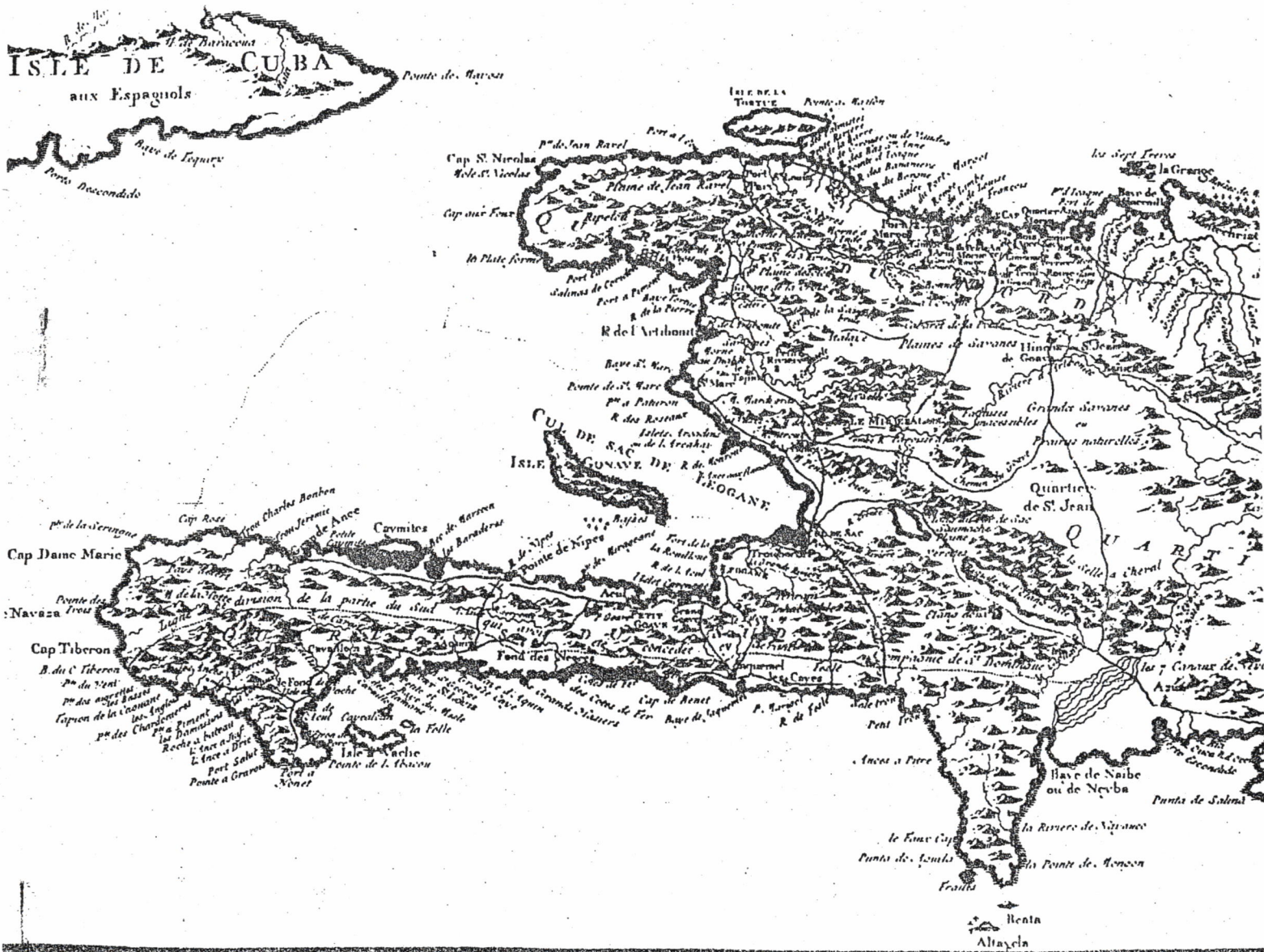


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EVERYDAY LIFE IN A TAINO VILLAGE

Though it is impossible to generalize about the everyday life of a Taino village because of their regional variances, this article will present a composite picture of what life for the Taino in general may have been like.

The early chroniclers, did not provide us with many details about the everyday life of the Tainos. However, it is possible to combine this documentary evidence with archaeological data to create a view into the past.

The first ethnographer of the Tainos was Fr. Ramon Pané, a friar from the order of St. Jeronimo. He compiled and wrote the first monograph about the myths and ceremonies of the Tainos. This work, published in 1498, was based on the inhabitants of Hispaniola which he says they called Haiti.

The Tainos have been subdivided culturally into three groups. These are the Classic, Western and Eastern Tainos. One of the main cultural determinants for these divisions is the pottery or ceramics manufactured by them.

