A Historical Overview of Colonial Puerto Rico: The Importance of San Juan as a Military Outpost

Encounters:

At the time of Columbus’ sighting\(^1\) of Puerto Rico, the land was inhabited by Natives called Taínos. Archeologists believe that the Taíno were part of the latest migration from Northern South America. At the time of the European explorations, Taíno lived in towns called “yucayeques”. Each yucayeque had a “cacique” or chief who, among other functions, had to defend and secure the village, distribute farm work, fish and hunt, and serve as the judicial authority\(^2\). The Taínos were structured in a hierarchical society in which the “nytainos”, the family of the cacique and the warriors were the upper class. The next level was that of the laborers or “naborias”. They were the ones who performed all agricultural labor and could be recruited in case of an attack. In this society, but not within the hierarchy, was the “bohíque”. The bohíque performed all religious and medical rituals and serve as the transmitter of the tribe’s history.

Taíno women had a very important function apart from reproduction. They were in charge of agricultural activities and artisan works. Women could become chiefs and could be succeeded by her siblings irrespective of sex. Succession was matrilineal meaning that a male cacique was succeeded by the children of his or her sister.\(^3\)

The Taíno were polytheists and animists\(^4\). They believed in a pantheon of gods headed by Yucahú or Yuquiyú whose counterpart was Juracán. Each of the gods were associated with the forces of nature, hence Yucahú was associated with the sources for food (the sea and agriculture) while Juracán with the winds. The important festivities and ceremonies of the Taíno were held at the “areyto” or ritual dance\(^5\). The areyto, apart from celebrating or commemorating any special event, reaffirmed the tribe’s unity by transmitting the history, beliefs and traditions of the group.

When the Spanish began colonizing Borikén in 1508, the island had about XXX yucayeques. Among them, the most important was that of Guainía, headed by Agüeybaná \(^6\). Guainía was located in the Southwestern side of the island, where most of the important yucayeques were located.

\(^1\) There is no written account of Columbus ever landing in Puerto Rico. Nevertheless this has not precluded a heated debate among historians as to the place where Columbus apparently landed. This debate has never produced conclusive evidence in support of any particular theory.


\(^3\) Ibid., p. 58-67

\(^4\) According to Webster’s Third International Dictionary, polytheism refers to the belief in many gods, animism refers to the belief of the divinities “incarnation” in the forces of nature or unanimated objects.


\(^6\) Blanca G. Silvestrini and María Dolores Luque de Sánchez, op.cit., p. 70-73. The location of Guainia in a modern map of Puerto Rico would correspond to that of the cities of Guánica (name derived from Guainia) and Yauco.
The Taíno Revolt of 1511

Since the arrival of Ponce de León in 1508, to 1511, the Spaniards and the Taínos lived in a relative peace. After Agüeybaná’s death in 1510, however, the relationship deteriorated progressively until the Taíno decided to attack the Spaniards. The Taíno revolted against the attempts of the Spaniards to use them as forced labor and also against their forced conversion to Christianity.

The Spanish established in the colony the “repartimientos” and the “encomienda” forced labor system. These systems were, with some variances, implemented later in the rest of the empire. The “encomienda” consisted on the granting to the Spanish colonists of a certain number of natives (between 30 and 300) to be instructed in the religious teachings of the Catholic Church. The natives were supposed to work in the mines or in the lands of the colonist during their indoctrination. The Crown had decreed the emancipation of the natives after they were certified as full-fledged Christians. However, the colonists early on treated the Taíno more like enslaved labor than free subjects of the Crown. The “encomiendas” was also a compulsory system meaning that the Taino who were assigned to an “encomienda” didn’t have the choice to leave it afterwards.

The “repartimiento” was a compulsory labor system in which a cacique and his village were under the obligation of working for the colonists. The Spanish government didn’t want this to become a way of enslaving the Taíno by clarifying that what the colonists were entitled to was just labor and not the Taíno themselves. In practice, however, this system degenerated into a form of enslavement.

Another reason for the Taíno rebellion was the Spanish attempt to erase any trace of Taíno culture and traditions. The Spanish meant a full internal and external transformation of the Taíno. Ideologically, the Spanish had instituted their compulsory indoctrination in Catholicism. The Taíno were also being required to learn Spanish as well as the “proper” ways of interacting socially. Their names were change after being baptized for Spanish ones and their social structure was questioned by the attempts of the Spanish to eliminate the figure of the bohíque who was viewed by the Spanish to be the source of the “wrong” religious practices of the Taíno.

