

Chapter 1

The indigenous Caribbean people

Fighting on arrival, fighting for survival

Bob Marley

Three thousand years before the Christian era a distinct Caribbean civilisation was established. These civilisations had a strong influence on the peoples of the ancient world. They, together with other communities, helped shape the way society was organised, how work, money and the economy were planned, and how human culture was created and developed. Together with their continental cousins in Mexico, Guatemala, Peru and elsewhere, the ancient Caribbean communities engaged with and used their environment in dynamic and creative ways. The Caribbean, then, was home to an old and ancient cultural civilisation that continues to shape and inform our present-day understanding and identity.

In this chapter we will learn about:

1. The culture of indigenous Caribbean people
2. The Ciboney
3. The Taino
4. The Kalinago
5. Continental cousins: Maya, Aztec, and Inca

1 The culture of indigenous Caribbean people

It has taken over 7,000 years for a Caribbean civilisation and culture to evolve. Throughout its history different groups of people like the Taino, Kalinago and Maya brought a range of beliefs, practices and traditions to create the foundations of the rich Caribbean culture that still exists today.

Researchers generally agree that before 1492 the populations of the Caribbean region were very large. They say that the islands were home to between 5 and 13 million people with a range of cultures. When the Europeans arrived in the Caribbean, they caused the devastation and decline of these cultures.

Once the Spanish-funded explorer, Christopher Columbus from Genoa in Italy, crossed the Atlantic Ocean in 1492, he linked the Caribbean and the Americas, Europe and Africa. He triggered what is now known as the wider Atlantic civilisation. The East and West Atlantic came together as one bigger and broader community. In the East Atlantic were the so-called 'Old Worlds' of Europe, Africa

and the islands off its coast. In the West Atlantic was the so-called 'New World'.

The Columbus journey ensured that indigenous Caribbean cultures were systematically linked with African and European cultures. Over the next 200 years, from 1492 to 1692, one effect of this was that the indigenous Caribbean people were almost wiped out. Hundreds of thousands of people died because of war, disease, social problems and poverty. Within 20 years of the Spanish arrival, for example, the Taino population of the island of Hispaniola was reduced from about 3-4 million people to about 60,000.

The arrival of the earliest inhabitants

Who were the ancient ancestors of Caribbean civilisation? This question is the subject of lively archaeological research in the Caribbean. Since the 16th century historians have assumed that the indigenous people of what is now called the American continent, entered this huge land from elsewhere. Two arguments are given for why people migrated or moved to the American continent. Both arguments are based on the belief that a mass of

Asian people crossed either a landbridge or an icebridge.

- The first argument is that 25,000 years ago, what we now call the Bering Straits was above sea level and formed the Beringia landbridge. Then 25,000 years ago, during the Ice Age people from the area now known as Mongolia in northeastern Asia, crossed the Beringia landbridge from Siberia into the American landmass at Alaska. It is believed that they were either fleeing the icy conditions or they were chasing the migratory herds of deer on which they survived.
- The second argument is that there was no landbridge 25,000 years ago but that there was an icebridge between Siberia and Alaska. This argument says that the Asians crossed this bridge and then followed the corridor between the Alaskan and Canadian mountains into the Canadian plains, pushing south to the very end of the continent.

