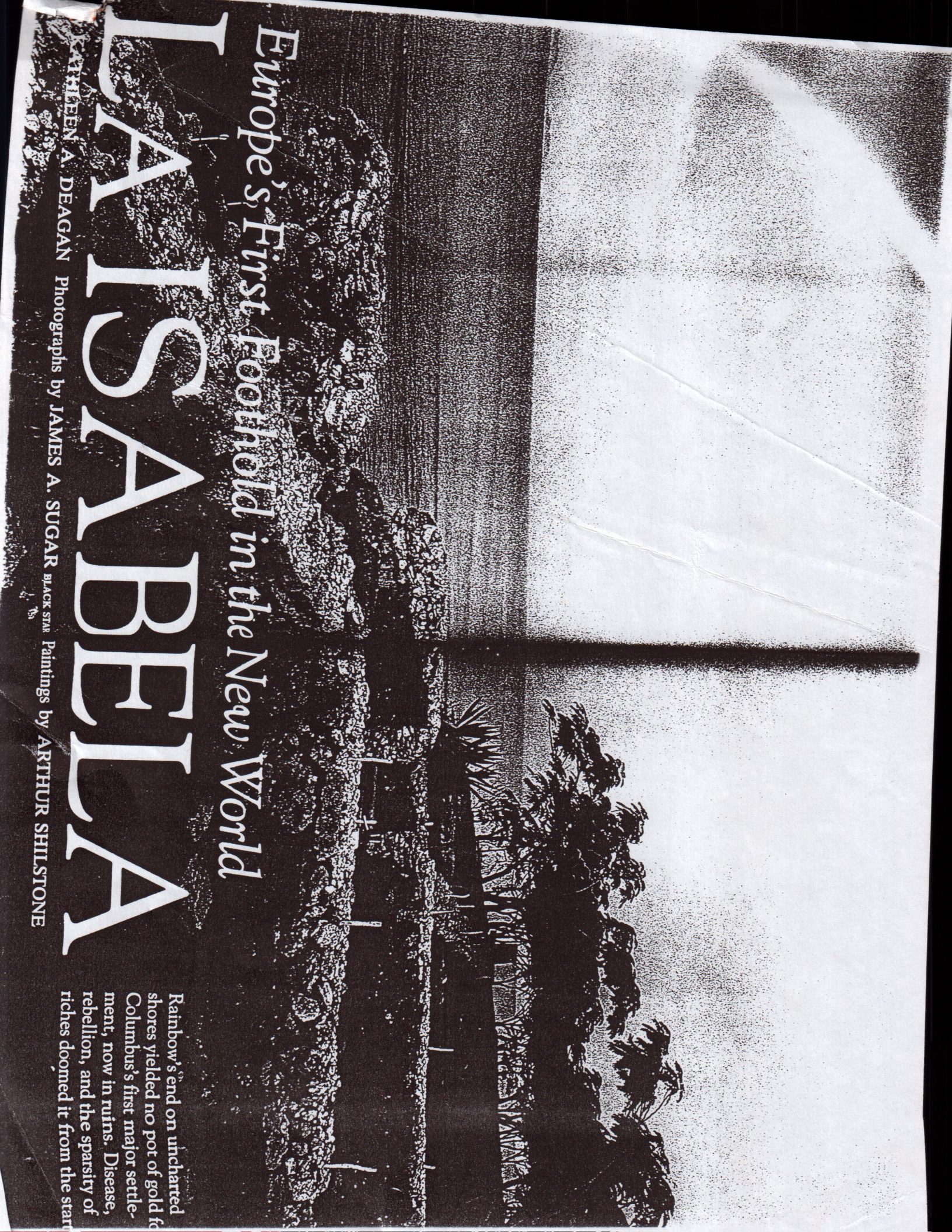


*Europe's First Foothold in the New World*

# LAISABEIA

KATHLEEN A. DEAGAN Photographs by JAMES A. SUGAR BLACK STAR Paintings by ARTHUR SHILSTONE

Rainbow's end on uncharted shores yielded no pot of gold for Columbus's first major settlement, now in ruins. Disease, rebellion, and the sparsity of riches doomed it from the start



**I**t was a spectacle unlike any ever seen west of the Azores.

Trumpet blasts sounded through mountain valleys. Drums echoed. Banners of Spain and the church rippled above a helmeted, armored parade of adventurers flanked by ferocious hunting dogs.