After three years of relative peace, some Taíno caciques under the leadership of Agüeybaná II (nephew of the first Agüeybaná and known as “el bravo” or the “brave one”) led an offensive against the Spanish towns located in the Western side of Puerto Rico. The Battle of Villa de Sotomayor was the first and only success the Taíno had, killing almost all of the Spanish living there and destroying the village. Afterwards,
Ponce de León himself led the Spaniards in a series of offensives that culminated in the Battle of Yaguecas\textsuperscript{12}. This battle ended effective Taíno resistance. Agüeybaná II was killed and the remaining Taíno rebels decided to retreat either to the mountainous center of the island or to the Lesser Antilles where they allied themselves with their former enemies the Caribe\textsuperscript{13}.

The relatively easy conquest of the Taíno meant that the Spaniards could pay attention to other matters such as the shortage of workers and the colonization process in itself. In a few years the colonists will experiment the need to defend themselves from the Caribe attacks as well as the threats by European powers rivaling Spain.

European Discovery and Early Colonization:

After Columbus first voyage in 1492, the Catholic Monarchs, Isabel and Fernando, financed another expedition to what was already being named “Las Indias”. On November 19\textsuperscript{th}, 1493, during his second voyage, Columbus encountered the Island which he named San Juan Bautista (Saint John the Baptist) which was known in to Taínos as Borikén. In 1508, after a failed attempt by Vicente Yáñez Pinzón (1505) to colonize the island, the Spanish governor of La Española, Fray Nicolás de Ovando, sent Juan Ponce de León to settle the Island. The first town founded by the Spaniards was Caparra, about two miles south from where San Juan is located today. The area selected wasn’t ideal. Caparra was surrounded by swamps and hills that weren’t conducive for the main activities of the colonists: mining and agriculture\textsuperscript{14}.

After the initial settlement in Caparra proved to be inadequate, the Spanish colonists asked the Crown permission to move to the San Juan Islet. The Spanish government approved the move based on the claims of the colonists and military considerations.

The conquest of the Aztec and Inca Empires in the American continent gave the Spaniards control of vast and rich lands. After the first attacks on the Spanish ports and towns in the Caribbean, the Crown became aware of the menace looming over their newly acquire empire. Hence the colonial governors of Puerto Rico, having realized the strategic importance of the island urged the Crown to protect the port of San Juan\textsuperscript{15}. The need to protect the fledging colony against attacks from the Taíno and the Caribe as well as other European nations moved the Spanish government to fund fortification work on the city.

\textsuperscript{12} The Yagüecas area has been identified with modern day towns of Mayagüez and Añasco, in the Western side of Puerto Rico.
\textsuperscript{13} Luis M. Díaz Soler, op.cit., p. 103-107.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 127-128. Mining was soon abandoned due to the exhaustion of gold mines. By 1529 mining was not a factor in generating revenues or economic activity. In fact because of the high prizes of enslaved labor and the high costs of credit (needed to buy enslaved Africans) a great percentage of the colonists involved in gold mining were either in bankruptcy or switching to agriculture (especially sugar cane farming).
\textsuperscript{15} Governor Francisco Lando in a letter to King Charles I (also Charles V, Emperor of the Sacred Roman Empire) wrote about Puerto Rico: “This is the entrance and key of all the Indies: we are the first ones with whom the French and English corsairs have to contend with…” . In Salvador Brau, La colonización de Puerto Rico (San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1981), p. 445-446.
The first fortification built was La Fortaleza (The Fortress—also known as the Santa Catalina Palace). Begun in 1537, the fort was located in an area where it offered no protection to the city of San Juan. Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, a known Spanish historian reported: “only blind men could have chosen the site for this fort”\(^{16}\).

The Spanish Crown then decided to fortify the entrance of the San Juan harbor and commissioned the construction of a fortification in a headland (“morro” in Spanish) on the Western-most side of the San Juan Islet. In 1539, construction of what was to become Fort San Felipe del Morro was initiated. This fortification became the key and the only effective part of the Spanish defensive system in Puerto Rico for nearly a hundred years.

