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SUMMER 2007

american archaeology

a quarterly publication of The Archaeological Conservancy

Vol. 11 No. 2

Tales of the Taino:

Archaeologists are searching land and sea for evidence of the people who first met Columbus.

Before and After Columbus

The Taino, the first Native Americans Columbus encountered, occupied the Caribbean for centuries prior to the explorer's arival. They were a vibrant culture before encountering the Spanish, but they declined sharply thereafter.

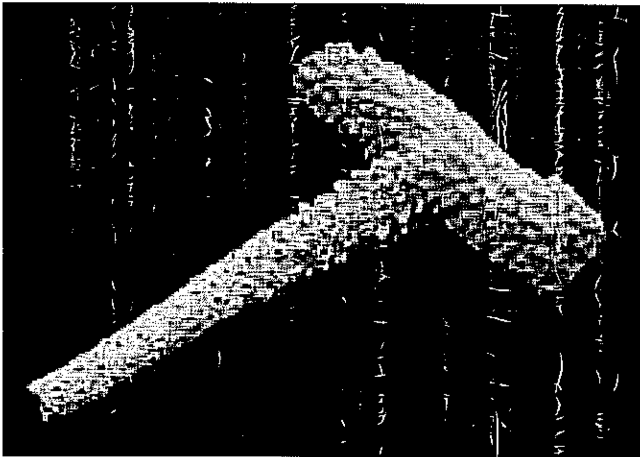
By Mike Toner

BILDARCHIV PREUSSISCHER KULTURBESITZ / ART RESOURCE, NY

The first encounter between Columbus and the people of the New World is depicted in this engraving by Theodore de Bry.

When Columbus landed on the island he called San Salvador in 1492, the Bahamian archipelago was home to as many as 80,000 native people. By Ponce de Leon's voyage in 1513, the Bahamas were uninhabited—the people dead of disease or taken away to serve as slaves in Spain's New World colonies.

Elsewhere in the Caribbean—in Puerto Rico, in Cuba, and on the island of Hispaniola—the meeting of New and Old World cultures had similar results. By 1542, Bartolomé de las Casas, a Spanish priest, historian, and human rights advocate, would lament the passing of "the most humble, patient and peaceable... of any people in the world." And he minced no words about the cause of their demise on Hispaniola, concluding that the "killing, terrorizing, afflicting, and destroying" by his countrymen had reduced the island's population from perhaps three million people to "barely two hundred persons."



This coral drill found at En Bas Saline in Haiti dates to about A.D. 1400.

FLORIDA MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

Estimates of indigenous populations, and the scope of the depopulation in the years following contact, vary widely, but there is little doubt that within a few generations, the people now known as the Taino—"good" or "noble" in the Arawak language they spoke—had been thoroughly decimated.

Until recently, contemporary knowledge of the Taino has been shaped mostly by the written record—Spanish censuses, official reports, and the writings of chroniclers like Las Casas and Fray Ramón Pané who, at Columbus' behest, lived among "los Indios" of Hispaniola for four years and recorded their customs. The Spanish, however, inevitably saw the Taino through the lens of their own experience.

"Although the Spanish had no experience with this form of social organization, the Taino were matrilineal," says Samuel Wilson, an archaeologist at the University of Texas, Austin. "Descent and inheritance passed through the female line. In most cases, however, men held the office of *cacique* (chief), reflecting the distinction between social hierarchy and political power."

"We attach so much weight to written accounts, but we have to realize that the Spanish only saw the world as they understood it," says archaeologist Geoffrey Conrad of Indiana University. "You have to remember that Columbus initially thought he was off the coast of Japan."

"One of the major mistakes the Spanish made was that they thought all of the Caribbean people they met were the same and they assumed they were all Taino," says University of Florida archaeologist William Keegan. "There's a famous passage from Las Casas in which he reports that the Indians all spoke the same language, but there were three mutually unintelligible languages on the island. Archaeological evidence supports that idea that the Caribbean was a melting pot of different cultures when Columbus arrived and had been for a long time before that."

Today, with a growing body of material evidence, and a reappraisal of written accounts, archaeologists are piecing together a fuller and more accurate picture of the origins of the people who discovered Columbus, as well as the aftermath of the collision of cultures that began in 1492.

"One of the distinctive features of 15th-century Taino culture is the vibrant sense of creativity and exuberant innovation," says Kathleen Deagan, research curator at the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville. "Taino artisans produced a wide variety of craft items, including elaborate decorated ceramics, cotton products, ground and polished stone beads, carved shell and bone ornaments, tools of stone, tobacco, various foodstuffs, and exotic birds and feathers."

