

Dispelling false claims of cannibalistic caribs—again

August 20 2021, by Julia McDonald



Giovas at the historic ruins in the Caribbean. Credit: Photographed by Laura Termes.

SFU archaeologist Christina Giovas and colleagues are formally denouncing what they call unsubstantiated and harmful claims of

cannibalistic Caribs migrating to the Caribbean, in a paper published today in Nature's *Scientific Reports*.

The story of Christopher Columbus and the colonization of Indigenous Peoples is a part of human history that is often told and retold with contradicting or false claims. According to the researchers, a paper published earlier in *Scientific Reports* (January 2020) is an example of these falsehoods.

The 2020 paper, which concluded Indigenous cannibals migrated into the Caribbean circa AD 800, was met with widespread concern from archaeologists, anthropologists and historians.

The problematic nature of the paper led the group of scholars to author a formal response, or rejoinder—published in the very same online, peer-reviewed journal.

Giovas and nine colleagues joined forces to challenge the paper's findings, including Florida State University's Tom Leppard, and University of Oregon's Scott Fitzpatrick, a professor and associate director of research at the Museum of Natural and Cultural History.

Fitzpatrick says they were "disconcerted about the revitalization of the cannibalistic narrative, which is disingenuous and hurtful to Indigenous groups."

The "cannibalistic narrative" is one that scholars have had to actively work to debunk, seemingly putting it to rest as the theory held no merit. "This dangerous trope was initially used to provide the moral justification Spanish colonizers sought to enslave Indigenous islanders and seize their land," says Giovas. The original paper brings the controversial discussion back to the forefront with what the group of scholars saw as flawed methods and data and a faulty conclusion.

"The idea that ancient Caribbeans were cannibals still persists in popular imagination, but there has never been any scientific evidence showing they practiced cannibalism, despite the fact that we have really good archaeological techniques to detect this," says Giovas.

While rigorous give-and-take is not uncommon in the [academic world](#), scholars rarely take the opportunity to publish a rejoinder to refute academic work. In this case, the researchers felt the consequences of the misinformation were too severe to ignore. Giovas explains that "how we reconstruct the past has real world implications in the present. We look to history to inform policy and decision-making today, so our understanding of history should ideally be backed by good science and multiple lines of evidence."

More information: Christina M. Giovas et al, Craniofacial morphology does not support a pre-contact Carib "invasion" of the northern Caribbean, *Scientific Reports* (2021). [DOI: 10.1038/s41598-021-95558-7](#)

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