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CHAPTER 1

BORIKÉN'S FIRST PEOPLES: FROM MIGRATION TO INSURRECTION

Before the arrival of Europeans, the island of Borikén was politically and administratively organized into dozens of *cacicazgos* (chiefdoms). These created a social structure for villages, peoples, and regions, as well as providing a hierarchical chain of command that organized and stratified the island's indigenous societies. While there may have been tensions between some *caciques* (chiefs), others were united by friendships, familial bonds, and networks that transcended the insular borders of Borikén. In fact, these communities likely imagined oceans, rivers, and other bodies of water not as frontiers but as pathways. An indigenous person from the southern coast of Borikén might have felt closer to communities in the neighboring island of Ayití, later renamed Hispaniola, than to the mountainous region of their own.¹

The caciques of Borikén had known of strange people landing in neighboring islands since the arrival of Europeans in 1492. When the Spaniards disembarked in 1508 to officially begin Borikén's conquest through sword and cross, indigenous communities understood exactly whom they were dealing with. Contrary to myths perpetuated by traditional historiography, the indigenous communities (soon to be named Taínos by the Europeans) did not consider the Spaniards gods. The caciques realized that the colonizers were not to be trusted as they had

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shown what they were capable of in Ayití. There, they had raped women, beheaded insubordinates, and terrorized indigenous villages.²

Agüeybaná I, then one of the most powerful caciques in the Caribbean, had to make a difficult decision. It was up to him whether his people resisted the conquest or negotiated with the conquistadores. His elderly mother advised him to make peace.³ This was not a sign of weakness or docility but a calculated political move. The Spaniards carried weapons that Agüeybaná I had never seen or imagined. Resisting them could have meant the immediate extermination of his people. The Spaniards also brought with them Bibles, crosses, and germs; their actions were guided by a desire to find and accumulate pieces of a glistening metal found in the island's rivers, often used as décor by indigenous leaders. This object, which the Spaniards called *oro* (gold), seemed to inspire violent greed.⁴ This violence, however, did not go unchallenged.

The First Migrations

When the Spaniards first arrived in the Caribbean, they met indigenous people they mistakenly referred to as Indians, thinking that they had arrived at the domain of the Great Khan. These peoples later came to be known as Taínos, though, as historian Ada Ferrer has noted, "how they called themselves in 1492 or 1511, we do not know."⁵ There is much that we do not know about pre-conquest indigenous cultures and societies, a testament to the malleability and ever-changing nature of the past.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European thinkers began to create categories to understand time and space. For these scholars, the planet lived in different temporalities, "with Europe in the present and the rest of the world in the past."⁶ Such categories were considered universal but inevitably privileged European experiences and knowledge. Scholars created an asymmetric way of understanding the world, with Europe at the center and the peoples without history, to borrow a phrase from anthropologist Eric R. Wolf, on the outside.⁷

History is the documentation and intentional recording of the past, but documentation cannot be solely limited to writing. The people who

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inhabited the Caribbean centuries before Europeans arrived on its shores had other forms of knowledge, history-keeping, and mythmaking. Oral tradition was a powerful tool to document the past while maintaining tradition and creating community; however, such traditions posed a serious challenge to those attempting to write down what happened in the past. Perhaps those oral traditions accrued their power by evading the gaze of outsiders such as historians writing thousands of years later.⁸

Crafting a history of the indigenous communities who first arrived in the archipelago we now call Puerto Rico requires a careful dance between archaeology, anthropology, and history. In the nineteenth century, the study of Puerto Rico's indigenous communities was done by amateur archaeologists—lawyers and medical doctors with an interest in setting the foundations for Puerto Rican history.⁹ Later, in the twentieth century, indigenous histories were taken up by a transnational Caribbean intellectual community who pieced together ceramics, seashells, and other artifacts that allowed them to begin crafting concrete yet fluid and ever-changing narratives of the region's ancestors.¹⁰

Out of these warring methodologies and debates about the region's first migrations some consensus emerged. It seems that the first migration of peoples to Borikén took place about six thousand years ago.¹¹ Named by archaeologists as *arcáicos* (archaics), they probably migrated from the estuary of the Orinoco River in the Amazon region by island hopping through the Caribbean. They were semi-nomad societies of hunter-gatherers. What we know of these archaic cultures has been the product of archaeological research. And scholars must grapple with the impossibility of ever fully understanding how these communities lived or the social imaginaries they created.¹²

The term "archaic" is used to identify indigenous societies that only developed rustic tools, but this does not negate the possibility that different ethnic and cultural groups existed in these earlier societies. It seems clear, however, that peoples identified as archaic were part of multiple waves of migration that took place all over the Caribbean. The region might have been more interconnected than we have previously imagined.