With the growth of her empire, Spain soon realized the strategic importance of Puerto Rico, the city of San Juan and its fortification system. As Historian Ricardo Torres Reyes says:

“Puerto Rico’s geographic position at the edge of the Caribbean made San Juan one of the key frontier outposts of Spain’s West Indies dominions. The forts here and those in Cartagena, Portobelo, Havana, Veracruz, and St. Augustine formed a chain of defenses that guarded Spain’s New World trade routes… and helped to protect the treasure ships that vitalized her empire. King Phillip IV called Puerto Rico ‘the front and vanguard of all my West Indies…the most important of them all and the most coveted by my enemies…”\(^{17}\)

But as the Spaniards realized the importance of the colony, their European enemies were already looking for strategies to wrest Puerto Rico from Spanish control.

Conflicts in Europe and Their Impact on Puerto Rico

While Spain devoted herself to conquering the American lands, Europe was in turmoil. After the surge of the Reformation\(^{18}\), Europe was immersed in the Wars of Religion that lasted until about 1648. Throughout the whole period, Spain championed the cause of the Catholic Church while other nations, such as England as well as the Netherlands\(^{19}\), embraced Protestantism.

England at the time was not directly involved in an open conflict with Spain but was secretly supporting the protestant Dutch in their fight for independence from Spain\(^{20}\).

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\(^{17}\) National Park Service, *The Forts of Old San Juan*, p. 19.

\(^{18}\) Jean Carpentier and François Lebrun, *Breve Historia de Europa* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1992), p. 263-270. The Reformation is the religious movement that ended Christian religious unity in Europe in the 16\(^{th}\) Century. It was initially led by a German Augustine monk named Martin Luther, and gave rise to various Christian groups like the Lutherans, Calvinists, Anglicans, among others.

\(^{19}\) Since the death of the King-Emperor Charles, the Netherlands were part of the Spanish European Empire. At the time the Netherlands included modern day Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands proper (commonly known as Holland).

\(^{20}\) Jean Carpentier and François Lebrun, *Breve Historia de Europa* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1992), p. 280-281. The Netherlands started their war for independence in 1566. It was not officially recognized
While not committing herself to fight Spain, Queen Elizabeth of England authorized some of her subjects to become privateers and corsairs. One of the most famous privateers at that time was Sir Francis Drake.

The First British Attack (1595)

Sir Francis Drake was a privateer under the service of Queen Elizabeth who had already become a legend in his own time. Drake raided Spanish possessions in the Caribbean and distinguished himself in one of the most decisive naval encounters in the history of Western Europe: the defeat of the Spanish “Armada Invencible” in 1588 (Invincible Armada). After the defeat of the Armada, Drake raided the Spanish and Portuguese coast and in 1595, the Queen asked Drake to undertake the attacks on the Spanish Caribbean ports of Nombre de Dios, Panamá; and San Juan, Puerto Rico.21

On November 22, 1595, Drake appeared off the coast of the San Juan Islet. Since Drake had already attacked the Canary Islands, the Spanish Governor Pedro Suárez Coronel had already made preparations to meet Drake’s armada. The Spanish governor had under his command about 1500 soldiers. On the night of the 23rd, Drake sent 1500 of his men (matching the Spanish force) to the attack. A Spanish anonymous account of the attack describes the decisive moment battle:

“[A]t ten o’clock at night, when it was quite dark, the enemy commenced an attack on the port with twenty-five boats, each carrying fifty or sixty men well armed, with the view of the burning frigates…and they all entered close up to the platform of the Rock [the Water Battery], ranging themselves under the fire of the artillery….Dark as it was, the boats were seen, and instantly the guns from the Rock and the fort of [Santa] Helena [Elena] began to play as briskly as possible. Most of the boats attacked the Capitana, the Texeda frigate, setting fire to her at the bow, and throwing into her a quantity of fire-pots and shells, while ours succeeded in extinguishing the flames before they had done any damage, the fight being carried on with cannon, musquetry, and stones.
At the same time they set fire to the [Santa] Ysabel and Magdalena frigates, and to the [Santa] Clara, which was extinguished; but the third time that the Magdalena frigate, of which Domingo de Ynsurraga was captain, took fire, it was impossible to extinguish the flames, as the ship took fire at the stern and burned furiously; and all that could be done to maintain a footing on board was done by the…captain and the people with him, until the ship was just burnt down and twelve men were killed by the enemy’s musquetry, besides as many more burnt…The battle lasted for an hour, the most obstinately contested that was ever seen, and the whole port was illuminated by the burning frigate in a manner favourable [sic] for the rest, who could thus see to point our artillery and that of the forts, with which, and with musquetry and the stones thrown from the frigates, they did such effect, that the enemy, after an hour…retreated with the loss of nine or ten boats and more than four hundred men, besides many more wounded; while on our side, the only loss was that of the frigate and forty men killed or burnt, besides a few wounded by the musquetry”22

