

### Columbus and Genocide

*The discoverer of the New World was responsible for the annihilation of the peaceful Arawak Indians*

By **EDWARD T. STONE**

On April 17, 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella, the Catholic monarchs of Castile, signed the Capitulations of Santa Fe, the agreement by which Christopher Columbus, one-time wool-weaving apprentice in Savona, Italy, undertook a voyage of discovery to the western Atlantic.

Columbus was in his forty-first year. After forsaking his father's loom in Savona he had spent some nine years in obscurity in Portugal, where his only known occupations were those of petty trader in sugar for an Italian commercial firm and maker and purveyor of maps and marine charts in collaboration with his younger brother Bartolomé. During this period he married a poor but aristocratic young Portuguese woman who bore him a son; he also supposedly made one or more sea voyages in an unidentified capacity.

Some time in those years he had conceived his enterprise of discovery. Finding no acceptance of it in Portugal, he had come to Castile in the early months of 1485 after his wife's death. There he had eked out a precarious living as an itinerant peddler of books and maps, existing partly on charitable handouts from noble patrons whom he had managed to interest in his enterprise.

Now the fruition of his dream was at hand. The Capitulations provided that:

1. Columbus was to be admiral of "all those islands and mainland in the Ocean Sea which by his hand and industry he would discover and acquire," the title to be hereditary and the office to be equal in pre-eminences and prerogatives to that of the High Admiral of Castile.
2. He would be "viceroy and governor general of all the said islands and mainland." In a subsequent royal provision signed a few days later, Columbus was specifically granted the power, as admiral, viceroy, and governor, to "hear and dispatch all civil and criminal proceedings pertaining to the said offices of the admiralty, viceroyalty and governorship" and to "punish and castigate the delinquents."
3. For his personal enrichment he was to have 10 per cent of all the removable assets of the newly discovered lands, including gold, silver, pearls, and precious stones, and the trade therein was to be a crown monopoly under his control. He was to receive an additional 12½ per cent in return for his pledge to contribute an eighth part of the cost of the expedition.

How a ragged and indigent foreigner whose only known experience at sea had been as a travelling commercial agent and earlier as a common seaman and who had not set foot on a ship in the seven years he had been in Spain could thus acquire by the stroke of a pen a station equal to that of the highest-ranking officer of the Castilian navy—indeed, how he could have wrung from these two powerful and able sovereigns such extraordinary concessions—is a fascinating story in itself, but it need not detain us here. [See "Christopher Columbus, Mariner," AMERICAN HERITAGE, December, 1955.] Of far more significance in their tragic portent were the provisions of the agreement that gave to the former weaver's apprentice the absolute power of life and death over tens of thousands of innocent human beings. His incapacity to discharge that responsibility justly and humanely would be distressingly demonstrated in the years that were to follow.

The somber chronicle of the events that ended in the genocide of the peaceful Arawaks of the Caribbean islands is amply documented in Columbus' own letters and journals and in the pages of his most ardent admirer, Father Bartolomé de Las Casas, the great contemporary historian of the West Indies who believed Columbus had been divinely inspired to make the Discovery. But Las Casas was a thoroughly honest writer, and he did not hesitate to pass harsh judgment on his hero for initiating and carrying on the wholesale

enslavement for profit of the gentle natives who had affectionately welcomed Columbus and his fellow argonauts to the New World. Throughout his long life Las Casas was an impassioned crusader for the rights and survival of the hapless Indians—his “poor innocents,” as he called them—whose cruel oppression by the Spanish invaders he laid square at Columbus’ door.

However controversial this Dominican priest may have been in his lifetime, however subjective and even irritating to his readers may be his interminable moralizing and expounding of God’s will, Las Casas’ monumental history remains without question the greatest single source of our knowledge of that milestone in human affairs. Born to an upper-class family in Seville, Las Casas was eighteen at the time of the voyage of discovery. His father went with Columbus on the second voyage in 1493 and was among the first colonists on the island of Haiti, which the Spaniards called La Isla Espanola (Spanish Island). Young Las Casas joined the colony in 1502 and for a time led the life of a landholder in this first Spanish settlement in the New World. But his sensitive mind and heart were sickened by the cruel oppression of the natives. He took the vows of the Dominican order and resolved to devote the rest of his life to their cause, a resolve he never relinquished until the end of his life, at ninety-two. For three years he was bishop of Chiapas in southern Mexico; he then returned to Spain for the last time in 1547, becoming a permanent resident of the monastery of San Gregorio in Valladolid. He began his *Historia de las Indias* in 1527, while he was still on Espanola, but did not complete it until thirty years later. He had become well acquainted with Diego, Columbus’ legitimate son and his successor as Admiral of the Indies, and with Diego’s highborn wife, Maria de Toledo, niece of the duke of Alba. They placed all of Columbus’ papers at his disposal, including a copy of the *Journal of the First Voyage*. Las Casas made an abstract of the latter for his own use, and it remains the only detailed record of the historic voyage. The original of the journal has been lost.