Perhaps most terrifying of all were men on horses—half man, half beast to the eyes of Taino Indians along their route.

In the endless search for gold that characterized his exploration of the Indies, Christopher Columbus in the spring of 1494 led his men from La Isabela, the first European town in America, to the interior of Española (now Hispaniola).

His impressive Grand March “fairly astounded” the natives and convinced them that the Europeans “were mighty enough to attack and hurt them,” wrote contemporary historian Bartolomé de las Casas.

Yet this triumphant march into the mountains was but a flickering moment of glory in the short, miserable history of La Isabela.

The town had been founded in the wake of calamity: On his first voyage, Columbus had left 39 men on Española at La Navidad, a fort hastily erected near the wreck of his flagship, the *Santa María*.

Returning from Spain on his second voyage in 1493, Columbus found the fort burned and all his men dead. Taino Indians told him some had died of disease; others had been killed battling hostile natives.

The La Navidad debacle



sowed seeds of distrust that were to plague Columbus's dealings with the Taino and poison his attempts to govern the island he claimed for Spain.

Though distraught at the loss of La Navidad, Columbus stuck stubbornly to his mission. He ordered a search for any gold his ill-fated sailors might have buried. He then set off to find a more hospitable location to establish a permanent settlement.

The fleet of 17 assorted ships, crammed with 1,200 or more men, sailed eastward along the coastline. Battling contrary winds, they took about a month to travel just seventy miles. They finally anchored in a lovely bay, open to the northwest. It was fed by a river and was pierced by a promontory Columbus described as a “well-situated rock” on which to build.

Visible in mountains nearby was a pass leading to what the explorer believed was an interior glistening with gold.

Almost immediately, construction began on La Isabela, named for Spain's queen and Columbus's benefactor. Before its abandonment, the town would function barely five years and sorely test its founder, the Viceroy and Governor of the Indies and Admiral of the Ocean Sea.



KATHLEEN A. DEAGAN, curator of anthropology at the Florida Museum of Natural History, has excavated Spanish colonial sites for nearly 20 years. She heads a University of Florida team that located La Isabela's residential area in 1989 and has cataloged more than 1.5 million objects from the site.

## The Admiral's fragile empire

"A most beautiful island," wrote Columbus of Española. After opening a route inland with his Grand March, he again set sail to explore (map inset). Coasting Cuba, he was convinced it was the Asian mainland and made his men swear in agreement—under threat of having their tongues sliced out.

In 1496 Columbus sent a letter from Spain ordering his brother Bartholomew to cut through to Española's south coast and establish a new town, which became Santo Domingo.

Continued expansion spelled disaster for the Taino, who were soon decimated by the Spaniards and their diseases. Taino culture survives in ornamental ceramic figures (top left) and carved shell beads (left).

Traces of the island's Taino-European-African heritage echo in the faces of Estella Maria Peña and her granddaughters (far left), who live in El Castillo, a village near the La Isabela site.



Brilliant splash of silvery beads (opposite) greeted 20th-century archaeologists excavating La Isabela's storehouse. These tiny globules of mercury were brought to the settlement by Columbus.

Mercury, an essential element in the smelting of gold, was stored in wooden casks, which were probably left in the storehouse after La Isabela was abandoned. As the wood rotted, the liquid metal flowed into the soil, to be discovered and

collected 500 years later by José F. M. Cruxent of Venezuela's Universidad Nacional Experimental Francisco de Miranda. He has been excavating the site for the National Park Service of the Dominican Republic since 1987.

