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The Virgin Islands as an Historical Frontier Between the Taínos and the Caribs*

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The role played by the Virgin Islands as a frontier between the Taínos of Puerto Rico and the Caribs of the Lesser Antilles has not been studied adequately. Historians and archaeologists either have avoided the issue,¹ or been divided on the subject² due to an incomplete consultation of printed sources, which are scattered and in various languages. This is the first attempt at a documented history encompassing the whole period in question (1493-1688), and existing theories may be tested against it.

St. Croix was the first of the Virgin Islands to be discovered by Columbus' fleet, and the only one found to be inhabited.³ It was reported as being well-cultivated in 1493 and was grouped with the other main Carib centers of Guadeloupe and Dominica.⁴ From it frequent raids were launched against the Taínos of Puerto Rico.

As in Guadeloupe and the other Carib islands, Taíno captives were a considerable portion of the Cruzan population.⁵ Women and boys were held

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1. Cf. Dookhan, pp. 15-29.
2. Cf. Hatt; vide Watlington, p. 5.
3. Bernáldez, p. 287
4. Cf. Bernáldez, pp. 284-286; Cuneo in *Raccolta*, p. 97.
5. *Ibid.*

in bondage, some of the former as concubines. The latter were castrated and fattened for slaughter. Exocannibalism, in fact, was an avowed reason for Carib raids. The only captives eaten, however, were adult males.⁶ The castrated boys were used in domestic and menial chores until they were old enough for consumption. Miscegenation between the two groups was unacceptable at this early date, since only those children born of Carib women were kept, all others being eaten.⁷

Traditionally, the Caribs have been mortal enemies of the Taínos.⁸ Without their cooperation, Caribs could not have obtained access to trees suitable for making sea-faring canoes, which were available in Puerto Rico. St. Croix, as now, lacked forests comparable to those of the larger island.⁹ If the sharp division evidenced clearly enough by constant warfare had been absolute, then it would follow that the Taínos must have ambushed Carib logging parties at every opportunity. That this was not so implies regulated warfare, perhaps of a ritual nature, rather than the total conflict sometimes envisioned.

In 1509, Juan Ponce de León began the Spanish conquest of Puerto Rico.¹⁰ While exploring the southern coast of the island, he came across Carib loggers, which he detained.¹¹ The Taínos complained to him that Caribs raided them often.¹² Ponce de León wrote Governor Ovando for permission to build a brigantine in order to patrol the coasts of Puerto Rico. He also intended to return the Caribs to St. Croix, take the Taíno captives held on that island back to Puerto Rico, secure provisions from the Cruzan natives, and in general, pacify them.¹³ The various requests were granted, and many of the Cruzan Caribs were converted briefly and nominally to Christianity.¹⁴ A *conuco* (garbled as 'convento' in some texts) was set up for the King.¹⁵

The adventurer Diego de Nicuesa raided St. Croix for slaves only three months after Ponce de León's pacification of the island.¹⁶ He took about 150 Caribs, and scandalized the Cruzans into rebellion.¹⁷ Spain lost St. Croix permanently the same year that it was won. The Taíno revolts, aided by the Caribs, kept the Spaniards busy elsewhere.¹⁸ The two former enemies had become allies.

6. Bernáldez, p. 285.

7. Op. Cit., p. 284.

8. Cf. Santa Cruz, p. 498.

9. Martyr, p. 99; cf. Coll y Toste, vol. I (1914), pp. 121-124; vide Brau y Asensi, p. 212.

10. Coll y Toste, loc. cit.

11. *Doc. Inéd.*, vol. XXXIV (1880), pp. 361, 488-489, 494.

12. *Ibid.*; cf. Martyr, loc. cit.

13. Falcó y Osorio, p. 87; *Doc. Inéd.*, vol. XXXIV (1880), pp. 488-489; cf. Murga Sanz, *Ponce*, p. 45.

14. Santa Cruz, p. 501.

15. *Doc. Inéd.*, vol. XXXIV (1880), p. 361.

16. *Doc. Inéd.*, vol. XXI (1879), pp. 530-531.

17. Santa Cruz, loc. cit.

18. *Doc. Inéd.*, vol. XXXIV (1880), p. 361.

