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| **Pre-Columbian Dominican Republic: Who were the Taino?** http://dr1.com/articles/taino.shtml |
| More than 1,500 years ago, the Arawak people of South America began to migrate northwards, eventually navigating the Orinoco River and exploring what is now the Caribbean and the Antilles. This migration would continue for hundreds of years, until there was a presence of Arawaks on most Caribbean islands, including Cuba, Jamaica, Puerto Rico and Hispaniola (the European name for what is now the Dominican Republic and Haiti).Although the tribes descended from the Arawak went under different names like Lokono, Lucayan, Carib or Ciboney, the Taino, which stood for "the good people" in Arawak, was the largest indigenous group under the umbrella of Arawak Indians, and would be the first group of indigenous Indians to make contact with European settlers.When Columbus landed in what is now the Dominican Republic, in 1492, there was a vibrant and flourishing civilization already present on the island of Haiti (this was the Taino name for what Columbus renamed Hispaniola). Though the Taino Indians of Quisqueya (the Taino name for the part of the island that is now Dominican Republic) were a quiet, peaceful and deeply spiritual group, this society this was one of tremendous resourcefulness and energy.**The Taino** The Taino had dark golden-brown skin, similar to that of their distant South American relatives, and were average in stature with dark, flowing, coarse hair, and large, slightly oblique eyes. Though modern depictions of Taino Indians at the time of Columbus’s arrival are of savage Indians parading around naked, the Taino were, in fact, highly skilled at weaving cotton and clothing. Clothing, or lack thereof, was used as an identifier of class and rank within the society.Both men and women painted their bodies on special occasions, and wore earrings, nose rings and necklaces, which were sometimes made of gold.**Taino Kingdoms** The Taino Indians lived in organized, hierarchically arranged kingdoms. Communities were divided into three social classes: the naborias, who were the working class, the nitainos or sub-chiefs and noblemen, which included the bohiques or priests and medicine men, and the Caciques or chiefs. Each Taino kingdom was ruled by a Taino Cacique, or chieftain, and at the time of Columbus’s arrival there were five Taino kingdoms on Quisqueya.Though the Taino kingdoms were ruled by Taino chieftains, it is a little-known fact that Taino societies were matriarchal in nature. The reasoning behind this fact is that though men wielded a considerable amount of power in the communities, it was the Taino women who actually chose the Caciques in the particular kingdoms. In this regard women were important because unlike men, the Tainos could trace royal lineage through women. It was only after Columbus’s arrival that the family structure was to change drastically.**The Caciques (Chiefs)**Caciques lived in rectangular huts called caneyes, located in the center of the village, facing the batey. It’s believed that the size of Taino settlements ranged from single families to groups of 3,000 people.The chieftains carried boldly carved scepters and daggers of polished stone as symbols of their authority. Caciques were also polygamous, and formed political alliances by marrying women from other kingdoms. Spanish records attest to the Caciques' power over almost every aspect of Taino society. “They controlled the collection and distribution of food and trade goods; they organized community festivals known as areytos; and they decided when to go to war. In addition, caciques functioned as spiritual leaders who contacted the supernatural through hallucinogenic trances and to ensure the well-being of the community.” |

Taino groups in the coastal areas relied on fishing, using large nets to catch fish, while groups in the interior of the islands were more dependent on agriculture. Their crops were raised in a conuco, a large mound, which was packed with leaves to prevent erosion, and then planted with a variety of crops to ensure that something would grow, no matter what the weather conditions. Their main crops were cassava, (which they ate as a flat bread similar to a tortilla) garlic, potatoes, yautias, mamey, guava, corn, squash, beans, peppers, yams, peanuts, as well as tobacco and anon.

Although there weren’t many animals to kill, the Tainos became skilled at killing the animals they could find. The manatee became a staple of their diet, and they also became accustomed to eating small animals such as rodents, bats, earthworms, ducks, lizards, turtles and birds.

**At Columbus’s Arrival**
At the time of Columbus’s arrival there were an estimated three million Taino Indians inhabiting Haiti/Quiqueya, but this was not to last. In the first 20 years of Spanish presence on Quisqueya, the Taino population dwindled to an estimated 60,000 natives, and in the next 30 years the population would be reduced to almost 5,000 native inhabitants, a decline of almost 98% of the indigenous population.