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The second broad cultural group identified by archaeologists are the Arawak. Much like the archaic, this broad category created by scholars is used to identify peoples who could have belonged to different cultural and ethnic groups. Scholars believe that they might have shared the Arawak language and that they also arrived in several waves of migration. There is also historiographical and scholarly debate about whether they incorporated previous migrant peoples into their societies and whether they clashed with one another.¹³

Anthropologist Irving Rouse famously referred to the Taínos as the people who greeted Columbus. Instead, I propose to think of them as the people who resisted conquest by Columbus.¹⁴ While the term "Taíno" has been traditionally applied to describe a single ethnic or cultural group, there might have been more than just one such group; the people we refer to as Taínos also might have included several ethnicities with different cultural practices that spread throughout the Caribbean region.¹⁵ What seems clear, however, is that those who inhabited Borikén when Columbus arrived had developed sophisticated social systems and hierarchies.

At the beginning of the conquest, Borikén's *yukayekes* (villages) were usually established next to rivers or in fertile valleys. Unlike previous migrations of nomadic groups, the people known as Taínos were farmers. Their diet was composed of tubers or root vegetables along with fish, poultry, reptiles, and insects. Taínos also dedicated some of their time to the production of artworks tied to their religious worldviews. They carved stones or wood to create necklaces, drawings, and ritual artifacts. The *dúho*, for example, was a small seat created out of wood or stone that might have been used for prayer; sacred objects also might have been placed on it. Perhaps the most important artifact in Taíno culture was the *cemí*. These small sculptures were believed to contain gods that represented the forces of nature.¹⁶

The cacique was at the top of Taíno society. His role was not solely political as he was also expected to lead the religious, military, and intellectual facets of everyday life. Directly below caciques were the *nitainos*, a group usually composed of the cacique's family members or those close to them. The nitainos administered social life on behalf of the

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cacique. *Bohiques* were those in charge of religious rituals and medicine. And common people were known as *naborías*.¹⁷

Women played a significant role in Taíno society, which had a matrilineal system where the inheritance of cacicazgos was based on kinship from the mother's side. When a cacique passed away, his siblings—not his children—inherited the cacicazgo. Women also played important roles in decision making. They took an active role in farming, military actions, and even political life. Historian Jalil Sued Badillo has documented the existence of *cacicas* (women chiefs) across the Caribbean region.¹⁸

Much of what we know about the Taíno culture of the Greater Antilles comes from firsthand accounts by Europeans. In his diary, Columbus wrote how during the first voyage he fooled his crew into believing they were sailing slower than they actually were to avoid mutiny after traveling for weeks without sign of land. Once they arrived in what they thought to be the domain of the Great Khan cited by Marco Polo, Columbus dedicated several pages to trying to comprehend the peoples who inhabited those lands.¹⁹

Columbus paid particular attention to the gold that adorned their bodies. Early chronicles of the conquest documented the existence of mute dogs, one-eyed humans, and cannibal people with dog snouts. While mute dogs did exist, the one-eyed, dog-snout peoples were pure fiction. Jalil Sued Badillo has argued that such fantastic portrayals of the Indies were used to justify the Spanish Crown's financing of future expeditions. Borikén's communities often went to war with the peoples living in the Lesser Antilles, known by Spaniards as the Caribs. The Caribs were portrayed by Europeans as warlike cannibals and savages. It seems that they did excel in the art of war and frequently attacked the indigenous communities of Borikén. But it is possible that they were not from a different ethnic group. Reports of cannibalism were also used for the purposes of enslaving rebellious indigenous populations.²⁰ When the Spanish Conquest unleashed its brutal violence, the perceived differences between Taínos and Caribs collapsed, giving way to collaboration and solidarities.²¹

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One of the most detailed accounts we have about the Taínos' worldviews, mythmaking, and religiosity was written by a self-defined "poor friar of the Order of Saint Jerome" named Ramón Pané. Inspired by Columbus's first voyage, he joined the second expedition and sailed to the Caribbean in September 1493. To comprehend Taíno culture for the purposes of evangelizing and conquering them, Columbus ordered Pané to move to the lands of Guarionex, a powerful cacique from Hispaniola who had shown interest in the Christian religion. Pressured by other caciques, Guarionex abandoned his Christian inclinations to the point of ordering the desecration of Catholic symbols. Pané alleged that Guarionex's people stole religious relics, threw them on the ground, and urinated on them. After these events, Pané settled in the lands of the cacique Mayobanex, where he lived for several years, learning the Taíno language and culture while also continuing his evangelizing mission.²²

