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ENCYCLOPÆDIA BRITANNICA

Tools

Taino

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Arawakan Indians who at the time of Christopher Columbus' exploration inhabited the Greater Antilles (comprising Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola [Haiti and the Dominican Republic], and Puerto Rico) in the Caribbean Sea. As the most numerous Indian people of the Caribbean, the Taino may have numbered one or two million at the time of the Spanish conquest in the late 15th century. A peaceful people, they had long been on the defensive against the aggressive Carib Indians, who had conquered the Lesser Antilles to the east. The Taino were easily conquered by the Spaniards beginning in 1493, and enslavement, starvation, and disease had reduced them to a few thousand by 1520 and to near extinction by 1550. Although Taino culture was largely wiped out, groups of Taino survived colonization. Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. state of Florida are among the regions in which Taino populations flourished. In 1998 the United Confederation of Taino People was created as an umbrella organization for the affirmation and restoration of Taino culture, language, and religion.

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When they were encountered by Europeans in the 15th century, the Taino practiced a high-yielding form of slash-and-burn agriculture to grow their staple foods, cassava and yams. The forest or scrub would be burned off, and the ashes and soil were then heaped up into mounds that could be easily planted, tended, and irrigated. Corn (maize), beans, squash, tobacco, peanuts (groundnuts), and peppers were also grown, and wild plants were gathered. Birds, lizards, and small animals were hunted for food, the only domesticated animals being dogs and, occasionally, parrots used to decoy wild birds within range of hunters. Fish and shellfish were another important food source.

Taino settlements ranged from single families to groups of 3,000 people, and houses were built of logs and poles with thatched roofs. Men wore loincloths, and women wore aprons of cotton or palm fibres. Both sexes painted themselves on special occasions, and they wore earrings, nose rings, and necklaces, which were sometimes made of gold. Other Taino crafts were few; some pottery and baskets were made, and stone and wood were worked skillfully. A favourite form of recreation among the Taino was a ball game that they played on rectangular courts. The Taino had an elaborate system of religious beliefs and rituals that involved the worship of spirits (*zemis*) by means of carved representations. They also had a complex social order. Their government was by hereditary chiefs and subchiefs, and there were classes of nobles, commoners, and serfs (or slaves).