

THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC READER

HISTORY, CULTURE, POLITICS



Eric Paul Roorda, Lauren Derby, and Raymundo González, editors

The Dominican Republic Reader

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THE
DOMINICAN
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READER

HISTORY, CULTURE, POLITICS

Eric Paul Roorda, Lauren Derby, and Raymundo González, editors

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For A. E., Alida, and Frances: graces, muses, and companions.

For Julian, Alec, and James, fellow travelers who have swum in the Artibonite, relished *pollo criollo*, and been blessed by the *misterios*.

A mi madre.

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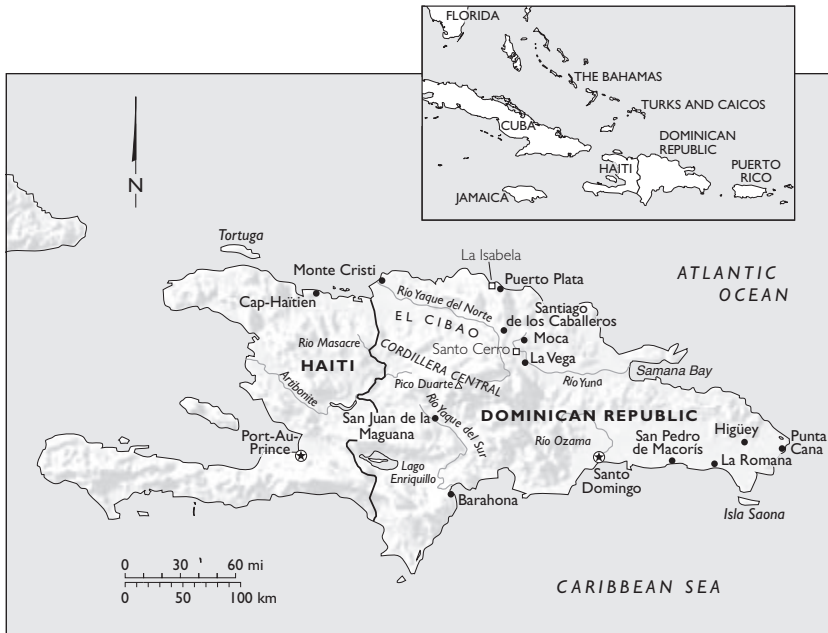
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La República Dominicana, the Dominican Republic.

Introduction

The Dominican Republic is home to the oldest of the Old World societies planted in the New World. The blending of all things indigenous, European, and African, which is largely the history of the Americas, began with this Caribbean nation. The early history of Santo Domingo, as it was called, foreshadowed the way the Spanish Empire developed, and at the beginning of that process, no place in the hemisphere was more important.

Despite its historical significance in the drama “Old World meets New World,” the Dominican Republic is familiar to most non-Dominicans only through a few elements of its history and culture. Many people are aware that it shares an island called Hispaniola with Haiti and that it was the place where Christopher Columbus chose to build a colony. Some people know that the country produces top major league baseball players and popular musicians. Other people have learned that it is a great option for an all-inclusive beach vacation. But not much else about the place is common knowledge outside its borders. People who visit the Dominican Republic but limit their experience to a week at a seaside resort gain little understanding of the country beyond the tourist enclave.

The relative obscurity of the Dominican Republic results partly from the fact that it has not received the academic attention in English that it deserves. It is more difficult to delve into the Dominican past and present than it is for most other Latin American nations. This Reader seeks to change that. It provides an introduction to the history, politics, and culture of the Dominican Republic, from precolonial history to current trends, combining primary sources such as essays, songs, poems, legal documents, and oral testimonies translated from Spanish, with excerpts from academic scholarship, to present the dramatic story of Dominican life since the country's founding.

By many measures, the Dominican Republic is a land of extremes. It has the highest mountain in the Caribbean archipelago, Pico Duarte in the Central Range, at more than 10,000 feet above sea level, as well as the lowest

2 Introduction

point, Lago Enriquillo, a saltwater lake 150 feet below sea level, which has doubled in size in recent years for mysterious reasons. It has the largest metropolis in the Caribbean, Santo Domingo, with a population of 2.2 million, which is also the oldest city in the hemisphere, founded more than 500 years ago, and one of the fastest growing, having tripled in size in the last four decades. Santo Domingo also has the newest subway system in the world. Beyond the capital city, the nation as a whole is also expanding rapidly, more than doubling in population since the 1970s, and increasing elevenfold in just the last ninety years; it is about as densely populated as Pakistan.

The Dominican Republic is a country in transition in many ways, with its burgeoning population, rapid urbanization, ongoing emigrant diaspora, democratic political development, and economic transformation. This anthology reflects these contemporary changes and traces their deep roots.

The collection begins with the indigenous Taíno people, who numbered some 1 million in the late fifteenth century, according to estimates going back to the first Spanish census in 1496. Considering this large native population, the arrival of Christopher Columbus on the island they called “Hayti” was less a discovery than an encounter, one characterized by deep misunderstanding on both sides. European contact brought famine and disease, which drastically reduced the numbers of indigenous people in the first decades of settlement, with only a few courageous priests to speak out against their abuse, to little effect. Spanish efforts to create a mining and plantation economy by dividing up the indigenous people and forcing them to work met first with the baffled incomprehension of the Taínos, who could not fathom the Spanish lust for gold, and then with their fierce resistance, as Indian communities held out militarily against the Spanish for decades, though in most cases they were unable to withstand their far better armed and supplied opponents. Traces of the indigenous population can be found today in scattered historical forms such as the paintings and carvings left on cave walls, words still embedded in Dominican Spanish, and foods such as *casabe*, a manioc flat bread that accompanies a proper lunch in the Cibao. Inaccurate versions of this early period are all that many outsiders have heard about the history of the Dominican Republic. For this reason, part I of this Reader offers a selection of sources that together represent the complexity of what took place more accurately than mainstream accounts, which underrepresent the size and relatively advanced state of the island’s indigenous society and minimize the intense violence and massive scale of the Spanish assault on it.

The epochal watershed of Columbus's arrival in 1492 (and even more so, his return with a much larger fleet in 1493) initiated the first Spanish colony, but Santo Domingo's course of development soon diverged from that of subsequent colonies planted in the region, whether Spanish, French, or British. His return set in motion three related processes that defined the Dominican Republic as unique, even by Caribbean standards: first, the early arrival of enslaved Africans and then the early end to the importation of enslaved people; second, the preponderance of freedpeople over enslaved people early on; and last, the fact that the economy was based on cattle ranching, logging, and contraband rather than plantation agriculture. These factors combined to give rise to a far less hierarchical social order than elsewhere in Latin America, where enslavement exerted more influence on the economies, societies, and plantation cultures. As Sidney Mintz has said about the Caribbean as a whole, the region is intrinsically modern because it was populated by immigrants, it lacked an indigenous presence, and it was defined by the protoindustrial rhythms of plantation agriculture.¹ Yet the Dominican Republic departs from this model in certain key respects, which we have sought to highlight here.

In much of the Antilles peasant society only existed at the margins of plantation monoculture, but the underdevelopment of the colony of Santo Domingo enabled far more rural autonomy there than elsewhere. Though the Spanish imported and enslaved tens of thousands of Africans during the sixteenth century to mine gold and grow sugar and tobacco, once colonial attention shifted to the more profitable mainland, with its highly successful silver mining in Mexico and Bolivia, the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo foundered. The low demographic density and poverty of the colonists made it impossible to establish the capital-intensive forms of production found elsewhere.

Dominican history laments this period of poverty and neglect, since it failed to enable the affluence acquired by neighboring colonies, yet it did succeed in giving rise to a flourishing popular Creole culture rooted in a free peasantry in the mountainous highlands, locally termed *monteros*—the Dominican version of the *jibaro* of Puerto Rico. Official neglect, a small, scattered population, and lax social control enabled a burgeoning “proto-peasant” subsistence economy to emerge, of shifting agricultural settlements largely populated by people who had escaped from slavery, people who had been manumitted, and their progeny. They supplied smoked meat and tobacco to a thriving contraband economy based on neighboring La Tortuga Island and extending to Santiago de Cuba and Port Royal, Jamaica. This system of illicit ports and maritime links, transnational in scope, de-

fied neat colonial boundaries. The importance of smoked meat to the ships' crews was the basis of this population of *buccaneers*, who took their name from the Taíno Arawak term *buccan*, a technique for smoking meat over an open fire.

This contraband economy of black "masterless men" was so successful that Spanish authorities resorted to draconian measures to contain it. The best known example was "the Devastations" of 1606, when Governor Domingo de Osorio burned northern settlements to the ground in a futile effort to curb contraband by forcing rural inhabitants closer to Santo Domingo. The fact that many of the wealthiest pirates in this pan-Antillean maritime community had formerly been enslaved probably doubly galled the Crown. This flourishing, illicit economy linking the sea with the interior helped to establish resilient individualism, informality, and rule-bending as enduring elements of Dominican cultural identity.