The great Taíno uprising of 1511 was the first of several aided and perhaps also instigated by the Caribs of St. Croix. Kinsmen from Guadeloupe and Dominica joined the Cruzans in their incursions on behalf of the oppressed Taínos,¹⁹ trying to reverse the Spanish conquest before it reached their islands. The Virgins became bases from which Taíno rebellions were staged and where Carib contingents assembled.²⁰

The Taíno institution of name-exchange, known broadly to the Caribs also, is perhaps one of the mechanisms which facilitated the confederation of these two nations. Upon an exchange of names, the parties involved would adopt each other. Persons so joined were said to be *guatiao*.²¹ Enmity did not cease between them altogether, but peace or cooperation with a common foe became possible. Insofar as documentary evidence is lacking, this is, of course, conjectural; but name-exchange similar to Taíno *guatiao* was the means whereby Caribs secured trade with the Lokono of the mainland during the early and middle XVII Century.²² Specific forms of social interaction that may have led to the alliance of Taínos and Caribs against the Spaniards are unknown. The exchange of hostages is one possibility.²³

It is surprising to read of the Cruzan Caribs as a threat to Spanish rule in Puerto Rico.²⁴ The island is quite small, and a large population is inconceivable. Over 20 villages are reported,²⁵ and the minimum number of inhabitants for each may be postulated at 60. If a maximum of 250 persons were admitted for a large Carib village, then the total would oscillate from over 1200 to under 5000, an unknown portion of whom would be Taíno captives. At a density of 40 individuals per square mile (within what is feasible for slash-and-burn horticulture) an acceptable figure of about 3275 is obtained. Clearly, Nicuesa's raid was a grievous blow and aid from the Lesser Antilles imperative if any large-scale fighting were to be undertaken.

The first Spanish reaction depopulated St. Croix for several years.²⁶ Significant ships and supplies arrived from Spain in 1511 as a foretaste of the *armadas contra caribes*.²⁷ The Caribs fled, scattered among the northern Virgins, and continued the fight from there.²⁸ It is interesting that many Puerto Rican Taínos apparently went down island with the Caribs rather than submit to the Spaniards. This has been noted by historians as a Taíno exodus,²⁹ and, specifically, it is stated that the Virgin Islands received a large number of them. Some also fled to Dominica, Guadeloupe, and other islands of the Lesser Antilles. Not only did Caribs come to Puerto Rico to aid the

19. Cf. Castellanos, pp. 125-138.

20. Brau y Asensi, pp. 232, 257-258.

21. Las Casas, vol. II, p. 234.

22. Dreyfus-Gamelon, p. 92.

23. Vide Martyr, pp. 99-100.

24. *Ced. P.R.*, vol. I, p. 158, *Doc. Inéd.*, vol. XXXII (1879), p. 261.

25. Santa Cruz, loc. cit.

26. Brau y Asensi, p. 213; *Doc. Inéd.*, vol. XXXIV (1880), p. 146; vol. XXXVI (1881), p. 383.

27. Tapia y Rivera, p. 302.

28. Brau y Asensi, p. 232; cf. Watlington.

29. Vide Murga Sanz, *Ponce*, pp. 311-312.

Taínos in their wars against the Spaniards then, but also received them as refugees and sheltered them from their enemies. Were the exodus as large as one might be led to believe, it is probable that historic Island Carib culture had blended with Taíno.³⁰

At this point the frontier became one of common resort and cooperation, the Virgin Islands being a battle ground where Taínos and Caribs together put up whatever resistance they could to the Spanish Empire. The fighting qualities of the Indians were held in low esteem by the Spaniards,³¹ but one may gather that important differences existed in their modes of warfare. The Taínos gave battle guided by strategic designs that demanded rigid organization. No allowance was made for individual heroism which might spoil a joint effort. War was waged for specific objectives and had no other social purpose. Rank and station were hereditary among the Taínos and could not be achieved in or outside combat.³²

The Caribs, however, used war as an instrument of social selection and ranking. Their only chiefs were military leaders selected according to their prowess. In order to retain social cohesion and structure, a state of perpetual warfare had to exist.³³ They were organized exclusively for predation, with no capabilities or numbers for significant territorial expansion, having only plunder and achieved status to gain from their raids. The Caribs were therefore better fighters individually, but less effective collectively.³⁴

During the first rounds of anti-Spanish warfare (1511-1514), the Caribs were junior allies subordinate to the needs, designs, and multitude of the Taínos. They fought largely, therefore, as special shock or support units of Taíno armies.³⁵ After the defeats of 1514 and the outfitting of the first official *armadas contra caribes*,³⁶ Taíno tactics became ineffective. Added to this, an ant plague spread in 1518, followed by smallpox in 1519.³⁷ The mortality sustained between war, famine and disease was such that organized resistance ceased in Puerto Rico,³⁸ and the Caribs, deprived of their formerly numerous allies and on the run in their own islands, reverted to raids having lost all hope of complete victory.

Raiding parties still resorted often to the Virgin Islands to hold *ouïcou* or sweet-potato beer festivals, even if permanent populations were lacking in most of them. Vieques was visited often until around 1582, though Caribs never settled it.³⁹ Another island frequented casually by Caribs was Virgin Gorda, where a large assembly of them, including Taíno refugees and booty,

30. Cf. Dreyfus-Gamelon.

31. Bernáldez, p. 284.

32. Fernández de Oviedo, *Las Casas*; cf. Dookhan, p. 24.

33. Cf. Dookhan, loc. cit.; Dreyfus-Gamelon, p. 89.

34. My conjecture on the basis of the foregoing.

35. Castellanos, loc. cit.; Brau y Asensi.

36. Murga Sanz, *Manuscritos*, pp. 115, 119, 272-273, 287, 295.

37. *Las Casas*, vol. III, pp. 270-273.

