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# The Decline of the Tainos, 1492-1542: A Re-Vision

Cain Stoneking  
*Western Oregon University*

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The Taínos were pre-Columbian inhabitants of the Bahamas, Greater Antilles, and the northern Lesser Antilles. It is believed that the seafaring Taínos were relatives of the Arawakan people of South America. Their language is a member of the Maipurean linguistic family, which ranges from South America across the Caribbean. Their inevitable destruction may be one of the saddest events in history. The history behind them is not shrouded in mystery, but it is covered in controversy about who the Taino are, and what their population numbers were. Their lifestyle was healthy, and what is known about the Tainos showed they worked few hours and enjoyed much leisure time. There are heated debates about how many Tainos actually inhabited the Greater Antilles; however there are few debates on why their numbers decreased so rapidly. Although they lived a peaceful life before Columbus arrived, everything changed thereafter and their population fell dramatically. The change to the Tainos was so dramatic because they were a peaceful, healthy, strong, happy tribe, that was still developing, but Columbus had brought with him torture, depression, harsh work conditions, starvation, and disease, and their numbers fell quickly.

The population dispute has become a big problem to decipher exactly how hard the population of the Tainos fell. Early population estimates of the Tainos on Hispaniola (Dominican Republic & Haiti), range from 100,000 to 1,000,000 people.<sup>1</sup> The maximum estimates for Jamaica and Puerto Rico, the most densely populated islands after Hispaniola, are 600,000 people. The Dominican priest Bartolomé de Las Casas wrote (1561) in his multivolume History of the Indies: “There were 60,000 people living on this

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1 Noble David Cook, *Born to Die: Disease and New World Conquest 1492-1650*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 278.

island [when I arrived in 1508], including the Indians; so that from 1494 to 1508, over three million people had perished from war, slavery and the mines. Who in future generations will believe this?"<sup>2</sup>

Although we understand the tragedies that befell the Tainos, again, the numbers of them are greatly disputed. Some scholars, such as David Henige and Peter Ewald, believe that Bartolomé de las Casas exaggerated the Indian population decline in an effort to persuade King Carlos to intervene, and that encomenderos also exaggerated it, in order to receive permission to import more African slaves.<sup>3</sup> Henige also believes that the scholars that theorize the numbers of the Tainos could have reached 8 million do not have a lot of evidence to back that up. Moreover, censuses of the time did not account for the number of Indians who fled into remote communities, where they often joined with runaway Africans, called cimarrones, producing zambos. There were also confusing issues with racial categorization, as mestizos who were culturally Spanish were counted as Spaniards. Henige would claim that it would have been very hard for people such as De Las Casas to know how many people lived on these islands. This is a main point of controversy for many scholars. How could some believe there are up to 8 million, while others believe 500,000? Both sides provide strong evidence to their claims. The scholars which claim 8 million can do so on the grounds that the conocus easily could have fed 8 million and their archeological evidence suggests that there were many conocus being used, and would have only been constructed if they were in fact used. Other scholars, such as Henige, point out that the Tainos usually had many conocus but that they worked a low amount of the time,

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2 Bartolome De Las Casas, *History of the Indies*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 35.

3 David Henige, *Numbers from Nowhere: The American Indian Contact Debate* (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1998), 133-135.

and planted just enough food to keep themselves full and healthy, but is in no indication of their numbers.

To fully understand the plight of the Tainos, it is important to note the history of the Greater Antilles, the larger islands in the Caribbean so that a background of the Tainos can be established, including where they originated and who they were. This will consist of the island of Puerto Rico, the Island of Cuba, and the Island of Hispaniola, which consists of Haiti and the Dominican Republic

One island that the Tainos inhabited was Puerto Rico. The history of the archipelago of Puerto Rico before the arrival of Christopher Columbus is not well known. What is known today comes from archaeological findings and early Spanish accounts. The first comprehensive book on the history of Puerto Rico was written by Fray Inigo Abbad y Lasierra in 1786, 293 years after the first Spaniards arrived on the island.<sup>4</sup> According to archeological studies, the first settlers were the Ortoiroid people, an Archaic Period culture of Amerindian hunters and fishermen. Between AD 120 and 400 the Igneri arrived from the South American Orinoco region. Between the 4th and 10th centuries, the Arcaicos and Igneri co-existed (and perhaps clashed) on the island. Between the 7th and 11th centuries the Taíno culture developed on the island and by approximately 1000 AD had become dominant.<sup>5</sup> This lasted until Christopher Columbus arrived in 1492.