Now however, biological scientists say that most of the major groups who

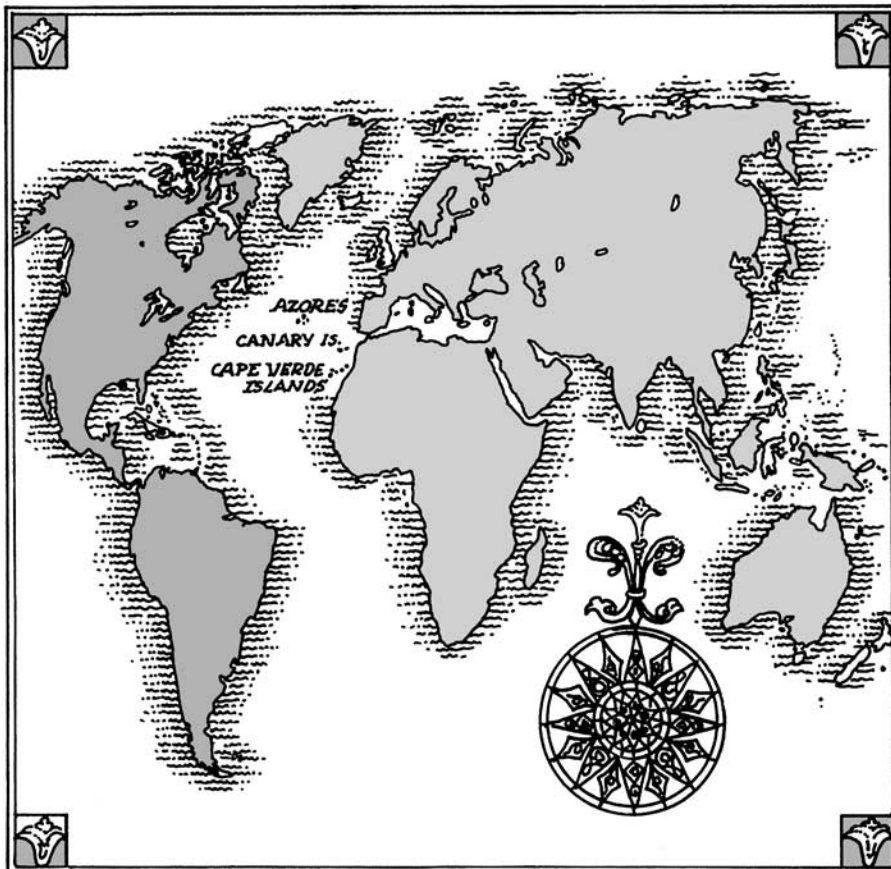


Fig 1.1 The 'Old World' of Europe and Africa and the 'New World' in the West

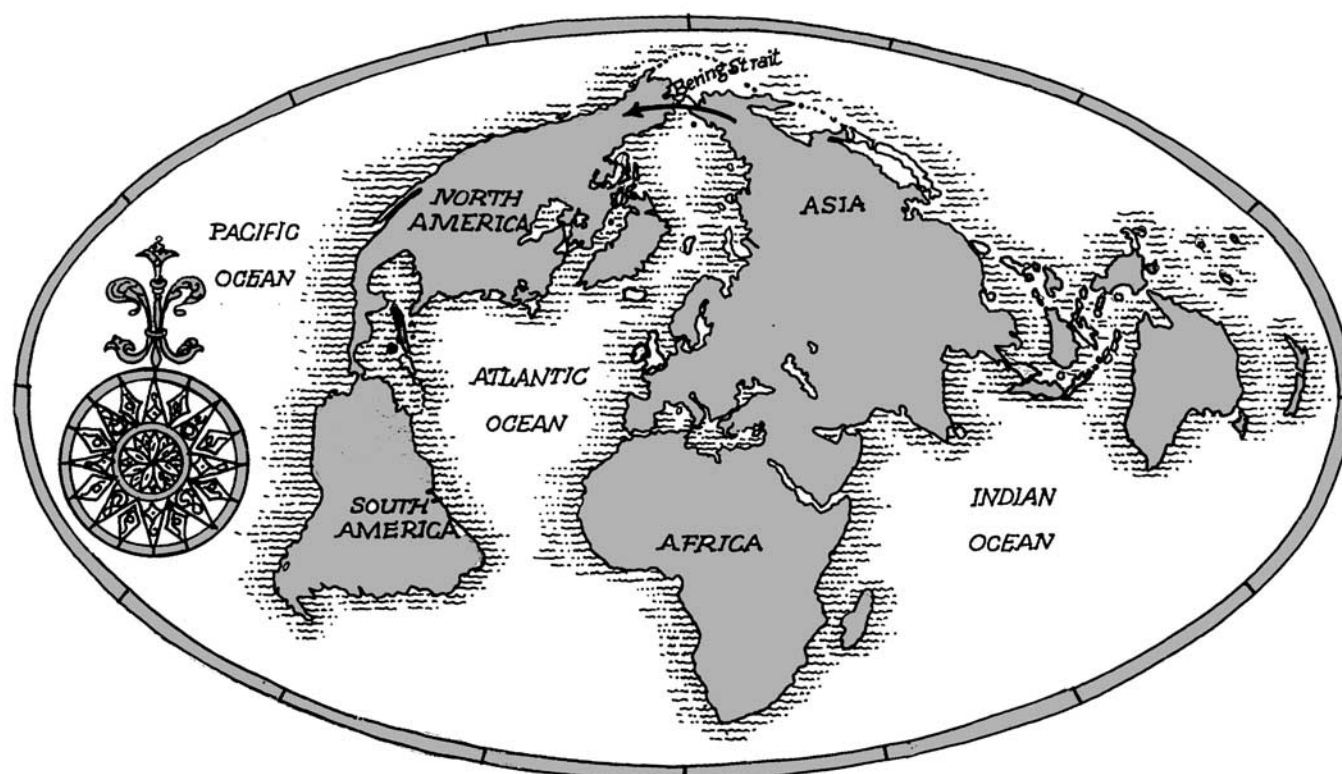


Fig.1. 2 The movement of people from Asia across the Bering Strait to the American landmass

came to occupy the American continent are genetically related and are indeed very similar. However they classify the Eskimos in the north as a separate group related more to the Mongoloid people of western China.

