

TIMELINE: Spain, Columbus, and Taínos

Approximately 13,000 B.C.: First known human beings live in the Caribbean.

Approximately 800 B.C.: The people who call themselves Taíno, or “men of good,” arrive in the region. With great care for the earth, the Taínos are able to feed millions of people. No one in a community goes hungry. They play sports and recite poetry. They are great inventors and travel from island to island. One Spanish priest reported that he never saw two Taínos fighting.

There are frequent skirmishes between Taínos and Caribs on nearby islands, but these threaten neither civilization.

1451: Columbus is born probably in the Italian port city, Genoa. At the time of his birth, there may be as many as 70 to 100 million people living in what will one day be called the Americas. They are of many nationalities, speaking perhaps 2,000 different languages.

1453: Constantinople (now Istanbul) falls to the Ottoman Turks who make it the capital of their empire. For European merchants, trade with Asia becomes more difficult.

1455: Christian Castile [Spain] begins attacks on Granada in Andalusia, the last province under Arab / Islamic rule in Spain. The Arabs (called “Moors” by European Christians) had ruled the Iberian peninsula for eight centuries.

1471: About this time, Columbus first goes to sea on a Genoese ship.

1483: Under King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, the Inquisition intensifies in the Christian-reconquered areas of Spain. The Inquisition aims at rooting out Muslims and Jews who had converted to Christianity but whose conversion the Inquisition deems insincere. Before it is over, three centuries later, thousands will die, with an estimated three million people driven into exile.

1484: Columbus first presents his idea to the king of Portugal for reaching the Indies by sailing west. The plan is rejected, not because the king’s advisors don’t believe the world is round, but because they think Columbus’s estimate of the distance is way



Columbus sets sail from Spain.

too small.

1486: Columbus first proposes a western voyage to Queen Isabella, whose advisors postpone any recommendation.

1488: Columbus appeals again to the Portuguese king. At the same time, Bartolomé Dias claims Africa can be rounded by sea to get to the Indies. This eliminates Portugal’s interest in looking for a westward route.

1490: Queen Isabella’s advisors urge the queen to reject Columbus’s proposal. But Isabella keeps Columbus on the royal payroll, offering him hope his proposal will eventually be granted.

Jan. 2, 1492: The Arab rulers and their court surrender in Granada. According to the surrender agreement, the inhabitants of Muslim Spain have until the beginning of 1495 to decide between living under Christian rule or exile. Those who choose to stay begin to feel the threat of the Inquisition immediately, and in 1498 official inquisitors come, and forced conversions to Christianity begin.

March 30, 1492: Ferdinand and Isabella order all Jews to leave Spain.

April, 1492: Ferdinand and Isabella agree to Columbus’s westward voyage to the Indies. They also agree to his demands: 10% of all the wealth returned to Spain, the title of Admiral of the Ocean Sea, governor and viceroy of all the territory he discovers. All these titles are to be inherited by his heirs.



Aug. 2, 1492: Deadline for Jews to leave Spain. Between 120,000 and 150,000 are forced out, able to take only what they can carry. They must leave all their gold, silver, jewels and money for the King and Queen.

Aug. 3, 1492: Columbus departs from Palos instead of the port of Cadiz, which is filled with ships taking some 8,000 Jews into exile.

Oct. 12, 1492: Juan Rodriguez Bermejo, a sailor on the Pinta, shouts, "Land, Land!" Columbus later claims he first spotted land and thus will collect the lifetime pension promised. The ships arrive at the island, Guanahani, which Columbus claims for Ferdinand and Isabella. Columbus receives presents from the people he encounters and gives them some red caps, glass beads, and "many other things of little value."

The first thing he tries to ask the people is "if they had gold."

Oct. 14: Columbus's thoughts turn to slavery: "... When Your Highnesses so command, they [the Indians] can be carried off to Castile or held captive in the island itself, since with 50 men they would be all kept in subjection and forced to do whatever may be wished."

Nov. 12: Columbus kidnaps 10 Taínos: My men "brought seven head of women, small and large, and three children."

Nov. 17: Two of his captives escape.

Dec. 9: Columbus sails into the harbor of the island the Taíno people call Hayti. Its plains are "the loveliest in the world" and remind Columbus of Spain. He calls the island Española.

Oct./Nov./Dec.: Columbus's every move is determined by where he believes he can find gold. On December 23 he writes in his journal: "Our Lord in His Goodness guide me that I may find this gold, I mean their mine, for I have many here who say they know it." Still, by mid-December Columbus has found very little gold.

