

The Arawak

Native Americans living in the Bahamas were killed by the Spanish



The Arawaks lived in peace until the Spanish arrived.

The Arawak were the first Native Americans that Christopher Columbus met on his first trip in 1492. He landed in the Bahamas, an island in the Caribbean Sea. When Columbus arrived the people greeted him warmly. The Arawak were very kind and generous people. Columbus wrote that the Arawak, *“...were well-built, with good bodies and handsome features.”*

The Arawak people had a very simple lifestyle. On their farms they grew corn, yams, and cassava. They developed a system of agriculture that didn't require them to farm every day. The Arawak people rarely fought, and had very few weapons. Since they didn't have weapons or an army Columbus believed the Spanish could conquer them very easily. He wrote:

“They do not bear arms, and do not know them, for I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance. They have no iron. Their spears are made of cane...”

From the beginning Columbus thought about enslaving the Arawak and other Native Americans. **He wrote “they would make fine servants...With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want.”**

Columbus' first task was to locate gold. The king and queen of Spain agreed to pay for the ships and provisions Columbus needed, because they hoped that Columbus would discover a new route to India, and to its spices. Some of the Arawak had small gold trinkets, and Columbus believed this meant the islands held lots of gold.

On his second trip Columbus promised to bring back “as much gold as they need... and as many slaves as they ask”. He told the Spanish king and queen that there was lots of gold, although he had no proof. The king and queen provided him with even more provisions on his second trip. He was provided 17 ships, and 1200 men. In comparison, he was only



Christopher Columbus was responsible for the deaths of many Native Americans.

given 3 ships on his first trip, and 39 men.

Columbus' ships went from island to island in the Caribbean. On each island they captured and enslaved Native Americans. They demanded that the Native Americans trade with them, and provide them gold.

Columbus left Spanish soldiers on different islands to ensure the Native Americans continued to find gold, and work for the Spanish. The Native Americans on Haiti fought back, and killed the

sailors who were left on the island. Many others attempted to fight the Spanish, but they were overmatched. The Spanish had armor, swords, and guns.

In 1495 Columbus took 500 Arawaks back to Spain, and only 300 survived the trip. Most of the Arawak died soon after arriving in Spain.

The king of Spain was becoming very upset with Columbus. Columbus had not returned the gold which he had promised, and the enslaved Native Americans did not survive in Spain. On his last voyage Columbus enslaved the Native Americans and forced them to mine for gold.

Mining for gold was very dangerous. The Arawaks had to dig deep tunnels into the ground in search of gold. The tunnels often collapsed. In Haiti for example, he ordered that anyone under 14, men, women, and children, were required to find a specific amount of gold every 3 months. If successful, they were required to wear a copper token around their neck. Anyone caught without a copper token, had their hands cut off, and bled to death. After a while, the Native Americans began abandoning their villages before the Spanish arrived, and some even killed themselves.

Unfortunately there was very little gold on the islands. When the native people did not find enough gold they were killed. The Spanish worked them so hard, that in 2 years they killed half the people in Haiti, about 125,000 people. The Spaniards eventually killed all the Arawaks.

The terrible treatment by the Spanish was witnessed by Bartolomé de Las Casas, a Spanish bishop. He wanted Spain to respect the rights of the Native Americans, and hoped to convert them to Christianity. Las Casas reported that the Spanish grew lazy, and forced the Native Americans to carry them. The Spanish would often kill them for fun.

Las Casas suggested that Africans should be brought to the New World and enslaved, rather than enslaving Native Americans. He later changed his opinion when he saw that slavery was just as bad for Africans as it had been for Native Americans, but it was too late.

READING QUESTIONS

1. Describe the Arawaks.
2. What type of weapons did the Arawaks have?
3. What did Christopher Columbus promise to bring back to Spain?
4. What happened on the island of Haiti?
5. Why did Native Americans wear copper tokens around their neck? What would happen to a Native American who didn't have a token?
6. How many Arawaks died on the trip back to Spain with Columbus in 1495?
7. List two things that Bartolomé de Las Casas wanted Spain to do with the Native Americans.
8. Who suggested that the Spanish should enslave Africans, and not the Native Americans?
9. Are there any Arawaks alive today?

PLACES TO KNOW

1. Caribbean Sea
2. Haiti
3. India
4. Bahamas