A chilling omen of the fate of the unarmed and inoffensive Arawaks is indicated in Columbus’ journal under date of October 14, 1492, two days after the first landing of the expedition on the tiny island of Guanahani in the Outer Bahamas, which Columbus christened San Salvador. “When your Highnesses so command, they could all be carried off to Castile or be held captive in the island itself,” he wrote, “because with 50 men they could all be subjugated and compelled to do anything one wishes.”

On Sunday, November 11, a month after the historic landing on Guanahani, the fleet of discovery was anchored in a harbor along a coast that seemed without limit.

The admiral had understood the name of this land to be Colba, and he tentatively identified it as the fabled island of Cipango (Japan). The fleet had reached it October 28 and now lay at the mouth of a large river that Columbus had named Río de Mares.

Four weeks of rather aimless wandering among the myriad islands surrounding the argosy had turned up very little in the way of gold, the sine qua non of the expedition so far as Columbus was concerned. Only a few of the natives wore small articles of gold, which they traded readily for any trifles the Christians offered them.

Where had the gold come from? The artless and naked islanders were eager to please, but the difficulty of communication was great. The sign language Columbus and his company tried to use was awkward and easily misunderstood and did little to identify the source of the gold ornaments that meant so little to their wearers and so much to the odd and powerful beings they believed had come from the sky.

In his frustration Columbus turned his attention to the trees and shrubs, many of which he was certain bore valuable spices. But which trees, and what spices? He had to confess his ignorance in that respect. “... and though I believe there are many herbs and many trees that would be highly valued in Spain for dyes and medicinal spices, most of them I do not recognize which causes me great annoyance,” his journal notes under date of October 19.

By sad irony one of the herbs he failed to recognize was to engender more wealth long after Columbus’ death than all the Golcondas of his dreams. During his sojourn along the coast of “Colba,” or Cuba, he sent two men into the interior on an exploratory mission. On November 6 they returned to the ship to report to the admiral on what they had found. Among other things they related that many of the natives, both men and women, were accustomed to holding a *tizón*, or firebrand, of *yervas* (weeds) in their hands and inhaling the smoke. The journal does not identify the *yervas*, but Father Las Casas does in his *Historia*. Columbus had discovered tobacco. To the end of his life he was totally unaware of the impact this discovery was to make on the world’s economy—if, indeed, he gave the matter a second thought.

No, the road to the expected riches of these exotic lands was not plainly marked. So far Columbus had little more tangible to offer the sovereigns than the beautiful scenery he described in his journal day after day in endless detail. But he was acutely aware that scenery could not be cashed at the bank, and the prospect of

another source of revenue that was plainly visible and plainly abundant began to take shape in his mind.

Along with the scenery, Columbus never tired of extolling the docility and peaceful nature of the timid people who had welcomed him and his fellow voyagers with such awe and affection to their island Eden. And he kept turning over in his mind how the meek and artless character of his brown-skinned hosts could be made a source of profit.

On the same day that the expedition landed on Guanahani, Columbus noted that the timid natives “should make good servants.” Several weeks later he remarked in the journal: “... they are very meek and without knowledge of evil nor do they kill others or steal ... and they are without weapons and so timid that one of our people can put a hundred of them to flight.”

On Monday, December 3, the admiral assured the sovereigns that ten men could cause ten thousand of the natives to flee, “so cowardly and fainthearted are they and they carry no arms except some rods at the end of which are pointed sticks which are fire-hardened.”

By December 16 his ideas in that respect had taken definite form. “They have no weapons and are all naked without any skill in arms and are very cowardly so that a thousand would not challenge three,” says the journal for that date. “... Thus they are useful to be commanded and to be made to labor and sow and to do everything else of which there is need and build towns and be taught to wear clothes and learn our customs.”

And finally, in a famous letter to Luis de Santangel, his patron at court, he gets right down to business: In conclusion, to speak only of what has been accomplished on this voyage which was so hurried, their Highnesses may see that I can give them as much gold as they will need with very little aid from their Highnesses. And there are spiceries and cotton, as much as their Highnesses may order and mastic in whatever quantity they may order ... and slaves in any number they may order and they shall be of the idolaters (i.e., heathens).