Dec. 25: Columbus's ship, the Santa Maria, hits rocks off Española. He is forced to abandon it. The Taíno *cacique* (leader), Guacanagarí, weeps when he hears of the shipwreck. Taínos help unload the ship "without the loss of a shoe string." "They are," Columbus writes, "a people so full of love and without greed... I believe there is no better race or better land in the world."

Dec. 26: Realizing he will have to leave men behind, Columbus orders a fort and tower built. He writes that it is necessary to make the Indians realize that they must serve Spain's king and queen "with love and fear."

Jan. 2, 1493: Columbus prepares to leave Hayti. He leaves behind 39 men and orders them "to discover the mine of gold."

Jan. 13: First reported skirmish between Spaniards and Indians: After landing on an island to trade for bows, Columbus writes that many Indians prepared "to assault the Christians and capture them." The Spaniards "fell upon" them, "they gave an Indian a great slash on the buttocks and they wounded another in the breast with an arrow." Columbus believes that these people were "Carib and that they eat men [though he offers no evidence]." He regrets he didn't capture some to take back to Spain.

Feb. 15: Columbus returns with relatively little of value. In a letter written aboard ship, Columbus lies, saying that on Española, "there are many spices and great mines of gold and of other metals."

Mid-April: Columbus welcomed by Ferdinand and Isabella. They begin planning his second voyage. Of the six Indians brought to Spain, one would stay and die in two years. The others would leave with Columbus for Española and three would die enroute.

May 28, 1493: The king and queen confirm that Columbus, his sons and his heirs will be Admiral and Viceroy and Governor of the islands and mainland discovered "now and forever."

Approx. Sept./Oct. 1493: The men left behind at La Navidad brutally mistreat the Taínos. They steal, take slaves and rape women. In response, the Taíno cacique, Caonabó, kills all the Spaniards on the island.

Sept. 25, 1493: Columbus's second voyage begins. His fleet includes 17 ships and between 1200 and 1500 men (no women). Pressure is high for Columbus to make good on his promises. At least some of the money to finance the voyage comes from wealth taken away from Spanish Jews.

Nov. 3, 1493: Columbus lands on Dominica. On Guadeloupe, his men go ashore "looting and destroying all they found," according to Columbus's son, Fernando. They capture 12 "very beautiful and plump" teenage Taíno girls.

Mid-Nov.: Columbus's crew trap a small group of Caribs in a harbor at what is now St. Croix. In defense, the Indians shoot arrows at the Spaniards, killing one and wounding one. The Indians are caught, and one is horribly mutilated, then killed, by the Spaniards.

Nov. 28: Columbus finds the fort at La Navidad burned.

Early Feb. 1494: Columbus sends 12 of the 17 ships back to Spain for supplies. Several dozen Indian slaves are taken aboard — "men and women and boys and girls," he writes. He justifies this by writing that they are cannibals and thus slavery will more readily "secure the welfare of their souls."

Columbus recommends to the king and queen that supplies needed in the Indies could be paid for in slaves, "well made and of very good intelligence," and that slave shipments could be taxed to raise money for Spain. Spanish priest Bartolomé de las Casas later writes that claims of cannibalism are used to "excuse the violence, cruelty, plunder and slaughter committed against the Indians every day."

Feb./March: In Isabella, Spaniards are dying of disease, and there is less food everyday. Columbus uses violence against Spaniards who disobey his orders to work. Any Spaniard found hiding gold is "well whipped." Colonist Michele de Cuneo writes: "Some had their ears slit and some the nose, very pitiful to see." Many blame Columbus, governor of the island, for their problems. Demoralized, many want to leave.

Late March/early April: Columbus is told that Indians are leaving their villages and that the cacique, Caonabó, is preparing to attack the fort at Isabella. Las Casas writes that Columbus "ordered Alonso de Hojeda to lead a squadron by land to the fort of Santo Tomas and spread terror among the Indians in order to show them how strong and powerful the

Christians were."

April 9, 1494: Hojeda takes 400 men inland, captures a cacique and some relatives, accuses one of theft and has his ears publicly cut off. When Hojeda returns to Isabella with these and other prisoners, Columbus orders a crier to announce their public decapitation. Las Casas comments, "What a pretty way to promote justice, friendship, and make the Faith appealing — to capture a King in his own territory and sentence him, his brother and his nephew to death, for no fault of their own!"

April 24, 1494: Columbus leaves Isabella to seek the mainland of the Indies.

Spring 1494: Columbus explores the coast of Jamaica. Andres Bernaldez, accompanying Columbus, writes of the island's "extreme beauty." Columbus sets loose a vicious dog against the Indians. Bernaldez writes that it "did them great damage, for a dog is the equal of 10 men against the Indians."