Pané finished his study and delivered his text to Columbus in 1498 during the admiral's third voyage to the Caribbean. After providing the manuscript, Pané disappears from the archival record. After all, he argued that he "wore himself out in order to learn all of this."²³ Just like Columbus's diary, Pané's original text, *An Account of the Antiquities of the Indians*, was lost. Fortunately, it was reproduced in the biography Fernando, Columbus's son, wrote to defend the honor and legacy of his father. Fernando was a bibliophile who built one of the most impressive libraries of his time. Nonetheless, the text of Fernando's biography also disappeared, only to be reproduced in a poor Italian translation published by Spanish historian Alfonso de Ulloa in 1571.²⁴

This surviving palimpsest offers a window—through multiple colonizers' gazes—into the ways that Taíno peoples conceptualized their world. It documents origin myths: for example, how the ocean was created and how a woodpecker was used to design female genitalia, thus creating women. It also describes Taíno fears of the dead—believed to walk among the living at night—and how bohiques were in charge of healing the sick, becoming victims of beatings or even death if they failed in their endeavors. One of the stories Pané retold had prophetic undertones. It was said that two caciques from Hispaniola abstained

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from eating and drinking for days so their cemís would reveal the future to them. After five days, the cemís spoke: "not many years would go by," they said to the caciques, "before a people covered with clothes would reach that island, and they would end all those rites and ceremonies of the island and would kill all their children and deprive them of freedom."²⁵

While the Taínos originally thought this premonition referred to the Caribs, it became clear that it was a prophecy about the arrival of the Europeans. After reading Pané's text, the historian and intellectual Pietro Martire d'Anghiera commented on this story in the mid-sixteenth century that "not even a memory is now left of the zemis [*sic*]."²⁶ Martire d'Anghiera never set foot in the Americas, but the proliferation of print media allowed him to make an accurate description of what was unraveling on the other side of the Atlantic. The Spaniards soaked the lands and rivers of Borikén with blood. But the Taínos fought back.

1511: The Road to Insurrection

The first recorded clash between indigenous communities and Europeans occurred during Columbus's second voyage. It was November 14, 1493. The Europeans had stopped at the island of Santa Cruz (today St. Croix). They saw a canoe with "four men, two women, and a boy."²⁷ Twenty-five Europeans decided to go after them. In self-defense, the fleeing indigenous people "daringly put their hands to the arches, the women as well as the men."²⁸ They were able to wound one Spaniard and kill another before being intercepted. The men were beheaded. The women were raped and later sent to Spain to be showcased as cannibals. Michele de Cuneo, a Spanish soldier who claimed to be on the boat, took pride in raping one of them and argued, "suffice to say that she really seemed trained as a whore."²⁹ Ten Taíno women were held captive in their ships. Six were able to escape by jumping ship and swimming away in the darkness of night.³⁰ This was the beginning of a regime of terror sustained by labor and sexual exploitation.

Europeans arrived at the island the Taínos called Burunquén or Borikén a few days later, on November 19, 1493. For decades historians

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debated about exactly where Columbus's expedition landed. Nonetheless, it seems that Columbus never actually set foot on the island. His crew stopped there for two days to restock their food supplies. They found empty huts, or *bohios*; all the indigenous people had fled. During his first voyage, Columbus wrote in his diary that the Taínos had feared them at first glance but were amiable after gaining their trust.³¹ In the Caribbean, bodies of water served as avenues of communication. Columbus noted, "I have seen these canoes with seventy and eighty men in them, and each had an oar."³² News of the Spaniards' arrival might have quickly spread across different cacicazgos, carried by such canoes. The empty bohios could have meant that the Taínos of Borikén had already heard the news about the Europeans' brutality.

A few days later, the Europeans returned to Hispaniola and found the Nativity Fort—their first settlement, established December 24 of the previous year from the wreckage of Columbus's first ship, the *Santa María*—burned to the ground with no sign of the thirty-eight men left behind to protect it. Historians have suggested that the attack was organized by the cacique Caonabo from Maguana to avenge the brutality of the Spaniards against their people.³³ While we can never reconstruct what actually happened, the fort's ashes might be imagined as a symbol of the first indigenous insurrection in the Americas.