Columbus arrived in Puerto Rico during his second voyage on November 19, 1493. The Tainos called the island "Borikén" or, in Spanish, "Borinquen".<sup>6</sup> Columbus named the

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4 Leslie Bethell, *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 197.

5 Morgan D. Machlan, "Archeology and the Ethno-Tyrannies," *American Anthropologists* 92 (1990): 615.

6 Karen Cordova, *Hispaniola and Puerto Rico: Indian Acculturation and Heterogeneity*, *The Public*

island San Juan Bautista, in honor of Saint John the Baptist. Later the island took the name of Puerto Rico (Spanish for "Rich Port") while the capital was named San Juan. In 1508, Spanish conquistador Juan Ponce de León became the island's first governor.

To the West of Puerto Rico is the island of Hispaniola, part of the Greater Antilles archipelago in the Caribbean region. The western third of the island Hispaniola is occupied by the nation of Haiti, making Hispaniola one of two Caribbean islands that are occupied by two countries, Saint Martin being the other. The Dominican Republic is the site of the first permanent European settlement in the Americas: Santo Domingo de Guzmán, the nowadays capital of the Dominican Republic, Santo Domingo. The Tainos called the island Kiskeya or Quisqueya, meaning "mother of the earth", as well as Haiti or Aytí, and Bohio.<sup>7</sup>

Columbus landed at Môle Saint-Nicolas, in northwest present-day Haiti, on December 5, 1492, during his first voyage. He claimed the island for Spain and named it La Española. Eighteen days later his flagship the Santa María ran aground near the present site of Cap-Haitien. When Columbus returned to Spain, he was forced to leave thirty-nine men, who built a fort named La Navidad (Christmas, or The Nativity). He then sailed east, exploring the northern coast of what is now the Dominican Republic, after which he returned home. After returning to Hispaniola, Columbus discovered all of his men had died. He quickly grew paranoid and distrustful of the Tainos, and later on punished and blamed them for what had happened. He sailed back to America three more times, and was buried in Santo Domingo upon his death in 1506.

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*Historian* 23 (2001): 33.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

The Taíno population on Hispaniola was divided through a system of established cacicazgos (chiefdoms), named Marien, Maguana, Higüey, Magua and Xaragua, which could be further subdivided. The cacicazgos (later called caciques in French) were tributary kingdoms, with payment consisting of food grown by the Taíno. Taino cultural artifacts include cave paintings in several locations in the nation, which have become national symbols of Haiti and tourist attractions. Modern-day Léogane, a town in the southwest, is at the epicenter of what was the chiefdom of Xaragua.<sup>8</sup>

Following the destruction of La Navidad by the Amerindians, Columbus moved to the eastern side of the island and established La Isabela.<sup>9</sup> One of the earliest leaders to fight off Spanish conquest was Queen Anacaona, a Taíno princess from Xaragua who married Chief Caonabo, a Taíno king (cacique) from Maguana. The two resisted European rule but to no avail. She was captured by the Spanish and executed in front of her people. To this day, Anacaona is revered in Haiti as one of the country's first founders, preceding the likes of founding fathers such as Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines.

The earliest inhabitants of Cuba were the Guanajatabey people, who migrated to the island from the forests of the South American mainland as long ago as 5300 BCE.<sup>10</sup> The Guanajatabeyes, who numbered about 100,000, were hunters, gatherers, and farmers. They were to cultivate cohiba (tobacco), a crop upon which the island's economy would one day depend. Spanish conquistador Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar later observed that the Guanajatabeyes were "without houses or towns and eating only the meat they are able to

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8 Constantino M. Torres, "The Island of 'Ayiti' or Haiti in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century," *The Western Quarterly* 32 (2001): 330.

9 Alfred W. Crosby, *Transformation: Hispaniola Island*, (Cambridge: Perseus Publishing, 2003), 248-250.

10 William F. Keegan, "Indigenous in the Caribbean," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 30 (1999): 138.

find in the forests as well as turtles and fish."<sup>11</sup> Though the Guanajatabeyes are now considered to be a distinct population, early anthropologists and historians mistakenly believed that they were the Ciboney people who occupied areas throughout the Antilles islands of the Caribbean.<sup>12</sup> More recently, researchers have speculated that the Guanajatabeyes may have migrated from the south of the United States, evidenced by similarities of artifacts found in both regions.<sup>13</sup> These facts make estimating the Taino population even more difficult. Some studies ascribe a role to these original inhabitants in the extinction of the islands' megafauna, including condors, giant owls, and eventually ground sloths.<sup>14</sup>

Further evidence suggests that the Guanajatabeyes were driven to the west of the island by the arrival of two subsequent waves of migrants, the Taíno and Ciboney. These groups are sometimes referred to as neo-Taíno nations.<sup>15</sup> The new arrivals had migrated north along the Caribbean island chain from the Orinoco delta in Venezuela. These two groups were prehistoric cultures in a time period during which humans created tools from stone, yet they were familiar with gold (caona) and copper alloys (guanín).