June 12, 1494: Columbus, off the coast of Cuba, believes he has reached the mainland. The next day he begins his return to Española.

Sept. 14: Columbus reaches the southern coast of Española. Instead of returning to Isabella, Columbus heads to Puerto Rico to raid for Carib slaves. However, he becomes ill and his officers return the ships to Isabella.

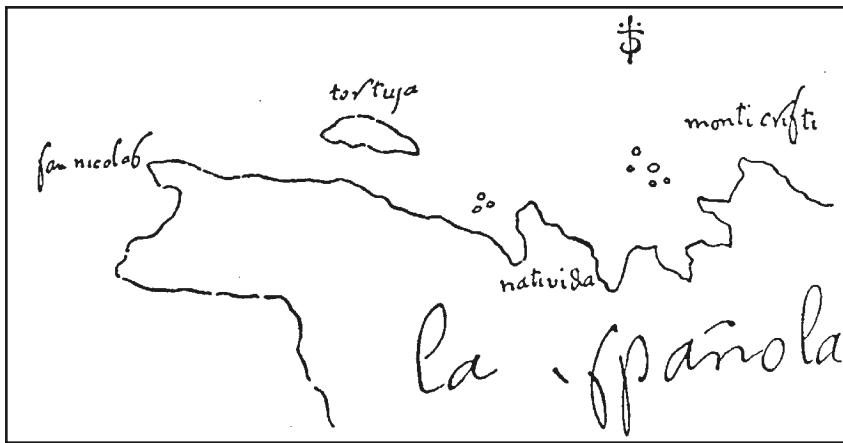
Nov. 1494: Returning to Spain, mutineers against Columbus complain to the king and queen. They say there is no gold and that the enterprise is a joke.

Feb. 1495: Columbus must be desperate to prove that his "enterprise" can be profitable. He rounds up



Theodore de Bry

The governor, de Ovando, lures the Taíno leader Anacaona and her followers to a meeting; the Spaniards burn down the meeting house and hang her.



A sketch by Columbus of northwest Hispaniola.

1600 Taínos — the same people he had earlier described as “so full of love and without greed.” Some 550 of them — “among the best males and females,” writes colonist Michele de Cuneo — are chained and taken to ships to be sent to Spain as slaves. “Of the rest who were left,” writes Cuneo, “the announcement went around that whoever wanted them could take as many as he pleased; and this was done.”

1495: Columbus establishes the tribute system. Every Taíno, 14 or older, is required to fill a hawk’s bell full of gold every 3 months. Those who comply are given copper tokens to wear around their necks. Where Columbus decides there is little gold, 25 pounds of spun cotton is required. The Spaniards cut the hands off those who do not comply; they are left to bleed to death. As las Casas writes, the tribute is “impossible and intolerable.”

Columbus will soon replace the tribute system with outright slavery, though the Queen will rule that Indians forced to work must be paid “wages.” It is called the *encomienda* system, in which colonists are simply granted land and numbers of Taínos.

March 24, 1495: Columbus, and his brothers Diego and Bartolomé, who had arrived earlier, send an armed force to the mountains to put down Taíno resistance to Spanish brutality. The force includes 200 soldiers in full armor, 20 vicious dogs and 20 mounted cavalry. The Spaniards confront a large number of Taínos in a valley 10 miles south of Isabella, attack them and, according to Columbus’s son, “with God’s aid soon gained a complete victory, killing many Indians and capturing others who were also killed.”

Oct. 1495: Responding to reports of Columbus’s misrule, the king and queen send an investigator to Española.

March 1496: Columbus departs for Spain. Two ships make the journey. Onto them, Columbus forces 30 Taíno prisoners, including the cacique, Caonabó, who led the first resistance to Spanish rule in Española. It takes 3 months to make the voyage. Caonabó dies enroute; no one knows how many others also die.

Columbus arrives and awaits an answer from the king and queen to his request for a third voyage.

July 1496: Ferdinand and Isabella agree to see Columbus. He sets out for Burgos with his Taíno slaves. Columbus promises to locate the mainland so that it will come under Spanish rather than Portuguese control. The king and queen will not agree to Columbus’s plans for almost two years.

May 30, 1498: Columbus’s third voyage begins. Three ships head directly for Española, another three, with Columbus, travel farther south.

July 31, 1498: Columbus sails past and names Trinidad. He saw what is today Venezuela, but didn’t realize that it was the mainland.

Mid-Aug. 1498: Columbus lands in Española. The admiral finds Spanish colonists in rebellion against his brothers’ rule. He backs down and offers amnesty to anyone who will return to Spain or will accept free land.