So, the Beringia landbridge/icebridge arguments suggest that there was an Asian migration 25,000 years ago. This rules out the possibility of prehistoric human settlement on the continent before this time. This is now a very debatable argument and has recently been shaken by archaeological excavation in South America that suggests that prehistoric human development did exist on the American continent long before this migration.

This recent research shows that people settled in the American continent possibly millions of years ago, rather than simply 25,000 years ago. Scientists are, however, still not sure whether one million years ago the continents of South America and Africa were joined – allowing for prehistoric humans to migrate across continents.

Prehistoric human development in the Caribbean

Significant research has been done, and much is ongoing, that seeks to identify the origins of Caribbean habitation. An archaeological excavation in southwest Trinidad has suggested that people settled in the areas as far back as

5000-3000 BC to 7,000 years ago. Archaeological evidence shows that these first inhabitants ate shellfish and made bone and stone tools.

Archaeologists in Cuba have found similar types of evidence that show human settlement in about 2050 BC. There is evidence too from sites in Santo Domingo that suggests community development as far back as 5000 BC.

It is likely that these people entered the islands from Central America, as the evidence is very similar to that found in Nicaragua.

In about 1000 BC the earliest inhabitants of the Caribbean were joined by another major group of migrants who travelled north from the Venezuelan mainland in South America, and entered the Caribbean Sea at Trinidad. Researchers describe this group of people as meso-Indians. They had a more advanced social structure than previous groups and they used advanced agricultural technologies.

They travelled through the islands and reached the northern Caribbean where they established large settlements. There is no doubt that they were skilled navigators, great explorers of new lands and open seas, and builders of large communities.

The archaeological evidence at the sites of these early Caribbean communities shows that they did not use