The first sighting of a Spanish boat approaching the island was on October 28, 1492, probably at Baracoa on the eastern point of the island.<sup>16</sup> Christopher Columbus, on his first voyage to the Americas, sailed south from what is now The Bahamas to explore the northeast coast of Cuba and the northern coast of Hispaniola. During a second voyage

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11 Ibid., 140.

12 Ibid., 142.

13 Cook, *Born to Die*, 278.

14 David Watts, *The West Indies: Patterns and Development, Culture, and Environmental Change Since 1942*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 288.

15 Keegan, "Indigenous in Caribbean," 141.

16 Jose Cruxent, *Columbus's Outpost among The Tainos: Spain and America*, (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1993), 250.

in 1494, Columbus passed along the south coast of the island, landing at various inlets including what was to become Guantánamo Bay. With the Papal Bull of 1493, Pope Alexander VI commanded Spain to conquer, colonize and convert the Pagans of the New World to Catholicism.<sup>17</sup> On arrival, Columbus observed the Taíno dwellings, describing them as “looking like tents in a camp. All were of palm branches, beautifully constructed”.<sup>18</sup>

The Spanish began to create permanent settlements on the island of Hispaniola, east of Cuba, soon after Columbus's arrival in the Caribbean, but it wasn't until 1509 that the coast of Cuba was fully mapped by Sebastián de Ocampo.<sup>19</sup> In 1511, Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar set out with three ships and an army of 300 men from Hispaniola to form the first Spanish settlement in Cuba, with orders from Spain to conquer the island.

Along with where the Tainos lived, it is equally important to distinguish who they are. The indigenous people Columbus encountered in his first voyage called themselves "Taíno", meaning "good" or "noble", to differentiate themselves from Island-Caribs.<sup>20</sup> This name applied to all the Island Taínos including those in the Lesser Antilles. Locally, the Taínos referred to themselves by the name of their location. For example, those in Dominican Republic called themselves Quisqueyanos and their island was called Quisqueya and those occupying the Bahamas called themselves Lucayo (small islands).

Some ethnohistorians, such as Daniel Garrison Brinton, called the same culture of people "Island Arawak" from the Arawakan word for cassava flour, a staple of the race.

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17 Watts, “West Indies,” 134.

18 Christopher Columbus, *The Diary of Christopher Columbus* (New York: NTC Contemporary Publishing Company, 1997), 45.

19 Cruxent, *Columbus's Outpost*, 60.

20 Kathleen Deagan, “Reconsidering Taino Social Dynamics after Spanish Conquest, Gender Class in Culture Studies,” *American Antiquity* 69 (2004): 597-626.



From this, the language and the people were eventually called "Arawak".<sup>21</sup> However, modern scholars, whom this paper references, consider this a mistake. The people who called themselves Arawak lived only in Guyana and Trinidad and their language and culture differ from those of the Taíno. I happen to agree with this latter argument because the culture of the two was vastly different, everything from religion to politics. Modern historians, linguists and anthropologists now hold that the term Taíno should refer to all the Taíno/Arawak tribes except for the Caribs. The Caribs are not seen by anthropologists nor historians as being the same people although linguists are still debating whether the Carib language is an Arawakan dialect or creole language or perhaps a distinct language, with an Arawakan pidgin often used in communication.

Rouse classifies all inhabitants of the Greater Antilles (except the western tip of Cuba), the Bahamian archipelago, and the northern Lesser Antilles as Taínos. The Taínos are subdivided into three main groups: Classic Taíno, from Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, Western Taíno or sub-Taíno, from Jamaica, Cuba (except for the western tip) and the Bahamian archipelago, and Eastern Taíno, from the Virgin Islands to Montserrat.<sup>22</sup>

Two schools of thought have emerged regarding the origin of the indigenous people of the West Indies. One group contends that the ancestors of the Taínos came from the center of the Amazon Basin, subsequently moving to the Orinoco valley. From there they reached the West Indies by way of what is now Guyana and Venezuela into Trinidad, proceeding along the Lesser Antilles all the way to Cuba and the Bahamian archipelago

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21 Daniel Garrison Brinton, "The Depopulation of Hispanic America after the Conquest," *Population and Development Review* 32, no. 2 (2006): 202.

