

How Indigenous Americans discovered Europe in the late 15th century

Historical records of Indigenous Americans are ignored in Europe's narrative of its past, says author

CBC Radio · Posted: Apr 05, 2023 5:14 PM CDT | Last Updated: August 23, 2023



In her book, *On Savage Shores*, historian Caroline Dodds Pennock traces the history of Indigenous Americans arriving in Europe from 1492 on. She says their encounters on European soil can be found throughout historical records but have largely been ignored. (Penguin Random House/Submitted by Caroline Dodds Pennock)



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On Savage Shores: How Indigenous Americans Discovered Europe

**Originally aired on April 5, 2023.*

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/how-indigenous-americans-discovered-europe-1.6802384>

It's a vantage point rarely adopted by European historians: that of an Indigenous person from what we now call the Americas, crossing the Atlantic from west to east during the century after 1492.

And yet, that was the experience of tens of thousands of people. A few came voluntarily, as diplomats or even tourists. Most came against their will, in conditions of severe violence, and had to fight for their freedom and survival on European soil.

Historian [Caroline Dodds Pennock](#) pieces together the written evidence of Indigenous lives in Europe during the 1500s. Her new book is *On Savage Shores: How Indigenous Americans Discovered Europe*.

She spoke to *IDEAS* host Nahlah Ayed about her research collecting evidence of the widespread Indigenous presence in Portugal, Spain, France, and England in the 100 years before Britain attempted to establish its first North American colony.

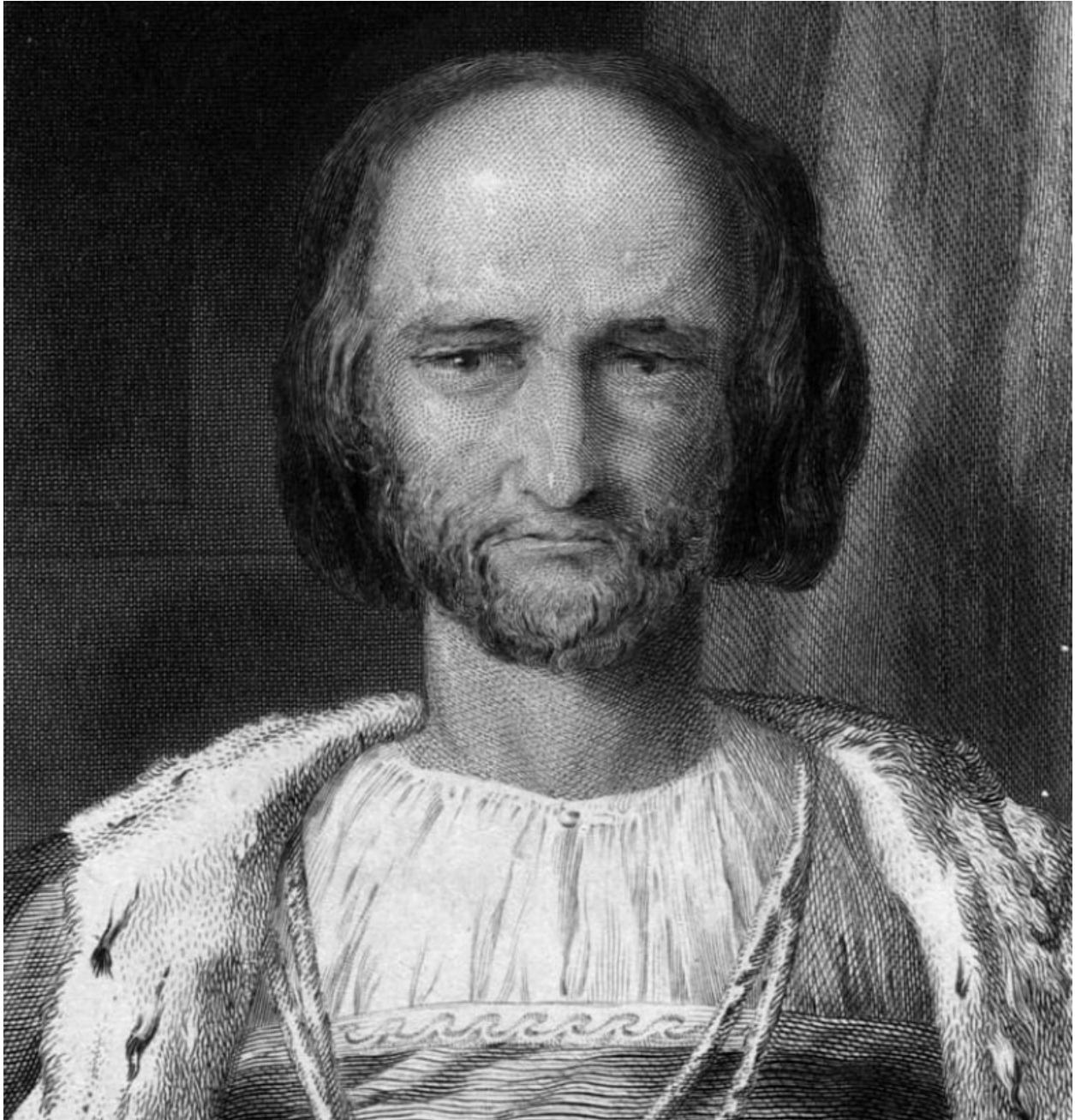
Take us back to 1493. The first Indigenous people from the Americas are setting foot on European soil. Who were they?

