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# The Taino Rebellion

The Taino lived on the islands of Cuba, Hispaniola (currently Haiti and the Dominican Republic), Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and the Bahamas in the Caribbean Sea. Archaeologists believe the Taino are descendants of people who traveled to the islands from South America around 250 BCE. By the 15th century, the Taino were living in settled villages (yucayeques) led by chiefs (caciques). They were skilled agriculturalists and artisans with hierarchical religious, political, and social systems. The total population of the Taino tribes was estimated to be about 1,000,000 before the arrival of Columbus.

The Taino people were the first people to meet Columbus in 1492. He quickly began his exploitation of the native population. He enslaved countless people, forcing many to work in gold mines. When he realized the limited gold on the islands, he turned the enslaved workers to sugar cane plantations. Millions of natives died as a result of Columbus' arrival either through violence from the Spanish or disease.

In 1508, another Spanish conquistador, Juan Ponce de León arrived in Puerto Rico to serve as governor of the colony. He was welcomed by Chief Agüeybaná I, who practiced the *guatiao* ritual, symbolizing peace by exchanging names with Ponce de León. However, the Spanish soon imposed the *encomienda* system, seizing land and forcing the Taino into labor. Agüeybaná I tried to maintain peace despite the atrocities of the Spanish.

When Agüeybaná I died in 1510, his brother, Agüeybaná II became the chief of the tribe. Determined to push the Spanish off the island, he rallied other chiefs and declared war. The Taino killed a Spanish officer named Cristóbal de Sotomayor and burned his settlement. The Spanish responded by destroying villages across the island. Despite Agüeybaná II's death in battle in 1511, guerilla attacks by the Taino continued. However, the Spanish were too powerful for the guerilla force. By 1519, most of the Taino fighters had fled to the islands of the Lesser Antilles. The Taino fighters continued to attack Spanish settlements in Puerto Rico from these islands until 1529.

The Spanish were committing similar atrocities on the island of Hispaniola (present-day Haiti and Dominican Republic). In 1500, Enriquillo was born into the Jarague tribe's royal family. When he was a child, his family was killed by the Spanish along with 80 leaders who had been meeting for peace talks with Nicolás de Ovando de Ovando. Enriquillo was sent to live in the Spanish monastery of Santo Domingo where he was raised and educated by the Spanish, including Bartolome de las Casas who was well-known for his criticism of the Spanish treatment of natives.

By 1519, Enriquillo could no longer tolerate the Spanish treatment of his people. He gathered other Taino leaders to rebel. Unlike the rebellion in Puerto Rico, the Spanish could not stop the attacks by the natives who knew the jungle terrain much better than the colonizers. In 1533, the Spanish signed a peace treaty with the Taino rebels. However, the peace came too late as most of the Taino had died from disease. Enriquillo died just two years later in 1535, but to this day he is remembered as a hero of the Dominican Republic.