

Why did the arawak
tribe disappear?



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As children, we are taught all about Christopher Columbus's voyage to the New World, and how he is the one person responsible for discovering America. Even though we spent so much time on the topic, we were never taught about his destructive tendencies. We were never told that he was responsible for the murder and extinction of Indian tribes, such as the Arawak. Although Columbus is popular for discovering the New World, he brought diseases and slavery that killed tribes such as the Arawak.

Over 520 years ago, Christopher Columbus sailed across the Atlantic Ocean on August 3, in search of Asia where he would obtain riches such as gold and pearls. Once his journey began, him and his crew would realize that it would be a much longer voyage than they had imagined. The crew's anxiety was at an all time high by the time October came around, but Columbus promised that if they had not found land in two days, they would go back home. The next day, on October 10, they found land that would be later known as the New World. In Christopher Columbus's replica journal, written by Bartolome de la Casas, Columbus wrote, At two hours after midnight the land was sighted at a distance of two leagues. The vessels were hove to, waiting for daylight; and on Friday they arrived at a small island of the Lucayos, call in the language of the Indians, Guanahani. Presently, they saw naked people. This was Columbus's first encounter with an Indian tribe, known as the Arawak (History).

The Arawak were the original people to live in the Caribbean Islands. Arawak's did not wear much clothing, like Columbus stated in his journal entry. The climate in the Caribbean was always warm, so men usually went without clothes unless it was for a special occasion. Women wore skirts and

necklaces. The Arawak people were advanced and quite intelligent, and their ways of life were futuristic. For transportation, they used canoes that could hold up to fifty people, and they were also known as agricultural people. Their most important crop was a potato-like root called cassava, and they also grew beans, squash, peppers, and corn. Arawak men would also hunt, primarily catching fish and other seafoods (Redfish). The Arawak people were known to have impressed Columbus with their kindness and hospitality. They will give all that they do possess for anything that is given to them, exchanging things even for bits of broken crockery, Columbus noted as he met them. He also stated, They do not carry arms or know them. They should be good servants. (Poole)

In the beginning, the Arawak and the Spaniards had a good relationship. From Columbus's journal he stated, They brought us sticks of the cotton candy thread and parrots and other little things which it would be tedious to list, and exchanged everything for whatever we offered them. After Columbus realized how useful the Arawak could be in the use of work, he wasted no time in establishing his first empire. As the Spaniards and Arawak continued to co-exist, their once good relationship deteriorated. The Spaniards began to remove Arawak men from the villages to work in newly discovered gold mines and colonial plantations. As forced work was pushed onto the Arawak, members of the tribe began to experience starvation, depression, suicidal thoughts, and fell to deadly diseases. (Poole)

As the Arawak worked on the plantations and in the gold mines, the Spanish settled and became physically closer to them. The members of the tribe were not able to plant crops while they were being forced to work, which led

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to many Arawak's to die due to starvation. Many other members committed suicide so they would not have to be under control of the Spaniards any longer. (Poole) The Arawak were not immune to diseases that came from Europe, specifically smallpox. As time went on and the more settled the Spaniards were, the Arawaks number decreased. In 1531, the number of Arawak was down to 600, from an estimated number of 100, 000. Today, there is no trace of the Arawak people, except for archaeological remains. (Corbett)

The arrival of Columbus and the rest of the Spaniards to the Caribbeans caused a genocidal end to the Arawak Indians. Columbus had an idea of dominating that new land he had found, but his only problem was the Arawak. In April, 1493, Columbus wrote a letter to Luis de Santagnel declaring “ their Highnesses may see that I shall give them as much gold as they need and slaves as many as they shall order to be shipped.” Christopher Columbus and his crew took advantage of the generosity and accommodation that the Arawak granted them because they knew how naive they were. After the Arawak were enslaved by the Spaniards, it is said that Columbus went back to Spain, where he celebrated through the street of Seville and Barcelona. (Bourne, pg. 270)

Famous for his New World discovery, Columbus is responsible for the genocidal end of the Arawak tribe. On October 10, 1492, Christopher Columbus discovered what he thought was the New World, but was actually already established by the Arawak people. The Arawak were good willed and gracious people who showed no threat to Columbus or his crew. Columbus took advantage of there humanity and enslaved them to take control of his

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new domain. Women were not able to plant crops, and the men were not able to hunt for food, so many began to succumb due to famine. I personally do not believe that this conflict evolved in American society, these conflicts have been covered up as the years have gone on. If they were more popularized, I do not believe Columbus Day would be a national holiday in the United States. I do believe it has impacted the American society instead of evolving it. I believe it impacted it because since we do celebrate Columbus Day, the people whose ancestors and relatives were affected by his actions, see him as a villain and murderer. I also believe it impacted the American society because when people discovered that Columbus was not as gracious and giving, it created a divided opinion on if the holiday should be celebrated.