

"Death Toll"

by William Keegan

in "Archaeology" (January/February 1992, p. 55)

In the absence of reliable population estimated, two opposing viewpoints have emerged concerning the demise of the Taino. There are those who believe that Columbus's brother Bartolome made a census of Hispaniola in 1496 and counted 1,100,000 people. Working from that number, the historical demographers Sherburne Cook and Woodrow Borah of the University of California, Berkeley, estimated a population of seven to eight million Taino in 1492. Those seeking to emphasize the devastating impact of the Spaniards put the number closer to ten million. Others, like Mexican scholar Angel Rosenblatt and David Henige, of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, do not believe that Bartolome Colon's census took place and estimate the native population in 1492 to have been around 100,000.

If the high population numbers are correct, some mechanism--disease, starvation, or murder--must account for the demise of the native peoples. Those who accept these numbers look to studies of epidemic diseases for support. Native Americans lacked all immunity to infectious diseases and offered "virgin soil" conditions to infectious European viruses and bacteria. Documented modern cases of virgin-soil epidemics in New Guinea and South America have claimed 30 to 100 percent of an infected population.

Further support for a high death toll is found in the famine reported by the Spanish during most of 1495 and 1496. This famine may have resulted from the initial disruption of the native society and the subsequent drain of available food. Heavy demand on the subsistence economy would have led to the exhaustion of limited surplus food supplies and to the consumption of immature manioc and sweet potato tubers. Starting

with the year 1496-1497, Cook and Borah estimate annual rates of decline in the Taino population exceeding 30 percent, up to 1504.

Such high mortality rates, however, are not consistent with other evidence. According to Cook and Borah, all of Hispaniola was undergoing a massive genocide that resulted in the death of more than three million people. Yet the cacicazgo of Xaragua, the part of the island now known as Haiti, continued to function and to pay tribute until after 1502, when its rulers were massacred by Governor Ovando. If the island was undergoing such massive depopulation, how could the cacicazgo of Xaragua have continued to exist? In fact, Ovando's actions in killing the rulers suggest that the Spaniards viewed the Xaraguan cacicazgo as a threat.

It is certain that a major decline in population did occur. However, prior to 1502 the major cause of death appears to have been warfare and abusive treatment. These activities were localized in the central portion of the island, which was conquered by force in 1496. Still, in 1499, Columbus felt confident in suggesting the sale of slaves as a means of resurrecting the failing economy. He apparently still believed that the Taino population was limitless.

Cook and Borah's population projections are based on the assumption that there was high native mortality due to disease and famine. Yet descriptions of ongoing Taino and

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interaction, such as with the cacicazgo of Xaragua, contradict that assumption. With no record of massive, island-wide depopulation, the pre-1500 projections must be revised substantially downward. A more acceptable range for the Taino population of 1492 is between 400,000 and two million. That is still an enormous number, especially when one considers that **by 1518 only 16,000 of them survived**. That year a smallpox epidemic swept through the Spanish colonies, a pandemic, according to the historical demographer Henry Dobyns, that by 1525 had left no American culture untouched. By 1545 the 29 sugar mills on Hispaniola were using nearly 6,000 non-Taino from the South American mainland and the Lesser Antilles and 3,300 Africans as laborers.

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