1500: By now the Spaniards have established at least seven forts in Española and at least 340 galleys.

Aug. 1500: The king and queen, upset over the negative reports of Columbus’s bad government, though not his mistreatment of Taínos, send a commissioner to take charge in Española. The commissioner arrives amid another uprising against the Columbus brothers. He arrests them and in October sends them to Spain for trial.

Late Oct.: Columbus arrives in Cadiz in chains. A few months later, he presents his case to the king and queen. He demands he be reinstated governor. He will make one more voyage but will never regain his power.

May 20, 1506: Columbus dies in Valladolid, Spain.

1542: Bartolomé de las Casas writes that a mere 200 Taínos still live in Española. One scholar recently estimated that perhaps more than 3 million Taínos lived there when Columbus first arrived.

— compiled by Bill Bigelow

Sources include: Cecil Jane, *The Journal of Columbus*; Benjamin Keen, ed. *The Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus by His Son Ferdinand*; Hans Koning, *Columbus: His Enterprise*; Milton Meltzer, *Columbus and the World Around Him*; Samuel Eliot Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*; Kirkpatrick Sale, *Conquest of Paradise*; *The Arab World and Islamic Resource and School Services*.

Montesinos appeared calm. "What I said today in my sermon was the result of much thought. It is what all the friars believe. Again I say to you: You are killing off the Indians. You treat them as if they were animals. But they are people, and it is up to the friars to save the souls of all people, Spaniard and Indian. I believe that in doing this, we are serving the King. Believe me, once the King knows what we friars are doing, he will thank us."

These words angered Columbus and the men. They had come to the Indies to get rich by finding gold. How could they find gold without the Indians? Who would work in the mines? Who would work in the fields?

Columbus spoke for the men. "Look, we are warning you. I demand that you preach another sermon next Sunday. And take back what you have said today. If you don't, we shall have you all sent back to Spain."

Now, it was Friar Cordoba's turn to speak. "Of course you can send us back to Spain. This can be easily done." It was true. The Dominicans had very little in the Indies. Besides their rough clothes, they owned nothing except a simple blanket. They slept on straw pads. Everything they owned could be fit into two trunks.

Admiral Columbus saw that his threats did not scare these Dominicans. "Please, Friar Cordoba, Friar Montesinos. Please preach another sermon next Sunday. People are very upset."

Friar Montesinos looked at Friar Cordoba. "Alright," he said. "I will preach another sermon next Sunday. I will do my best to make myself more clear."

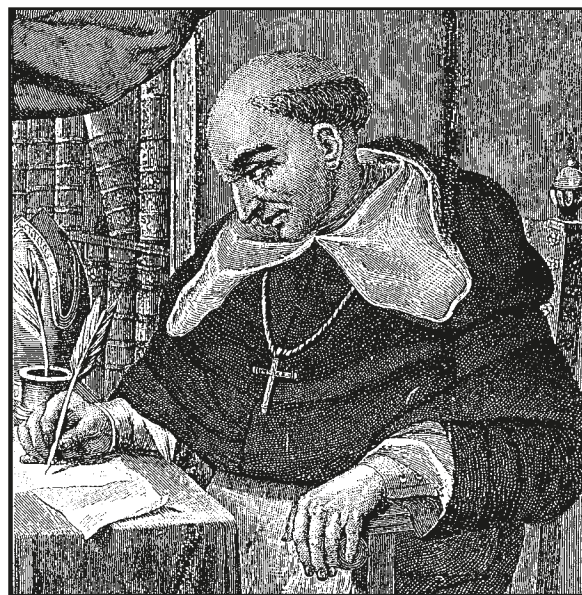
Diego Columbus thanked the friars and the men left. They were happy and joked to themselves as they walked away from the Dominicans' house.

News spread quickly that next Sunday, Friar Montesinos would preach another sermon. People heard that Montesinos had promised to take back everything he had said. The church was crowded with people.

Friar Montesinos walked steadily to the pulpit. "I take my theme from Job 36," he said in a loud, strong voice. "From the beginning, I shall repeat my knowledge and my truth. I will show that what I said last Sunday, that made you so angry, is true."

People in the church looked at each other. They wanted to stop him, but he had already begun. Diego Columbus stared at him with anger.

"With my own eyes, I have seen Indians starving to death. With my own eyes, I have seen people who call themselves Christians whip an Indian to death. Dogs are treated better than Indians. Again, I tell you: You will go to hell if you do not stop. If you don't like what I say, then write to Spain. Do



The Spanish priest, Bartolomé de las Casas chronicled Spanish abuses of the native Taínos.

whatever you like. I will not stop saying what I know is true. It is the only way I know how to serve my God and my King."