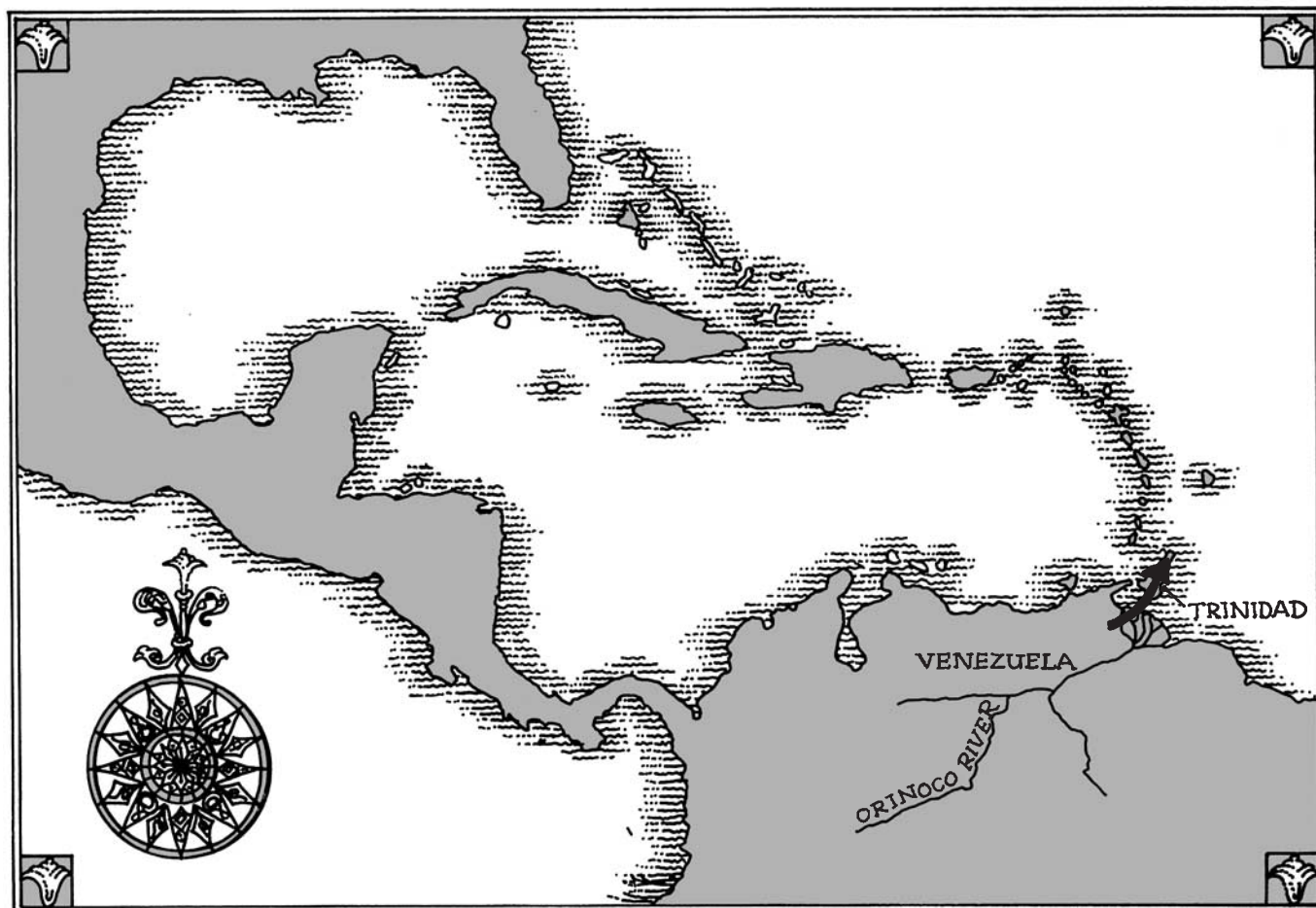


Fig 1.3 Migration from the Venezuelan mainland into the Caribbean

agriculture or farming to survive. Rather, they relied upon hunting animals like the manatee; fishing for turtles, crustaceans and a range of reef fish; and gathering wild vegetables. Their tools were made of bone, wood, shells, and stone. They knew the art and science of pottery-making and their ceramic work that was found in the Dominican Republic resembles work found at a site in Colombia.

Historians have named these people the Ciboney. The name was used in the mid-16th century by the Spanish priest Las Casas, who came across them in Cuba and Hispaniola. The Ciboney, the Guanahacabibe, lived as nomadic hunter-gatherers, dwelled in caves and gullies and used the sea for food more than they used the land.

However despite the research of archaeologists, we still do not have a clear picture of the cultural identities, social relations and belief systems of these first inhabitants. We know that they built walls, assembled large stones for cultural purposes, and developed irrigation systems, but we still do not fully understand exactly for which purpose these structures were used. Nonetheless, there is enough

evidence to show that they made up the foundation societies of the Caribbean world and that the Caribbean had an ancient culture long before the Christian era.

So we have seen that the cultural pillars of Caribbean civilisation date back to the times of other known ancient cultures such as those of Pharaonic Egypt and that of the classical Greek world of Europe. In 1492 Columbus and subsequent colonisers, established the contact between Europeans and the indigenous Caribbean settlers.

The European explorers met the Ciboney or Guanahacabibe, whom they said were wild and 'as fleet as deer'. They also met the three major Caribbean groups whom they labelled Arawaks, Caribs and Maya, although these groups had their own names to define and identify themselves. Historians now believe, for example, that the people called Arawaks and Caribs were the Taino and Kalinago respectively. In recent times, the term 'Taino' was used to define the Arawakan speaking group, and now appears widespread in the literature.

