

Columbus exposed as iron-fisted tyrant who tortured his slaves

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Christopher Columbus was a despot who ruled his subjects with an iron fist, according to documents which have emerged 500 years after his death. The man who discovered America for Europe routinely tortured slaves and starved his subjects in colonies on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola.

Columbus was known to have mistreated native people when he was viceroy in Santo Domingo, the capital of today's Dominican Republic, at the end of the 15th century. But until now it had been put down to his lack of political sensitivity.

The documents suggest a hidden face to the man who, after arriving in the Caribbean in 1492, fell from grace eight years later because of his conduct in Santo Domingo. In 1500, Columbus was brought back from the city as a prisoner on the orders of the Spanish monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, to stand trial.

Statements from 23 witnesses at his trial were uncovered at the archive of Simanacas, near Valladolid, by an archivist, Isabel Aguirre, who spent a year transcribing them.

Consuelo Varela, a historian in Seville, has studied the documents and believes it is the most important discovery about Columbus's life for a century. Her research, which appears in *La Caída de Cristóbal Colón* (The Fall of Christopher Columbus), reveals the brutal life in the first colony which Columbus set up.

Varela told the Spanish daily *El País*: "Life in the colony in these first seven years was hard and terrible. There was a great deal of hunger, envy, rancour and rumours of all sorts. It was a primitive, insular life, rather like what we see in Western films." She said people, including white Spanish slaves, were auctioned in the main square of Santo Domingo. "We hear of a poor boy who was caught stealing wheat grain. They cut off his ears and nose and put shackles on him and made him a slave. Columbus ran the colony with an iron fist.

"One woman happened to say that Columbus came from a working-class family and that his father had been a weaver. Columbus's brother Bartholme had her tongue cut out, after parading her naked through the streets on a donkey.

Christopher congratulated his brother on defending the family honour."

There were many attempts at mutiny in the colony, she said.

The 46-page document shows Columbus and his brothers Bartolme and Diego as tyrants who ruled through summary justice. They also forbade natives from baptism so they could be used as slaves. Varela said the documents showed Columbus's "immense greed". He was eventually arrested, tried and dismissed as viceroy of Santo Domingo and governor of the Indies.

"Now we know why he was removed from office and the good reasons for it," she said.

"Nobody likes to air dirty laundry, but this is what the document shows."

The exposure has already provoked an angry reaction. Critics say some of the accounts may have come from enemies of Columbus, who were out to damage his reputation. But other accounts come from members of his own close group, even trusted friends. "Even they told of the atrocities that happened," said Varela. "Columbus's government was tyrannical, with no trials or anything similar."

The revelations come as the world marks the 500th anniversary of Columbus' death in 1506. DNA investigations on his descendants are under way in several countries finally to pinpoint the explorer's birthplace, usually attributed to Genoa in Italy. A result is expected later this year.

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