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Here are the indigenous people Christopher Columbus and his men could not annihilate



An engraving by Theodor de Bry depicting Christopher Columbus landing on Hispaniola on Dec. 6, 1492. (Theodor de Bry/Library of Congress)

By Gillian Brockell

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The Lucayan did not know it was Oct. 12, 1492. They did not know that their island, in what would become the Bahamas, had been spotted by Spanish explorers led by a Genoese man named Christopher Columbus. And they did not know that in less than 30 years, their island would be empty from the coming genocide.

As Columbus and his men approached, the Lucayans greeted them warmly, offering food and water, and “we understood that they had asked us if we had come from heaven,” Columbus wrote in his journal.

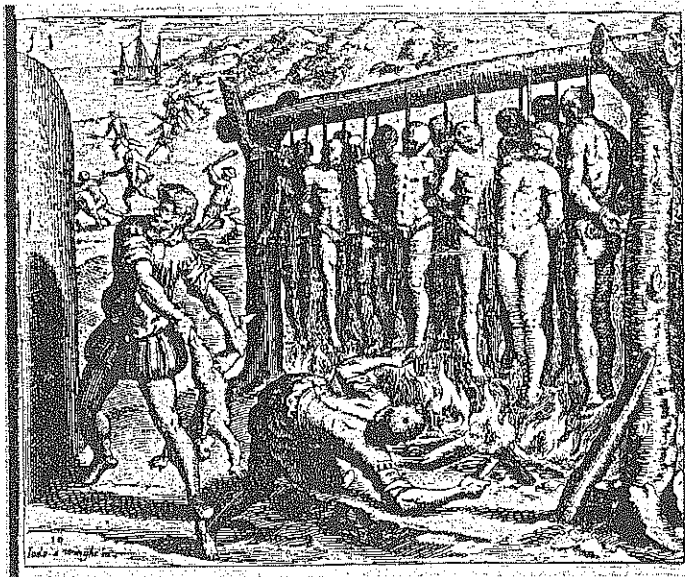
Then he added, “With 50 men they can all be subjugated and made to do what is required of them.”

So Columbus tried again for gold, but this time he and his men didn't go looking for it. They ordered all Taíno people 14 and older to deliver a certain amount of gold dust every three months. If they didn't, their hands would be cut off.

At this point, the Taíno were refusing to grow crops, and those who didn't bleed to death after their hands were removed began to die of famine and disease. When they fled into the mountains, they were hunted down by dogs. Many killed themselves with cassava poison.

Columbus's men also continued to sexually abuse Taíno women and girls. In 1500, Columbus wrote to an acquaintance that "there are many dealers who go about looking for girls; those from nine to 10 are now in demand."

As the population plummeted, they abducted indigenous people from other islands, like the Lucayan, to work the fields and mines of Hispaniola. When the British colonized the Bahamas in the 1600s, the islands had been deserted for more than a century.



This engraving by Joos van Winghe and Theodor de Bry depicts the atrocities committed by Spanish explorers on the indigenous people of the Caribbean described by Bartolomé de las Casas. (Peace Palace Library/, The Netherlands)

Bartolomé de las Casas arrived in Hispaniola in 1502, when he was 18. For decades, he participated in the mistreatment of the Taíno and the introduction of enslaved Africans, before renouncing it all, becoming a Dominican friar and confessing what he had witnessed in "A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies."

It is worth quoting him at length. This excerpt is very graphic:

“They [Spanish explorers] forced their way into native settlements, slaughtering everyone they found there, including small children, old men, pregnant women, and even women who had just given birth. They hacked them to pieces, slicing open their bellies with their swords as though they were so many sheep herded into a pen. They even laid wagers on whether they could slice a man in two at a stroke, or cut an individual’s head from his body, or disembowel him with a single blow of their axes. They grabbed suckling infants by the feet and, ripping them from their mothers’ breasts, dashed them headlong against the rocks. Others, laughing and joking all the while, threw them over their shoulders, shouting, ‘Wriggle, you little perisher.’

When las Casas wrote this in 1542, there were only 200 Taíno left on Hispaniola. Across the Caribbean, he claimed the Spanish were responsible for the deaths of 12 to 15 million indigenous people.

Historians usually attribute most of the deaths to the spread of diseases for which native people had no immunity, but recently historian Andrés Reséndez has pushed back against this, arguing that populations were lower than previous estimated, and “a nexus of slavery, overwork and famine killed more Indians in the Caribbean than smallpox, influenza and malaria.”

Soon after Columbus’s death in 1506, Spanish explorers moved on to other islands, like Puerto Rico and Jamaica, and according to las Casas, “perpetrated the same outrages and committed the same crimes as before.”

By 1650, Zinn wrote, reports indicated the Taíno were extinct.

But recent scholarship proves that may not have been the case. Researchers compared the DNA from the tooth of a pre-Columbian Lucayan woman found in a cave in the Bahamas to that of contemporary Puerto Ricans, who are generally thought to be an interracial mix of African, European and Native American ancestry. They found that the Native American component in the Puerto Rican samples was closely related to the Lucayan DNA. The results were published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in 2018.

Jorge Estevez, a Taíno descendant who assisted the research, told Newsweek: “I wish my grandmother were alive today so that I could confirm to her what she already knew. It shows that the true story is one of assimilation, certainly, but not total extinction.”

The Taíno also live on in our language — barbecue, hammock, canoe, tobacco and hurricane are all derived from Taíno words.



A pre-Columbian drawing by the Taíno in a cave in San Cristobal, Dominican Republic. (TOMAS VAN HOUTRYVE/AP)

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