

St. Vincent, the island

The island of St. Vincent, which is about 133 square miles in size, is located in what the British term the Windward Islands of the Caribbean, although the French refer to the islands as Leeward. It takes its name from St. Vincent of Saragossa. Legend has it that the island was named as such because Columbus discovered it on 22nd January 1498, the feast day of St. Vincent. This is, however, demonstrably untrue, because Columbus was not in the Caribbean on that date. Its pre-Columbian name was *Hairouna*, meaning “*Land of the Blessed*”. This may have been derived from the Arawak belief that their principal deity, Jochu, lived in the land of the volcano, where soil is fertile, thus blessing its inhabitants with plenty. It is believed that the pre-Columbian Kalinago, better known as the Caribs, first inhabited it a century before the Spanish initially arrived in the Caribbean. They had taken the island over from the Arawak people, who, in turn, had replaced the Ciboney. The Pre-Columbian people of the Caribbean were not, as is sometimes thought, wiped out by the early Spanish expeditions and settlers in the region, but still survive today, particularly on Dominica, and there are still people of Kalinago descent on modern St. Vincent.



St. Vincent of Saragossa

Although the Spanish obviously knew of the island's existence and gave it a new name, it appears that they never made an attempt to settle on the island, possibly due to its volcanic nature, and it became a stronghold for the surviving Carib population over the course of the 16th century. Greater European, and indeed African, interaction with the island would evolve over the course of the 17th century.



Unbeknownst to the Caribs, several European powers were laying claim to St. Vincent without even so much as setting foot on the island. The English first made a claim under King Charles I, who in 1627 granted several islands, including St. Vincent, by charter to the Earl of Carlisle. The British still maintained the claim, granting the islands to Lord Willoughby in 1672, after the Earl's death. However, at no point were the British in actual possession of St. Vincent, nor did they make any serious physical claim to the island until 1722, when a Captain Braithwaite was sent to survey it, and was met with hostility by the indigenous peoples.

Portrait of Caribs by Agostino Brunias The French had a far better relationship with St. Vincent, in part due to their possession of nearby Martinique. In 1678, the French signed a treaty with two Vincentian Carib chiefs, known as Jonana and Pierre Moigna, in order to protect their holdings on Martinique. As a result, the French were the first Europeans known to settle on St. Vincent. This, at first glance, seems to take the form of missionaries being sent there, to attempt to convert the inhabitants to Roman Catholicism. It is known that a French Jesuit missionary, Friar Adrien Le Breton, was resident on St. Vincent in the late 17th and early 18th century (1693-1702), and it is clear that the gentleman had not had much, if any, success in his task, although he did maintain a generally amicable relationship with the inhabitants of the island.

The association with the French was sufficiently strong for the Kalinago, who had continued to have a poor relationship with the Garinagu, to ask for French for help from Martinique circa 1719 as they felt threatened by the Garinagu practice of kidnapping. The French agreed to help and planned to send a force of some 1000 men to St. Vincent to aid the Kalinago. However, in the end, the force amounted only to a mere 300 men, which proved ineffective against the Garinagu, who used the hilly, jungle-covered terrain to ambush them.

Sir William Young claimed that the expedition was actually the result of a Monsieur de Bucq convincing the Governor of Martinique to seize the island in order to establish plantations and reduce the Garinagu to a state of slavery. He also thought that the Kalinago had been asking for French aid for a much longer time, and had invited the French to settle amongst them even earlier, with a notable French presence being established as early as 1710.

Regardless of the motivation of the French expedition, the Kalinago did sign a treaty of friendship with the French in December 1719, which they later renewed in 1727. The Garinagu, for their part, sent a delegation to the Governor of Martinique to protest against their treatment by the French. Here they were able to reach an agreement with the French, promising that they would be allies and return escaped slaves to their owners, and settled into what would be a long-term alliance. Gifts were thus exchanged, and items taken from the French expedition to St. Vincent were also returned. The Garinagu even invited the French to live on the island. Hence, some French colonists from Martinique settled on St Vincent during this period, and some sources claim that it was at this time that the Garinagu first adopted the practice of binding their heads to distinguish themselves from the black slaves that the French brought with them, although the practice may have arisen much earlier.



Bryan Edwards

It was claimed by Sir William Young and historian Bryan Edwards in their respective writings that the Treaty of Aix-La-Chappelle in 1748, which ended the War of the Austrian Succession, stipulated that St. Vincent would be a neutral island between the French and the British. However, no mention of the island and neutrality is mentioned either in the text of the main treaty or the preliminary agreements signed by Britain and France.

The island's neutral status is in fact older, dating back to an arrangement reached in 1660, which stated that both Dominica and St. Vincent would not be colonised by either European Power, which appears to have been forgotten, or, more likely, ignored by both sides. However, the conclusion of the next major conflict between Britain and France, the Seven Years War, would change the situation permanently.