Montesinos ended his sermon. Again, he left the church with his head held high.

"He lied to us," said one man. "He promised he would take back what he said last week."

"Yes, let's go back to the Dominicans and order them to preach another sermon," called out someone from the back.

Others became quiet as Diego Columbus spoke: "And what good would that do? He would continue to tell us we are going to hell. I'm tired of listening to that idiot! No, we must tell the King. He will order Montesinos to stop. The King has no wish to be poor like a Dominican friar." The others laughed. "And without the Indians, the King would get no gold. He would lose his power."

When the King received Diego Columbus's letter, he ordered the head of the Dominicans in Spain to come to him. "What is this man causing so much trouble for? You must stop him. And if you don't, I will."

You see how easy it is to fool a king....

— adapted by Bill Bigelow from *Bartolomé de las Casas, History of the Indies, 1542.*

Additional Reading:

Stopsky, Fred. Bartolome de las Casas: Champion of Indian Rights (Lowell, MA: Discovery Enterprises, 1992)

Bartolomé de las Casas. A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies. New York: Penguin, 1992 (pb. edition).

SECONDARY SCHOOL ISSUES



Spain, Columbus, and Taínos

Historical Timeline (p. 99)

In preparing this timeline, we found it easy to find information about Christopher Columbus but more difficult to learn about the Taínos. How would you explain this? How do you think the Columbus expedition to the Americas was related to the war against the Moors, the expulsion of the Jews, and the Spanish Inquisition? (This might be a good topic for student research.)

What might Columbus have thought as he approached Guanahani? What thoughts might his crew have had? What might the Taínos have thought as they watched Columbus and his men come onto their island? Is there any evidence to suggest that the Taínos thought Columbus was a god? Why has this myth become so widespread? (Students could write a set of interior monologues, contrasting the thoughts of Spaniards and Taínos.)

What appears to be the objective of Columbus's first voyage? On January 13, Columbus encounters what he decides is resistance. Why does he presume that these people are Caribs and not Taínos? How does Columbus justify taking slaves? What prevented the Taínos from mounting an effective resistance to Columbus's invasion?

Write the thoughts of Columbus's Taíno kidnap victims as they arrive in Spain.

Write Caonabó's interior monologue as he is led in chains onto a ship bound for Spain. Recall that he led the first resistance to the Spanish on Hayti.

Write an appropriate epitaph for Columbus.

Have students do more research and continue the timeline. Have them choose events on the timeline to research more thoroughly. Are there particular "choice points" suggested in the timeline where people's decisions could have resulted in different historical outcomes?

Also see "Talking Back to Columbus" (p. 115) for other teaching ideas.

"Open Your Hearts"

Adapted from las Casas (p. 103)

According to Antonio de Montesinos, what is wrong with Spanish rule in the Indies? What does Montesinos think about Native people? Does he believe Native people should rule themselves? How did Montesinos want the Spaniards on the island to

change? Did he want them to get out of the Indies? Why are Columbus and the others so upset? Why don't they just ignore Montesinos? What did Montesinos risk?

Write the thoughts of Montesinos preparing for his second sermon. And/or ask students to improvise a discussion between Montesinos and Father Cordoba.

Write the reaction of a Taíno cacique to Montesinos. Does he approve of everything Montesinos says and does?

Encourage students to research Spaniards like Bartolomé de las Casas, author of the book that this excerpt is adapted from, who fought for Native rights in the Americas.

Ceremony

Poem by Leslie Marmon Silko (p. 114)

Read "Ceremony" aloud. Who is the "they" who tries to destroy the stories? Why would "they" want those stories destroyed? Whose evil is mighty? Why can't it overpower the strength of the stories?

Have students bring in stories from their lives — ones that teach, that amuse, that remember. Seat students in a circle, maybe even on the floor, and share these as a group. Afterward talk about the roles stories play in our families and in our cultures.

Columbus Day

Poem by Jimmie Durham (p. 123)

Read the poem aloud. Ask students to visualize the descriptions.

How does the poem make you feel? Why? Is Durham angry, sad, hopeful? Why do you think he wrote the poem? What else has been left out of the school curriculum that should be there?

Use Durham's poem as a prompt for students to write. Begin: "In school I was taught..." and begin a second verse: "No one mentioned..."

Choose someone referred to by Jimmie Durham — Chaske, Many Deeds — and write a poem from one of their perspectives. Or write a poem about people from another group that has traditionally been silenced in the curriculum.