Great evils are apt to have small beginnings, or, as Father Las Casas put it, “Men are never accustomed to falling into a single error or committing only one sin.” So it was that on November 11, 1492, the admiral ordered five young male natives, who had come trustingly aboard his flagship, forcibly seized “to take to the Sovereigns to learn our language so that it might be disclosed what is in the land.”

A trifling incident in itself, but to paraphrase Father Las Casas, Columbus was quite ready to multiply his sins.

“Afterwards I sent to a house which is in the area of the river to the west,” Columbus says in his journal, “and they brought back seven head of women, small and large and three children. I did this because the men would comport themselves better in Spain having women from their land than without them.”

The cynical kidnapping of seven “head” of women to keep the male captives docile in their slavery (Columbus used the phrase *cabezas de mugeres* just as he would say seven head of cattle) was the first act of a tragedy whose last would be the extermination of the Arawak natives of the Antilles. “This,” noted the Spanish historian José Asensio, “was a great abuse and bad judgment on the part of the Admiral which was to set a most lamentable precedent, an act so apparently trifling which was to have fatal consequences.”

The incident set off a series of denunciations by Father Las Casas in his *Historia* that could not have been more bitter if they had come from Columbus’ worst enemy rather than from his most devoted admirer. “A pretty excuse he has given to explain or justify such a nefarious deed,” wrote the indignant priest. “One might ask whether it was not a most grievous sin to pillage with violence women who had their own husbands. ... Who was to give an accounting to God for the sins of adultery committed by the Indians whom he took with him, to whom he gave those wives as sexual partners? For this injustice alone it could well be that he merited before God the tribulations and afflictions which he was to suffer throughout his life. ...”

The Catholic sovereigns must have taken more than passing note of their admiral’s burgeoning ideas for exploitation of the natives as part of the exportable assets of the newly discovered lands. In written instructions to Columbus issued from Barcelona on May 129, 1493, the king and queen were explicit in their mandate respecting treatment of the Indians. Not only was Columbus to make their conversion to the Christian faith his first order of business, but the monarchs also firmly decreed that they were not to be molested or coerced in any way. They instructed Columbus as he prepared for his second voyage:

And because this can best be done after the arrival of the Meet in good time, the said Admiral shall take measures that all those who go therein and those who have gone before from here shall treat the Indians very well and affectionately without causing them any annoyance whatever ... and at the same time the Admiral shall make some gifts to them in a gracious manner and hold them in great honor and if it happens that some persons should treat the Indians badly in any way whatsoever the said Admiral, as viceroy and governor for

their Highnesses, shall mete out severe punishment. ...

This narrow-minded approach to the problems of making an honest ducat would have discouraged anyone less determined to have his own way and less adept at achieving it than Columbus. The sovereigns were well-meaning, of course, but they didn't understand the situation too well. He would have to humor them up to a point, but it was no great problem.

On the outward passage of the second voyage Columbus' fleet of seventeen sail discovered and named a number of the islands of the Lesser Antilles in the southwestern Caribbean. These islands were inhabited by a warlike people called Caribs who had the reputation, whether or not deserved, of dining on the prisoners they took in raids on their peaceful Arawak neighbors to the north.

Columbus and his company had a brief skirmish with these cannibals on the island of Santa Cruz (St. Croix), one of the Virgin Islands. A Spaniard was killed by an arrow, and a few of the natives were taken prisoner. The exact number is difficult to establish from the three rather confusing eyewitness accounts we have of this encounter, but it couldn't have been more than a dozen or so, including three or four male adults and some women and children.

But they were enough to give Columbus an inspiration for carrying on his proposed traffic in slaves without hindrance from his sentimental sovereigns. Just call his merchandise cannibals and who could object? Who cared what happened to cannibals?

On February 2, 1494, two and a half months after the skirmish on Santa Cruz and about eight months after the sovereigns had forbidden any kind of coercion of the natives, a cargo of slaves departed from Isabela, the new Spanish colony on Espanola (Haiti). They were in twelve ships under the command of Antonio de Torres, a brother of the governess of the crown prince of Castile. They were dispatched by Columbus to be sold in the slave market of Seville.