These are a group of Lucayan Taino people whom Christopher Columbus has kidnapped. We think maybe about 12 or so survive the voyage. We know very little about them, except that there are men, women, and children who set out, though we don't know if any children survived the voyage.

We know of just one family where Columbus has kidnapped a woman and her son and two daughters. [Her husband] rows out to the boat and begs to be allowed on board so that he can travel with his family. That is the one identifiable group that we know are amongst the people who set out. Whether they survive the voyage, we don't know.

To what end were they kidnapped?

Columbus talks an awful lot about enslaving people. He thinks they will be "very suitable for slavery," he says from the beginning. He also wants translators, go-betweens, people who can help him communicate with this new culture. And also to show off this society.



When Christopher Columbus encountered Indigenous people, historian Caroline Dodds Pennock says the Italian explorer thought he had arrived in India. 'So Indigenous people in this period are often seen through the lens of other kinds of non-Christian peoples.' (Hulton Archive/Getty Images) There's a hint that some of the people on these early voyages may have travelled voluntarily. It's a little bit difficult to tell, but some sources from the 18th century suggest that some of them are high-status figures who voluntarily go, as ambassadors, and are among the first to survive — and be baptized.

One of the first Indigenous people in Europe was baptized as 'Juan'. And he stayed in Spain?

He does stay in Spain, according to the sources. The chronicler Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo meets him some two years after he's arrived in Spain, and he's living as a nobleman, dressing as a Spanish nobleman, and also speaking Spanish fluently. But he dies soon after that. We don't know what he died of, but this is not unusual — Indigenous people in Europe, just like Indigenous people in the Americas, often succumb to the many germs that they don't have any immunity to, in this early period.

How extensive was the practice of capturing and moving Indigenous people to Europe in the century after Columbus landed?

It was extremely extensive. We know from the work of Andrés Reséndez and his wonderful book, [*The Other Slavery*](#), that Indigenous enslavement is very widespread. The majority of people who are enslaved are not shipped across the Atlantic, but it seems that the numbers are in the tens of thousands in the first 100 years. Columbus ships perhaps 3,000 people to Europe — just Columbus alone. But then you also have lots of other people who are coming, and instead of calling them indios, which is the term for Indigenous people in the records, meaning 'Indians,' [the enslavers] call them 'brown people,' for example — loro. That's to get around the laws against Indigenous enslavement.

What kind of world was it that Indigenous people were discovering in Europe in the 1500s?