22 See Irving Rouse, *Tainos: Rise and Decline of the People Who Greeted Columbus*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 230-234.

Evidence that supports this theory includes the tracing of the ancestral cultures of these people to the Orinoco Valley and their languages to the Amazon Basin.<sup>23</sup>

The alternate theory, known as the Circum-Caribbean theory, contends that the ancestors of the Taínos diffused from the Colombian Andes. Julian Steward, the theory's originator, suggested a radiation from the Andes to the West Indies and a parallel radiation into Central America and into the Guianas, Venezuela and the Amazon Basin. Taíno culture is believed to have developed in the West Indies. The Taino believed they had originated from caves in a sacred mountain of Hispaniola.<sup>24</sup>

Taíno society was divided into two classes: naborias (commoners) and nitaínos (nobles). These were governed by chiefs known as caciques (who were either male or female) who were advised by priests/healers known as bohiques.<sup>25</sup> Bohiques were extolled for their healing powers and ability to speak with gods and as a result, they granted Taínos permission to engage in important tasks. Now that we can differentiate who actually qualify as the Taínos, we can begin to understand their specific life styles.

The way they lived is very important to the thesis of this paper because it will show they were susceptible to Columbus' conquest, and will show in great amount of detail how they had once lived peacefully and happy, only to succumb to depression and sometimes suicide. The Tainos lived in a matrilineal society. When a male heir was not present the inheritance or succession would go to the eldest child (son or daughter) of the deceased's sister. The Taínos were very experienced in agriculture and lived a mainly agrarian

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23 Cook, *Born to Die*, 344.

24 See Julian Steward, "Conquistador y Pestilencia, the First New World Pandemic and the Fall of the Great Indies," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 47 (1967): 325-328.

25 Watts, *West Indies*, 45.

lifestyle but also fished and hunted. A frequently worn hair style featured bangs in front and longer hair in back. They sometimes wore gold jewelry, paint, and/or shells.<sup>26</sup> Taíno men sometimes wore short skirts. Taíno women wore a similar garment (nagua) after marriage. Some Taíno practiced polygamy. Men, and sometimes women, might have 2 or 3 spouses, and it was noted that some caciques would even marry as many 30 wives.<sup>27</sup>

Another important factor in how they lived was their type of homes. The Taínos lived in metropolises (called yucayeques), which varied in size depending on the location; those in Hispaniola and Puerto Rico being the largest and those in the Bahamas being the smallest. In the center of a typical village was a plaza used for various social activities such as games, festivals, religious rituals, and public ceremonies. These plazas had many shapes including oval, rectangular, or narrow and elongated. Ceremonies where the deeds of the ancestors were celebrated, called areitos, were performed here. Often, the general population lived in large circular buildings (bohio), constructed with wooden poles, woven straw, and palm leaves. These houses would surround the central plaza and could hold 10-15 families. The cacique and his family would live in rectangular buildings (caney) of similar construction, with wooden porches. Taíno home furnishings included cotton hammocks (hamaca), mats made of palms, wooden chairs (dujo) with woven seats, platforms, and cradles for children.<sup>28</sup>

The Tainos enjoyed much leisure time before Columbus' arrival, and one example came in the games they played. The Taínos played a ceremonial ball game called batey.

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26 Ibid., 52.

27 Ibid., 56.

28 See Lizabeth A. Carlson, "The Columbian Exchange of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century," *The Geographical Review* 25 (1998): 177-198.

The game was played between opposing teams consisting of 10 to 30 players per team using a solid rubber ball.<sup>29</sup> Normally, the teams were composed of only men, but occasionally women played the game as well. The Classic Taínos played in the village's center plaza or on especially designed rectangular ball courts also called batey. Batey is believed to have been used for conflict resolution between communities; the most elaborate ball courts are found in chiefdoms' boundaries.<sup>30</sup> Often, chiefs made wagers on the possible outcome of a game.

The Tainos also influenced present day America. They spoke a Maipurean language but lacked a written language. Some of the words used by them such as barbacoa ("barbecue"), hamaca ("hammock"), canoa ("canoe"), tabaco ("tobacco"), yuca, and Huracán ("hurricane") have been incorporated into the Spanish and English languages.<sup>31</sup>

The food the Tainos ate, and how they farmed is extremely important in dissecting their decline because they often only grew just the right amount of food. Taíno staples included vegetables, fruit, meat, and fish. Large animals were absent from the fauna of the West Indies, but small animals such as hutias, earthworms, lizards, turtles, birds, and other mammals were eaten. Manatees were speared and fish were caught in nets, speared, poisoned, trapped in weirs, or caught with hook and line.<sup>32</sup> Wild parrots were decoyed with domesticated birds and iguanas were extracted from trees and other vegetation. Taínos stored live animals until they were ready to be consumed, fish and turtles were stored in weirs, and hutias and dogs were stored in corrals.