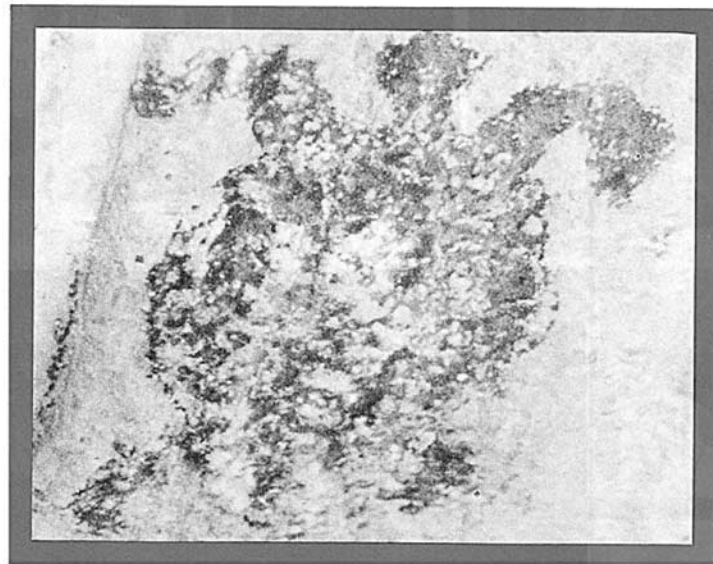
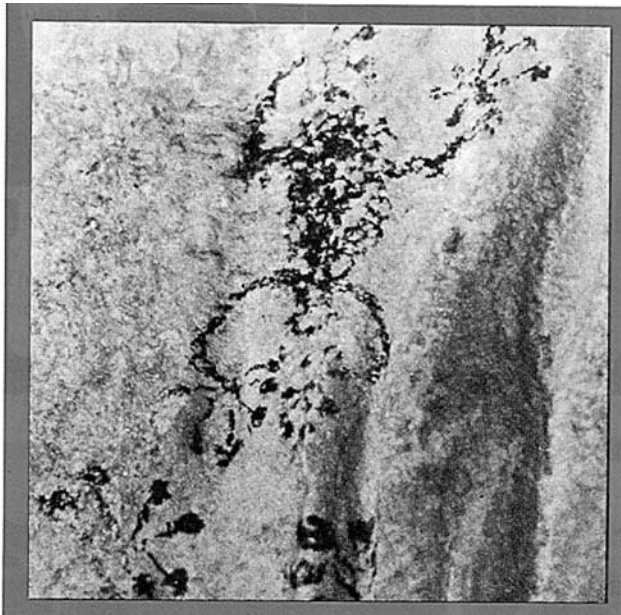


Fig 1.4 Pre-Columbian cave art found in Mountain River Cave, St Catherine, Jamaica

2 The Ciboney

The earliest and smallest known group of Caribbean inhabitants was the Ciboney, who were nomad hunter-gatherers. They used the Caribbean space in creative ways, taking from it only what they required to survive, and making only minimum changes to it. They did not store, distribute or trade any extra or surplus food.

Origins

Initially, archaeologists suggested that the Ciboney in Cuba and the Bahamas migrated from the south via the Lesser Antilles. However no matching sites were found in these places. Later on archaeologists suggested that the Ciboney entered the Caribbean through the Florida peninsula. However, insufficient evidence remained to support this theory. The most popular view now is that the Ciboney were from pre-farming cultures that entered the Antilles from South America, not as one ethnic group, but as waves of different migrants over a very long period of time.

Technology

Their technological development was not advanced. They did not make textiles for clothing, or ceramics for domestic or ritualistic religious purposes. The Ciboney went naked and did not use any complex domestic utensils. They did not make weapons and had no military organisation or army. Their simple political organisation

was expressed in nomadic bands, and there is no evidence of any enforced social hierarchy. In other words, people did not have different status in the group.

As hunter-gatherers, the Ciboney did not live in a village and use agriculture and industrial technologies. They did not even cultivate cassava, which all the ethnic groups in the Caribbean, Central and South America relied heavily upon for survival. When they first came across the Taino and Kalinago groups they recognised them as newcomers to their world. However they could not defend themselves against these groups.

European sources from the time of Columbus suggested that the numerous and technologically developed Taino dominated the Ciboney. In battle, the Ciboney threw stones and used wooden clubs. This shows that their society was not organised for modern military activity. In all the islands they occupied they were outnumbered and marginalised by the Taino – in Jamaica, Hispaniola, Bahamas, and Puerto Rico.

3 The Taino

The material culture of the Taino and Kalinago was broadly similar. However, they came from two language groups: those who spoke Arawakan and those who spoke Cariban. At the time of the Columbus voyages both language groups were widespread throughout the Caribbean and in the northern South America. They were a highly developed agricultural people. Their industrial

