

AUTHOR'S NOTE

When Christopher Columbus landed on San Salvador, his first landfall in the New World, on October 12, 1492, he claimed the beautiful little green island for his king and queen and country. Yet it was not an uninhabited island upon which he set the Spanish flag. The Taino lived there and called the place *Guanahani* after the island's many iguanas. The Taino were a gentle people who wore gold nose rings and gold armbands, sometimes painted their faces and bodies, and always greeted strangers with a feast.

Columbus called the tribespeople "Indians," mistaking the land for India. In his journal, he wrote that they were "well made, with fine shapes and faces; their hair short, and coarse like that of a horse's tail, combed toward the forehead, except a small portion which they suffer to hang down behind. . . ."

The Taino gave the sailors balls of cotton thread and fish darts and parrots in friendship. In turn, the sailors gave them Venetian glass beads, little brass bells, and red caps. They asked in sign where the natives' gold rings and armbands came from. It was the gold that interested them the most.

Columbus carried away ten young Taino men and women (or six, according to different sources) from the various islands they visited, carting them back to Spain as slaves. Later when the islands were colonized by the Spanish, the native religions, languages, and lifestyles were changed forever. Though there were originally some 300,000 native islanders, by 1548 — a little more than fifty years later — less than 500 remained. Today, there are no full-blooded Taino.

Since most stories about that first encounter are from Columbus's point of view, I thought it would interest readers to hear a Taino boy speak. We don't have an actual record of that, so I have re-created what he might have said — using historical records and the storyteller's imagination.

ILLUSTRATOR'S NOTE

Creating illustrations for this book presented many challenges, because little is known about the Taino culture. Apparently most of their artifacts were either melted down or burned; those that are left are made of stone. Many mysteries remain — such as the meaning of the fin-shaped stone *zemis* on page 1. As far as we know, the native people wore no clothing, so I was faced with the problem of how to present them without offending those who object to nudity in a children's book. I chose to portray them with a cloth covering to be as accurate as possible without interfering with the story.