A system of ceramic classification was developed by Irving Rouse over 45 years ago. The classification is based on "type" which is an abstract class symbolizing the group and "method" which is based on the type of manufacturing technique.

In a later definitive study by Rouse and J.M. Cruxent, the different ceramic types and styles were grouped into "series". These ceramic series have come to include the Saladoid, Ostionoid, Chicoid, Meillacoid and others not within the scope of this article.

Many other subseries such as the Barrancoid, Arauquinoid, Suazoid and Chican came about as a result of local conditions and the migration of various indian groups into other areas. These subseries led to a great diversity of regional cultural development and gave rise to the Island Caribs as well as others.

Presently, the Saladoid series appears to be the earliest in the Antilles and marks the beginning of the Ceramic Age in the Caribbean. It is generally characterized by its thinness and hardness as well as its careful manufacture. It is defined by white on red and incised crosshatched designs. Later ceramic-ware seems to have been made in a more haphazard manner.

The Saladoid series originated in the Orinoco River Valley. A local subseries, known as Cedrosan Saladoid, was later introduced into the Antilles. Depending upon its location, the evolution of the Cedrosan Saladoid culture brought about the cultural diversity of the Tainos.

The subsistence of the Classic Tainos consisted mainly of agriculture instead of the slash and burn brush-clearing technique used by some of their contemporaries. For this reason, most of their settlements were located in fertile coastal or inland plains where an abundant water supply existed. The location of the settlements was important not only for agricultural purposes, but also for defense against enemies.

Cultivation was accomplished on mounds of earth created by the Tainos. This allowed for drainage and irrigation control. The soft alluvial soil provided excellent drainage, hence allowing underground storage of the various root crops grown. These fields were called 'conucos'.

The main agricultural product of the Classic Tainos was the manioc root or "yuca" which had practically been deified by them. This root was easily grown and could be preserved in the ground for over two years. Women grated these starchy roots and would squeeze out its juice in a basketry sieve to obtain flour. This flour would be baked into bread on a buren or griddle made from clay.

They knew how to use various textile fabrics from which they would weave their nets and bags. The cultivation of corn was also practiced though it was not of major significance. Its kernels were eaten from the cob instead of being ground into flour and baked into bread as with most other roots or grains.

Cotton was another important crop from which they made their hammocks and short skirts which the married women wore. Cotton was usually grown nearby the houses to facilitate its access. The men generally were naked except for a loincloth. Unmarried females also went about naked except for a headband which perhaps signified their availability. Both sexes adorned themselves with feathers and wore necklaces and belts made from stone beads.

Sweet potato was also cultivated and eaten as a boiled vegetable. Additional seed crops included peppers, beans, squashes, calabashes and peanuts. These were boiled with meat or fish into a stew. Calabashes as well as ceramic pots were used as water containers.

Wild crops which were collected included palms, guava berries and 'guayiga' roots as well as other less abundant fruits and vegetables. Fishing was accomplished using nets, lines and hooks and by spearing them. These were stored in weirs for later consumption. Turtles were also kept this way.

During the time occupied by humans, most of the Caribbean islands have not contained large mammals except for ground sloths, but these apparently became extinct soon after occupation. Taino mammalian diet consisted mostly of 'hutias' and possibly dogs. Even manatees were at times speared and eaten.

The Tainos had copper-color skin most likely developed as protection from the relentless tropical sun. They were of medium stature, black coarse, straight hair with eyes that were somewhat separated. They deformed the frontal bone of their crania which gave them the appearance of having prominent foreheads.

Taino society was matrilineal which means that their status and descent were traced through the mother and not the father. Men lived in the village of the mother and upon marrying brought their wife or wives to that village.

Each village was ruled or controlled by a chief or 'cacique'. Caciques could be either male or female. Their exalted status allowed them to live in specially built houses. These 'bohios' were rectangular in shape and occupied a prominent place near to or on the central village courtyard. They were made of palm thatch and wood. All dwellings had dirt floors, so sleeping was done on hammocks. Goods and supplies were stored in baskets hung from the ceiling or walls.

Caciques were in charge of organizing daily activities as well as overseeing the storage of foodstuffs for future use. These surplus goods were stored in specially constructed buildings and were distributed among the villagers as became necessary. They had the power of life and death over their subjects.

Each village was loosely affiliated with others in the area into district chiefdoms. These districts were usually ruled by the most prominent village cacique. Larger groupings of district chiefdoms were at times made into regional chiefdoms ruled by the most prominent district chief.

Though daily life for the Tainos was not idyllic, the abundance of food supplies and their organizational skills allowed them to live a life above the subsistence level. This provided much free time to develop elaborate worship rituals as well as ball games and dances.

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