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29 Watts, *West Indies*, 76.

30 Peter Ewald, "The Evolution of Chiefdoms: A Reconstruction of Taino Kinships Politics," *American Anthropologists* 91 (1987): 1011-13.

31 *Ibid.*, 627-28.

32 Deagen, "Reconstructing," 601.

Taíno groups in the more developed islands, such as Hispaniola (Dominican Republic & Haiti), Puerto Rico, and Jamaica, relied more on agriculture. Fields for important root crops, such as the staple yuca, were prepared by heaping up mounds of soil, called conocus,<sup>33</sup> which improved soil drainage and fertility as well as delaying erosion, and allowing for longer storage of crops in the ground. Less important crops such as corn, was raised in simple clearings created by slash and burn technique. Typically, Conucos were 3 feet high and 9 feet in circumference and were arranged in rows. The primary root crop was cassava or yuca, a woody shrub cultivated for its edible and starchy tuberous root.<sup>34</sup> It was planted using a coa, a kind of hoe made completely out of wood. Women squeezed the poisonous variety of "cassava" to extract the toxic juices preparatory to grinding the roots into flour for baking bread. Batata (Sweet potato) was the next most important root crop.

Contrary to mainland practices, corn was not ground into flour and baked into bread. Instead, it was eaten off the cob. A possible explanation for this is that corn bread becomes moldy faster than cassava bread in the high humidity of the West Indies. Taínos grew squash, beans, peppers, peanuts, and pineapples. Tobacco, calabashes (West Indian pumpkins) and cotton were grown around the houses. Other fruits and vegetables, such as palm nuts, guavas, and Zamia roots, were collected from the wild.

The Tainos were able to grow and harvest much more than food, and this shows they were still advancing as a society. The Taínos used cotton, hemp and palm extensively for fishing nets and ropes. Their dugout canoes (kanoa) were made in various sizes, which

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33 John F. Richards, *The Unending Frontier: An Environmental History of the Early Modern World* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 320.

34 *Ibid.*, 321-23.

could hold from 2 to 150 people. An average sized kanoa would hold about 15 - 20 people. They used bows and arrows, and sometimes put various poisons on their arrowheads. For warfare, they employed the use of a wooden war club, which they called a macana, which was about one inch thick and was similar to the coco macaque.<sup>35</sup>

The Taino culture even obtained their own religion, not the one forced upon them later by Columbus. Their religion centered on the worship of zemís or cemís. Cemís are gods, spirits, or ancestors. The major Taino gods are Yucahu and Atabey. Yúcahu, which means spirit of cassava, was the god of cassava (the Taínos main crop) and the sea.<sup>36</sup> Atabey, mother of Yúcahu, was the goddess of fresh waters and fertility. The minor Taino gods related to growing of cassava, the process of life, creation and death. Baibrama was a minor god worshiped for his assistance in growing cassava and curing people from its poisonous juice. Boinayel and his twin brother Márohu were the gods of rain and fair weather respectively. Guabancex was the goddess of storms (hurricanes).<sup>37</sup> Juracán is often identified as the god of storms. but juracán only means hurricane in the Taíno language. Guabancex had two assistants: Guataubá, a messenger who created hurricane winds, and Coatrisquie, who created floodwaters. Maquetaurie Guayaba or Maketaori Guayaba was the god of Coaybay, the land of the dead. Opiyelguabirán, a dog-shaped god, watched over the dead. Deminán Caracaracol, a male cultural hero from which the Taíno believed to descend, was worshipped as a cemí.<sup>38</sup>

Cemí was also the name of the physical representations of the gods. These

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35 Ricardo Algeria, *Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Carribean*, (New York: Monacelli Publishing, 1998): 176-78.

