

The Indies were discovered in the year 1492. Christian Spaniards began to settle there in the following year. Therefore, it has been only forty-nine years since Spaniards in great numbers arrived, which they did first at the large and lovely Island of Hispaniola, which is six hundred leagues around. There are infinitely many other islands, some exceedingly large, everywhere around Hispaniola, all populous and filled with native-born peoples, the Indians. When we came upon the Indies, it was as well populated a land as any upon the earth. The seacoast of Venezuela remains filled as though with a beehive of people. It would appear that God set forth upon these lands an entire multitude, the greatest part of all humanity.

God made these people open and straightforward, without malice or guile, most obedient and most loyal to their native lords and to the Christians whom they serve. Of all the people of the earth, these natives are the most humble, most patient, most peaceful, the least quarrelsome or troublesome, the slowest to take offense, and most tranquil in demeanor. Hatred, rancor, and vengeance are utterly foreign to them. They are likewise physically slight and delicate, and unable to endure hard labor, perishing easily of any illness or disease. Not even the children of princes and lords raised among us are more physically delicate than the Indians, and I refer even to the humblest ones. Among nations, these people possess, and desire to possess, the fewest earthly goods of any. And, thus, they are never ambitious and never greedy. No saintly hermit ever satisfied himself with food more simple and meager than that which the Indians eat. Most go naked, covering only their private parts, and their most lavish clothing is a small cotton shawl. They sleep on straw mats or suspended in contrivances like fishing nets, and they call these "hammocks."

These people are among the purest, the most innocent, and the most intelligent imaginable, very receptive to good teachings, virtuous customs, and our holy Catholic faith. As soon as they learn a bit of Christian doctrine, they become eager to learn more, and I have been told by many Spaniards other than clergy, men who have dwelled in the Indies for years, that they see undeniable goodness in the Indians. "In truth," they say, "these people would be the most blessed on earth if they only knew God."

Upon this herd of gentle sheep, imbued by their Creator with all the aforesaid qualities, the Spaniards descended like starving wolves and tigers and lions. And what they have done for the last forty years, and continue to do, right down to today, is slay, torment, persecute, dismember, and destroy the Indians with refinements of cruelty never before seen, heard of, or read about in books, and so horribly, that on the Island of Hispaniola, of the over three million native people who lived there when the Spanish arrived, no more than two hundred remain. The island of Cuba—almost as lengthy as the distance from Valladolid to Rome—is today virtually depopulated. Puerto Rico and Jamaica, both of them large, lovely, and fertile islands, have been totally devastated. Not a living soul remains of the five hundred thousand who once dwelt in the Bahama Islands, which lie to the north of Hispaniola and Cuba, all of them more lovely than our king's gardens. These innocent victims perished while being brought to the island of Hispaniola when the Spaniards realized that the native population there was dying off. Another thirty small islands in the vicinity of Puerto Rico now lie deserted and uninhabited for the same reason. On the mainland to the south, there can be no doubt that our Spaniards, by their cruel and wicked acts, have depopulated and laid waste more than ten kingdoms, an area larger than the entire Iberian Peninsula—twice the territory between Seville and Jerusalem, a distance of more than two thousand leagues.

Beyond question, during the forty years in which Christians have devastated the Indies, more than twelve million souls, including men, women, and children, have died unjustly, and I do believe that a truer number would be above fifteen million.

Two principle methods have been employed by those who, calling themselves Christians, have annihilated these unfortunate Indians from the face of the earth. The first is war—unjust, cruel, bloody, and tyrannical war. The other method—applied after having slain all those who have resisted or tried to escape, which is to say, all the adult males, for the Spaniards customarily allow only young boys and females to live—the other method is the harshest bondage ever afflicted on man or beast.

The reason that the Christians have slain such an infinite number of souls has been the desire to take the Indian's gold, to enrich

themselves quickly, and to raise themselves up to a high social rank that bears no relation to their humble origins in Spain. This insatiable greed and ambition knows no limits. These lands were so rich and favored by God, and the inhabitants so humble and easy to subjugate, that the Christians should have respected them, and yet they treated the Indians worse than beasts (to beasts they might have been more gentle), with less regard than one treats a pile of manure in the road. I speak as a firsthand witness, for I was present during the entire time. And with like disregard have the Christians mistreated the Indians' souls, for all these millions have died without our Christian faith and without the sacraments of the Church. And it is a widely known and undisputed truth, acknowledged by one and all, that the Indians never once did anything to hurt the Christians, but instead believed them to be descended from heaven, until becoming victims of so much robbery, savagery, and murder at their hands.

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The Island of Hispaniola was the first where the Christians began their depredations, not content with what was freely given, taking the women and children of the Indians to serve them and eating the food produced by the Indians' hard work. The Indians have little, seldom more than they need, and in truth what suffices several Indian households for a month a Christian will consume in one day. The Indians soon realized that these newcomers had not come down from heaven, and some hid their provisions, others their women and children, while still others took refuge in the wilderness. The Christians struck them with clubs and seized the village chieftains. And such was their shameless temerity that a Christian captain raped the wife of their greatest king, lord of the entire island. Then the Indians began seeking ways to rid themselves of the Christians and took up arms. But their weapons are weak and ineffectual—so much so that their wars resemble a fight with wooden swords or a children's game in Spain—and at that, the Christians, with their horses and swords and lances, began the slaughter.

They entered villages and spared neither children nor old people, neither pregnant women, nor those with nursing infants. They made

bets to see who could, with a single sword stroke, slice an Indian in half, spill his entrails, or cut off his head. They ran swords through a mother and child at once, or flung infants into rivers, laughing and making fun. They pulled babies from their mothers' breasts and swung them by the feet to smash their heads on rocks. They split open women's bellies and hacked them apart as though butchering lambs. They erected long gallows high enough to dangle thirteen Indians just above the ground, putting firewood around them to burn them alive—all in honor, or so they said, of our Redeemer and the twelve Apostles. They encased other Indians' bodies in dry straw to burn them that way. If they desired to let an Indian live, they cut both his hands nearly off, but left them dangling by the skin, as an example to those who had fled and hidden themselves. They killed the Indian nobles and lords by tying them on a grate over a slow fire, to roast them little by little until they died howling in agony.

On one occasion, I saw four or five Indian leaders being burned on grates in this way, with terrible screams, and perhaps the Spanish captain took pity on them, or possibly their cries were disturbing his sleep, because he ordered them strangled, but the executioner (whose name I know and whose kinsmen I have met in Seville) did not want to take the trouble, and so he simply shoved branches into their mouths to silence them and then stirred up the fire. And because some Indians fled and hid in the mountains, escaping from this pitiless savagery, the Spaniards trained fierce dogs to find them and tear them to pieces. These hounds did terrible carnage. And because sometimes—though seldom and for good reason—the Indians slayed a Christian, the Spaniards make a law that for every Christian slain, a hundred Indians would die.

I saw all the things that I tell of here and an infinity of similar things.

*Analyzing the Sources:* In addition to their gruesome nature, what other aspects of the events in the Indies would presumably displease the king of Spain?