Four days earlier he had given Torres a lengthy written memorandum instructing him as to how he was to explain the shipment of slaves to Their Highnesses and laying the groundwork for more of the same. "You must say and supplicate on my behalf to the King and Queen, our Lords, the following," Columbus wrote Torres: Item, say to their Highnesses that because there is no language by means of which this people can understand our Holy Faith ... thus are being sent with these ships the cannibals, men and women and boys and girls, which their Highnesses may order placed in the possession of persons from whom they can best learn the language.

Item, say to their Highnesses that the profit from the souls of the said cannibals would suggest the consideration that many more from here would be better and their Highnesses would lie served in this manner: that in view of the need for cattle and beasts of burden for sustaining the people who are here ... their Highnesses could give license to a number of caravels sufficient to come here each year and bring the said cattle and other provision; ... for which payment would be made in slaves from these cannibals. ...

There is no record of the number of slaves sent with Torres, but from all indications there were considerably more than the handful of Caribs taken in the skirmish on Santa Cruz, Columbus' only known encounter with these fierce natives on his second voyage. Most of Torres' wretched cargo must have been made up of the inoffensive inhabitants of Espanola, whose meekness, so highly praised at first by Columbus, was being strained to the breaking point by the strong-arm tactics of the European invaders, including Columbus' own periodic kidnappings of groups of natives "to learn the secrets of the land."

Eleven weeks after the departure of Torres with the first shipment of slaves, Columbus beetled off to other parts of the Caribbean in another vain pursuit of his obsession for gold. He left the dull and frustrating routine of administering the new colony on Espanola to his younger brother Diego, who, from all accounts, was a well-meaning nonentity. To a hidalgo named Pedro Margarit he entrusted the command of the armed forces during his absence.

Columbus returned to Espanola four months later to find affairs on the island in chaos. Margarit had thrown up his captaincy and returned to Spain, leaving the soldiers under his command to roam the countryside, raping the native women, robbing the villages, and, in the words of Ferdinand Columbus, "committing a thousand excesses for which they were mortally hated by the Indians." (Ferdinand was Columbus' illegitimate son, who wrote a biography of his father that was largely a panegyric.) The tormented natives finally turned on their oppressors, and ten Christians were slain in ambush.

This was all Columbus needed to establish a steady supply of slaves. He no longer would have to maintain the fiction that they were cannibals. Despite the fact, even acknowledged by Ferdinand, that the slain Spaniards had justly earned their mortal hatred, Columbus led an expedition against the defenseless Indians that was

incredibly savage in its slaughter of the naked islanders and destruction of their villages. The heavily armed Europeans were accompanied by ferocious greyhounds each of which, Las Casas wrote, "in an hour ... could tear 100 Indians to pieces because all the people of this island had the custom of going ... nude from head to foot." Many people were taken alive, and five hundred were sent as slaves to be sold in Castile. They were carried in four ships that Antonio de Torres had brought, and they left for Castile on February 24, 1495.

Michele de Cuneo, an Italian compatriot of Columbus, accompanied the admiral as a gentleman adventurer on the second voyage and has left a lively eyewitness account of that trip. He was a passenger on Torres' slave-laden fleet on the 1495 voyage back to Spain. He related that sixteen hundred Indian captives, male and female, had been gathered in Isabela, the island capital. Five hundred or more of the more salable "pieces" were loaded aboard the ships, and the rest were parcelled out to the colonists. When the fleet reached the colder European waters, about two hundred of the wretched captives died of exposure, and their bodies were thrown into the sea. The survivors were consigned to Juanoto Berardi, Columbus' Italian business agent in Seville, for sale in the slave market there.

"The ships brought back 500 souls of Indians, men and women all of good age from 12 to 35," wrote Columbus' good friend, the historian Andrés Bernaldez. "They came thus to this land as they had been born to their own and with no more embarrassment than if they were wild animals, of which all were sold and this proved to be very bad as they all died, being unfitted for the land."

Thus the island was "pacified" by favor of the Lord, says Ferdinand in his biography of his father: Two squadrons of infantry assaulted the multitude of Indians, putting them to rout with crossbow shots and guns and before they could rally they attacked with horses and dogs. By these means those cowards fled in every direction and the destruction was so great that in brief time the victory was complete. ...

Not only did His Divine Majesty's hand guide him [Columbus] in achieving the victory but He also imposed such a severe shortage of food and such varied and grave infirmities that the Indians were reduced to a third of the number they had been before, so it is clear that from His divine guidance such a marvelous victory ensued. ...

