3 cm. Acquired by Josef Mueller from Charles Rattou before 1939. Formerly P. de Givenchy Collection. Barbier-Mueller Museum.





to the Caribbean. The cultural and linguistic roots of this culture, now known as the Taíno, can be traced back some 1 500 years earlier to the adjacent South American mainland. All the island cultures of the Greater Antilles including Puerto Rico, Hispaniola (later to become divided between Haiti and the Dominican Republic), Jamaica and eastern Cuba (**map**) – had developed into hierarchical societies known as *cacicazgos* (chiefdoms) led by a cacique (chief). They shared many similarities in material culture, subsistence economy, religion and cosmology, but marked differences in political complexity also emerged as the most powerful Taíno chiefdoms began to coalesce around 1000 AD, especially on the larger islands such as Hispaniola. As a consequence of the initial Spanish contact and later European conquest, which brought a deadly combination of contagious disease and enslavement, this culture was to suffer a catastrophic collapse.

The exhibition and the book begin with the remarkable story of the Catalan Fray Ramon Pané, a laic hermit who trained at the monastery of San Jerome of La Murtra close to Barcelona, and who was among the party that accompanied Columbus on his second voyage to the Caribbean. Pané's journey across Hispaniola and his brief but absorbing account of Taíno religious beliefs and practices mark him out as the first ethnographer of the Americas. His descriptions offer key insights into Taíno social and political organisation as well as the Taíno religious universe. Taíno caciques ruled by surrounding themselves with icons that faithful followers believed to be imbued with supernatural power called *cemí* (meaning 'sweet' essence or power), similar to the Oceanian concept of *mana*. The *cemí* (pronounced "saymee") could manifest itself in natural



Fig. 4. Wooden seat dúho. Taíno. Puerto Plata. Dominican Republic. 9th–16th century. Height: 72.5 cm. BM Am 9753. British Museum.



objects such as a curiously shaped stone, a particular tree or perhaps in the form of a stalagmite in a cave. If it revealed its presence to a human being, a *behique* (shaman) might then be called to perform a ceremony involving the inhalation of *cohoba*, a powerful hallucinogenic snuff made from the pulverised seeds of a shrub (*Anadenathera peregrina*). This made it possible to establish contact between the everyday world and the spirit beings. The chosen object would then speak to the shaman and reveal its identity and personhood including his/her names and titles, gender, social rank, genealogy, and the specific powers it wielded. It did instruct the *behique* to build a *caney* (large house) in which to reside, to cultivate a garden, and perhaps indicate how s/he was to be venerated, and when to conduct *cohoba* ceremonies. Crucially the *cemí* as a powerful but essentially invisible being also revealed the material image or body he or she should have.

Cemis were capable of causing good as well as evil. The power of each *cemí* could be quite specific, such as the power to cause beneficial rainfall, disastrous drought, or unleash tropical storms and hurricanes. Others had the power to make crops grow or aid women during birthing. Another class of *cemis* contained the skull and bones of dead humans and related to the cult of the ancestors.

Like human society, the *cemí* idols were themselves stratified and ranked. The most powerful, highest ranking and prestigious ones were entrusted to the

Fig. 5. The royal condor with its majestic posture. Photo Hedgehog House, Tui de Roi.

care of caciques as their 'owners'. All *cemís* were, by definition, powerful; however, over their lifetime their reputation and prestige would vary considerably as a result of the deeds and impact their powers had on people and nature. The powerful ones would be those revered objects that had been around long enough to accrue storied biographies unique to each *cemí* icon and reflecting the deeds of their owners. Legends would be built around them. Upon the death of a cacique, these icons would be inherited by the cacique's heirs or gifted to foreign political allies. Some icons would be buried with him and taken out of circulation. Other *cemís* were stolen by competing cacique factions in times of crises, especially during the Spanish Conquest. As a result, many were hidden, often in secluded caves (**title pages**). In Taíno mythology it was from a cave, Caçiba-jagua (literally 'hole-stone-black'), that humanity emerged and where ordinary human beings would ultimately be buried. Such caves were likewise the abodes of *cemí* images and symbols carved or painted in the walls where some of the *cohoba* ceremonies invoking the *cemí* spirits would take place.