Colonial poverty and the fact that imports of enslaved people ceased in the sixteenth century also gave rise to another feature distinctive to the Dominican Republic: a far more familial and paternalistic form of slavery than elsewhere. The fact that most farms were small and slave owners had only a few slaves, who worked alongside family labor, fostered far more intimate relations between masters and slaves than in the larger-scale plantation model. Freedpeople were more numerous than enslaved people in the Dominican Republic as early as the seventeenth century, a fact that itself helped shape a very different culture of race and status-marking than elsewhere. If the constant lament of Dominican elites into the twentieth century was the stubborn "idleness of the island," this was testimony to the effectiveness of peasant resistance, as the peasantry perceived no need to withdraw from a secure subsistence base to enter the labor market. The lawless environment of colonial Santo Domingo dominates part II.

Tobacco and meat smuggling began to diminish in importance once a third of the western portion of the island was given to the French in 1697 and the French colony of Saint Domingue was born. As the neighboring French colony grew into the jewel in the crown of the French empire, providing more wealth to France than all the other colonies combined by the mid-eighteenth century, the Spanish side of the island also benefited indirectly, becoming a net purveyor of cattle, fine woods, and foodstuffs to the west, while serving as an important refuge for people escaping from the harsh treatment they suffered while enslaved within the plantation regime of colonial Haiti. While the two colonies developed distinct identities, trade alliances and population movement forged bonds among individuals across the frontier.

Traditional Dominican historiography vilifies Haiti, highlighting ethnic and cultural differences between the former French and Spanish colonies and assuming them to be primordial, constant, and unchanging across time and space. Indeed, François-Dominique Toussaint-Louverture conquered the Spanish side during the Haitian Revolution (1790–1804), Emperor Jean-Jacques Dessalines sacked Santiago and the Cibao Valley in 1805, and in 1822, owing to fears of further foreign intervention from the east, the newly unified Republic of Haiti occupied the even newer Dominican Republic, which had declared itself free from Spain just months before. The Dominicans finally gained their independence in 1844, not from Spain but from Haiti. While we cover this period in part III, we also strive to portray Haitian-Dominican relations even during this period as more complex than the traditional portrayal presumes. For instance, it is important to remember that there was some Dominican support for Haitian intervention, not least from people who were freed from slavery by the Haitian regime. We have also included selections in other sections on popular music and religious practices that demonstrate cultural continuities across the border, even when ideas of national difference blind observers to recognizing these forms.

One feature distinctive to the Dominican colony and the nation that grew from it was that blackness was not at all segregated, marginal, or univocally associated with menial work. As a result, many African-descended Dominicans rose to become prominent intellectuals, priests, and statesmen. Their voices are represented throughout this anthology, including that of Salomé Ureña de Henríquez, the national poet, first lady, and feminist. Dominican history includes many prominent men and women of color who played important roles in public life, even if they saw themselves as creoles, not black, and thus have not been included in the annals of African American history.

Another distinguishing feature of the Dominican Republic is that it has suffered far more foreign intervention than other Latin American countries. Part IV deals with the politics of the mid- to late nineteenth century, dominated by three strongmen, or *caudillos*, who often abetted the intrusions: Pedro Santana, Buenaventura Baez, and Ulises “Lilís” Heureaux. This period included the Spanish recolonization effort of the 1860s and the US attempt to annex the Dominican Republic in the 1870s. The selections in this part of the Reader document the causes and results of those imperial episodes.

Part V presents the conversation about national identity that caudillo rule and foreign intervention sparked. How was the new nation to deal with the “northern colossus”? In this part, we seek to characterize the range of fears and dreams that pervaded the debates over this question, both between

liberals and conservatives and within the community of late nineteenth-century liberal thinkers. For example, we hear from Pedro Francisco Bonó, who saw the essence of national identity as located in the tobacco cultivators of the Cibao Valley in the 1870s; Rafael Damirón, who chronicled a certain way of being Dominican called *dominicanidad* (dominicanity) via the mores and fashions of the cosmopolitan elite of the capital city, Santo Domingo; and finally critics of the savage capitalism of the foreign-owned sugar industry, which they saw as the ruin of the nation. A key contribution of this Reader is that it presents these primary Spanish sources in translation, since virtually none of them, unlike those of Cuba or Puerto Rico, have been translated or known outside the island before now. There are some interesting surprises, such as the fact that the renowned black abolitionist Frederick Douglass, alongside some prominent Dominicans, was a proponent of annexation to the United States.

Part VI returns to the subject of intervention, this time the US Marine occupation of 1916–1924, presenting documentation of both the brutality of this little-known war, including the use of waterboarding on suspected insurgents, and the depth of Dominican resistance to it.

The US occupation built the foundation for the long-lived dictatorship known as “The Era of Trujillo.” Rafael Trujillo got his start as a Marine trainee, seized power in 1930, and kept it for three decades. During that time he simultaneously modernized the nation’s economy and infrastructure and traumatized much of its citizenry. This collection of documents on the period is meant to reflect Trujillo’s compelling personal amalgam of energy, efficiency, ambition, depravity, and megalomania.

Another key topic this Reader documents is Dominican state formation and political identity, from the caudillos of the nineteenth century to the two authoritarian leaders of the twentieth, Rafael Trujillo and the man who succeeded him in power, his intellectual enabler and protégé Joaquín Balaguer. Part VIII follows the nation’s political misfortunes from the collapse of the Trujillo dictatorship through the power struggles of the early 1960s; the rise and fall of the populists Juan Bosch and José Francisco Peña Gómez; the revolution of 1965 and subsequent US invasion and occupation; the making, unmaking, and remaking of the Balaguer administration; the advent of relatively fair elections; and finally the rise of the three-time centrist president Leonel Fernández. These readings bring these events and personalities to life through materials such as the prize-winning poem that launched the young Balaguer’s career, a story and interview by Juan Bosch, US Senate testimony from the general who ousted him, a radio address by Peña Gómez, and revelatory US intelligence reports on the post-Trujillo po-

litical climate and the notorious “Twelve Years” dictatorship orchestrated by Balaguer, among other items.

The last three parts delve deeper into everyday life in the Dominican Republic through an examination of religious beliefs, popular culture, and transnational migration. Part IX represents the broad range of overlapping Dominican belief systems, including Roman Catholicism, Protestant evangelicalism, and hybrid genres such as Vodú, Espiritismo, and the southwestern regional healing cult of Liborismo. Part X takes on the rich and complicated subject of popular culture, in particular notions of race, modes of masculinity and femininity, styles of music, and forms of magic. Dominican music has had an inordinate impact on the world and is best known through the current global boom of *bachata* and merengue. Three important but lesser known Dominican purveyors of Latin rhythms to the global music market are represented here: the operatic baritone singer Eduardo Brito, who rose from shoeshine boy to perform at the Waldorf Astoria in New York in the 1930s; the merengue star Johnny Ventura, who was so popular he was elected mayor of Santo Domingo; and Milly Quezada, one of the few women to achieve prominence in Dominican music. This part concludes with an account of the magical significance of names and some handy charms to use for obtaining a US visa.

The border-crossing theme continues in part XI, which explores the flow of Dominican emigration and immigration to gauge how they have changed the contours of everyday life there. In recent decades, hundreds of thousands of Dominicans have left the island permanently or for considerable periods of their lives, many of them going to New York City, which today has become a second Dominican capital. They are part of an enormous transnational community of individuals who might be seen as both Dominican and American, or as neither, because they represent a new hybrid of the two nations. In Dominican neighborhoods in the United States, youths have adapted African American forms such as hip-hop into the new styles of merenhouse and dembow, which have proven wildly popular. Dominicans have also made their mark on the production end of *reggaetón*, since the Dominican duo Luny Tunes helped give rise to the genre, and the music producer and songwriter El Cata (Eduardo Bello Pou) from Barahona has collaborated with contemporary global music sensations Shakira and Pitbull. In addition, the best-selling immigrant writers Julia Alvarez and Junot Díaz have described the wrenching challenges of life in the United States to readers who otherwise would be blind to Dominican reality, and they portray Dominican domestic struggles in both countries as alternately explosive and joyous.

But the most visible of all the Dominicans in the United States play baseball for a living. More than 10 percent of all players in the major leagues, including many of its biggest stars, have come from the Dominican Republic or Dominican neighborhoods in the United States. The spectacular rise of Dominican baseball began in 1956 with the virtually forgotten Osvaldo “Ozzie” Virgil, an immigrant as a boy, who is featured in part XI. The appeal of emigration is powerful for poor Dominicans, many of whom attempt to reach Puerto Rico by sea and perish in the attempt, a fact that the merengue star Wilfrido Vargas lamented in the 1980s hit song “La Yola” (The Little Boat). The collection concludes with a glossary of Dominican American jokes and expressions.