A snapshot of the Taino people in 1492 would have shown a diverse, politically complex, hierarchical society with as many as several million people living on the larger islands of the Greater Antilles—Cuba, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica. These experienced farmers grew yuca, beans, squash, guava, pineapple, tobacco, and other crops. They had ocean-going canoes that could carry as many as 100 people and they traded with other islands in the Caribbean as well as the mainland of Central America. They lived in hereditary chiefdoms ruled by powerful caciques who controlled up to 100 villages and thousands of people.

"By the time Columbus arrived, more than 200 generations of indigenous Caribbean people had come and gone, passing their knowledge and relationships on to their children," says Wilson. "There were long periods with little noticeable change and periods of dramatic cultural change—some of them cataclysmic." The arrival of Columbus would prove to be the most cataclysmic of all.

Radiocarbon dates associated with lithic tools in Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic indicate that humans have lived in the Caribbean since about 4000 B.C. Many, but not all, experts believe that around 2000 B.C. a wave of hunter-gatherers migrated northward from South America into the

CHARLES BEEKER

Archaeologist John Foster holds a Taino war club in his left hand and a canvas bag with fragile artifacts in his right.

SAMUEL WILSON

The ballcourt complex at Caguana in west-central Puerto Rico has as many as 10 plaza features. This photo shows rectangular courts, cobbled pavements, circular features, and, in the middle-right of the picture, a row of standing stones carved with petroglyphs.

Lesser Antilles and Puerto Rico. Then, around 500 B.C., another migration took place—its presence in the archaeological record marked by the distinctive white-on-red painted pottery and incised crosshatched designs—a style called Saladoid after the site in Venezuela's Orinoco Basin where it was first identified. By A.D. 600, large, but widely scattered Saladoid communities were found from Trinidad through the Lesser Antilles and east as far as the Dominican Republic.

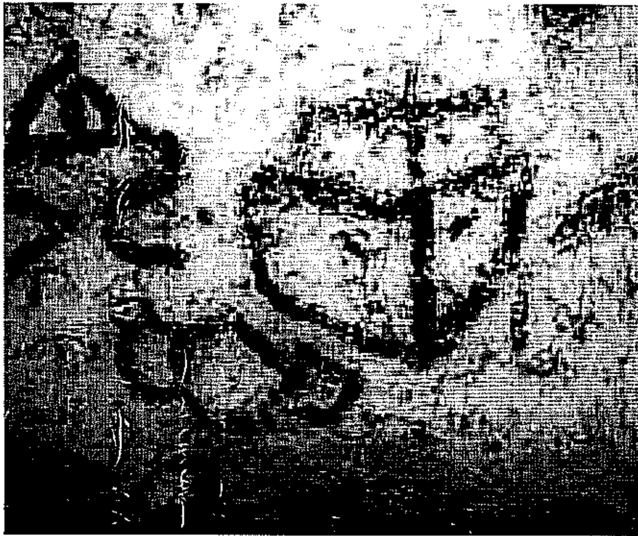
"The Saladoid peoples were horticulturists who also relied extensively on fishing and the collecting of marine and faunal resources," says Peter Siegel, an archaeologist at Montclair State University in Montclair, New Jersey. "They produced thin-walled, elaborately painted, incised, and modeled ceramic vessels and figurines, ground-stone celts, in addition to many everyday items fabricated from stone, bone, shell, clay, coral, woods, and feathers."

Archaeologists believe that over the next several centuries, interactions between the agrarian Saladoids and the earlier hunter-gatherer populations led to the emergence of the more complex, and more highly organized Taino society that, by Columbus' arrival, was concentrated in the Greater Antilles.

Siegel has chronicled the gradual evolution of Taino culture in the ball courts and ceremonial plazas of Puerto Rico and other islands. Ball courts—large, defined spaces for ritual competitions and community events—were built by prehistoric cultures throughout Mesoamerica. Approximately 100 of them have also been found in Puerto Rico, and many more have been identified throughout the region, even on smaller islands like St. Martin and Tortola in the British Virgin Islands. The rules varied, but the Caribbean ball game, which differed from the Mesoamerican version, was generally a contest between teams of 10 to 30 players—usually, but not always men—who used a rubber-like ball to score points. But the competition wasn't just for sport. The outcome helped resolve conflicts between communities without armed conflict. Elaborate petroglyphs with images linked to important myths in Taino cosmology surrounded some of the fields, attesting that they were sacred spaces.