36 Bethell, *Latin America*, 83.

37 Maclachan, "Archeology," 615.

38 *Ibid.*, 623.

representations came in many forms and materials and could be found in a variety of settings. The majority of cemís were crafted from wood but stone, bone, shell, pottery, and cotton were also used.<sup>39</sup> Cemí petroglyphs were carved on rocks in streams, ball courts, and on stalagmites in caves. Cemí pictographs were found on secular objects such as pottery, and on tattoos. Yucahú, the god of cassava, was represented with a three-pointed cemí which could be found in conucos to increase the yield of cassava. Wood and stone cemís have been found in caves in Hispaniola and Jamaica.<sup>40</sup>

Cemís are sometimes represented by toads, turtles, snakes, and various abstract and human-like faces. Some of the carved Cemís include a small table or tray which is believed to be a receptacle for hallucinogenic snuff called cohoba prepared from the beans of a species of Piptadenia tree.<sup>41</sup> These trays have been found with ornately carved snuff tubes. Before certain ceremonies Taínos would purify themselves, either by inducing vomiting with a swallowing stick or by fasting.<sup>42</sup> After serving communal bread, first to the Cemi, then to the cacique, and then to the common people, the village epic would be sung to the accompaniment of maraca and other instruments.<sup>43</sup>

Tainos also employed body modification as an expression of their faith, which again shows they were developing themselves as a culture; a culture that ended too soon when Columbus arrived. The higher the piercing or tattoo on the body, the closer to their gods.<sup>44</sup> Men usually wore decorative tattoos and the women usually had piercings. One Taíno oral tradition explains that the sun and moon come out of caves. Another story tells

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39 See Algeria, *Pre-Columbian Art*, 204-214.

40 *Ibid.*, 213.

41 Bethell, *Latin America*, 122.

42 Crosby, *Transformation*, 136.

43 Bethell, *Latin America*, 126.

44 Maclachan, 1015

of people who once lived in caves and only came out at night, because it was believed that the sun would transform them.<sup>45</sup> The Taíno believed themselves descended from the union of Deminaán Caracaracol and a female turtle. The origin of the oceans is described in the story of a huge flood which occurred when a father murdered his son (who was about to murder the father), and then put his bones into a gourd or calabash. These bones then turned to fish and the gourd broke and all the water of the world came pouring out. Taínos believed that the souls of the dead go to Coaybay, the underworld, and there they rest by day, and when night comes they assume the form of bats and eat the fruit "guayaba".<sup>46</sup>

These examples have provided ample information that the Tainos enjoyed a rich, healthy life-style and one that was highly developed with religious practices and much leisure time. However, this would all change once Columbus arrived, as he wrote:

They traded with us and gave us everything they had, with good will...they took great delight in pleasing us. They are very gentle and without knowledge of what is evil; nor do they murder or steal. Your highness may believe that in all the world there can be no better people... They love their neighbours as themselves, and they have the sweetest talk in the world, and are gentle and always laughing.<sup>47</sup>

The Tainos decimation is quite sad, and many factors contributed to it. One such breeding ground for these factors was the city of in 1496 on the city of Nueva Isabela when Bartholomew Columbus, Christopher's brother, built the city in the south of Hispaniola. It was one of the first Spanish settlements (the previous ones had also been on Hispaniola), and became Europe's first permanent settlement in the "New World". The Spaniards created a plantation economy on Hispaniola, particularly from the second half of the 16th century. The island became a springboard for European conquest of the Caribbean

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45 Ewald, 620

46 Torres, "Haiti," 325.

47 Columbus, *Diary*, 55.



islands, called Las Antillas (The Antilles), and soon after, the American mainland. For example, Anderson Córdovas estimates a maximum of 500,000 people inhabiting the island.<sup>48</sup> The Taíno population estimates range all over, from a few hundred thousand up to 8,000,000.<sup>49</sup> They were not immune to Old World diseases, notably smallpox. Many of them were worked to death in the mines and fields. They literally worked until they collapsed from exhaustion and were beaten in attempt to get up, but most never did. They were also put to death in harsh put-downs of revolts or committed suicide (throwing themselves out of the cliffs or consuming manioc leaves) to escape their cruel new masters. Las Casas wrote that the Spaniards:

made bets as to who would slit a man in two, or cut off his head at one blow; or they opened up his bowels. They tore the babes from their mothers breast by their feet, and dashed their heads against the rocks...they spitted the bodies of other babes, together with their mothers and all who were before them, on their swords....and by thirteens, in honor and reverence for our Redeemer and the twelve Apostles they put wood underneath and, with fire, they burned the Indians alive"<sup>50</sup>

Columbus and his men became paranoid on Hispaniola and other island. Columbus and his men came to a conclusion that they must create awe and fear among the Tainos in order to quell any ideas of an upheaval. Their brutality was in full effect very quickly after arriving. Columbus and his men created reasons to chop body parts of the Tainos, and in some cases decapitate them. The fear they imposed were just one of the many reasons the Tainos fled the island and never tried to fight back the outnumbered Spanish. These brutalities were also huge reasons why the Taino population fell rapidly.