Now an ingenious plan occurred to Columbus for imposing profitable servitude *in situ* of the entire native population. He decreed that every Indian over fourteen years of age inhabiting the two large areas of Cibao and Vega Real, where gold had been found along the riverbeds, must pay tribute every three months of enough gold dust or grains to fill a hollow *cascabel* (hawkbell). Those living some distance from the sources of gold would be allowed to substitute an *arroba* (about twenty-five pounds) of cotton.

To ensure compliance with the order Columbus devised a metal disk to be hung around the neck of each native, showing whether he was up to date with the tribute. Those in arrears were punished; any who rebelled or tried to flee were hunted down and sold into slavery in Castile.

Washington Irving, from whose pen came the most eloquent account of the plight of the unhappy islanders, wrote:

In this way was the yoke of servitude fixed upon the island and its thralldom effectually insured. Deep despair now fell on the natives when they found a perpetual task inflicted upon them. ... Weak and indolent by nature, unused to labor of any kind and brought up in the untasked idleness of their soft climate and their fruitful groves, death itself seemed preferable to a life of toil and anxiety. They saw no end to this harassing evil which had so suddenly fallen upon them; ... no prospect of a return to that roving independence and ample leisure so dear to the wild inhabitants of the forest. The pleasant life of the island was at an end. ... They were now obliged to grope day by day with bending body and anxious eye along the borders of their rivers, sifting the sands for the grains of gold which every day grew more scanty; or to labor in the fields beneath the fervour of a tropical sun to raise food for their taskmasters or to produce the vegetable tribute imposed upon them. They sunk to sleep weary and exhausted at night, with the certainty that the next day was to be a repetition of the same toil and suffering. ...

Thus by his own authority and in virtual defiance of the mandate that his royal patrons had given him, Columbus established slavery in the New World.

So the caravels continued to ply between Espanola and Spain, their holds crowded with miserable cargoes of human cattle. One of the hazards of the traffic was the unfortunate tendency of many of the Indians to die on the way to the slave markets, a circumstance reflected in the higher prices necessary to make a profit out of the survivors.

In one particularly expensive episode Columbus held a fleet of five ships in Santo Domingo Harbor for two and a half weeks beyond sailing time while he negotiated an agreement with a rebel hidalgo named Francisco Roldán. The holds were crammed with slaves to the point of suffocation. Under the hot tropical sun, with the

hatchways closed, “unable to breathe, from anguish and the closeness of their quarters, they smothered and an infinite number of these Indians perished,” reported Father Las Casas, “and their bodies were thrown into the sea downstream.”

Columbus wrote Roldán to hurry up with his signature on the agreement “because I have detained the ships 18 days beyond their schedule and would detain them longer except for the Indians which they carry were a heavy burden and were dying.”

Of course every business has its drawbacks. Columbus could at least congratulate himself that so far the sovereigns had not interfered in his “profitable” enterprise despite their high-sounding instructions about treatment of the Indians. They were willing to accept his word that the steady shipment of slaves were “cannibals” or prisoners taken in “just wars.”

Now he was emboldened to offer a scheme of regular cropping of slaves as part of the New World’s exportable economy, and he wrote the sovereigns:

From here one can, in the name of the Holy Trinity, send all the slaves that can be sold of which, if the information I have is correct, they could sell 4,000 and at a minimum value they would be worth 20 millions, and 4,000 quintals of brasil [wood] which would be worth at least as much, at an expense of six millions. It would appear that 40 millions could be realized ... if there is no lack of ships which I believe with the aid of the Lord there will not be if once they are filled on this voyage. ... Thus there are these slaves and brasil which appear to be a blessed thing and even gold if it pleases The One who giveth it and will give at His pleasure. ... Even now the masters and mariners leave rich intending to return and take back slaves at 1500 *maravedis* [a unit of Castilian currency roughly worth seven tenths of a penny today] the piece and feed them and pay for them out of the first money they collect; and though it is true that many die it need not always be that way; it was this way also with the first of the Negroes and Canarios and there is an advantage in these: that is to say, the Indians are more profitable than the Negroes.

Columbus was, of course, quite unconscious of the bitter irony of invoking the Holy Trinity as underwriter of this sordid proposal. His God was an accommodating deity who adjusted easily to every whim of his ambitious servant.

But the God of Las Casas was of sterner stuff, and a showdown was imminent between the two conceptions of the Heavenly Majesty that would topple Columbus from his high estate and send him back to Spain in irons and disgrace.

“What greater or more supine hard-heartedness and blindness can there be than this?” raged Las Casas in the *Historia*. And to cap this he says that “in the name of the Holy Trinity he [Columbus] could send all the slaves which could be sold in all the said kingdoms. Many times I believe blindness and corruption infected the Admiral.”