Siegel says the first sacred spaces in Puerto Rico were little more than centrally located open plazas that also served as graveyards. At Maisabel on the island's north coast, Siegel estimates there are more than 2,500 burials in the plaza. But he contends that in the earliest courts the absence of high-status goods in the graves, along with the presence of elaborate stone celts and other artifacts in middens constructed outside the courts, shows that the early Tainos were egalitarian and village-oriented. During the formative period of Taino culture, elite burials were largely absent.

By A.D. 700, however, the ball courts were becoming more elaborate. The plazas were landscaped and outlined with boulders and carved rocks—physical evidence, Siegel says, that ancestor worship remained a key aspect of the culture, but the consolidation of power into regional polities had begun. By 1200, burials had been moved entirely outside the courts. The



This pictograph panel was found in Jose-Maria Cave in the Dominican Republic. The image on the right is perhaps the first known image of a Spanish ship painted by New World peoples.

JOHN FOSTER

courts were larger, paved, and formally constructed to reflect the power of the leaders who presided over them and the "elaborate ceremonies and rituals revolving around them." By the time Columbus arrived, the ball courts were the tangible expression of chiefly power that the caciques wielded over many villages.

Researchers have found another intriguing sign of the evolution of the complex hierarchical society that Columbus stumbled upon. National Park Service archaeologist Ken Wild has excavated two Taino ceremonial sites on the north coast of St. John in the U.S. Virgin Islands that he believes were used for ancestor worship. Between them, the sites at Cinnamon Bay and Trunk Bay contain a tightly dated sequence of Taino iconography that spans the entire 600 years preceding European contact.

Bats have always been a dominant figure in Taino art. Early historical accounts say the Taino looked upon the Caribbean's ubiquitous fruit bats as spirits of the dead, who lived in caves by day and came out at night to feed. But Wild has found that during this period the icons used to decorate ceremonial pottery underwent significant changes. In the beginning, the hollow-eyed icons had predominantly human features. Over the centuries, however, the human faces came to be crafted with distinct, bat-like noses, a feature that reflects the growth of social complexity. By the 1400s, however, the bat-nosed human faces were also embellished with chiefly headdresses, a feature that Wild says suggests the emergence of an elite hierarchy with chiefs claiming links to departed ancestors and spiritual beings the Taino revered.

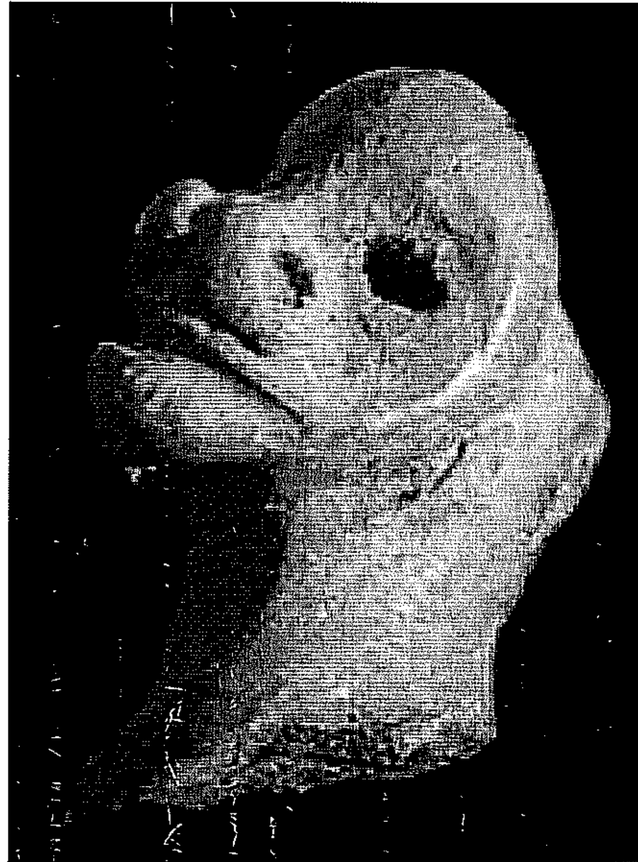
One expression of the Taino reverence for the dead is what University College London archaeologist Jose Oliver calls "endocanibalism"—a ceremony in which the "spiritual essence" of the departed was served to the living in a beverage made of the person's ground and burned bones. Oliver says some indigenous South American people engage in a similar ritual today, embracing the notion that bones are the source of life itself.

