

Columbus's Hispaniola



The Nations of the Island at the time of First Contact with the Spanish

- The primary Indigenous Peoples of the island was the Arawak/Taíno people.
 - At the time of Columbus' arrival in 1492, there were five Taíno chiefdoms and territories on Hispaniola, each led by a principal Cacique (chieftain), to whom tribute was paid. *Ayiti* ("land of high mountains") was the indigenous Taíno name for the mountainous side of the island of Hispaniola, which has retained its name as *Haïti* in French.¹
 - "Hispaniola is the heart of Taíno culture and the caves are the heart of the Taíno," said Domingo Abréu Collado, chief of the speleology division in the Dominican Ministry on Environmental and Natural Resources.²
- There is still heated debate over the population of Taíno people on the island of Hispaniola in 1492, but estimates range upwards of 3,000,000.³
- Cristoforo Colombo's ship, *Santa María*, ran aground off the northern coast of the island. Colombo left members of the wrecked crew behind when he heard there were deposits of gold on the island – they founded the settlement of La Navidad in 1492 with building materials harvested from the *Santa María*.

¹ Rob, A. (2016, March 03). Taíno: Indigenous Caribbeans. Retrieved March 12, 2021, from [https://www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/pre-colonial-history/taino-indigenous-caribbeans/#:~:text=The%20Ta%C3%ADno%20were%20an%20Arawak,Haiti\)%2C%20and%20Puerto%20Rico.](https://www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/pre-colonial-history/taino-indigenous-caribbeans/#:~:text=The%20Ta%C3%ADno%20were%20an%20Arawak,Haiti)%2C%20and%20Puerto%20Rico.)

² Poole, R. M. (2011, October 01). What became of the Taíno? Retrieved March 12, 2021, from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/what-became-of-the-taino-73824867/>

³ Ibid.

- Fact: Colombo always thought that he was off the coast of India, even dispatching a delegation to modern-day Cuba to seek an audience with the Emperor of China!⁴
- Another Fact: The Spanish Crown was not the first choice as patron of Colombo's voyages. Christoforo Colombo approached and was denied by the Duke of Anjou, King of Portugal, Duke of Medina-Sedonia and Count of Medina-Celi before he went to the King and Queen of Spain in 1492.⁵
- On May 4th, 1493, Pope Alexander VI issues the papal bull *Inter caetera* which – among other things – declares:

And, in order that you may enter upon so great an undertaking with greater readiness and heartiness endowed with the benefit of our apostolic favor, we, of our own accord, not at your instance nor the request of anyone else in your regard, but of our own sole largess and certain knowledge and out of the fullness of our apostolic power, by the authority of Almighty God conferred upon us in blessed Peter and of the vicarship of Jesus Christ, which we hold on earth, do by tenor of these presents, should any of said islands have been found by your envoys and captains, give, grant, and assign to you and your heirs and successors, kings of Castile and Leon, forever, together with all their dominions, cities, camps, places, and villages, and all rights, jurisdictions, and appurtenances, all islands and mainlands found and to be found, discovered and to be discovered towards the west and south, by drawing and establishing a line from the Arctic pole, namely the north, to the Antarctic pole, namely the south, no matter whether the said mainlands and islands are found and to be found in the direction of India or towards any other quarter, the said line to be distant one hundred leagues towards the west and south from any of the islands commonly known as the Azores and Cape Verde.

With this proviso however that none of the islands and mainlands, found and to be found, discovered and to be discovered, beyond that said line towards the west and south, be in the actual possession of any Christian king or prince up to the birthday of our Lord Jesus Christ just past from which the present year one thousand four hundred and ninety-three begins.

What does this mean?



⁴ Jerry Bentley and Herb Ziegler, *Traditions & Encounters*, (Toronto: McGraw Hill, 2006), 606.

⁵ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 412-413.

What does *Terra Nullius* mean?