An anthology of this size cannot be comprehensive.² Nonetheless, in one volume this Reader brings together translated materials by Dominicans about their challenges and excerpted selections of outstanding scholarship on the Dominican Republic by outsiders. It provides lesser known perspectives on topics such as the indigenous populations and their religious beliefs, the violence of the Spanish and the native resistance to them, the buccaneers and the world of the pirates, and the communities of maroon fugitives from slavery. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw decades of the destruction of war, which we see through the eyes of eyewitnesses and participants. We have collected the voices of army generals, peasant women, CIA operatives, popular healers, and many others so that *The Dominican Republic Reader* could extend as it does across ideologies and categories of age and gender. It provides insights into the reasons for the country’s struggles for democracy, when and why political openings emerged, and why they were shut down. It offers a social, political, and cultural history, one that brings together perspectives from all sides—academic scholarship, journalism, religion, photography, testimonial literature, poetry, short stories, and several original interviews that were conducted especially for this Reader. Most of all, it offers a deeper understanding of the history of a country whose people, through a tumultuous past profoundly shaped by the United States, have faced adversity with courage, honor, wit, and poetry. We hope to inspire you to learn more about this compelling country.

All notes in the selections are the editors’ unless otherwise indicated.

Notes

1. Sidney Mintz, *Caribbean Transformations* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).
2. For those looking for an excellent overview of Dominican history, there is Frank Moya Pons, *Dominican Republic: A National History* (Princeton, NJ: Marcus Wiener, 2010).

European Encounters

Humans reached the shores of what was to become the Dominican Republic about 6,000 years ago, when the Casimiroid People came from the Yucatán Peninsula via Cuba. They made stone tools to fish and hunt manatees and sloths, driving the sloths to extinction. Around AD 250, waves of Amerindian newcomers began to arrive on the island, having moved up the archipelago of the Lesser Antilles from the coast of what is now Venezuela. They cultivated crops, made elaborately decorated pottery, cooked bread on ceramic griddles, and traveled in canoes made of whole trees. The word “canoe” is one of only a few words that survive of the languages spoken by their descendants, people known collectively as the Taíno. Other words with Taíno origins, including “hurricane,” “hammock,” “tobacco,” and “barbecue,” reflect other important aspects of their lives.

They were divided into several different chiefdoms whose regional variations have their contemporary parallel in differences that continue to define Dominicans’ regional identities. It is an ongoing debate in the Dominican Republic whether one’s allegiance is stronger to the nation or to one’s home region, or *patria chica*.

The Spanish invasion introduced dozens of devastating new maladies, including influenza, cholera, smallpox, and many other infectious pathogens, which assailed the Taínos’ unprepared immune systems, destroying entire towns at a time. Their harsh lives, spent working in the conquerors’ mines and plantations or hiding in the mountains beyond the conquerors’ control, often ended prematurely. Adding to the toll, Spanish military campaigns to suppress native resistance sometimes culminated in genocidal reprisals carried out on horseback with the aid of guns, steel swords, vicious mastiff dogs, and the gallows. Between epidemics and abuse, the “pre-Columbian” population dwindled rapidly.

The People Who Greeted Columbus

Irving Rouse

*The classic secondary source on the indigenous people of the Dominican Republic is the archaeologist Irving Rouse, who began digging at Taíno sites in Puerto Rico in the 1930s. The introduction to his book *The Taínos: Rise and Decline of the People Who Greeted Columbus* summarizes the culture of the Classic Taínos, which was more complex than the societies of Western and Eastern Taínos and Caribs on the neighboring islands.*

Columbus encountered large, permanent villages in Hispaniola and Puerto Rico, each governed by a chief, or cacique. They contained an average of one thousand to two thousand people and ranged in size from a single building to twenty to fifty houses, all made of wood and thatch. Several related families lived together in the same house.

The houses were irregularly arranged around a central plaza. The chief's home, larger and better made than the rest, was situated on the plaza. Round, conically roofed dwellings called *caney* predominated. They were accompanied, at least during colonial time, by rectangular *bohíos* [houses]. The houses had dirt floors, and there were no partitions between families. Although some chiefs slept on wooden platforms, most people used hammocks made of cordage. Goods were stored in baskets hung from the roof and walls. The chiefs and other persons of high rank received guests while sitting on carved wooden stools, or *duho*, which reminded the Spaniards of the thrones they knew in Europe.

The villages were loosely organized into district chiefdoms, each ruled by one of the village chiefs in the district, and the chiefdoms were in turn grouped into regional chiefdoms, each headed by the most prominent district chief. The villagers were divided into two classes (*nitáino* and *naboria*), which the chroniclers equated with their own nobility and commoners. They searched in vain for a still lower class, comparable to their own slaves.

Columbus took special notice of the Taínos' goldwork because it offered him an opportunity to repay his debt to his patrons, the king and queen

of Spain. The Taínos mined nuggets of gold locally and beat them into small plates. Archaeological research has shown that they were used interchangeably with cut shell to inlay wooden objects and to overlay clothing and ornaments. The Taínos could not cast the metal, but their caciques did wear *guanín*, ornaments made of a copper and gold alloy, that they obtained through trade with South America.

The local artisans were also experienced woodworkers, potters, weavers of cotton, and carvers of wood, stone, bone, and shell. Some may have specialized in different crafts, but the Taínos do not seem to have developed any craft into a full-time occupation. They made fire with a wooden drill.

The men went naked or covered their genitalia with cotton loincloths. Unmarried women wore headbands; wives wore short skirts (*nagua*), the length of which indicated the wearer's rank. Both sexes painted themselves before participating in ceremonies, the men also before going to war. Red was the favorite color; this may have given rise to the misconception that Native Americans have red skins.

It was fashionable to flatten the forehead by binding a hard object against it in childhood, before the skull was fully formed. Ears and nasal septa were pierced for the insertion of feathers, plugs, and other ornaments; and waists and necks were decorated with belts and necklaces. The Spaniards reported that the chiefs were distinguished by headdresses adorned with gold and feathers. Pendants in the form of carved human masks, called *guaíza*, were also worn as a sign of rank.

The Classic Taínos had a sophisticated form of agriculture. Instead of simply slashing and burning the forest to make a temporary clearing, as is common in the tropics, they heaped up mounds of earth in more permanent fields to cultivate root crops in the soft alluvial soil. The mounded fields were called *conuco*. The mounds, three feet high and some nine feet in circumference, were arranged in regular rows. They retarded erosion, improved the drainage, and thus permitted more lengthy storage of the mature tubers in the ground. They also made it easier to weed and to harvest the crops. The inhabitants of the dry southwestern part of Hispaniola are said to have constructed extensive irrigation systems.

Cassava was the principal root crop, followed by the sweet potato. Cassava thrived in a broad range of local conditions, from wet to dry. It could be grown over a period of ten to twelve months and kept in the ground for up to three years. The men used digging sticks to plant cassava cuttings. Women grated its starchy roots and squeezed out its often-poisonous juice in a basketry tube to obtain flour, from which they baked bread on a clay

griddle. The bread, too, could be preserved for long periods of time. Sweet potato was eaten as a vegetable.

Indian corn (*maiz*) was less important, as is evidenced by the fact that it played no role in the Taínos' religion. It was grown on the forest floor by the slash-and-burn technique, and its kernels were eaten off the cob instead of being ground into flour and made into bread, as on the mainland. According to Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, corn bread was inferior to cassava bread because it could not be stored in the high tropical humidity of the islands; it soon became moldy.

Other crops grown from seed included squash, beans, peppers, and peanuts. They were boiled with meat, fish, and cassava juice, a procedure that detoxified the juice. "Pepper pots" containing these ingredients were kept on the fire to provide food as needed. Alternatively, meat and fish were roasted on spits.

Fruits, calabashes, cotton, and tobacco were grown around the houses. The pineapple was cultivated, but not the peach palm and cacao, which were limited to the mainland and to Trinidad. Calabashes served as water containers. Tobacco was smoked in the form of cigars (*tabaco*), apparently for pleasure. Unlike the mainland ethnic groups, the Classic Taínos did not indulge in beer fermented from cassava or corn, nor did they chew coca. They collected a variety of wild fruits and vegetables, such as palms nuts, guava berries, and guáyiga roots, whose remains have been found archaeologically.

The chroniclers tell us that the Taínos caught fish in nets, speared them, and used hooks and lines. They also stupefied them with poison, trapped them in weirs, and stored both fish and turtles in weirs until they were ready to eat them. They drove hutias [a species of small rodent] into corrals by burning the prairies or chasing them with dogs and torches and kept them penned there until needed. They plucked iguanas off trees and decoyed wild parrots with tame birds. In the absence of large land mammals, they augmented their supply of protein by spearing manatees in the mouths of the rivers and by eating dogs. They may also have had guinea pigs, but the evidence for this is inconclusive. . . .

The Classic Taínos also played ball on the central plaza and elsewhere. Their ancestors appear to have used nonstructured areas, which may be termed ball grounds. They themselves often constructed specially designed ball courts, applying the term *batey* to both the game and the court where it was played. The court is said to have been rectangular. Ordinary spectators sat on its stones or embankments, the caciques and nobles on their stools.