The resolution of events that were to engulf Columbus in their tragic wake was not long in coming. His letter to the sovereigns proposing exportation and sale of four thousand slaves went with the fleet of five ships that left Santo Domingo on October 18, 1498. In the same fleet were several hundred colonists returning to Spain and six hundred enslaved Indians. Each returning colonist had been presented with a slave by Columbus as a token of his good will. Two hundred more had been allotted to the masters of the ships to cover the cost of their transportation.

The arrival of the fleet and Columbus’ letter to the sovereigns could not have come at a worse time for him. Complaints of the chaotic and harsh rule of the three Italian brothers—the admiral and Diego had been joined in Santo Domingo by their brother Bartolomé—had been pouring into the royal court with increasing urgency. And indeed, as the historian Angel de Altolaquirre remarked, “the state of misery which reigned in Espanola was demonstrated by the fact that Columbus, for his own profit, and to meet the expenses of the colony, found no other means than to sell its inhabitants.”

The sixteenth-century historian Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas—also a great admirer of Columbus—wrote that among the many charges brought by the white residents of Espanola against the admiral was one that “he would not consent to baptism of the Indians whom the friars wished to baptise because he wanted more slaves than Christians; that he made war against the Indians unjustly and made many slaves to be sent to Castile.” And four Catholic missionaries, in separate letters to Cardinal Cisneros, the archbishop of Toledo, accused Columbus and his brothers of actively hindering the efforts of the missionaries to convert the natives to Christianity and furthermore asserted that their cruelty to the Indians was a continual frustration to the friars’ labors in the Lord’s vineyard.

Columbus’ proposal for wholesale enslavement of the natives to meet the economic needs of the new colony

not only confirmed the reports the sovereigns had received from other sources but also awakened them for the first time to the real character of his traffic in human beings. And with the awakening came a royal explosion.

“By what authority does the Admiral give my vassals to anyone?” Isabella exclaimed angrily when she learned of the arrival of the returning colonists with their “gift” slaves. She ordered that it be publicly cried in Granada and Seville, where the court then was in residence, that all those who had brought Indians to Castile as a result of Columbus’ largesse return them to freedom in Espanola on pain of death. Las Casas soberly reports that his own father was one of those compelled to surrender slaves.

“I do not know what prompted the Queen with so much anger and severity to order those 300 Indians whom the Admiral had given as slaves, returned,” Las Casas wrote. “... I found no other reason but that, until this latest arrival, I believe the Queen, because of erroneous information which the Admiral sent to the Sovereigns, supposed they were taken in a just war.”

By royal decree from Seville, dated June 20, 1500, the few surviving Indian slaves in Castile—most of the expatriated captives had died—were ordered collected and delivered into custody of Cardinal Cisneros, to be freed and returned to their homeland.

Columbus’ downfall, harsh and humiliating, came within weeks of this decree. The sovereigns summarily removed him from his high estate of viceroy and governor of the New-World colonies and appointed the *commendador* (commander) Francisco de Bobadilla as his successor. In what many historians regard as an excess of zeal, Bobadilla sent Columbus and his two brothers back to Castile in chains. The sovereigns ordered the brothers released and authorized a fourth voyage by Columbus, but mandated that he never set foot on Española again.

It remained for Father Las Casas to draw the obvious moral:

God, who is a just judge, afflicted and cast him down in this life, he and his brothers. I hold it for a certainty that if he had not been impeded by the great adversity to which he came in the end for unjustly and tyrannically making slaves of these people ... he would have ended in a very little time in consuming all the people of this island. ...

But the sovereigns’ intervention came too late to save the Arawak people. The tragic sequence of events that began on that November day of 1492, one month after the Discovery, had to be played out to the bitter end. “So that with the slaughter from the wars and the hunger and illnesses that resulted from them ... with so much sorrow, anguish and sadness, there did not remain of the multitudes of people which were in this island from the year ’94 to ’06 ... but a third,” Las Casas wrote. “Great harvest and accomplished in sufficiently short time,” he added acidly.

Today the Arawak community of peoples, those “innocents” of Father Las Casas, who once inhabited in such numbers the larger islands of the Caribbean and who welcomed the white men to the New World, has vanished from the West Indies.

“The race perished,” said Charles Kendall Adams, late president of Cornell University, “and may be said to have left only a single word as monument. The Spaniards took from them the word ‘hammock’ and gave it to all the languages of Western Europe.”

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