The Taino's spirit ancestors were *zemis*, a term that also applies to iconographic stone, wood, bone, or shell objects—often three-pointed in design—that carried human or animal likenesses.

For the Taino, caves provided the access between the earth's surface and the underworld. For modern archaeologists, they are proving to be a rich source of cultural material. Jose-Maria Cave in the Dominican Republic's East National Park, for instance, contains over 1,200 pictographs ranging from geometric designs and anthropomorphic figures to one that appears to depict a square-rigged Spanish ship.

Although rock art and ceramics make up the greatest share of the Taino's extant material culture, some subterranean sites have yielded less durable artifacts. At Manantial de la Aleta in the Dominican Republic, for instance, Conrad's colleagues underwater archaeologists Charles Beeker of Indiana University and John Foster of California State Parks have located a huge trove of organic items, some nearly 1,000 years old, that were preserved in the dark, anaerobic waters of a remote sinkhole in a tropical forest. It's a mystery how the Taino entered the deep sinkhole and placed offerings in the water so deliberately that their bowls of seeds remained upright for centuries.

The site holds a host of rarely seen objects: woven baskets, gourd vessels, a carved crocodilian figure, part of a canoe paddle, and even a small ceremonial stool used by chiefs and other high-ranking individuals as a symbolic and literal seat of power. The water-logged discoveries include a macana, a two-handed war club said to be capable of crushing a man's skull,



KEN WILD/NPS

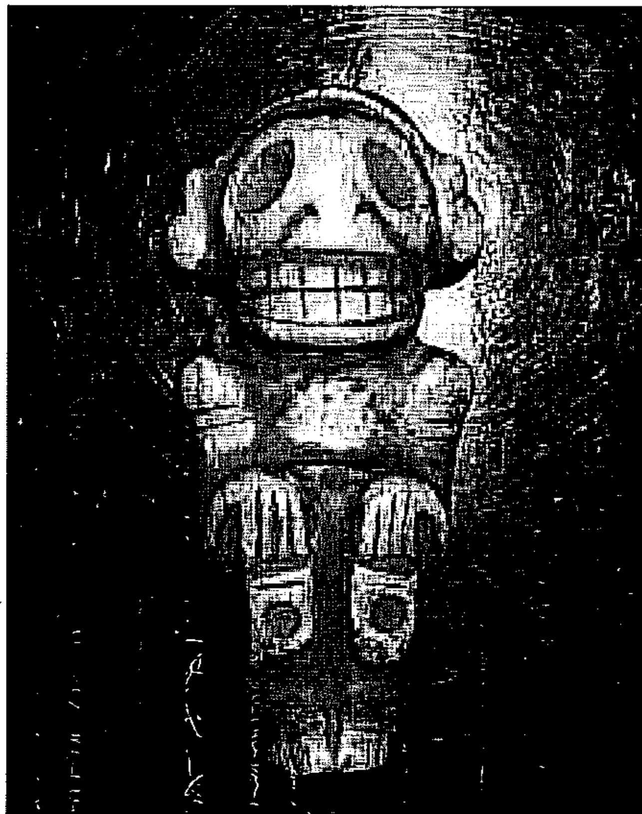
This bat-nosed icon was found at Cinnamon Bay. It once embellished a vessel.

This underwater photo shows gourd containers with cordage, a decorative pottery bowl, and a feather at the bottom of the Manantial de la Aleta sinkhole. Because of the anerobic conditions of the sinkhole, these artifacts are amazingly well preserved. The pottery bowl was recovered, but the other artifacts were left in situ.

a bowl for hallucinogenic snuff used during ceremonial communications with the spirit world, and a carved spatula that is thought to have induced vomiting when it was put down a person's throat. It's believed that all of these items were used in rituals. "So far we have removed only a small sample of the organic objects in the sinkhole," Conrad says. "Hundreds, perhaps thousands of objects are still down there."

