

Author's Note

Some of you may be wondering, “How historically accurate is *Hammer of Witches*?” Magic aside, I’d say, “Reasonably.” Cristobal Colón was of course a real person, as were the Pinzón brothers, Antonio de Cuellar, Juan de la Cosa, Rodrigo Sanchez, Anacaona, Caonabó, Higuamota, and Guacanagarí. Colón’s Jewish translator, Luis de Torres, and his cabin boy, Pedro de Terreros, also existed, though I’d venture to guess they weren’t actually wizards.

The cultural diversity in *Hammer of Witches* is based in history. Before 1492, Spanish Catholics, Jews, and Muslims lived and worked side by side, often grudgingly. Then, as Baltasar mentions, the Muslim emirate of Granada fell to Spanish forces, marking the end of the Spanish Reconquista, a series of wars battled over the course of several centuries to “take back” Spain from Muslim rule. In Granada, King Fernando and Queen Isabel signed the Alhambra Decree, expelling all non-converted Jews from the country. At least a hundred thousand Jews were displaced, and those who converted faced a more aggressive Inquisition. Hundreds of thousands

of Muslims left Spain at the time of the fall of Granada, and the Moriscos (Muslims who converted to Christianity) would be banished not long later. But Spain would remain diverse in other ways. Walking through the streets of fifteenth century Valencia, for example, you'd see Spaniards, Berbers, Arabs, Genoese traders, Eastern European and Greek slaves, and a substantial population of Africans (both slave and free). Palos, as a small harbor town, would not be as diverse as a large city, but it also wouldn't be completely white.

When writing about the events that unfolded in Ayití (Hispaniola) during the last weeks of Columbus's first voyage, I strove to be as historically accurate as possible and to describe Taíno culture with as much precision and sensitivity as I could, given my own non-native background and the dearth of reliable primary sources from the period. No written language existed in the Caribbean in pre-Columbian times, so most of what we know about fifteenth century Taíno culture comes from a few contemporary Spanish writers (all of whom had their own agendas) and more modern archaeological and linguistic research. What these resources make clear is that Taíno civilization was and is significantly more complex than high school history textbooks give it credit for, and I hope my humble abilities as a writer were enough to illustrate the richness of fifteenth century Ayití's culture. At the same time, Baltasar is a somewhat unreliable narrator who sees the Taíno through young, Eurocentric eyes. Throughout the book he swings back and forth between seeing the citizens of Marién and

Maguana as “barbarians,” noble savages in a Garden of Eden, wise mentors, warlike villains, victims in need of saving and, sometimes, actual human beings. He’s learning—slowly. His beliefs are his beliefs and not my own.

No one knows exactly what happened at La Navidad, so the final two chapters of this book are based on my own educated guesses. Primary sources tell us that, in the beginning of 1493, Columbus left thirty-nine members of his crew in a fortress cobbled out of timber from the Santa María, which had run aground on Christmas day. When Columbus returned a year later, the fortress was destroyed, the crew was gone, and the Spanish objects inside the fortress taken by the Taíno. Guacanagarí told Columbus that Caonabó had burned the fortress, killed some or possibly all of the Spanish men, attacked his village, wounded him, and stolen one of his wives. Columbus believed this report. I’m inclined to believe it, too.

If Caonabó *had* attacked the fortress, the attack may have been spurred by his discovery that some of the Spanish were taking three or four Taíno “wives” apiece (according to Guacanagarí). There were also reports of Spanish men being killed after they had trespassed on Taíno mines either before or after the destruction of La Navidad. Whatever his reasons, Caonabó probably did attack the fortress, because, when the Spanish captured him during Columbus’s second voyage, the cacique admitted to burning the fortress and killing between eleven and twenty of the thirty-nine men. However, it is also possible that the crew themselves burned the

fortress after some internal conflict, though I've personally seen no evidence for this theory.

