

The story of Christopher Columbus and the short-live town called La Isabela

From 'Home is the Sailor', an investigation by Doug Price and colleagues (full reference below)

Seventeen ships sailed from Spain in AD 1494 toward the Americas, a new world that the farmers, sailors, soldiers, nobility, miners, and craftsmen – 1,200 people – intended to make their own. They brought everything they thought they needed, their livestock, grain, and tools, and established a town called La Isabela on what is now the north coast of the Dominican Republic. The islands were not uninhabited; indigenous peoples live on the Caribbean islands and had complex cultures and trade networks.

Who lived at La Isabela? The ship's rosters listed men, but historians discovered women's names, María Fernández and Bárbara de Vargas, as well as a pilot of African descent, Peralonso Niño, who may have been among the earliest settlers. Did the rosters not list everyone on the ships? Or did they sail on later ships that brought much-needed food and other supplies to these early colonists? Other studies have showed that Africans were some of the earliest immigrants to the 'New World', and historic accounts show the roles of women in what became the Viceroyalty of New Spain.

Columbus governed the colony for 18 months, and by all accounts, things did not go well. The colonists wrote home and asked for more food. They were sick, hungry, exhausted, and rates of death and disease were high. There were reports of hurricanes. Columbus sailed back to Spain in 1496, leaving the settlement behind.

Archaeologists began to explore the ruins in the 1980s. They found a walled waterfront town with remnants of up to 200 perishable structures and evidence for crafts like ceramic and brick production. There was also a church. And they found more than 100 graves, with bodies buried in Catholic tradition of the time with arms crossed over the chest and heads oriented to the west. Some bones were displaced and rearranged, but with no tombstones, the researchers turn to the bones to address the questions the history books left unanswered.

The appearance of the bones testified to nutritional stress; many of the deceased had severe scurvy, a lack of vitamin C that in its severe form causes bleeding in gums and over time affects the bones. This likely resulted from the long sea voyage, but malnutrition and hard physical labor may have slowed their recovery. The settlers were more interested in familiar foods, such as beef, bacon, barley, and wine, that were in short supply than indigenous foods such as maize (corn), sweet potatoes, and fish. The chemistry of the bones also suggests that La Isabela's inhabitants did not, in fact, embrace the new Caribbean foods, or perhaps that they did not know how to use them. Other studies show that some farm animals also failed to thrive in the new environment, which may have contributed to the ultimate failure of the settlement.

The bones also show that there were women at La Isabela, because their remains can be identified by the shapes of different bones in observable ways (the shapes of the skull or size of the upper arm (humerus) or leg (femur) bones. DNA also can distinguish males from females, as well as different ancestry, but the bones were too degraded from the tropical environment to recover any DNA that remained. The shapes of the teeth and bones such as the mandible (jaw), however, also can reflect genetic differences, and suggest that more than one individual was of African ancestry; whether from Africa or Spain is not known. The shape of the head also showed that at least one woman was indigenous, as her flattened forehead reflecting a cultural practice of shaping infant crania that was native to the Americas.

Most of the deceased came from Spain, as shown by the elements oxygen and strontium (an element similar to calcium), whose forms or isotopes differ geographically, and are fixed in their tooth enamel as it forms. The high isotopes also reveal that individuals of African and local origin also were buried in the cemetery. Ultimately, 300 of the settlers returned home, perhaps disappointed that there was no gold or silver, ill from contracting syphilis, or disillusioned with the life. Many of those who remained died young, between just 20 and 40 years of age. La Isabela was eventually abandoned, and in 1496 Bartholomew Columbus established Santo Domingo, which became the capitol of the new Spanish colony.

To read the complete study and find other references:

Home Is the Sailor: Investigating the Origins of the Inhabitants of La Isabela, the First European Settlement in the New World

By T. Douglas Price, Vera Tiesler, Pilar Zabala, Alfredo Coppa, Carolyn Freiwald, Hannes Schroeder, and Andrea Cucina and comments by M. Anne Katzenberg, William F. Keegan, Kelly J. Knudson, James E. Laffoon in *Current Anthropology* 61 no. 5, 2020: <https://doi.org/10.1086/711157>