The Spanish Crown made Hispaniola their first colonial hub in the Caribbean. The exploitation of indigenous communities started immediately after the conquest began. Interested in the limited gold reserves found in the Caribbean, Europeans established a system of forced indigenous labor known as repartimientos (divisions), which later became encomiendas. In this way, Spaniards exploited the land through forced labor. Each colonizer, known as a *vecino* (neighbor), received indigenous peoples as subjects.³⁴ As historian Ida Altman notes, "Indians [*sic*] could be encomienda workers, permanent servants (*naborías*), or slaves, but in all cases they were subject to Spanish labor demands, strictures, and punishments."³⁵ This system was legally consolidated after a series of royal edicts from 1503 to 1504 ordered *encomenderos* (grantees) to remunerate indigenous people for their labor, to provide them time to rest and work in their own fields, and, ultimately, to evan-

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gelize them.³⁶ As historian Juan Ángel Silén has argued, the Taínos' indoctrination was part of a longer war Iberians waged against paganism and Islam. The conquest of the Americas began immediately after Spain had expelled Muslim communities from the Iberian Peninsula following almost a millennium of conflict.³⁷

The official conquest of Borikén, soon renamed the Island of San Juan Bautista, began in 1508. The original charter for its colonization was granted in 1505 to Vicente Yáñez Pinzón, who had traveled with Columbus on his first voyage to the Americas. The charter was sold and resold, passing through different hands until it was granted to Juan Ponce de León, later immortalized for his death while supposedly searching for the fountain of youth in Florida. (His true intentions were otherwise he was looking for indigenous people to enslave.)³⁸

In 1508, the archipelago was organized around two or three geopolitical units divided among dozens of cacicazgos, the most powerful of whom was Agüeybaná I. He dominated half of the island through alliances and familial relations with other caciques. Ponce de León had met Agüeybaná on a previous trip.³⁹ His arrival on August 12, 1508, had been delayed by two powerful hurricanes that seem to have predicted the coming storm brought upon by the colonizers.⁴⁰ Fernández de Oviedo, one of the first chroniclers, noted that it was Agüeybaná I's mother who convinced him to receive the Spaniards in peace because they knew of the methods used to "pacify" the indigenous communities in their neighboring island.⁴¹

In a document written and signed on June 4, 1516, and sent to the incoming king, Charles I, fourteen priests shed light on the brutality of the conquest during its first years. I will not reproduce the violence gruesomely described in the document, but it included infanticide, sexual terror, brutal dehumanization, and labor exploitation. The friars carefully described the conquest's genocidal impulse.⁴² Agüeybaná I's decision to negotiate peace with the colonizers should not be understood as an act of docility but one taken after careful political and military reflection.

Back in Spain, Christopher Columbus's son Diego Colón demanded to be named viceroy of the Indies as part of his inheritance. This meant

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that Nicolás de Ovando, the governor of the Indies who had granted Juan Ponce de León a charter to colonize Borikén, would lose his power. Knowing that it was just a matter of time before Diego Colón arrived and reconfigured the political landscape, Ponce de León rushed to establish the town of Caparra, Borikén's first official European settlement.⁴³ Shortly after, in 1509, Diego Colón sent Cristobal de Sotomayor, a knight from Galicia, to Borikén. Since Ponce de León had already settled in Caparra, it was decided that Sotomayor would establish another town in the southern part of the island, a territory that belonged to the Agüeybaná I cacicazgo.⁴⁴

Two storms had welcomed Ponce de León to Borikén. Now, the winds of war began blowing. In November 1510, a group of indigenous peoples from the Yagüecas region in modern-day Añasco were tasked with ferrying Diego Salcedo, a young Spanish conquistador, across the Guaorabo River. As they carried Salcedo across, his fate turned. The cacique Urayoán had apparently ordered his assassination. The Taínos drowned him, an incident that still carries power today. Some scholars believe that Salcedo might have played and lost a game of *batú* with the Taínos. This ball game was played not only for fun but also for ceremonial purposes, with the loser oftentimes sacrificed.⁴⁵ In Puerto Rican mythology, however, the murder was committed to prove the Spaniards' mortality. Recounted in the 1535 chronicles of Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, the story gave power to the myth of Taíno docility.⁴⁶ However, it can also be understood as a war cry.