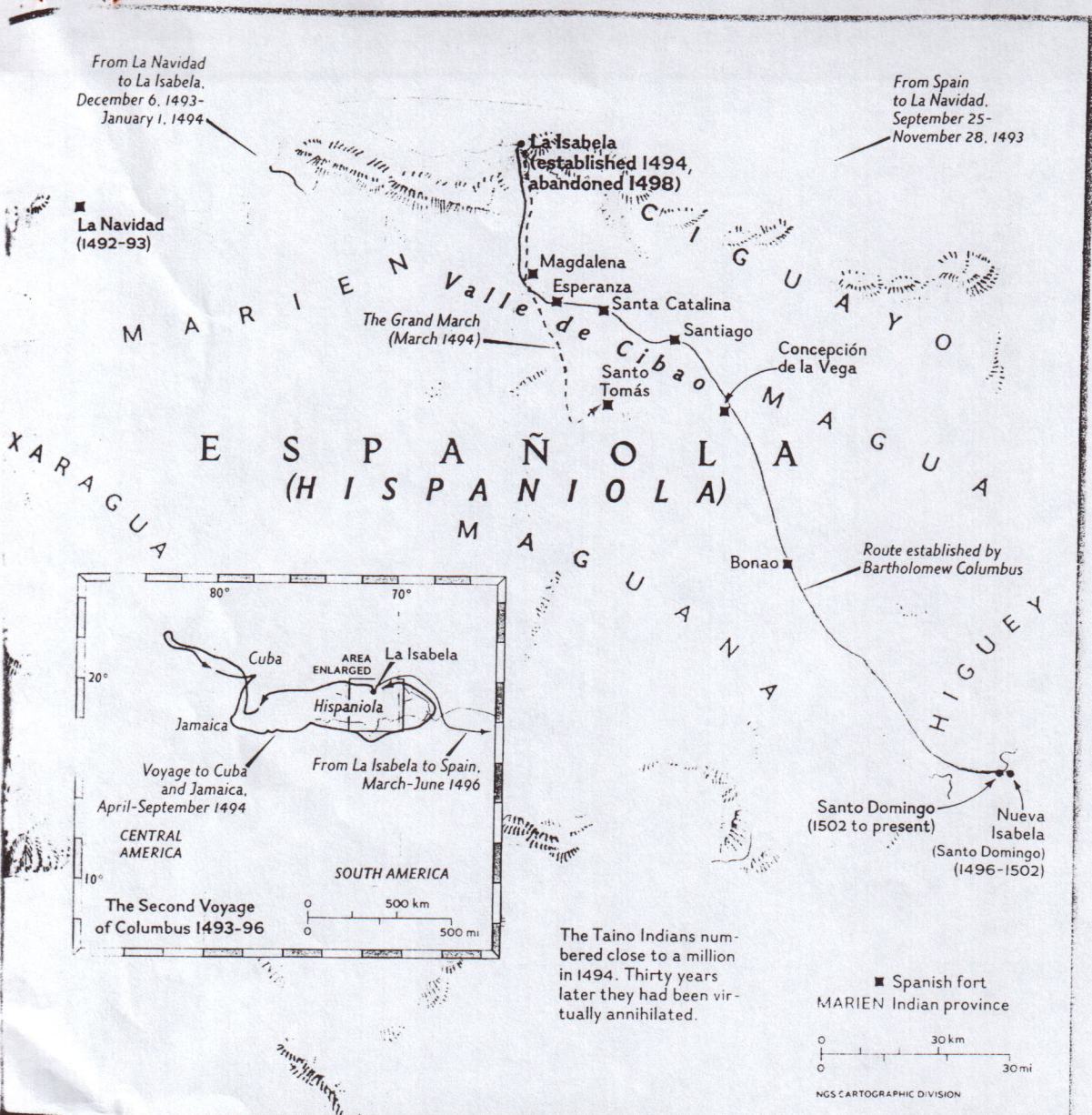
For Professor Cruxent—and for me, leading a University of Florida archaeological team that joined him in 1989—the shimmering droplets reflect the hopes and failures of Columbus's first town.

One of the early parties sent to find gold reported it "in more than fifty streamlets and rivers," wrote the physician who accompanied Columbus's second voyage, Alvarez Chanca.

"Never yet, since the creation, has such a thing been seen or read of; for on the return of the ships from their next voyage, they will be able to carry back such a quantity of gold as will fill with amazement all who hear of it."

