Columbus crossed the Atlantic Ocean in search of the great Chinese seaports of Zayto and Quinsay, about which Marco Polo had written. But the small Bahamian islands on which he landed were obviously not the mainland he sought, and the people were not dressed in a fashion expected of the subjects of an Asiatic king. The naked islanders who met him, the Lucayans, were of Taino descent; their name means "people of the small islands." The Lucayans had migrated northward from Hispaniola, colonizing the Bahamas by about A.D. 700. By 1492 they occupied all of the major Bahamian islands.

Columbus was met by young men who carried spears, probably warriors sent to defend their villages. With nothing to suggest he had reached Asia, Columbus sailed on. The Nina and the Santa Maria made slow progress against the wind along the coasts of Cuba and then Hispaniola. Off Cuba, Martin Alonzo Pinzon, the captain of the Pinta, abandoned Columbus to seek his own fortune. When Columbus reached Hispaniola, the Taino received him in much the same way the Lucayans had. The Spaniards were swarmed by natives seeking objects of European origin. Chiefs, who undoubtedly saw the Spaniards as potentially valuable allies, welcomed them and treated them like royalty.

On Christmas Eve, disaster struck. Columbus's flagship, the Santa Maria, hit a reef in the vicinity of present-day Cap Haitien and sank. With the assistance of the local Taino cacique (chief), Guacanagari, the contents of the ship were salvaged. Because the Nina could not accommodate all of the Santa Maria's sailors, 39 men were chosen to remain behind and establish a fort, called La Navidad, in Guacanagari's village. Columbus, meanwhile, reunited with Pinzon and sailed for Spain.

Upon his return to Hispaniola in 1493, Columbus found his men dead and La Navidad in ashes. The common explanation for the murder of these men is that they violated local behavioral rules--they stole, looted, and raped. If such violations were the reasons for the murders, then Guacanagari would have been the one to order the killings. Yet the documents make it clear that he was not held responsible by the Spaniards. Blame and retribution centered on caciques at the highest level of the Taino political hierarchy. These primary caciques acted independently of lower-level chiefs like Guacanagari. As a matter of politics, primary caciques could not permit a second-
level cacique to harbor a garrison of well-armed Europeans. The Europeans had to be eliminated because they upset the established balance of power.

There may, however, be more to this event than simple political expediency. There is also evidence of how the different participants viewed the encounter. We know that Columbus thought that "there cannot be a better or more gentle people" than the Taino. We also know that he believed the Taino thought he and his men "came from the heavens." But what did the Taino really think of the Spaniards?

The Taino appear to have assigned a supernatural origin to the explorers. Columbus, and later Fray Ramon Pane, reported that the Taino initially identified the Spaniards as Caribes. Caribes were mythical beings associated with the underworld who consumed human flesh. Rather than beings from heaven, then, the Spaniards were viewed as the incarnation of beings from hell. Thus, the Taino caciques may have justified the killing of 39 men who founded La Navidad as appropriate because the Spaniards had violated mythic proscriptions. After all, mythical beings were not supposed to remain on earth permanently.

Since 1983, Kathleen Deagan of the Florida Museum of Natural History at Gainesville has directed archaeological investigations of the large Taino site known as En Bas Saline, on the north coast of Haiti. More than seven tons of archaeological materials have been recovered from the site, including more than 40,000 artifacts, some 675 pounds of shells, and 20 pounds of animal bones. Most of the artifacts are of Taino origin; only 17 are European (ceramics, glass, and a nail). The small number of European artifacts is not surprising since, as Deagan has pointed out, they would have been so exotic during the earliest phases of contact that the Taino would have prized them highly. It is unlikely they would have been discarded casually.

Despite the small quantity of European artifacts, a substantial body of circumstantial evidence is available to identify En Bas Saline as the Taino village in which La Navidad was built. First, the site dates to the early Contact period. The most common artifact, Chican-style Taino pottery, has been dated using radiocarbon and thermoluminescence techniques to A.D. 1450±80. The majority of the artifacts (62 percent) come from deposits that must be post-Contact because they include remains of European animals, the pig and the rat. Second, the size and community plan--a 380-by-32-yard C-shaped earthwork with an open plaza and centrally located chief's residence--are exactly what one would expect for a chief of Guacanagari's stature. Third, at least part of the site was burned, as was La Navidad.