Unhappy with the Taínos he had received as part of his repartimientos, Cristobal de Sotomayor began to organize raids to capture indigenous peoples from inland communities and cacicazgos. In fact, Sotomayor was the first person to receive a charter allowing him to enslave indigenous peoples. This created tension between the colonizers and the southern cacicazgos, forcing Cristobal de Sotomayor to move the town of Guánica to the west, soon to be renamed Aguada.⁴⁷ Spanish conquistadores began documenting resistance from indigenous communities that refused to be subdued and rumors circulated about the planned assassination of Sotomayor.

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FIGURE 1.1. Assassination of conquistador Diego Salcedo. Source: John Carter Brown Library.

Unfortunately for Cristobal de Sotomayor, Agüeybaná I, who had been peaceful with the colonizers, died two years after his arrival. His brother Agüeybaná II inherited Borikén's most powerful cacicazgo. Known as Agüeybaná the Brave, he probably grew up hearing stories about the colonizers' actions in neighboring Ayití and was now seeing that violence unfold in his own land. Unlike his brother, he decided to act. As a political, religious, and military leader, he began organizing for war against the colonizers.⁴⁸

In September 1510, Agüeybaná's sister advised Sotomayor to run away.⁴⁹ After receiving confirmation of the planned assassination, Sotomayor gathered four soldiers and made his way to Caparra to alert authorities there about the rebellion. As they traveled along the Jauca river, Agüeybaná II intercepted them. All the Spaniards were killed except for Juan González, a Spanish scout who had infiltrated an indigenous ceremony and knew their language. He swore on his life that he would become

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loyal to Agüeybaná. He was wounded and left to live—only to promptly alert the Spanish authorities about what had happened that night. The conquistadores' bodies were buried vertically with their feet aboveground, their bodies pointing toward the hell the Christians talked so much about. War was inevitable.⁵⁰

By 1511, Agüeybaná II had amassed an army of 3,000 soldiers. They destroyed the town Sotomayor had established in the south and simultaneously attacked other settlements throughout the island. They killed 150 to 200 Spaniards at a time when the population was not more than a few hundred.⁵¹ In the chaos of the moment, those who survived fled to Caparra, where Juan Ponce de León was organizing an army. When Ponce de León's soldiers marched toward indigenous territories, they found that the Taínos had swept the dirt roads, symbolically welcoming the Spaniards into battle. The Spanish offensive proved successful, and the repression was brutal. Spaniards burned any Taíno town that was in their way and arrested and enslaved a great number of Taínos, burning an F into their heads to remind them that they were property of the Spanish king, Fernando de Aragón.⁵²

It was clear that the Taínos had suffered a great defeat. But the war did not end there. When Juan Ponce de León offered a pardon to those caciques in arms, only two accepted. After the initial stage of the war, indigenous communities changed their strategy. Instead of frontal warfare, they now opted for sneak attacks on Spanish settlements and for a naval strategy. In fact, it seems that many indigenous communities fled Borikén and took shelter in the Lesser Antilles, home to the so-called Carib Indians who had once been their enemies.

One of the most famous early battles took place in Yahuecas in Borikén's central-eastern region. According to chronicler Fernández de Oviedo, Ponce de León killed a cacique carrying a big *guanín* (gold metal necklace). This triggered the long-standing idea that Ponce de León had slain Agüeybaná II in battle. Nonetheless, Jalil Sued Badillo has persuasively demonstrated that the Spaniards recorded sightings of Agüeybaná during the following decades. In fact, the figure of Agüeybaná became a powerful myth, and people reported seeing him fight in multiple battles. It is more likely that he joined those who settled in the

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Leeward Islands and continued leading attacks on Borikén's colonizers for years to come.⁵³

The war that began in 1511 and continued in the form of attacks for decades marked a turning point in the initial stages of Spain's colonial project in Puerto Rico. After the first battles, the Spaniards viciously murdered and enslaved many indigenous communities while more were killed by European germs. Exploitation and violence consolidated the conquest's genocidal impulse. By 1530, the Spanish reported 1,553 "indians" enslaved or in encomiendas.⁵⁴ That number, of course, is questionable if we take into account methods used to generate the data. Many indigenous peoples took to the mountains to live outside the limits of the state and are thus absent from the historical archive. Such silences pose challenges to historians. But if we take an indigenous perspective, absences could also provide a motive for celebration. Disappearing from the archive and from history may have meant surviving the conquest's genocidal thrust. It was in communities that indigenous peoples created on the fringes of societies where some of them befriended another group of people escaping the unspeakable violence of Spain's settler-colonial project: African-descended peoples escaping enslavement.

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Note: "PR" refers to Puerto Rico. Page numbers in italic type indicate illustrations.

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