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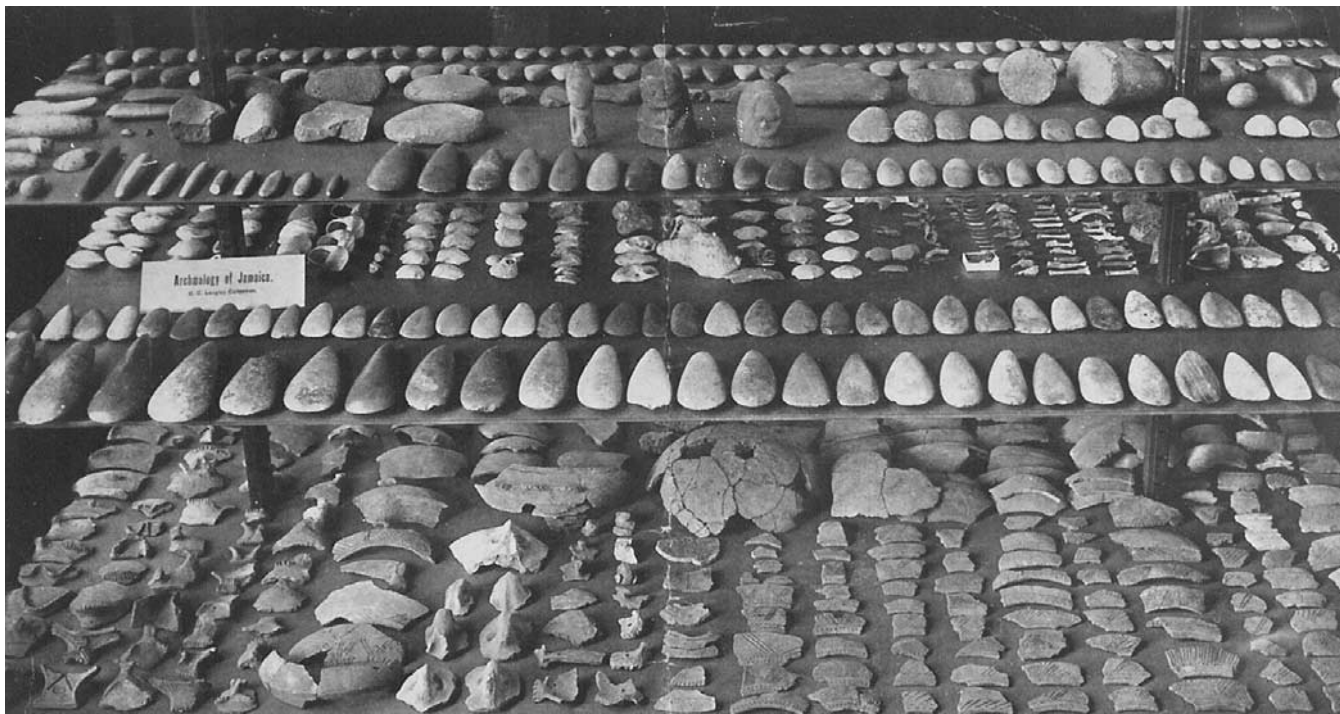
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Fig 1.5 Collection from the Kitchen Middens of Jamaica:

Upper shelf – stone pendants, stone idols, spindle shape celts, stone axes

Middle shelf – celts (axes), shells and bones of fish and coney

Lower shelf – fragments of pottery. At rear are baking slabs used for baking cassava bread

technology in textiles and ceramics was of the same standard as that of the rural communities of Asia and Europe.

Origins

Archaeologists have traced the cultural origins of the Taino back to the lower Orinoco. They arrived in the Caribbean through the Venezuela-Trinidad gateway in about 300 BC. After that several waves of the Taino groups entered the Caribbean. They were expert seafarers, and quickly navigated their way up the island chain until they reached the Greater Antilles where they formed the largest communities in about 250 AD.

Between 250 AD and about 1000 AD many different Taino groups entered the Greater Antilles and established themselves as large communities. They soon took over from the Ciboney as the main cultural force within the evolving Caribbean civilisation. In time the Ciboney were completely displaced, marginalised and weakened in Cuba, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico and, to a lesser extent, the Bahamas.

Culture and identity

Archaeologists have identified two separate Taino groups by analysing their ceramic techniques and styles. They have classified the first Taino to arrive in the Caribbean