Dugout canoes made from entire trees transported native peoples as they populated the Americas. The method of constructing them, which involved felling and burning out the enormous trunks, could produce vessels large enough to carry scores of people, as Columbus noted in his journal. Such canoes were still in use into the twentieth century, as shown on this postcard titled “Peasants’ Canoe.” Photographer unknown, black-and-white postcard, c. 1911. Courtesy of the Roorda/Doyle Collection.

The courts within the villages were for intramural games; other courts, in the countryside, were for games between villages.

Both men and women participated, always separately. The teams, each with ten to thirty players, occupied opposite ends of the court, as in tennis, and alternated in serving the ball. Players attempted to keep it in motion by bouncing it back and forth from their bodies to the ground inside the limits of the court. They were not allowed to touch it with their hands or feet. Its elasticity amazed the Spaniards, who had never seen rubber, the substance of which it was made.

Courts are said to have been in constant use. Wagers were made by the players and, in the case of inter-village games, by their caciques, who also offered small prizes—food, for example. The game was occasionally played before public decisions were made. . . .

Unlike the present inhabitants of the West Indies, the natives traveled by sea whenever possible. They used canoes (*canoa*), which they hollowed out of logs by alternately charring and chopping them with petaloid stone axes, known [to archaeologists] as celts. Spade-shaped paddles were the only means of propulsion until the Spaniards introduced sails. The largest ca-

noes belonged to the chiefs. They were carved, painted, and kept in special boathouses reminiscent of those in Polynesia. Columbus reported that they could hold up to 150 people. On land, the chiefs traveled in litters and the ordinary people by foot. The latter carried burdens suspended from balance poles.

Both men and women were eligible to serve as chiefs and, as such, to live in specially built houses, sit on thronelike stools, have special forms of transportation, and wear insignia of their rank. Each cacique presided over the village in which he or she lived. They organized the daily activities and were responsible for the storage of surplus commodities, which they kept in buildings constructed for the purpose and redistributed among the villagers as needed. They acted as hosts when the village received visitors, and had charge of the political relations with other villages. The caciques owned the most powerful statues of gods (*zemis*) and supervised their worship. They organized the public feasts and dances and, having learned the songs by heart, directed the singing. Because their canoes were the largest in the village, they were responsible for public forms of transportation.

Village chiefs reportedly had the power of life or death over their subjects. The district and regional chiefs did not exercise this kind of control but could requisition food and military service. Their ability to do so depended upon their personalities and political relations. . . .

Individuals traced their descent through their mothers rather than their fathers. Goods, class status, and the office of chief were also inherited matrilineally. A man resided in the village of his mother's lineage. If he chose a wife from another village, he brought her to his own.

Polygyny was prevalent. Most men probably obtained wives in or near their own villages, but chiefs sometimes arranged long-distance marriages for political purposes. A commoner had to temporarily serve his prospective bride's family to compensate it for her loss; a chief could instead make a payment of goods. Only a chief could afford to have many wives.

Trade was widespread. Parties or single persons undertook long sea voyages for the purpose. Some districts excelled in making particular products. . . . Residents of eastern Hispaniola and western Puerto Rico are said to have exchanged daily visits across the Mona Passage. Such interaction was facilitated by a common language.

The Classic Taínos fought among themselves to avenge murders, to resolve disputes over hunting and fishing rights, or to force a chief who had received a bride price to deliver the woman purchased. They did not themselves obtain additional wives by raiding other communities and had difficulty fending off the Island-Caribs, who did.

Only the chiefs and nobles attended meetings at which war was declared. A chief was elected to lead the attack; the nobles served as his or her body-guard. Before going into battle they painted their bodies red, hung small images of *zemis* on their foreheads, and danced. They fought with clubs (*macana*), with spears propelled by throwing sticks, and, in the eastern part of their territory, with bows and arrows. The Ciguayan and Borinquen Taínos, of northeastern Hispaniola and Puerto Rico, respectively, are said to have been the most warlike, probably because they were forced to defend themselves against Island-Carib raids. . . .

Because few women came to the original Spanish colony during the first twelve years of its existence, when it was being governed by Christopher Columbus and Bobadilla, we may reasonably assume that the custom of intermarriage between Spaniards and Taínos began at that time. Intermarriage continued through the terms of Ovando and Diego Columbus; the census of 1514 found that 40 percent of the officially recognized wives of Spanish men were Indian. Consequently, a large proportion of the modern population of the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Cuba is able to claim partial descent from the Taínos.

Religion of the Taíno People

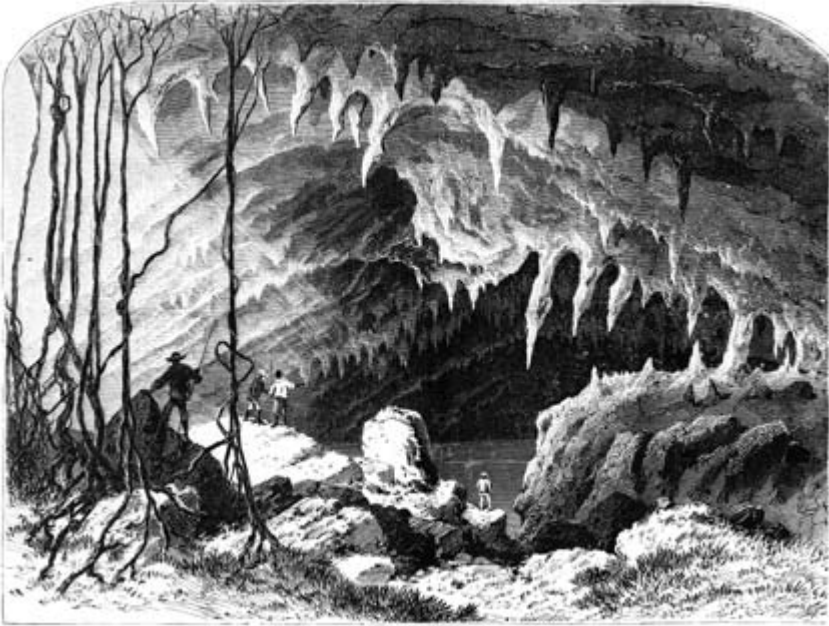
Ramón Pané

Only a handful of accounts of Taíno culture were ever recorded by their conquerors. The best of these sources was also the first book ever written in the Americas, An Account of the Antiquities of the Indians, by Fray Ramón Pané, a monk from Catalonia. Brother Ramón, of the Order of Saint Jerome, was present at the convent near Barcelona when King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella received Christopher Columbus there in 1493, after the admiral's first voyage to the "New World." Pané accompanied Columbus on his return voyage later that year. After their arrival, the admiral ordered the friar to go live with the native people, learn their language, gather information about them, and report back. Brother Ramón lived among the native people from 1494 to 1497, first learning the Macorís language spoken by the people near the north coast of the island and then moving in with a different group who taught him the dominant idiom of the Arawak language spoken on the island. He probably composed his text in 1498, from notes he took during the years he spent with the indigenous people.

Fray Ramón Pané's original manuscript has been lost, but his account survived by a circuitous route. First it was transcribed by Columbus's son Fernando, whose copy was also lost, but not before being translated into the Venetian dialect of Italian by Alfonso de Ulloa. Peter Martyr and Bartolomé de Las Casas, the best known sources on the Taíno people, also summarized Pané's account in their narratives. Pané's book begins with a collection of Taíno beliefs about human origins, women, the sea, ghosts, and gods, sampled here.

Chapter 1: Where the Indians came from, and how

The island of Hispaniola has a province called Caonao, in which there is a mountain by the name of Canta, which has two caves called Cacibayagua and Amayauga. Most of the people who populated the island emerged from Cacibayagua. While they were living in that cave, they kept watch during the night, a job they entrusted to one named Marocael. He was late in getting to the door one day, they say, and because of that, the sun carried him



According to the creation story of the native Taíno people, human beings emerged from an enormous cave. There are many huge caverns in the Dominican Republic, such as this one near Santo Domingo. Engraving by unknown artist, from *Illustrated Home Book of the World's Great Nations*, edited by Thomas Powell (Chicago: People's Publishing Co., 1888). Courtesy of the Roorda/Doyle Collection.

away. Seeing that the sun had taken him away for his dereliction of duty, they closed the door to him, and he was turned to stone near the entrance. They also say that others, having left to go fishing, were caught by the sun and turned into *joko* trees, also known as Mirobalanos.¹ The reason why Marocael was looking out and standing guard was to see which areas to send the people to and to distribute them, and it only seems that he showed up late, to his great regret.