A number of the idols in the exhibition form a key part of the ceremonial paraphernalia used in the *cohoba* ceremony. The *dúho* recovered from the Dominican Republic (**fig. 1**) is an effigy seat carved from a single block of hardwood (*Guaiaacum officinalis*). Its gold (*caona*) inlay is strategically placed at key joints and body orifices, enabling this anthropomorphic *cemí* to gaze into the invisible world. Sitting on such a powerful *cemí*, the cacique would face yet another powerful *cemí* idol over which a platter or tray containing *cohoba* powder would be placed. The 'canopied' wooden idol (**fig. 6**) depicts a bird, possibly the Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias adoxa*), that



Fig. 6. Sculpture representing a Great Blue Heron that stands atop a turtle. Wood. Taíno. Greater Antilles. 9th–16th century. Height: 65.5 cm. BM Am, MI.168. British Museum.



Fig. 7. The Taíno were inspired by fauna as suggested by this petroglyph showing a long-beak bird (probably a heron). Puerto Rico. Photo José R. Oliver.

stands atop a turtle. In Taíno myths, herons and woodpeckers are characters who, by pecking a vulva on wooden proto-women, transformed them into fecund 'wives'. Surviving Arawakan and Carib myths in Guiana also tell of a husband-bird (heron, egret, or woodpecker) who, with his beak, picked-up his frog-wife (or turtle, fish) to ascend to the sky world. The Taíno bird-turtle *cemí* idol, with a hallucinogen platter on top (symbolising the sky or 'heavenly' realm), enables the cacique sitting on the *dúho* (ground) to access and engage the *cemís*-as-visions in their cosmic dimension. The imposing figure of the standing male (**fig. 8**) was most likely the centrepiece in a *cohoba* ceremony and the one that would be invoked to 'join' the cacique in his hallucinatory travel. It is carved from the slow-growing hardwood *guayacán* (*Guaiaacum officinalis*) and highly valued for its durability. Its jet black colour is associated with the domain of the dead spirits (*opiya* or *opía*) of the ancestors and with the darkness of caves. This personage is likely a *cemí*-ancestor; his erect, exaggerated penis may suggest his fecundity and prowess as a progenitor. His eyes with streaming tear-lines and clenched teeth could represent the physiological consequences brought about by ingesting the hallucinogen.

In all important decisions affecting good government, a cacique would call his trusted advisors for a council meeting in his *caney* (large house). He would perform the *cohoba* ceremony in order to divine whether a given policy or action should or not be implemented, such as whether to go to war, wed his daughter to this or that ally, or when to best harvest manioc. Once out of hallucinatory trance, he would recount what the *cemí* revealed to the assembled elite (*nitaino*) and the statements would be vigorously debated. Shamans, more preoccupied with affairs of the soul and body, could also lead *cohoba* ceremonies which might take place either in the *caney* or within caves as enclosed, private spaces. Other Taíno *cemí* icons were intended for public display and were carved on large

monoliths demarcating the central plazas (*batey*) of civic-ceremonial centres such as Caguana, Puerto Rico.

The caciques and shamans surrounded themselves with an array of powerful *cemí*-icons that enabled them to exercise religious authority as well as political power. These compelling icons are not merely objects of mediation, but full participants and causal agents in the turbulent world of Taíno politics before, and even sometimes well after, Columbus arrived in the Caribbean. The Taíno, fearing the destruction of their images by Spaniards, often hid them in caves, which is why so few have survived to this day.

BIOGRAPHIES

Colin McEwan is Head of the Americas Section in the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas at the British Museum, London. He received his Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2004 based on fieldwork undertaken at Agua Blanca, Ecuador. He has excavated and published widely on the art and iconography of the pre-Columbian Americas. He is the author/editor of *Ancient Mexico* in the British Museum (1994), *Patagonia: Natural History, Prehistory and Ethnography at the Uttermost End of the Earth* (1997), *Precolumbian Gold: Technology and Iconography* (2000), *Unknown Amazon: Culture in Nature in Ancient Brazil* (2001); *Turquoise Mosaics from Mexico* (2006); *Ancient American Art in Detail* (in press).

Dr **José R. Oliver** is a Lecturer in Latin American Archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology-University College London and an Associate Fellow at the Institute for the Study of the Americas-London University. He teaches courses on the Andean Civilisations, Amazonian and Caribbean archaeology. He has conducted numerous archaeological investigations in Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic. He is interested in the formation of pre-Columbian ethnicities, such as the Taíno, and how these are expressed and negotiated through material culture.

Fig. 8. Anthropomorphic statue in wood. Taíno. Montaña Carpenters. Jamaica. 9th-16th century. Height: 104 cm. *BM Am* 1997, Q. 3. British Museum.