Fig 1.6 Examples of Saladoid and Barrancoid ceramics

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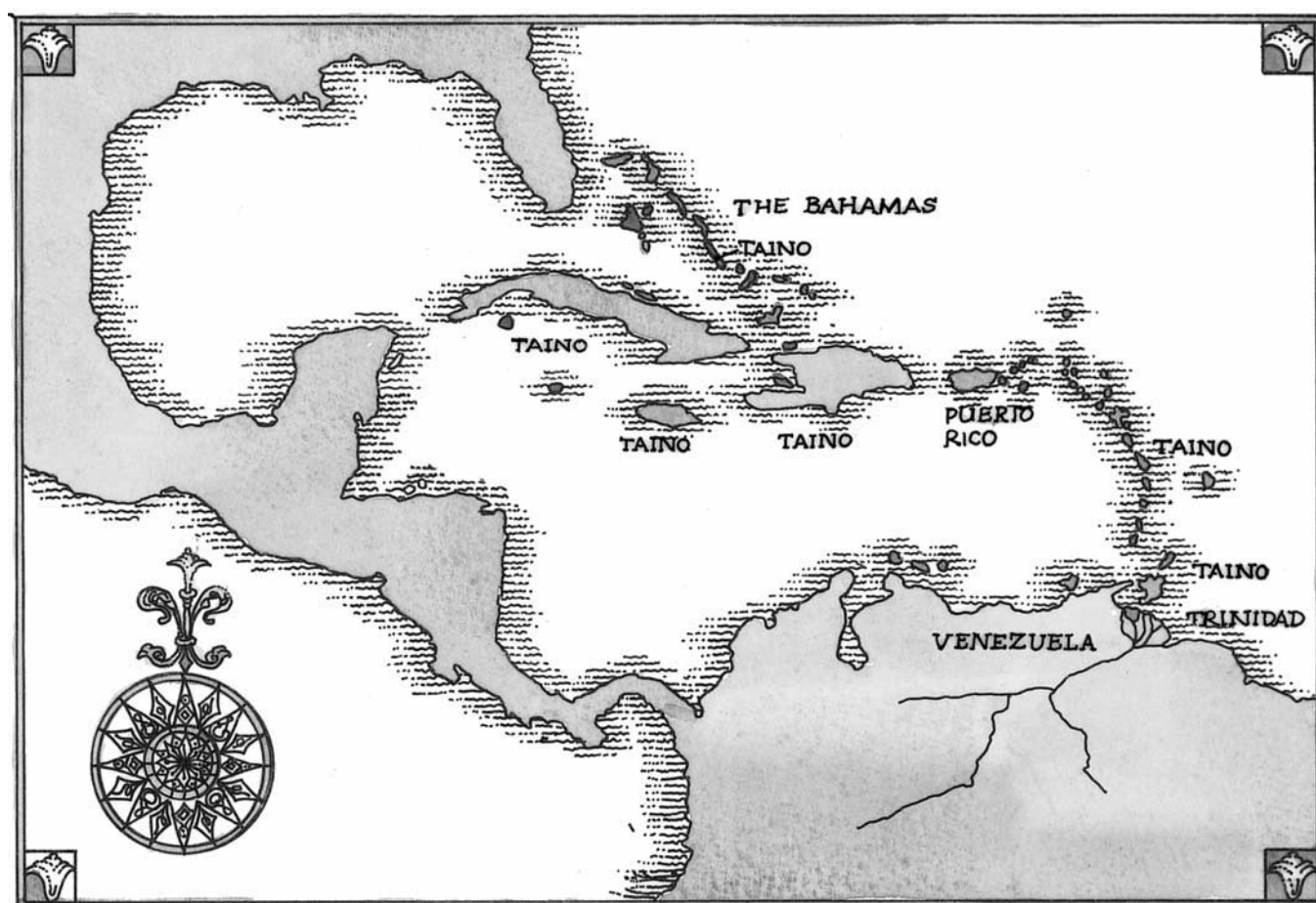
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Fig 1.7 Areas of Taino settlement

around 300 BC as the Saladoid culture group. They were known for their common use of white-on-red artistic pottery decorations. Archaeologists have classified the second Taino to arrive as the Barrancoid culture group. Their pottery styles were more varied and less distinctive, and they were more widespread throughout the Lesser and Greater Antilles than Saladoid pottery.

Since the 1980s more and more has been written about Taino society and economy. The archaeological work of Irving Rouse, and the ecological and geographical work of David Watts, added considerably to our knowledge. We now know that the Taino constructed their settlements throughout the Caribbean in a range of different environments: rainforests, mountain valleys, dry, open plateaux and to a lesser extent, on the savanna grasslands.