In 1493, Columbus moved his base of operations 70 miles to
the east and established the settlement of La Isabela, on the north coast of the present-day Dominican Republic on the Rio Baiaabonica. A joint archaeological project under the direction of Deagan and Jose Maria Cruxent, of the Universidad Nacional Experimental Francisco de Miranda, Venezuela, has been underway at the site since 1987. As the first Spanish settlement in the Americas, La Isabella (1493-98) presents the baseline against which Spanish adaptation to the Americas must be gauged. Cruxent and Deagan's excavations have revealed the possibility that La Isabela was actually made up of three distinct areas: a limestone fortification with church, storehouses, watchtower, hospital, and Columbus's house; a Spanish settlement near the fort in the area of the modern village of El Castillo; and a farming and manufacturing area called Los Coles on the Rio Isabela. In addition to architectural features, their excavations have uncovered a large kiln, liquid mercury that was brought over for extracting gold, and pieces of what may have been Columbus's chamber pot.

The most striking aspect of the site is its overwhelmingly European artifact assemblage. Unlike later sites, even those established a few years later, La Isabela had an essentially medieval material culture. Its ceramic kiln, necessary for the production of familiar Spanish ceramics, is symbolic of the colonists' efforts to re-create their Iberian homeland. Yet within five years, at sites throughout the region, European ceramics such as braziers for heating and amphoroidal vessels for storage were replaced by local earthenware pots. Foods and food preparation also changed as European grains and the morteros used to grind them were replaced by maize and cassava, and the manos, metates, and griddles that the Taino used to prepare these foods. Changes in cuisine had a profound influence on the Americanization of the Spaniards and, according to Deagan, it is in this area of female domestic activity that we find the greatest flexibility in incorporating Native American practices.

Between 1493 and 1500 the Spanish colony on Hispaniola suffered more defeats than successes. On the positive side, the Admiral could list the pacification of the Taino, the establishment of gold mines in the central mountains, a new port at Santo Domingo (present-day Santo Domingo on the south coast of the Dominican Republic), and the promise of profits from the export of slaves and brasilwood (a source of red dye) that would put the colony on a paying basis. All of these came at a high cost to the Taino, especially in the center of the island where the Spaniards had concentrated their effort to find gold. Although the Taino could field armies with thousands of men, they were no match for the superior armaments and, to them, unorthodox
fight tactics of the Spaniards.

As governor of Hispaniola, Columbus expected the Spanish colonists to follow his commands. Yet many of the Spaniards saw no reason to obey Columbus, and they proved impossible to control. In 1497, Francisco Roldan, mayor of La Isabela, led a revolt against the Columbus government. A year later 300 colonists, disenchanted with living conditions and the absence of regular wages, left Hispaniola for Spain. The loyalties of those who remained were divided equally between Columbus, who controlled the center of the island, and the rebel force headed by Roldan in the west. The peace that Columbus negotiated with Roldan had a lasting effect on the character of Spanish-Native American interactions. For the first time, native communities were allocated to individual Spaniards. Roldan, for example, was given the native province, or cacicazgo, of Xaragua. With these allocations, called repartimientos, the government became dispersed, with each Spaniard taking what he could from his allotment. Although there was a brief cessation of hostilities between the Spanish factions, gold production was not sufficiently profitable, and the colonists remained dissatisfied with living conditions and the irregular payment of wages. In addition, the Taino had not, as Columbus promised the Crown, been organized into communities or converted to Christianity. The Admiral had also, without authority, awarded one Taino to any colonist returning to Spain. When colonists and their natives arrived in Spain, Queen Isabel promptly set the natives free and had them returned to Hispaniola.

In July 1500 the Crown sent Francisco de Bobadilla to investigate the continuous reports of unrest in the colony. When Bobadilla arrived, he found two rebel Spaniards hanging from the gallows. Because they had violated Spanish law by executing Spaniards, Columbus and his two brothers were arrested by Bobadilla and sent back to Spain in chains. Cleared of all charges in December of 1500, Columbus returned to the New World in April 1502, only to be shipwrecked in Jamaica from June 1503 to March 1504.

There was a brief peace on Hispaniola under the administration of Bobadilla. The 300 Spaniards who remained on the island were quieted, gold placers began to produce good returns, and explorations were made to mainland South America. There were still attempts to find a passage to the west, but South America was soon recognized as a place to obtain wealth in the form of pearls and dye wood. Fifteen years later, the colony of Nueva Cadiz was established on the island of Cubagua off the coast of Venezuela. The Spanish contingent on Hispaniola remained relatively small, and there were no new repartimientos,
uprisings, or reprisals. The island's Taino did, however, bear the burden of being the major suppliers of food as well as the source of labor for the gold mines.