Chapter 2: How the Men were Separated from the women

It happened that one called Guaguyona told another by the name of Yadruvava to go out to gather an herb called *digo*,² which they clean their bodies with when they bathe. Yadruvava went out ahead, but the sun came up and caught him on the road, and turned him into a kind of bird that sings in the morning, like a nightingale, called Yahuva Bayael. Guaguyona, seeing that the one he sent to gather the *digo* was not coming back, decided to leave the cave.

Chapter 3

Guaguyona . . . said to the women, leave your husbands, and let's go to other lands, and we'll bring lots of digo. Leave your children, because we'll come back for them later, and we'll bring nothing but the herb with us.

Chapter 4

Guaguyona left with all the women, and went looking for other lands. He arrived at Matanino, where after a brief stay he left the women behind, and went to another region, called Guanín.³

They had left the little children beside an *arroyo*. Later, when hunger started to bother the children . . . they cried and called for their mothers, who had left. The fathers could not comfort their children, because they cried from hunger for their mothers, saying "mama," demanding, no doubt, to be nursed. Crying that way begging for the breast, saying "*too, too*," like someone asking for something they really, passionately want, they turned into little animals like the frogs called *tona*, because of the way they cried to be fed. And that's how the men were left without women. . . .

Chapter 6: How Guaguyona returned . . .

They say that when Guaguyona was away . . . he saw that he had left one woman in the sea, which made him very happy. He immediately started taking baths to clean himself, because he was full of those ulcers we call the "French disease."⁴ Then the woman put him in a *guanara*, which means a place set off by itself, and being there cured his sores.⁵ Afterward he asked her permission to continue on his way, and she consented. . . .

Chapter 7: How women came back to the island of Haiti, now called Hispaniola

It's said that one day the men went to take a bath; standing in the pouring rain, they became aroused for women. Often when it rained, they would go searching for the footprints of the women, but they had never been able to find any trace of them. But that day, while they were bathing . . . they saw coming down from some trees, through the branches, some kind of people who were neither men, nor women, because they had neither male nor female sex organs. The men tried to catch them, but they slipped away like eels. Two or three men were then selected by the chief to find out how many of the creatures there were, in order to get the same number of men

afflicted with *caracaracol*, because they have rough hands, and could hang on to [the creatures] more tightly. [The scouts] told the chief that there were four of them, and so they got four men with *caracaracol*, which is an illness like mange that makes the skin rough, and they seized the creatures. Then the men discussed how they could turn the four creatures into women, since they were neither male nor female.

Chapter 8: How they found a way to make them into women

They searched to find a bird called *inriri cahuvayal* that lives in the trees, which we call a woodpecker. They tied the feet and hands of those people without the sex of either a male or a female, then took the bird and tied it to their bodies. The woodpecker, thinking they were wood, began his usual work, pecking and poking a hole in the spot where the “nature” of women is ordinarily located. And that’s how the Indians say they got women, as told by the elders. . . .

Chapter 9: How they recount how the sea was made

There was a man referred to as Yaya [spirit essence], whose real name they do not know; his son was called Yayael, which means son of Yaya. Yayael wanted to kill his father, so he was sent into exile for four months. Then his father killed him, and put his bones into a hollowed-out gourd, which he hung from the roof of his house, where it remained suspended for some time. One day, Yaya felt the desire to see his son, so he said to his wife, “I want to see our son Yayael.” She was happy to hear that, and taking down the gourd, she turned it over to see the bones of her son. Many fish, large and small, came out of it, and seeing that the bones had turned to fish, they decided to eat them.

They say that one day, Yaya having gone to his *conucos*, meaning possessions, which were his inheritance, four sons of a woman named Itiba Yauvava arrived. They were all from the same womb, and all twins, but their mother died in childbirth, and they had to open her up and take out the four sons. One had a case of *caracaracol*, and so his name became Caracaracol; the other three had no names.

Chapter 10: How the four twin sons of Itiba Yauvava, who died in childbirth, together came to get Yaya’s gourd, where his son Yayael was, who had been turned into fish, and no one dared to take it except Caracaracol, who took it down and everyone filled up on fish

While they were eating, they heard Yaya returning from his conucos, and hurrying to hang up the gourd again quickly, they did not hang it well, and it fell to the ground and broke. They say that so much water came out of that gourd that it filled the whole world . . . and that is the origin of the sea. . . .

Chapter 13: About the appearance they say the dead have

They say that during the day the dead hide; at night they go have fun and eat a certain fruit called guava. . . . They change into fruit, have their recreation, and go about among the living.

They have this way of recognizing the dead: they touch the belly with their hand, and if they don't find a navel, they say that one is . . . dead, because they say the dead don't have belly buttons; and that's how they're fooled sometimes, because not taking note of that, they lie with some woman from the Realm of the Dead, and when they think they are embracing her, they have nothing, because she suddenly disappears. That's what they believe down to the present. . . . The dead do not appear to them during the day, but always at night, and because of that, no Indian goes out alone at night without great fear. . . .

Chapter 15: About the observations of these Indian medicine men; how they profess medicine, teach the Indians, and are often mistaken in their medicinal cures

All or most of the Indians of the island of Hispaniola have many *zemis* of different kinds. Some where they keep the bones of their father, of their mother, of their relatives and of other ancestors, which are made of stone or of wood; they possess many of both sorts; there are some that talk; others that cause edible things to sprout; others that bring rain, and others that make the wind blow. . . .

Chapter 19: How they make and look after the zemis of wood and of stone

Those of wood they make in the following manner: when someone goes out and it seems to them that a tree moves its roots, that man stops in fright and asks who it is; the tree responds, "Bring a medicine man here, he will tell you who I am." That Indian, having arrived at the doctor, tells him what he has seen. The wizard or witch doctor then goes to see the tree that the other told him about, sits next to it and prepares *cohoba*.⁶ . . . Having done



The Taíno people worshipped a broad pantheon of deities represented by small statues called *zemis*. Individuals possessed their own personal *zemis* that they kept in their houses, while other *zemis* were objects of veneration for the entire community and “lived” in their own temple-like dwellings. “Taíno Shell Amulet.” Haiti or Dominican Republic. Taíno, AD 700–1500. Carved shell. #055.00.01. Jay I. Kislak Collection, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress. Courtesy of the Kislak Collection of the Rare Book Division of the Library of Congress.

the cohoba, he rises and addresses the tree using all of its titles, as if they were those of a great lord, and says to him, “Tell me who you are, what you’re doing here, what you want of me, and why you have had me called; tell me if you want to be chopped down, or if you want to come with me, and how you want to be taken; I will build you a house with an estate.” Then, that tree or *zemi*, ready-made idol or devil, responds, saying in what form he wants to be made. The witch doctor cuts it down and fashions it in the way he has been ordered, constructs for it a house with grounds, and many times every year he prepares cohoba for it, which is to offer prayers to it, to satisfy it, to learn various good and bad things from the *zemi*, and also to ask for wealth. When they want to know if they will attain victory against their enemies, they enter a house where no one except the top men can go; their chief is the first to do the cohoba and play a musical instrument. While he does the cohoba, none of those who are in his entourage talk until he is finished. After his speech ends, he remains for a while with his head bowed, and his arms on his knees; then he raises his head looking to the sky and speaks. Then they all answer together out loud, and when they all have spoken to give him thanks, he recounts to them the vision he had while hallucinating on the cohoba that he inhaled and which went to

his head; they say he conversed with the zemis, and that the Indians would attain victory; that their enemies will flee; that there will be many casualties, wars, famines and other such things, whatever the drunken one wants to say. . . . This cohoba isn't done only for the stone and wooden zemis, but also for the corpses of the dead. . . .

Chapter 22: About another zemi called Opiyelguoviran . . .

They say the zemi Opiyelguoviran has four feet like a dog; it's wooden; many times, it left the house at night and hid in the jungle, where they went to look for it, and returned to the house with it tied up with ropes, but it returned to the forest. They say that when the Christians arrived on the island of Hispaniola it fled and went to a lake; that they followed its tracks, but they never saw it again, and don't know anything about what happened to it. . . .

Chapter 23: About another zemi called Guabancex

The zemi Guabancex was in the country of one of the great chiefs, who was named Aumatex; this zemi is a woman, and they say there are two in her company: the one is the announcer, and the other is the gatherer and governor of the waters. When Guabancex gets mad, they say she makes the winds and waves rise, and causes everything on the land to fly around, and uproots trees; they say that zemi is a woman, and is made of the stone of that region; the other two zemis in her company are Guatauva, the towncrier and herald, who at Guabancex's command orders the other zemis of that province to help the wind blow and the rain fall. The other is called Coatrisquie, and of that one they say that he gathers the waters in the valleys between the mountains, and then lets them go to destroy the country. They are convinced of this. . . .

Chapter 25: Concerning what the two main chiefs told them . . .