Despite such promising

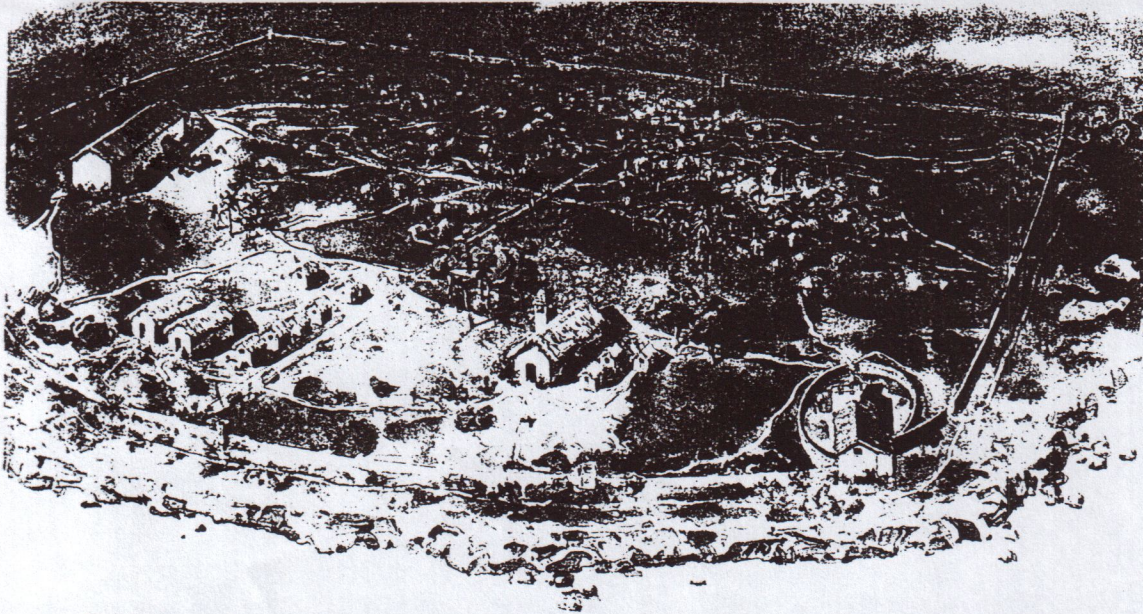
*National Geographic, January 1990*



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accounts and a few tantalizing Taino gold artifacts, Columbus's expeditions into the region around La Isabela produced little gold to enrich the coffers of Spain.

It was a bitter disappointment for Columbus's men, many of them veteran Spanish soldiers from the conquest of the Moors. They had been inspired by the Admiral's vow to present King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella with "as much gold as they need."



the others have been spared by the centuries—and from an unfortunate mistake some 40 years ago. Dominican Republic leader Generalissimo Rafael Trujillo had ordered the area prepared for the arrival of dignitaries.

As part of the cleanup, tractors accidentally pushed parts of the site into the sea. Fortunately for Columbus's house, its position at the edge of the cliff protected it from the tractor's blade.

Tiles from the Admiral's roof, stacked near the ruin by archaeologists (below), are linked to a major find across the bay. There, Cruxent excavated a beehive-shaped kiln used to make bricks, tiles, and pottery.



That discovery shattered centuries-old beliefs about Columbus's town. The kiln and the artifacts around it revealed that, in addition to the main site, Columbus established another settlement nearby. Before the kiln was found, researchers believed that European ceramics had not been produced in the New World until decades later.

An artist's conception of La Isabela (above), based on years of excavations, shows Columbus's house dominating the shore, far right. To the left stands the colony's church, where the first holy bell rang in the Americas. Beyond it are houses thought to belong to expedition officers, a hospital, and, at far left, the 113-foot-long storehouse.