- When Colombo returned to La Navidad on 27 Nov 1493, his second voyage from Spain, he "found it burned to the ground . . . nobody in the vicinity." In the fields nearby, however, he discovered the "bodies of eight Christians." Colombo later discovered that, soon after his departure, his "men began to quarrel among themselves, each taking as many women and as much gold as he could." Some of the men had left for the gold mines in the interior of the island, but were killed. Indigenous Peoples then attacked La Navidad, destroying the settlement and killing the remaining men.⁶
 - On this voyage Colombo brings cattle, inflected with influenza, to the Western Hemisphere triggering a pandemic amongst the Taíno Nations.
- On Columbus' second voyage to the region, he began to require tribute from the Taíno in Hispaniola. According to historian Kirkpatrick Sale, each adult over 14 years of age was expected to deliver a hawk's bell full of gold every three months, or when this was lacking, twenty-five pounds of spun cotton. If this tribute was not brought, the Spanish cut off the hands of the Taíno and left them to bleed to death.⁷
- The Spanish saw the huge tracts of fertile land in Hispaniola as providing the potential for creating huge profits from plantations that were able to supply the growing European demands for sugarcane and other agricultural commodities.
 - In 1516 the first Spanish plantations were established on Hispaniola. The primary crop was sugar cane, one of the most lucrative crops of times.
 - Plantations operated almost exclusively on slave labour.⁸



⁶ Ferdinand Columbus. *The Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus by his son Ferdinand*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers, The State University, 1959), 82–86.

⁷ Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise*, (New York: Plume, 1990), 155.

⁸ Jerry Bentley and Herb Ziegler, *Traditions & Encounters*, (Toronto: McGraw Hill, 2006), 712-713.

- For the Taíno Nations, the arrival of the Spanish triggered an apocalypse. War, slavery, disease and loss of land decimated the Taíno population, but also led to significant (and successful) resistance movements.
 - By 1514 an official survey showed that 40 percent of Spanish men had taken Indigenous women as their wives.⁹
 - The first recorded smallpox outbreak in Hispaniola occurred in December 1518 or January 1519. The 1518 smallpox epidemic killed 90% of the natives who had not already perished. Warfare and harsh enslavement by the colonists had also caused many deaths. By 1548, the native population had declined to fewer than 500.¹⁰
 - Taíno culture still survives, with communities spread across the Caribbean to this day.
 - A nationwide genetic study established that 15 percent to 18 percent of Dominicans had Indigenous markers in their mitochondrial DNA, testifying to the continued presence of Taíno genes.¹¹
 - In 2003, Juan C. Martínez Cruzado, a biologist at the University of Puerto Rico, announced the results of a genetic study of Puerto Rico. Taking samples from 800 randomly selected subjects, Martínez reported that 61.1 percent of those surveyed had mitochondrial DNA of indigenous origin, indicating a persistence in the maternal line that surprised him and his fellow scientists. The results encouraged a Taíno resurgence, with native groups urging Puerto Rican schools to take note of the indigenous contribution to Caribbean history, opposing construction on tribal sites and seeking federal recognition for the Taíno, with attendant benefits.
 - The same study revealed African markers in 26.4 percent of the population and 12.5 percent for those of European descent.¹²

Some of the Taíno words that entered into our lexicon: canoe, hammock, barbecue, tobacco, hurricane and Cuba.

⁹ Poole, R. M. (2011, October 01). What became of the Taíno? Retrieved March 12, 2021, from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/what-became-of-the-taino-73824867/>

¹⁰ Rob, A. (2016, March 03). Taíno: Indigenous Caribbeans. Retrieved March 12, 2021, from [https://www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/pre-colonial-history/taino-indigenous-caribbeans/#:~:text=The%20Ta%C3%ADno%20were%20an%20Arawak,Haiti\)%2C%20and%20Puerto%20Rico.](https://www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/pre-colonial-history/taino-indigenous-caribbeans/#:~:text=The%20Ta%C3%ADno%20were%20an%20Arawak,Haiti)%2C%20and%20Puerto%20Rico.)

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¹² Ibid.