Taino culture was similar across the region. Whether communities lived in the Lesser Antilles or the Greater Antilles, they shared a common language, had similar social and hierarchical systems in their groups, and used

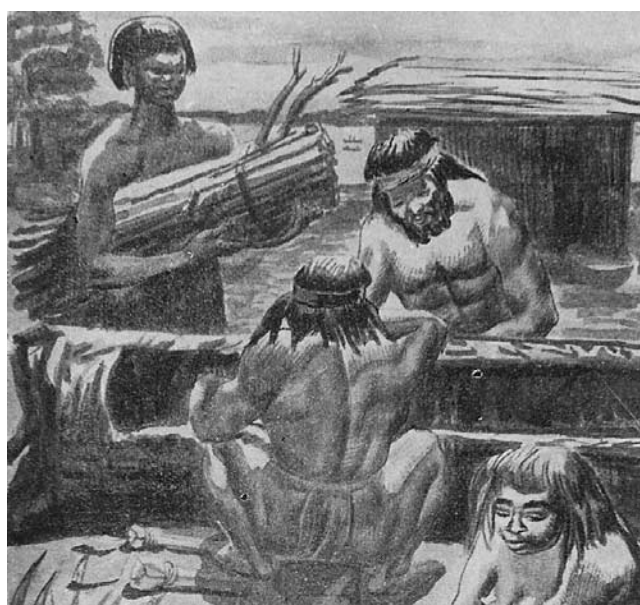


Fig 1.8 Taino loading a canoe

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the same technologies in agriculture, canoe building, ceramics, house construction, and in the fine arts, especially to produce gold ornaments. The Europeans of Columbus' times were genuinely impressed and fascinated by their sophisticated industrial technology in textiles, ceramics and, of course, the gold craft.

Taino economic planning and production

David Watts has shown that the Taino economy consisted of three main ways of producing enough food for their survival: conuco cultivation, house gardens and fishing, hunting and gathering.

Conuco cultivation

Conuco cultivation was an organised system of large-scale agriculture that produced starch-based foods and foods rich in sugar. This cultivation was based on the planting of roots, seeds and vegetables. The Taino rotated their crops to make sure that staple foods were available through all the seasons.

Watts explains that under this system it was normal for each family to have a conuco, or small farm plot, which was close to the village, usually a few miles away. Family members cleared the land by felling trees and burning bushes and prepared for the tilling and planting process.

A family would cultivate a conuco intensively for 2-3 years. When the soil was no longer fertile and production levels fell, the family would move on to a new, fresh plot. The old conuco would be left uncultivated for about the same length of time (2-3 years) before it was brought back into production. It was only later that the Taino developed the technology of fertilising soils with animal and vegetable manure. Shortly before the European arrival, fertilisers were widely used. Before this, traditionally the Taino believed that heavily used soils became infertile and unproductive because of some magic or religious forces at work.

The main crop that Taino farmers produced on their conucos was manioc, or cassava as it was known. Throughout the Caribbean this crop dominated agricultural activity. It grew well on most Caribbean soils, whether acidic or alkaline, and yields were high in both dry and wet conditions. Each year the farmers harvested two cassava crops.

There were two main varieties of the cassava plant; one was called the sweet cassava, and the other the 'poison' or 'bitter' cassava. It was called this because it was bitter in taste and contained cyanic acid, which was highly poisonous. The sweet cassava plant was not as high in yield as the 'bitter' plant. Its tubers were much softer and

sweeter but both could be harvested between 5-8 months after planting.

Taino women knew how to process the tubers of the 'bitter' cassava and to remove the acid and much of the bitterness. They grated the tubers, then repeatedly washed and packed them together until the poison acids were strained out. They then dried the grated substance and ground it into flour.



Fig 1.9 Mealing stones used by Taino to grind maize and cassava

The Taino women also made various types of bread with cassava flour, some unleavened, some sweetened. Cassava breads and cakes were the staples of Taino people. They generally did not use the sweet cassava to make flour. Rather, because of its sweetness and softness they boiled and ate it with fish. Sometimes they roasted it on an open fire and ate it with various types of meat.

The Taino adopted the cassava plant as a staple food because it was high in nutritional content, it was suitable to different soils and climate, and it sprung from minor roots when the major tubers were harvested. In favourable conditions, the calorie yield of the cassava flour is three times that of maize flour. No other Caribbean crop was more productive in starch content, and it could be stored for a much longer time in humid conditions.

Taino farmers set aside some conuco space for the cultivation of the sweet potato, a secondary staple within their food system. The yield of sweet potato was not as high as the bitter cassava. However, it had a shorter planting-harvesting cycle of 2-4 months and it was ideally suited to the moisture and conditions in conucos in rain forest and mountain valleys. The high sugar content of the sweet potato allowed the Taino to use it to make cakes