So in general I'd say that the history in *Hammer of Witches* is reasonably accurate, but you might want to think twice before using it as a study guide for your next history test. Here's why:

THE TIMELINE

Hammer of Witches is a work of fiction, and fiction has its own rules which don't apply to history. For one thing, history doesn't follow a schedule. Events can happen gradually over a long period with many lulls in between. Fiction, on the other hand, must keep readers' attention, and climaxes hopefully arrive when expected. For this reason I compressed the timeline of Colón's first voyage, cutting out his layover in the Canary Islands and some of his wanderings around the Caribbean so I could focus solely on his time in Ayití, where more of the dramatic events occurred. Unfortunately that meant readers didn't get to see the Bahamas or Cuba in this book, and here, Martin Pinzón separated from Colón near Hispaniola and not off the Cuban coast.

THE SPANISH INQUISITION

The Malleus Maleficarum witch hunters in this book are an invention and should not be confused with the historical Spanish Inquisition. As horrific as the Inquisition was, the real Inquisitors of Spain would not have kidnapped Baltasar under the cover of night with no warning, nor would they have resorted to torture so

quickly. The Inquisition was far too legalistic for that. They would have first formally accused Baltasar of heresy and given him a month or so to confess and repent. If he didn't turn himself in at the end of the month, he would have been arrested and taken to a relatively nice prison, in comparison to other Spanish prisons of the time. (Still, he might have to wait there for a few years before his case was heard.) The Inquisitors would have seized his and his family's assets to pay for his imprisonment and trial—and perhaps more importantly, to line their own pockets. At the trial, Baltasar would have faced a tribunal of learned men, had a defense attorney, and likely be defended by character witnesses. The tribunal would rule for torture only rarely; the seizure of assets and threat of torture were usually more than enough to get a confession. Afterward Baltasar would face execution, hard labor, public shaming, or freedom.

In contrast, the fictional *Malleus Maleficarum* in *Hammer of Witches* is more of an organization of spies, renegade priests, and bounty hunters than an arm of the Spanish legal system. The book *Malleus Maleficarum* did exist in the 1400s and was somewhat popular in Europe. However, both the Church and Inquisition condemned it.

THE CHARACTERS

I did not live in the 1490s, nor did I have any personal interactions with Christopher Columbus, Martin Pinzón, Caonabó, or Anacaona. No one can know exactly what these people were like,

although we can make guesses based on our primary sources. That said, *Hammer of Witches* is a work of fiction. At times I flashed my poetic license and changed the characters for the sake of plot. Here's the breakdown:

Things we know about Christopher Columbus: He made some over-the-top demands of King João of Portugal and Spain's King Fernando and Queen Isabel and finally was able to make his first voyage; he seemed to be a religious Catholic; he got along with Guacanagarí; he took between six and ten Taíno back with him to Spain after the first voyage; in later voyages he attempted to establish a slave trade and forced the Taíno to pay tribute to him in the form of gold, under penalty of death; he was eventually arrested for his mismanagement of Hispaniola.

What we don't know about Christopher Columbus: where he came from (his son and contemporaries said or strongly suggested Genoa); if part or all of his family was Jewish; if he was a good captain and navigator; if he liked or hated Martin Pinzón (or both); why he immediately believed Guacanagarí when he said he didn't attack La Navidad; whether he was a nice guy to be around. During the second voyage, rumors of Columbus's cruelty to the Taíno (cutting off heads, hands) began to spread, but it's unclear how true these rumors were.

Things we know about Martin Pinzón: He was from Palos; he was an excellent mariner; he was famous for his efforts in the War of Castilian Succession; he had a couple of brothers who were also involved in the first voyage; he was initially so confident about

Columbus's plans that he put up his own money to help fund it; for some reason he sailed off without Columbus while in the Caribbean; eventually they found each other again and returned to Europe, where he quickly died.