In April 1502, Nicholas de Ovando replaced Bobadilla as governor. Ovando arrived with about 2,500 Spaniards. The strain on the local economy was felt immediately. Fray Bartolome de Las Casas, the first priest ordained in the new World and later known as the "Protector of the Indians," reported that sickness broke out and that 1,000 of the new arrivals died and more became ill. The Spaniards who headed directly for the gold fields introduced diseases into an already unhealthful environment in which the Taino were fed only cassava and performed hard labor for long hours. The death toll among the Taino reached 25 to 30 percent of each work gang.

Relations with the remaining cacicazgos also changed. In the fall of 1503 Ovando marched his forces into the cacicazgo of Xaragua, which had peacefully submitted to Columbus's tribute demands since 1496. Ovando had 84 caciques burned and hanged, including Anacaona, the paramount cacica (female chief). Attention was next directed to the conquest of the southeastern peninsula in 1504. The last major Taino cacique was deposed in this War of Higuey (the Taino name for the province). All of the natives were then assigned to the Crown or to individual Spaniards. The Crown maintained that these people were vassals entitled to rights, including proper care and wages. But these rights were largely ignored.

As an observer of the wanton destruction of human life, Las Casas could no longer sit idly by. He came forward as the defender of the Taino, and castigated his countrymen for their harsh treatment of them. He wrote, for example, "... they thought nothing of knifing Indians by the tens and twenties and cutting slices off them to test the sharpness of their blades." Las Casas claimed that three to four million Taino lived in Hispaniola in 1492, and he mourned the loss of 500,000 Lucayans from the Bahamas alone. So severe was his critique that it later fueled the anti-Hispanic Black Legend, the distorted image of the Spanish as inherently intolerant and cruel that was put forward in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to denigrate and deny Spanish contributions to European civilization. Because his writings lack objectivity, Las Casas's population estimates are often dismissed. His accounts do, however, raise important questions. How many Taino were living in Hispaniola at contact? How devastating was the European invasion? We can't be certain, but a reasonable estimate of the Taino population is between 400,000 and two million.

Archaeological investigations of early sixteenth-century
Caribbean sites have focused on the ways in which materials and beliefs cross cultural boundaries. Archaeologists in Cuba and the Dominican Republic, who have undertaken most of this research, call this process transculturation. Manuel García-Arevalo, a leading Dominican scholar, identifies the wattle-and-daub or wood-and-thatch structure ("bohio"), cultigens (cassava, corn, sweet potato), words (hammock, canoe, barbecue, hurricane), and the geographical names as lasting contributions of the Taino. The earliest material expressions of transculturation were changes in Taino pottery that show a gradual loss of Taino elements between 1515 and 1530, along with evidence for the replacement of native West Indian potters by those of African origin after 1520. García-Arevalo sees these changes as symbolic of the criollo Hispanic-American culture as it exists today.

With the rapid decline of native populations on Hispaniola, the Spanish officially directed their attention to other sources of native labor. In 1503 Queen Isabel approved the taking of hostile Indians as slaves. In 1509 the labor shortage was so acute that King Fernando ordered the enslavement of Lucayans from the Bahama Islands. By 1512 some 40,000 Lucayans had been forcibly taken to Hispaniola according to Pietro Martire d'Anghiera, who recorded the affairs of the Indies in Seville.

Archaeological surveys have identified enough villages of sufficient size to confirm that the Bahamian Lucayan population in 1500 was between 40,000 and 80,000. By the time of Ponce de Leon's voyage in 1513, the Bahamas were uninhabited.

What is striking is that this massive removal of people was apparently accomplished without leaving a more obvious material record. Very few European objects--amounting to perhaps three dozen earthenware sherds, a few glass beads, some brass rings and belt buckles, a musket ball, a portion of a sword, and a single coin--have been recovered from Lucayan sites. In addition, a few pieces of Lucayan pottery have been found in a contemporary Spanish shipwreck in the Bahamas. Our present record of the depopulation of the Bahamas amounts to a shoebox full of artifacts.

For more than 15,000 years the Old and New Worlds followed different historical paths. Within a century those paths were forcibly united. No culture or ethnic group was left untouched. In a very real sense Columbus's achievement was not the discovery of a "New World" but the creation of a new world in which all of us continue to participate.

Until now the story of initial encounters in the Caribbean has been written from documents left by the Spanish. As is the case with most historical records, the concerns of the state are emphasized while those of ordinary people, both native and
Spanish, are ignored. By studying the material culture of the initial period of Spanish colonization, we can assemble a clearer portrait of Columbus and his times, and give the Taino at least a voice from the grave.