One of the larger reasons for the Tainos decline was starvation. The Spanish

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48 Anderson Cordovas, *The Colonization of the Indies*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999), 34-36.

49 Henige, *Numbers from Nowhere*, 140.

50 De Las Casas, *History*, 154.

demanded food for themselves from the Tainos. However it was very hard for them to produce such a surplus to meet the large appetite of the Spanish. The conuco cultivation was created by the Tainos to feed just themselves, and not have any surplus. The conucos provide an excellent example to the contrast the Tainos experienced before and after Columbus's arrival. John F. Richards writes, "Twenty persons working six hours a day for one month will make a planting of such conucos that will provide bread for 300 people for two years."<sup>51</sup> The Spanish did not seem to care and they took much food for themselves at the stake of the Tainos. Also, most conucos were deserted as the Spanish wanted the Tainos to mostly mine gold. These deserted conucus grew secondary vegetation and weeds quickly.<sup>52</sup> The animals that the Spanish brought in had also trampled many conucos and the environmental damage the foreign species can still be seen today. Famine conditions were rampant for the first time on the island after Hispaniola. These famines were a large reason for the decline of the Tainos population, however it wasn't the only one.

Another such hardship came while facing hard working conditions. Gold seeking expeditions for Columbus, also gave him cause to make many Tainos slaves. Men, women and children were forced to work many hours, under harsh conditions. Some Tainos were ordered to pay gold tributes to Columbus, and were often not able to. Those unable to comply, were forced to work in labor camps, or were shipped to Europe to be slaves.<sup>53</sup> Many Tainos, did not want to live under these conditions and abandoned their homes and fled in huge numbers. Urged by royal demands, colonists put immense pressure on the

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51 Richards, *Unending Frontier*, 319.

52 *Ibid.*, 332.

53 Patricia Seed, "Are These Also Not Men? The Indian's Humanity and Capacity for Spanish Civilization," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 25, no. 3 (1993): 132.

Tainos to exploit all gold opportunities, more than had ever been custom. By 1502, Hispaniola was shipping a lot more gold back to Spain every year. News of the gold quickly spread to Spain and many settlers were inhabiting the islands. Partly as a result of the forced labor mentioned, Taino mortality resumed to the toll that only 60,000 remained in 1508.<sup>54</sup> The forced labor had the Taino working many hours, in mine shafts that were dark, dirty and unsafe. Casualties were abundant, and many were injured with no chance of receiving medicine or medical care. Mixing races from slaves brought in from other islands also was a key factor in the decline of the Tainos.

To supplement the declining Tainos population, the colonists began to import black slaves from West Africa and the Canary Islands to work in these fields of gold.<sup>55</sup> While working under the hardships they faced searching for this gold, most Tainos did not survive. The ones that did often fell under cultural depression, and some committed suicide and many women stopped having children.<sup>56</sup> It is argued that there was substantial mestizaje as well as several Indian pueblos that survived into the 19th century in Cuba.<sup>57</sup> The Spaniards who first arrived in the Bahamas, Cuba and Hispaniola in 1492, and later in Puerto Rico, did not bring women. They took Taíno women for their wives, which resulted in mestizo children.<sup>58</sup> Once Frey Nicolas de Ovando arrived in the West Indies, royal orders commanded him to encourage the Tainos to accept Christianity. He also had to collect tribute, or tithes, for the church from people that knew very little about their

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54 Brinton, "Depopulation of Hispanic America," 160-162.

55 Steward, "Conquistador," 109.

56 Ibid., 112.

57 Cordova, *Hispaniola*, 36.

58 Ibid., 40 – 45.

religion.<sup>59</sup> Those that refused to assimilate were killed or beaten, and these actions also repressed the Tainos to try any upheaval. These instances played a large role in the decline of the Tainos, but were just a small piece of the puzzle.

Another reason for the decimation of the population of the Tainos, and largest, was disease. Disease was so devastating to the Tainos, as well as most of the Indian tribes the Spanish encountered, because they had no immunities in their bodies to fight them. Their susceptibility to introduced viruses had a devastating toll on the Tainos and their numbers fell at an exacerbating rate. On Hispaniola, the indigenous people fell quickly under Diego Columbus's rule. When Ferdinand died and Charles V ascended to power and new spirit arose in Spain, and many people acknowledged the atrocities committed against the Tainos.<sup>60</sup> Many officials began to abolish forced labor and tried to “settle the surviving Tainos in pueblos and restore conuco horticulture for manioc. However, just as this program was taking off, the first smallpox cases arrived and spread rapidly through the susceptible Taino population. of Hispaniola. Quickly, rapidly and without a hitch it spread to present day Puerto Rico and the other island of the West Indies.