The great Lord who they say dwells in the sky . . . ordered [chief] Cacivaquel to conduct the kind of fast that they all commonly observe, in which they remain secluded for five or six days without eating anything at all, except juices made of the same kind of herbs they use to wash. In the time they go without eating, due to the weakness they felt in the body and the head, they say that they have seen various things, perhaps that they had longed for, therefore all of them fast in honor of the zemis they have, in order to

know if they will achieve victory over their enemies, to acquire riches, or whatever other thing they desire. They say that this chief affirmed that he spoke with the Yucca God, who announced to them that however many of them outlived the chief after his death, they would little enjoy his dominion, because there would arrive in the country a people wearing clothes who would dominate and kill them, and they would die of hunger. But they thought he was talking about the cannibal Caribs; later, considering that the Caribs do nothing but rob and go away, they believed it must be another people that the zemi talked about. Now they believe it was the Admiral and the men who arrived with him.

Translated by Eric Paul Roorda.

Notes

For a scrupulously researched reconstruction of the text, see Fray Ramón Pané and José Juan Arrom, *An Account of the Antiquities of the Indians: A New Edition, with an Introductory Study, Notes, & Appendixes*, translated by Susan C. Griswold (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

1. Called hog plum tree in English, the species is nearly extinct in the Dominican Republic.
2. It is uncertain which plant the Taínos called *digo*. Las Casas wrote that the native people chewed coca but did not record their word for it. As Pané recorded later in his book, the Taínos took part in weeklong religious fasts, during which they subsisted entirely by chewing the herb they called *digo* and bathed in its juice, as the friar mentions.
3. Columbus referred to an island the Taínos called Guaní, which a chief told him was the source of the “metal jewel” he wore on a necklace. Matanino may also be the name for a neighboring Caribbean island.
4. This reference supports the argument that syphilis predated the arrival of Europeans in the Americas.
5. *Guanöru* means “disease” in Guajiro, a related Arawak language; perhaps a *guanara* was a kind of infirmary.
6. Cohoba trees, also called *yopo*, *jopo*, *nopo*, and *mopo*, of the genus *Anadenanthera* in the legume family, produce powerfully hallucinogenic beans. During religious ceremonies the Taíno ground them up and inhaled the powder from ritual vessels and then interpreted their hallucinations as religious experiences.

First Descriptions of the Land, First Violence against Its People

Christopher Columbus

During December 1492 and January 1493, on his first voyage to the Americas, Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) sailed along the north coast of the island shared today by the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Nearly two months before, at his first landfall in the Bahamas, he had taken seven native people captive; they spoke a language similar to this island’s language. The admiral anchored the three Spanish ships at the most promising harbors and sent parties of men ashore to approach the inhabitants, who called where they lived Quisqueya. Columbus renamed it La Isla Española (“The Spanish Island”), which became “Hispaniola.”

The part of the island the Spanish had come across was Marién, one of five major cacicazgos, areas ruled by major chiefs, like kingdoms. Marién occupied the north-west portion of the island. After a series of amicable exchanges with the people living there, the final encounter between the Spanish and the Taíno ended in misunderstanding and violence. That violent incident, occurring just before Columbus began his return voyage to Spain, set the precedent for the bloody conquest of the island he initiated on his return.

Columbus recorded his dazzled first impressions of the island in his journal, which was copied, paraphrased, and summarized before being lost. The following excerpt from the surviving version of the journal alternates between verbatim first person quotations from the admiral’s own words and third person encapsulations of his narrative.

Thursday, December 6, 1492

All the island appeared to be more rocky than any that had been discovered. The trees are smaller. . . . It is a very high country, all open and clear, with a very fine air, and no such cold has been met with as elsewhere . . . there is a beautiful valley watered by a river; and in that district there must be

many inhabitants, judging from the number of large canoes, like galleys, with fifteen benches.¹ All the natives fled as soon as they saw the ships. . . .

Friday, December 7

The Admiral discovered an opening, through which he could see a very large valley, covered with crops like barley, and he therefore judged that it must sustain a large population. Behind there was a high range of mountains. . . . He landed near a small river at the point of the harbor, flowing from valleys and plains, the beauty of which was a marvel to behold. Walking a short distance inland, the Admiral found much land under cultivation, and heard the singing of nightingales and other birds of Castile. Five men were seen, but they would not stop, running away. . . .

Sunday, December 9

He believed that the villages must be at a distance from the sea, whither they went when the ships arrived; for they all took to flight, taking everything with them, and they made smoke-signals, like a people at war. [This is] the most beautiful country, almost like the lands of Spain: these even have the advantage; for which reasons the Admiral gave the name of the said island *La Española*.

Tuesday, December 11

[The Indians from the Bahamas on board] have reason in saying the inhabitants are a clever race, for all the people of these islands are in great fear of those of Cariba. So the Admiral repeats, what he has said before, that the Cariba is nothing else but the Grand Khan, who ought now be very near. He sends ships to capture the islanders; and as they do not return, their countrymen believe that they have been eaten. Every day we understand better what these Indians say, and they us, so that very often we are intelligible to each other. . . .

Wednesday, December 12

The Admiral . . . set up a great cross on the west side of the [harbor], on a very picturesque height, "in sign," he says, "that your Highnesses hold this land for your own, but chiefly as a sign of our Lord Jesus Christ." This being done, three sailors strolled into the woods to see the trees and bushes.

Suddenly they came upon a crowd of people, all naked. [The sailors] called to them, and went towards them, but they ran away. At last they caught a woman; for I had ordered that some should be caught, that they might be treated well, and made to lose their fear. So they took the woman, who was very young and beautiful, to the ship, where she talked to the Indians on board, for they all speak the same language. The admiral caused her to be dressed, and gave her glass beads, hawks' bells, and brass ornaments; then sent her back to the shore very courteously, according to his custom. He sent three of the crew with her, and three of the Indians he had on board, that they might open communications with her people. . . .

Thursday, December 13

The three men who had been sent by the Admiral with the woman returned at 3 o'clock in the morning, not having gone with her to the village, because the distance appeared to be long, or because they were afraid. . . . The Admiral, with the desire of ascertaining whether there were any profitable commodities in that land, being so beautiful and fertile, and of having some speech with the people, and being desirous of serving the Sovereigns, determined to send again to the village, trusting in the news brought by the woman that the Christians were good people. For this service he selected nine men, well armed and suited for such an enterprise, with whom an Indian went from those who were on board. The men reached the village, which is four and a half leagues² to the southeast, and found that it was situated in a very large and open valley. As soon as the inhabitants saw the Christians coming they all fled inland, leaving their goods behind them. The village consisted of a thousand houses, with more than three thousand inhabitants. The Indian whom the Christians had brought with them ran after the fugitives, saying that they should have no fear, for the Christians did not come from Cariba, but were from heaven, and that they gave many beautiful things to all the people they met. They were so impressed with what he said, that upwards of two thousand came close up to the Christians, putting their hands on their heads, which was a sign of great reverence and friendship; and they were all trembling until they were reassured. The Christians related that, as soon as the natives had cast off their fear, they all went to the houses, and each one of them brought what he had to eat, consisting of yams, which are roots like large radishes, which they sow and cultivate in all their lands, and it is their staple food.³ They make bread of it and roast it. The yam has the smell of a chestnut, and anyone would think he was eating chestnuts. They gave their guests bread and fish, and

all they had. As the Indians who came in the ship had understood that the Admiral wanted to have some parrots, one of those who accompanied the Spaniards mentioned this, and the natives brought out parrots, and gave as many as they wanted, without asking anything for them. The natives asked the Spaniards not to go that night, and that they would give them many other things that they had in the mountains. While all those people were with the Spaniards, a great multitude was seen to come, with the husband of the woman whom the Admiral had honored and sent away. They brought her, riding on their shoulders, and they came to give thanks to the Christians for the honor the Admiral had done them, and for the gifts. The Christians reported to the Admiral that this was a handsomer and finer people than any that had hitherto been met with. . . . As regards beauty, the Christians said there was no comparison, both for men or women, and that their skins are whiter than the others. They saw two girls whose skins were as white as any that could be seen in Spain. They also said, concerning the beauty of the lands which they saw, that the best land in Castile could not be compared with it. And the Admiral also, comparing the lands they had visited before with these, said that there was no comparison between them, nor did the plain of Cordoba come near them, the difference being as great as night and day. They said that all these lands were cultivated, and that a very wide and large river passed through the center of the valley, and could irrigate all the fields. All the trees were green and full of fruit, and the plants tall and covered with flowers. The roads very broad and good. The climate was like April in Castile; the nightingale and other birds sang as they do in Spain during that month, and it was the most pleasant place in the world. Some birds sing sweetly at night. The crickets and frogs are heard a good deal. The fish are like those of Spain. They saw much aloe and mastic, and cotton-fields. They found no gold. . . .