What we don't know about Martin Pinzón: if he had syphilis when he was on the first voyage, and if it had any effect on his decision to separate from the other two ships; if he died of syphilis at all; if he separated from Columbus on purpose or by accident. For the purposes of this book I decided he left on purpose, because nothing happens in a fantasy book by accident.

Things we know about Caonabó: Bartolomé de las Casas said Caonabó was not from Hispaniola, but one of the Lucayan islands (the Bahamas or Turks & Caicos); he was married to Anacaona and was cacique of Maguana; he was older and sharp-witted, and Columbus respected him; after the second voyage he and others attacked some Spanish fortresses Columbus had ordered built; he was captured by the Spanish and died in a shipwreck on the way back to Spain.

What we don't know about Caonabó: if really he burned La Navidad (see above); if he really stole one of Guacanagarí's wives; if he really was captured when the Spanish tricked him into putting on a pair of handcuffs by calling them bracelets. That last story sounds particularly fishy to me.

Things we know about Anacaona: She was from Hispaniola; she was the sister of the cacique of Jaragua; she was married to Caonabó and was the mother of Higuamota; she was well-respected

as a composer of areitos (Taíno ballads); the Spanish thought she was beautiful; toward the end of 1496 she and her brother made a treaty with Columbus, after which she was friendly with the Spanish; she eventually became a cacica (female cacique); later, during a feast, Spanish Governor Nicolas de Ovando burned down her meeting house and had her hanged.

What we don't know about Anacaona: if she agreed with her husband's decision to attack the Spanish. In *Hammer of Witches*, I decided the answer was "yes" to make her a more active character. However, there's no proof either way.

THE STORIES

Most of the stories recounted by the characters in *Hammer of Witches* are retellings of real folktales, fairy tales, myths, and religious stories. But I've taken some liberties. The prologue's hameh story is mostly my own invention, and I decided to keep the Ali Baba story in there even though there's no evidence it was being told at the time. Then again, there's no evidence it wasn't.

THE MAGIC

Storytelling is an invention of mine, so I had to make guesses about how it would affect the world if it did exist. In the 1300s and 1400s, Spain increasingly disapproved of differences of religious belief and interpretation; for this reason, I assumed there would be a "Magic Inquisition" to eradicate the heresy of Storytelling. In Ayití, such inquisitions did not exist, so I concluded that Storytell-

ing would likely be more accepted there. In the fictional world of *Hammer of Witches*, the best Taíno Storytellers (like Arabuko) would become the village shamans by virtue of the fact that they could apparently call upon and talk to spirits. That said, I do *not* want to suggest that real Taíno people are magical or that real Taíno shamans were witches. In reality, the Taíno shamans (*behiques*) were religious leaders and doctors who used medicinal herbs, *cemís* (religious icons), ceremonial fasts and purging, songs, and hallucinatory drugs to perform their sacred rituals.

THE LANGUAGE

Some readers have asked me why Baltasar's narration in *Hammer of Witches* doesn't sound more "medieval." Put simply, *Hammer of Witches* is a young adult novel, and I wanted it to be accessible to young adults. Beyond that, Baltasar is neither a member of the church nor the aristocracy, so there's no reason to believe he would have written or spoken in a formal manner. If I wanted to write in a historically-accurate fashion, I would have written *Hammer of Witches* in Old Castilian (which Baltasar would have spoken), Renaissance Latin (the language in which he probably would have written), or very very Early Modern English. If you'd like to see some very very Early Modern English in action, I encourage you to read "The Tree of Common Wealth" (1509) by Sir Edmund Dudley, which begins, "fforeasmuch as euy man is naturallie bounde not onlie moste hartelie to praie for the prosperous contynuaunce of his liegue Soueraigne Lorde . . ." I could have certainly written

Hammer of Witches in such language. Something tells me, though, that my editor wouldn't have been too happy with me!

So there you have it. If you want to learn more about fifteenth century Spain, Columbus's voyages, or Taíno culture, please visit my website hammerofwitches.com to find a suggested reading list and other special features. Thanks for reading.