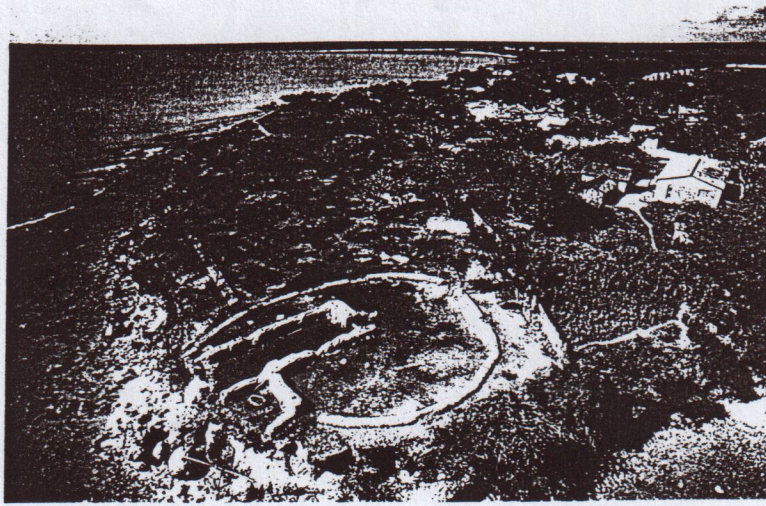
At the rear of the site, excavations funded by the Society, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the University of Florida have revealed La Isabela's residential area, along with refuse worth more than gold to archaeologists.

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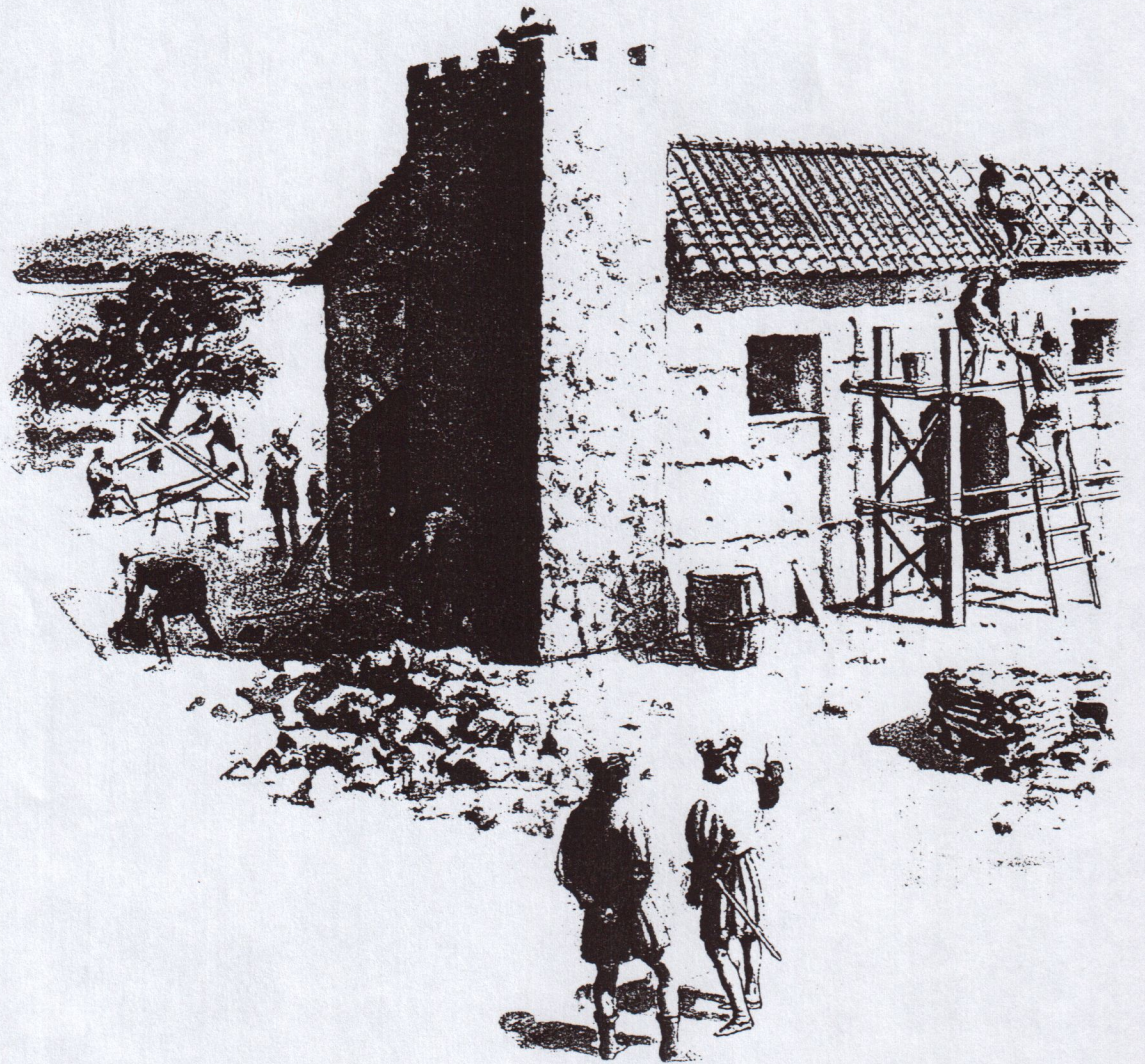
## After 500 years, stones yield the tale of Columbus's "well-situated rock."