Until recently, archaeological investigations have tended to focus on the state of Taino culture before Columbus, with little attention to the cultural upheaval that followed. Columbus and his men were initially befriended by the cacique Guancanagari; but relations soured quickly after Columbus returned on his second voyage in 1493 and found the 30 men he had left behind dead and their encampment, named La Navidad, destroyed. Guancanagari blamed the massacre on outsiders, but the arrival of more than 1,300 permanent colonists, and the Spaniards' need for laborers to raise their crops and mine gold, quickly dashed any hope of peaceful coexistence. On Hispaniola, five years of open conflict ended with Spanish subjugation of the island and the imposition of a system of forced labor that required Taino towns to provide workers in return for instruction in Christianity and "civilization." In 1508 in Puerto Rico, the Taino rebelled against the forced labor system imposed by Ponce de Leon, but were soundly defeated.

"The combined effects of military defeat, near-slavery, forced physical relocation, social abuses, and new diseases



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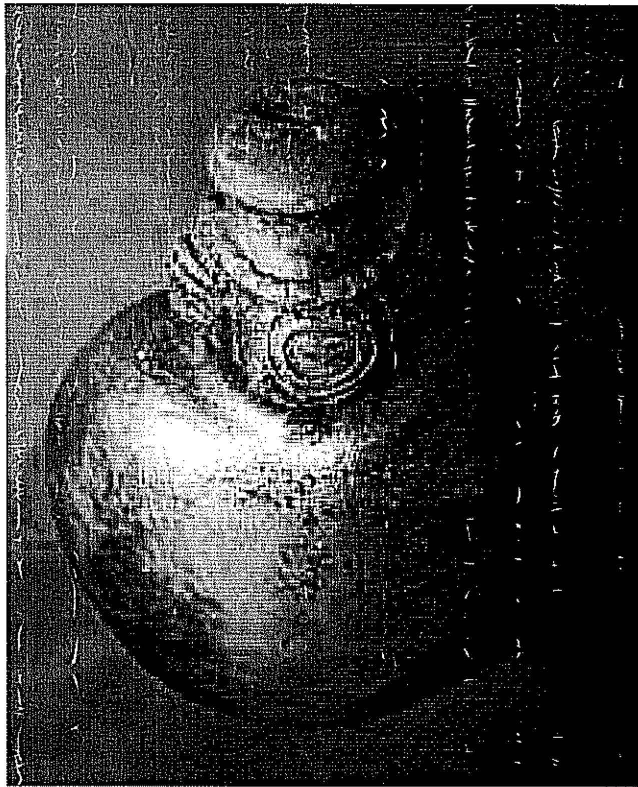
A Taino amulet made from manatee bone.



This intact water jar, called a potiza, was recovered from Chicho Cave in the Dominican Republic's East National Park at a depth of 25 feet. Potizas are Taino pottery jars with incised decorations and phallic necks.

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created severe demographic pressure and population loss," says Deagan. The Taino, however, did not vanish as swiftly, or as surely, as historical accounts suggest. Deagan's excavations on the north coast of Haiti, at En Bas Saline, which is widely believed to be the location of La Navidad, found signs of substantial and continued Taino occupation—more than 188,000 artifacts—for more than three decades after Columbus visit. The paucity of European trade goods and food suggests that the Taino there had little to do with the colonists. As late as 1530, in fact, the Taino were mounting guerilla-style attacks on the nearby settlement of Puerto Real.

"There is increasing evidence that, in some parts of the Caribbean, Taino culture continued until the middle of the 16th century," says Keegan. Recent excavations of wooden structures at Los Buchillones on the north coast of Cuba, in fact, suggest that a Taino village there may have been occupied as late as 1640.

Although some indigenous villages are thought to have survived in remote parts of the Caribbean where the Spanish presence was less extensive, archaeologists agree that the Taino ceased to be a cohesive society within a few generations of Columbus' arrival. In some cases, remnant populations were simply assimilated. In Puerto Rico, for instance, one-fifth of the marriages recorded in 1530 were between Spaniards and Tainos. "The culture essentially disappeared," says archaeologist L. Antonio Curet, of Chicago's Field Museum. "The Taino were the first people in the New World to feel the impact of contact and its aftermath. It was a preview of what would happen later in other Spanish colonies."

Even today, however, echoes of the culture that once dominated the Caribbean still linger in the modern world. In Puerto Rico, one genetic study funded by the National Science Foundation shows that as many as 60 percent of the island's long-time residents have Native American DNA. "The political system of the Taino fell apart pretty quickly," says Wilson. "But we can't really say with any certainty when the culture ended. If you think of culture as the style of houses, or food, or basic economies, you could go into some parts of the Caribbean today and still find people doing some things the way the Taino would have done them."

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KEN WILD/NPS

This carved stone face was found in situ with other ceremonial items at Cinnamon Bay.