Tuesday, December 25, Christmas Day

It pleased Our Lord that, at twelve o'clock at night, when the Admiral had retired to rest, and when all had fallen asleep, seeing that it was a dead calm and the sea like glass, the tiller being in the hands of a boy, the current carried the ship [*Santa María*] on one of the sand-banks. If it had not been night the bank could have been seen, and the surf on it heard for a good league. But the ship ran upon it so gently that it could scarcely be felt. The boy, who felt the rudder ground and heard the rush of the sea, cried out. The Admiral at once came up, and so quickly that no one had yet realized the ship was aground. . . . He ordered the masts to be cut away and the ship

lightened as much as possible, to see if she would come off. But, as the water continued to recede, nothing more could be done. She turned broadside to the sea, although there was little or no sea running. Then the seams opened, and ship was lost. The Admiral sent a boat. . . . to inform the king [Guacanagarí], who had invited the ships to come on the previous Saturday. His town was about a league and a half away from the sandbank. They reported that he wept when he heard the news, and sent all his people with large canoes to unload the ship. This was done, and they landed all there was between decks in a very short time. Such was the great promptitude and diligence shown by that king. He himself, with brothers and relations, were actively assisting as well in the ship as in the care of the property when it was landed, that all might be properly guarded. Now and then he sent one of his relations weeping to the Admiral, to console him, saying that he must not feel sorrow or annoyance, for he would supply him all that was needed. The Admiral assured the Sovereigns that there could not have been such good watch kept in any part of Castile, for that there was not even a needle missing. He ordered that all the property should be placed by some houses which the king placed at his disposal, until they were emptied, when everything would be stowed and guarded in them. Armed men were placed round the stores to watch all night. "The king and all his people wept. They are a loving people, without covetousness, and fit for anything; and I assure Your Highnesses that there is no better land nor people. They love their neighbors as themselves, and their voices are the sweetest and gentlest in the world, and they are always smiling."

Wednesday, December 26

. . . The king dined on board the caravel with the Admiral and afterwards went on shore, where he received the Admiral with much honor. He gave him a repast of two or three kinds of yams, with shellfish and game, and other foods they have, besides the bread which they call *cacabi*.⁴ He then took the Admiral to see some groves of trees near the houses, and they were accompanied by at least a thousand people, all naked. The king had on a shirt and a pair of gloves, given to him by the Admiral, and he was more delighted with the gloves than with anything else. In his manner of eating, both by his high-bred air and his exquisite cleanliness, he showed his nobility. After he had eaten, he remained some time at the table, and they brought him certain herbs, with which he rubbed his hands. The Admiral thought this was done to make them soft, and they also gave him water for his hands. . . .



Dominican popular belief holds that Columbus left a curse on the island that he invaded in 1493. To avoid the curse (*fukú* in Dominican Spanish), many Dominicans avoid saying his name, instead referring to him as “the Admiral.” This perspective contrasts with the tradition of trumpeting the Spanish heritage of the Dominican Republic as “The Land Columbus Loved.” The statue of Columbus in front of the cathedral in Santo Domingo was erected in 1886, when the four-hundredth anniversary of his first voyage was approaching and such commemorations, which depicted him as an agent of progress, were becoming popular. “Estatua de Colón, Ciudad Trujillo, R.D.,” photographer unknown, black-and-white postcard, c. 1930s. Courtesy of the Roorda/Doyle Collection.

Wednesday, January 9

. . . The day before, when the Admiral went to the *Rio del Oro*, he said that he saw three mermaids, who rose well out of the sea, but they are not as beautiful as they are depicted.⁵ . . .

Sunday, January 13

The Admiral . . . sent the boat to land at a beautiful beach to obtain yams to eat. They found some men with bows and arrows, with whom they stopped to speak, buying two bows and many arrows from them. They asked one of them to come on board the caravel and see the Admiral; who says that he was very wanting in reverence, more so than any native he had yet seen. His face was all stained with charcoal. . . . He wore his hair very long, brought together and fastened behind, and put into a small net of parrots' feathers. He was naked, like all the others. The Admiral supposed he belonged to the Caribs, who eat men.⁶ . . . The Admiral ordered that the Indian should be fed, and given pieces of green and red cloth, and glass beads, which they like very much, and then sent on shore. He was told to bring gold if he had any, and it was believed that he had, from certain small ornaments that he was wearing. When the boat reached the shore, there were quite fifty-five men behind the trees, naked, with very long hair, as the women wear it in Castile. Behind the head they wore plumes of parrot feathers and feathers of other birds, and each man carried a bow. The Indian landed, and signed to the others to put down their bows and arrows. . . . As soon as they came to the boat the crew landed, and began to buy the bows and arrows and other arms, in accordance with an order of the Admiral. Having sold two bows, they did not want to give more, but began to attack the Spaniards, and to take hold of them. They were running back to pick up their bows and arrows where they had laid them aside, and took cords in their hands to bind the boat's crew. Seeing them rushing down, and being prepared—for the Admiral always warned them to be on their guard—the Christians attacked the Indians, and gave one a stab with a knife in the buttocks, wounding another in the breast with an arrow. Seeing that they could gain little, although the Christians were only seven and they numbered over fifty, they fled, so that none remained, throwing bows and arrows away. The Christians would have killed many, if the pilot, who was in command, had not prevented them. The Spaniards presently returned to the caravel with the boat. The Admiral regretted the affair for one reason, and was pleased for another. They would have fear of the Christians, and they were no doubt an ill-conditioned people, probably Caribs, who eat men. But the Admiral

felt alarm lest they should do some harm to the 39 men left in the fortress and town in *Navidad*, in the event of their coming here in their boat. Even if they are not Caribs, they are a neighboring people, with similar habits, and fearless, and armed. The Admiral says all this, and adds that he would have liked to have captured some of them. He says that they lighted many smoke signals, as is the custom in this island of Española.

Notes

1. Mediterranean galleys were rowed by four crewmen per bench, so the native craft had a crew of some sixty oarsmen.
2. A Spanish league equaled approximately 2.6 miles or 4.2 kilometers.
3. The name is similar to the tubers called *ñames* today, but the description better fits the versatile yucca, which can be made into nutritious cassava bread.
4. *Cacabi* may be a reference to cassava bread.
5. Columbus probably saw three manatees.
6. They actually were Ciguayos, a group living in the northeast region of Hispaniola, who were vulnerable to Carib raids and so were more warlike than the Taínos and held out against the Spanish for a longer time.

Death of the Spanish at Navidad

Diego Álvarez Chanca

After the wreck of the Santa María, there was not enough room on board the two remaining vessels to fit the crew of the lost flagship, so a group of them remained behind when the rest of the Spanish sailed away. They lived near the Taino town, in a fort constructed partly from the timbers of the wrecked ship. Columbus gave this first Spanish settlement in the Americas the name Navidad, or Christmas, for the day of the shipwreck. Columbus returned to Navidad on his second voyage in 1493, in command of more than a thousand men aboard seventeen ships, to renew the Spanish invasion of Hispaniola. In the following letter, his ship's surgeon, Dr. Diego Álvarez Chanca, narrated what the Spanish found when they got there.

As we went on making observations of . . . the neighboring land, some of our people discovered the bodies of two dead men in the grass by the river bank, one with a rope around his neck and the other with his feet bound. This was on the first day of our landing there. On the following day they found two other corpses farther on along the river, and it was noticed that one of them had been heavily bearded. This was regarded as a very suspicious circumstance by many of us, because, as I have already said, all these Indians are beardless.

This harbor is twelve leagues from the place where the Christians had been left by the admiral on his return to Spain from the first voyage, and under the protection of Guacamarí [called Guacanagarí in the journal of Columbus, and hereafter], a king of these Indians who I suppose is one of the principal sovereigns of this island. After we anchored at said spot, the admiral ordered two lombards [muskets] to be fired in order to see if there was any response from the Christians, who would fire in return, as a salute, for they also had lombards with them; but we received no reply, nor did we see on the seashore any body, or any signs of houses whatever. Our people then became very much chagrined, and began to realize what the circumstances naturally suggested. . . .

Next morning some of our men landed by order of the admiral, and went

to the spot where the Christians had been housed. They found the building, which had been fortified to a certain degree by a palisade surrounding it, all burned up and leveled with the ground.

They found also some rags and stuffs which the Indians had brought to set the fort and the houses in the environs on fire. They observed, too, that the few Indians seen going about in that neighborhood were shy, and dared not approach, but, on the contrary, when called, fled.

This did not look well to us, for the admiral had said that on arriving at that place, so many of their canoes would come alongside the ships to see us that we should not be able to keep them off, and that so it had been on the other voyage, and as we saw now that they were suspicious of our men, it did not seem well to us.

. . . In those houses [some distance away] we found many belongings of the Christians, which it could not be believed that they should have bartered, such as a very handsome Moorish mantle, which had not been unfolded since they brought it from Castile, and stockings and pieces of cloth, and an anchor of the ship which the admiral had lost there on the previous voyage, and other things, from which our opinion was the more confirmed. . . .

We found that they had shown where eleven dead Christians were, already covered by the grass which had grown over them. All with one voice said that Caonabo and Mayreni [the cacique of Maguana and his brother] had killed them. But with all this they began to complain that the Christians had taken one, three, another four women, from which we came to believe that the evil which had fallen on them was the result of jealousy. . . .