Standing watch on La Isabela's shore, the remnants of the Admiral's house—America's oldest surviving European construction—lie encircled by a wall (left) that was uncovered by Professor Cruxent.

Experts had long assumed the modest 18-by-48-foot home had been built entirely of cut stone, but recent discoveries show the long walls were made of hard-packed earth, coated inside and out with thick lime plaster.

The west wall has been lost to erosion of the cliff below it, but



## America's welcome: disaster and death

“One-third of our people have fallen sick within the last four or five days,” wrote physician Chanca, shortly after construction of La Isabela began. Medicines, brought from Spain in glass vials unearthed at the site (below), were of little help. Dr. Chanca blamed hard work and an unhealthy climate; historians add intestinal parasites as well as venereal and other infectious diseases as possible culprits.



Despite raging illnesses, the Admiral pushed relentlessly to continue building the town and planting crops.

His men rallied their strength—but in a direction Columbus never dreamed of. The men, especially some Spanish nobles who were far more interested in riches and adventure than in hard work, were incensed by the Admiral's

demands. Less than a month after La Isabela was settled, Columbus had to put down a revolt led by the expedition's chief accountant, Bernal de Pisa. Columbus jailed Pisa and hanged several followers.

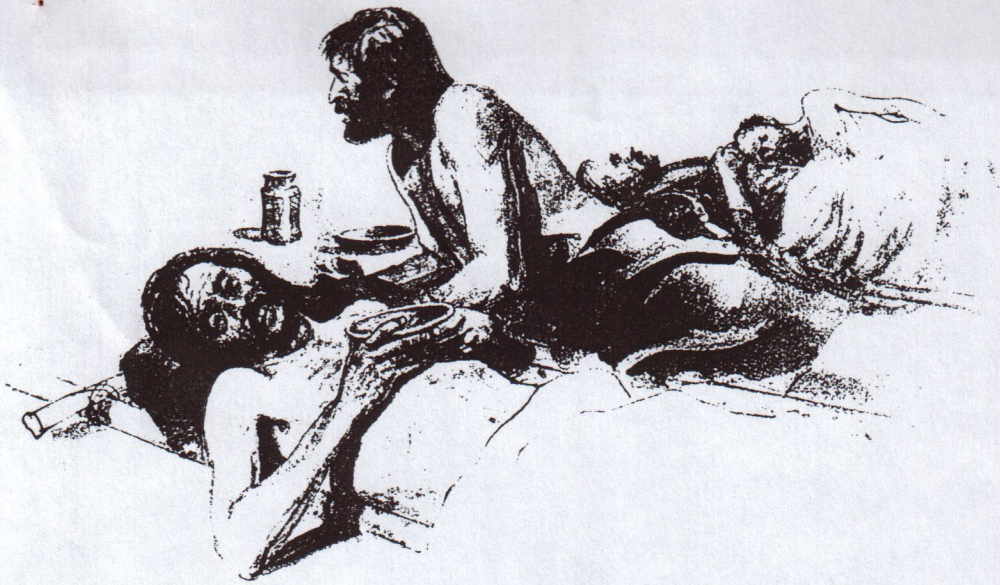
One possible victim of execution—buried facedown with his hands behind his back—was uncovered at the site by physical anthropologist Fernando Luna Calderón of the Museo del Hombre Dominicano. The

remains of other Spaniards in the town's cemetery were found with arms folded across the chest in the traditional Catholic rest (below).