Of course, the experience would have varied tremendously depending on who you were. For people who come from Mexico, they're used to urban settlements, for example. They have big cities. Tenochtitlan, the Aztec-Mexica capital, is perhaps bigger than any city in Europe at that time, certainly bigger than any city in Spain.

One theme that keeps coming up over and over again is surprise and disgust at the inequalities they see in Europe. Now, that's not to idealize Indigenous societies as a kind of perfect utopia, but they weren't used to seeing extreme poverty alongside extreme wealth. There are very few Indigenous communities

where there isn't some form of communistic help. Even the Aztec-Mexica, who have extreme differences of hierarchy... people at the bottom are supported with things like communal grain stores.

Michel de Montaigne writes a famous essay. He met some Indigenous people in Rouen, and he says that they say, *Why aren't people burning down these palaces? There's these people with all this money! And then outside, people in great poverty. Why on earth aren't they burning down the palaces and taking something? We don't understand!*



Michel de Montaigne was one of the most influential writers of the French Renaissance. He is famous for creating essay writing as a literary genre. This 1587 portrait is by Étienne Martellange. (Wikimedia)

Montaigne, of course, is using the Indigenous people to critique Europe. It is a piece of rhetoric which is intended to shed light on the inequalities and violence of European society. But what's interesting for me is that the words he puts into the mouths of the people he meets are not out of line with other Indigenous people's accounts. You see this kind of idea come up again and again, including in much later sources.

What concerns do you have with the idea that Indigenous experiences, whether then or now, may not be your story to tell?

I was very concerned about that, especially as in the last 10 years or so I've been privileged to know more Indigenous scholars and to connect with them digitally as a colleague, and to listen to Indigenous people. I don't take lightly the responsibility of being the person to bring these stories to a wider audience. I've been working on this project for about 15 years.

My last book was a long time ago, and it's something that is built up over a very long time and doesn't speak to just one Indigenous community. So it has peoples all the way from the Taino in the Caribbean to the Inuit in Nunavut and the Tupi people in Brazil. And so it is a very wide perspective, and I'm very aware that I'm putting forward the stories of all kinds of different indigenous communities who may feel very differently about these experiences.



Archaeologist Nathan Mountjoy holds a drawing of what might be the wall of a Taino indigenous village called 'Batey,' in Ponce, Puerto Rico, 2007, made with stones decorated with petroglyphs. The archaeological site is one of the most important discoveries in the Caribbean. (Andres Leighton/Associated Press)

What I've tried to avoid doing is ventriloquism. I've used their own voices. Of course, I can't represent every Indigenous point of view. There are many people who would disagree with each other, I'm sure. Nor do I want to claim that I am speaking for them. I'm just doing my best to put forward their voices and their histories and to try and draw people's attention to them where I possibly can. I feel a really enormous responsibility not to misrepresent them, to do my very best to sensitively and accurately and without causing further damage to communities that have been and often still are marginalized and discriminated against.

The more I worked on this project, the more I realized that there are thousands of Indigenous people traveling to Europe whose stories people just do not know about. It's not that there is no scholarly awareness, and of course, descendant communities know about these things. But for some reason that work hasn't made a dent on popular understandings of this period of history. People think they know this period really well. It's the period of the Renaissance and the Reformation, of Henry VIII, the Golden Age of Spain. People in Europe think they understand this period. But how many people know there was a Brazilian king at the court of Henry VIII? I was speaking to a specialist in Henry VIII, and she didn't know that.

There is a transformative history of Europe to be told here. It's not just about Indigenous peoples. It's about helping people in Europe understand the diversity of their past, to recognize these longer, deeper connections that Indigenous people are so much part of.

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Also interesting is *Hehaka Sapa*/ Black Elk's experiences in Europe late 19th century having come there with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. He meets Queen Victoria, gets left behind, wanders the Continent, falls in love with a young French woman taken in by her family, and somehow gets back to America and home. Black Elk had a truly remarkable life (*Black Elk: The Life of An American Visionary*, 2016, Joe Jackson).