And that evening [Guacanagarí] came with the admiral to the ships, and the horses and what we had there were shown to him. At this he was very astonished as being something unknown to him. He took supper on the ship, and this evening returned to his house. The admiral told him that he wished to settle there with him and wished to build houses, and he answered that it pleased him, but that the place was unhealthy, because it was very damp, and such was in fact the case. All this passed, there acting as interpreters two Indians of those who on the previous voyage had gone to Castile and who had remained alive of the seven whom we embarked in the port, for five of them died on the voyage and the others escaped by a hair's breadth. . . .

In the ship there were ten women of those whom we had taken in the islands of the Caribs; most of them were from Borinquen [Puerto Rico]. That brother of Guacanagarí talked with them; as we believe, he told them to do that which they did immediately on this night. And it was that, in

the first watch, they threw themselves very quietly into the water and made their way ashore, so that by the time that they were missed, they had gone such a distance that with the boats they were unable to take more than four, whom they took as they were coming out of the water. They swam more than a full half league. On the morning of the next day, the admiral sent to Guacanagarí to tell him that he should send to him those women who had fled the night before and that he should command immediate search to be made for them. When they arrived, they found the village abandoned by its inhabitants, so that there was not a soul in it.

The First Christian Converts—and Martyrs— in the New World

Ramón Pané

After finding the fort at Navidad destroyed, the Spanish constructed a new settlement near present-day Puerto Plata. Columbus named it La Isabela for the queen of Spain. There he established his capital and set about the conquest of the island and the creation of the first European colony in the Americas. He sent the missionary priest Ramón Pané to begin converting the local people to Christianity.

In An Account of the Antiquities of the Indians, the first book written in the New World, the “poor friar,” as Pané called himself, recounted the fate of his first converts. These unfortunate Taínos became not only the first indigenous Christians but also the first martyrs in the New World. They apparently died as the result of a cultural misunderstanding concerning buried icons. The Taíno would sometimes “plant” zemi figurines representing agricultural deities in the fields to encourage a successful crop, “watering” the buried icon with their urine. But when neighbors of the Taíno Christians did the same thing with images of Christ and the Virgin Mary, Pané interpreted the action as a sacrilegious desecration, not an expression of reverence for the new gods he had introduced to them. Columbus’s brother Bartholomew, left in charge when Christopher returned to Spain, agreed, ordering the brutal execution of the Indians accused of the blasphemous crime. Their relatives took revenge on the Taíno Christians.

While . . . under the orders of Governor Don Cristóbal Colón [Christopher Columbus], God wished to illuminate with the light of the Holy Catholic Faith, everyone in the leading household in Magdalena in the province called Macorís, and the head of the house named Guavaconel, which means son of Guavaenequin.

In said house there lived his servants and favorites, who are called *yahu naboriu* and there were a total of sixteen members of his family, among whom were five brothers. Of them, one died, and the other four received the water of holy baptism. I believe that they died as martyrs, because of

what was seen of their perseverance and their death. The first that received death . . . was the Indian named Guaticava, who had received the name Juan Mateo. That was the first Christian who suffered cruel death, and I am certain that it made him a martyr, because, according to what I heard from some who were there when he died, he said: “Dios naboria daca, Dios naboria daca,” which means: “I am a servant of God.” That’s also how his brother Antonio died, and with him, another, saying the same thing. . . .

Then the Lord Admiral told me that the language of Macorís . . . was not spoken all over the island; for that reason I went to live with another leading chief [Guarionex, ruler of the region of Maguá], a lord who ruled many vassals, because his language was understood through the whole country. . . . At first he showed us goodwill, and gave us hope that he would do what we would wish him to do, and to be a Christian, because he asked us to teach him the Lord’s Prayer, the Hail Mary, and the Creed and all of the other prayers and other things appropriate to a Christian. He learned the Lord’s Prayer, the Hail Mary and the Creed; many in his household did the same; he would say his prayers every morning and make everyone else in the house say them twice. But then he became angry and abandoned his good intention, which was the fault of other chiefs in that area, who reprimanded him because he obeyed the Christian law, being that the Christians were cruel and had taken over their lands by force. For that reason they advised him no longer to occupy himself with Christian things, but rather to come to terms with them and conspire to kill the Christians, because the latter could never be satisfied, and so they had resolved not to follow Christian customs in any way. For that reason he distanced himself from his previous goodwill, and we, seeing that he was detaching himself and renouncing that which we had taught him, decided to take our leave and go where one might harvest more fruit, teaching the Indians and indoctrinating them into things having to do with the holy faith. So, we went to another head chief, a man who was called Maviatúe, who demonstrated his goodwill to us, saying he would like to be Christian.

The day after we set forth from the village and dwelling of Guarionex, to go to another chief named Maviatúe, Guarionex’s people built a house next to the house of prayer; in the latter we had left some images, before which the catechumens kneeled and prayed; they were the mother, the brothers and the relatives of the aforementioned Juan Mateo, the first Christian, . . . all members of whose household became Christians, and persevered in their good intention according to our faith; and so it was that the entire family was left to guard the chapel and some fields that I had tilled or had told others to till.¹ . . . The second day after we went to Maviatúe, six men arrived at

the house of prayer that the said catechumens, seven in number, had under their custody, and by mandate of Guarionex, told them to take those images that I had left in the power of the catechumens, and break them and destroy them, because Fray Ramón and his companions had gone away and would not come to know the authors of the deed. The six servants of Guarionex who went there, encountered the six boys who guarded the house of prayer, fearing what happened next; the boys, warned, opposed their entrance, but they entered by force, took the images and carried them off.

Chapter 26: About what happened to the images, and the miracle that God worked to demonstrate his power

The Indians left the house of prayer, threw the images to the ground, covered them with earth and urinated on them saying: “Now your fruit will be good and big”; that is what they said because they buried them in a tilled field, meaning that whatever was planted there would bear good fruit; all of that, as vituperation. When the boys who were guarding the chapel . . . saw that, they ran to their elders, who were in the fields, and told them that Guarionex’s people had destroyed and ridiculed the images. As soon as the elders learned what had happened, they ran yelling to tell it to Don Bartholomew Columbus, who was in charge of the government for the Admiral, his brother, when he went to Castile. Don Bartholomew, as deputy of the Viceroy and Governor of the islands, put the wrongdoers on trial, and, the truth revealed, had them burned in public. In spite of this, Guarionex and his vassals did not renounce the wicked aim they harbored to kill the Christians on a certain day designated for the Indians to deliver the tribute that they pay in gold. But the conspiracy was discovered, and the plotters were captured on the same day that they proposed to put it into effect. Nevertheless, continuing their perverse design, they carried it out, and killed four men and Juan Mateo, the leader, and his brother Antonio, who had received the holy baptism; then they ran to where the images were hidden, and threw away the pieces. Some days passed, and the owner of that field went to harvest *ajes*, which have certain roots resembling turnips, and others that look like radishes; in the place where the images were buried, two or three *ajes* had grown, as if they had been placed with one in the middle of the other, in the form of a cross.

Translated by Eric Paul Roorda.

Note

1. The indigenous people's agricultural technique was to build up soil into mounds in garden plots called *conucos*, rather than plowing the soil, as Europeans did. The priest's order to till their fields must have been difficult for them to understand.

Founding Santo Domingo

Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas

Bartholomew Columbus relocated the Spanish capital from La Isabela to the south coast of Hispaniola in 1496, founding Santo Domingo, the oldest European city in the Western Hemisphere and the capital of the Dominican Republic. The location had many advantages, but there was some confusion about what the name of the new settlement would be. The following version of these events comes from General History of the Deeds of the Castilians in the Islands and Mainland of the Ocean Sea, written by Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas (1559–1625) between 1601 and 1615 and published in Madrid.

[Christopher Columbus] wrote from Cádiz to his brother Don Bartholomew, to go to the southern part of the island, and look for some port; and it being comfortable and convenient, to move everything from Isabela, and depopulate it. And Don Bartholomew, leaving in his place his nephew Don Diego, departed with the healthiest men to the mines of San Cristóbal; and asking which was the closest to the sea, he made port at Río de Ozama, as the Indians called it, a very gracious river, and populated on both sides. He reconnoitered it, did soundings, and found that ships of three hundred tons and more could enter, and he determined to begin building a fortress of adobe on the top of the riverbank bluff, above the mouth of the river, and on the east side. He sent to call the people from La Isabela, to begin the settlement, and he gave it for a name, Santo Domingo, for having arrived on the feast day of Santo Domingo [de Guzmán], or on Sunday [Domingo], or because his father was named Domingo, even though the Admiral always called it La Isabela Nueva [New Isabela]. They left the old La Isabela, the officers who commanded two caravels, and some men; and beginning the work, he decided to get to know the King of Bohechio, called Jaragua, about whose state, and policies, and of his sister Anacaona, he had heard great things.

Translated by Eric Paul Roorda.