Despite Columbus's best efforts, La Isabela became a lightning rod for disaster. The struggling community was repeatedly brought to its knees by epidemics, a fire that leveled two-thirds of its buildings, and a hurricane that destroyed several ships in the harbor.









## Bloodshed and rebellion

Columbus pledged to Spain's Catholic monarchs that he would convert the Indians to the "holy faith," but his legacy was one of distrust, subjugation, and bloodshed.

The peace between the Europeans and the Taino was shaky at best when, in 1494, Columbus sent a group of men led by Alonso de Hojeda to reinforce the inland fortress of Santo Tomás. At a river crossing Hojeda seized a Taino chief and two companions. Accusing them of stealing clothing from some Spaniards, he cut off an ear of one of them (above) and sent the other two in chains to La Isabela.

After this incident the Taino retaliated against acts of violence—and against intolerable taxes. For example, a fee of three ounces of gold every three months was levied on Indians over the age of 14 in gold-mining districts.

Defense against Indian

attack was provided by such late medieval weapons as hand cannon and crossbows. Excavations uncovered iron cannonballs (top right) as well as part of a stone mold used for making lead or iron shot. Archaeologists also found fragments of chain



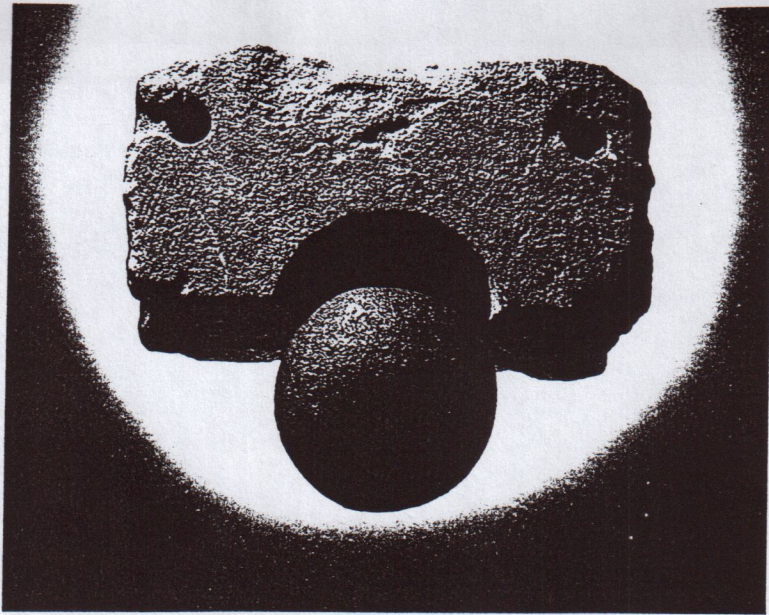
...il and metal tips from dagger  
scabbards (below right).

The colony was soon threat-  
ened from within. In 1496 Co-  
lumbus's brother Bartholomew  
began to relocate able-bodied  
men to Santo Domingo, which  
had a better harbor and was  
...er to the richer gold  
deposits of the south coast.

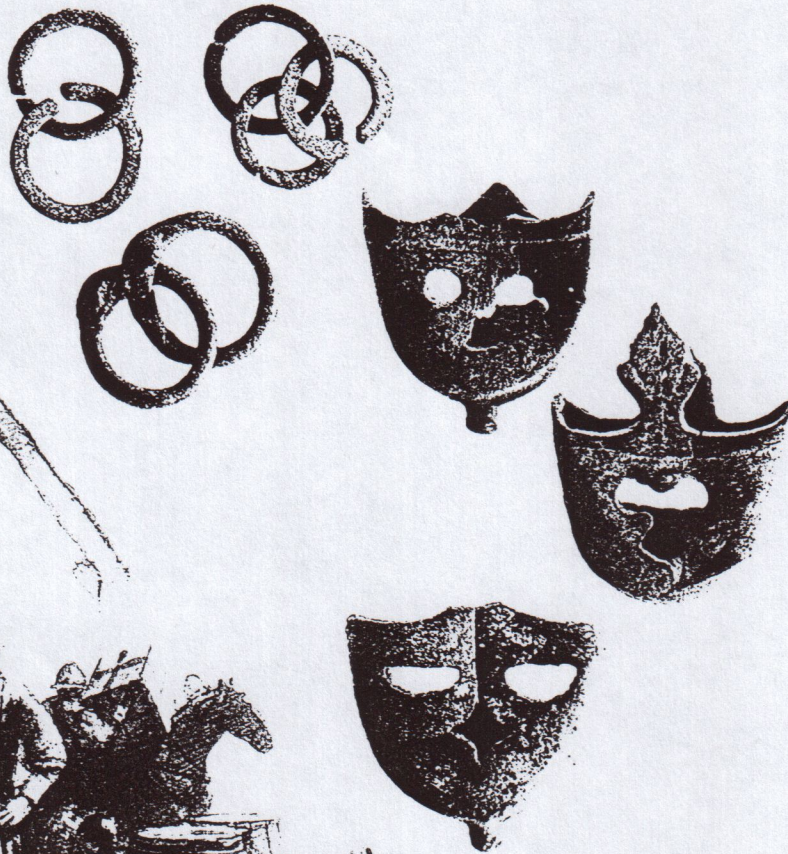
Infuriated over harsh rule by  
the brothers, emboldened by  
their absence, and desperate  
from near famine, the mayor of  
La Isabela, Francisco Roldán,  
rallied supporters to insurrection  
in 1497. Colonists and natives

