From the Journal of Christopher Columbus

Sunday, 14 October. In the morning, I ordered the boats to be got ready, and coasted along the island toward the north- northeast to examine that part of it, we having landed first at the eastern part. Presently we discovered two or three villages, and the people all came down to the shore, calling out to us, and giving thanks to God. Some brought us water, and others victuals: others seeing that I was not disposed to land, plunged into the sea and swam out to us, and we perceived that they interrogated us if we had come from heaven. An old man came on board my boat; the others, both men and women cried with loud voices--"Come and see the men who have come from heavens. Bring them victuals and drink." There came many of both sexes, every one bringing something, giving thanks to God, prostrating themselves on the earth, and lifting up their hands to heaven.

It was to view these parts that I set out in the morning, for I wished to give a complete relation to your Highnesses, as also to find where a fort might be built. I discovered a tongue of land which appeared like an island though it was not but might be cut through and made so in two days; it contained six houses. I do not, however, see the necessity of fortifying the place, as the people here are simple in war-like matters, as your Highnesses will see by those seven which I have ordered to be taken and carried to Spain in order to learn our language and return, unless your Highnesses should choose to have them all transported to Castile, or held captive in the island. I could conquer the whole of them with fifty men, and govern them as I pleased.

…Colon [Columbus] and his crew did not voyage alone. They were accompanied by a menagerie of insects, plants, mammals, and microorganisms. Beginning with La Isabela [Colon’s first settlement], European expeditions brought cattle, sheep, and horses, along with crops like sugar cane (originally from New Guinea), wheat (from the Middle East), bananas (from Africa), and coffee (also from Africa). Equally important, creatures the colonists knew nothing about hitchhiked along for the ride. Earthworms, mosquitoes, and cockroaches; honeybees, dandelions, and African grasses; rats of every description — all of them poured from the hulls of Colon’s vessels and those that followed, rushing like eager tourists into lands that had never seen their like before. Cattle and sheep ground the American vegetation between their flat teeth, preventing the regrowth of native shrubs and trees. Beneath their hooves would sprout grasses from Africa, possibly introduced from slave ship bedding; splay-leaved [with wide leaves] and dense on the ground, they choked out native vegetation. (Alien grasses could withstand grazing better than Caribbean groundcover plants because grasses grow from the base of the leaf, unlike most other species, which grows from the tip. Grazing consumes the growth zones of the latter but has little impact on those in the former.) Over the years forests of Caribbean palm, mahogany, and ceiba [the silk-cotton tree] became forest of Australian acacia [small tree of the mimosa family], Ethiopian shrubs, and the Central American logwood. Scurrying below, mongooses from India eagerly drove Dominican snakes toward extinction. The changes continue to this day. Orange groves, introduced to Hispaniola from Spain, have recently begun to fall to the depredation of lime swallowtail butterflies, a citrus pest from Southeast Asia that probably came over in 2004. Today Hispaniola has only small fragments of its original forest.

*Movqvites (Mosquito), “Histoire Naturelle  
des Indes,” ca. 1586*

From the human perspective, the most dramatic impact of the Columbian Exchange was on humankind itself. Spanish accounts suggest that Hispaniola had a large native population: Colón, for instance, casually described the Taino as “innumerable, for I believe there to be millions upon millions of them.” Las Casas claimed the population to be “more than three million.” Modern researchers have not nailed down the number; estimates range from 60,000 to almost 8,000,000. A careful study in 2003 argued that the true figure was “a few hundred thousand.” No matter what the original number, though, the European impact was horrific. In 1514, twenty-two years after Colon’s first voyage, the Spanish government counted up the Indians on Hispaniola for the purpose of allocating them among colonists as laborers. Census agents fanned the across the island but found only 26,000 Taino. Thirty-four years later, according to one scholarly Spanish resident, fewer than 500 Taino were alive….

Spanish cruelty played its part in the calamity, but its larger cause was the Columbian Exchange. Before Colon none of the epidemic diseases common in Europe and Asia existed in the Americas. The viruses that cause smallpox, influenza, hepatitis, measles, encephalitis, and viral pneumonia; the bacteria that cause tuberculosis, diphtheria, cholera, typhus, scarlet fever, and bacterial meningitis — by a quirk of evolutionary history, all were unknown in the Western Hemisphere. Shipped across the ocean from Europe these maladies consumed Hispaniola’s native population with stunning rapacity. The first recorded epidemic, perhaps due to swine flu, was in 1493….

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