

Lost city may be site of massacre

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Taino Indians met Columbus on his arrival

By **MATT CRENSON**
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In the remote jungle of the Dominican Republic, archaeologists have discovered a long-lost city once inhabited by the people who welcomed Christopher Columbus to the New World.

The Taino Indians were the first people Columbus encountered after landing on an island he called San Salvador in 1492. They numbered in the millions and had developed a network of small cities ruled by chieftains.

Earlier this month, archaeologists found one of those cities, in the easternmost part of the Dominican Republic.

Researchers exploring around a sinkhole in the country's East National Park on March 20 found three large ceremonial plazas and the remains of a substantial settlement that appears to have been home to thousands of people.

There is a strong possibility that the city is the same one whose brutal destruction by the Spanish in 1503 is described in an account by the missionary Bartolome de Las Casas.

According to him, it all began when the Taino were loading bread onto a Spanish ship. A Spanish officer standing nearby had an attack dog on a leash, and when the animal began acting up another officer joked about setting the dog on the Indian chief.

"Tomalo," he said, meaning, "Take him."

The dog lunged and disemboweled the chief.

The Indians retaliated a few months later by killing a few Spaniards. That led the colony of Santo Domingo to lead an expedition against the Tainos' city, possibly the newly discovered La Aleta.

"This is going to give us more insight into the Taino than has ever been known before," said Charles Beeker, director of the underwater science program at Indiana University. The find was announced Friday at a meeting in Rohnert



Indiana University

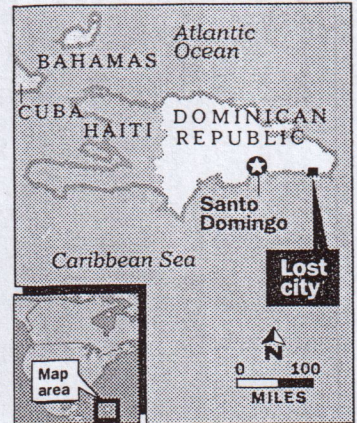
Charles Beeker inspects artifacts found at the site of a newly discovered city of Taino Indians in a jungle in the Dominican Republic.

Park, Calif., of the Society for California Archaeology.

Beeker and several colleagues traveled to the site by helicopter the previous week to investigate the area around a cenote, or natural well, that the Indiana archaeologist has been studying for several months. Last fall scuba divers retrieved carved wooden axes, baskets, ornate pottery and other artifacts from the well that were probably dropped into the water as part of a sacrificial ceremony.

With Beeker were Geoff Conrad of Indiana University, California state archaeologist John Foster and three East National Park consulting archaeologists.

Though the Taino are all but forgotten today, certain aspects of their culture live on. The English word "barbecue" comes from the Taino term for the rock slabs they used to cook bread. The hammock is also a Taino invention discovered by the Spanish upon their arrival in the New World.



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At the site, the archaeologists found three plazas lined with 5-foot-tall limestone blocks. The plazas were 75 yards long and 15 yards wide, and would have been used for ceremonies and the playing of a soccerlike game that was common in North America.

They also found kitchen areas, and stones used to break and grind oyster shells. Some of the stone depressions still had bits of shell left in them, looking as if the people who had used them weren't long gone.

"They could have just walked off last week," Beeker said.

So far, the site does not appear to be the largest Taino city ever discovered. One site in Puerto Rico has seven plazas to La Aleta's three. But there's no telling how many more plazas archaeologists will find when they return in July, Conrad said.

So far, the 115-foot-deep well is the most impressive find, said University of Texas archaeologist Sam Wilson, because it is the first ceremonial cenote ever discovered at a Taino site. The Maya of Central America are known to have put ceremonial offerings, including human sacrifices, into natural wells. But until now it was not known that the Taino also engaged in the practice.

No bodies have been found in the cenote at the Taino site.

Very little is known about the Taino Indians because they were all but annihilated by 1515.