38. Brau y Asensi, p. 299; Murga Sanz, op. cit., p. 158.

39. *Doc. Inéd.*, vol. XXI (1874), p. 285.

was broken up as early as 1511.⁴⁰ Three years later a Carib war party from Dominica was surprised while holding a *ouïcou* in Vieques and massacred by the Spaniards.⁴¹

Culebra was inhabited by Caribs around 1541.⁴² St. Croix was inhabited sporadically at least through 1587.⁴³ Aboriginal settlements close to Puerto Rico, however, were at the mercy of the Spaniards and suffered the fate that many northern European settlers were to share with them in this area until about 1689: periodic annihilation.

One learns of no aborigines encountered when St. Croix was colonized briefly by the French in 1621. As several nations (chiefly the Dutch and English) struggled for an upper hand there, a similar silence prevails on the question. Perhaps the island had been abandoned recently by the Caribs, or they may have been chased off island by the colonists. Even if the native Caribs were gone, it is likely that the Dutch brought some to St. Croix as slaves. During the major period of Dutch colonization on St. Croix (1642-1645) the Carib slave trade was initiated on nearby St. Eustatius.⁴⁴ Indeed, the Dutch colony founded on St. Thomas between 1657 and 1666 included some Caribs.⁴⁵ These were probably at least partly native, though they were few. Despite the expulsion of the Dutch from St. Thomas in 1667, the Danes found some of these Caribs still there five years later.

The Dutch colony on Tortola (which lasted from around 1648 until 1672)⁴⁶ may also have had a Carib population. Shortly after 1672, most of the St. Thomian Caribs removed to the uninhabited island of St. John in order to avoid Danish colonists.⁴⁷ What became of them is uncertain. A census of St. Thomas counted four Caribs still living there in 1688.⁴⁸

From the preceding it can be seen that the Virgin Islands played three different roles as a frontier area. Until the Spaniards arrived in Puerto Rico they were an embattled frontier between the Taínos and the Caribs, St. Croix being a Carib center. The smaller Virgins were undefendable by either side due to constant warfare. After 1509, the Virgin Islands became a common frontier or meeting ground where Caribs and Taínos pooled their resources in order to save Puerto Rico and protect the Carib islands. After the defeat of the last major Taíno revolt in 1514, devastating reverses such as the ones suffered on Virgin Gorda and Vieques, and the onset of diseases in 1519, the Virgin Islands assumed their final role as a frontier area for native Americans, becoming an advanced outpost used by Taíno refugees and

40. Tió y Nazario, pp. 30-109.

41. Castellanos, p. 137.

42. Santa Cruz, p. 501.

43. White in Hakluyt, pp. 764-765; vide Marx, p. 50.

44. Hartog, p. 61.

45. Høst pp. 5-6; Oldendorp, vol. I, p. 33.

46. Menkman, pp. 184-185.

47. Oldendorp, vol. I, p. 21.

48. Westergaard, p. 122.

Caribs against Spanish Puerto Rico. They were no longer occupied by large numbers of Indians.

It was the colonization of the Lesser Antilles by European powers that ended the role of the Virgin Islands in the history of aboriginal America. Puerto Rico had long been alienated from that world when the other side of the frontier also collapsed. Little of the Carib homeland was left by the middle of the XVII Century, and of this the Virgins were a severed outlier, with a few inhabitants that had both their escape and succour pre-empted. It is likely that the last Indians of the Virgin Islands, whether Taínos, Caribs, or a blend of these, died in slavery or trying to resist it.

ABBREVIATED DOCUMENTARY SOURCES

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EDITOR'S NOTE:

This article, published originally in 1978, offered a very innovative understanding of the relations between Tainos and Caribs during early colonial encounters with European intruders. While at the start of the article the author reproduces what were the orthodox understandings of Carib cannibalism, and here readers should exercise prudence in considering the many critiques of these once common portrayals. *KACIKE* nevertheless reproduces this article for two main purposes: (i) its publication is in keeping with *KACIKE*'s goal of providing an archive of articles printed in journals that may not be easily accessed by the wider public; and, (ii) the article *does* provide us with what are still some very necessary data and analyses of the ways that boundaries between the Caribs and the Tainos, their increasing exchange, and common resistance to Spanish colonizers. Very little information is available on the Virgin Islands during this period, and, we have very little in the way of detailed information or interpretation on Carib-Taino relations during this critical period.