until 1648 as part of the provisions of the Treaty of Westfalia that also ended the Thirty Years War on Europe.

The Spanish defenses at Fort San Felipe del Morro, with the appropriate command and resources proved able to withstand Drake’s attack. While the Spanish felt confident on their ability to defend Puerto Rico against enemy attacks, England was already planning another attempt. This time the Spanish were not that fortunate.

The Second British Attack (1598)

After Drake’s failure to conquer Puerto Rico, Queen Elizabeth asked Sir George Clifford, Third Earl of Cumberland, and a privateer, to attack Puerto Rico and secure it for the English Crown. The Earl of Cumberland was another veteran of the battle with the Spanish Armada and a noted mathematician. Taking Puerto Rico would establish an English outpost from which to harass Spanish commerce and Spain’s defensive lines. Cumberland also realized Drake’s mistake in trying to attack the fortifications of the harbor entrance and decided on another strategy.

On June 16, 1598, Clifford landed his troops in the Condado area, near the San Juan Islet’s Eastern side. The next day the English attacked the area where the San Antonio Bridge is, the only land access to the San Juan islet. The Spanish at the Boquerón Battery held the English at bay until the next day, but on June 18, the English were able to silence the defensive outpost and march on San Juan.

After entering the abandoned city, Clifford, informed by reports of the desperate situation of the garrison at El Morro, decided to lay siege on the fortification but did not attempt to take it by force. Meanwhile, the Spaniards, affected by dysentery and the lack of munitions and supplies, were reaching the limit of their resources. On July 1, 1598, the Spanish garrison at El Morro surrendered to the English.

The Spanish surrender opened a three month English control over San Juan. The rest of the inhabitants of the island remained loyal to Spain. Former Governor Pedro Suárez Coronel, who defeated Drake in 1595, was organizing the resistance to the English in the Puerto-Rican hinterland. Meanwhile, the Spanish King Phillip III23 was already organizing a military expedition to retake the island from English control.

In the meantime, the Earl of Cumberland was facing an unexpected problem. Due to food and water contamination, his troops were decimated (about 400 dead and 400 sick) by dysentery. Faced with the fact that he didn’t have enough men to garrison the city, he decided to leave Puerto Rico. Before leaving, the English pillaged and burned San Juan24.

Spain resumed control and a period of 27 years of peace allowed the new governor, Alonso de Mercado, to rebuild and reinforce Fort San Felipe del Morro, the Boquerón Battery and build a minor but very important defense on the Western side of the San Juan harbor. This fortification was named San Juan de la Cruz but was soon

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23 Phillip II died three days after learning of the fall of Puerto Rico into English hands, hence the responsibility for the recovery of Puerto Rico fell on Phillip III.

known as El Cañuelo. The newly reconstructed fortifications were tested when a new enemy tried to end Spanish dominion in Puerto Rico.

The Spanish Empire in Europe: The Beginning of the End

The Dutch Attack (1625)
Include something about Spain’s decline as a world power

The Illustration and Puerto Rico: Government and Military Reforms in the Colony
Brief description of life before the reforms
Impact of Dutch attack
Implementation of reforms (big examples, etc.)
A Defense of the First Order
The French Revolution Wars and the Last British Attack (1797) Abercromby
The Spanish-American War (1898)
Slavery:
Military character of the colony:
Conclusion:
“The San Juan fortifications served to keep the island and its excellent port out of the hands of Spain’s enemies, notably England, Holland, and France…In their hands, San Juan and Puerto Rico would have provided a base for raids upon Spanish trade and settlements”. (Ver nota al calce #1).