The animals that the Spanish brought with them were the main culprits, as the disease ridden creatures roamed all over the islands once they were brought in. The lack of fences built by the Spanish were the main cause of these free roaming animals. Those animals also ate too much food, trampled conucos,, which was the main source of food for the Tainos furthering their problems. With these food problems, and the disease that the Spanish brought, the Tainos had very little chance to survive in the long run. Clergyman

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59 Deagan, “Taino Social Dynamics,” 599-600.

60 Francisco Guerra, “The Earliest American Epidemic: The Influenza of 1493,” *Social Science History* 12 (1998): 288-289.

Bartolomé de Las Casas observed a number of massacres initiated by the invaders as the Spanish swept over the island, notably the massacre near Manzanillo of the inhabitants of Caonao. According to his account, some three thousand villagers had traveled to Manzanillo to greet the Spanish with loaves, fishes and other foodstuffs and were "without provocation, butchered".<sup>61</sup> The surviving indigenous groups fled to the mountains or the small surrounding islands before being captured and forced into reservations. One such reservation was Guanabacoa, which is today a suburb of Havana.

In 1513, Ferdinand II of Aragon issued a decree establishing the *encomienda* land settlement system that was to be incorporated throughout the Spanish Americas. Velázquez, who had become Governor of Cuba relocating from Baracoa to Santiago de Cuba, was given the task of apportioning both the land and the indigenous Cubans to groups throughout the new colony.<sup>62</sup> The scheme was not a success, however, as the Cubans either succumbed to diseases brought from Spain such as measles and smallpox, or simply refused to work preferring to slip away into the mountains.<sup>63</sup> Desperate for labor to toil the new agricultural settlements, the Conquistadors sought slaves from surrounding islands and the continental mainland. But these new arrivals followed the indigenous Cubans by also dispersing into the wilderness or suffering a similar fate at the hands of disease.

The West Indies has a rich and fascinating history. The Tainos enjoyed a free lifestyle and lots of free time. They were healthy in many ways, especially when compared to the Spanish. However, once Columbus arrived in 1492, their population shrank very

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61 Seed, "Indian's Humanity," 248-49.

62 Richards, *Unending Frontier*, 325.

63 Guerra, *American Epidemic*, 290.

quickly. Again, there were many disputes about the population of the Tainos before Columbus arrived, but there is little dispute about the population after he came, and what caused it. 8 to 2 million people fell close to zero in about 50 years. It comes as no surprise that the the Tainos were decimated, this decimation was highly caused by disease, Spanish violence, overwork, cultural despair and intermarriage were the main reasons for the decline of the Taino.

After providing all evidence, and facts that I happen to agree with, I believe the population was probably around 2 million. The islands could have supported this easily, while the natives could work as little as they wanted or needed. What we know about the culture of the Tainos is that chiefdoms usually centered around a large amount of people, but probably would have needed more cheifdoms if there were 8 million Tainos. For the amount of people inhabiting the islands, scholars, and I, believe that the population probably rested around two million. However, this again is all speculative, there is evidence that 8 million people lived on the islands, and there is evidence that 500,000 people lived on the islands based on eye witness accounts. However the numbers are always going to get muddled for the reasons above, not to mention that the addition of some zambos were categorized as black and some Indians as mulattos,<sup>64</sup> no matter what the numbers were, the real problem came in how they fell to zero.

Many people still identify themselves as descendants of the Taínos, and most notably among some Dominicans & Puerto Ricans, both on the island and on the United States mainland. People claiming to be Taíno descendants have been active in trying to assert a call for recognition of their tribe. A recent study conducted in Puerto Rico suggests

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64 Kirkpatrick Sale, "The Conquest of Paradise," *The Public Historian* 16 (1987): 83-84.

that over 61percent of the population possess Taíno mtDNA. Recently, a few Taíno organizations, such as the Jatibonicù Taíno Tribal Nation of Boriken Puerto Rico (1970), the Taíno Nation of the Antilles (1993) and the United Confederation of Taíno People(1998), have been established to defend these claims.<sup>65</sup> What some refer to as the Taíno revival movement can be seen as an integral part of the wider resurgence in Caribbean indigenous cultural restoration. The Jatibonicu Tribal Nation of Borikén was reaffirmed in Puerto Rico on November 18th 1970, Lambda Sigma Upsilon, a Latino Fraternity, adapted the Taíno Indian as their mascot symbol in 1980.

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<sup>65</sup> Cordova, *Hispaniola*, 43.

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