...med the storehouse (below),  
looting weapons. Abandoning  
the town for the western part  
of the island, they allied them-  
selves with the Indians there.

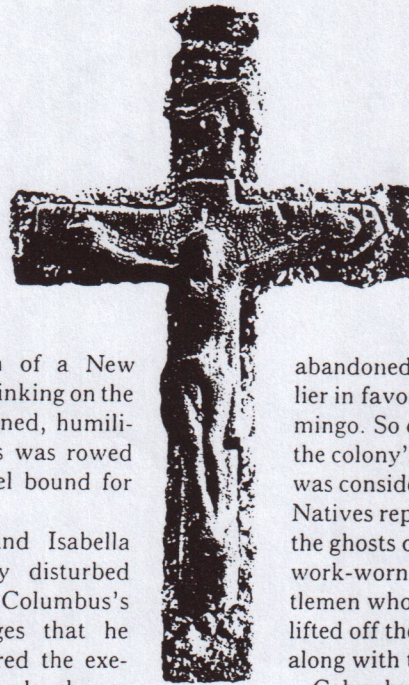
Columbus, returning from  
Spain in 1498 to find his domain  
split and his support dwindling,  
...no choice but to recognize  
the settlement of Roldán and his  
followers as legitimate.



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## Enchained by ambition, the Admiral is recalled.



His dream of a New World empire sinking on the horizon, a chained, humiliated Columbus was rowed out to a caravel bound for Spain in 1500.

Ferdinand and Isabella had been very disturbed by reports of Columbus's excesses—charges that he ruthlessly ordered the execution of Spaniards who rebelled against him, refused to give supplies to those who displeased him, and enslaved Indians against the express orders of the king and queen.

Just as alarming were rumors that he intended to hand the Indies over to the government of his native Genoa.

The Spanish monarchs sent a royal investigator to Española. He wasted little time in imprisoning and deporting Columbus.

Aboard ship the caravel's master offered to unlock Columbus's chains. But the Admiral insisted on keeping them, wearing his "great injury and great injustice" like a badge of honor.

His gesture had the desired result. Horrified at news of their Admiral in chains, the king and queen ordered his release, but they did not restore his duties or his title as Governor.

By the time of Columbus's greatest humiliation, La Isabela was a dismal memory,

abandoned two years earlier in favor of Santo Domingo. So complete was the colony's failure that it was considered cursed: Natives reported seeing the ghosts of starved, work-worn Spanish gentlemen who in greeting lifted off their heads along with their hats.

Columbus's career as a colonizer was over. He again sailed to the West, but the aging Admiral was by then only one of several adventurers exploring the Indies.

In his last days, perhaps gazing on a crucifix like one found at La Isabela (above), a still defiant Columbus insisted that he had a God-given right to govern all the lands he had discovered.

"I presented [to Spain] the Indies," he wrote in his will. "I say presented, because it is evident that by the will of God, our Sovereign, I gave them, as a thing that was mine." □

