

Caribbean Holocaust (Arawak)

Lead: On October 12, 1492 the three ships in Christopher Columbus' tiny squadron made land on San Salvador Island in the eastern Bahamas. He found there a handsome indigenous people of peaceful disposition and of efficient agricultural habits. Within fifty years the Arawak or Tainos were all but wiped out.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: He called them, "the best people in the world and above all the gentlest," but Columbus' mind and

that of his royal patrons was on gold and silver and the peaceful people of islands were soon found to be expendable. The Arawak immigrated to the eastern Caribbean archipelago from mainland South America and by Columbus' time were found mostly in the Greater Antilles: Cuba, Dominica, and the Bahamas. They had a complex religious and social structure organized around autonomous villages some of which had as many as 3000 inhabitants. Each village was led by hereditary rulers called cacique (kaseke) who were assisted in religious matters by shamans.

When the Spanish explorers established contact they were impressed by Tainoan agriculture.

Using a system of crop-rotation known as canuco, they planted root crops to prevent erosion and leaf crops which provided shade and conserved moisture.

Though the Spanish admired certain aspects of the Arawak culture, they were made quickly aware that the natives on the eastern islands were peace-loving and no match for the aggressive Europeans. The Spanish royal house demanded that expeditions turn a profit. That meant mining precious metals. Columbus and his successors attempted to use the Arawak to dig for gold but the islanders were unsuited for the hard continuous work required in the

mines.

If slavery were not enough, the Europeans also brought with them disease. After Columbus' second voyage many natives began to die, probably in part from infections borne by the domesticated animals such as pigs brought by the Spaniards. Native immune systems were as unprepared for influenza as the people themselves had been for the demands of slavery. By 1550 most of the Arawak were dead. In the clash of cultures they had been overwhelmed.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

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Resources

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